



Kedma: Penn's Journal on Jewish Thought, Jewish Culture, and Israel

Volume 2
Number 3 *Spring 2019*

Article 3

2020

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Museum Review: **The Complexities of Freedom for the American Jewish Experience**

Simone Burde

Tucked in the bustling area of Independence Mall in Philadelphia, the National Museum of American Jewish History narrates the stories of how a religious and ethnic group immigrated to and assimilated in the United States. Factoring into the larger history of the United States, the story begins with the first few Jewish immigrants before taking the visitor on the journey to contemporary Jewish American life. The museum features the triumphs and the struggles of Jews as they attempt to simultaneously assimilate and maintain their Jewish traditions and values. The museum is split into three floors, with the top floor examining the years 1654-1880, the middle floor, 1880-1945, and the bottom floor, 1945-present. Throughout these three floors, American Jewish life is presented via its place both in American and world history. The National Museum of American Jewish History explores the theme of the complexities of freedom as it relates to American Jewish life.

I. The Top Floor – 1654-1880

The top floor houses the early years of Jewish immigration, 1654-1880, and narrates the American Jewish struggle for freedom and tolerance. During this time period, Jews examined the conditions of their freedom in the U.S.

The first challenge to American Jewish freedom came when the first Jewish migrants arrived at the port of New York. Peter Stuyvesant, mayor of New Amsterdam, did not want any Jews in New York. Thus, in a letter to the Dutch West India Company in 1654 he wrote that he “deemed it useful to require them [Jews] in a friendly way to depart.”¹ His desire to expel Jews was blocked by the Dutch West India Company. As America became a land for religious tolerance, Judaism survived and flourished in the nascent United States. Jewish life started in America before the Jewish immigrants could build synagogues, yet on the top floor, the museum displays a Torah to represent the primary religious article Jews needed for religious practice. In this early period, Jews lacked religious tolerance and freedoms. In placing a Torah in this section, the museum symbolizes the hope that many Jews had during this trying time.

Following the Revolutionary War, American Jews continued to fight for their own freedoms. Notably, Moses Seixas wrote a letter to George Washington in which he famously asked for a government “which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”² More remarkably, however, was President Washington’s reply, “it is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”³ These letters are displayed in the museum, demonstrating the fragility and complexity of freedom of religion, a right which existed nowhere else in the world. Even though American Jews were living in what was, by law, a nation which respected freedom of religious thought and practice, they still felt the need to ask for their own rights. The way the museum presented the difference between *freedom*, which by the Constitution individual Jews had, and *tolerance*, which is what Jews sought, succeeds in demonstrating the complexity of freedoms. In the barest sense, freedoms existed, but Jews were striving for the tolerance in addition to freedom.

Starting in the early 1800s, Jews began immigrating to America in greater numbers for economic security in the “land of the free.” During this time, Jewish centers began to spring up in the major cities along the East Coast. One room in the museum displays comments about the different cities and their specific contributions to Jewish life in America. For example, the section dedicated to New York shows different monumental years throughout the 1800s that illustrate how Jews expressed different degrees of freedom. One such avenue was through the the country’s first Jewish periodical *The Jew*, which began publication in 1823.⁴ The fact that Jews were able to have a publication of their own shows the degree to which Jews were able to assimilate while simultaneously maintain their own community and perspectives. Furthermore, it shows the start of the increased tolerance of Judaism in the U.S. The freedoms surrounding American Jews during the 1800s allow for the complex tension between assimilation and tradition. As the Jewish population increased, Jews attempted to obtain the same freedoms as their fellow Americans, while at the same time striving to maintain their own community with their own traditions. This section of the exhibit does an effective and meaningful job in highlighting the dichotomy between the achievement of freedoms and the tolerance yet to be acquired.

The complexity of American Jewish freedoms is further featured in the section on slavery. A description on the wall says that Jews were “divided over slavery.”⁵ Like their American neighbors, Jews were divided based on their geographic location. Ironically, Jews were still seeking tolerance for their freedom, but some Southern Jews chose to side with the Confederates. The Jews who sided with the Union viewed Abraham Lincoln as comparable to Moses, as demonstrated by a Hebrew acrostic poem in the museum which commemorates Lincoln. However, the importance of this poem is more than the Jews’ view of Lincoln. To not only write a dedication to the man who fought to keep the union together, and for the freedom of others, but to write that dedication in Hebrew shows the Jews’ dedication to achieve both

tolerance for their religion and freedom for other minorities. The museum's exhibition of the poem succeeds in showing the importance Jews placed on the American values, and their willingness to uphold these values.

The final part of the 1654-1880 floor gives a factual account of the continuous struggle for the tolerance of religious freedom. The blurb entitled "A Sensation at Saratoga," and the accompanying artifacts show the limitations of Jewish freedoms that still existed despite Jews being a part of American society.⁶ Joseph Seligman attempted to vacation at the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, New York in 1877. Judge Harry Hilton, who ran the hotel, forbade Jews from staying there.⁷ In a letter to Hilton, Seligman expressed his disgust at this policy, notably telling Hilton: "you are no judge of the American character."⁸ Seligman's statement shows the frustration of Jews regarding the lack of religious tolerance from other Americans. The museum chose a story that successfully conveys the confusion Jews experienced as they had achieved legal freedoms, yet lacked the unofficial tolerance that others had for Jews. This part of the exhibit comes right before the timeline, which is placed at the end of each exhibit, and is a segue into the next chapter of American Jewish history which surveys the complexities of American Jewish freedom in conjunction with increased immigration and the Industrial Revolution.

II. Middle Floor – 1880-1945

As visitors descend a floor in the museum and arrive at the years 1880-1945, they enter a period centered around mass immigration for the promise of economic opportunity and religious and political freedoms. The era of mass migration began in the late 1800s. The exhibit cites "overpopulation, oppressive legislation, economic dislocation, forced conscription, wretched poverty, crushing despair, and violent attacks known as pogroms" as reasons for the rise in immigration.⁹ Jews were also involved in the movement for freedom, as they organized to help their fellow Jews who came to America.

Notably, the museum displayed a book in this section entitled, *What Every Emigrant Should Know*.¹⁰ While some Jews may not have wanted immigrants to tarnish their standing as Americans, there was an organized movement to help others understand the issues involved in immigrating to the United States. The museum was thorough in displaying the importance of why Jews came to America: to obtain the basic freedoms they were denied elsewhere.

With the Industrial Revolution came large factories, giving many Jews, who arrived in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, work in the garment industry. The exhibit emphasizes the dichotomy between the freedom to work, regardless of religion, and the fight for workplace safety and workers' rights in the workplace, through information about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and the unionization of workers. During the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, many Jewish immigrant women were trapped in the factory because the factory owners deliberately locked the doors; "the tragedy came to symbolize the abuses of manufacturers and the exploitation of workers," as well as the limits of freedoms in the workplace.¹¹ While Jews did have the freedom to work in America, the factory system severely limited Jews' (and other workers') safety and security. At the same time, Jewish workers were expressing their freedom to unionize through union protests against harsh working conditions. Notably, the exhibit shows a picture of female workers striking, showing that women were just as important as men in fighting for their freedoms. Besides exhibiting the strikes, the museum fails to go into much detail about the political activism of Jews during this time period. Jews used their acquired freedoms and tolerance to become a strong voice in the labor and socialist movements.

With the onset of both World War I and World War II, Jews continued to fight for the freedoms of others, while America's tolerance of Jews was challenged. With World War I came rumors that Jews were associated with Communism, and Jews "became targets for increased prejudice and violence."¹² Following World War I, Jews faced increasing anti-Semitism,

with quotas being implemented at many universities. The museum emphasizes Jews' disgust about the anti-Semitism through a poster entitled, "History of the United States," which shows their projection of America, with Uncle Sam replacing Native Americans at the top of the mountain, followed by Jews replacing Uncle Sam at the top of the mountain.¹³ World War II and the Holocaust once again showed the freedom American Jews had to participate in the military, especially considering the mounting concern about the decimation of the Jewish populations in Europe. The exhibit delves into the first instances of attempts to save the Jews of Europe, which did not happen "until the creation of the War Refugee Board in January 1944."¹⁴ While the War Refugee Board did not save many Jews, it did help to save and at least give Jews who had been imprisoned the first taste of freedom. The exhibit also displays Riegner's telegram to Stephen Wise. The telegram contained information about Hitler's plan "for the extermination of all Jews in Nazi-occupied lands."¹⁵ While, most significantly, the telegram demonstrates the removal of the most important freedom, the right to live, it also demonstrates the lack of immediate action for a group with a significant population in America, as Wise was not allowed to communicate the contents of the telegram when he received it. While the museum's recount of the wars shows how American Jews were treated just like all other Americans as they fought for their country, the museum failed to show in much detail how the Great Depression impacted Jews during the interwar years. More emphasis on the 1930s would show that, as with the ability to fight in the wars, Jews faced the same trials as the rest of America during the Great Depression.

The exhibit on this floor ends with a board entitled "New Possibilities" which helps to understand the place where freedom stood in relation to American Jews after World War II.¹⁶ It poses the question "Having witnessed the effects of prejudice abroad, would the country shake off old prejudices and expand freedom and opportunity at home?"¹⁷ While the exhibit acknowledges anti-Semitism in America, it also provides examples of Jews thriving in

American activities and pastimes: Bess Myerson was the first Jewish Miss America in 1945 and Hank Greenberg “[led] the Detroit Tigers to the American League pennant” in 1945 as well.¹⁸ These Jewish pioneers combined their American life with their Jewish heritage, conveying to American Jews that there was a way to be both Jewish and American, and that avenue still exists today.

III. Bottom Floor – 1945-Present

The bottom floor of the National Museum of American Jewish History shows the choices and decisions that came with freedom for American Jews. Having acquired freedom through the arc of American history, as displayed both on the top floor, and more freedoms and tolerance on the middle floor of the museum, the bottom floor shows what Jews chose to do with this new found tolerance of their freedoms. One of the choices that Jews made in the post-World War II era was to become an active part of American political life. The end of the Holocaust also brought the decision to found the state of Israel, with which the museum commemorates with “Proclamation of the Establishment of the State of Israel.”¹⁹ Because many American Jews thought that the establishment of Israel was “vital,” they risked their own freedom to “courageously escort refugees to Palestine, smuggle arms to Jewish forces, and enlist in Israel’s fledgling military.”²⁰ Another choice American Jews had to make in the post-war years was whether to move out of the cities and into the suburbs. Many Jews moved out to the suburbs from the crowded city hubs as well as to less populated cities such as Miami and Los Angeles. This freedom that Jews were now experiencing – freedom to live wherever and however they want – brought choice. One of the choices was how to express faith. As compared to when the first immigrants settled in America, there were now many outlets for Jewish expression, from the different denominations to the sheer number of synagogues that were established both in the suburbs and in the city.

Jews also had to choose the way in which they would educate their children. During the baby boom, post-war Jewish children began to attend Hebrew School. Trunks, lockers, and camp memorabilia represented in the exhibit show the choice that many Jewish parents made to send their children to camp. In addition, popular culture showed that Jews had the same rights as other Americans to now be featured in primetime media. Shows such as *The Goldbergs*, which premiered in 2013, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which premiered in 2000, are Hollywood expressions of Jewish life. These freedoms to express Jewish life were also diminished at times with Zurawik reporting that “too Jewish” became an issue in Hollywood as network executives and directors were overly critical of Jewish jokes, given the history of anti-Semitism in the United States.²¹ The exhibit also shows smaller decisions that have come with Jewish freedom in America that have happened in the last decade. For example, displayed in the exhibit is American Girl Doll, Rebecca Rubin, who is a Jewish immigrant living in New York City in the early 1900s. This last time period in the museum shows that freedom gave both Jews choices on how to express themselves and live their lives, and America choices regarding the way in which it could represent Jews.

The diversity of the exhibit for the third time-period, from sections about political activism and Israel to mock houses and the memorabilia of the suburbs and camp, to popular culture shown through the media, and to artifacts that represent contemporary American life, shows the diversity of American Jewish expression and choices that came with the previously achieved freedoms.

The National Museum of American Jewish History explores the theme of the complexities of freedom as related to the American Jewish Experience. While the museum did a thorough job of exploring this theme, personal stories were lacking. Though there were some intriguing anecdotes, the museum would benefit from a room, separate from the three floors, that would tell stories of everyday life for Jews in each of the three time periods.

At the end of the third exhibit, there was an interactive exhibit that allowed visitors to add their own stories; however, it would be fascinating to see even more interaction or anecdotes. Through splitting the museum into three time periods, the acquisition of freedom and religious tolerance, and its effects are highlighted by historical information and artifacts.

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Endnotes

1. Peter Stuyvesant, "Petition to Expel the Jews from New Amsterdam" (September 22, 1654), in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, eds. Paul Mendes Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, 452.
2. "'To Bigotry No Sanction': George Washington and Newport, Rhode Island Jews," in Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America*, 29.
3. "'To Bigotry No Sanction': George Washington and Newport, Rhode Island Jews," in Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America*, 31.
4. "New York," The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1654-1880.
5. The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1654-1880.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. "Success and Exclusion: Joseph Seligman," in Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America*, 86.
9. "An Era of Mass Migration," The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
10. The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
11. "Protesting Lives Lost: Rose Schneiderman," in Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three*

Centuries of Jewish Voices in America, 162.

12. "Freedom Challenged" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
13. "History of the United States" Poster, The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
14. "First Rescue Efforts" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
15. "Rabbi and Activist: Stephen S. Wise," in Wenger, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America*, 273.
16. "New Possibilities" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
17. "New Possibilities" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1880-1945.
18. Ibid.
19. "Proclamation of the Establishment of the State of Israel" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1945-present.
20. "Building a Homeland" The National Museum of American Jewish History, exhibit for the years 1945-present.
21. David Zurawick, *The Jews of Prime Time*, 6.