OBJECTS OF AFFECTION:
THE MATERIAL RELIGION OF AMERICAN JEWISH NOSTALGIA

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Abstract

This dissertation identifies nostalgia as an integral religious feature of American Jewish practice in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Based on material culture studies, ethnographic research, and interviews, it examines American Jews’ sentimental, generalized longing for their communal homelands of eastern Europe and ethnic neighborhoods in the United States, particularly but not exclusively New York’s Lower East Side. The project focuses on four case studies of increasingly commercialized and institutionalized nostalgia: the materials and practices of Jewish genealogy and family history; the use of historic synagogues as heritage sites; illustrated children’s books and dolls; and American Jewish foodways, particularly the culinary revival of restaurants inspired by traditional Ashkenazi cuisine. American Jews use each of these materials and spaces in their affective search for a seemingly authentic past. Emotional and spiritual connections to American Jewish history have been made consumable and uniform, accessible to American Jews across and beyond religious movements as well as to non-Jews.

This thematic research on nostalgia moves beyond the scholarly distinctions between Judaism, the religion, and Jewishness, the culture, a dichotomy that has little practical application to the ways American Jews make and sustain personal and communal meaning. It also moves beyond simplistic divisions between “religious” and “secular” Jews that no longer accurately describe the diversity of American Jewish practice. American Jews with a broad array of religious affiliations and those with no affiliation engage in the ostensibly nonreligious activities of Jewish genealogical research, visiting Jewish historic sites, consuming markedly Jewish food, and purchasing books and toys that teach Jewish nostalgia to their children. These activities provide personally meaningful engagements with American Jewish pasts that afford
affective connections to imagined transhistorical Jewish communities. Attention to American Jewish nostalgia identifies robust forms of religious meaning in works of public and personal histories, emphasizing the centrality of emotional and commemorative norms in American and Jewish religious practices. This study of the materials of nostalgia reveals normative themes about historical periods, immigration, and religious practices often taken for granted in American Jews’ relation to history.
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Introduction

The Modern Jewish Mitzvah

I do not want anything to happen in Jewish history without it happening to me.
—Elie Wiesel, quoted in Arthur Kurzweil, From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History (1980)

“Stand at the center of the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue . . . and gaze upward, past the chandeliers with their curled vintage glass, toward the 70-foot-high vaulted ceiling, painted with gilded stars,” directed Edward Rothstein, cultural critic-at-large for The New York Times, in December 2007. Rothstein’s article appeared on the eve of the official reopening of the synagogue building as the newly renamed Museum at Eldridge Street, following a $20 million restoration over twenty years.¹ His review opens with a command, not a request: Stand there. Stand on New York’s Lower East Side. Feel the pathos as you imagine the dilapidation of this building. Gaze upward and feel gratitude and admiration for the work and the money and the research and the years—twenty years—that went into its restoration. Stand and look and feel and be inspired.

Continuing to use imperatives, Rothstein instructs readers to imagine the reconstructed building by empathetically identifying with the original congregants, immigrant Jews from eastern Europe who lived in what was then one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the world:

Even now—as this space’s religious function has faded and been folded into the newly named Museum at Eldridge Street, and as Irving Howe’s “world of our fathers” on the Lower East Side in New York becomes more like the “world of our great-grandfathers”—it is possible to be awestruck by the exotic splendor of this meticulously restored sanctuary . . . Imagine, then, the impact it must have had on its worshipers when

this synagogue flourished, amid its neighborhood’s raucous, grinding poverty and slum tenements, and its residents’ intoxicating American ambitions and devout Old World beliefs.²

Rothstein’s reference to Irving Howe’s monumental 1977 study of eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States, *World of Our Fathers*, tightens the emotional bond by echoing Howe’s use of the first person plural.³ It was the world of our fathers, now our great-grandfathers. Rothstein invites American Jews—and perhaps, more broadly, all readers of the *New York Times*—to see the memory of the Jewish Lower East Side as their inheritance. The ever-increasing distance from this moment in history heightens longing for this past even as it continually slips away.

Like many others, Rothstein believes that the religious function of the synagogue building has “faded” as it has been turned into a heritage site.⁴ In contrast, I contend that the building has taken on a different but no less religious function as the object of nostalgic longing for an American Jewish past. In this dissertation, I identify nostalgia as an integral religious feature of American Jewish practice in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Through analysis of material culture and ethnographic research, I examine American Jews’ sentimental, generalized longing for their communal origins of eastern Europe and for ethnic neighborhoods in the United States, particularly but not exclusively New York’s Lower East Side. The project focuses on four case studies of increasingly commodified and institutionalized nostalgia in modern American culture: Jewish genealogy, heritage tourism, children’s literature and playthings, and American Jewish foodways. I examine how American Jews use each of these materials in their affective search for a seemingly authentic past.

² Rothstein.
⁴ Rothstein does not acknowledge that a small congregation has continuously held services in the Eldridge Street Synagogue.
Emotional and spiritual connections to American Jewish history have been made consumable and uniform, accessible to American Jews across and beyond religious denominations, as well as to non-Jews. This thematic research moves beyond the scholarly distinctions between Judaism, the religion, and Jewishness, the culture, a dichotomy that has little practical application to means by which American Jews make and sustain personal and communal meaning. It also moves beyond simplistic divisions between “religious” and “secular” Jews that no longer accurately describe the diversity of American Jewish practice. A study of the materials of nostalgia cuts across lines and reveals normative themes about historical periods, immigration, and religious practices that are often taken for granted in American Jews’ relation to history.²

Religious studies scholar Arnold Eisen declares nostalgia the “modern Jewish mitzvah.”³ The description fits: In the American Jewish understanding of the term, mitzvot (the plural of mitzvah) are both divinely commanded ordinances and, more flexibly, good deeds. For many American Jews, to wax nostalgic is a positive engagement with an imagined community that fulfills a mandate to honor ancestors, something that should and must be done. As a mitzvah, it is one that accommodates the religious needs of American Jews. The far-ranging practices of Jewish nostalgic longing occur in both private and public spheres and can be incorporated into nearly any aspect of a practitioner’s life. One may engage in nostalgic practices as an individual

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³ Arnold Eisen, Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). It is not irrelevant that, following an academic career, Eisen is now Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. His concepts of Jewish thought were judged a useful platform from which to direct the training of the clergy and educators of Conservative Judaism and, therefore, the future of the movement.
through the use of ritual objects or genealogical research, for instance. Nostalgic practices often involve interaction with social peers and may embrace corporate and institutional resources such as a museum, restaurant, or online forum. But even when it is practiced as an apparently individual endeavor, nostalgia draws upon an imagined, transhistorical community.⁷

Understanding nostalgic practices as religious ones challenges assumptions about the limited role of religion among non-Orthodox Jews in modern America and highlights normative practices that American Jews hold in common across and beyond the standard spectrum of American Jewish movements. The concept of religion is a modern Protestant creation, and modern Judaism has never fit comfortably into the category, despite the best efforts of Jewish thinkers and communal leaders to separate religious and cultural aspects of Jewish practice.⁸ In the United States, Jews have embraced American conceptions of religion as an individual matter of belief and choice rather than one mandated by ethnicity and community, giving rise to dynamic, changing communal arrangements and rituals. As historian Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi wrote, “the blandly generic term secular Jew gives no indication of the richly nuanced variety within the species,” to which Eisen added, “the companion term ‘religious Jew’ conceals no less

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diverse an array of existential options, one which [a] focus on practice should help delineate. 9

The American Jews in this study identify across and beyond denominational structures, divisions that have become increasingly fluid. 10 They are women and men of all ages, and materials are produced for girls and boys of all ages. Nostalgia is a normative mode of American Judaism that fosters a particular, affective response to the past, cutting across the statistical categories of religious affiliation, gender, and age that delineate American Jews.

Moreover, American Jews express and produce nostalgic longing in a variety of communal institutions, including those generally understood as secular spaces. Genealogical archives and online databases, museums, bookstores, online toy stores, and kosher-style delicatessens are all examples of the supposedly secular contexts that provide physical and digital space for the American Jewish mitzvah of nostalgia. The creators, staff, and participants at each of these institutions these institutions, among others, encourage patrons to use their materials to form emotional connection to Jewish pasts that are inaccessible by other means. Often, staff members at such organizations minimize their own impact, emphasizing the authority of their patrons. As the Jewish Museum of Florida, located in two historic synagogue buildings, told its prospective members, “This Museum is about you—and for you.” 11 American Jewish nostalgic longing is “a practical consciousness,” or what cultural critic Raymond Williams termed “a structure of feeling,” an emotional reaction to the past that is learned and

10 Pew Research Center.
taught.\textsuperscript{12} While academics and others have disparaged nostalgia for its emphasis on exaggerated emotion, it is, in fact, a way of finding one’s place in the world and of laying claim to the past. The institutions of American Jewish nostalgia encourage their patrons to rest personal identities upon the past and claim ancestral heritages in ways that are meaningful beyond simplistic divisions among religion, spirituality, and culture.

\textbf{The Terms of the Past}

American Jews have long been guided by relationships to communal pasts, though those relationships have changed over time, as have the terms used to describe them. American Jews have drawn selectively from their historical experiences in order to communicate particular narratives about their collective pasts, developing a heritage designed to support individual Jewish identities and unify increasingly diverse communities. In the first half of the twentieth century, popular heritage narratives about colonial history and patriotic participation in the Civil War provided Jews, along with other ethnic and religious minorities, with historical narratives not found in professional histories.\textsuperscript{13} Today, even as historians’ subject matter grows ever more heterogeneous, popular heritage continues to provide communal meaning absent from mainstream historical accounts. These narratives of heritage have allowed Jews to connect their personal experiences and memories with those of the larger, transhistorical group.

The historiography of Jewish social memory begins, in large part, with \textit{Zakhor}, Yerushalmi’s influential study of Jewish memory. Yerushalmi identifies memory and history as

\textsuperscript{12} Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, Introduction to \textit{Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

“radically different relations to the past.”14 Jewish memory—by which he meant social or communal memory—conflated the past and the present, so that its practitioners identified with collective recollections. Interlocking social and religious institutions upheld Jewish memory, allowing Jews to enact and perpetuate this memory through shared rituals, liturgy, and lifestyle. In contrast, says Yerushalmi, since the nineteenth century, the declining number of participants in that traditional lifestyle, coupled with the emergence of critical Jewish scholarship, has led to the preeminence of historical assessments and the supposed decline of Jewish collective memory. The modern historian, unlike the Jewish practitioner of old, strives for an objective distance from the present concerns of the group. The historians’ search to recover a “total past,” explains Yerushalmi, contrasted with the drastic selectivity of a living relation to the past.15 Nonetheless, this clear distinction between memory and history, and Yerushalmi’s insistence that Jews lack the former in the modern period, is overdrawn. In the American context, Jewish social memory—of which nostalgia is an essential part—has been articulated not only through traditional practices and innovative religious rituals, but also through engagement with diverse materials typically understood as secular, from family photographs to pastrami sandwiches.16 History and memory, to whatever extent the two can be separated, work in tandem in a variety of quotidian and explicitly religious Jewish practices.

Later theorists have recognized a more complex relationship between history and memory, drawing attention to the ways that Jews, among others, may use each in the service of

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15 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 94.
the other. Questioning the expediency of demanding objective histories, an assumption underlying the differentiation between history and social memory, has become de rigeur.\textsuperscript{17} Amos Funkenstein has gone a step further in drawing attention to the manner in which “the historical story . . . sometimes becomes an integral part of the collective memory,” and Michael Schudson has similarly articulated how the past directs the present as much as present views reshape the past, creating an intricate interweaving of influences and dependencies.\textsuperscript{18} Beth Wenger, among others, has likewise complicated David Lowenthal’s distinction between history, an exploration of “pasts grown ever more opaque over time,” and heritage, which “clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes,” again drawing attention to the ways that both professional histories and popular heritages reflect present-day concerns.\textsuperscript{19}

In focusing on nostalgia, I join the scholarly conversation complicating the categories of Jewish memory, history, and heritage. American Jews’ enactment of nostalgia as a form of public history demonstrates an active social memory of the past. This memory values and builds upon historical scholarship about Jewish pasts but, as an imaginative process, does not rely entirely upon it. Conversations enacting American Jewish nostalgia take place in public and semi-public spaces—such as museums, privately owned restaurants, and online forums—and challenge the categories of professional and amateur historians.\textsuperscript{20} The affective connection of

\textsuperscript{17} See Peter Novick, \textit{That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).


\textsuperscript{20} In discussing the categories of amateur history and public history, I draw on the work of Bonnie Smith and Tammy Gordon. Smith’s work identifies the connection between the category of amateur history and women’s research and writing. While Smith’s work identifies an important phenomenon from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, in my
nostalgia bridges history and memory, serving as an integral part of American Jewish heritage that sanctifies a relationship with the past, provides meaning in the present, and looks toward the future.

Nostalgia depends on an evaluation of authenticity. In recent decades, authenticity has become a key term in conversations about American Jewish heritage and practice, as well as other forms of American Jewish identity-making. As religious studies scholar Stuart Charmé articulates, American Jews’ references to authenticity use “descriptive claims about historical continuity with particular traditions of the past as a source of authority for the present.”21 As cultural critic Lionel Trilling explains, authenticity is “a word of ominous import,” tied to conceptions of moral authority. The term is used to evaluate “whether objects of art are what they appear to be or are claimed to be, and therefore worth the price that is asked for them—or, if this has already been paid, worth the admiration they are being given.”22 Within the practices of American Jewish nostalgia, authenticity is evaluated by the emotions it elicits. The authentic objects of American Jewish nostalgia are those that create an abiding emotional connection to an imagined past.

In its emotional aspect, nostalgia bears a close relation to sentimentality and kitsch. Nostalgic longing, in many ways, is a backward-facing sentimentality. Cultural critics and

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22 Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), 11, 93.
philosophers have long critiqued sentimentality as an emotion too easily elicited and too easily discarded. “Nostalgia is to memory what kitsch is to art,” historian Charles Maier announced, dismissing nostalgia and kitsch at once.\(^\text{23}\) According to its critics, kitsch “is a debased copy of genuine culture that operates through formula, vicarious experience, and faked sensations.”\(^\text{24}\) Highbrow critiques of kitsch stem from the associations among beauty, truth, and goodness in a relation that indicates civilized moral uplift or even divine revelation. Building on these associations, the sentimentality of kitsch has been considered morally harmful because it supposedly portrays beauty that does not reflect truth, leading to moral impotence.\(^\text{25}\) Likewise, “nostalgia too easily mates with banality,” says scholar of comparative literature Svetlana Boym. It covers up the pain of loss by making a false, emotional substitute homecoming available on request. “The acceptance of the world of ready-made thoughts and emotions is static; it excludes reflective time.”\(^\text{26}\) At its worst, nostalgia and sentimentality may be considered “dangerous, like any ready-made emotion,” their prefabrication allowing the absence of individual, reflective thinking and a subsequent abdication of personal responsibility.\(^\text{27}\) Among others, philosopher Michael Tanner condemns sentimentality a “disease of the feelings,” an “unfocused emotion,” and an “excuse for indulgence.” He continues, “The feelings which are worth having are those which it costs an effort to have.”\(^\text{28}\) But nostalgia, sentimentality, and kitsch are not as easily


\(^{25}\) McDannell, 16.


\(^{27}\) Boym, 338.

wrought as these critics claim, as evidenced by how very hard the institutions I examine work to elicit them. Nor are they easily discarded; as I argue throughout this dissertation, nostalgia is a normative mode that underpins much of American Jewish familial and communal life. A less narrow, less derogatory view of sentimentality and nostalgia permits us a deeper view of the meaning-making practices of American Jews.

From Pathology to Mitzvah

Though we take nostalgia for granted today as a sentimental emotion, it is a supremely modern concept. Initially a diagnosable and curable disease, nostalgia was first identified by Johannes Hofer in his 1688 dissertation in Basel. At a time when doctors were focused on classifying diseases, Hofer diagnosed young Swiss mercenaries longing for their native land with a term he coined from the Greek nosos, return home, and algos, sorrow. Subsequent scholars and medics built upon Hofer’s “disorder of the imagination.” The neurologist Philippe Pinel described the symptoms, beginning with “a sad, melancholy appearance . . . countenance at times lifeless,” progressing to “a rather constant torpor” broken by fits of weeping while asleep. The worst cases refused to leave their beds, remaining obstinately silent and refusing food and drink, leading to malnutrition and eventual death. Unlike the more philosophical ailment of melancholia, which befell elite intellectuals such as monks and philosophers, nostalgia was a more lowbrow disease, afflicting soldiers, sailors, and country people who had moved to the cities. Political and military leaders were particularly concerned with the contagious nature of nostalgia, in that the infirmity of longing for distant homelands both enforced and challenged the emerging concepts of nationalism and patriotism. Treatment included leeches, purges, emetics, and blood-letting, and Hofer suggested “hypnotic emulsions,” “cephalic balsams,” and opium for

29 Boym. 5.
the later stages. A Russian general in 1733 found terror successfully restorative: he only had to bury alive two or three incapacitated nostalgic soldiers before the outbreak subsided. But the only certain cure remained a return home.\(^{30}\) Today, dissociated from its medical origins, nostalgia continues to transition fluidly between the states of personal affection and societal condition. Its anti-intellectual associations, too, haven proven surprisingly resilient, refashioned to an association with the “bad taste” of kitsch.

Though nostalgia was understood as a “contagious disorder” as late as World War II—the U.S. Surgeon General included it on a list of standard illnesses that might “spread with the speed of an epidemic” through induction centers—its sociological connotations had already come to the fore.\(^{31}\) Along with its medical history, the word has shed its core referent of homesickness, becoming a “murky and inchoate amalgam of sentiments.”\(^{32}\) Despite these etymological changes, studies of nostalgia have continued to insist upon defining the concept as a reflection upon personal experiences. As recently as 1979, in one of the first sociological monographs of nostalgia, Fred Davis found the idea of nostalgia for that which was not personally experienced so inconceivable as to be rhetorical:

> The past which is the object of nostalgia must in some fashion be a personally experienced past rather than one drawn solely, for example, from chronicles, almanacs, history books, memorial tablets, or, for that matter, legend. (Can I be nostalgic for the Ganges, a place I have never seen, or you for the Crusades, a time when you have never lived?)\(^{33}\)

Even Boym’s excellent study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, which examines nostalgia in the context of European émigrés, does not go beyond that which is personally experienced. “Nostalgia is

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\(^{33}\) Davis, 8.
about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory,” she explains.34

Americans have often had an ambivalent and contested relationship with nostalgia as a condition of acute homesickness. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans of European descent, homesickness could be a mark of a good and refined character. European Americans viewed the homesickness of Native Americans they forced to vacate ancestral lands as regressive, standing in the way of progress, and often refused to believe that enslaved African Americans shared their level of emotional sensitivity. By the nineteenth century, however, in the midst of the market revolution and the emergence of a full-fledged capitalist economy, as white Americans idealized the “self-made man,” they came to believe that those who were able to conquer their homesickness were the most culturally advanced. As Matt argues, Americans eschewed homesickness as they learned habits of rugged individualism that supported capitalist activity. Only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Matt contends, did Americans begin to publicly question the emotional restrictions that modern capitalism demanded of them.35

The modern phenomenon of Jewish nostalgia began in the nineteenth century, as Jews entered mainstream European society as recently emancipated citizens. Eisen has identified nostalgia as a prevalent theme in the writings of German, French, and British Jewish writings of the nineteenth century who had abandoned traditional Jewish religious practices for more enlightened models of behavior. These Jews, as Eisen argues, continued to believe that remembering their ancestors was a central component of Jewish practice and, as they deemphasized traditional ritual observance, awarded nostalgia “a centrality that it likely never

34 Boym, xvi.
before possessed” in Jewish practice. “Discontinuity with the past has rendered the memory and merits of those who inhabited it all the more precious a resource for religious and ‘secular’ commitments alike,” Eisen states.  

This dissertation builds upon Eisen’s view of nostalgia as the modern Jewish mitzvah, examining the cultural institutions and products of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that uphold and encourage this affective connection to American Jewish pasts. Most American Jews have not experienced the broadly acknowledged Jewish homelands of early modern eastern Europe and, closer at hand, the Lower East Side of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some had parents or grandparents who came from these milieus, but a direct ancestral connection is not a requirement for this nostalgia. Though they may not have personally experienced the objects of their collective nostalgia, I contend that American Jews have learned their nostalgia through engagement with material culture.

My project directly counters Davis’s claim that nostalgia cannot be drawn “from chronicles, almanacs, history books, memorial tablets, or . . . legend.” I concede that nostalgia cannot be acquired solely from study, but it can be communicated through material practices invoking an imagined community. Objects new and old, heritage sites, and food—that most ephemeral and intimate of substances—serve as emotionally evocative signs pointing to other contexts, physically linking those caught in the web of nostalgic longing to imagined pasts.

**The Geography of Nostalgia**

Like the original nostalgia of Hofer’s Swiss mercenaries, American Jewish nostalgia is a longing for particular places, though those places are inextricably linked to particular time periods through the retelling of origin stories. American Jewish nostalgia has two primary sites

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36 Eisen, 158.
of origin: the mythological shtetl and New York’s Lower East Side. These can be seen clearly in illustrated children’s books, which introduce homelands in simple terms and images. Amy Hest’s *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*, or instance, begins in the mythical Jewish shtetl: “Once, in a poor village far from here, there was a very small house with a slanting roof.” While it is not explicitly identified, the reader is meant to understand that the story begins in eastern Europe, based on the illustrations and on popular understandings of American Jewish pasts. Hest’s story follows the protagonist, Jessie, from the unnamed shtetl to the Lower East Side, which is explicitly identified. Jessie moves through the common geography of American Jewish nostalgia, reinforcing themes of longing for each imagined site.

As Jeffrey Shandler has identified, the term shtetl, Yiddish for “town,” began to appear untranslated in European languages, including English, much more frequently after World War II. In the wake of the destruction of European Jewry, “shtetl” came to stand in for an increasingly nostalgic vision of European, particularly eastern European Jewish life, generally imagined as backwards and pre-modern but warm in community spirit. As Jewish historian Hasia Diner writes,

> The masses of American Jews who have participated in the process of enshrining eastern Europe, usually described as a “shtetl” (small town), and the Lower East Side did not have to directly experience either place because the representations of both have played key roles in shaping American Jewish popular culture. They could be found almost anywhere. Their images ran through the imaginative world of American Jews as instant mnemonics of places that everyone knew, but, ultimately, few had lived in.

As Hest’s introductory sentence indicates, one does not even need to use the term word shtetl to suggest it. *Fiddler on the Roof*, both the 1964 musical and 1971 film based on the Tevye stories

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by Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, were also evidence of this phenomenon as well as the lodestar for future iterations.\textsuperscript{40} By 1960s and 1970s, American Jews had a common referent for an imagined communal past in terms such as “the shtetl,” “the Old Country,” and “eastern Europe.”

As American Jews of the mid- and late twentieth century reflected back on Jewish urban neighborhoods of the early twentieth century, particularly but not exclusively the Lower East Side, many of the feelings associated with the shtetl were transferred to this urban context.\textsuperscript{41} Like the shtetl, early twentieth-century immigrant Jewish experiences on the Lower East Side are depicted as a longed-for golden age to which American Jews cannot and do not wish to return. In both cases, place and time are conflated in the geography of nostalgia. As historian E.J. Hobsbawm noted in reference to preservationist efforts, which try to capture a lost time within a lost place,

> What people actually wish to restore is too vast and vague for specific acts of restoration. . . . It also suggests a strong symbolic element, perhaps even a form of magic which, by restoring a small but emotionally charged part of a lost past, somehow restores the whole.\textsuperscript{42}

In this way, American Jewish references to the Lower East Side serve as mnemonic substitute for the entirety of the Jewish immigrant experience.

At the same time, more broadly, New York came to stand in for all things Jewish, for both Jews and non-Jews. Even references to historically Jewish neighborhoods in other cities often serve as conduits for remembrances of New York themselves or use the Lower East Side as

\textsuperscript{41} See Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger, eds., \textit{Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and Diner, \textit{Lower East Side Memories}.
a referent. As Caryn Aviv and David Shneer assert, New York “is where Jewish identity and memory are manufactured, performed, reinvented, contested, and then circulated throughout the world.” New York is far from the only location where Jewish identity-making functions are produced and disseminated, and this project will examines people, institutions, and materials throughout the United States (and sometimes venturing into Canada, when Canadian creations have a significant impact on Jewish nostalgia south of the border).

Nonetheless, the idea of New York, particularly the Lower East Side, is undeniably central to the study of American Jewish nostalgia. But the New York that features most prominently in this project is the New York of an imagined past, an object of unfulfilled longing. Many American Jews have visited heritage sites of the Lower East Side, gone to historic synagogues or Jewish delis in traditionally Jewish neighborhoods elsewhere in the country, or travelled to Europe to see what has become of their ancestors’ origins. Yet even as they take these excursions, it remains impossible to reach the subject of nostalgia: time and memory have altered it. One practices nostalgia without directly experiencing the times and places for which one is nostalgic. It is one’s longing, not one’s location, that generates the practice of nostalgia.

The negative depictions of the physical conditions of the Lower East Side and other objects of nostalgia provide a complex narrative in line with stories of American Jews’ upward mobility. Rothstein’s depiction of the early days of the Eldridge Street Synagogue, which flourished, he said, “amid its neighborhood’s raucous, grinding poverty and slum tenements, and its residents’ intoxicating American ambitions and devout Old World beliefs” is a perfect example of this nostalgic mythology: In their subsequent upward mobility and moves to the more disparate neighborhoods and suburbs in the mid-twentieth century, this narrative suggests,

American Jews lost a kind of authentic uniform and unified Jewishness, those “Old World beliefs” that could not last long on American soil. This mythology, like much of American Jewish conversation about “assimilation,” imagines a move from an imagined, essentialized religious Judaism that is threatened by American culture toward watered-down Jewish identities or, in more catastrophic imaginings, the disappearance of American Jews altogether. Fears about assimilation rest on assumptions about a static European Judaism and a static capitalist Americanism. They take for granted that American Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were poor and religious, and that, by the turn of the twenty-first century, American Jews were financially well off and less religious. According to this mainstream narrative, when Americanism and Judaism collided, via the mass immigration of eastern European Jews, Judaism lost, and it has been on a downward slope ever since.

This declension narrative, the framework of American Jewish fears about assimilation, is historically inaccurate. It boldly overlooks the dynamic developments in Jewish culture and ritual in Europe and around the globe over the past two thousand years as well as change and diversity of culture and religion in North America over the past three centuries. It also fails to take into account wealthy Jews of the early twentieth century and impoverished Jews of the present day. Closely aligned with the assimilation narrative is a firm belief in “Hansen’s Law,” historian Marcus Lee Hansen’s 1930 assertion that what the second generation wishes to forget the third wishes to remember. As American Studies scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson articulates, the second generation forgot considerably less than was presumed by later generations. Examining newspaper accounts, public monuments, pageants, parades, and children’s books of the early and mid-twentieth century, “we get the feeling that, whatever death or slumber ethnicity
was supposedly ‘revived’ from in the ethnic revival, the hiatus could not have been very long,” Jacobson writes.44

Still, Hansen’s Law has shaped Americans’ understanding of the “ethnic revival” of the 1960s and subsequent decades. Both the declension narrative of American Jewish heritage and Hansen’s Law forces us to ask what engagement with this narrative provides American Jews. I contend that a brief excursion, physical or imaginary, to the misery of the mythological past provides more than a sense of self-satisfied comfort in the present. The intensity of nostalgic longing mirrors the imagined emotional connections between ancestors, real and fictional. At the same time, the affective connection of a conflicted, ambivalent nostalgia for the past highlights a narrative of progress, coupling longing for the past with the fervent if unstated hope that the perceived upward trend will continue in the future.

Case Studies and Methodology

In the following chapters, I examine the materials and practices of American Jewish nostalgia in four cases studies: the materials and practices of Jewish genealogy and family history, historic synagogues used as heritage sites, illustrated children’s books and dolls, and the culinary revival of the new Jewish food scene. To conduct this research, I engaged in the ethnographic research of participant observation within genealogical society meetings and historic synagogues in 2012 and 2013, for which I obtained exemption status from Princeton University’s Institutional Review Board, which oversees research on human subjects. Between 2012 and 2014, I conducted interviews with sixty people working in fields related to the material culture of Jewish nostalgia, including genealogists, authors, and software designers in the field of family history research; staff members and volunteers at heritage sites; philanthropists; authors,

illustrators, and editors of children’s books; Jewish communal professionals; and restaurateurs, cookbook authors, journalists, and entrepreneurs in the food industry. I obtained oral or written consent—in most cases, both—when conducting and recording these conversations. When possible, I conducted interviews in person, in my interlocutors’ places of business, in their homes, or in coffee shops, but the wide-ranging nature of my research necessitated a number of telephone interviews. Only one of my interviews was a group interview, a conversation with four board members of the Jewish Genealogical Society in New York. In addition to interviews and participant observation, my research draws upon examinations of family trees, memoirs, museum exhibits, websites, illustrated children’s books, dolls, menus, meals, and other iterations of the material cultures of American Jews. This wide-ranging research allows me to make claims about the broad phenomenon of American Jewish nostalgia as well as examine how it functions within particular locales, communities of like-minded people, and types of commerce.

To some extent, the categories I examine in each of my four case studies are discrete only for the organizational convenience of the reader. In reality, these categories continually overlap. Jewish genealogists visit historic synagogues as they search for their ancestors’ records and try to learn more about the worlds they inhabited. Public history organizations based in historic synagogues, for their part, often try to attract those interested in their own American Jewish family histories, whether or not they would call themselves genealogists. The Museum at Eldridge Street, for instance, has a Family History Center located in the former rabbi’s office of the synagogue, and the Jewish Museum of Florida frequently includes a “Florida Connection” addition to its exhibits, exhibiting family stories and artifacts on loan or donated by local members of the museum. Like most public history institutions, the historic synagogues I examine all have children’s programming, sometimes building upon themes in children’s books. The
Museum at Eldridge Street even offers an “All-of-a-Kind Family Walking Tour” of the Lower East Side based on the book, which takes places take place in the neighborhood. Many of the books and dolls I examine are sold in the historic synagogues’ gift shops. Finally, the connection to food is ever-present, as few American Jews do not connect to (or react against) their family and communal histories through food. The Museum at Eldridge Street, again, regularly offers “nosh and stroll” walking tours of the Lower East Side, enticing visitors to “take a tasty trip back in time to the turn of the last century.”LIKEWISE, the Jewish Museum of Florida displayed an exhibit entitled “Growers, Grocers & Gefilte Fish: A Gastronomic Look at Florida Jews in Food” and offered walking tours of Jewish-owned restaurants past and present in its once predominately Jewish neighborhood of South Beach on Miami Beach.

The connections between my case studies were embodied in the extraordinary person of David M. Kleiman (may his memory be a blessing). Kleiman passed away in January 2014. I am deeply saddened that I cannot share this dissertation with him and receive his feedback, and I regret that I did not have more conversations with him when I had the opportunity. Publisher, public historian, genealogist, and educator, Kleiman served on the Executive Council of the Jewish Genealogical Society in New York and was deeply involved in genealogy networks in New York and elsewhere, both Jewish and non-Jewish, as a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists and the Genealogical Speakers Guild and as the co-founder and chair of the New York Computers and Genealogy Special Interest Group. Kleiman was also the curator of the Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. Visitors Center at the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, the oldest synagogue building in the United States. As Kleiman told me, he and

his public history firm, Heritage Muse, became involved in the Touro Synagogue project because he and his wife, Kate Kleiman, had already worked with the donor, Ambassador Loeb, on a number of projects related to Loeb’s family history.47

Despite the deep connections between the materials and people I study, I have divided this dissertation into case studies by material types in order to explore nostalgic themes engendered by specific materials in depth. In the first chapter, I begin with the materials and practices of Jewish genealogy, in which one may see the most personal forms of nostalgia in sentimental relations to one’s ancestral pasts. Very little scholarly work has yet been done on Jewish genealogy, though it is a widespread phenomenon and one that has grown and changed rapidly with the increasing digitization of archival material and other technological advances. These digital worlds, I argue, should be considered within the framework of visual and material culture studies, based on how users physically interact with computers and speak about them like other physical materials. Based on ethnographic research, interviews, and studies of family books and websites, this chapter examines Jewish genealogists’ claims to authority and search for authenticity as they make use of the personal, historical material on which genealogy is based—the letters, documents, photographs, and heirlooms that may inspire a genealogical quest. As Jewish genealogists research their familial histories, they often come to view their research as a “spiritual journey” that provides them their own authoritative place in Jewish history.

Moving from the history of individuals to communal histories, I turn to the burgeoning industry of Jewish heritage tourism, particularly the use of historic synagogues as heritage sites. Drawing from ethnographic research at historic synagogues in New York City, Boston, Miami Beach, and Newport, Rhode Island and material culture studies of reconstructed buildings and promotional materials, this chapter examines how these sites now serve as urban tourist attractions, sites of communal gathering, and memorials to earlier Jewish communities. As symbols of the Jewish community, historic synagogues are popular settings for a family outing or a school field trip. Many of these synagogues were abandoned as Jews left ethnic enclaves in cities for the suburbs in the mid-twentieth century; some of them still serve as spaces of worship.

I engaged in participant observation of tours, public programming, and services held at these synagogues as well as the everyday work of staff members, and I conducted formal and informal interviews with staff members, congregants, museum interns, and visitors. I found that in serving as heritage sites, historic synagogues acquire a new public role within the Jewish community and the greater American public sphere as representatives of American Jewish culture, history, and religious practice.

My study proceeds with the future of nostalgia: children’s books and toys, which reveal the nostalgic attitudes that adults wish to pass on to the next generation, sometimes subtly and sometimes didactically. American Jews have long thought seriously and distinctively about educational materials for children, but an industry of materials for Jewish children’s entertainment and informal education has grown exponentially in recent decades. Approaching illustrated children’s books and dolls as objects of material culture, I have not only analyzed texts, the illustrations of books, the visual culture of dolls, but I have also conducted interviews with authors, illustrators, publishers, and others involved in creating and distributing these
materials, as well as analyzing responses to the books and dolls in newspapers and online. I focus on illustrated books endorsed and distributed by the PJ Library, which sends age-appropriate books with Jewish content free to Jewish or intermarried families with children in North America in order to influence families’ religious lives. I also examine Rebecca Rubin, the first Jewish character in the Mattel-owned Pleasant Company’s enormously successful American Girl collection of historical dolls, the Ellis Island Collection dolls, a popular item in Jewish gift shops, and Gali Girls’s representation of historical characters in books and dolls. These books and dolls are intended not only to impart about facts about Jewish American history but also to induce in the next generation a nostalgic longing for Jewish cultural origins in eastern Europe and ethnic neighborhoods in the United States.

In my last case study, I examine the commerce of American Jewish nostalgia through the intimate medium of food. By including a case study of food in this dissertation, I have made a deliberate choice to present this ephemeral medium as type of material culture, bringing together the fields of foodways and material culture studies. This chapter is based on interviews I conducted with restaurateurs, owners of food trucks, and distributors who are creatively reimagining American Jews’ hearty eastern European-based foodways in terms of current culinary emphases on local ingredients and sustainable practices, as well as public responses to their work. This culinary revival blends personal nostalgia and nostalgia for communal pasts that most American Jews have not personally experienced, interpreting certain iconic foods as indicative of an authentic Judaism. Most of these restaurants are “kosher style,” alluding to eastern European Jewish foodways without following traditional Jewish dietary laws. Instead, they turn to sustainability as a more meaningful source of religious authority. I conclude this chapter by analyzing the Brooklyn restaurant Traif, named after the Yiddish word for non-kosher.
Traif moves from kitsch to camp, inviting the restaurant customer to join in the nostalgic joke. Like historic synagogues, these businesses permit non-Jews to participate in the American Jewish practice of nostalgia both immediately and vicariously, raising questions about the boundaries of religious inclusion.

In this project, I do not claim that all American Jews are nostalgic or that all American Jews who engage the materials I examine are nostalgic. Rather, I see nostalgia as a powerful, normative mode of American Jewish religious thought and practice. Nostalgia is my term, not that of my subjects. I employ it as an analytic term that builds on and complicates scholarly conversations about Jewish memory, history, and heritage. American Jewish social memory has been articulated both through traditional religious rituals such as the Passover seder and by engagement with diverse materials typically considered secular, from family photographs to pastrami sandwiches. American Jewish nostalgia brings this social memory into the world of commerce, where it bridges historical scholarship, social memory, and quotidian practices. It serves as an integral, affective part of American Jewish heritage that can be bought and sold even as it provides a narrative and physical connection to the past, engenders meaningful relationships in the present, and offers values for the future. American Jews have cultivated nostalgic sentiments through engagement with certain objects, spaces, and words that connect them to an imagined community of Jews present and past. Emotional engagement with the material of nostalgia provides the basis for sacred relationships with people, places, objects in the present, remembered, and imagined. These relationships cross spatial and temporal boundaries, identifying both here and there, then and now as American Jews’ homes and homelands.

My study of American Jewish nostalgia highlights the ways that memory, long integral to Jewish cultural and religious practices, functions as a commercial practice and occurs in
everyday encounters at home and in the public sphere. This work aims to shift where scholars and Jews look for American Jewish religion. Since the mid-twentieth century, American Jewish communal leaders, bolstered by sociological studies, have agonized over the apparent decline in Jews’ religious practices. Fears about intermarriage and its effects on Jewish religious continuity have been articulated in sociological language from the pulpit, from Jewish organizations, and in large-scale philanthropy.48 These conversations have drawn divisions between recognizably religious Jewish practices, recognized as “good for the Jews,” and cultural Jewish practices, secularism, assimilation, and intermarriage, which are conflated under the category of “bad for the Jews”—or, obfuscated by academic sociological language, “the need to assess which features and trends enhance or thwart Jewish continuity.”49

In 2013, the Pew Research Center released its sociological study, A Portrait of Jewish Americans, which identified 78 percent of the 6.7 million Americans they identified as Jews as “Jews by religion.” The remaining 22 percent comprised the category of “Jews of no religion.”50 American Jews’ panicked public responses to the survey were ritualized and predictably alarmist.51 In newspapers, blogs, and from the pulpit, American Jews repeatedly interpreted the results in ways that intensified their fears of secularism and assimilation. Jane Eisner, editor-in-chief of the Jewish newspaper The Forward—who had in fact set this survey in motion—told

50 Pew Research Center.
The New York Times that she found the results “devastating,” because “I thought there would be more American Jews who cared about religion.” She continued, “This should serve as a wake-up call for all of us as Jews to think about what kind of community we’re going to be able to sustain if we have so much assimilation.”

Such concerns about religion and assimilation have a real impact on large-scale Jewish giving and community directives. Like previous surveys of American Jews, the Pew survey will have a marked effect on American Jewish philanthropy, organizational efforts, and communal conversations. But these identifications of which Jews are and are not religious should not be taken for granted. Beyond the door of the congregational synagogue or Jewish Communal Center, American Jews’ spiritual lives are rich, complex, and hard to pin down. American Jews with a broad array of religious affiliations and those with no affiliation engage in the ostensibly nonreligious activities of Jewish genealogical research, visiting Jewish historic sites, consuming markedly Jewish food, and purchasing books and toys that teach Jewish nostalgia to their children. These activities provide personally meaningful, emotionally driven engagement with American Jewish pasts that provides an affective connection to an imagined transhistorical Jewish community. Attention to American Jewish nostalgia identifies robust forms of religious meaning in works of public and private history, emphasizing the centrality of emotional and commemorative norms in American and Jewish religious practices.

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Chapter One

“Lost in the Diaspora”: Creating Jewish Genealogy

“I am a Dobromiler. I was born in New York but came out of a shtetl.”
—Arthur Kurzweil, From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History (1980)

In the summer 1977, Sallyann Amdur Sack’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Kathy, had just returned from a debate camp in Vermont, where, among other things, she learned how to do research. Browsing in a bookstore, she picked up a book about a Jewish genealogical research, journalist Dan Rottenberg’s newly published Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy.1 Returning home, Kathy handed the book to her mother, saying, as Sack recounted to me many years later, “Here, I brought you a present. I want to learn all about my ancestors.” Delighted that her fifteen-year-old daughter wanted to spend time with her mother, Sack enthusiastically agreed to research their family history. Following Rottenberg’s instructions, mother and daughter began sending letters to relatives, asking for permission to interview them. “And then,” Sack told me, “because Kathy was fifteen, the inevitable happened. She got a boyfriend.” Kathy quickly lost interest in the project, but her mother was still receiving replies to their letters. “And it was so fascinating,” Sack said. “People who do genealogy, or do Jewish genealogy, will tell you it’s like a virus. It just sort of bites you. In any case, I started answering all the letters and corresponding. And before I knew it, it was just an obsession.”2

Sack’s obsession would lead her to become one of the leading figures in the nascent movement of Jewish genealogy; she is sometimes called the “godmother” of the field.3 Though

2 Sallyann Amdur Sack, telephone interview by author, April 28, 2012.
Sack’s influence on the field is remarkable, her introduction to Jewish genealogy through Rottenberg’s manual was not uncommon. Rottenburg’s book was the first Jewish genealogy research manual, and it had an enormous impact, reaching American Jews who were struggling to research their ancestry and those who had long assumed that there was no way to research Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry. Writing in *Commentary* in 1980, a young professor named Jonathan Sarna—who would go on to become arguably the most prominent historian of American Jews—described Rottenberg as “the Dr. Spock of Jewish root-seekers.” Like pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock’s 1946 bestseller, *Baby and Child Care*, Rottenberg’s *Finding Our Fathers* was the progenitor of a new genre of how-to books, teaching its audience both to rely upon the advice of experts and to find their own authority. Drawing upon the popularity of the roots movement, the white ethnic heritage revival beginning in the 1970s, *Finding Our Fathers* signified a new age of Jewish searches for lineage, heritage, authenticity, and authority.

In this chapter, I examine Rottenberg and Sack’s field of Jewish genealogy, an enormously popular activity that blurs the line between hobby and religious practice and reveals the significant role of nostalgia among American Jews. Following an introduction to the activity, I examine the rise in popularity of Jewish genealogy in the United States throughout the second half of the twentieth century, which developed alongside technological advances. Organizational development of Jewish genealogy has led to an increasing commodification and commercialization of the activity, even as it remains a highly personal venture. Asking what motivates Jewish genealogists, I interrogate their searches for authentic histories and their understandings of their own authority before turning to the concept of Jewish genealogy as a spiritual activity. Finally, I conclude the chapter by examining one of the features that sets

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Ashkenazi genealogy apart from the genealogy of other ethnic groups—the concept of Jewish genealogy as a memorial for Holocaust victims. To pursue this research, I have conducted interviews, pursued ethnographic participant observation, and engaged in material culture and literary studies in order to arrive at a robust understanding of the lived religion of Jewish genealogy. I have examined the written materials of Jewish genealogy, in print and online, including how-to manuals, trade journals, memoirs, family history books, institutional websites, and personal blogs. I attended Jewish Genealogical Society meetings in New York and interviewed Jewish genealogists throughout the United States, including both amateurs and professionals, terms that hold a particular meaning for genealogists, as discussed below. I spoke with genealogists across the spectrum of Jewish life and of varying ages. As ethnographic research lends itself to anecdotal claims rather than statistical ones, balancing findings from my ethnographic work with analyses of national Jewish genealogical publications allows me to make claims about larger trends.

Genealogists, Jewish and otherwise, regularly ask weighty, existential questions such as “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” They find the answers to these questions about individual identity in “ancestral legacies,” accounts of people’s lives from before their birth, through which they create a personal connection to the events of Jewish history by means of their emotional resonance. The ordinariness of these identity questions should make them no less remarkable. As a leisure activity, Jewish genealogy is usefully described as “holy leisure,” Troy Messenger’s descriptive term for particular communities’ understanding of mundane activities as sacred within certain contexts.5 In this chapter, I defamiliarize the process of asking and answering the commonplace questions of genealogy in order to understand the sacred, meaning-

making work genealogical research and recording does for individuals and communities. Jewish genealogists often conflate personal identities and ancestral legacies to create a personal connection to a broader sense of Jewish history, beyond their own genealogical lineage. In turn, as genealogists acquire a sense of authority as historical researchers, their emotional engagement with broader, “authentic” Jewish history becomes a personal possession, something they can make their own.

At Jewish genealogy conferences, Arthur Kurzweil, author of the popular manual From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History directly connects genealogy to familiar Jewish practices. He reminds audiences of the injunction of the haggadah, the text read at the Passover seder, which quotes from Exodus 13:8: “In every generation, each individual is bound to regard himself as if he had gone personally forth from Egypt, as it is said, ‘And you shall relate to your son that day saying, “This is on account of what the Lord did for me, when I went forth from Egypt.’” The command makes historical events one’s own, giving the descendant ownership over events that occurred to his or her ancestors.

Kurzweil extends this scriptural command for personal, empathetic allegiance to the miracles of the biblical past to the more recent, but still mythical past: “I am a Dobromiler,” he says, identifying as a resident of his ancestral town in Poland. “I was born in New York but came out of a shtetl.” Without ever having laid foot in Dobromil, Kurzweil claims it as his own, in a

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7 Adapted from Passover Haggadah, Deluxe Edition, The Coffees of Maxwell House (Kraft General Foods, Inc., 1991), 25. Created as an advertisement for the coffee company, the Maxwell House haggadah is the most widely-circulated haggadah in the world, with over fifty million copies printed since its creation in 1934.

8 Kurzweil, Generation to Generation, 11. In modern Jewish discourse, the shtetl, the small town of eastern Europe, especially Poland and Russia, where Jews were the majority in the population and set the tone of life, has become an idealized archetype of idyllic pre-modern Jewish life. For
move he finds as obligatory as the biblical command to remember the Exodus. In line with much of American Jewish memory practice, the genealogical act of social and religious memory is one that centers on a nostalgic search for an authentic past, such as Kurzweil’s Dobromil, and involves claims of ownership and authority.

“We must immerse ourselves in their worlds”

As a Jewish practice, genealogy is both very new and very old. The Hebrew Bible records lineages, long lists of who “begat” whom, in the language of the King James Bible. Though some Jewish genealogists draw inspiration from this biblical precedent, their pursuit is a relatively new leisure activity that gained traction with Americans’ “ethnic revival” in the 1970s and following decades. In the last few decades, Jewish genealogy has become increasingly organized, institutionalized, and commercialized, creating fields and products labeled Jewish in distinction to mainstream genealogy. At the same time, Jewish genealogists, like other genealogists, remain independent researchers, pursuing the histories of their own families. This structure, an increasing commercialization balanced against continued individual sentiment, is characteristic of American Jewish nostalgia, which has followed this trend since the 1970s, when the Jewish heritage industry grew out of a broader trend of Americans’ ethnic revivals. On JewishGen, the leading online, non-profit resource for researching Jewish genealogy, users post images of letters, official documents, family photographs, and gravestones on the site’s ViewMate section, asking each other for help in identifying people pictured or for translation.

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9 For more on Americans’ ethnic revival, beyond Jews, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006).
Though they work through a corporate (if not-for-profit) entity that encourages a sense of community and shared purpose, they remain motivated by individual interests.

Today, genealogy is a wildly popular pastime, both among Americans in general and American Jews more specifically. In 1995, *American Demographics* reported that a poll found that four in ten American adults, or 113 million, were “at least somewhat interested in genealogy.” Seven percent, or 19 million Americans, said that they were involved a great deal in tracing their lineage. Adults across all age brackets were interested in researching their genealogies, though the middle-aged showed the most interest. Interest in the activity was also spread across income levels, though those with disposable income, household incomes of $55,000 or more, showed the most enthusiasm, an unsurprising finding for a leisure activity that can take up as much time and money as one allows it.\(^\text{11}\) In 2011, JewishGen reported 409,617 registered users on their site, up from 106,526 in 2004.\(^\text{12}\) Jewish genealogy has become increasingly popular across demographic categories of age, gender, and income, and it has become increasingly tied to technological advances.

In the United States, genealogy began as a recording of lineages, in which genealogists traced a few lines of descent that conferred social status. Hereditary societies that formed after the Civil War, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, used genealogical research as a means to an end, largely upper-class, nativist statements about their members’ unequivocal status as an Americans in the face of unprecedented immigration from eastern and southern Europe. At the same time, over the course of the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints came to believe that their

\(^{11}\) Jennifer Fulkerson, “Climbing the Family Tree,” *American Demographics* 17, no. 12 (December 1995): 44.

missionary work could be continued in the afterlife, or “spirit world.” Genealogical research to collect the names of the dead became an essential part of this otherworldly missionary work. The Genealogical Society of Utah, now officially known as the Family History Department of the Church, was founded in 1894. Mormons quickly became the premier researchers and collectors of their own and others’ genealogy. They have gained the respect and gratitude of other American genealogists, though the purpose of their genealogical research, the sacred ordinances they perform on behalf of the dead, is not without controversy. Meanwhile, as Mormons and nativists organized their genealogical efforts, American historians trained in the emerging “scientific methods” worked to differentiate their studies from those of genealogists and local historians. These historians emphasized their thorough research, objective analysis, and careful documentation. In large part, historians’ bias against genealogy persists, even as historians question the futility of aspiring for objectivity and much of genealogical work has become more thoroughly researched and better documented. Today, some Jewish genealogists are fighting an uphill battle for academic recognition, particularly under the auspices of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy (IIJG).

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It seems likely that some American Jews began researching their family histories in the early twentieth century, though they did so quietly and independently. By the mid-twentieth century, the rise of social history expanded scholarly and popular interests in family and local histories, including among Jews. Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern, later called the “father of Jewish genealogy,” published his *Americans of Jewish Descent*, a documentation of the earliest American Jewish families, in 1958, on the cusp of this sea change. As more Jews became interested in tracing their family histories, they learned what Sack calls the “basic truth” that Jewish genealogical research differs from that of other peoples of European descent. Joining a local, nonsectarian society help did not Jewish genealogists learn how trace their own ancestors. “To find the documents and traces left by our ancestors . . . we must immerse ourselves in their worlds,” Sack explained. Jewish genealogists needed “to understand the cultural and religious traditions, the naming patterns, and many other specific details related to history and geography.” Because Jewish genealogy requires a broad knowledge of Jewish history, culture, and religion, Jewish genealogical societies regularly host Jewish historians and other authors to speak to their groups about their research.

In general, Jewish genealogy also has a much shorter range than that of most other non-Jewish Europeans. For one thing, most Jewish genealogists, like most American Jews, are descended from Ashkenazi Jews, a group that largely did not adopt surnames until the late

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eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, the Holocaust has an enormous impact upon research possibilities, choices, and interpretation of Jewish genealogy, as in other aspects of Jewish life. Because the majority of American Jews have European ancestry, most American Jewish families have relatives of some kind who were killed in the Holocaust. Holocaust research involves the use of particular books, records, and institutions, both in the United States and abroad, that differ from the resources that non-Jewish genealogists would use. In some cases, genealogists may find that the considerable records of Holocaust atrocities simplify their search; in others, the details of what happened to their relatives have yet to be uncovered. Finally, Jews have developed particular ways of thinking about genealogy as a religious or spiritual activity, building upon traditional Jewish memorial activities and notions of Jews as a “people of memory,” as well as upon American conceptions of spirituality.

American Jewish genealogy arose out of a dramatic increase in genealogy among all Americans. The constitutive event in American genealogy occurred in 1976, the year of America’s bicentennial celebration, when Alex Haley published his famous tome, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. A twelve-hour television miniseries based on the book appeared on ABC in January 1977 to much fanfare. Over half of the novel and the miniseries recount the story of Kunte Kinte, an African boy captured just outside his village in Gambia and taken on a slave ship to America. The story continues with six generations of his descendants, ultimately leading to Alex Haley. *Roots* and the genealogical fervor and ethnic pride it inspired challenged the master narrative of American history, in the same year that state and local celebrations of the bicentennial across the country offered a multiplicity of American histories. *Roots* has been credited with a great deal: inspiring African Americans’ renewed interested in Africa, furthering interest in “hyphenated American” identities of other ethnicities, enabling both blacks and whites
to see African American history in a sympathetic light, and igniting Americans’ interest in
genealogy. While *Roots* was a symptom as much as a cause for many of these cultural shifts, it
certainly marked a turning point. Among many others, Warren Blatt, the president of JewishGen,
credits *Roots* for first inspiring him, at the age of fourteen, to puzzle out relationships in his large
extended family. When *Roots* came under attack for historical inaccuracy, Haley defended his
work as the “symbolic history of a people.” As Haley recognized, the significance of *Roots* was
not in its details but in its ability to educe Americans’ desire to create a personal connection to
ethnic pasts.

In the midst of Americans’ “roots craze,” Jewish genealogy publications and
organizations began in earnest. In 1977, Dan Rottenberg published the first American Jewish
genealogy manual, *Finding Our Fathers: A Guidebook to Jewish Genealogy*. Explaining the
need for a manual specifically devoted to Jewish genealogy, Rottenberg described the
genealogists’ exploration of Jewish history in lurid terms:

> We are now ready . . . to plunge deeper into the past, and this excursion will inevitably
take us into that dark, strange, confusing and very exciting land known as the Diaspora.
> Just as a tourist is likely to be left behind on a safari if he shows up wearing a fedora and
loafers instead of a pith helmet and swamp boots, so you are likely to get lost in the
Diaspora if you’re unprepared.

Caught up in what became known as the roots craze, Rottenberg’s excitement was palpable. (An
implicit allusion to Haley’s saga of African American history and identity-making might be
found in Rottenberg’s description of genealogy as a safari in a “dark” land, referencing the
romanticized Africa.) Rottenberg’s manual, and the others that would follow his lead, did much

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20 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the
21 Sallyann Amdur Sack, “Susan King Steps Down as JewishGen Director: Warren Blatt
22 Landsberg, 105.
23 Rottenberg, 40.
to establish Jewish genealogy as a distinct category. These books provide an accessible entry into
the field, introducing novice genealogists to the methods and resources for Jewish genealogical
research. They also provide a significant avenue by which authors and readers can establish
themselves as experts on family and Jewish history, as well as opening the door to question such
stances of authority. Furthermore, they provide an introduction to the prevailing sentiments that
provide an affective structure by which to understand this research.

As Jewish genealogists began to convene, helping each other learn how to research their
ancestries by building upon the work of Rottenberg and others, they developed their own set of
terminology. The founding of the first Jewish Genealogical Society (JGS) in New York and the
publication of the first issue of Toledot, the first Jewish genealogical journal, by Arthur Kurzweil
and Stephen Siegel, both also in 1977, would be instrumental in developing the language and
tools of Jewish genealogy. The popular excitement about ancestry sparked by Roots was “an
opportunity not to be missed,” one of JGS’s founders later explained.24

Would-be Jewish genealogists were delighted to learn that the popular conception that
“wars, persecution and the Holocaust had destroyed every record” of prewar Jewish life in
Europe was largely untrue. As Schelly Talalay Dardashti, creator of the popular Jewish
genealogy blog “Tracing the Tribe,” wrote,

We were told that villages were destroyed. . . . We were told that no one was
interested. . . . We were told that no relatives were left, although families separated by
decades or centuries have been miraculously reunited.25

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24 Neil Rosenstein, “Founding of Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc.” Avotaynu 13, no. 1 (Spring
25 Schelly Talalay Dardashti, “Family History: A Link in the Jewish Identity Chain,” Women’s
But researchers found that “villages did survive, as did cemeteries and even some ancestral homes.” They found older family members willing to speak to them. “Against all odds, reunions have brought together branches lost for nearly a century.”26

As Jewish genealogists organized themselves, they held their first conference in 1981, a three-day affair attended by about ninety genealogists from around the country.27 Conference-goers encouraged each other to create local JGSs in their hometowns, and by 1987 thirty such groups existed throughout the United States. In 1985, Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Sack founded Avotaynu: The International Review of Jewish Genealogy. The journal, Sack told me, “served the purpose of being the voice for Jewish genealogy, causing people to feel that there was a community and that they could participate in it.”28 Conferences, journals, manuals, and genealogical societies heartened Jewish genealogists, who found others who shared their interests and encountered similar challenges, guiding those “lost in the Diaspora,” in Rottenberg’s words. They shared their frustrations and techniques for acquiring information from their ancestral homelands in communist countries, behind the Iron Curtain.

“The medium is the message”

As I asked Jewish genealogists how they initially became involved their research, many of them related personal histories centered around materials, both primary sources and research tools. Marla Raucher Osborn, for instance, began our conversation by telling me that she had been recognized as the family member who was interested in family history since she was a young teenager. She organized her personal history in terms of the resources she used:

[I] collected the photographs and talked to the grandparents and did recordings and that sort of thing. But it really wasn’t until probably the late ’90s, when Ellis Island records

26 Dardashti.
27 Fisher, 67.
28 Sack, interview.
went online, and I still had a grandmother living, and I actively then really started pursuing this, looking for records from Ellis Island, and also from NARA, the National Archives. And I think it was probably in ’98 or ’99 I got my first genealogy program on the computer, which was Family Tree Maker. . . There’s a long history of me being the hub of this [family history]. It just takes different forms. Photographs, stories, and now I’m over here in Europe actually doing research in archives and that sort of thing.29

As Osborn’s personal history indicates, genealogy is not only inseparable from the primary sources of Jewish history, but also the tools that genealogists use, including digital technologies. The history of Jewish genealogy is, in fact, tied to the history of technology.

As an activity that creates cosmological meaning for individuals and their communities, genealogy is usefully analyzed in light of studies of lived religion and material religion that pay

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29 Marla Raucher Osborn, Skype interview by author, August 24, 2012.

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careful attention to what people do, the meaning they attribute to the objects they use, and the relationships they create. Though genealogy supposedly traces the intangible connections between generations, it relies heavily upon the material realm, both imagined and immediately tangible. As Bill Gladstone writes in the Jewish genealogy journal *Avotaynu*, Jewish genealogists pursue their research for the “the emotional payoff that comes from rooting through antiquated records in musty archives, entering the forbidding precincts of old cemeteries, and traveling vast distances to ancestral villages in search of an authentic connection to our family’s past.”

Family photographs, heirlooms, or documents may pique a future genealogist’s curiosity. Genealogists search for more evidence of family history in old civic records in archives and online databases. Increasingly, genealogists rely on online scans of original documents rather than transcriptions of originals, as was the case in the past, and it is important to remember here that the virtual is no less a form of material culture than any physical object. Scientific innovations have added to the diversity of the material culture of genealogy, as researchers encourage their family members to undergo DNA testing to trace long-term biological relations. Using these diverse materials, genealogists are inspired by the “authentic” materials of the past and, more broadly, search to understand a purportedly authentic past, one that elicits emotion and bolsters personal and communal identity. As they do so, genealogists find their own authoritative voices as they compile their findings in notebooks and computer programs and as they share them on online, in journal articles, and in manuals.

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Jewish genealogy burgeoned in the 1990s, as the fall of the Soviet Union enabled easier access to records. This genealogical work paralleled and often overlapped with the growth of heritage travel, as American Jews began to travel increasingly to their family homelands in central and eastern Europe with the opening of international borders. At the same time, the advent of the Internet and related technologies allowed increasing digitization of documents and increased communication and cooperation among researchers. Jewish genealogy’s primary online presence has its origins in the dial-up bulletin board for Jewish genealogy that Susan King

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created from her home in Houston, Texas in 1987. King created a FIDOnet echo she called JewishGen, which initially served as an electronic forum for about 150 participants to share information about tracing their Jewish ancestry. In 1989 to 1990, she began using the Internet to create a mailing list and, to make the forum most accessible to individuals all over the world, she offered a bulletin board, email, and newsgroup options.32

King had a degree in communications, and as she later told me, she had been firmly inculcated with Marshall McLuhan’s dictum that “the medium is the message.” She saw the Internet as another communications medium. Between her background in broadcast communications and marketing, and her personal interest in her family history, “the building of JewishGen really just pulled together all the tools in my toolbox,” she told me.33 “The Internet was new and nobody knew what was going to happen. But we had a goal,” she said:

Number one, to connect and reconnect Jewish families who were separated by the Holocaust. Number two, to be an educational [resource], to teach people how to do their Jewish research. Number three, as the Internet started to grow, was to provide both types of databases that were active where people could input data about their families so that people could connect, to be part of the connection process. The Internet kind of guided us a little bit different because it was just there and we just kind of rode right on the wave.34

Interest in Jewish genealogy paralleled technological advances. JewishGen moved online in 1993 as an electronic mailing list and Usenet newsgroup. The JewishGen website was created in 1995, and the first online databases were accessible a year later.35 As the Internet and interest in Jewish genealogy developed in tandem, Jewish genealogists began to feel like a community. Reflecting back on the early days of JewishGen, Sack told me that King’s personality helped bring the community together. “Susan was the kind of person who had the ability to make people feel that

33 Susan King, telephone interview by author, May 2, 2012.
34 King, interview.
they were a part of a team, in helping to develop this,” Sack told me.\textsuperscript{36} King and the early users of her programs were building a community even as they were developing technological tools.

The starting place for many Jewish genealogists and a continual resource throughout their research, JewishGen was arguably the most important Jewish genealogical institution in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It became a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization in 2001. Primarily run by volunteers, JewishGen includes a series of webpages and databases; hosts Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which foster conversations among genealogists researching certain ancestral areas, unlike JGSs uniting researchers presently living in the same area; and provides other services for researchers.\textsuperscript{37} In 2003, JewishGen became affiliated with New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage, located in lower Manhattan. The affiliation provided a measure of administrative stability and professionalization for JewishGen, whose volunteers had found that demand for their services had outpaced their abilities to provide them. The museum hired five JewishGen employees and assumed responsibility for its administration, though King, still based in Houston, continued as its managing director. At the time, King described the “marriage” of the two organizations as beshert (Yiddish for fated, as in a couple meant to be together). The Museum of Jewish Heritage is located in Battery Park City in lower Manhattan, overlooking Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, “the symbolic point of entry of the personal research of most American Jews,” as well as the literal point of entry for many of their ancestors.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite public declarations of enthusiasm on the part of both JewishGen and the museum at the time of the merger, affiliation with the museum proved to be insufficient to stabilize

\textsuperscript{36} Sack, interview.
\textsuperscript{37} Sack, “Susan King,” 19.
JewishGen. While the museum had supposedly taken responsibility for JewishGen’s administration, the genealogical organization remained dependent upon donations and volunteers for data acquisition and transcription projects. Susan King stepped down as director of JewishGen in 2008. Later that year, the new director, Warren Blatt, announced it had entered into a cooperative agreement with Ancestry.com, the dominant for-profit genealogy search website, allowing JewishGen to post some of its databases on Ancestry’s site.39

The resulting uproar underscores how American Jewish nostalgia institutional contests frequently underlie nostalgia and, indeed, lead to its creation. A number of Jewish genealogists saw the move to affiliate with Ancestry.com, which requires a paid subscription to access its databases, as JewishGen “selling out.” Irate genealogists sent the director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage “nearly incoherent, even threatening messages,” particularly before it was made clear that JewishGen would remain free.40 Writing in Avotaynu, Sallyann Sack responded defensively to those who derided the agreement, explaining, “This is one of those delightful win/win situations.” JewishGen gained financial stability and “desperately needed technical support.” With access to Ancestry’s databases, Jewish genealogists have the potential to discover more family connections, and Ancestry users would have some reciprocal access to JewishGen’s


resources. Currently, the JewishGen website describes the organization as “an affiliate of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust” and “powered by Ancestry.com.” More than money was at stake in Jewish genealogists objections to JewishGen’s merger with Ancestry, though that was certainly important. Like other heritage institutions, JewishGen purports to represent a community and has the power to define communal identity and who is a member of that community.

In addition to the databases of records compiled at JewishGen and other sites, advances in DNA studies have also contributed to Jewish genealogical research. A number of molecular genetic studies have been published over the last few decades concerning the origins of Jewish populations and communities. A number of recent studies have focused on the discovery of the Cohen Modal Haplotype, a set of markers found on the Y-chromosome of many Ashkenazi and Sephardi men who claim to be cohanim (the plural of cohen), or members of the priestly class; according to Jewish tradition, the cohanim are descended from the biblical Aaron, brother of Moses. The study provides genetic evidence for the relationship of Sephardim and Ashkenazim despite centuries of separation between these communities. As religious studies scholar Sarah Imhoff has written, the study has been used to validate religious traditions. Scientific findings are used in the service of “a racialist logic of Jewish identity,” emphasizing heritable characteristics and race.42

In 2001, Jewish genealogist Bennett Greenspan founded Family Tree DNA, the first company to develop the commercial application of DNA testing for genealogical purposes.

Previously, such tests had been available only for academic and scientific research. The company originated from Greenspan’s own frustration with dead-end paper trails in his family history research. As he told me, he had been interested in family history since he was a boy. Greenspan had “picked up and put down and picked up and put down my genealogy many times” throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, “always quitting because I would run into paper trail roadblock that I couldn’t get beyond.” In the 1990s, using JewishGen’s databases, Greenspan got in touch with a woman in Buenos Aires who was searching for relatives with the same last name he was tracing. This time, having reached the end of paper resources, Greenspan contacted University of Arizona Professor Michael Hammer, one of the coauthors of a Y-chromosome study of cohanim in 1997. Hammer agreed to analyze Greenspan’s DNA and that of his Buenos Aires contact to confirm their genetic relationship. At that point, said Greenspan, I convinced them to kind of go into business with me, with me buying services from them and me explaining the science on the front end, with them providing the wet work from the laboratory on the back end. So the deal was ‘Nobody calls me. You don’t make my phone ring’—that’s what the university said. ‘We don’t want to deal with these genealogists. We just want to deal with the science.’ So I have had the opportunity to work with thousands of Jews of all stripes.

Family Tree DNA, and its parent company Gene by Gene, owned by Greenspan and Max Blankfeld have grown tremendously, forming partnerships with other genomics research institutions that allowed them access to larger databases and markets. By now, Family Tree DNA, “Family Tree DNA Reaches a Historic Milestone: Over 500,000 DNA Tests, Family Tree DNA,” https://www.familytreedna.com/pdf/Press-Release-500k-milestone.pdf.

Bennett Greenspan, telephone interview by author, May 2, 2012.


Greenspan, interview.

DNA boasts 672,703 records, “the largest ancestry DNA database in the world!” The company now offers not only Y-chromosome (Y-DNA) and mitochondrial DNA tests, which test genetic relationships through straight paternal or maternal lines, but also a “Family Finder” test that uses autosomal DNA to trace genetic lines across gender lines. Greenspan advertised the product with the slogan, “Sex doesn’t matter any more.” Family Tree DNA holds the world’s largest DNA database for matching Ashkenazi Jewish male Y-DNA samples and, through Avotaynu, Mokotoff and Sack have urged Jewish genealogists to register their DNA with Family Tree DNA in order to consolidate the database of Jewish genetics. “When even a single, unique Jewish male Y-DNA sample goes into a database other than the ‘Jewish DNA Central’ database, this is a loss for the entire community,” they wrote.

While genetic studies of Jews have been used to support ideas of Jews as a race, more often, Jewish genealogists use it in conjunction with research based on documents and artifacts. Through online connections at MyFamily.com, a site owned by the same parent company as Ancestry.com, Elise Friedman, president of the Jewish Genealogy Society of Maryland, found thirty families with the family name she was researching, Palevsky. She convinced four of the families to take DNA tests and results showed they were related. “We matched,” Friedman told a

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49 Autosomal DNA, inherited from both parents, controls physical characteristics. Autosomal DNA testing scans all of an individual’s chromosomes without gender restrictions and can establish family relationships back to the generation of a person’s great-great-great-great-grandparents. Sallyann Amdur Sack-Pikus, “Family Tree DNA Develops Cross-Gender Test to Find Cousins,” Avotaynu 26, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 12–13.
50 Sack-Pikus, “Family Tree DNA.”
reporter. “I still have to do the research on how we’re related. But the DNA tests put us on the track.” As Bennett Greenspan writes,

People often ask, ‘Can DNA tell me if I am Jewish?’ The answer, of course, is “no,” since DNA shows genetic history while religion refers to one’s current belief system. If, however, the question is reframed as, ‘Can DNA reveal if someone has Jewish ancestry?’ then the answer is ‘yes’—under some circumstances.

In many ways, the history of Jewish genealogy research is the story of increasing institutionalization and commercialization of an inherently individualistic research experience and of personal meaning-making. There are practical reasons why the broadening scope of genealogy institutions benefits family history researchers, who gain access to more data and interaction with others who will share information and expertise with them. But tensions between individualistic and corporate missions remain. As Dardashti told a reporter, genealogy “has become so much more popular just because there are so many more resources accessible. You can sit at home in your jammies and bunny slippers and connect.” With the growth of Internet databases, interest in genealogical societies and even online forums has waned. (Longtime Jewish genealogists insist, with good reason, that newcomers who think they can navigate these documents on their own are ignorant of the complexity of Jewish genealogical research.) Still, even as technological advances seem to have spurred a return to a more individualistic model, the corporate nature of online genealogical research means that the activity remains a commodity, one that is interpreted within personal, communal, and institutional frameworks.

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“What does it matter if they are true?”

When I spoke with her in the summer of 2012, Linda Cantor, a retired teacher who served as president of the Jewish Genealogical Society in New York from 2007 to 2010, explained to me that genealogists get absorbed in family lore, fascinated by the lives and backgrounds of the people they trace:

It’s not just that we’re looking for names on a family tree—but as you get involved you get interested in reading about the history of what was going on in Europe. What were their lives like? Most of us don’t have pictures of the people, but we can look at the towns. We are in contact with other people whose families come from there [and] some of them have photographs. It just becomes this quest to really know our history beyond our own family.

Even as Jewish genealogy has become increasingly institutionalized and commodified, genealogists continue to use traditional methods of documenting lives through paperwork, artifacts, and stories from relatives and neighbors. Genealogy is, in large part, the search for an authentic past, involving concern for materials tied to particular, earlier periods and, more generally, a desire for an earlier, mythically foundational period. Heirlooms, photographs, documents, other objects acquired from the past acquire an aura of authenticity, both promising and inscrutable. For genealogists, authenticity is a measure of whether objects and, more abstractly, historical periods are deserving of their attention and admiration. Ultimately, for many genealogists, the measure of an object’s authenticity often lies in the emotion it elicits. The genealogist’s object is “not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present.” Rather, engagement with the object allows the genealogist “to envelop the present within the past.”

The genealogist’s authentic objects point to an unavailable time, the inaccessibility of their origin evoking longing for that which cannot

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56 Susan Stewart’s analysis of souvenirs is relevant to this analysis of genealogists’ artifacts. The two are not identical cases but have much in common. Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 151.
be reached. The strategies genealogists employ to deal with these opaque markers of a purportedly authentic past challenge simplistic divisions between history and memory, inspiring genealogists to develop complicated ethical reactions to historical “truth.”

Genealogists’ historical research draws upon the categories cultural historians refer to as history, memory, and heritage, understood as cultural meaning in the present that relies on historical narratives about the past. Like other examples of American Jewish nostalgia, genealogists’ interest in their pasts should be understood within the context of Jewish heritage production. But genealogists also move between the formal materials of history—artifacts and documents—and the more fluid category of memory, both in their ancestors’ stories and their own interpretations. Throughout their negotiations in search of a “true” past and a meaningful present, their nostalgic connection to the objects and stories of the past provides the ultimate measure of authenticity.

For genealogists, objects become gateways into lost worlds. Following the death of her parents, comparative literature scholar Nancy Miller described herself as a “middle-aged Jewish orphan.” Though “the last keeper of my Jewish past was dead and I was free to put it behind me,” she says, she turned back to the past to find her own interpretation of it.⁵⁷ Reflecting upon her discovery of locks of hair and other items among her deceased father’s possessions, Miller writes:

The objects—in particular, the locks of hair—photographs, and documents in my personal safekeeping for which I am seeking an interpretative framework take on meaning in relation to a world in which I have no direct access beyond their limited material dimensions. My objects bear witness, as it were, to the existence of a community

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to which I belong only remotely, but that I can invoke when I insert them into this historical context.\textsuperscript{58}

Miller’s objects hold power because of their inscrutability. Drawn particularly to the bodily relic of hair and playing on the idea of an heirloom, Miller continues, “For me, the locks are family hair that looms, that beckons mysteriously from the borderlands of my quest. The hair is a chain in a link that ties me, binds me tightly, to the past, even if I can’t fully decipher either hair or past.”\textsuperscript{59} For Miller, the authenticity of genealogical artifacts lies in the emotion they inspire, not in their clarity.

As genealogists search for an authentic past, they evaluate the authentic qualities of their sources. Genealogical researchers learn to be cautious in approaching sources as historically reliable, mistrusting their sources and evaluating the provenance of objects, documents, and oral histories. Articles in \textit{Avotaynu} frequently advise Jewish genealogists to be skeptical of historical documents and relatives’ oral histories.\textsuperscript{60} In the weighty, comprehensive \textit{Avotaynu Guide to Jewish Genealogy}, Harold Rhode advises Jewish genealogists to be skeptical of Jews’ recorded past in eastern European governmental documents. “Registration with the authorities in Eastern Europe invariably meant trouble,” he explains. “People, therefore, developed methods to evade taxes and military service. Our ancestors’ experience in czarist Russia—and for that matter in many other states—taught them that government usually meant trouble.” He continues,

One way to understand this is to remember what Tevye, the main character in ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’ asked the shtetl rabbi: ‘Is there a blessing for the czar?’ The rabbi answers: ‘A

\textsuperscript{58} Nancy K. Miller, “Family Hair Looms,” \textit{Women’s Studies Quarterly} 36, no. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 163.
\textsuperscript{59} Miller, “Hair Looms,” 164.
\textsuperscript{60} See, for example, Manny Hillman, “Beware of Both Documented and Oral Histories,” \textit{Avotaynu} 20, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 24–25.
blessing for the czar? Of course. May G-d keep the czar far, far away from us!’ This short exchange sums up how our ancestors viewed government.61

Rhode’s use of this quip from the well-known 1964 musical and its 1971 film adaptation—not original to the Yiddish stories of Sholem Aleichem on which the musical and movie are based—is multilayered. While Rhode’s ostensible point is a mistrust of the accuracy of historical documents, his use of Fiddler on the Roof complicates his message. The musical and film serve as touchstones, shorthand for a nostalgic homage to the past. While a more complete analysis of the plot correctly identifies it as “a parable of self-validation at the expense of the past,”62 validation of a mainstream American lifestyle at the expense of eastern European Jewish customs and religion, Rhode uses Fiddler as a marker of authenticity in itself.62 Even as he advocates careful research, requiring authentication from multiple sources, he references a cultural marker of authenticity.

At times, genealogists’ research runs up against their treasured imaginings of what the past should have looked like. In her manual, Rabbi Jo David recounts:

As a young child, I was fascinated with my grandmother’s stories of her life in the Ukraine and of the long and difficult journey that she and my grandfather endured before they finally arrived in New York City. Her descriptions of life in ‘Kiev’ fired my imagination and created a bond between us that was very precious.63

When she learned that her grandmother actually lived in a small town outside of Kiev, David was shocked. She continues:


For more than forty years, my grandmother’s persona was linked inextricably, for me, to a place called ‘Kiev’ and now I had discovered that her home was somewhere different. Why hadn’t I ever heard of this other place before? Why hadn’t my mother mentioned it?64

David was learning one of the first lessons of Jewish genealogy, that natives of central and eastern Europe frequently identified their hometown by the province named after its major city, regardless of whether they lived in the city itself. But for David, who linked her own identity to her understanding of her grandmother’s past, the revelation came as a betrayal of what she had imagined as an authentic past, one that had grown significance because of its emotional resonance. Personal identity, ancestral travels, and ethnic migrations were inextricably connected, so that the new knowledge about her grandmother’s origins required a revaluation of David’s own identity.

Like David, Sallyann Sack found that her research required her to discard long-held beliefs and assimilate new facts into her conception of her family history and, ultimately, into her personal identity, though she provides an alternate explanation for her grandfather’s distorted history. Her grandfather, who emigrated from Poland, recorded Łódź as his birthplace on his legal records in Canada but wrote Plotsk on his subsequent citizen application in the U.S. Though Sack’s grandfather continued to insist he came from Plotsk, his ailing brother told her that they were from “Vishkovo.” On top of this, though Sack knew his surname as Steinsnider, he revealed to her that it had originally been Dubner, explaining that he had “bought papers from a guy named Steinsnider” to escape the Czar’s army, as many Russian Jews did to avoid the horrors of conscription into the front lines of the Russo-Japanese War. “Certain that he would not lie to his eldest grandchild,” Sack contacted the Polish state archivist, who informed her that there was no evidence that anyone named Dubner ever lived in Plotsk. Years later, Sack learned

64 David, 9.
from the Jewish genealogical network of a man researching his Dubner roots in the Polish town of Pultusk, not far from the town of Wyszków, an elegant solution in line with both her grandfather’s and his brother’s stories. “Old habits die hard,” Sack explained, understanding her grandfather’s shifting origin story as a continual effort to evade the Russian government, even deliberately misleading his family many decades later. For Sack, the search for her grandfather’s true origin involved a re-evaluation of family members’ characters, their relationships to her, and her own place in her family. Every stage involved emotional responses to the past built on careful historical research.

For some genealogists, the revelation of inaccuracies in records and recollections requires a nuanced response, a way to reevaluate “truth” that balances ethical obligations to family traditions and factual accuracy. Like Rhode, Manny Hillman advised readers of *Avotaynu* to “adopt a healthy skepticism” toward written as well as oral history. They should keep in mind that “documents” may simply be the recordings of family legends, which may be reproduced in print. Furthermore, both oral and written histories require knowledge of the correct framework for interpretation. Hillman recounts that he had always been told that his father was born in Graz, Austria, even though the rest of his family came to the Americas from Jerusalem. When he found documents asserting that his father had emigrated from Jerusalem, he assumed that they were wrong, but a visit with an Israeli cousin set him straight. Hillman’s father had been born in Jerusalem four months after his own father died and had grown up in an orphanage, visiting his impoverished, widowed mother on weekends. When confronted with this account, Hillman’s father acknowledged it as the truth. Nonetheless, Hillman recounts, “When my father died, I

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listed his birthplace as Graz on his death certificate as a tribute to that part of his life that
obviously had troubled him. 

While Hillman maintains that the “moral” of this and similar stories is to approach family legends and documents with suspicion, he also offers an ethical model of honoring the stories that have shaped others’ lives, regardless of their factual accuracy. Here, to be virtuous is not necessarily to proclaim the truth of uncovered facts but to honor what has held emotional significance for others and what continues to hold sentimental meaning for the genealogist.

Along similar lines, Arthur Kurzweil advises Jewish genealogists to exercise caution in accepting all family legends as factually accurate without dismissing those that seem incredible. Kurzweil recounts a conversation he had with Elie Wiesel, in which Wiesel instructed Kurzweil, “This is very important. You should collect as many stories as you can. Write them down. Save them. You should have a file. Label the folders by name and save the stories. This is very important.” Kurzweil agreed with the necessity of recording family stories, but told Wiesel that he did not accept all of the stories as truth. “What does it matter if they are true?” Wiesel replied, a glimmer in his eyes. ‘They’re stories!’” (It is noteworthy that Wiesel’s name lends any lesson a hefty weight of authority to this instructional narrative.) For the benefit of his readers, Kurzweil elaborates: while he believes that “claiming things that are false is the worst family history ‘sin’ possible,” the family historian should “record the story, remember it, and even pass it along to the next generation. It is our job to learn the stories, enjoy them, check them out if we can, and perhaps speculate as to how or why the story originated.”

Kurzweil’s sophisticated idea of truth complicates the idea of authenticity in Jewish genealogy. While Kurzweil advises genealogists to be wary of common Ashkenazi Jewish family legends—claiming descent from the Baal Shem

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66 Hillman, 24–25.
67 Kurzweil, Generation to Generation, 46, 49.
Tov, the Vilna Gaon, or King David; relation to the Rothschild family; descent from Spanish Jews who fled the Inquisition—he does not dismiss the significance they can have for the storyteller and the audience. These stories serve to connect the particular family to the themes of Jewish history and mythology more broadly and to make Jewish history personal, precisely the work of Jewish genealogy. In line with his view of genealogy as a “spiritual pilgrimage,” Kurzweil looks for the moral lessons in such stories. A story that his great-great-grandfather once offered a plate of food to a hungry man who happened to be Emperor Franz Josef, who in turn made his great-great-grandfather his personal guard, provides the lesson of charity offered without thought of reward. The story’s significance is not in the acquisition of facts, but in the meaning it holds for the family historian and others. Once again, in a search for an authentic past, the family historian has become the arbiter of authority, if an inclusive one.

“Write your family history now!”

Genealogy may seem like a simple matter, tracing lines of descent and lineage. But at every turn, the genealogist or family historian makes choices about what to lines to follow, how to acquire information, how to record it, how to interpret it, and how to share that interpretation with others. Through family history research, genealogists align themselves with particular historical narratives. Genealogists often begin their family history research by starting with a family member to whom they felt close. Marla Osborn, for instance, has focused much of her research on her family history in Rohatyn, now Rogatin, Ukraine, the birthplace of her last living grandmother:

She passed away about six years ago. She was probably the single largest influential factor in my life. She was quite a strong woman, a feminist, a traveler, a Communist her whole life—indeed incredibly interesting, and for whatever reason, even though I had the least amount of information on that part of the family, that was the part of the family I

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68 Kurzweil, *Generation to Generation*, 46.
identified with the most. The women were all very well educated; they were European-born and educated. Osborn choice to focus on a particular grandmother’s line because she identified with what she saw as a family history of well-educated, outspoken women, like herself. These were ancestors she could relate to and make part of her own self-narrative.

In contrast to Osborn’s choice to focus on her grandmother, traditionally, genealogists traced their patrilineal, direct family lineage or researched her relation to a famous individual. Among Ashkenazi Jews, yichus, or pedigree, primarily referred to one’s descent from well-known rabbis or from an illustrious family and served as a measure of one’s worth on the marriage market. (In some Orthodox circles, yichus continues to operate in this way.) Today, Jewish genealogists may be compelled to buck both American and Jewish conventions and research individuals who are distantly related to them or related to them only by marriage, particularly when tracing family lines broken by the Holocaust. Nonetheless, whatever the choice, every recorded inclusion involves necessary, if unwitting, exclusions. Just as conceptions of family are social constructions disguised as a natural order, sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel explains, “relatedness is not a biological given but a social construct.” The way individuals choose to trace their ancestors relies on “social norms (and therefore parts of particular social traditions) of remembering and forgetting.” To examine the practices of genealogy, therefore, is to investigate a prime example of social memory, revealing a key component in understanding how Jews relate to the past and utilize it in the present.

Jewish genealogists are often drawn to a particular immigration story. Rabbi Jo David, for instance, has written that she identifies strongly as the granddaughter of eastern European

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69 Osborn.
immigrants, as she is on her mother’s side, even though her great-grandparents on her father’s side were German Jews who immigrated slightly earlier than the eastern Europeans. “For some reason,” she writes, “the German part of my heritage has no emotional pull on me. I identify completely through my maternal grandparents’ immigrant experience and cherish that link to the past.” While David explains this identification by way of her closer relationship with her mother’s parents, their greater Jewish observance, and their “exotic” Old World ways, they also align more closely with common depictions of American Jewish ancestry, which emphasize the wave of Ashkenazi Jews from central and eastern Europe who came to America in the great immigration waves of 1880 to 1924, like David’s maternal ancestors. With such moves, tracing one’s ancestors becomes a means of finding oneself within a larger group narrative and making the narrative one’s own.

These narrative choices highlight the power relations inherent in genealogical research and recording. As genealogists sift through historical materials, they learn to trust or distrust family stories and historical records, appraising sources’ authority and, in the process, becoming authorities in their own right. There are archival issues of who decided to record what about whom, how information has been preserved and in what manner the public may access it. Senior relatives become gatekeepers, deciding what stories to share with their descendants. Genealogists decide which branches to pursue and how to do so, and they go on to make decisions about what to share and through what medium. Issues of authority are constantly in question, in addition to contentions over authenticity.

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71 David, xiv.
The authoritative genealogist is not necessarily a “professional” or an “amateur” genealogist, another pair of terms complicated by genealogy. These labels hold a particular meaning for genealogists, leaving questions of authority open to interpretation on other terms. Most genealogists are hobbyists, untrained in historical research. Roughly, someone who solely researches his or her own genealogy is an amateur genealogist, while someone who researches another person’s genealogy for pay is a professional genealogist. Amateur and professional genealogists generally do the same research with the same tools. Professional genealogists often continue to work on their own family histories, and experienced amateur genealogists may research a friend’s genealogy without pay. While a genealogist might turn professional only after he or she acquires considerable research experience, many non-professional genealogists have at least equal experience, and their peers do not necessarily hold professionals in greater esteem.

Membership in the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) is open to anyone who claims to abide by its code of ethics, which emphasizes a “truthful” and honest approach to sources and resources. Their language hints at the potential abuses of power relations by those who would consciously present a false narrative of the past; it leaves unsaid the myriad avenues of interpretation. While those who measure authority on different terms, particularly academics, continually contest genealogists’ legitimacy as historical researchers, in general, the authoritative genealogist is one who feels that he or she honors a family’s history.

Genealogy manuals provide another avenue by which to establish and question authority. Jewish genealogy manuals did much to establish the category as a distinct field. These books vary widely in size and content. Warren Blatt’s thin, 44-page *FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions about Jewish Genealogy* (1996) is written in a straightforward, to-the-point tone, providing a list

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of direct answers to basic questions about the field. In contrast, Arthur Kurzweil’s popular manual, *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History*, is four hundred pages and is written in a conversational, inviting tone. Kurzweil describes his journey into Jewish genealogy, supplemented by his family photographs. Inspiring quotes about Jewish history and genealogy enlivens the text, and Kurzweil includes transcripts of interviews he conducted with other leading Jewish genealogists. First published in 1980, Kurzweil’s manual has been updated and republished four times so far, most recently in a 2011 edition broadened to include instructions on online resources. This most recent edition is bound by a bright, inviting yellow cover with a black-and-white family photograph of Kurzweil’s ancestors, much like one that might inspire his readers’ desires to begin researching their family histories. Other manuals fall in between the extremes of Blatt’s sparse style and Kurzweil’s expansive publication.

A few Jewish genealogy manuals have been written to introduce children to the field of family history, underlining the significance of family history to American Jews. Arthur Kurzweil’s *My Generations: A Course in Jewish Family History*, is a 128-page workbook printed on sturdy paper with activities for children to fill out about their family history, designed to be used in Jewish classroom settings. Kurzweil’s workbook offers students stories about the author’s own family, illustrated by photographs and copies of documents. Advice about Jewish life cycle rituals and researching family history is interwoven throughout the book, which provides spaces for students to fill in their facts and stories about their own family histories and

74 Blatt, *FAQ*.
paste to paste in photographs. Ellen Levine’s *If Your Name Was Changed at Ellis Island* offers young readers an eighty-page illustrated book about the immigration era in question-and-answer format. Though it does not focus exclusively on Jews, Levine’s book seems to have been written with Jewish family history in mind; a girl with a Russian-style headscarf adorns the cover.⁷⁷

Even as they have introduced novice family historians to the craft, authors of Jewish genealogy manuals often express their own lack of credentials for writing such a book. In part, they may be dissembling, but such claims to lack of authority serve an affective purpose as well, aligning author and novice reader. In the first American Jewish genealogy manual, *Finding Our Fathers* (1977), Dan Rottenberg traced his book’s origin to his frustration with the lack of guidance for Jewish research in mainstream genealogy guidebooks: “I found myself wishing someone would write a guidebook for Jewish genealogists. I thought about that some more and wondered, Why shouldn’t I write it?” But Rottenberg brings himself up short:

> There was, in fact, a good reason why I shouldn’t. Ideally, a book on Jewish genealogy should be written by a scholar or a professional genealogist or an expert on Judaica, and I am none of these. I am simply a journalist who happens to be Jewish and who enjoys tracing his ancestors in his spare time.⁷⁸

Despite his emphasis on his supposed lack of qualifications, Rottenberg was, in fact, introducing a genre with these words. His self-deprecation brought him in line with his intended audience, establishing the intimacy of shared ignorance, and allowing the readers to take the reins of authority as they begin their forays into family history.

Decades later, after Jewish genealogy had become an established field, Rabbi Jo David described her manual, *How to Trace Your Jewish Roots* (2000), as “different from all other

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⁷⁷ Ellen Levine, *If Your Name Was Changed at Ellis Island* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1993). The titular conceit of Levine’s book is misguided. Despite popular conception, almost no names of immigrants were changed at Ellis Island. Philip Sutton, “Why Your Family Name Was Not Changed at Ellis Island (and One That Was),” *New York Public Library*, July 2, 2013, [http://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/07/02/name-changes-ellis-island](http://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/07/02/name-changes-ellis-island).

⁷⁸ Rottenberg, ix–x.
Jewish genealogy books,” many of which “are written by professionals—either professional
genealogists or Jewish historians or researchers with a specific specialization in documenting
Jewish life.” David sympathizes with the beginning hobbyist, who may be overwhelmed at the
start of his research. “Personally, when I was starting out, many of these works made my eyes
glaze over. I would have liked to have found a book that was written for someone like me—a
real beginner.” She continues:

*How to Trace Your Jewish Roots* is designed for the Jewish person who knows absolutely
nothing about genealogy, but who would like to stick a cautious toe into the genealogical
ocean. It was written, not by a professional genealogist, but by a professional writer and
rabbi with an interest in Jewish genealogy.\(^79\)

Such moves ostensibly undermine authorial authority, but they may also be understood as
calculated attempts to relate to the books’ readers, most of whom lack formal training in
historical research.

As a genre, Jewish genealogy manuals owe much to two predecessors, both instantly
recognized as classics in their own day. The first, of course, is Alex Haley’s *Roots* in 1976 and
its television adaptation the following year. While *Roots* is widely acknowledged as the
inspiration for much of American interest in genealogy over the past four decades, the second
antecedent is particular to the American Jewish community: the remarkable *Jewish Catalog: A
Do-It-Yourself Kit* in 1973 and its two sequels in 1976 and 1980. *The Jewish Catalog* was itself
modeled on the quintessential products of 1960s counterculture, Alicia Bay Laurel’s *Living on
the Earth* and the famed *Whole Earth Catalog*, the “famous bible of the hip apostles, of the
communitarian movement, of all sorts of dissidents . . . dedicated to the transmission of
knowledge.” In a world before Google, the *Whole Earth Catalog* was “an evaluation and access
device,” containing information from how to perform mundane and essential activities (how to

\(^79\) David, xviii.
remove ticks, how to sew) to how to acquire arcane objects (a High Lama prayer wheel, Danish earth shoes). The Jewish Catalog was more focused, in that it only aspired to include everything Jewish. As the two original conceivers of The Jewish Catalog wrote,

Like the Whole Earth Catalog we wish to be a clearing house for ideas, materials, and personal resources, if not as an actual catalogue store, then at the very least in a ‘where-to-get-hold-of-it’ way. We also want, in many cases, to be a “how-to” book as well. . . . For certain topics which we deem important or desirable to describe, we will include more than a simple mention of the tool and where to get hold of it, but in addition present a recipe, or a blueprint, or instructions to enable a person to do certain things right from the book.81

One of the best-selling books of American Jewish history, The Jewish Catalog was already being referred to as a classic within a few months of its publication. At one time, it was “probably the most well-known book in the American Jewish community, overshadowed only by the Bible.”82

Though it was most well received by religiously liberal Jews, its popularity cut across denominational lines. While Jewish genealogy manuals are undeniably and most obviously literary descendants of Roots, products of the broader American interest in genealogy research, as American Jewish how-to manuals, they owe much to The Jewish Catalog. The Jewish Catalog was the first, but far from the last, book to tell American Jewish readers, “here are the tools to be Jewish with.”83 Jewish genealogy manuals’ optimism and encouragement, their practical advice on what to do, how to do it, and where to find the appropriate “tools” are derived from the Catalog. Like the Catalog, the genealogy manuals are undergirded by a guiding philosophy

82 By 1978, The Jewish Catalog had sold well over 200,000 copies in five years and The Second Jewish Catalog had sold approximately 100,000 copies in two years. Though it was most well received among liberal Jews, its popularity cut across denominational lines. They served as “manuals for creative Jewish living, handy reference books, [and] reasonably priced Bar Mitzvah gifts.” Marc Silver, “The People Behind the Jewish Catalog,” Baltimore Jewish Times, September 22, 1978: 64.
83 Silver, 62.
about the Jewish people and Jewish communities, often implicit and occasionally made explicit. Jewish genealogy manuals owe a do-it-yourself spirit to *The Jewish Catalog*, as well as an emotional connection to Jewish peoplehood built on unconventional Jewish practices.

While they are not without precedent, Jewish genealogy manuals have had their share of detractors. Jonathan Sarna’s scathing 1980 *Commentary* review of Arthur Kurzweil’s foundational guide to Jewish genealogy, *From Generation to Generation*, calls into question the entire project. Sarna baldly labels American Jews’ search for their ancestral pasts “narcissism projected backward in time.” When Kurzweil rhetorically asks, “Why, in the year 1970 would a young man in his twenties, born and raised in New York suburbs, be elated at being called a member of a shtetl?” Sarna snidely replies, “At least he has asked the right question.”\(^{84}\) When a reader responded to the editors of *Commentary*, defending Jewish genealogy as a gateway to broader interest in Jewish history, Sarna responded in turn, “The theory that narcissistic interest in personal roots will magically stimulate interest in Jewish history, however, remains to be proved” and expressed doubt that it would come to pass.\(^ {85}\) This exchange is by no means the final word from one of the most prominent historians of American Jewish history. Today Sarna regularly speaks at Jewish genealogy conferences and has appeared as a Jewish history consultant on Henry Louis Gates’s genealogy television show, *Finding Your Roots*. Rather, Sarna’s article is a representative expression of the defensive position of the academy at a particular moment, as well as the skeptical view of some American Jews at that time, just as Jewish genealogy was gaining traction. By now, over thirty years after the *Commentary* review, it is clear that Jewish genealogists do use family history research as a means through which to

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\(^{84}\) Sarna, “Into the Past,” 70.

\(^{85}\) Benjamin Adelman, letter to the editor, *Commentary* 70, no. 6 (December 1980): 22; Jonathan D. Sarna, letter to the editor, *Commentary* 70, no. 6 (December 1980): 22.
explore broader themes in Jewish history, including the structures of Jewish families and communities; Jewish demography, including migration and settlement patterns; and Jewish onomastics (the study of proper names), among other topics. Nonetheless, the issue at hand is not the substance of Sarna’s 1980 criticism but the forces driving it.

This critique by the academy gets at the heart of questions of authority in family history research: Genealogy provokes ire in a way that other pastimes do not, because it raises the central questions of who is authorized to interpret history and who determines what is worthy of interpretation. The defensiveness of specialists, who instinctively bristle in the face of apparent amateurs encroaching upon their intellectual territory and raising uncomfortable questions about the value of their training, plays a large part. Moreover, this defensiveness is compounded by the perception of genealogists’ research as sentimental activity, irrespective of whether particular genealogists are guided by nostalgia. The academic resistance to queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s effort to “rehabilitate the sentimental” is implicit and often even explicit in its scorn for a different approach to similar material, guided by different goals. Academics’ and journalists’ hostility to what cultural historian Alison Landsberg calls the experiential mode of knowledge “reflects an anxiety about the threat posed to the hegemony of the cognitive.” Genealogists and others wish to engage not only the factual history of academics but also an affective memory that binds the individual to the past through emotional connections. In recent years, some scholars have begun to pay attention to affective and experiential modes of knowledge that the academy has traditionally denigrated. Landsberg urges scholars to “take seriously Americans’ widespread desire to live history” and to recognize “the importance of this experiential mode to the

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87 Landsberg, 131.
acquisition of particular kinds of knowledge.” Genealogists guided by a sentimental or experiential approach are not “bad historians”; they have different objectives, centered on personal and communal meaning.

At the same time, some Jewish genealogists—including those backed by wealthy Jewish philanthropists—are working to make genealogy more appealing to academics. The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy (IIJG), founded in January 2006 and located at the National Library of Israel at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, holds as its aim “developing Jewish genealogy into a recognized field of academic investigation, within the realm of Jewish Studies and in association with a broad range of other sciences on an inter-disciplinary basis.” Its director, Neville Lamdan, received a doctorate in modern history from Oxford before pursuing a career in the Israeli Foreign Ministry that included serving as Israel’s ambassador to the Vatican. Lamdan explains, “Jewish genealogy has reached a level of maturity where we can [move] from the individual to a wider perspective.” The Institute oversees a number of research projects, variously described as “‘pure’ historical genealogy” or “applied genealogy,” most of which connect genealogy to social history studies. Its studies, says Lamdan, use genealogical research “as an illuminating lens through which to view Jewish history and society,” demonstrating “that Jewish genealogy is a scientific activity that uses the accepted methods and standards of modern research. In brief, it is a systematic search for hard facts, derived from

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88 Landsberg, 130–131.
primary sources and supported by demonstrable evidence." In its search for academic legitimacy, the Institute continues to speak from a defensive position. But despite its efforts to remake public perception of Jewish genealogy, its efforts to encourage genealogy courses at the university level have, to date, been an uphill battle. Continued academic resistance to experiential and affective learning is not the only factor, but it has played a part.

Academic recognition is not the only standard by which to measure Jewish genealogical authority: genealogists also work to convince each other that they are legitimate authorities. Articles in *Avotaynu* and speakers at local Jewish genealogical society meetings and conferences encourage genealogists to “publish” their material, both formally and informally. Common excuses are shot down: “After a while family members began to ask when you were going do a book about the family so they can have all of the information you had gathered,” relates one genealogist. “Sometimes we answered, ‘when I’m finished,’ but in our heart of hearts, we know that the work will never really be finished.”

In this view, genealogists must resign themselves to sharing what they know is inherently incomplete research. Another Jewish genealogist provides a powerful reason for publishing: “Publishing brings your relatives back to life, gives them immortality, and is a gift that will last a lifetime and beyond.” Giving genealogists the push he feels they need, Mike Karsen, president of the JGS of Illinois, gives talks entitled “Write Your Family History NOW!” There is a palpable urgency to his language. Karsen advises genealogists to abandon their “excuses” and “publish now,” informally sharing material with others who will correct and add to it. Publishing transforms the researcher, who undergoes a

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status change to “author.” Whether formal or informal, the act of publication also materially transforms the genealogist’s research. While discrete artifacts serve as mnemonic devices for the researcher, collecting them in a formal whole creates a new narrative. They can now be viewed as a collection, erasing the origins of individual parts. While each object in the book retains its story of acquisition for the researcher, the objects tell a story of the personal history of familial relation, leading up to the authoritative decisions of the creator.

Technological advances have provided more flexible forms of publication. Writing in *Avotaynu*, genealogist Eileen Polakoff advises creating a family history website. “With genealogy we are dealing with something that may never be done in the same way that a needlepoint pillow is done,” she says, and a website provides the flexibility to reflect new information gleaned about family history and as facts about living family members change. “A family history website is a living thing,” says Polakoff. “You are only limited by your imagination.” In creating a website, the genealogist poses more as a curator than an author, but the curator is no less a position of authority, if an oblique one.

Steven Lasky has grasped the connection between curator and genealogist, using the similarities to emphasize the affective nature of genealogy. Lasky’s online Museum of Family History has gone beyond documenting his own family history to include virtual exhibits contributed by others seeking a showcase for their genealogy research and family stories. Lasky’s website includes floor plans in which he lays out the exhibits as if they existed in a physical museum. As Lasky explained to me,

“A museum is an institution that displays the best a culture has to offer. . . . It elevates an object, a material object to a certain status. . . . And in a sense by creating this [virtual]

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96 Stewart, 152.
97 Polakoff, 26.
museum as a museum, I’m saying that each person who wants to participate has a way of honoring their own family.”

For Lasky, to “honor” one’s family members means to put them on a virtual pedestal, an act that gives honor and authority to both ancestor and descendent.

In a similar way, Jewish feminists may also understand genealogy as a way to elevate the female subjects of their studies. One genealogist explained to me that her work is “a way of trying to write women back into the record.” Unlike other types of historical records, in which women may not appear, the family tree is “one record that woman can’t be taken out of and can’t be rendered unimportant in.” In fact, this view of genealogy as a feminist activity has roots in what Matthew Frye Jacobson identifies as the “shared meaning and form” of ethnic heritage revival and feminism. Esther Broner’s feminist haggadah exhorts, “Who are our mothers? / Who are our ancestors? / What is our history? / Give us our name. Name our genealogy.”

For feminist genealogists, as for Lasky, the authority of the genealogist as researcher has the power to validate the subject of study as well—which, in turn provides meaning and shared authority to the researcher.

Lasky’s multimedia site aims to include the online visitor as an active participant: “I did not want to create a website that was simply a display of photographs and essays; I wanted to appeal to our other senses as well,” he writes. “The Museum is, thus, a website of sight and sound” in which one can “hear the voices of our fellow Jews” who lived through different events throughout the twentieth century. “You can also hear from those who speak eloquently as loving

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99 Gabrielle Weiss (pseudonym), Skype interview by author, May 22, 2012.
100 Jacobson, 249.
children and grandchildren about their family members who are gone but not forgotten.”

These “technologies of memory,” in Landsberg’s term, provide Lansky’s project with the authoritative voice (sometimes literally) of the primary subject. At the same time, it is the emotional reaction of viewers, both descendants of the subjects and others, which provides the real legitimacy to the project.

While visually very different from Lansky’s Museum of Family History, the work of digital media developer Tammy Hepps underscores the importance of emotion as a central feature in genealogy. Hepps has recently launched Treelines, genealogy software that shifts the focus of display from family trees—lines of ascent, descent, and relation—to the family stories and material artifacts that inspire genealogists. While Hepps intends Treelines to appeal to

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genealogists of all backgrounds, her own work has been greatly influenced by Jewish genealogy. Treelines software allows genealogists to create interactive digital presentations telling the stories of their family history research that integrate the narrative of family history with images of the documents or photographs that provide these facts or illustrate them, alongside a family tree. As one enthusiastic user of Treelines said, Hepps is “showing us something new: how to take the ‘dry’ documents that we are researching and reveal the vibrant, living people they represent.” Like Lansky, Hepps explicitly describes the genealogist’s work as one of curation, a deliberate act of arranging and presenting the past in ways that provide meaning in the present. Lanksy’s and Hepp’s work represent the opposite end of the spectrum from the IIJG’s appeal to the academy, an embrace of the experiential, affective, and nostalgic aspects of genealogy as the markers of authority.

“To fan the flame of Judaism”

Not infrequently, the emotional aspects of genealogy shift easily into more or less explicit spiritual and religious interpretations of Jewish genealogy. Though the current movement of Jewish genealogy, like other forms of American genealogy, is in some respects only three decades old, Jewish genealogists describe their work as being in line with older Jewish practices, literary forms, and historical accounts. Unlike Mormons’ motivations for genealogical research, Jewish genealogical research builds upon traditional Jewish notions of memorial obligations and practices.

As discussions of genealogy as a religious ritual are usually limited to Mormon genealogy, a brief discussion of genealogical research within the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints is warranted here. LDS Church members are required to pursue genealogy in order to identify ancestors who were not Church members and baptize them by proxy. Rites performed for the salvation of the dead can only be performed when adequate information about them is known, including their name, birth date, and parents’ names. Following the teachings of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Church, and later interpretations by Church presidents, LDS members perform rites to “seal” together husbands and wives, and later children, in order ensure that God recognizes them as an eternal family unit in the afterlife. Temple work on behalf of the dead began to be formally organized in 1894, when LDS President Wilford Woodruff gave clear directions on “sealing” children to their parents, assuring that they will be together in the afterlife, just as married couples are sealed together by Temple marriages. Following Woodruff’s announcement, church members formed the Genealogical Society of Utah to keep organized records of their family members. The storage facility of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City now contains over a million rolls of microfilm, which can be shipped to Family History Centers to be accessed by Mormon and non-Mormon genealogists around the world. Religious studies scholar Rachel Fisher argues that the Mormon emphasis on genealogy has allowed the Church to “create a heritage for itself.” As the genealogical mission of the Church has become a central aspect of being Mormon, its transformation of a common American

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cultural practice into an official religious practice has served as one way for the Church to identify its place in American society.\textsuperscript{106}

In stark contrast to the explicitly theological Mormon understanding of genealogical research, Jewish genealogical research is not an officially recognized religious practice with implications for salvation. As Jewish genealogy began to be organized, Jewish genealogists took cues from their Mormon counterparts, while simultaneously making an effort to distance themselves from what was seen as Mormons’ outlandish theology regarding conversion of the dead: Dan Rottenberg explains in his 1977 manual, “each time I have uncovered the name of one of my long-forgotten ancestors I have been filled with the mystical feeling that I was indeed rescuing that ancestor—not from hellfire, perhaps, but from oblivion.”\textsuperscript{107} As Jewish genealogists have searched for their own language to articulate the deep meaning of genealogy, the fact that it is not a religious rite has allowed them a greater freedom of interpretation of their practices and has given rise to a greater diversity of opinion about the nature of Jewish genealogy. Nonetheless, several common threads reappear throughout the conversations about the meaning of Jewish genealogy, including references to biblical genealogies, multilayered references to mitzvot, and, throughout it all, the idea of genealogical research as a “spiritual journey.”

Authors of genealogy manuals seem to feel compelled to mention the genealogies in Genesis. As Arthur Kurzweil declares, “Genealogy has always been an important topic within Jewish tradition. . . . We find genealogy in the very first chapters of the Bible itself, and genealogy can be seen as playing a part in the lives of Jews from ancient times to the present.”\textsuperscript{108} Likewise, in a chapter entitled, “Genealogy: It’s Very Jewish,” David goes so far as to describe

\begin{footnotes}
\item[106] Fisher, 40.
\item[107] Rottenberg, 9.
\end{footnotes}
the list of the descendants of Adam and Eve as “a blueprint for modern genealogists,” demonstrating “the way in which personal names, place names, occupations, and important historical events are intertwined with a family’s history.” Using her genealogy manual as a chance to teach Jews about the Torah as well as how to research their genealogies, Rabbi David explains that each genealogy in the Bible has a specific purpose. Linking modern genealogy, biblical narrative, and eastern European Jewish traditions, David continues, “The first genealogy in the Torah is important because it establishes yichus—the legitimate and prestigious family lineage—for the various characters that will later be introduced on the stage of biblical history.”

Likewise, in *A Student’s Guide to Jewish American Genealogy*, Jay Schliefer also interprets the biblical descriptions of “who ‘begat’ whom” as a model for his readers. “Why has so much space been spent on this strange accounting?” he asks rhetorically. He explains, “The answer seems to be that the Jews understood early on that one of the best ways to keep their faith strong and alive was to link it to family.” This kind of interpretation, making the text speak to present concerns, is in keeping with Jewish traditions of textual interpretation. These moves place the Jewish genealogist in line with Jewish tradition, emulating the authors of the Torah—or God, in the traditional Jewish understanding of the Pentateuch’s divine origin. Though their work is certainly different from that of the genealogies in Genesis, the comparison legitimates genealogy as an authentic and traditional Jewish practice—even a religious activity.

Jewish genealogy is interpreted as a Jewish activity not only through its allusions to biblical models but also within the framework of modern Jewish forms memory. Jews have long

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109 David, 22–23.
understood themselves as a people of memory, and nearly all of their traditional ritual practices are constructed as acts of social memory. Even mitzvot, divine commandments, have been interpreted as memory acts. In this context, it is no great leap to interpret genealogy as a religious act. Arthur Kurzweil makes the most explicit, consistent, and articulate case for genealogical research as “a spiritual pilgrimage,” in his words, a religiously meaningful act of self-discovery and connection to tradition. Kurzweil is also one of the few genealogists to enumerate the traditional mitzvot regularly performed by genealogists. Though Kurzweil is the main proponent of this idea, he should not be understood as the only one who holds this belief. While a number of Jewish genealogists have told me that they “wouldn’t think in those words” and might feel more comfortable speaking of “passion” rather than “spirituality,” they affirm that he articulates what they feel about their research.

Kurzweil identifies genealogy with both parts of the dual definition of mitzvot, as an obligation and as a good deed. It benefits the researcher, but it is also something he must do:

My genealogical research serves as a doorway for me. As I enter the world of Jewish culture, Jewish thought, Jewish life, I come to see that Jewish ideas are profound, Jewish sages are nourishing for my soul, and it is my obligation to fan the flame of Judaism by being an active part in it.

Kurzweil would agree with Jewish thinker Yehuda Kurtzer’s analysis that “Memory is a tool of commandedness.” That is, Jewish memory involves participation in the Jewish covenantal relationship with a God who is active in history and inspires action. Kurzweil points to a series of specific mitzvot performed by genealogists, connecting genealogical research to specific rabbinic values: Genealogists honor the elderly and demonstrate respect for others by listening to

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112 Kurzweil, Generation to Generation, xxv–xxvi.
113 Kurtzer, 29, 41.
their stories. They honor the dead by visiting cemeteries. They study and teach Jewish history. Genealogists engage in “perfecting the art of remembering, which, of course, is a mitzvah in itself,” says Kurzweil. They ask historical questions, which emulates the ancient rabbis recorded in the Talmud and inspires humility. They discover the diversity of Jews within their own families, inspiring ahavat Yisrael (love of the People of Israel), which Kurzweil explains as toleration of difference, at least among Jews. They find themselves in their family tree, which Kurzweil likens to the Jewish liturgical style of invoking the mythical ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Finally, sometimes, as in Kurzweil’s own experience, their genealogical research inspires them to lead a more traditionally observant lifestyle. Kurzweil’s affirmation of genealogical research as an inherent good, in line with Jewish values more broadly and enacting specific biblical and rabbinic obligations, resonates with a vast majority of Jewish genealogists. He articulates how they instinctively that their work is a particularly Jewish activity, even when, to all outward appearances, it appears identical to the work of non-Jewish genealogists.

Kurzweil draws the most definite connections to specific mitzvot, using them in the more formal sense of a commandment, but he is far from the only Jewish genealogist to use the term. In an article in Avotaynu entitled, “Compiling the Family Tree: Hobby, Commitment or Mitzvah?” Leonard Kofkin employs a broader sense of mitzvah as a general good deed. Kofkin identifies his genealogy work as a mitzvah because it preserves family information as a “gift” for future interested generations. His work as a genealogist, he says, encourages living relatives to feel a “renewed appreciation of ‘family,’” even bringing together cousins who had not seen each

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other for forty years. “Is that not also a mitzvah?” he asks. As Kofkin uses the term, “mitzvah” is contrasted with obligation, though he identifies genealogy as an obligation, too. But for him, a mitzvah is a good deed that makes one feel good—a gift for the future and the reconciliation of family members. Here, mitzvot have become closely aligned with sentimental understandings of the relationships between people, both those in the present and spanning generations.

The language of mitzvot is not the only way to describe Jewish genealogy as a spiritual activity. For many Jewish genealogists, an identification of recurrent family traits provides insight into the genealogist’s own identity, akin to the spiritual journeys of self-help manuals. In a published letter to Avotaynu, Rabbi Ben-Zion Saydman explains that “the core of why we do genealogy” is that serves as a “a spiritual journey into the lives of those who made us what we are today.” Researching his ancestors in Philadelphia, he discovered that his great-great-grandfather had been president of Congregation Kesher Israel in downtown Philadelphia. His research culminated in the “spiritual experience” of leading morning services at the synagogue. “Imagine standing in the same spot, in the same shul, saying the same prayers as had your ancestor more than 100 years ago!” Saydman draws a direct connection between his parents’ Jewish communal activity in Orange County, California, where they founded a synagogue, and that of his ancestor in Philadelphia.

Other genealogists, too, spoke to me of learning about family traits that gave new meaning to their lives and choices. Hadassah Lipsius, a metallurgic engineer, discovered a document that revealed that her great-great-grandmother owned a copper factory. “It’s like, wait a minute. Now I know where that comes from!” she exclaimed. Likewise, Roni Leibowitz,

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president of the JGS in New York, is a retired speech and language pathologist whose sister is an art therapist. Leibowitz was excited to find that on one branch of her family, all her cousins seem to be therapists as well. “And here I thought maybe I went into the wrong field. It was destiny,” she said, only half joking. In conversations with me, genealogists described these as natural abilities that are genetically passed along within their families. Such understandings provide an affective, intimate view of history, despite the invocation of scientific knowledge. Learning about one’s family becomes a window into learning about oneself.

For Saydman, this affective view of family inclinations has a spiritual dimension. “I can see that every branch and generation of my family worked tirelessly to perpetuate the ideals given to us at Sinai so long ago,” Saydman explains. “This is Yiddishe Nakhes (Jewish joy), and it transcends time and space.” Here, “spiritual journey” is closely aligned with the sentimental. His view of family history directly interprets the past in light of his present, warmly and affectively, highlighted by his use of the Yiddish term yiddishe nakhes. While nakhes is generally used to refer to the pride elders take in their descendents. Saydman both inverts and doubles the term, including both his pride in his ancestor’s accomplishments and, implicitly, the pride he imagines his ancestor would take in his family’s actions. His spiritual journey is both emotional and imaginative.

Others describe family history research as a satisfying avenue for spiritual seekers. In the foreword to his memoir An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy, Paul Cowan explained:

Many people who might have once explored the nation’s physical or economic frontiers are journeying inward: they are the Kit Carsons of the soul. Some adopt creeds that are new to them—Eastern religions, or an all-embracing born-again Christianity. But many,

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like me, seek to synthesize their Old World heritage with the America that has shaped their consciousness.”\textsuperscript{119}

For Cowan, family history researchers are the frontiersmen of the soul, searching for a spiritually meaningful present in the records of their family’s past. He explicitly equates a search for one’s family history with traditional religious practices. But the spiritual journey of family history research involves a search for ownership. Like Kit Carson, the explorer, fur trapper, and soldier of the nineteenth-century American west, Jewish genealogists fight to gain a form of possession over their territory, though theirs is the authentic “Old World heritage” they seek.

\textbf{“Giving them back their names”}

The Holocaust plays a large part in setting Jewish genealogical research apart from the genealogy of other ethnic groups, as Jewish genealogists interpret their work as Holocaust memorials.\textsuperscript{120} Reflections on the Holocaust have long understood it as a crisis of memory. Its sacred place in American Jewish practice was articulated most concisely by philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who, as early as the 1960s, named Jews’ obligation to remember the Holocaust a “614th commandment,” in addition to the traditional count of 613 mitzvot: “The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler another, posthumous victory” by refusing to participate in Jewish religious and communal life.\textsuperscript{121} How American Jews practice this 614th commandment through their family history research is, once again, a nostalgic function of both Jewishness and Judaism, including notions of both religiosity and peoplehood, obligation and identity.

\textsuperscript{119} Paul Cowan, \textit{An Orphan in History: Retrieving a Jewish Legacy} (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), ix.

\textsuperscript{120} Even as Holocaust-era genealogy research sets Jewish genealogy apart, it is noteworthy that a number of Jewish genealogists liken the challenges of tracing the fate of family members during the Holocaust to African Americans’ search for their family histories in Africa before their ancestors were taken to the Americas as slaves, the origin of the roots movement, placing Holocaust genealogy within the context of a distinctively American practice.

In contrast to the well-funded Holocaust museums and public monuments that have attracted critical attention, the memorial work of genealogists consists of private, small-scale affairs. The very acts of researching and recording family lines that were destroyed in the Holocaust are themselves often understood as memorials, even without further commemorative work. At the same time, Holocaust memory also informs much of American Jewish nostalgia, longing for inaccessible pasts cut off by the Holocaust, and certainly much of Jewish genealogy. Researching and recording any Jewish lineages, in some ways, becomes a rebuttal to the Nazis’ attempt to destroy Jews and evidence of their pasts.

In their slim introductory volume to the field, Getting Started in Jewish Genealogy, Gary Mokotoff and Warren Blatt inform their readers that every Jewish family with roots in central and eastern Europe—that is, the majority of American Jews—has family members who were murdered in the Holocaust. “If your family left that part of the world many years ago and your ancestors were safe elsewhere, you haven’t completed your family tree,” they baldly announce. They continue:


123 In this light, what I refer to in this section by the shorthand “Holocaust genealogy” encompasses not only the research of Holocaust victims, but also the research of older relatives whose communities would later be destroyed by the Holocaust, as well as connections forged with living relatives related by branches of one’s family tree cut off by the events of World War II and only rediscovered by genealogical research.
Most of your family members murdered in the Holocaust died without a tombstone or gravesite to mark their passing. In some cases, the fact that they ever existed has been eradicated by acts of war or the deliberate acts of the Nazis and their collaborators. Placing them in your family tree documents that they once lived; it is a permanent memorial to them.\textsuperscript{124}

Here, finding victims’ place in a family tree serves as “a permanent memorial,” as though a genealogist’s notes on paper or in a digital record were akin to a monument that could withstand the test of time. In the same vein, Arthur Kurzweil wrote of his own family history research:

> More than one hundred members of the Kurzweil family were killed in the Holocaust. I collected their names, their relationships to the rest of the family, their ages, and in many cases their specific fates. There are no graves for these cousins of mine, no memorials. My family tree was their memorial. I wanted the family to know them and to remember them.\textsuperscript{125}

For Kurzweil as for Mokotoff and Blatt, contextualizing victims within their familial relationships serves to memorialize them, as does sharing this information with living family members. It is, in fact, the feeling of memorializing that largely serves as the memorial itself, along with the acts and small markers that follow from it.

> There is something striking, almost paradoxical, about describing genealogy work as a memorial. After all, memorials are by and large physical, public, often highly visible, markers of the past. In contrast, genealogy is a largely individualistic affair. Particular family lines are noted in books or on websites and rarely on a physical, monumental scale, barring certain family gravestones, which are the primary resources, not the product, of genealogy. Still, Jewish genealogists who understand their work as a memorial assert that it is a concrete marker of their family’s pasts, even when it has not been shared with others in a book or online.

> Incorporating genealogy into the framework of memorials, as many Jewish genealogists do, challenges conceptions of both “public” and “memorial.” As Erika Doss argues in \textit{Memorial...}


\textsuperscript{125} Kurzweil, \textit{Generation to Generation}, 17.
Mania: Public Feeling in America, contemporary American memorials “are archives of public affect, ‘repositories of feeling and emotions’ that are embodied in their material form and narrative content.” Memorials provide the opportunity for public, material expression of particular feelings. In contrast to physical memorials, representations of genealogy participate in “public feeling” not so much in that they present a material representation of an emotion to the public, but rather that they participate in American Jewish nostalgia, a normative, emotional response to Jewish history. For Jewish genealogists, their emotion becomes the memorial itself.

Sometimes this emotion—a mixture of grief and nostalgia—is made tangible in published works. Helen Epstein’s memoir Where She Came From: A Daughter’s Search for Her Mother’s History serves as a literary memorial for her mother’s female ancestors in Central Europe, acculturated Jewish women in Czech and German lands whose history was eliminated by the Holocaust. Epstein’s mother, born in Prague, survived the Holocaust; both her mother’s parents were both killed. When Epstein’s mother died, she fixated on a family history account written by her mother at Epstein’s request a decade earlier. Epstein wrote:

There are no Fruchts nor other Jews left and, apart from tombstones in the cemetery, no artifacts. . . . This dearth of a tangible past—people, objects, physical context—with which I had grown up and to which I had become accustomed was made suddenly intolerable by my mother’s death. ‘To be able to give, one has to posses,’ wrote Simone Weil and, as I went about my daily routines, those words gave the twelve-page chronicle that had been lying in my desk a sudden and urgent importance.

Epstein’s travels to Central Europe and, more so, the literary account she produces detailing her female ancestors’ pasts and her journey to find them serve, to some extent, as the closest things to a tangible memorial for them.

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126 Erika Doss, Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13.
127 Helen Epstein, Where She Came From: A Daughter’s Search for Her Mother’s History (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 18.
Moreover, even in the context of Holocaust research, perhaps especially in the context of Holocaust research, the question of ownership of ancestral past is never far away. What Epstein goes on to “possess,” in keeping with the Simone Weil quote, are not material artifacts but the feelings evoked by her heritage travel, the nostalgic longing evoked by her attempt to physically walk in the ways of her ancestors. As in Kurzweil reminder to genealogists of the biblical injunction in the haggadah that “each individual is bound to regard himself as if he had gone personally forth from Egypt,” Epstein’s very longing for the inaccessible past makes it her own.

This personal, emotional memorialization of genealogy need not be disconnected from large institutions or from ritual practices. Many Jewish genealogists submit “Pages of Testimony” recording the names and biographical data to Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial museum, to be physically housed in the museum’s Hall of Names and recorded online in the Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names. Some say kaddish, the Jewish mourner’s prayer said on the anniversary of death, for the people they “discovered,” distant relatives who were victims of the Holocaust and have no one else to say it for them. On the yahrzeit (anniversary of death) of his mother, Rabbi Norbert Weinberg, who had previously described his mother’s story of surviving the Holocaust disguised as a gentile under Nazi-controlled Lviv and Warsaw in a detailed account in the virtual Museum of Family History, posted a link to his Museum of Family History “exhibit” on Facebook. These actions and creations, too, act as memorials of feeling, whether they are physical, digital, or verbal markers of remembrance.


129 Weiss.

Finally, in stark contrast to genealogists’ continual efforts to record Holocaust victims’ names, genealogical memorialization also involves the removal of their names. LDS Church members’ desire to offer salvation to the dead and to conduct the Church work of proxy baptisms have led some Mormons to gather names of the dead indiscriminately from other vital records, including records of Holocaust victims. In 1994, Jewish genealogists learned that the names of Holocaust victims and other deceased Jews were listed as “baptized” and “sealed” in the LDS International Genealogical Index (IGI). In an exchange of letters with Church Elder J. Richard Clark, Gary Mokotoff explained, “Baptism is a Christian ceremony that is particularly repugnant to Jews. It reminds us of the centuries of persecution against Jews where our ancestors were given a choice; be baptized or suffer death.” To baptize Holocaust victims was seen as a desecration, a further indignity imposed upon them in death. Like other memorial-makers, Jewish genealogists police the boundaries of who is permitted to invoke the names of Holocaust victims and in what ways those names can be employed.

Over the months following Clark’s and Mokotoff’s correspondence, Jewish leaders worked to persuade Mormons to change their policies regarding baptisms. In May 1995, representatives of the Church signed an agreement to remove all Holocaust victims’ names from the IGI and to discontinue proxy baptisms of deceased Jews who were not direct ancestors of Mormons by requiring permission from the closest living relatives of any deceased individual who died within the last 95 years before “providing Temple ordinances” for him or her. In

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131 Gary Mokotoff, “Mormons Baptize Holocaust Victims,” *Avotaynu* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 11. Presumably Mokotoff means that Jews particularly object to baptisms in which the baptized have little or no choice in the matter, not to the practice in general.

132 Fisher, 42.
2012, this rule was changed to 110 years. Nonetheless, the issue remains “the controversy that won’t go away,” as Mokotoff calls it, as individual Mormons and local churches continue to add Jewish names to the IGI in defiance of the 1995 agreement and as names added prior to the agreement are discovered by genealogists. In early 2012, it was revealed that the parents of Simon Wiesenthal, the late Holocaust survivor and Nazi-hunter, had been baptized. Leaders of the Church apologized to Wiesenthal’s and announced that the person who had entered the names into the database had been disciplined. Not long after, the Church admitted that Anne Frank, the most recognizable Holocaust victim worldwide, had been baptized in a Mormon church in the Dominican Republic, despite the technological safeguards the Church had put in place to prevent such occurrences.

If Jews do not believe that the Mormon’s proxy baptisms are efficacious, why do they care about them? Some do not, as the journalist Jeff Jacoby attests, writing in the Boston Globe that he found Mormon proxy baptism of his relatives killed in Auschwitz, “eccentric, not offensive.” In fact, he wrote, “I was grateful for any gesture that might help preserve some remembrance of these family members whose lives had been so cruelly cut short.” But

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133 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Member’s Guide to Temple and Family History Work, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009).
Jacoby’s opinion is in the minority, or is at least drowned out by denunciations by the likes of Eli Wiesel, whose own name was entered into the Mormon registry, and Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.\(^{138}\) Arthur Kurzweil’s emphasis on the particular significance of the names of Holocaust victims to Jewish genealogists helps explain their outrage:

> I don’t know what to do with the Holocaust. Most people in the world don’t know what to do with the Holocaust. But I think we genealogists have found out what to do with the Holocaust. We remember names. When the Nazis rounded up our relatives, they took away their names and gave them numbers. What we genealogists are involved with is taking away the numbers and giving them back their names.\(^{139}\)

To memorialize is, in many ways, to possess, as the Simone Weil quote illustrates. In collecting the names of Holocaust victims, building memorials of emotion, Jewish genealogists see themselves as reclaiming the victims, taking them back unto the fold of their people. The Holocaust victims died because they were Jewish and, to some, their proxy baptism seems to render their suffering meaningless. Moreover, Mormons’ ritual offering of conversion to the victims seems to take some measure of ownership over the paradigmatic suffering of Jews in the modern era. In this light, Mormons’ act of laying claim to these victims itself is much more problematic than any eschatological difference.

Since its organizational beginnings in the 1970s, Jewish genealogy has made delving into Jewish history an experiential and emotional practice. It is both broadly expansive and narrowly personal, as genealogists find their own ancestral legacies through which to lay claim to the past. Ancestral past and individual present are conflated through the nostalgic longing engendered by genealogical research and presentation. Through their work, genealogists employ material expressions that bridge the categories of Judaism and Jewishness and religion and culture. They


\(^{139}\) Kurzweil, “Genealogy as a Spiritual Pilgrimage,” x.
search for and develop markers of an authentic past as they find their own authoritative place in Jewish history.

Even as it is based on facts and documents, the nostalgia of genealogists is affective and intimate, drawing upon and evoking an emotional intimacy with the past. In genealogy, as in much of American Jews’ practice, the dividing line between religion and culture is rarely clear and indicates very little about the constitutive meaning of Jews’ practices. At the same time, following many Jewish genealogists’ understanding that genealogy engages core Jewish values and involves the performance of mitzvot, engagement with this nostalgic view of family and community may be understood as a religious performance in itself. For Jewish genealogists, genealogy is an identity-making practice, enabling them to draw near to their ancestors through documents, artifacts, and stories, figuratively tracing their paths and sometimes literally travelling to their ancestral homes. In the end, the emotion that binds them to the past often becomes a destination in itself, serving as a means to claim ownership over the past and make it one’s own.
Chapter Two

“Feel the History at Your Feet”: Historic Synagogues as Heritage Sites

Do stones speak? They do on Eldridge Street. . . . Hear them: “In remembrance is the secret of redemption.”
—Bill Moyers, quoting the Baal Shem Tov, Foreword to Landmark of the Spirit: The Eldridge Street Synagogue (2009)

Visitors to New York’s Museum at Eldridge Street sit in the pews of the restored 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue, admiring the elaborate Moorish-style interior and listening to a docent tell a story of Jewish immigrants’ arrival and aspirations at the turn of the century; how they built the first synagogue structure established by eastern European Jews in America in their crowded Lower East Side neighborhood; how the congregation dwindled in the Depression and as Jews fled from the old neighborhoods for the suburbs at mid-century; and how the cavernous sanctuary was shut up for four decades until, finally, preservationists restored it to its former glory over the last few decades. When the docent finishes her story, she leads them out of the sanctuary. At the back of the room, where the museum has removed the pews to leave an open space, she pauses and invites them to step into the occasional indentations in the original pine floorboards. She points out that the group has arranged itself into straight lines. “Why do you think this is?” she asks, waiting for visitors to realize that they are standing in footprints of former male congregants, positioned in front of their assigned pews. She explains that the indentations were caused by men shuckling, rocking back and forth as they prayed in the traditional eastern European Jewish manner in front of their pew. As I repeatedly observed tours of the synagogue, I always saw a number of visitors emulate her motion. Some were familiar with the motion from their own synagogue services, but most moved more awkwardly, if enthusiastically. That visitors can literally stand in the footprints of former congregants provides an immediate, sensory connection to the past, one that encompasses the visitor’s entire body. For
many visitors, the moment is a highlight of the tour. One user of the review site Yelp exulted, “You literally feel the history at your feet.”\(^1\)

Historic synagogues used as heritage sites, such as the Museum at Eldridge Street, are wellsprings of American Jewish nostalgia, evocative sites that use material culture and space to create an emotional, melancholic connection to a religious and cultural past. A study of these synagogues demonstrates how nostalgia bridges historical scholarship and social memory, serving as an integral, affective part of American Jewish heritage that provides sacred meaning in the present and provides values for the future. As in the example of the indented floors at Eldridge Street, visitors to historic synagogues seek a physically “authentic” experience of Jewish history. At the same time, they also seek an experience that speaks to their contemporary concerns. Their interaction with the mythic past of the American Jewish immigration era, for which the authentic objects of historic synagogues are an allegory, is an “elusive and allusive” bodily experience. Visitors to historic synagogues physically engage “a nostalgic myth of contact and presence,” in the words of literary critic Susan Stewart.\(^2\) Tourists pay to enter the heritage site and experience contact with a past that always both present and absent, evoking waves of nostalgia that are by overlapping turns melancholic, elegiac, and celebratory.

While Chapter One examined the more individual nostalgia of genealogical research, this chapter focuses on public nostalgia. Scholars of nostalgia have focused on nostalgia as a longing for bygone personal experiences, but American Jewish nostalgia may be experienced—and even taught—as a communal yearning for a bygone time and place that one has not personally

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\(^1\) “Wood Elements in the Sanctuary,” Museum at Eldridge Street, 

experienced. As many American Jews have grown increasingly distant from the objects of communal longing, it has fallen to institutions such as historic synagogues to teach nostalgia. Through ethnographic research of the behavior of staff and visitors at several historic synagogues, interviews with staff members and philanthropists, and studies of the material and digital cultures produced by and about historic synagogues, I have found that they teach a certain kind of nostalgia: Not a simple wish to return to the past, nor even necessarily an actual desire to revive the past within the present, but an elegiac nostalgia, one that recognizes that changes and improvements have come at a cost, mourns that which has been lost, and retrieves select stories and values as allegorical tools for the present. Elegiac nostalgia accepts the present, realizing its price.

In 2012 and 2013, I conducted short-term ethnographic studies at the Museum at Eldridge Street, an 1887 synagogue building on New York’s Lower East Side now open as a museum and still home to a small congregation; the 1763 Touro Synagogue in Newport, the oldest synagogue building in the United States, displayed to the public under a number of organizational auspices and still used by a congregation; the Vilna Shul in Boston’s Beacon Hill, a 1919 synagogue building now open for tours and Jewish cultural events; and the Jewish Museum of Florida, a museum collection housed in former synagogue buildings from 1929 and 1936 in Miami Beach. I chose these sites not because they are representative of the diversity of all historic synagogues in the United States—they are not—but because they demonstrate a range of possible uses and public faces of historic synagogue buildings, between the polarities of a functioning, congregational synagogue and a museum. At each site, I shadowed docents giving tours of the buildings, attended public events, and spent time observing and speaking formally and informally with staff, visitors, and philanthropists.
In this chapter, based my ethnographic and oral history research as well as public accounts of historic synagogues in newspapers, newsletters, and online sources, I begin with the origin stories of historic synagogues, examining the narratives that heritage organizations tell about the preservation of their buildings and the debates over the names they choose. I then move within the buildings by examining organizational contestations over their spaces, focusing on the Touro Synagogue, the case with the longest history as a heritage site. Having established the behind-the-scenes institutional contexts, I examine visitors’ expectations and experiences, focusing on their sense of emotional authority within historic synagogues. I then move to two specific kinds of presentations of synagogue spaces: the depiction of women’s galleries and representations of historic synagogues aimed at children. I conclude the chapter by examining the participation of non-Jews in creating narratives about historic synagogues. Their engagement demonstrates how Jewish nostalgia has become a widespread American phenomenon.

Whether or not their board members choose to formally designate their building as a “museum,” by displaying historic spaces, all of the synagogues I examine rely upon American Jews’ extraordinary affinity for museums. In the United States and worldwide, Jews have enthusiastically embraced museums as a source of religious and ethnic identity, a means to represent Jewish history and culture to both insiders and outsiders. Museums and religious sites are a felicitous pair: Both are sites of stories and meaning making that have the power to “change what people may know or think or feel, to affect what attitudes they may adopt or display, to

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3 Among many excellent works on Jewish museums and Jewish communities, see David Clark, “Jewish Museums: From Jewish Icons to Jewish Narratives,” *European Judaism* 36, no. 2 (Autumn 2003): 4–17. Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). It is significant that local and national American Jewish groups often have greater financial and political resources than other ethnic groups do to establish heritage museums.
influence what values they form,” as the influential curator Stephen Weil wrote of museums.\textsuperscript{4}

Museums and memorials, like religious sites, are, in the words of historian Erika Doss, “archives of public affect, ‘repositories of feelings and emotions.’”\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, building upon the longstanding significance of material culture to Jewish practice, American Jews (as well as Jews worldwide) have developed particularly strong relationship with museums. Jewish museums serve as emblems of the community, demonstrating to insiders and outsiders the strengths of the group. With increasing frequency, Jews employ museums as a Jewish space appropriate for the celebration of weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other life cycle events and celebrations.\textsuperscript{6} As other scholars have found, Jewish museums are “a place to assemble with other Jews, to affirm one’s identity, to define one’s values, to take stock of the present, and to contemplate the past.”\textsuperscript{7}

Museum attendance is one of the few activities Jews do at a consistent rate across denominations; it is an “equal-opportunity access point” for Jews of different religious backgrounds and knowledge.\textsuperscript{8} The widespread phenomenon of American Jewish nostalgia functions similarly, crossing sectarian labels and degrees of religious and cultural familiarity.

\textsuperscript{5} Erika Doss, \textit{Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 13.
\textsuperscript{6} Historic synagogues used as heritage sites are also attractive locations for weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, and other life cycle events. They serve an increasingly large contingent of American Jews who do not pay membership dues to a congregation, a common prerequisite for American bar and bat mitzvah services. Steven Greenberg, interview by author, Boston, June 27, 2012. Bonnie Dimun, interview by author, New York, July 10, 2012. On July 22, 2012, the Museum at Eldridge Street reported on Facebook that an engagement took place there that day. See also Rebecca Kanter, “Converting to Judaism at the Vilna Shul,” \textit{Vilna Scribe} 16, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 5.
In this cultural context, historic synagogues open to the public as heritage sites act as significant landmarks, both literally and metaphorically, in American Jewish social memory and in public representations of American Jews. Their sanctuaries now serve as urban tourist attractions, sites of communal gathering, and memorials to earlier Jewish communities. It is not a coincidence that synagogues successfully adapted as heritage sites are located in tourist destinations; the ones I focus on are located in New York, Boston, Miami Beach, and Newport. As symbols of the Jewish community, they are popular settings for a family outing or a school field trip. Many of these synagogues were abandoned as Jews left ethnic enclaves in cities for the suburbs in the mid-twentieth century; a handful still serve as spaces of worship. As museums and heritage sites, they acquire a new public role within the Jewish community and the greater American public sphere as representatives of Jewish heritage and fountainheads of nostalgia.

**Salvation Stories**

Roberta Brandes Gratz, the founder of the Eldridge Street Project, which restored the Eldridge Street Synagogue, describes her first sight of the interior of the synagogue in December 1982 in this way:

Pigeons roosted in the attic and flew in and out of missing windows. Dust was so thick on the pews that you could carve your initials in it. Water was pouring through one corner of the roof. Prayer books were left strewn about. Little objects that worshippers long ago had left behind, including crystal drinking glasses, were randomly scattered. Pieces of stained glass from broken windows were everywhere.9

Today, docents display pictures from this time, holding up large photographs for visitors to contrast with their view of the restored synagogue. Museum materials often quote Gratz’s

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comment on that period: “It was as though the synagogue was held up by strings from heaven.”

That is, it was nothing less than a miracle—divine providence—that the synagogue building survived, that it was found by preservationists, and that it was successfully restored so that visitors can stand in it today.

When the non-profit organizations that display historic synagogues to the public tell their buildings’ stories, salvation stories such as Gratz’s serves an essential purpose. These stories capture tourists’ attention as well as explain—and to some extent, defend—the institution’s purpose. These narratives identify their historic homes as sacred sites, made sacred both through their use as a house of worship and through the process of preservation. As Stewart identifies, an origin narrative “is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.” As a narrative of origins and reclamation, the salvation story reveals and conflates the narrator’s conflicted longing for the past with its description of broken and repaired objects and spaces. These are stories of both salvage and salvation.

Historic synagogues often frame these salvation stories in traditional Jewish terms, as in the Eldridge Street Project’s “rededication” of the Eldridge Street Synagogue in December 2007. The Project held its event just before Chanukah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew. Staff members drew parallels between their work in preserving the Lower East Side synagogue and the Maccabees’ rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BCE commemorated during Chanukah. But unlike the paradigmatic rededication story of the Temple,

11 Stewart, 136.
the Eldridge Street Project was not only restoring a worship space to its previous use—though a congregation continues to use the synagogue as a worship space—but announcing its official opening to the public as a heritage site.

Salvation stories help to establish heritage sites as sacred spaces, in part because preservationists often recognize historic sites as sacred only when they are at risk of being desecrated or destroyed. Since nostalgia is a longing for a particular time and place, the renovated and restored historic synagogue presents a paradox of authenticity: The ostensibly authentic space of the past is both absent and present. The simultaneous longing to have the site in its original glory, the nadir of its ruin, and the desire to see it in its restored splendor are united in the telling of a salvation story, making elegiac nostalgia an active force in the present. While designers of other kinds of memorials often deliberately avoid referring to the “processes that

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brought them into being,” historic synagogues tell specific stories about their development in order to heighten visitors’ emotions about the site.\(^\text{16}\)

I describe these narratives as *salvation* stories advisedly: Like Christian notions of salvation, narratives about the preservation of historic synagogues are stories of revival, wholeness, and reclaimed authenticity in the building’s second life as heritage.\(^\text{17}\) As in evangelical narratives of being born again, retelling stories of a building’s preservation plays an important role in its ongoing salvation. Such salvations stories engage a process of allegorization, creating a narrative that both affirms and erases the symbol’s original meaning.\(^\text{18}\) In the allegorization of historic synagogues, these buildings stand in for the myth of American Jewish immigration history and the nostalgic elegy associated with it. The allegories of salvation encourage patrons to feel an emotional connection to the particular synagogue and, more broadly, to certain American Jewish pasts, each building upon the other.

This process of allegorization and salvation has had political consequences that have reshaped urban neighborhoods: Jewish preservationists’ efforts to save the historic synagogues of formerly Jewish neighborhoods in large cities, abandoned when Jews left *en masse* for the suburbs, enacted what historian Lila Corwin Berman calls American Jews’ “remote urbanism.” As Berman argues, American Jews’ politics of urban investment “was intensified, not diminished,

\(^{17}\) Here I rely upon Peter Clecak’s analysis of salvation in relation to Americans’ searches for self-fulfillment and social justice in the second half of the twentieth century. Peter Clecak, *America’s Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
by urban flight and upheaval.”19 Jewish leaders, including preservationists, asserted that one did not have to live in the city to have a stake in it. Emotional attachment, the historic presence of a people, and preservation efforts were sufficient proof that the city—or at least parts of it—belonged to Jews.

Historic synagogues’ salvation stories and their political consequences are not limited to elegies of America’s era of immigration, though those are most common. The Jewish Museum of Florida, housed in two adjacent former synagogue buildings in Miami Beach, tells a salvation story focused on the mid-twentieth century. The museum’s two buildings, once owned by a single congregation, “served as the religious and cultural center of the South Beach Jewish community through the heyday of Jewish life there from 1936–1986.” The museum’s website continues:

Then the neighborhood rapidly declined. The congregation dwindled as the Jewish community moved away from the South Beach neighborhood. While some other nearby synagogues were converted to nightclubs, this building was abandoned and fell into disrepair. Hurricane Andrew decimated the roof in August 1992. The resulting torrents of water destroyed the ceilings, walls, foundation, decorative plaster moldings and oak floors. The stained glass windows became the target of vandalism.20

The building was slated for demolition, to be replaced by an apartment building. Luckily, so the story goes, at just that moment Marcia Jo Zerivitz, who had organized a traveling exhibit about the Jewish history of Florida, was looking for a permanent home for her exhibit. In 1993, “a wonderful marriage was made” between the vacant synagogue and the homeless exhibit.21 This ostensibly fated union affirmed South Beach as a Jewish place just as South Beach was attaining

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21 “Historic Buildings.”
prominence as an international tourist destination, allowing the museum to participate in the neighborhood’s gentrification.

Recounting the stories of these buildings serves to heighten perceptions of their status as a sacred space, a space set apart for heightened emotional sensitivity. Though museum staff and visitors would be unlikely to use this language, historic synagogues are out-of-the-ordinary spaces, sites of liminality. Visitors understand that historic synagogues are set apart for feeling a particular set of emotions regarding the past. These buildings are appropriate for nostalgia because they are sacred, and, simultaneously, they are sacred because they are objects of nostalgia.

When they arrive at historic synagogues in the U.S., visitors have certain models of sacred spaces in mind. Consciously or unconsciously, many visitors draw parallels between

![Figure 5](image-url)  The Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach. Photo by Alexf. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.
American synagogues employed as heritage sites—largely abandoned because of migration patterns as Jews moved away from immigrant enclaves—and European synagogues that stand empty, their congregations murdered in the Holocaust. This comparison reflects American Jewish fears about assimilation in American society following the destruction of European Jewry. In light of Fackenheim’s articulation of American Jews’ obligation to remember European Jewish pasts and prohibition against handing Hitler “another, posthumous victory” as a 614th commandment, empty synagogues, even in America, represent a Nazi victory, if an indirect one.²²

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, interest in European Jewish life has increased exponentially, and Jewish heritage tourism has become big business.²³ Synagogues renovated and re-opened as museums draw attention to their missing congregations, which cannot be restored. As Ruth Ellen Gruber explains,

> The mere fact that a synagogue stands empty of Jews, used as an exhibit or housing an exhibit, may end up being the principal means of conveying a sense of loss: palpable absence may be the most important “exhibit” on the Holocaust and post-Holocaust period.²⁴

I contend that any synagogue devoid of its congregation in the post-Holocaust period evokes this abiding sense of loss, whether congregants were directly affected by the Nazi regime or whether they left the building under happier circumstances. Abandoned American synagogues echo the elegiac melancholy of their European cousins. When the American buildings acquire a second

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²³ While there were few efforts to preserve and maintain sites of former Jewish communities in the decades immediately following World War II, as Michael Meng has traced, by the late 1970s, Germans and Poles began to restore the historic traces of Jewish life. Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).

life as heritage sites, staff members utilize that melancholy in the service of nostalgia, which not only mourns but also celebrates the past.

At the same time, to assert that certain institutions encourage nostalgia does not mean that they do not engage in responsible, academically rigorous portrayals and research of history. As the scholar of comparative literature Svetlana Boym reminds us, “Longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection.”25 The Jewish Museum of Florida has reminded potential members, “By strengthening Jewish continuity and raising public awareness in our diverse multicultural society, the Museum enhances understanding and encourages visitors to THINK.”26 The work of historic synagogues values and builds upon historical scholarship about Jewish pasts but, as an imaginative process, does not rely entirely upon it.

This public display of nostalgia is often a matter of political contestation. Like the Museum at Eldridge Street, the story of the near-desecration and salvation of the 1919 Vilna Shul in Boston derives from a familiar story of Jews leaving the once-thriving immigrant Jewish neighborhood of Beacon Hill for the suburbs. (“Shul” is the Yiddish term for synagogue.) But the development of the Vilna Shul into a heritage site was more complicated than the straightforward narrative of salvage and salvation that appeals to visitors. Local Jewish groups competed for limited financial resources, opposing and supporting the restoration of the synagogue and its adaptation to a heritage site and Jewish community center.

The Vilna Shul had dwindled to three members by 1985, when the 87-year-old president, Mendel Miller, was mugged while setting up for holiday services. The attack cemented Miller’s decision to disband the congregation, sell the building, and give the proceeds to charities in Israel. But when Boston’s Jewish community leaders learned of his plans, they rushed to stop him from selling the last remaining Jewish presence on Beacon Hill. “This has always been a Jewish institution and should remain so,” preservationists argued. Miller resentfully responded that preservationists had no authority over the space. They had never helped him to maintain the building or attract service participants. “I took care of the shul twenty-three years and no one in the Jewish community helped or was interested. Why should they be interested now?” he griped. While Miller believed that the tiny congregation had dominion over the synagogue, preservationists saw the synagogue as the inheritance of a broader, loosely defined local Jewish community.

When it was revealed that a Massachusetts law on proceeds from dissolved charities would direct some of the assets from the sale of the Vilna Shul to the other struggling Orthodox synagogue in Boston, the battle heated up. The president of that congregation told a reporter, “We feel that designating this shell of a building [as a historical landmark] is really to no fruitful

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27 Jack Porter, quoted in Ethan Bronner, “Beacon Hill; Proposed Sale of Vilna Synagogue Assailed; Official Cites a Lack of Support While Opponents Say They Want to Preserve Jewish Heritage,” Boston Globe, February 3, 1986, 18. Notably, this view of Beacon Hill evinces a limited historical scope. The neighborhood was home to Jewish, Irish, and other immigrants from the late nineteenth- to mid-twentieth century; before that, it had been an African American neighborhood since the mid-eighteenth century.
He told another, “Judaism is considered a living religion, for the living,” and turning the synagogue into a museum would only commemorate the dead.  

Miller planned to sell the property to a real estate developer who intended to tear it down and build a parking garage in the now-gentrified neighborhood where parking is always at a premium. The sale fell through, not because of any actions by preservationists, but because of the developer’s arrest on drug charges.  

Preservationists subsequently persuaded Boston’s mayor to designate the synagogue’s interior as a historic landmark. Their antagonists, in favor of the sale,  

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proceeded to spend the better part of a year forcefully lobbying city councilors to veto the mayor’s decision.  

Ultimately, preservationists won the battle, and today the semi-restored Vilna Shul is open to visitors, for community events, and for Havurah on the Hill (HOH), an independent group of twenty- and thirty-year-olds who meet there for monthly services. HOH follows the trend of proliferating lay-led minyanim (prayer groups) that draw together young adults, particularly singles, who are uninterested in paying membership dues to join synagogue congregations dominated by their parents’ generation and geared toward families.  

At a moment when the Jewish communal establishment worries loudly about the continuation of Jewish communal practices among post-college adults—driven primarily by fears about intermarriage—HOH has received a great deal of praise and financial support, particularly from Boston’s Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP).  

Participants and supporters view Havurah on the Hill as the successful outcome of the Vilna Shul’s salvation story, fulfilling Fackenheim’s 614th commandment and assuaging Jewish communal concerns about young adults’ participation in Jewish institutions.  

An HOH participant reflected her awareness of these issues when she


34 Barry Shrage, interview by author, Boston, June 28, 2012. The Jewish communal establishment I have in mind includes but is not limited to congregational leaders, philanthropists, journalists, and sociologists of Jews. See Doug Most, “Boston’s Jewish Renaissance,” *Boston Globe*, November 6, 2005. The lengthy subtitle of Most’s article is telling: “Fifteen years after a study on the rise of interfaith marriages had Jewish leaders bemoaning the religion’s slow death, Judaism is thriving in Boston. What’s more surprising is who’s leading the revival.” Most depicts Havurah on the Hill as an explicit response to concerns about intermarriage on the part of the young adult participants and their funders, including both the board of the Vilna Shul and the CJP.

35 See, for example, concerns about Jewish young adults giving less charity to Jewish causes than their elders; giving money to Jewish causes, particularly federations (collective philanthropic organizations), has been an important religious act and indicator of communal identity for
described her first experience praying with the Havurah: “Though the building was in significant disrepair as compared to how it stands today, I saw such great potential in my surroundings and could feel the building urging us and thanking us for having a real and active future—not just to be used a source for looking at the past.”

The Jewish immigrant past, seen as incarnated in the historic synagogue, has been made complicit in contemporary communal politics.

A founder of Havurah on the Hill explained the group’s appeal by saying, “When you come in here, you immediately feel like you’re a part of Jewish history. I think it’s a way to connect to Judaism that’s very tangible.”

Another board member said, “It’s the ghosts of people past, the ghosts of their great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents that really excite these young adults.”

The havurah’s location in a historic synagogue comfortably connects its participants to the religious history of generations preceding that of their parents. Its participants have clearly articulated a personal longing for the past that only came to the fore when the space was threatened and when it was unquestionably past its prime. As Miller recognized, preservationists did not want full-time congregational use of the building. The pull of elegiac nostalgia was more poignant, particularly when it involved activist efforts to “save” the building from the evils of real estate development.

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“We’re Not Really a Museum”

Once a historic synagogue is “saved” from destruction, a not-for-profit’s executive director or board of directors chooses how to present the building to the public. At the start of nearly every tour I observed, docents at historic synagogues carefully explained to visitors where they were. “You are standing in 301 Washington Avenue, the second building built by the first Jewish congregation in Miami Beach,” docents at the Jewish Museum of Florida explain to each visitor. When I began my research, I expected visitors to arrive knowing something about the place they had chosen to visit, and I was surprised by the large numbers of visitors I observed who appeared confused about how a synagogue building could function as a heritage site. In anticipation of such reactions from visitors, naming practices at such sites are always matters of dispute as the organizations responsible for historic synagogues attempt to be as clear as possible about their purposes.

Complicating this attempt at clarity, a sizable contingent of staff and visitors perceive a contrast between a “living” synagogue, with a congregation led by a rabbi, and a “dead” museum, so choosing the name by which a synagogue-as-heritage-site will be presented to the public is always a matter of some contention. In order to be an active force in the present, elegiac nostalgia cannot appear to rely too heavily on elegy. After preservationists won the rights to the Vilna Shul, they opted to open it to the public as the Vilna Shul—Boston’s Center for Jewish Culture. When I asked staff members about the descriptive title, program manager Jessica Antoline immediately differentiated the space from that of a museum, in terms of exhibition:

We’re not really a museum. That’s not really the word for us here. It’s a cultural center and it’s a historic site. And that’s a different thing. We don’t have objects that we’ve brought in and we’ve decontextualized. We’re the opposite. All of our objects have
always been here. The Jewish community brought their objects here. So we’re not really a museum. We function a little bit differently.\textsuperscript{39}

Lacking a congregation, the historic synagogue could easily be understood as a museum, making the semantic distinction all the more crucial for not-for-profit organizations that rely on public perception of their mission for their funds. To accomplish this differentiation, Antoline distinguished between a museum, which she saw as an institution displaying artifacts out of context, and the Vilna Shul, which maintains a certain kind of credible authenticity because its artifacts have a history of use within the synagogue building.

The Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, the oldest synagogue building in the United States, has a constant stream of tourists, but the tiny Orthodox congregation has serious financial issues, sometimes threatening the salary of its rabbi. The congregation’s co-president, Bea Ross, told a reporter, “The minute it doesn’t have a full-time rabbi, then it doesn’t function as a synagogue anymore.” She added, “If it isn’t open as a house of worship, then it just becomes a museum, and the world doesn’t need another museum.”\textsuperscript{40} Ross demonstrates a prevalent view of museums as devoid of living community. Staff members and board members of historic synagogues shy away from designating their buildings as museums because many visitors share Ross’s critical view of museums as encouraging a “disinterested, distanced, formal contemplation” of the objects they display.\textsuperscript{41} Critics have attacked the museum “as a symptom of cultural ossification,” presenting only the “dead weight of the past.”\textsuperscript{42} The philosopher Theodor Adorno believed that museum exhibits display “objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to

\textsuperscript{39} Jessica Antoline, interview by author, Boston, June 26, 2012.
\textsuperscript{40} Anthony Weiss, “Touro Struggles With Its Historic Legacy,” \textit{The Jewish Daily Forward}, May 27, 2009, 1, 10.
\textsuperscript{42} Huysssen, 13.
historical respect than to the needs of the present.” Adorno and other detractors of museums have been concerned with the distance between the past and the present and the lack of meaning with which the subjects of museum display allegedly hold for the present.

In contrast to these positions, contemporary museum studies repeatedly demonstrate that successful museums hold meaning for their audiences. Most significantly, art historian Carol Duncan’s analysis of museums as cultural artifacts suggests that museums develop their own communities, complete with rituals and rules of engagement that mirror the structured activities of religious rites. Architectural and curatorial design and visitors’ behavior set apart the museum for a special kind of contemplation, and museum staff members regulate visitors’ behavior, garnering the differentiation from other spatial experiences that is characteristic of sacred spaces. At the same time, changes in museum design and curation have increasingly made museums sites for the public to interact with their subject matter. Despite these changes in scholarly and professional approaches, many staff members and congregational representatives maintain their instinctive aversions to the word “museum.”

When the not-for-profit Eldridge Street Project renovated the Eldridge Street Synagogue between 1986 and 2007 and displayed it to the public, staff members were careful not to call the building a museum, emphasizing that it was still used by a small congregation. In fact, the congregation still owned the building; in the years when the sanctuary was closed off due to lack of funds for heating and preservation, they had continued to meet for services in the beit midrash (study hall) in the basement. As Gratz and her fellow preservationists initially sought funding to restore the building, they struggled with how to frame their preservationist effort while balancing

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45 Weil, “From Being About Something.”
their obligation to the congregation. “We were like a fish out of water,” Gratz said. “We fell into nobody’s real category so people would say we don’t have a category for you.”

Even after the Project joined the American Association of Museums in 1991, its designation as a museum remained a “delicate point,” said Amy Waterman, the executive director of the Project. “Some of our board members would say, ‘Don’t call it a museum. It sounds like it’s over, like it has ossified,’” she told a reporter in 2005.

Nonetheless, only two years later, upon the completion of the renovation in 2007, the Project was renamed the Museum at Eldridge Street. Praising the conclusion of the synagogue’s renovation as a “cause for celebration,” historian Jenna Weissman Joselit described popular reactions to the name change in The Forward: “And yet, there’s something about a synagogue-turned-museum that saddens, even disturbs. . . . It carries the whiff of disappointment, the sting of failure about itself.”

Perhaps as a result of such reactions, Bonnie Dimun, the executive director of the museum, remains hesitant about the term. She wonders if the Project rushed into the name change too fast. The new name causes confusion because many visitors expect a museum to have temporary and permanent object-based exhibits and imagine a museum site as a “dead” space, devoid of ongoing community. Nonetheless, says Dimun, the focus should be on what happens within the space, not merely on its name:

The good news is it’s alive and well. Call it whatever you want—a museum, a landmark, a heritage [site]—whatever name works, the place is alive again. It is not alive again the

47 Salamon.
48 Jenna Weissman Joselit, “Museum Woe,” The Jewish Daily Forward, January 2, 2008, http://www.forward.com/articles/12370. A member of the congregation commented on Joselit’s article, reminding her and her readers that the synagogue’s congregation benefitted from restoration, which enabled it to use the restored main sanctuary for Saturday morning services.
way it was as a house of worship only, but it is alive again with music and events and history and the opportunity to tell the stories of the past and make it present.”

Dimun’s understanding of the “life” of the Museum at Eldridge Street stands in sharp contrast with the opponents of the Vilna Shul restoration who argued that turning the Boston synagogue into a heritage site would only serve the dead.

**Institutional Biographies**

As the debates over naming practices suggest, historic synagogues are always sites of organizational contestations over space. A great deal is at stake: Heritage sites, including historic buildings and ethnic or cultural museums, purport to represent a community, and those located in houses of worship present a religion to a variety of adherents and outsiders. Even when the staff of heritage sites makes no such claims, visitors often see historic synagogues as representative of an American Jewish community and often of Judaism in its entirety. As sites of public history, ostensibly purveyors of objective knowledge, museums representing living groups control the expression of those communities. “To control a museum,” Duncan explains, “means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths.”

Officials at heritage sites have the power to define communal identity and who constitutes it. The stakes are raised, or at least complicated, when religion, as well as ethnic heritage, is at stake. Heritage sites become the keepers of religious boundaries and the arbiters of a community’s central values.

The oldest extant synagogue building in the United States, the Touro Synagogue has a 350-year history of shifting oversight and competing institutional claims. Currently, the Touro Synagogue is overseen by an abundance of organizations—five, by one count. While casual visitors to the synagogue are rarely aware of the complicated institutional relationships going on

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49 Dimun, interview.
50 Duncan, 8–9.
51 Mary Jo Valdez, interview by author, Newport, Rhode Island, August 15, 2012.
behind the scenes, I will spend some time examining its institutional history. As Boym asserts, “The ‘biography’ of memorials—the debates and controversies around them—might be as important as their form.”\(^{52}\) While nostalgic presentations emphasize a seamless trajectory from the past to the present, the need for a nostalgic narrative is often born of conflicting narratives and competing institutional claims. Tracing the Touro Synagogue’s institutional history provides a window into the means of memorial collection and the aggregation of sentiments that have formed the heritage site that tourists call “America’s oldest synagogue.”\(^ {53}\)

The Touro Synagogue’s beginnings are celebrated by the many institutions that oversee it today: It traces its origins to fifteen Jewish families of Spanish and Portuguese origin who immigrated to Newport in 1658, drawn to the colony of Rhode Island by promises of religious liberty and economic opportunities.\(^ {54}\) They founded Congregation Jeshuat Israel (Salvation of Israel) not long after their arrival, but they did not build a synagogue until 1763, when the synagogue’s Dutch-born leader, the hazzan (cantor) Isaac Touro, commissioned the renowned architect Peter Harrison to design a synagogue in the Georgian style popular at the time.\(^ {55}\) The building was not in use for long. In 1776, the Jewish community joined their neighbors in fleeing

\(^{52}\) Boym, 79.

\(^{53}\) The Touro Synagogue building, built in 1759, is the oldest synagogue building in the United States; its founding congregation was established in 1658. Congregation Shearith Israel, in New York City, founded in 1654, is the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States. Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel in Curaçao, built in 1732, is the oldest synagogue still in use today in the Americas.

\(^{54}\) These families probably came to Newport from Curaçao, in the West Indies, then a Dutch colony with a community of Spanish-Portuguese Jews whose ancestors had fled the Inquisition in the late fifteenth century. Today, Curaçao boasts the oldest synagogue and the oldest active Jewish congregation in the Americas, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. See Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Curaçao, N.A., 2003, [http://www.snoa.com/snoa.html](http://www.snoa.com/snoa.html). The founders of both the Newport and Curaçao synagogues were Sephardic Jews, following liturgy, legal traditions, and customs that trace their origins to early modern Spain. (Sephardic is the Hebrew term for “Spanish.”)

Newport when British forces occupied and laid siege to the island. Like other colonists, the
Newport Jews were divided on the subject of revolution, and the synagogue building survived
the British siege because Isaac Touro convinced the British to use the building as a hospital.\textsuperscript{56}

After the war, as the country struggled to establish a system of government, George
Washington visited Newport in 1790 in an effort to promote the Bill of Rights.\textsuperscript{57} During this visit,
Moses Seixas, the warden of the synagogue, presented Washington with a letter supporting his
administration and expressing gratitude from “the children of the stock of Abraham” for “a
Government which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously
affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.”\textsuperscript{58} Washington’s response to
“the Hebrew congregation in Newport” echoes Seixas’s wording:

For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to
persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should
demean themselves as good citizens. . . . May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who
dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants;
while every one shall sit in the safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be
none to make him afraid.\textsuperscript{59}

This letter would become essential to the historical presentation of the synagogue, and the
synagogue would be bound up in American and Jewish social memories as inextricably tied to
ideas of American individual liberties and religious freedom.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} Laura Liebman provides a description of the colonial Jews of Newport. Laura Arnold Liebman,\
\textit{Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life}
\textsuperscript{57} This was Washington’s second visit to the building. In 1781, in the midst of the American
Revolution, Washington visited Newport for a strategic meeting with Generals Lafayette and
Rochambeau, at which time a town meeting was held in the empty synagogue building. During
the 1790 visit, Thomas Jefferson accompanied Washington, but the New England synagogue
does not make much of Jefferson’s visit.
\textsuperscript{58} Letter from Moses Seixas, in Theodore Lewis, “History of Touro Synagogue;” \textit{Bulletin of the
Newport Historical Society} 48, no. 159 (Summer 1975): 317.
\textsuperscript{59} Letter from George Washington, in Lewis, 318.
\textsuperscript{60} In 1982, the U.S. Postal Service sold a stamp featuring the synagogue’s façade and the words
“To bigotry, no sanction. To persecution, no assistance. George Washington,” inducting the
As I have observed, tour guides often gloss over the nineteenth century in their retellings of the Touro Synagogue’s history, in order to better create narrative continuity between the present congregation and the original, colonial congregants. After the congregation abandoned the building, it was used as a state house, courthouse, and town hall. In 1805, Moses Lopez, the last remaining Jew in Newport and a son of one of the synagogue’s founders, handed the keys and deed to the synagogue to the Sephardic Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, the oldest congregation in the United States, to which Jeshuat Israel had long had closes ties. While the building would not be home to a congregation for much of the nineteenth century, bequests in the 1820s by Isaac Touro’s sons, the philanthropic brothers Abraham and Isaac Touro, ensured that building’s physical survival, funded its first restoration, and provided funds for a future congregation. These bequests ensured the building’s place in American and Jewish memory as well as its physical survival.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a large number of Christian visitors to the building, who viewed the synagogue as an empty building symbolizing the destruction of the Jews, as well as Jewish visitors who took pride in the Jewish colonial history. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the most famous American poet of his day, visited the synagogue in 1852; his poem


61 Weiss. Congregation Shearith Israel is colloquially known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, but I will refer to it by its congregational name so as not to cause confusion with the Touro Synagogue, whose founders were also of Spanish and Portuguese origin. The New York congregation is older than the Touro Synagogue, dating back to 1654, but it is not housed in its original building.
“The Jewish Cemetery at Newport,” published in *Monthly Magazine* in July 1854, concludes, “The groaning in travail and pain / Brings forth its races, but does not restore, / And the dead nations never rise again.” The Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, best remembered for the poem inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty, visited the synagogue in 1867, and penned a reply to Longfellow, “In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport.” As Esther Schor recounts, neither Longfellow nor Lazarus saw signs of life at the synagogue, but Lazarus was inspired by the potential for present-day holiness by connecting to Jewish history: “Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,” she wrote, “With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod. / Take off your shoes as by the burning bush, / Before the mystery of death and God.” Simultaneously emphasizing the irrevocable distance between past and present as well as the impact of the synagogue’s past upon its “consecrated” present, and the poem articulated a model for future nostalgic presentations of the synagogue.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants from central and eastern Europe were settling in Newport, as in the rest of the country. With the permission of Shearith Israel, the New York Sephardic congregation, the Newport synagogue was reopened for occasional services in 1883. Two competing Ashkenazi congregations claimed jurisdiction over the building, Congregation Jeshuat Israel (named for but with no connection to the original congregation) and the Touro Congregation. From New York, Shearith Israel retained control of the building—a fact that remains important today—and arbitrated the matter. With the threatening spread of Reform Judaism on its mind, Shearith Israel insisted that the synagogue retain Orthodox Sephardic customs and affirmed Congregation Jeshuat Israel, which employed a

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Sefardic rabbi, though the members of the congregation were Ashkenazi. By 1902, Jeshuat Israel hired its first Ashkenazi rabbi, though the services continued to follow the Sephardic rite, at least to some degree.63 Nostalgia for the colonial past, as well as a keen understanding of its obligation to Shearith Israel, would smooth over any discrepancies between the Sephardic designation and Ashkenazi realities at the Touro Synagogue in the decades to come.

In 1946, the National Park Service (NPS) recognized the synagogue as a National Historic Site, a credential providing an outside measure of legitimacy to heritage presentations of the synagogue’s history. In order to arrange the designation, the NPS had to negotiate an agreement between Newport’s Congregation Jeshuat Israel and its overseer in New York, Congregation Shearith Israel. Acting on the advice of NPS delegates, Jeshuat Israel’s president,

Bernard C. Friedman, organized the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, adding another layer to the intricate institutional history of the building. The Society, now the Touro Synagogue Foundation, is the 501(c) 3 not-for-profit, nonsectarian organization dedicated to maintaining and preserving Touro Synagogue and to “promoting and teaching religious diversity, colonial Jewish history and the history of Touro Synagogue.” The Foundation directs the presentation of the synagogue’s history onsite and therefore has a large measure of control over the kind of nostalgia produced and circulated about it.

Today, the synagogue building is the still the home of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, along with several other organizations. While the congregation has about 140 member families, some of those do not live in the area and have joined the synagogue to show their support for the historic site. In the winter, the congregation struggles to gather a minyan of ten Jewish men on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, but in the summer Newport’s tourists join its morning and evening daily services.

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64 The Touro Synagogue came to the attention of the National Park Service by means of an unusual suggestion by Arthur Hays Sulzberger, publisher of The New York Times. In 1945, Sulzberger suggested that the NPS create a historic church advisory board to help select and set aside one Protestant church, one Roman Catholic church, and one Jewish synagogue in each of the original thirteen colonies as evidence of American religious unity during World War II. (Sulzberger himself was descended from early American Sephardic families, whose history would have been represented in the colonial synagogues.) While the NPS did not follow through on Sulzberger’s cumbersome plan, his suggestion set in motion the Park Service’s evaluation of the Touro Synagogue. Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949, vol. 2 (Charlottesville, Virginia: Published for the Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States by the University Press of Virginia, 1981), 736–738. See John H. Sprinkle Jr., “Viewpoint: ‘History Is as History Was, and Cannot Be Changed’: Origins of the National Register Criteria Consideration for Religious Properties,” Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum 16, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 1–15.

In 1997, the congregation and the Foundation approached the businessman and philanthropist John L. Loeb, Jr. to consider purchasing the land abutting the synagogue and building a visitors center on the premises. The scion of a wealthy banking family, formerly the U.S. Ambassador to Denmark and as the Delegate to the United Nations, Loeb is descended from original congregants of the Touro Synagogue. “My sense of Jewish identity was tremendously enhanced when I found out that I was distantly related to the Touros,” Loeb said. “I found out that there are quite a number of Jews with the same feeling: As they learn more about American Jewish history, it gives them a sense of belonging to this country as a Jew.” For Loeb and others, the emotional intersection between personal and communal histories is the basis for participation in Jewish nostalgia, as is clear in the case of Jewish genealogical interest.

Loeb feels a particular passion for George Washington’s letter to the congregation, and when the congregation and the Foundation approached him, he was already thinking about how to make the Foundation’s annual reading of the letter better known. He told a reporter, “I don’t remember the exact moment when I realized that the purchase and gift of the properties to the congregation would be the very meaningful project that I had been looking for.”


Leon.
congregation’s co-president, had a happy explanation, another salvation story: “We talked about it being *beshert,*” she said, using the Yiddish word for “destiny.”

Over the course of twelve years, Loeb ended up spending $12 million to purchase two properties abutting the synagogue and build a visitors center, passing ownership of the properties on to the congregation. Along the way, he founded the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom (GWIRF). GWIRF oversees the Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. Visitors Center and also promotes knowledge about the letter more widely, using the letter as a lens through which it “empowers educators, students and citizens of all ages around the world to address issues of religious freedom and ‘liberty of conscience.’” Loeb believes that “the most important thing is to get people to read the letter” and that it has a “transformative quality” that will affect readers’ citizenship, and these views guide GWIRF’s activities. For Loeb and GWIRF, the Touro Synagogue is an important vehicle for popularizing the letter amongst visitors and disseminating a broader message about the foundational basis of American religious liberty.

GWIRF’s oversight over the Touro Synagogue’s Visitors Center affects the tenor of the exhibits and docents. The docents who show the synagogue building to tourists, who are supervised by the Foundation, emphasize the synagogue’s unique place in Jewish history. Down the hill of Patriots Parks, at a small, two-story Visitors Center with exhibits placing the

68 Weiss.
70 Michael Feldberg, telephone interview by author, August 23, 2012. An American Jewish historian, Feldberg is the executive director of the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom. He came to GWIRF after serving as the executive director of the American Jewish Historical Society.
synagogue in its historical contexts, docents overseen by GWIRF see their role as “let[ting] the public know that the story is much bigger than this building, this congregation’s history, that this is a national historic site because [of its] connections. It could just as easily be a Quaker meetinghouse or a Unitarian church. It just happens to be Touro Synagogue because of the George Washington Letter.” Given the institutional histories of the building, nostalgia for this colonial Jewish and American past has been contested almost since its occurrence. The competing narratives of the Visitor’s Center, GWIRF, the Foundation, and the congregation demonstrate the institutions’ different historical emphases and diverse access points of the institutions that promote them.

Currently, Congregation Jeshuat Israel is engaged in a legal dispute with Shearith Israel, its New York counterpart, over whether the former has the right to sell its eighteenth-century Torah finials, (*rimonim*, bells adorning the top of a Torah scroll) to a museum in order to raise money for the congregation. “Shearith Israel owns . . . the building, real estate and any and all historic [artifacts] used by or for Touro Synagogue,” the New York congregation asserted in papers filed in December 2012 in Rhode Island Federal Court. This case underlines the continual institutional contestation for control of American Jewish heritage sites, the physical spaces that are both the bedrock and the tools of Jewish nostalgia.

“There This Museum Is About You”

Once synagogues are opened to the public as heritage sites, visitors arrive seeking authenticity—that certain events really happened there and that! j they can be demonstrated

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71 Valdez.
72 Paul Berger, “Dazzling Torah Bells Spark Legal Dispute at Touro Shul,” *The Jewish Daily Forward*, February 15, 2013, [http://forward.com/articles/170584/dazzling-torah-bells-spark-legal-battle-for-touro/](http://forward.com/articles/170584/dazzling-torah-bells-spark-legal-battle-for-touro/). There is more to be said about the current relationship between Shearith Israel and the Touro Synagogue, but representatives of those congregations will not speak publicly about the matter until it has been resolved.
using historical artifacts—and museum staff members are on hand to provide it. “Even though we are not the oldest synagogue building [in Boston],” wrote the president of the board of the Vilna Shul, “we are the only one that still survives in its authentic form.”\(^{73}\) But how is the authentic identified and measured by staff members and visitors? Over the past few decades, academic interest in the concept of authenticity has increased, in two discrete fields: Philosophers and cultural critics analyze personal and emotional authenticity, and preservationists are concerned with the historical authenticity of material culture and historical architecture.\(^{74}\) While participants in these two scholarly realms rarely speak directly to each other, both types of authenticity are in play at heritage synagogues, where visitors judge authenticity by their emotional reactions to the historic spaces.

Visitors to historic synagogues, particularly Jewish visitors, often enter the buildings with a sense of emotional ownership over them, believing that they exist for the purpose of shoring up their own identities. They are not entirely wrong. As scholars have identified, American Jews have come to see Jewish museums as institutions “whose primary mandate was to renew them, to affirm them in their Jewishness, to show cause as to why Jewish culture mattered.”\(^{75}\) Visitors’ reasonable confusion over what these buildings are—synagogue, museum, or tourist attraction—and who is running the show only reinforces their resolution that the synagogue belongs to them. While the staff members present their artifacts—primarily the synagogue buildings themselves—as historically authentic, visitors respond to them emotionally. Indeed, staff members often

\(^{73}\) Jack Swartz, “Please Spread the Word,” \textit{Vilna Scribe} 16, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 1.

\(^{74}\) For a history of scholarly theories of authenticity (excluding preservationists), see Rebecca J. Erickson, “The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society,” \textit{Symbolic Interaction} 18, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 121–144.

\(^{75}\) Joselit, “Best-in-Show,” 152.
encourage them to do so, in order to have what staff members understand to be an authentic experience of the space.

For example, concerts held in the restored sanctuary of the Museum at Eldridge Street are designed to provoke an emotional reaction from visitors. One concert in December 2012 featured fourteenth-generation cantor Netanel Hershtik singing classical hazzanut, the near-operatic form of Jewish cantorial performance. At the museum, Hershtik performed liturgy from the “golden age” of American Jewish cantors of the 1920s and 1930s and more recent cantorial pieces. Pro Musica Hebraica, an organization devoted to presenting Jewish classical music in concert hall settings, sponsored the event. Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, who founded Pro Musica Hebraica with his wife, Robyn Krauthammer, told a journalist, “To me, [this music] captures the sense of what Jewishness is all about. One doesn’t have to be religious to feel the power of this music.”76 Hazzanut performances in concert halls were popular in the early twentieth century and Pro Musica Hebraica works to revive this tradition, but Hershtik’s performance of liturgical music in a historic synagogue amplified and complicated the sanctity of the performance of liturgy.77

As Krauthammer’s comment indicates, the divisions among religious, cultural, and spiritual experiences of this concert are not clear. Hershtik, who works as the cantor at the Hampton Synagogue in Westhampton, New York, told The Jewish Week that he views his work as a cantor as a religious obligation. “Standing in that synagogue it’s a mission for me. I have a job to do in this world, to bring [classical hazzanut] to the world. I don’t know if there is a music

in the world that has more ancient roots.”  

Performing in a concert setting rather than in a religious service complicated but does not diminish this mission:

For me to stand in front of an audience is a challenge. The most natural place for me is the amud (prayer leader’s desk). . . . Everyone is thinking the same thought and I’m trying to evoke that emotion for everyone. I’m not performing, I’m praying.

While one did not “have to be religious” to appreciate Hershtik’s music, as Krauthammer declared, the performance was intended to be a powerful experience of music recognized as authentically Jewish in some way, and it was deliberately held within a space noted for its authentic representation of the past. Through the combined sensory experiences of music and historical space, patrons were encourage to form strong emotional connections to particular images of Jewish communal pasts.

Staff members at historic synagogues encourage visitors to channel their desire for an authentic past into these kinds of emotional connections to the site as well as by recalling their own family history connection to the building, through aesthetic appreciation for the building’s architecture and décor, and by means of awe for its historical significance. The Jewish Museum of Florida has advertised its membership by baldly declaring, “Whether your family came here 100 years ago or today, this Museum is about you—and for you.”  

They offer visitors a sense of authority, an emotional connection that leads to nostalgic longing for what came before. It is not entirely clear who “you” are here—do you need to be Jewish or Floridian or American?—but it is clear that you, whoever you are, have a stake in their mission.

During my ethnographic research at the Jewish Museum of Florida, I met a husband and wife who had responded to the Museum’s call for materials in its newsletter and lent the museum

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79 Robinson.
80 “Museum Membership.”
family belongings for an exhibit of Florida Jewish family connections to Lithuania. When they had attended the opening of the exhibit a few weeks earlier, they were dismayed to find that a certain artifact of his father’s was not on display; the day I met them, they had returned solely to make sure that curators had now put it on display. They were possessive of the display, clearly enacting the Museum’s stated policy that it was about them and for them. Genealogical longings were pinned upon the display: They hoped that family members who saw the display might get in touch, but so far no one had contacted them. Architectural historian Giovanni Galli’s suggestion that we should identify a “shared” nostalgia rather than a “collective” nostalgia helps explain this kind of give-and-take interaction between visitors’ and heritage institutions’ constructions of the past. Historic synagogues encourage a nostalgia shared by a “spiritual community of individuals” who participate in the same sentiment but may do so through attachment to different objects. The couple at the Jewish Museum of Florida were focused on their own lineage but still participated in a shared nostalgia through the communal form of the museum-turned-synagogue building.

Even as they encourage visitors to feel an emotional authority over synagogue spaces, staff members also provide visitors with institutional rules of behavior, whether explicitly or implicitly, such as when one can enter the building, how much visitors must pay if there is a charge, in what order visitors should view the space, whether photographs are permitted, and whether men are required to cover their heads with yarmulkes. They often explain that the synagogue is operating as a museum and hence behavior appropriate to museums is required; at other hours, the congregation may have dominion over the space, instituting a different set of behavioral expectations. These museum rules of “do and don’ts” can serve ritual activities and

expectations of comportment that set the space apart from other spaces, as sacred spaces and sites of community-building.\textsuperscript{82} But perhaps more than other heritage sites, visitors to historic synagogues routinely challenge staff members’ authority. Not only do staff members encourage visitors to feel a sense of authority over the space; many visitors arrive with a sense of entitlement, as I observed and was repeatedly informed by staff members.\textsuperscript{83}

Throughout my ethnographic research, I continually observed repeat visitors attempting to usurp the role of their tour guide, particularly if they felt greater attachment to another version of the building’s history and thought the docent was not highlighting the most interesting parts. One repeat visitor to the Vilna Shul who repeatedly interrupted the docent explained to her friends how the first time she entered the building, the synagogue’s murals had not been uncovered and repainted, as they are now. Her own experience was bound up in her telling about the synagogue; her retelling of the synagogue’s history was her story. Authenticity is always tied to conceptions of moral authority, a judgment about whether objects or places or people are what they appear to be or claim to be, if they are worthy of the admiration accorded to them, and from whose perspective the story should be told.\textsuperscript{84} History is alternately written by the victors, or the non-profits, or the visitors to historic sites.

Sara Lowenburg, who began working at the Museum at Eldridge Street as a college intern in 2012 and is now the Education and Programs Associate there, told me that she has found that groups with strong Jewish background feel a particular ownership over the space of the synagogue. She finds that Orthodox visitors who recognize that she is not Orthodox sometimes question her knowledge about the history of synagogue and challenge her authority as

\textsuperscript{82} Duncan, 10.
\textsuperscript{83} Valdez.
\textsuperscript{84} Lionel Trilling, \textit{Sincerity and Authenticity} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), 11, 93.
a tour guide. In the summer of 2014, Lowenburg gave a tour of the synagogue to a challenging group of Orthodox high school girls. She told me:

There were several in the beginning who were kind of . . . trying to ask me questions to throw me off. Not obnoxiously so, but just that they knew what they were talking about and were almost testing me to see if I did. . . . By the end [of the tour] they were more receptive to me. I won them over and almost was deemed a suitable guide to the space. 85

Lowenburg was not offended by this test of her knowledge. Instead, she explained, “I think it’s a very good thing, and I think it’s one of the reasons that Eldridge Street exists as a museum, that people can come in and relate to it.” 86 Both the authority of the tour guide, which enables her to tell the history of the building, and the emotional authority visitors feel over the space, are essential to the function of a historic synagogue as a heritage site. It is no wonder that the two occasionally clash. If the tour guide handles the tension between the two gracefully, the heritage site emerges a more stable site of public history.

In part, the entitlement of visitors to historic synagogues arises from the shifting priorities and social positions common to all museums. Stephen Weil explains that nineteenth-century museums were in a position of superiority over the public, established to “raise” the level of public understanding, “elevate” visitors’ spirits, and “uplift” common taste. This relationship is changing rapidly and dramatically:

At some point—probably not more than forty to fifty years into the twenty-first century—the relative positions of the museum and the public will have revolved a full 180 degrees. In their emerging new relationship—already to be glimpsed in a myriad of ways—it will be the public, not the museum, that occupies the superior position. The museum’s role will have been transformed from one of mastery to one of service. 87

This sense of visitors’ mastery over the space is exacerbated at ethnic heritage sites and religious institutions explicitly aiming to have an impact on visitors’ identities.

86 Lowenburg.
Visitors’ inability to distinguish between the museum and congregational modes of historic synagogues illuminate their sense of ownership. Jewish visitors to the Touro Synagogue routinely object to paying an admission fee to view “America’s oldest synagogue,” which they view as a space of worship and a heritage treasure that belongs to them as Jews. (The historic Congregation Mickve Israel in Savannah, Georgia, avoids such confrontations by asking for a five dollar donation in exchange for a tour of their 1878 building.\textsuperscript{88}) Tourists expecting to take their time examining Touro Synagogue’s historic architecture balk when tour guides nudge them out the door at the half-hour mark in order to make room for the next group. Despite signs directing them to buy tickets at the Visitors Center, a separate building on the same campus, tourists routinely bypass the Center and head straight for the synagogue, the authentic historical artifact they came to see. Standing at the gate by the entrance to the synagogue, they promise docents that they will pay for the tour on their way out, trying to wheedle their way into the synagogue. Others object to paying at all. “It sometimes becomes a very unpleasant confrontation,” one staff member told me. In extreme cases, visitors objecting to the admissions fee have “become very upset, to the point where they will slam doors, they will throw things at us.” They are only pacified when staff members are able to explain that the synagogue receives no funding from federal, state, or local governments; that the small, aging congregation is short on funds; and that the admissions fee is essential to the maintenance of the synagogue building. “Then some people realize, ‘Okay, so my money is going to help the synagogue.’ And then it’s okay,” a staff member recounted.\textsuperscript{89}

Not all visitors to historic synagogues see themselves as museum visitors; some see themselves as transient congregants entering a house of worship. In the high tourist season in the

\textsuperscript{88} “Visit Us,” Congregation Mickve Israel, \url{http://mickveisrael.org/}.\textsuperscript{89} Valdez.
summer, Newport has become a popular vacation spot for ultra-Orthodox Jews. They come to see the synagogue and take tours, but the men also expect to be able to use the synagogue as a space of prayer for their required thrice-daily prayers. While the congregation offers morning and evening prayer services before and after the tours run by the Visitors Center, men expecting to use the space for prayer during the afternoon are shocked to learn that they cannot do so, as the half-hour tours run continuously throughout the day. The various institutions at play at the Touro Synagogue simply cannot live up to visitors’ demanding, conflicting expectations.

Some institutions make a point of valuing public opinion, making note of visitors’ suggestions and making certain decisions transparent. For many years, the Eldridge Street Synagogue, view from the women’s balcony. The east window contains the glass blocks put in place in 1944. Photo by Elliott Kaufman, 2000. Used with permission of Hana Iverson and Elliott Kaufman.
Project had held an ongoing conversation about historic preservation in which the public had been, and continues to be, included. Though the restoration of the synagogue was officially completed in 2007, preservationists had no available records of the original east window. The original rose window had been destroyed in a storm in 1944, at which point the congregation opted to pay off its mortgage rather than restoring the window, and glass blocks were put in as a placeholder to fill the space. As docents remind visitors, this decision preserved the building, if not the window, for future generations.

Preservationists debated what to do about the window for years. The Project consulted experts in historical restoration and surveyed visitors: Should the glass blocks be kept in place, should the Project create a new window, or should it imitate the intact, west rose window? Some said the glass blocks were a part of the synagogue’s history, a reminder of hard times, and the blocks were left in place for the rededication of the building when the Project became the Museum at Eldridge Street.

After much debate, the museum’s board decided to replace the window and held a competition for a new design that would make a contemporary work of stained glass a permanent part of the building. Dimun, the executive director of the museum, explained to me, “We decided not to try to recreate something when we did not know what that something really looked like.” Another staff member added that since the original plans for window were unknown, “This was the only place in the building where we could extend the story.” Following a suggestion by a

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In 2009, the museum selected its contest winners, artist Kiki Smith and architect Deborah Gans. (The public was not consulted in this selection.) In the new window by Smith and Gans, curved spokes radiate from the six points of a yellow Star of David at the center of the window, and smaller yellow and gold five-pointed stars are scattered throughout a blue-green field, reflecting the celestial motif found in the synagogue’s original design. As docents inform visitors, the artist, Smith, interpreted the five-pointed stars as a reference to the stars on the American flag; juxtaposed with the central six-pointed Star of David, they make a visual statement about
American Jewish identity and the freedom to practice Judaism within the United States. Within the steel frame, the design team adhered the panels of colored glass with modern silicone rather than the tradition lead of stained glass. “What would have been lines of lead are lines of light,” said the architect, Gans, said in an oft-quoted description.93 The window is thus presented to visitors as a visual symbol of the museum’s role as a heritage institution, representing a reinterpretation of an older space in light of new demands upon it. It provides a visual narrative of elegy and restoration, culminating in emotional uplift and celebration of the present.

The installation of the new window provided the museum with a great deal of favorable publicity. Today, after the fact, the museum continues to ask visitors whether they would have made the choice to keep the glass blocks in place, create a new window, or imitate the west rose window. Visitors, particularly American Jews, feel a sense of entitlement to the space, regarding it as a heritage treasure that belongs to the public, and they feel free to voice their opinions, whether or not they are in line with the museum’s decision. Some critique the museum for its lapse in a strict restoration. Others, swayed by the beauty of the new window, agree with the decision, viewing the new window as emblematic of the synagogue’s second life as a heritage site, a blend of new and old. Echoing the sentiment of the earlier installations, one reviewer saw the window as emblematic of feminist empowerment against traditional Orthodox patriarchy, writing, “There’s something touching to me about the fact that while once upon a time, women had no role in the ritual life of this building, now they’ve helped to create it.”94

“View From the Balcony”

Most historic synagogues in the United States present Orthodox spaces to a largely non-Orthodox public. Because men and women are separated for prayer in Orthodox synagogues, the women’s gallery can be a particularly contested site when the building is presented as a heritage site. Not infrequently, staff members at heritage organizations consider the women’s galleries of their historic synagogues out-of-the-way places, perfect for their offices, as at the Jewish Museum of Florida. Staff members there view the converted galleries as entirely secular spaces, while docents present the main floor of the building—the men’s space, where the primary ritual action of the service took place—as the primary artifact of the museum. In converting the women’s galleries to staff offices, administrators are unconcerned that they have eliminated women’s historic experience of the space and reinforced men’s ritual experiences as “real” Judaism. To be fair, these were not particularly attractive galleries, especially before they were converted to offices, and they were not spaces conducive to visitors. But the question remains: What has the museum lost in deeming women’s spaces unworthy of heritage tourism? The museum’s utilitarian use of the balconies removes women’s experience from the historical narrative of the synagogue experienced by visitors who stand in the sanctuary and learn of the history of the (male) space.

In contrast, docents at the Museum at Eldridge Street make a point of bringing visitors up to the women’s gallery. From the early days of the Project, Waterman identified gender as the most controversial topic of visitors’ questioning. Not infrequently, non-Orthodox visitors asked questions with an implied commentary, “Orthodox Jews don’t treat women in a way I think they

95 Jo Ann Arnowitz, interview by author, Miami Beach, July 24, 2012.
ought to be treated.” On the recommendation of sociologist Samuel Heilman, museum staff members patiently reiterate that synagogue is a preservation project, “trying to preserve a significant landmark and its content to a particular moment in history—the early 20th century.” They do their best to leave discussion of the division between men and women in contemporary service spaces—including that of the congregation that used the building—to other forums.

When I conducted fieldwork at the museum in 2012 and 2013, docents explained to visitors, “if the women were in a separate place, they were also in the best place,” in that they had the best view of the sanctuary. In a space where non-Orthodox visitors, particularly liberal Jews, might feel antagonistic toward what they see as the oppression of Orthodox women, docents are trained to represent the early female congregants as historical actors. They emphasize women’s active roles in the congregation, often in opposition to male leaders. They draw visitors’ attention to a crystal chandelier above the women’s space that contrasts sharply with the brass light fixtures throughout the rest of the sanctuary. Docents explain that they imagine the women complained that they did not have enough light and that they suspect a wealthy congregant who had an extra chandelier donated the fixture, a narrative that simultaneously emphasizes women’s agency and may reinforce ideas about women’s secondary position in Orthodox Judaism.

Another story utilizes the view from the women’s gallery as an illustration of early female congregants’ active roles in the synagogue and the neighborhood. Docents and staff

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97 Waterman, “In the Spirit.”
members recount female congregants’ participation in the kosher meat boycotts of 1902, when New York’s kosher butchers raised the price of meat to a price that immigrant women, their primary customers, could not afford. One Saturday morning, docents explain, groups of women went to synagogues throughout the Lower East Side to encourage a boycott of kosher meat. At the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a pair of women ascended to the bimah at the front of the synagogue, in the men’s section, and asked the congregation to officially support the boycott. When the president of the congregation and other male leaders attempted to dismiss their concerns, and suggested that they buy only half of the kosher meat they needed, a commotion broke out from the gallery. Congregants above and below yelled “No meat! No meat!” The following boycott of kosher meat succeeded in bringing down butchers’ prices.\textsuperscript{100} In telling these stories, the Museum at Eldridge Street encourages visitors to feel an empathetic and physical connection to the women of the early congregation, the “heroic housewives” who sat in the seats they sit in and saw something like the same view of the sanctuary below that they see.\textsuperscript{101} This story serves to turn the women’s balcony into a place of women’s empowerment rather than oppression, addressing potential hostility from non-Orthodox visitors. It also links the synagogue to popular recollections of progressive political activism in the Lower East Side, itself an ostensibly secular object of American Jewish nostalgia.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} This story is recounted in Annie Polland, \textit{Landmark of the Spirit: The Eldridge Street Synagogue} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 64–66. At the time of the book’s publication, Polland was the vice president of education of the Museum at Eldridge Street.

\textsuperscript{101} “The Real Housewives of Eldridge Street,” advertisement for event on May 12, 2013, Museum at Eldridge Street, \url{http://www.eldridgestreet.org/may/351-20130512-the-real-housewives-of-eldridge-street}.

\textsuperscript{102} While this is a story of consumer activism, the progressive political activism of Jews on the Lower East Side and other urban Jewish neighborhoods is more often remembered through stories of labor activism, and the Eldridge Street Synagogue story should be interpreted in that context. Immigrant Jewish labor activism is often remembered as a feminist story, as the history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, which helped spur the growth of the International
From the days of the Eldridge Street Project’s preservation efforts, museum staff members have successfully used professional artwork to capture visitors’ attention and engage them in the ongoing work of social memory in the women’s gallery. Under Amy Waterman’s direction, as the Eldridge Street Project invited the public to view the building in various stages of disrepair throughout its renovation, and as the Project solicited funding, it invited a number of artists to display exhibits exploring the theme of the women’s balcony. Through the innovative work of feminist artists, the Project made the women’s balcony palatable to non-Orthodox, liberal audiences. Displayed at the Eldridge Street Project from June 2000 through December 2003, Hana Iverson’s installation explored themes of distance from the past and reconciliation with it. A site-specific video and sound installation, View From the Balcony utilized an empty stairwell shaft that had once held the stairs leading from the main sanctuary to the women’s balcony above. Viewers saw the artist’s hands sewing together pieces of Torah parchment projected onto a forty-foot-long white cloth, while they heard a recording of women’s voices running in a loop. The voices of women connected to the synagogue or the neighborhood spoke in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English, which Iverson called the languages of “prayer, community, and assimilation.” In Hebrew, a woman’s voice spoke the traditional Jewish woman’s prayer blessing God for making her “according to His will”—that is, not a man; in Yiddish, another recited a recipe for strudel and Yiddish expressions such as “You should be

Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, making it appropriate for docents and staff members to allude to this progressive history through a story in the women’s balcony of synagogue. For the history of immigrant Jewish women and labor activism in the early twentieth century, see Susan A. Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).


well in every weather—rain, snow, and mud”; and family stories played in English, including descriptions of women praying in synagogues and lighting candles on Shabbat.  

According to the artist, the installation metaphorically explored issues of healing and mending in Jewish tradition and practice: the physical distance between men and women in the synagogue, immigrants’ separation from their countries of origin, the American Jewish community’s detachment from the European traditions of their ancestors, and the ruin of the Eldridge Street Synagogue during years of neglect. Iverson, who describes herself a “truly a secular Jew,” and who is more familiar with Reform Jewish practices, saw Orthodox Judaism as hurtful to women. To Iverson, her project at the synagogue served as “a vessel for healing wounded memories” about the patriarchal traditions of Orthodox Judaism, as well as more personal, individual memories. She used the mechitza, the divider between men and women at Orthodox services, as a projection screen, turned vertically to bridge the divide between the men’s section on the ground floor and the women’s balcony. The images of sewing represented “the mending of wounds to the psyche caused by the Orthodox tradition” and other themes.

When I interviewed her, Iverson told me that the piece explored “the threshold between life and death” and between past and present. “The installation was in a space that was like a ghost chamber because there had been an architectural structure there that was gone. . . . And ghosts live on that threshold.” In drawing connections between dimensions, the installation served as a way to emotionally interact with the imagined ancestors. In its many images of

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106 Hana Iverson, telephone interview by author, January 8, 2013.


108 Iverson, interview.
physical and metaphorical connection and disconnection from ancestors and from broader narratives about the Jewish immigrant past, *View From the Balcony* provided visitors an outlet to explore conflicts they might feel about the space, even as they expressed a reverence for a historical space.

In 2004, another Jewish feminist artist, Carol Hamoy, exhibited a version of her *Welcome to America* installation in the women’s gallery. For this traveling installation, Hamoy crafted dresses from wedding gowns, dresses, skirts, bed linens, scarves, and undergarments to represent immigrant women who had worked in the garment industry, as her grandmother had. Hamoy studied the synagogue’s archives and oral history collection to learn about women in the original congregation and represented twenty-five of them in eighteen dresses. She tinted and stained the white garments and imprinted them in gold text with a quote from the woman or brief, poignant
For Etta, who emigrated from Austria in 1911, she wrote, “I got lost on the boat. My brother found me sleeping in the captain’s cabin.” Anna, who came from Russia in 1904, received the inscription, “She regarded the Eldridge Street Synagogue as her synagogue.”

The ghostly garments hung from netting stretched across the ceiling by filament, swaying in the breeze, and visitors walked among them in the balcony or viewed them from below, in the main sanctuary. Hamoy’s ghostly dresses materialized the absent immigrant founding congregants. Visitors’ movements through the maze of dresses and memories physically reinforced the connection between past and present. While one reviewer described *Welcome to America* as “entirely secular,” in contrast to her many works representing biblical women, others

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saw spiritual meaning in its installation at the synagogue.\textsuperscript{111} An explicitly feminist review explained that the installation “invites the spirits who once frequented the synagogue to revisit their ancient abode,” coming from their “divine home, of which this synagogue was once the earthly manifestation. . . . Their presence among us derives from a higher realm, and reminds us that our foremothers are ever present in our midst, especially when we pray.”\textsuperscript{112} Regardless of whether they were biologically connected to the women represented, viewers acutely felt the guiding presence of ancestors, spiritually, nostalgically, and religiously.

Installations were not the only way the Eldridge Street Project explored women’s historical experience of the space. In 2004, the Project invited Hebrew Union College cantorial student Hayley Kobilinsksky, klezmer vocalist Elizabeth Schwartz, and Yiddish-style singer and klezmer accordionist Jeanette Lewicki to perform in the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{113} Only men led services when the building was used exclusively as a congregational space, while women prayed more quietly upstairs in the balcony. In deference to the Orthodox congregation and the Orthodox custom of women refraining from singing for men, only women were permitted to attend the event, a policy that hints at complicated negotiations between the Project and the congregation. Still, the event was portrayed as a contemporary rebellion against Orthodoxy. “I’m so happy to be singing here, where so many women have silently prayed,” Lewicki announced before launching into a Yiddish song. Schwartz sang a revision of the prayer Avinu Malkeinu (Our Father, Our King), recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur; Schwartz’s feminist version was Imenu Makatseiun (Our Mother, Our Queen), emphasizing a belief in God’s feminine characteristics. “We thought it would be a good idea to do a program that turned tradition on its

\textsuperscript{111} Matthew Biagell, “Carol Hamoy: Religious and Secular Passions,” \textit{Women’s Art Journal} (Fall/Winter 2012): 36.
\textsuperscript{112} Orenstein.
\textsuperscript{113} Klezmer is the musical style associated with eastern European Jewish culture.
head,” explained staff member Amy Stein Milford, who helped plan the event. Still, the musicians displayed respect for Jewish pasts, even as they challenged traditional norms. As in Netanel Hershtik’s Pro Musicia Hebraica performance, these explicitly feminist musicians drew the audience into an engagement with the memory of past congregants and past liturgies performed within the space.

Through an active exploration of the past, such installations and performances draw together a community of visitors affectively engaged with their work and with the synagogue, including the artists, visitors, staff, and congregants, both past and present. These installations mark the synagogue, particularly the gallery, as a special space, even a sacred one, in which verbal and symbolic conversations about the past were appropriate and necessary. Singled out as a location at which the past could palpably touch the present, the Eldridge Street Synagogue fosters elegiac nostalgia through communal engagement and artists’ and musicians’ creative visions.

**Playing Preservationist**

Seeking to impart their narratives and sentiments to the next generation, historic synagogues encourage visits by families and welcome public school classes, Jewish day schools, and summer camps. As Laurajane Smith articulates, taking children to heritage sites and teaching them how to visit them is itself an important performance of cultural heritage and statement of cultural identity. This act of heritage is especially prevalent among American Jews, for whom museums are a key cultural and religious institution. For American Jewish parents and educators, making children accustomed to visiting heritage sites and museums and informally instructing

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them in how to respond emotionally to the exhibits is a significant act of cultural and religious socialization, perhaps as valuable as teaching them the content of the narratives.

At the Museum at Eldridge Street, family-oriented tours and children’s craft activities introduce children to nostalgia for the former Jewish Lower East Side as an active, creative expression, involving their whole bodies. In the “Preservation Detectives” family program, children are given binoculars, notepads, and magnifying glasses, and the synagogue becomes the site of a scavenger hunt, during which families learn about the history of the building. Following this and other programs, such as visits by school groups, children are provided with craft activities, tracing stencils of the building’s rose window design, making their own stained glass out of colorful, translucent plastic, or playing with stickers depicting the synagogue. Through such simplified activities for children, the synagogue becomes a symbol of nostalgia, its flattened image representing a deeper, affective engagement with and obligation to American Jewish heritage.

To bring the experience home, museum staff members Judy Greenspan and Miriam Bader have created a coloring and activity book, sold in the museum gift shop, in which coloring pages are accompanied by text from the perspective of a Jewish child who emigrated from eastern Europe to New York. The book introduces children to the main tropes of American Jewish heritage, teaching elegiac nostalgia in an accessible form: “When my family came to America from far away across the sea,” the text begins, “we thought the streets would be paved with gold.” Of course, the narrator finds no gold, just crowds and noise outside in the Lower East Side neighborhood and inside the family’s “tiny tenement apartment.” But the Eldridge Street Synagogue provides a measure of relief: “Each week, when we stepped through the door, our
dark tenement seemed far away. Inside, we found light and space and peace.”

In this example of elegiac nostalgia, Greenspan and Bader have not overlooked but highlighted the difficulties and physical discomforts undergone by mythical ancestors—in this case, the nameless immigrant narrator—but highlighted them and contrasted with the warmth of their community.

Moreover, the authors tie the immigrant’s journey to distinctly American, if generic, ideals: Within the synagogue, the child-narrator says, “here at last, I found gold in America. Gold stars glowing from the highest, bluest ceiling I have ever seen. . . . Papa said they stood for freedom: the freedom to be ourselves in America.”

Children are taught gratitude and

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117 Greenspan and Bader.
sentimental appreciation for the hardships undergone by generic immigrant ancestors. As historian Hasia Diner explains, in the American Jewish imagination, the Lower East Side is depicted as “a kind of transitional zone,” in which Jewish immigrants and their families “underwent an ordeal of cultural reeducation as they learned to be free.” The staff members of the Museum at Eldridge Street turn the synagogue into an object lesson for that cultural sentiment.

“Our Immigrant Heritage”

Historic synagogues often present themselves as paradigmatic of a generic American experience, generally an American immigrant experience. In doing so, they permit non-Jews to freely join in the celebration of American Jewish nostalgia, extending the sentiment’s reach. In part, the inclusion of non-Jews in the rites of Jewish heritage is a performance of multiculturalism, a statement that the American melting pot “did not happen.” It also demonstrates the widespread nature of Jewish nostalgia as a recognizable American phenomenon among both Jews and other Americans. Not only does one not need to have experienced the Jewish past for which one is nostalgic, one does not even have to be Jewish. Just as one does not have to be of Irish Catholic descent to participate in St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in the United States, one does not have to be Jewish to be moved by the materials of American Jewish nostalgia, to be part of the community created in and around historic synagogues. Scholarly analyses of ethnic heritage sites generally analyze them in terms of their meaning for contemporary analogues, the supposed inheritors of the past. But non-Jews make up a significant

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proportion of visitors to historic synagogues and they are an important consideration for staff members.

The Jewish Museum of Florida’s annual essay contests for Florida schoolchildren exemplify the multicultural use of Jewish history. The 2012 competition was designed to complement the museum’s temporary exhibit, “From Home to Home: Jewish Immigration to America.” The prompt for second through fifth graders playfully interpreted the concept of “alien resident” to mean “extraterrestrial”:

It is the first day of school and your new classmate has just arrived from another planet. He/she looks totally different from anyone you have ever seen and speaks a language no one can understand. How do you make your classmate feel comfortable? How do you help them succeed? How do you get your fellow classmates to help?120

In this exercise based on the museum’s exhibit, Jewish immigration becomes the paradigmatic example of all immigration, even from beyond this planet. Even as the connection is tenuous—student authors did not have to visit the exhibit before composing the essays—it is pervasive.

Speaking to an adult audience, New York State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver used Jewish history in much the same way at the 2007 rededication of the Museum at Eldridge Street. “At this moment in history,” Silver announced, “when the mere mention of the word ‘immigrant’ can evoke such bitterness and distress, it is wonderful to be together here on Eldridge Street and to be celebrating the restoration and re-dedication of this precious gem of our immigrant heritage.”121

Particularly because Silver is publicly known as an Orthodox Jew, it is not clear if “our immigrant heritage” belongs only to Jews or is the inheritance of all Americans; the politician may have been deliberately vague. In any case, in delivering these remarks at the Museum at

Eldridge Street, Silver upheld the Jewish eastern European immigrants of the Lower East Side as model immigrants, an acceptably unifying historical conceit.  

Non-Jewish visitors are an important part of the imagined communities of historic synagogues at all times, but their presence is particularly noteworthy at the signature events of the Touro Synagogue and the Museum at Eldridge Street. Since its establishment in 1948, the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, now the Touro Synagogue Foundation, has held an annual observance commemorating George Washington’s letter to the building’s original congregation. The Foundation invites local and national dignitaries to attend a ceremony on or about August 19, the day Washington penned the letter, and the small building is always filled to capacity with members of the Foundation, congregations, and others interested in the history of the building. Events on “George Washington Letter Reading Day” include a ceremonial reading of Seixas’s and Washington’s letters, a keynote address by a public figure, and the presentation of awards to those who have worked to promote religious toleration. The Foundation honors an individual or institution that “best exemplifies the contemporary commitment to the ideals of religious and ethnic tolerance and freedom” with a non-monetary award and presents two Rhode Island high school seniors—not necessarily Jews—with small college scholarships for essays interpreting the relevance of the George Washington letter for the present day. This is civil religion, an affirmation of national myths in attempts to unify

122 Race is not incidental here: Sheldon’s remarks illustrate the ways that the conception of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” stands in for white ethnicity and whiteness itself, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown. As Jacobson explains, “The white ‘we’ of America’s we-and-they language of racialized contest . . . continues to texture public images of the nation, its origins, its newest immigrants, and its possibilities for cross-racial understanding.” Jacobson, 319–320. It is significant that the controversies over immigration that Sheldon alludes to are primarily about the immigration of Latinos and other non-white immigrants.

Americans, but it is also a demonstration of American Jewish nostalgia, a reflection upon how Jewish pasts provide meaning for the present.

George Washington Letter Day serves as an outlet for both patriotism and pride in the American Jewish community. When Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke in 2004, the year celebrated nationally as the 350th year of Jewish communal life in the United States, her presence and her words highlighted the success of American Jews. When the chair of the Touro Synagogue Foundation introduced Ginsburg as the personal “fulfillment of the American dream,” he did not need to explain that he also meant the American Jewish dream. Ginsburg herself gave the Jews assembled reason to congratulate themselves and engage in elegiac nostalgia for the struggles of past generations of American Jews. Describing her family history and her career, she asked rhetorically, “What’s the difference between a Jewish bookkeeper and a Jewish Supreme Court judge? One generation.” At the same time, Ginsburg’s joke uses Jews to stand in for other American immigrant groups, who should imitate American Jews’ apparent communal success in the public sphere, regardless of social, economic, or political differences in circumstances.

When I attended George Washington Letter Day in 2012, sixteen-year-old high school student Jessica Ahlquist was honored with the Teitz Award. That year, with the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union, Ahlquist, an avowed atheist, had won a lawsuit against her public high school in Rhode Island, mandating the removal of a “school prayer” banner referencing “Our Heavenly Father” from the school’s auditorium; the suit had brought verbal

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attacks, and even death threats, from her peers and from media outlets.\textsuperscript{125} As I observed, the Touro Foundation represented Ahlquist as upholding Washington’s principles and as the modern-day equivalent of Seixas, fighting for religious freedom. While Ahlquist might be better described as fighting for freedom \textit{from} religion, representatives of the Foundation imagined her as a defender of “religious freedom” without interrogating the category. In their depiction, all defenders of American religious freedom are spiritual descendants of colonial Jews, a particular Jewish variation on American civil religion. These interpreters of Jewish history use Jewish particularity to stand in for all Americans’ views of religion in the public sphere, employing the American Jewish experience as a source of patriotic unity.

In a less ceremonial, more festive event, the Museum at Eldridge Street also explicitly extends the community of its participants in its signature event, “Egg Rolls and Egg Creams.” At this annual summer “block party” held since 2000, the museum celebrates Jewish and Chinese cultures, bringing together the traditions of the former Jewish inhabitants of the Lower East Side and its current place in American Jewish memory and the traditions of the current Chinese American residents of the neighborhood, now recognizable as part of Chinatown. The festival has grown exponentially each year, and in June 2012, 10,000 people attended the festival, mobbing the street outside the synagogue and swarming in and out of the building. Festivities include a klezmer band performing traditional Jewish music followed by a performance of Chinese folk music. Kosher vegetarian egg rolls and egg creams are on hand.\textsuperscript{126} Groups of


\textsuperscript{126} An egg cream is a beverage composed of milk, seltzer, and chocolate syrup. While some claim that the egg cream was invented on the Lower East Side, it is particularly associated with
women compete in both Chinese and American Jewish versions of mahjong, sometimes pausing to teach younger visitors how to play. Inside the synagogue, specialists teach visitors how to tie tefillin and Chinese knots, how to write Hebrew and Chinese calligraphy, how to participate in a tea ceremony, and how to say basic words in Mandarin and Yiddish, among other activities. Children of all ethnicities can be seen wearing yarmulkes and Chinese opera masks they have decorated.

This unique event is the creation of Griff-Sleven. Griff-Sleven, a folklorist, encouraged the Eldridge Street Project to interact with the local Chinese community even before she worked at the synagogue, when she reviewed the Project’s application to the New York State Council on the Arts to hold a Jewish heritage festival. Griff-Sleven encouraged the Project to fulfill its aspiration to work with the neighborhood, mentoring a staff member to create the first Egg Rolls and Egg Creams festival and then, when she joined the Project staff, going on to develop and expand the festival herself.

Griff-Sleven sees the festival as a community event, bringing together disparate residents and tourists in the neighborhood. She takes pride in her connections with the local Chinese community, particularly through the Chinatown Senior Citizens Center, which has connected her to many of the Chinese musicians and artisans who perform and display their work at the festival. Ken Lo, director of the China Arts Council, has worked at the Egg Rolls and Egg Creams

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128 Griff-Sleven.
festival for years, overseeing the tea ceremony. Lo grew up on the Lower East Side and remembers when a Jewish presence was more evident in the streets. Now, he says, “If there weren’t any of these events at the synagogue, it would just be this strange building they don’t know anything about.” Nonetheless, visitors interpret the event through different lenses: One museum intern wrote of the 2011 festival, “From the first emotive blast of the trumpet [of the Klezmer band], I was filled with an odd sense of nostalgia for a time I never experienced. Something about the location of the synagogue took me to a different time, along with the entertainment, food, and activities that were provided at the festival.” Not everyone immediately understands the festival, and some Jewish visitors would like to see it remain an exclusively Jewish affair. Griff-Sleven recounts that one Jewish woman attending the festival told her, “This is so weird. Why are you doing this?” Griff-Sleven replied, “Did you look around? We’re a synagogue in Chinatown!” The idea of the Lower East Side as a Jewish space is so firmly planted in Jewish American cultural memory that such visitors have trouble accepting the experiential evidence of Chinatown surrounding them.

129 Ken Lo, quoted in Salamon.
131 Griff-Sleven.
132 Hasia Diner and Jack Kugelmass describe the same phenomenon among Jewish visitors to the Tenement Museum, located a few blocks from the Museum at Eldridge Street, where visitors can view restored apartments and listen the stories of former occupants. While Tenement Museum staff members explicitly work to depict families of multiple faiths and national origins, Jewish visitors insist on seeing the building as a Jewish site. As Diner explains, “The Jewishness of the building and its residents emerges despite the efforts of the staff to present the historically more accurate tale of what happened within its walls.” Diner, 188. Jack Kugelmass, “Turfing the Slum: New York City’s Tenement Museum and the Politics of Heritage,” in Remembering the Lower East Side, ed. Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 179–211.
Still, Griff-Sleven’s sense of obligation to the local neighborhood as well as to the Jewish past seems to be gaining ground. This vision, connecting the Jewish past to a non-Jewish present, may be easier to implement beyond the Lower East Side. While the Lower East Side bears a cultural burden to represent a broad, generalizable narrative about American Jewish history through the history of the neighborhood, beyond New York, Jewish heritage sites may have more freedom to create connections between a neighborhood’s Jewish past and its present residents. In the Boyle Heights neighborhood in Los Angeles, the Breed Street Shul Project seeks to use the 1915 and 1922 buildings of the Breed Street Shul (Congregation Talmud Torah of Los Angeles) as a community center focused on the needs of its neighbors. Boyle Heights was the center of Jewish Los Angeles from the 1920s through the 1950s and is now a low-income Latino neighborhood. Since the 1980s, the Shul “suffered neglect, vandalism, earthquake damage and
abandonment, rendering it unusable and in real danger of demolition.” Preservationist efforts, led by the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California, saved the buildings from destruction and stabilized them and the Project is currently seeking funds for its restoration. The Project hopes to use the space as a center for a variety of non-profit organizations that will offer tutoring and after-school activities for local school children, programming with Jewish youth groups, and a variety of adult education programs and social services, including the Jewish Free Loan Association, Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles’s literacy program, and Bet Tzedek Legal Services. Stephen Sass, the longtime president of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California who has led the effort to rehabilitate the Shul, says that the building “was born of a Jewish experience in a particular time and a particular place, and that is still meaningful, and we want to share that meaning and expand it and reinvent it.” Having been established as a stable feature of American culture, American Jewish nostalgia is looking outward.

Employed as heritage sites, the historic synagogues examined in this chapter are points where the American Jewish past touches the present through emotional responses and personal authority. “The authentic work of art instructs us in our inauthenticity and adjures us to overcome it,” says the cultural critic Lionel Trilling. For many involved in or visiting these synagogues, the representation of an authentic past touches them personally in ways that provide them with a sense of moral authority and personal authenticity rooted in elegy and nostalgia. As means of searching for authenticity, nostalgic representations are rarely uncontested, and historic

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135 Quoted in Fax.
136 Trilling, 100.
synagogues are semi-public spaces of contestation of power and authority between congregations, not-for-profit heritage organizations, and visitors who arrive with their own varied and even potentially conflicting agendas.
Chapter Three

“That Part Is True”: Playing with Nostalgia

“Sol, what are you telling that child?”
“A true story, just the way I remember it, Rose dear,” Julie’s grandfather said.

“The dress is SO cute!!!!!!!!!!!! The little buttons...the sash... - EVERYTHING!”
reported an enthusiastic young consumer. “My daughter has been waiting for the past 3 years for
this doll,” explained a mother. A father added, “Now we can discuss Jewish identity . . . . For this
am I ever so grateful.” “Thank you for this heritage treasure,” gushed a grandmother.¹ Since May
2009, customers have responded enthusiastically with comments like these to the release of the
first Jewish historical character by the enormously successful Mattel-owned Pleasant Company’s
American Girl. The doll, named Rebecca Rubin, garnered media and consumer excitement.
Eighteen inches tall, with wavy, mid-tone brown hair and a smart red herringbone dress, she was
accompanied by six slim chapter books describing a “spunky, conflicted, compassionate and
determined” nine-year-old girl living on the Lower East Side in 1914. This exemplary iteration
of American Jewish nostalgia, offering for sale a material representation of Jews’ sentimental
longing for the sites and lifestyles of communal pasts, won approval from tween girls, Jewish
feminists, and even Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League.²

¹ Magicwithmydoll, “Quality…” product review of Rebecca Doll, Book & Accessories,
November 23, 2011; Agfan4ever, “Worth the wait,” product review of Rebecca Doll, Book &
Accessories, June 1, 2009; PapaRosenbaum, “Mazel Tov AG,” product review of Rebecca Doll,
Book & Accessories, June 6, 2009; NanaFL, “Beautiful Doll,” product review of Rebecca Doll,
Book & Accessories, August 12, 2011, American Girl,
2009; Julie Gruenbaum Fax, “American Girl Introduces First Jewish Doll,” The Jewish Journal
of Greater Los Angeles, May 27, 2009.
This nostalgia does not come cheap. One can purchase the doll and one book for $105 or doll, accessories, and complete set of books for $152—not including a host of other tempting miniatures, including a tiny lunch box filled with cheese bagel, *rugelach*, and pickles; a miniature Chanukah menorah, gelt, and dreidel; doll-sized Sabbath candlesticks, challah, and a samovar; not to mention outfits and furniture corresponding to Rebecca’s adventures in the books, with prices ranging from $22 to $130 for individual items and sets. American Jewish nostalgia can be purchased as a plaything or a collectible item.

In this chapter, I place the Rebecca Rubin doll and books alongside illustrated children’s books and collectible dolls depicting eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States. In recent decades, this theme has become increasingly common in American Jewish children’s literature; European scholar Jana Pohl identifies 78 English-language children’s books dealing with the subject published by North American authors between 1970 and 2005. After situating this material in historiographical and interpretive context, I provide a brief history of the growth of American Jewish children’s publishing from the mid-twentieth century through the present day. The enormously influential PJ Library, which since 2004 has arranged for Jewish and interfaith families in North America to receive free children’s books with Jewish content every month, is particularly illustrative of my broader claims about the marketing of nostalgia. Moving into the heart of this chapter, I examine two themes prevalent in the genre: what I term the figure of the “eternal grandparent,” who provides a personal connection to the past, and the presence of historic synagogues, which ground these narratives in space as well as time. I then analyze two popular illustrated books in depth, *The Castle on Hester Street* (1982, 2007) and *The Always Prayer Shawl* (1994), both of which explicitly address the construction of Jewish heritage.

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narratives, before returning to American Girl’s Rebecca Rubin and the American Jewish heritage dolls that preceded her. Finally, I conclude by examining the role of non-Jews as both creators of and audience for these materials of American Jewish nostalgia.

While many scholars of children’s literature restrict themselves to close analyses of published texts, I approach both the books and dolls examined in this chapter as commodities that require multiple research methods in order to understand the intentions of those who created them as well as their reception history. To that end, my analysis is based not only on the texts and illustrations of the books themselves, as well as responses to the books and dolls in newspapers and online, but also upon interviews with authors, illustrators, publishers, and others involved in creating and distributing American Jewish children’s books.

The children’s books and dolls examined in this chapter reveal the intimately nostalgic attitudes which adults wish to pass on to the next generation, sometimes subtly and sometimes didactically. They speak to the future of nostalgia. Though it is not uncommon, it might seem counterintuitive to teach nostalgia to children, who are not expected to have enough life experiences to experience longing for the past. As religious studies scholar Jodi Eichler-Levine asks, “What does nostalgia mean when it is encouraged in young people? What does it mean to introduce longing for the past as a condition of being young?” Generally, nostalgia is “assumed to be a longing of those who are aged, or at least older: nostalgia contains within it a fiction of prior experience, of a previously inhabited space for which one can long.” But as American Jewish nostalgia is largely an affective longing for familial and communal pasts that its practitioners have not experienced, there is no reason why children should not experience it as

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5 Eichler-Levine, 74.
much as adults—and, as a core part of contemporary American Jewish rhetoric, there is every reason to teach it to children. Like much of American identity politics, it is demonstrated and taught through commercial practices.

Illustrated books present an intimate nostalgia of the American Jewish immigrant past for consumption by parents and children. This intimate nostalgia encourages emotional responses to the past, drawing on familial concerns, both of the practitioners and the subjects of the stories. Intimate means marked by close acquaintance or familiarity; relating to or indicative of one’s deepest nature; essential, innermost; marked by informality and privacy; and very personal. As a verb, to intimate means both to make known subtly and indirectly or, in contrast, to announce or proclaim. The intimate nostalgia of children’s books and toys is designed to communicate matters of the heart, alternately subtly and directly. They are intended to have a deep and lasting emotional effect on their audiences. Meant to be a family affair, nostalgic children’s materials are ideally employed in intimate scenes between parents and children or used by children in directed creativity.

In describing these materials as intimately nostalgic, I build upon Boym’s conception of “diasporic intimacy.” The state of a permanently uprooted people, diasporic intimacy consists of emotional relationships with multiple lands, each with a different temporal valence. Diasporic intimacy both glorifies images of the past homeland and finds pleasure in the land of exile. For most American Jews, firmly rooted in the United States, eastern Europe and urban neighborhoods in the U.S. exists as mythic points of origin, the geographies firmly tied to earlier eras. American Jewish children’s materials teach a connection to these homelands that

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7 Boym, 252.
emphasizes their distance both in time and location as well as their emotional proximity. The pleasures of exile are extolled, as longing for past homelands and extolling the present one becomes the basis of enjoyable narratives. It is possible to celebrate both locations, to teach children patriotic enthusiasm for one’s present land and to encourage their longing for another, inaccessible site.

Modern notions of nostalgia and childhood developed at roughly at the same time; they both might be thought of as products of the romantic era in the long eighteenth century, when the middle- and upper-classes began to think of children less as miniature adults and more as having a particular character of their own, differentiated by playful, sensuous, and imaginative qualities. Though ideas of childhood have changed over the centuries, its associations with innocence and imagination fit neatly with the emotive, sentimental qualities of nostalgia. The concept of childhood, like nostalgia, is a construction of present circumstances, and both reflect the qualities of the ages in which they developed and of our own day.\(^8\) Both intangible constructions are marketed as commodities in the form of books and dolls.

Commodified versions of intimate nostalgia, like genealogical research, build on the idea of warm family relationships. It is unabashedly sentimental and explicitly concerned with generational links. Manufacturers and distributors of intimately nostalgic products intend to bring the imaged past to bear upon the immediate present. Ideally, the comfortable glow of present-day family relationships and remembrances of both real and imaged past family exchanges should enhance each other. In less ideal circumstances, when the lived experience fails to correspond with the model of warm family relationships, intimate nostalgia may be even more potent, intertwining longing for the inaccessible past with longing for exemplary family

relationships. As present and past circumstances affect the other, intimate nostalgia is intensely concerned not only with using the past and present to shape each other, but to use both to construct a particular kind of future.

It is also important to note that nostalgic children’s materials are not intended exclusively for children. Designed for parents and other adults to read to and with children, illustrated books are marketed toward a dual, multi-generational audience, containing messages for adults as well as children.9 As Carole Scott writes, illustrated books and picture books provide a unique opportunity for a “collaborative relationship between children and adults” as they read and interpret stories together.10 The relationship formed between parents and children over reading books aloud is an intimate one, mirroring the intimate nostalgia communicated by the content of the books examined in this chapter. In consuming the products of American Jewish nostalgia, manufacturers, producers, authors, and communal leaders intend American Jewish families to form intimately nostalgic attachments to representations of immigrant pasts. This nostalgia should inform their family lives, with effects lasting longer than the moments of purchasing goods, reading books, and playing with dolls.

“We Are Neglecting Our Children”

Stories about children have been used to address the issues American Jewish immigrants faced in the early twentieth century since the time of the immigration itself. Mary Antin’s famous 1912 autobiography, The Promised Land, tells the story of Antin’s adjustment to life in

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9 Although the terms “picture books” and “illustrated books” are often used interchangeably and the categories are indistinct, on the whole, picture books are specifically designed to communicate through a combination of words and images. Images interact with and extend the text to a greater extent in picture books than in illustrated books. Carole Scott, “Dual Audiences in Picture Books,” in Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults, ed. Sandra L. Beckett (New York: Garland, 1999), 101.
10 Scott, 101.
the United States after her immigration from Polotzk, a town in the Russian Pale of Settlement (now Belarus). Antin’s influence on the historical narrative of American Jews, and the broader narratives of American immigration, cannot be underestimated. In the years following the publication of *The Promised Land*, first as a serial in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911 and later as a monograph, Antin was the most talked-of writer, if not the most talked-of woman, in America.\(^{11}\) Focused primarily upon her experience in the public school system in Boston, Antin places the burden of Americanization upon the bodies and minds of schoolchildren. In this as in other ways, Antin’s writing set the tone for immigration narratives throughout the following century. While Antin’s work was intended for adults, not children, the importance of children’s stories to American Jewish immigration literature helped the genre fit neatly into literature intended for children’s consumption.

Originally meant to counter rising nativist tendencies, Antin positions herself as the quintessential American precisely because of her immigration as a child: “I am the youngest of America’s children, and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage,” she writes in the conclusion to her narrative.\(^{12}\) Antin’s positioning of herself as a child is not accidental. America is “the promised land,” replacing the biblical Land of Israel—in counterpoint to her Zionist contemporaries—and Antin is the promised child, one receptive to the influences of the American school system, which taught patriotism and American mores alongside educational content. Following Antin’s model, representations of children, those supposedly most malleable of beings, would be crucial to American Jewish self-fashioning for both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences over the following century.


The growth of Jewish children’s materials complement the rise of the material culture of American Jewish nostalgia, as the two have developed in tandem over the course of the twentieth century. American Jews have thought seriously and distinctively about educational materials for children since at least the early twentieth century, but an industry of materials for Jewish children’s entertainment and informal education took off in the 1940s and 1950s as Jews reorganized their communities in the postwar suburbs, and it has grown significantly in the succeeding decades. In the years following World War II, middle-class migration from ethnic urban neighborhoods to newly developed suburbs had an indelible impact on the communal structures of American Judaism, including the development of American Jewish children’s literature and playthings. In their new suburban homes, mid-century American Jewish parents, largely the children of immigrants who had rejected the Orthodoxy of their parents, relied heavily upon Jewish organizations to educate their children in Jewish rituals and historical narratives while they led home lives generally undifferentiated from those of their non-Jewish suburban counterparts. As a result, synagogue services, religious education, and other Jewish activities seemed divorced from their children’s everyday, secular American lives. Without the dynamic, continual ethnic reinforcement of Jewish neighborhoods in the city, the maintenance of the Jewish identity of the next generation seemed imperiled.

To counter this, Jewish authors and educators sought fresh ways to interest American Jewish youth in their heritage, attempting to fill the perceived Jewish gap at home. Recognizing the limited value of formal education, too easily dismissed as stiflingly boring, they turned their

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attention to playtime. In response to these concerns, American Jews created a variety of formal and informal educational materials for children in the 1940s and 1950s, including “alphabet blocks, spelling games, coloring books, flip charts, film strips, fun books, cassettes, workbooks, and notebooks along with graduated texts,” all designed to interest children in Jewish living and education. These toys and activity books, along with new Jewish storybooks and biographies, were intended to foster a culture of Jewish childhood that communal leaders feared would not arise organically. In this context, the cheerful, seemingly innocuous genre of Jewish children’s books bore heavy communal expectations.

Nonetheless, amidst all of these educational and entertainment materials, few works of Jewish children’s fiction were published. In the 1950–1951 publication of the *Jewish Book Annual*, Jewish educator and author Jacob S. Golub lamented the size of the “crop” of Jewish juvenile fiction for 1949–1950, a list of “a bare eighteen titles.” Calling for more children’s books on Jewish themes, he decried, “It is obvious that we are neglecting our children.” As an essential part of modern socialization, creating Jewish children’s literature was a religious and communal obligation, a mitzvah that was essential to perpetuating Jews’ ways of thinking about themselves, including their histories. For American Jews at mid-century and thereafter, children’s literature was not merely a pastime, but an essential component in the development of children’s religious identities.

As American Jews reconceived of their communities in the postwar years, still reeling from the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, Golub wrote, “We are barely holding

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our own in a land and at a time when we were supposed to become the cultural leaders of world Jewry. It must become someone’s duty to see to it that forces are drawn in and that our children’s literature expands.”\textsuperscript{17} In the years following the war, American Jews spoke continually of the burden that the Holocaust had placed on them as “the last of the great Western Jewries.”\textsuperscript{18} As American Jews reconceived of themselves as the new leaders of world Jewry, the development of a robust canon of American Jewish children’s literature was not only necessary for the development of American Judaism, but for the continuity of Jews worldwide.

The breakthrough Golub hoped for arrived within the year: First published in 1951, and continuously in print ever since, Sidney Taylor’s \textit{All-of-a-Kind Family} is generally acknowledged as the first mainstream American children’s book to feature Jewish characters. The book set the tone for much of American Jewish children’s literature that would follow. \textit{All-of-a-Kind Family} and its sequels, which appeared from the 1950s through the 1970s, tell the story of an Ashkenazi immigrant Jewish family in the early part of the twentieth century, from 1912 through the interwar years. The first and most popular book in the series focuses on five “all-of-a-kind” sisters and their mischievous little brother living with their parents in a tenement on the Lower East Side of New York, where their Papa runs a junk shop. Later books followed the family along a typical socioeconomic and geographic pattern of Jewish immigrant families, as the family moves to the new middle-class housing in the Bronx, now connected by mass transit to Manhattan. Taylor’s books were pioneering works of Jewish literature that paved the


way for future works, validating young Jewish readers as they recognized characters like themselves and introducing Jewish characters to a mainstream American audience.

While fewer children read Taylor’s books now than in past decades, the stories continue to receive recognition as an essential part of the canon of American Jewish children’s literature. On occasion, for instance, the Museum at Eldridge Street provides an All-of-a-Kind Family walking tour of the Lower East Side, intended to complement tours of the historic Eldridge Street Synagogue. Staff members take children and their families to the remaining spots on the Lower East that resemble those that the characters would have encountered, including the local public school, library, park, and a candy store. When I observed the tours in the summer of 2012, I found that many parents and children had not read the books, but the tour encouraged them to buy a copy from the museum’s gift shop, perpetuating the book’s legacy.

Since its publication, the All-of-a-Kind Family series has provided a model of how to effectively use the image of the Lower East Side as a site of nostalgia in Jewish American children’s literature. In particular, the negative depictions of the physical conditions of the Lower East Side in the series provide a complex narrative of longing for the past and contentment with American Jews’ upward mobility. Taylor set the scene in the first book:

The East Side was not pretty. There was no grass. Grass couldn’t very well grow on slate sidewalks or in cobblestoned gutters. There were no flowers except those one saw in the shops of the few florists. There were no tall trees lining the streets. There were tall gas lampposts instead. There was no running brook in which children might splash on hot summer days. But there was the East River. Its waters stretched out wide and darkly green, and it smelt of fish, ships, and garbage.\(^1^9\)

As Hasia Diner points out, Taylor contrasts the “meanness” of the neighborhood’s physical condition with the sweetness of the intense relationships among the immigrant Jews who lived

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there.\textsuperscript{20} This mythology both valorizes the American Jewish family and simultaneously suggests that in their subsequent upward mobility and moves to the more disparate suburbs in the mid-twentieth century, American Jews lost a kind of authentic uniform and unified Jewishness. At the same time, I argue, it suggests that American Jews still have the tools to replicate what they believe to be the best features of the past. Longing for the Jewish family of the past would create the Jewish family of present.\textsuperscript{21}

From the first book, and throughout the series, Taylor carefully describes Jewish holidays and rituals, which both provide instruction for readers unfamiliar with these traditions and affirm the experiences of children who are already familiar with them. At the same time, as June Cummins convincingly argues, Taylor also depicts her characters’ process of assimilation. “For while the books are about being Jewish, they are also about becoming American,” Cummins explains.\textsuperscript{22} As Jodi Eichler-Levine describes in her substantive analysis of the series, by the 1950s, Jews had joined the face of mainstream America as part of the Catholic-Protestant-Jew model of American religion, and they had earned enough money to move into middle-class suburbs. At the same time, “they still faced public suspicion and discrimination and continued to negotiate the question of whether or not the Jewish or Hebrew ethnicity was quite white enough—although it was certainly becoming whiter.”\textsuperscript{23} Taylor’s series successfully negotiated

\textsuperscript{21} Such depictions of Jewish family life have political ramifications. As Matthew Frye Jacobson explains, since at least the mid-twentieth century, stories of white immigrant families, not least including Jews, provided the normative version of the American family, against which the “pathologies” of black families were contrasted. Matthew Frye Jacobson, \textit{Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America} (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 204.
\textsuperscript{23} Eichler-Levine, 72.
the identity politics of mid-century Jews through her depiction of the past, and provided a model for future books to do the same for their own time. Taylor’s books, and those that would follow in its wake, “instill a longing for a particular Jewish past in young people—some Jewish, some not—of roughly school age; many of them carry this fantasy of the Lower East Side into adulthood.”

The All-of-a-Kind Family series would provide a model of how to effectively communicate American Jewish nostalgia to children in a manner that would stay with them as they grew older.

As mid-twentieth-century American Jewish authors, publishers, and educators shifted their priorities toward juvenile fiction, awards were established to encourage publishing children’s books with Jewish themes. The Jewish Book Council created its first children’s book award, the Isaac Siegel Memorial Award, in 1951, which it conferred upon All-of-a-Kind Family. Still, Jewish children’s literature progressed slowly. Writing in the Jewish Book Annual, Marcia W. Posner, a leader in the field of Jewish literature, saw the 1960s as a turning point in the genre. American authors were writing children’s books about life in modern Israel as well as books of historical fiction about Jewish history. By the 1960s, American Jews began to publish greater numbers of personal narratives and biographical fiction about the Holocaust intended for children. Publications of retold folktales began slowly in the 1960s and increased dramatically in the next few decades. In 1968, the Association of Jewish Libraries established its prestigious children’s book award, then called the Shirley Kravitz Children’s Book Award. The award

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24 Eichler-Levine, 74.
would be renamed the Sydney Taylor Book Award in 1978, following the death of the All-of-a-Kind Family series’ author.26

By the 1970s, as the roots movement took hold, ethnic pride was on the rise and publishers became interested in the “New Pluralism.” Mainstream trade presses began to issue Jewish-themed books in larger numbers, equaling or surpassing the offerings of Jewish publishers. At the same time, several Jewish publishers turned their attention to children. The countercultural do-it-yourself Judaism of the 1960s and 1970s led to small Jewish presses devoted to children’s materials, such as Kar-Ben, founded in 1975. Orthodox publishers, such as Hebrew Publishing Company and Art Scroll, began to publish children’s materials in the 1970s, too. In 1979, the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) created a regular staff position for a juvenile book editor. David Adler, a prolific and highly respected children’s book author, took up the task to produce a well-rounded list of Jewish children’s books for a broad audience. Adler aimed to make JPS “the premier publisher of Jewish juvenile books.”27 Adler was responsible for publishing Linda Heller’s lively The Castle on Hester Street (1982), which I examine at length below. Both book awards and Adler’s efforts at JPS encouraged the growth of the American Jewish children’s literature.28

By the time of her 1993 review, Posner was ready to suggest that the decade between 1982 and 1992 might be the “golden age of Jewish children’s literature.”29 Increasingly, from the 1980s through the early 2000s, publication of illustrated books and holiday books (often one and the same) were both on the rise, as was the publication of Holocaust books and those on other

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28 Posner.
29 Posner, 91.
themes of Jewish heritage. Books focused on the immigration era grew steadily. Jewish-themed children’s books began to have serious crossover appeal to non-Jewish audiences, making publishers more likely to print Jewish books. But in the mid-2000s, the slow and steady development of Jewish children’s literature was entirely upended by the creation of PJ Library, which both dramatically expanded its markets and had an impact upon its content.

Currently, PJ Library is one of the most influential Jewish organizations in North America. Founded in 2005 by the real estate mogul Harold Grinspoon, the North American iteration of PJ (for “pajama”) Library, a program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, partners with local Jewish organizations, including synagogues, Jewish community centers, and Jewish Federations, to provide free books and music to Jewish and interfaith families with children. As the program’s 2013 Executive Summary states, “The primary purpose of this program is to encourage parents to share Jewish stories, traditions and values with their children, promote family conversations, and inspire families to engage in meaningful Jewish social, education, and communal experiences.” Each month, through its affiliates throughout North America, PJ Library sends age-appropriate books or music to children ages six months through eight years old. The organization prints special paperback copies of their book selections with front and back flaps unique to their editions that explain a Jewish concept or value related to the book’s story as

30 A Jewish Federation is a local confederation of Jewish social agencies, volunteer programs, educational bodies, and other organizations. The umbrella Jewish Federations of North America is one of the most powerful organizations in American Jewish life, representing 157 Jewish Federations and over three hundred communities, which annually raise and distribute more than three billion dollars.
well as suggestions for conversations between adult readers and young listeners or follow-up activities that related to the Jewish concept or value PJ Library wishes to highlight.\(^{32}\)

Grinspoon was inspired to create PJ Library after hearing a National Public Radio story about the Imagination Library, founded by the singer Dolly Parton to give free books to children in her native rural Tennessee.\(^{33}\) Grinspoon, who has long given millions of dollars to Jewish summer camps and to schools and synagogues in western Massachusetts and is a major funder of Taglit-Birthright Israel, was inspired to “do what Dolly does, with a Jewish twist,” in the words of a *New York Times* reporter.\(^{34}\) While Parton’s program aimed to increase literacy, Grinspoon aimed to increase Jewish literacy—by sending Jewish children’s books to those who could afford them but might not yet know that they wanted them.

PJ Library’s Book Selection Committee accepts books and manuscripts submitted for review by authors and publishers, and they also independently review previously published books not submitted for consideration, including titles now out of print. They search for books that will be appropriate for a diverse audience. As the Book Selection Guidelines state on PJ Library’s website:

> PJ Library families . . . come from rural, suburban, and urban environments. They also come from many backgrounds—some are intermarried, some have little or no formal

\(^{32}\)The PJ Library has expanded from the United States and Canada into Mexico and Australia. A version of the program called Sifriyat Pijama (Hebrew for “Pajama Library”) distributes books to preschools in Israel, in partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education. Plans are in the works to expand the PJ Library in other international sites. Marcie Greenfield Simons, telephone interview by author, January 27, 2014. “About PJ Library,” PJ Library, https://www.pjlibrary.org/About-pj-library.aspx.


\(^{34}\)Oppenheimer. Taglit-Birthright Israel provides a free ten-day heritage trip to Israel for Jewish young adults aged 18 to 16. For an academic analysis of the program, see Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). Birthright is widely credited with having a major impact on the American Jewish landscape.
Jewish learning, some attend a synagogue and celebrate Jewish holidays, and others may be unfamiliar with Jewish practice.\textsuperscript{35}

The guidelines continue:

\begin{quote}
While the PJ Library program is open to all Jewish families, the committee focuses primarily on unengaged families when making selections. PJ Library strives to include books that reflect the diversity of Jewish customs and practice.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

While PJ Library certainly reaches families with a range of practices, it is significant that the committee focuses on “unengaged families” when selecting their materials. Searching for positive engagements with Jewish culture, religion, and history, PJ Library will not distribute Holocaust-themed books. The committee is very interested in holiday-themed books, as PJ Library sends materials to families each month and encourages them to be aware of the Jewish calendar. The organization’s preferences have dramatically increased the market for Jewish books dealing with holidays not often celebrated by non-Orthodox Jews, such as Shavuot and Tu B’Shvat.\textsuperscript{37}

PJ Library has also selected a number of books for distribution that focus on immigration themes and highlight the dynamics of nostalgia. As I spoke to authors, illustrators, publishers, and employees of PJ Library in 2013 and 2014, I heard conflicting impressions of what the PJ Library looked for in selecting non-holiday books to send to families. Some authors believed that their books were not chosen because they were not explicitly Jewish enough, while others believed PJ Library did not choose books that were “too Jewish” so as not to alienate recipients who are less knowledgeable or less involved in Jewish life. As generalizable stories about immigrants’ experiences, accounts of early twentieth-century immigrants fall into the Goldilocks

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{36} “Book Selection Committee.” \\
\textsuperscript{37} Shavuot (Pentecost) commemorates the day God gave the Torah to Israelites assembled at Mount Sinai. Tu B’shvat, the Jewish “New Year of the Trees,” is celebrated as an ecological awareness holiday, focusing on the fruits and trees of the Land of Israel.
\end{footnotesize}
sweet spot between too Jewish and not Jewish enough. Moreover, longing for immigrant pasts is a significant part of American Jewish literacy that Jews deem important to be taught to children, no less than holidays and home rituals.

PJ Library has an increasingly powerful influence on American Jewish families and the institutions that impact them. In February 2014, the program sent out its five millionth book. Recipients of the program recognize that “There’s no catch. There’s no reason not to do it.” Nonetheless, having no immediately recognizable “catch” for recipients does not mean that it has no effect. For better or worse, PJ Library unquestionably influences publishers of Jewish-themed children’s books, including both Jewish publishing companies and mainstream ones. Publishers are much more likely to publish a book that they know PJ Library will purchase by the thousands, and the program has helped to publish over two hundred titles by collaborating with publishers and guaranteeing them a market for selected books. Publishers freely admit that PJ Library’s purchasing power has not only had a dramatic influence on the number and breadth of Jewish children’s books being published, but also influences choices about text and illustration to reflect PJ Library’s desires.

In the last few years, the Jewish press has been full of anecdotal stories of families who became more engaged in Jewish life because of PJ Library. More quantitatively, PJ Library’s Executive Summary, based on surveys of over 20,000 Jewish families—the largest survey of American Jewish families to date—demonstrated its impact on Jewish families in convincing numbers. Among other findings, 57 percent of their respondents reported that the PJ Library has made their family more aware of Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, and 56 percent reported that it made them more aware of Jewish concepts and values. As parents are well aware, “The books are aimed at children, but they are also aimed at teaching adults.”

Authors’ responses to PJ Library and its influence on their field vary. Some authors I spoke to would like to be more involved with decisions to reprint their books, negotiations that are currently managed exclusively by PJ Library and publishers. Some authors worry about how giving away thousands of free copies of their books affects the profits from their work. Not only do authors receive less remuneration for each copy distributed by PJ Library than standard books, but they worry that PJ Library creates a culture that discourages parents from buying Jewish children’s books, weakening the retail market for Jewish children’s books more broadly. Why buy Jewish children’s books when you can get them for free?

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44 Berkman.

45 More research needs to be done on the effect of the increase in free programming for American Jews. The ongoing research of tourism scholar Yaniv Poria on participants’ valuation of Birthright as a free trip will be relevant to future analyses of PJ Library. Yaniv Poria, conversation with author, Blacksburg, Virginia, April 29, 2014.
Other authors appreciate that their books may reach a group of children who might otherwise not encounter them, and that, in the PJ Library model, interaction with the books is “part of the whole family experience and not isolated in one area.” Many authors appreciate that PJ Library has persuaded publishers that there is a market for Jewish books. “I have my mission and PJ Library has theirs,” acclaimed children’s book author Eric Kimmel told me, and he appreciates that both want to expand the market for Jewish children’s literature, even if he holds a different perspective on Jewish life. He views Judaism as a culture—like the Bundists and the Reconstructionists, he told me—while he believes PJ Library focuses on averting intermarriage or dealing with its consequences, which are not his concerns. Other authors told me they applaud what they perceive as PJ Library’s mission of making families more Jewish in the face of rising intermarriage. PJ Library’s effort to connect reading practices to actions and guiding sentiments, including nostalgia, provide a rare opportunity for children’s book authors to envision the effects of their works on their readership.

The goals and success of PJ Library highlight American Jews’ confusion between “religion” and “culture” and general aversion to the former term. “The ultimate goal of PJ Library,” states the Executive Summary, is to enhance Jewish identity, increase engagement in Jewish life and community and, over time, build a more vibrant North American Jewish community.” As organizers recognize, the free books act as a “a very nonthreatening

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46 Jacqueline Dembar Greene, telephone interview by author, November 19, 2013.
47 Eric Kimmel, telephone interview by author, November 14, 2013. The Bund was an eastern European Jewish socialist movement of the early twentieth century. Reconstructionist Judaism is a small but mainstream American Jewish movement that views Judaism as a progressively evolving civilization.
48 Amy Hest, telephone interview by author, January 6, 2014.
49 Sherwin.
introduction to everyday Jewish life.” Marcie Greenfield Simons, then the director of PJ Library, told me she was uncomfortable with my description of PJ Library as aiming to influence family’s religious lives. She explained,

I tend to veer away from [the description] “religious life.” I think that families connect with their Jewish heritage in a variety of ways. For some it’s through ritual, for many it’s through culture, for many it’s through community. And I think that what I’d like to say is that PJ Library inspires families to think about what Jewish choice they’re going to make, both in their home and outside their home. Simons went on to suggest examples of “Jewish choices” that families might make as an example of reading PJ Library books. It is not insignificant that all of them are traditionally religious actions:

In their home, are they going to have a tzedakah box and make that an active part of their family’s life? Are they going to bake challah for Shabbat? Are they going to think about blessing their children? Outside of their home, are they going to consider a Jewish day camp or a Jewish preschool? Are they interested, even if they’re not members of a local synagogue, would they like to go over to be part of the Purim carnival or be part of the Megillah reading?

Simon’s reluctance to label these actions as religious ones may spring from her own limited definition of religion (like most American Jews) or from a savvy understanding that to label PJ Library’s goals religious ones would alienate a large part of their audience, which includes Jewish families who identify across and beyond the spectrum of Jewish denominations.

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52 Simons. The Scroll of Esther (in Hebrew, Megillat Esther or the Megillah) is read on the holiday of Purim, which commemorates the deliverance of Jews in the ancient Persian Empire from a plot to destroy them. Many synagogues celebrate the holiday with a carnival for children.
53 Forty-six percent of families receiving PJ Library materials identify with one of the three major North American Jewish movements, including 11 percent who identify as Modern Orthodox; 28 percent identify as “just Jewish” and 22 percent identify as “Jewish and something else.” Sherwin.
Simon’s protests to the contrary, it is clear that PJ Library does intend to draw families into organized Jewish life and affect their values and views of the world—in other words, their religious lives.54

PJ Library has managed to transform the once small, niche market of Jewish children’s books into a lucrative, growing market for mainstream publishers.55 “Every major publisher wants to do a PJ Library book,” Carolyn Hessel, the director of the Jewish Book Council, told the Forward in 2011. “They’re doing it for the bottom line; they know that there’s a market out there.”56 PJ Library’s success is the fruition of a decades-old concern. From at least the mid-twentieth century through the present day, the production of children’s books has evinced the communal worries of the Jewish communal establishment. Kapp’s 1949 call to create books that would “make our youngsters conscious, self-respecting Jews” prefigured PJ Library’s initiative. PJ Library titles include the board book Nosh, Schlep, Schluff: BabYiddish by Laurel Snyder, distributed to children ages six months to two years old, designed introduce small children to Yiddish words commonly used by American Jews, “while parents learn or are reminded of some commonly-used Yiddishisms.”57 Holiday themes are underscored with books such as Picture a

54 In my analysis of PJ Library, as throughout this dissertation, I follow the understanding of religion articulated by Robert Orsi and other religious studies scholars as the totality of people’s “ultimate values, their most deeply held ethical convictions, their efforts to order their reality, their cosmology” or, more simply, “what matters.” Robert A. Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xliii
Tree by Barbara Reid, distributed to five- and six-year-olds to teach about the holiday of Tu Bishvat, the Jewish “new year of the trees.” In June 2012, PJ Library reprinted and distributed All-of-a-Kind Family for ages eight and above; a year later, it distributed All-of-a-Kind Family Downtown, which takes place just after the first book, though it is the fourth book Taylor wrote for the series. The organization’s carefully curated book selection, designed to introduce children and parents to the major themes of American Jewish life, includes a significant number of books dealing with Jewish history, particularly the immigration era. As discussed below, these books are designed to teach an emotional connection to the past, an intimate nostalgia that builds on but is not limited by factual history.

The Eternal Grandparent

Many Jewish American children’s books, including a number distributed by PJ Library, provide connections between young characters, who serve as stand-ins for real-life child readers, and the immigrant generation, who are almost invariably depicted as grandparents. While children born in the twenty-first century are several generations removed from the era of massive Ashkenazi immigration (circa 1880–1924), they are repeatedly encouraged to identify as the grandchildren of immigrants who settled in urban enclaves. At the same time, as authors depict the immigrant generation, they merge remembrances of their own grandparents and great-grandparents, blending the preceding generations into a single eternal grandparent figure. This imagined cross-generational familial connection teaches a sentimental nostalgia to the youngest of American Jews and creates a link to multiple ancestral generations through a relationship with a single figure.

58 Barbara Reid, Picture a Tree (Chicago: Albert Whitman & Co., 2013).
Dianne Hess, Executive Editor at Scholastic Press, has published several Jewish children’s books, including Eric Kimmel’s *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah* (1998), which was chosen as a PJ Library book in 2012. While Scholastic primarily publishes mainstream materials, generally geared toward children in the public school system, Hess told me that she sees her work with Jewish books in the context of the changing American Jewish family. As an increasing number of American Jewish families are interfaith and interracial, children have less of a connection to their European immigrant past. Hess, the daughter of European immigrants, told me, “the new generation in my family is East Indian, Chinese, German, half Jewish/half Lutheran, Puerto Rican, Columbian, et cetera. They’re from all over the world.” Based on her own family experiences, Hess believes that as a result of this diversity,

Most kids don’t have a solid Jewish background now and don’t have that nostalgia for the immigrant grandparents. And for me, it would be a great loss to break that connection with our past because that is the voice of a big piece of our history that held our dispersed community together for so many generations.60

Hess’s perspective captures how the imperative to teach about European Jewish immigration has become a central tenet of American Jewish identity politics. Without this narrative, in the view of Hess and others, Jewish children will be unmoored from the narratives that bound earlier generations of Jews.

It is noteworthy that in books relating Jewish immigration history, the child is not the figure of nostalgic attention. Instead, the inaccessible object of nostalgic longing is the historical scenery of eastern Europe and American ethnic neighborhoods that surround the protagonist through description, dialogue, and illustrations. In contrast, the contemporary reader can relate to the child protagonist. The accessible protagonist stands in as an avatar for author and readers, exploring the nostalgic past around her or him. This perspective provides a sharp break from the

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60 Hess, interview. Dianne Hess, email to author, June 25, 2014.
traditional connection between nostalgia and childhood. In Victorian literature, the golden age of nostalgic representations of childhood, literary images of children allowed adults the means by which to experience an imagined or remembered childhood. As Linda Austin writes, the child became “a memorative object,” one that could be possessed without relinquishing one’s position in the present time and place.\(^{61}\) In contrast, for contemporary adult and child readers of Jewish children’s literature, the figure of the child serves as an intimate access point, a comfortable form through which to navigate the inaccessible, longed-for American Jewish past.

Even as protagonists are timeless avatars, their fictional grandparents always remain elderly immigrants, regardless of the era in which the story take place. In Amy Hest’s *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* (1997), Jessie, the young, immigrant protagonist, serves as a stand-in for author and reader, and her relationship with her grandmother models an ideal relationship with familial and communal pasts. Since Jessie is herself an immigrant, it is noteworthy that she still requires the complement of an immigrant grandparent figure. While Jessie learns to adapt to her life in the U.S., Grandmother undergoes no character development; she is a static Old World character, defined by Jessie’s love and longing for her.

Hest’s straightforward narrative introduces Jessie as an ageless orphan (presumably a teenager) who lives with her grandmother in “a poor village far from here,” the mythic shtetl of the American Jewish imagination.\(^{62}\) When the village rabbi receives a ticket to America, he chooses to give the ticket to Jessie. Hest describes Jessie’s reluctant separation from her grandmother, her immigration journey, and her settling on the Lower East Side. Jessie finds love in her new country, developing a relationship with Lou, who had emigrated with her on the boat.

\(^{61}\) Austin, 97.

\(^{62}\) Amy Hest, *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 1997).
to America. She earns money by sewing lace, a skill that her grandmother taught her. Sewing lace both assuages and deepens Jessie’s longing for her grandmother: “Just to touch the soft lace was like touching Grandmother again.”

The young immigrant saves her earnings to buy her grandmother a ticket to America. In a satisfying end to the story, Jessie and her grandmother are successfully reunited just before Jessie and Lou’s wedding.

It is noteworthy that the story focuses on Jessie making a new life for herself in America; her unnamed grandmother is always present in Jessie’s memory but appears as an active character only on the last page of the book, a figment of Jessie’s old life in Europe. Focusing on the relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter who both ultimately emigrate to America, Hests’s story does not precisely follow the typical theme of grandparental relationships in American Jewish children’s literature, which more typically explore the relationships between American-born grandchildren and their European-born grandparents, as in The Castle on Hester Street, discussed below. Still, Jessie’s grandmother is in many ways an archetypical eternal grandparent, a relatable, timeless figure that draws connections between real and fictional generations.

Like many of the authors I spoke with, Hest drew upon her own experiences. Jessie is “really about my grandmother and myself,” Hest told me. “I wrote this book as a way of telling about my own family history, and I blended the real family history with stories that I made up.”

Hest’s grandmother was born in the United States, and she used to tell Hest about her own parents, Jessie and Lou, who emigrated from eastern Europe. Jessie’s fictional grandmother is, in some ways, an archetype of the eternal immigrant Jewish grandparent type, a combination of the immigrant grandparent figure and Hest’s remembrances of her grandmother. The most

63 Hest, Jessie, n.p.
64 Amy Hest, telephone interview by author, January 6, 2014.
historically unlikely part of the narrative, the satisfying ending in which Jessie successfully brings her grandmother to join her in New York, was, Hest explained to me, “my way of bringing back my grandmother, who died many years ago. It was my way of reconnecting with her and making a happy ending.” Jessie’s longing for her grandmother mirrors the author’s longing for her own grandmother, as well as drawing upon and encouraging American Jewish longing for the immigrant past. For both Hest and her readers, the book takes the tangible place of Jessie’s lace, providing a palpable way to connect to the imagined past.

The nostalgia of Hest’s narrative references multiple imagined communities as homelands: the imagined eastern European Jewish communities from which the fictional Jessie, Hest’s great-grandparents, and the ancestors of many American Jewish readers emigrated; the Jewish Lower East Side at the turn of the century; and contemporary American Jewish communities, among others. As Boym writes, “Homecoming—return to the imagined community—is a way of patching up the gap of alienation, turning intimate longing into belonging.” Yet Hest’s narrative has an interesting twist: Rather than returning to the site of communal origin, Hest brings a representative of one imagined communal past (the eastern European Jewish town) to another (the Lower East Side). At the same time, Jessie represents the present, as the surrogate of both author and reader. Her reunion with her grandmother represents a moment where the past touches the present—enacted by reading the story.

The eternal grandparent figure is useful for the PJ Library, which uses the inside covers and inside flaps of the paperback books it distributes to explicitly teach about “Jewish values” the organization wishes to highlight. On the back flap of the PJ Library’s paperback edition of When Jessie Came Across the Sea, PJ Library encourages deepening the connection between

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65 Hest, interview.
66 Boym, 255.
young readers and the protagonist, as it does in many other books. PJ Library uses *Jessie* as a lesson for the mitzvah of *v'hadarta p’nei zaken*, the biblical instruction to honor the elderly (Leviticus 19:32). PJ Library explains, “Respect is a central value in Judaism—respect for parents, for animals, for the earth, for others, and for oneself.” The organization encourages parents to “talk with your children about the Jewish values of respecting the elderly” and suggests a variety of activities to help them practice the mitzvah, such as “making paper flowers and taking them to a local nursing home,” or “visiting a community senior lunch program and visiting with seniors during the meal.” While the PJ Library explicitly intends to use the picture book as a means of teaching the Jewish value of respect for the elderly, its connection between reader and protagonist also strengthens the implicit lesson of nostalgia for the American Jewish immigrant past. PJ Library encourages adults reading such books about Jewish American immigration to use them as a spark for conversation with children about their Ashkenazi heritage, whether the readers are parents, grandparents, or other adults. As adults use the books as an inspiration for stories about their own parents or grandparents, they make engagement with Jewish nostalgia a more personal experience, drawing emotional connections between generations past and present.

“The Synagogue Speaks”

As part of a larger nostalgic movement for the Jewish neighborhoods, primarily New York’s Lower East Side but also other immigrant neighborhoods, historic synagogues such as the Eldridge Street Synagogue often serve a symbolic role in children’s books as in other Jewish nostalgic materials. Just as public history organizations use their historic synagogues to create a

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physically authentic relationship with the past through the medium of sacred space, illustrated children’s books use images of historic synagogues as markers of an authentic, sacred Jewish past. The Eldridge Street Synagogue, located on the Lower East Side, appears in several children’s books, including Eric Kimmel’s *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah* and Elsa Okon Rael’s *When Zaydeh Danced on Eldridge Street* (1997). In 2011, Jewish Museum of Maryland, which owns the historic 1845 Lloyd Street Synagogue in Baltimore, published *The Synagogue Speaks*, an illustrated book depicting the history of the building, including its heyday as home to two Jewish congregations and a Baptist church and the building’s restoration under the auspices of the museum, told from the first-person perspective of the synagogue building itself. (As Jewish heritage expert Samuel Gruber noted, “‘If these walls could talk’ is a cliché in the historic preservation world, but when standing inside an old synagogue it is still an irresistible phrase and idea.”) In children’s books, as in the presentation of historic synagogues as heritage sites, the historic synagogue appears as a symbol of a seemingly authentic Judaism, the Judaism of eastern European immigrants in the early twentieth century.

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69 Anita Kassof, *The Synagogue Speaks* (Baltimore: The Jewish Museum of Maryland, 2011). The book was created to accompany a permanent multimedia exhibition of the same name recounting the synagogue building’s history, displayed within the Lloyd Street Synagogue.

While staff members at historic synagogues used as heritage sites tell elegiac narratives about their sites’ histories to demarcate them as sacred spaces, illustrated children’s books present historic synagogues as magical places full of possibilities, an easy way to explain sacred heritage sites to children. Both magic and the sacred, after all, allude to the supernatural, to what cannot be properly explained, defined, or measured in ordinary terms. Since the nineteenth century, authors and artists have depicted childhood as a period prone to magical experiences.  

Although children’s books depicting historic synagogues use a different set of descriptors than adults commonly use, illustrated books serve as a significant method of introduction to children.

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to the concept of scared space, using depictions of magic and the supernatural familiar from other children’s books.

In Eric Kimmel’s *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah*, the tiny, mouse-sized members of the Klein family live behind the walls of the Eldridge Street Synagogue at the turn of the century, “borrowing” objects from the synagogue’s human-sized inhabitants. Kimmel’s story consciously emulates Mary Norton’s acclaimed chapter book, *The Borrowers* (1952). Kimmel’s biography on the back flap of the book only adds to the mystique of the synagogue: “As soon as he began to write this story, he knew right away it was the perfect home for Mindy and her family.”

![Image of the Eldridge Street Synagogue from *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah* by Eric A. Kimmel](image-url)


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72 Eric A. Kimmel, *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2005). With tongue in cheek, the author named his characters after the Yiddish word for small. At the end of the book, they host their friends, each representative of different groups of early twentieth-century Jews: the Pequeños (Spanish) from Shearith Israel, the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue; the Littles from the Reform Temple Emanu-El; and the Katans (Hebrew) from Jerusalem.

73 Kimmel, *Mindy*, back flap.
Kimmel’s choice of the Eldridge Street Synagogue as the location for his characters, whose size associates them with myths about tiny miniature creatures such as pixies and elves, conveys the message that the synagogue is a magical place. Barbara McClintock’s watercolor, black ink, and gouache paintings illustrating *Mindy* evoke early twentieth-century book illustrations, complementing the text’s connection to the past. Setting the story in the Eldridge Street Synagogue asserts that this magic—or, in less child-like language, sanctity—derives from history.

*Mindy* was created in conjunction with the restoration of the synagogue. When McClintock set out to illustrate the book in the late 1990s, the Eldridge Street Project’s efforts to restore the historic synagogue were still underway. To prepare for her illustrations, McClintock did extensive research on the Lower East Side in general and the synagogue in particular. She spent time at the synagogue, photographing and sketching the interior and interviewing those involved in the restoration project. “At that point,” McClintock told me, the synagogue “was really a mess. There were holes in the ceiling. It was really terribly degraded.” McClintock was aware that “people were trying to renovate it, and they kept [running] out of money, and they’d have to find more grant funding, and then they’d come back. It was sort of in fits and starts, pulling the synagogue back together again.”

McClintock based her illustrations on the details she found on the remaining paintings on the walls and ceilings, the designs on the walls, the woodwork, and the intact pews. “I made a composite,” she told me, of the intact decorative elements. According to McClintock, she created what was the only picture of the original (or restored) sanctuary interior in existence at the time, which appears as a two-page spread in the book (Figure 15). The illustrator was justifiably “quite

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74 Barbara McClintock, telephone interview by author, November 27, 2013.
proud” of the fact that the Eldridge Street Project used her illustration in their presentations to potential donors to the project and showed it to those who worked on the interior renovation.75

Likewise, when Rael published *When Zaydeh Danced on Eldridge Street* in 1997, she and illustrator Marjorie Priceman would have encountered the synagogue in a dilapidated condition. Like McClintock, Priceman depicted the sanctuary, though her exuberant gauche and watercolor drawings illustrations have a less detailed style than McClintock’s style (Figure 16). *Publishers Weekly* praised the artist for “captur[ing] the sacredness and beauty of religious

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75 McClintock. Eric Kimmel and Diane Hess, the author and the editor of *Mindy*, respectively, also recalled that the Eldridge Street Project used McClintock’s illustration for their funding and renovation efforts. The current staff at the Museum at Eldridge Street does not corroborate this story. Nancy Johnson, email to author, March 7, 2014.
symbolism without abandoning her playful, deceptively casual style.” Rael, for her part, provided child’s-eye view of the sanctuary from the vantage of her young protagonist, Zeesie, who attends the synagogue with her grandfather on the holiday of Simchat Torah:

Zeesie had never seen so beautiful a synagogue. . . . Here the last of the sunset sparkled through brightly colored glass windows. Reds, greens, yellows, lavenders, and blues filtered in and cast a magical light across the pews. Wood carved in intricate patterns decorated the entire room. Zeesie spun around. This looks like a palace, she thought, and here I am, in the middle, like a princess!77

The imaginative work of illustrators, piecing together images of the past, and engaging texts in the language of children, are intended to mirror the imaginative work of young readers, who are encouraged to place themselves within these scenes.

The elegiac nostalgia of historic synagogues used as heritage sites and the intimate nostalgia of children’s books have been created in tandem, one influencing the other. In these works, children are introduced to the longing for imagined pasts. As in the narratives of restoration told at historic synagogues, these books present the past glory of the synagogue as an active force in the present, though they use the childlike language of magic to do so.

“A True Story, Just the Way I Remember It”

Other children’s books invoke the Lower East Side more generally, beyond historic synagogues. Linda Heller’s acclaimed The Castle on Hester Street features eternal grandparent figures who debate their recollections of immigrant life on the Lower East Side.78 Heller’s explicit, if lighthearted, focus on debates about American Jewish memory struck a chord with audiences. JPS first published the book in 1982 as part of David Adler’s push to increase JPS’s

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children’s publications, with illustrations by Heller. In 2007, Simon and Schuster reissued the book with new illustrations by Boris Kulikov, and the book was printed in paperback and distributed by the PJ Library in 2012.

In Heller’s story, the young protagonist, Julie, hears radically different versions of the past from her grandfather and grandmother. Her grandfather, Sol, tells her extravagantly tall tales about his voyage from Russia to the United States and his life on the Lower East Side, beginning with Moishe the goat who pulled her grandfather’s wagon from Russia to America, leaping across oceans “the way others jump over puddles.” Julie’s grandmother, Rose, counters with alternate, more factual versions:
Grandpa came on a boat, just like I did. It was terrible. Hundreds of families were crowded together. Babies were crying. Bundles were piled over. The boat rocked so much, I thought we would drown. But in Russia, life for Jews was very hard.  

When Sol recounts being greeted by President Theodore Roosevelt and tells Julie, “Everyone who came here was given a castle,” Rose remembers the “horrible little room” he shared with several other boarders. While it is clear that Rose’s stories are intended to be more factual, importantly, both versions are presented as stories and, in fact, Sol tells the more engaging tales, making the Lower East Side a place of magic and wonder. While Rose repeatedly corrects her husband’s stories—only infrequently conceding, “That part is true”—Sol defends his tales as “a true story, just the way I remember it.”  

Like genealogists who find meaning in their ancestors’ less-than-factual accounts of their personal histories, Rose’s stories are presented as meaningful engagements with personal and communal history. Elie Wiesel’s words to Arthur Kurzweil are no less relevant here than to genealogical research: “What does it matter if they are true? . . . They’re stories!”

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79 Heller, Castle, n.p.
80 Heller, Castle, n.p.
81 Arthur Kurzweil, From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, 2004), 46.
In the book’s original publication, Heller, who had begun her career as an illustrator, illustrated her own narrative, using the limited color printing available in the early 1980s. The book received attention from Jewish audiences and won the prestigious Sydney Taylor Book Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) in 1982. JPS also received the prestigious Philadelphia Book Clinic award for the design, printing, and binding of *The Castle on Hester Street* at the 38th Philadelphia Book Show. Muriel Berman, president of the publishing house, proudly called it “a charming, utterly delightful book . . . full of humor and fantasy” in her annual report. Nonetheless, the book received some mixed reviews. While the *School Library*

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Journal found Castle on Hester Street to be “a good book to read and talk about while comfortably ensconced in a grandparent’s lap,” the reviewer believed that the book would hold interest for limited audiences. While it “could be read aloud to young children interested in their ethnic heritage or to a class studying family origins,” she found that “it does not have enough dramatic tension to grab the attention of a casual reader”—that is, a non-Jewish reader—“and while the illustrations have a haunting quality they would not attract the average browser.”

It is likely that this review reflects the limited appeal in the early 1980s of books with Jewish themes, including immigrant Jewish history, beyond holiday books.

By 2007, the Jewish book market had changed dramatically. The Castle on Hester Street, with its whimsical take on the immigrant Jewish past, may have been ahead of its time. Having negotiated the copyright with JPS, Simon and Schuster reissued the book with new illustrations. Boris Kulikov’s brightly colored, modern illustrations gave the book “new life,” in the publisher’s words, and enhanced Heller’s text, which Simon and Schuster modified slightly.

The revised edition had mass appeal in the early twenty-first century. Booklist called Heller’s story “an elemental blend of magical dreams and harsh reality” and described Boris Kulikov’s illustrations as “wry, wild, [and] tender. . . . The warm pictures combine the glowing tall-tale scenarios with realistic views of tenements and sweatshops to give listeners a sense of history without frightening them.” A Kirkus reviewer still critiqued the text, finding the historical references to Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson “a bit creaky,” but had nothing but

memory by Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, just before mentioning the award for The Castle on Hester Street. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).


praise for the new illustrations: “Kulikov recreates warmly lit, authentic-looking interiors and street scenes, and his smiling, flexibly posed figures project an intimacy that will draw children in to this intergenerational interchange.”\textsuperscript{86} Kulikov’s deliberately fantastical images, which draw out the whimsy of the text, can be understood as “authentic-looking” only if we understand that the authentic Lower East of popular imagination is, in fact, a place of fantasy.

Both the Kirkus and Booklist reviewers emphasize that the book can be used to facilitate warm, intimate “intergenerational exchange” based around a shared nostalgia for the Lower East Side. PJ Library’s commentary on The Castle on Hester Street makes it clear that the grandparents are to be used as paradigmatic examples of eternal grandparents. In the inside cover book flaps created for the PJ Library paperback edition of The Castle on Hester Street, the PJ Library helps parents use the book as a teaching about the myth of the Lower East Side: “Julie’s grandparents represent the Jewish families from eastern Europe who fled their pogrom-torn homeland and came to the United States seeking refuge and an enhanced way of life.”\textsuperscript{87} Heller’s fictional grandparents are not only characters who tell good stories; they are representations that bear a heavy cultural load. As in Hest’s Jessie, children are intended to take the grandparental relationships modeled in the book as their cue—not in their relationships with their own grandparents, but in their relationships to the Jewish past as well.

\textsuperscript{87} PJ Library, inside front cover flap of Heller, The Castle on Hester Street (2012).
Rose, Julie’s grandmother in *The Castle on Hester Street*, concludes her role in the book with a paradigmatically patriotic moral reminiscent of *All-of-a-Kind Family*: While Julie’s grandparents had to work hard in America “we had something more valuable than jeweled crowns and golden baby carriages. We had each other and we were free to live as we wanted.”\(^{88}\)

Like Sidney Taylor’s classic chapter books, Heller contrasts the difficulty of immigrant life on the Lower East Side with both the warmth of strong familial ties and a fervent patriotism for immigrant families’ new country. Still, by 1982—and even more so by 2007—this rhetoric was nothing new, and American Jews (or at least Heller) were ready for a new version: While Rose’s

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tale serves as a teaching tool, her grandfather gets the last word. Though Sol nominally agrees to his wife’s insistence on “the truth,” once Rose is out of earshot, he cannot help embarking on another tall tale “about the time Moishe the goat and I sang for President Wilson.” On the back flap of their paperback version, the PJ Library encourages young readers to reflect on these alternate versions of the past. “Why might Grandpa have made up these scenarios? Why did Grandma Rose counter each of Grandpa’s stories with one based in reality?” the PJ Library asks, introducing Jewish children to the self-conscious world of Jewish memory-making. Still, this cultural burden does not diminish the book’s playful relationship with the past. By the last decades of the twentieth century, it was the storytelling, the grandparental immigrants and nostalgia for them and their pasts that mattered most. While these emotional connections were to be taken seriously, they need not be a burden. They could be a fun romp through American Jewish history.

In both editions, Heller’s tale gets to the heart of the issues at stake in depictions of American Jewish history for children: How to depict this formative period for American Jews, both as it is enshrined in popular memory and according to historical accounts. Heller’s storyline is effective. As one parent wrote in a glowing review of the book on Amazon:

I find this two-step process to be a clever way to teach children about the experience which their grandparents went through, first hooking them with a silly story, and then hitting them with the facts. . . . My children and I find this book funny and endearing, and have read it together many times.

Like Jewish genealogists who honor their ancestors’ seemingly fictional accounts, Heller can have it both ways, valorizing both Julie’s grandfather’s fantastical account and her

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90 PJ Library, back flap, *Castle*.
grandmother’s more pragmatic tale of suffering, hard-working immigrants. While the narrative presents Sol’s account as fictional and Rose’s counterpoints as a realistic, it also presents both as acts of memory-making. This is not the division between communal memory and modern academic history envisioned by Yerushalmi. Rather, both serve as forms of communal memory and as teaching tools for readers.

“Some Things Change and Some Things Don’t”

Intimately nostalgic themes of family memories and religious continuity are explicitly addressed in another PJ Library book, Sheldon Oberman’s The Always Prayer Shawl (1993), illustrated by Ted Lewin. Told in powerful, straightforward language, the book tells the story of Adam, “a Jewish boy in Russia many years ago.” Along with teaching him Hebrew and “the stories of their people,” Adam’s grandfather tells him the story of his name: “You are named after my grandfather whose name was Adam. He was named after his grandfather’s grandfather whose name was Adam, That way there will always be an Adam.” When Adam responds, “I am always Adam. That won’t change!” his grandfather sagely replies, “Some things change. And some things don’t.”

When Adam and his parents leave their home for “a better place” that is “so far away that we can never come back,” his grandfather remains behind in Russia. Before they leave, his grandfather gives Adam his prayer shawl, which his own grandfather had given to him. The narrative follows Adam’s growth in his new country, as he continues to wear and repair his “always prayer shawl” throughout the years. The story concludes with Adam putting his prayer shawl on his own grandson and promising to give it him one day. As Adam tells his grandson about his own grandfather and his life in Russia, he explains that the prayer shawl has changed.

92 Yerushalmi.
many times as it has been repaired. “But it is still my Always Prayer Shawl,” he tells his grandson. “It is just like me. I have changed and changed and changed. But I am still Adam.” In response, his grandson promises, “I am going to be just like you. I will have a grandson whose name will be Adam. And someday I will give him this Always Prayer Shawl.” Now in the role of the grandfatherly sage, Adam replies, “Now I can teach you something that my grandfather taught me. He taught me that some things change and some things don’t.”

A Canadian writer, high school English teacher, sometime journalist, and filmmaker, Oberman was “a fixture in Winnipeg’s art scene his entire adult life.” Published by Boyd Mills Press, the trade division of Highlights for Children, Inc., *The Always Prayer Shawl* was one of Oberman’s most successful works. Though Oberman loosely based the story on his own family and set the story in Canada, he also made the story generically North American so that it could be easily accepted by audiences in the United States. While this dissertation focuses primarily on depictions of Jewish history within the United States, I include *The Always Prayer Shawl* in this chapter because it has been well received in both Canada and the United States. The book has been recognized by numerous American and Canadian organizations, as well as Jewish organizations that span North America: The Association of Jewish Librarians awarded Oberman the Sidney Taylor Award in 1994 for the book. It won the 1994 National Jewish Book Award in the children’s picture book category, and received the American Bookseller’s “Pick of the List Award,” *A Child’s Magazine*’s “Best Book of the Year,” the National Council of Social Studies’s “Notable Book in the field of Social Studies,” and Canada’s “Choice List,” awarded by

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It was distributed as a PJ Library book to families with children ages eight years and older in September 2012.

The book’s success drew on its emotional appeal for audiences of all ages. As Larry Rosler, the editor of *The Always Prayer Shawl*, told me, Oberman was “a storyteller first.” He “polished and tweaked” the texts of his children’s books through performances before submitting them for publication, and he loved giving public readings after their publication. At Oberman’s public readings of *The Always Prayer Shawl*, wrote one journalist, “The effect on listeners is strong. Noses redden. Eyes rim. One man who heard Oberman on the radio had to pull his car off the road.”

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96 Winnipeg Jewish Theatre, “Sheldon Oberman Wins Award for ‘The Always Prayer Shawl,’” March 1, 1995, press release. Retrieved at Sheldon Oberman Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Manitoba, Canada (hereafter SOC), MSS328, Box 3, Folder 1.

97 Larry Rosler, telephone interview by author, March 2, 2014.
the road to compose himself.” Children, too, found the book captivating: When he read the book at a Jewish school in Shaker Heights, Ohio, “Oberman’s story caused second- and third-graders to stop swinging their high-tops and listen, even on the hot second day of school. A few thumbs found their way into mouths.”

Shortly after the book’s publication, Oberman turned his story into an hour-long play by the same title, and it has found ready audiences, particularly in Canada but also in the United States. The Winnipeg Jewish Theatre performed *The Always Prayer Shawl* in Winnipeg’s Warehouse Theater in March 1995 before going on tour at schools throughout Manitoba. The same group performed the play to “nearly-full houses” of 250 people at Toronto’s Ashkenaz Festival of New Yiddish Culture, in July 1995 where it was “well received by both the general public and schools, grades 1 to 12.” The Winnipeg Jewish Theatre made copies of the script—along with a tape of the original music and sound effects, a portable set, costumes, a teaching guide, and videotape and photos of their performances—available to groups who wished to hold subsequent performances of the play.

In December 1995, the play appeared in the United States, when an intergenerational cast including grade school children, teenagers, and adult amateur actors performed the play at the Katz Jewish Community Center in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, as part of the JCC’s Festival of Arts, Books, and Culture.

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100 Oberman, “Playwright’s Note.”
101 “‘Always Prayer Shawl’ a Hit at Toronto Jewish Festival,” *Winnipeg Sun*, July 26, 1995. Retrieved at SOC, MSS 328, Box 6, Folder 3. The Katz JCC Eleventh Annual Festival of Arts,
As Oberman recounted in several journal articles, *The Always Prayer Shawl* had its roots in the author’s memories of his own grandfather and in his relationship with his son. The book creates an imaginary and otherwise impossible connection between Oberman’s grandfather, his zaida, who passed away when Oberman was twelve, and Oberman’s son, named Adam.103 “I wrote the story for Adam so he would know the story of my grandfather, whom he never saw,” Oberman explained at a reading.104 The writer recounted that when his grandfather died, he was buried with the tallit (prayer shawl) he wore regularly on Shabbat, and Oberman inherited a tallit his grandfather wore on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. At the time, Oberman was entirely uninterested in this inheritance:

> The time was the 1960s, and I was an adolescent rebelling against authority and traditions. In fact, I never even had a bar mitzvah. The tallit seemed to represent the very worst of it, something that would bind me up with religious demands and restrictions: “Go to synagogue. Recite the prayers. Listen to the rabbi. Don’t grow! Don’t change!” So, I put the tallit away in a drawer and out of my mind.105

Decades later, Oberman came across his zaida’s tallit as he prepared for the bar mitzvah of his oldest son, Adam. By this point in his life, Oberman recounted, “I was craving peace of mind, wisdom, a faith in something beyond myself, and the quiet strength that my grandfather had drawn from his beliefs. I wondered if I might find it by honoring what he honored and by drawing upon its power.”106

Oberman devised what he considered a “wonderful ritual” of transfers: his father would give Adam his tallit and, as Adam put on his grandfather’s tallit, Oberman would put on his


102 “Draw Close.”

103 Zaida, like zaydeh, is a transliteration of the Yiddish word for grandfather.

104 Long, 1F.


zaida’s tallit. As Oberman recounted, Adam and “Dad” were very pleased with the idea, but Adam’s mother (then Oberman’s ex-wife), Lee Anne, put a hitch in the plan: Lee Anne had bought a new prayer shawl for Adam. Lee Anne had never had a bat mitzvah, a practice that has become more common for girls in recent decades, and her gift of a tallit for her son was deeply meaningful for her. “She wanted Adam to wear this new shawl so she could feel she was up there embracing and sheltering him just like that garment.” Adam’s parents were both offering him a tallit, and each gift was weighted with emotion.

At an impasse, Oberman and Lee Anne decided to consult a rabbi on this ritual decision. Oberman framed their meeting as a connection to their Jewish ancestors: “That was what our great-grandparents did when the rabbi was the community’s only counselor, teacher and judge. Even though we considered ourselves modern and enlightened, we took this very traditional approach.” Though their rabbi was a professor of religious studies, not a congregational rabbi, Oberman and Lee Anne felt connected to Jewish history. They emerged from their consultation with a decision: They would combine the shawls. Lee Anne removed the worn tzitzit from Oberman’s father’s shawl and tied on the new ones from her shawl. Adam received a single tallit made from the fabric of his grandfather’s shawl and the tzitzit of his mother’s gift, a ritual garment representing both sides of his family. “As for myself,” Oberman concluded, “I was proud to finally wear my grandfather’s tallit and soon afterwards, I wrote The Always Prayer Shawl.” The illustrated book “was a final bar mitzvah gift for Adam which I gave on behalf of my grandfather, his great-grandfather, who had died so long before he was born.”

108 Oberman, “The Gift,” 9. The end of Oberman’s life was also marked by a bar mitzvah. Oberman died of esophageal cancer in March 1994 at the age of 54. Before Oberman passed away, he and his second wife, Lisa Dveris, accelerated plans for their twelve-year-old son Jesse’s bar mitzvah. The bar mitzvah was held in a hospital chapel so that Oberman could attend. “Jesse
As in *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* and other books, *The Always Prayer Shawl* simplifies intergenerational relationships. The four real-life generations of Oberman, his grandfather, his father, and his son become three characters, only two of whom encounter each other at a time. (The immigrant Adam’s parents have more of a role in the play.) The fictional Adam is an eternal grandparent *par excellence*, a link between generations and between Jewish life in pre-War Europe and modern life in North America. Oberman’s representation of intimate nostalgia suggests a “desire for complete reconciliation of past and present,” in the words of gender studies scholar Elspeth Probyn. The writer’s ability to control the past, through this fictional account—and the fictional Adam’s ability to do so through his recollections and his

attachment to the tallit—means being in control of his present self, as well as the future, in the person of his son and future descendants, just as the real-life generations are blended into composite fictional characters. “The past mastered through memory grounds the proof of truth in the present,” Probyn articulates. As Foucault explains, this form of history provides “a suprahistorical perspective.” It is “a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past.” The Always Prayer Shawl binds past, present and future with the emotional intimacy and familial affection of nostalgia.

Oberman was well aware of the ways in which he conflated characters and rewrote history. He told a reporter, “I find myself writing stories in which old people are tremendously important to young people—the wisdom of older people is one of our greatest resources.” Nonetheless, the writer recognized that he dealt more with the idea of wisdom of the elderly than the reality. He freely admitted, “To be clear, there is a lot of wish-fulfillment that goes on in storytelling. Although I was close to my grandparents, I really didn’t know them very well.” Reflecting upon the story’s impact on readers and audiences, he said, “Even if you didn’t know your grandparents, you know what you needed from them.” In The Always Prayer Shawl, Oberman added to the ritual of the passing on the prayer shawl another ritual, a ritual of passing on the name Adam, his own son’s name. In the book and the play, the immigrant Adam is named for his grandfather’s grandfather, and Adam’s grandson promises that his own grandson will be

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110 Probyn, 112.
113 Long, 1F.
114 Long, 1F.
named Adam. This four-generational spread between Adams allows the passing on the name to become a ritual link between fictional generations while respecting the Ashkenazi tradition of naming children only for deceased relatives. The story, with its many-layered rituals and generational links, provides the emotional, nostalgic intimacy of what readers want from past generations—a comfortable nostalgia that assures them that, while the past is irrevocable, certain core values can be retrieved and passed on to future generations.

Ted Lewin’s evocative pencil and watercolor illustrations of *The Always Prayer* complement Oberman’s writing and storytelling, further emphasizing the connections between the author and his story and continuing Oberman’s conflation of real and fictional generations. Lewin chose to illustrate the first half of the book, from Adam’s childhood in Russia through the early years of his immigration, in black and white, and he illustrated the second half, which takes place closer to the present day, in color. The artist asked to borrow Oberman’s grandfather’s prayer shawl as he created on the illustrations, and Oberman took pictures of himself wearing the prayer shawl so that Lewin would know to depict it. Even though he had sent these pictures, Oberman recounted, “I was quite surprised when I opened the book to see that Ted had drawn me as the adult Adam wearing the shawl. I was also surprised at how much the model for [the young] Adam resembled my own son Adam at that age.” In a transitional two-page spread depicting the passage of time, Lewin depicted the young Adam in black and white alongside a full-color adult Adam, who closely resembles Oberman (Figure 21). While Oberman and his

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115 While Sephardic Jews name children after living relatives, Ashkenazi Jews avoid doing so because of a folk belief that when the Angel of Death came for the older relative, he would mistakenly take the younger one instead.
grandfather were united by their shared physical experience of wearing the same tallit, in this illustration, the author and his grandfather-protagonist are conflated into a single character.

In a fitting performance for a story about rituals, Oberman turned his public readings into a ritual by wearing his grandfather’s tallit as he read his book:

The Canadian author wrapped his shoulders in the Russian garment, with its frayed tassels and rip below the left collar and began to tell ‘The Always Prayer Shawl.’ Oberman didn’t read his 32-page book. He memorized it long ago, through five years of public retellings, putting its sentences through 50 drafts and transforming it into an hourlong [sic] play.\(^{117}\)

Rosler, who has since left Boyd Mills Press, told me that watching Oberman recite The Always Prayer Shawl at his local synagogue while wearing the prayer shawl was one of the “great experiences” he had while working at that Press. Oberman was “just spellbinding.” Oberman’s tallit served as more than a prop for his story. In wearing the traditional (male) garb of Jewish prayer, the author turned the reading into a religious ritual. The act reinforced the portrayal of Jewish nostalgia as a mitzvah, a religious obligation born of imagined family connections. Oberman’s act of wearing his grandfather’s tallit also blended fact and fiction. Was he wearing the “always prayer shawl”? The line between his own family experiences and his narrative was deliberately obscured. The division between the religious activity of prayer and the ostensibly cultural activity of a public reading, too, has been made indistinct. Distinguishing between these binaries is beside the point, even unhelpful. Both the story and the action were particularly, Jewishly nostalgic in ways at once “religious” and “cultural.”

“A Girl’s-Eye View”

The intimate nostalgia of American Jewish children’s literature reached a wider audience when, in the summer of 2009, Jewish immigration history was officially included in the

\(^{117}\) Long, 1F.
American Girl canon with the debut of its Rebecca Rubin character.118 In anticipation of their American Jewish historical doll, American Girl commissioned children’s book author Jacqueline Dembar Greene to write a series of books that would accompany the doll and provide the personality of her character. Greene had previously authored a number of children’s books on both Jewish and non-Jewish themes, including two chapter books on Portuguese Sephardic Jewish sisters in the seventeenth century.119 Greene’s father is Ashkenazi and her mother is Sephardic, but she grew up surrounded by her mother’s Ladino-speaking family and her family observed Sephardic customs. (Greene’s maternal grandparents were from Smyrna, Greece, now Izmir, Turkey.) As Greene told me, she came to write her first book about Sephardic history as she tried to learn more about her own heritage.120 Her Sephardic historical fiction found its way to the desk of an editor at American Girl, who invited her to be one of several authors to submit detailed proposals for six books about an American Jewish girl set between 1880 and 1915.

American Girl specified only that the character should be the first American-born generation of an immigrant family who came to the U.S. during the heyday of Jewish immigration, setting her in a recognizable historical context but not making her too foreign to be relatable to American-born consumers. Greene initially thought about writing a story about a Sephardic family, like her own ancestry. The author, who lives outside of Boston, also

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118 Rebecca Rubin was not the first Jewish doll character produced by American Girl. The first was Lindsey Bergman, produced as the first doll and book in American Girl’s limited edition “Girl of the Year” series in 2001. Lindsey is a contemporary character living in the Chicago area who loves animals and her laptop and wants to help out at her brother’s bar mitzvah. The doll did not sell well. “Lindsey Bergman,” American Girl Wiki, http://americangirl.wikia.com/wiki/Lindsey_Bergman.


120 J. Greene, interview.
considered having the family immigrate through Boston, as many ships were diverted there from New York when Ellis Island could not handle the influx of European immigrants. But, as she researched the period, Greene jettisoned these initial ideas for a more mainstream story, in line with the majority of American Jewish immigrants. As Greene recognized, for many of American Girl’s target readership of eight to twelve-year-old girls, the American Girl books are “their first exposure to that phase of American history. And so it just seemed as though it made the most sense for it to be more mainstream and not some little sidebar that I came up with.”¹²¹ The monolithic narrative of Ashkenazi American nostalgia would predominate.

It is noteworthy that American Jewish nostalgia was deemed significant enough to be included in American Girl’s history of the United States. Since the Pleasant Company’s founding in 1985, and even after it became a subsidiary of Mattel in 1998, American Girl has reflected the vision of its founder, Pleasant Rowland, a former teacher and textbook author. Its products provide a semi-authoritative history of America for girls. As Rowland described the mission of the company, “We give girls chocolate cake with vitamins. Our books are exciting, our magazine is fun, and our dolls are pretty. But most importantly, they all give girls a sense of self and an understanding of where they came from and who they are today.”¹²² American Girl’s collection of historically based characters represented in dolls and books has become increasingly representative of Americans’ historical racial diversity, including an escaped slave of 1864, a Hispanic character living New Mexico in 1824, an American Indian of the Nez Perce in 1764, and a Chinese American in 1970s San Francisco. The popularity of American Girl products has

¹²¹ J. Greene, interview.
made the racial diversity of their characters a subject of national discourse. To many consumers, these are not “just dolls,” but a statement about the inclusion of different kinds of Americans in an official pantheon.¹²³

In Greene’s books, Rebecca is a bold, energetic nine-year-old with big dreams of becoming a movie star, a character to which contemporary American girls can relate. Appealing to the widest possible audience, Greene presents Judaism as an integral part of Rebecca’s life that appears when it is relevant to her adventures and disappears into the background when she focuses on nondenominational pursuits, such as acting in a movie or visiting Coney Island (which the family does in celebration of her brother’s Bar Mitzvah). Like other characters in Jewish children’s literature, Rebecca Rubin has grandparents who figure as representatives of the Old World, far more so than her parents, who are also immigrants. Rebecca’s grandparents, unlike her parents, speak a stilted English. The grandparents are upholders of traditional Jewish rituals, objecting to her father’s practice of working in the store on Saturdays; Rebecca’s grandfather prepares her brother for his bar mitzvah.¹²⁴ Even Rebecca, based in 1914, has eternal grandparent figures, providing comfortable connections to vague Jewish eastern European pasts.

Rebecca’s adventures reflect those of the period in which she is set, the experiences of her creator, and the present day. In Candlelight for Rebecca, the third book in the series, Rebecca’s teacher assigns the class the activity of making Christmas decorations. When Rebecca

balks, her teacher tells her that Christmas is a national holiday, for all Americans to celebrate. Rebecca dutifully follows instructions but remains conflicted about the assignment. Her inner conflict is resolved when she gives the Christmas centerpiece to her Italian neighbor. As Greene told me, she wrote the story “because this whole idea of Christmas and Hanukkah is such a big deal for kids today. And it’s always been part of American Jewish culture and often as a dilemma for families. How much of the Christmas celebration do we actually consider to be cultural and not religious?” Greene based the story on her research on early twentieth-century public schools’ efforts to Americanize immigrant children, but also on her own experience growing up Jewish in a small town in Connecticut in the 1950s. Greene recalled her inner torment when her class made Christmas centerpieces; her mother resolved the conflict, suggesting that Greene give her project to a widowed neighbor, who expressed suitable admiration for the centerpiece. Rebecca’s experiences, presented as “a story from a girl’s-eye view,” blend American experiences of girlhood from the early twentieth century, the 1950s, and the present day. Readers’ ability to relate to the story is key here, as it is in all forms of historical fiction for children; the author must readers’ interest by encouraging them to place themselves within the story.

As with all of American Girl’s historical characters, the Rebecca doll is dressed in period clothing, and the doll, its accessories, and the illustrated chapter books work in tandem to create a high-spirited, independent character grounded in “American values” associated with a particular tradition. Through its catalog and website, in its physical stores, and in publicity events, American Girl carefully markets the doll, accessories, and books as individual components that

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126 J. Greene, interview.
127 J. Greene, interview.
are part of the character that is Rebecca. Both American Girl and its consumers regularly refer to the personified “Rebecca”; as such, the doll, accessories, and books should be analyzed in tandem.\textsuperscript{128} While the doll-and-book combination dates back to British publisher John Newberry’s 1744 \textit{Pretty Little Pocket-Book}, sold together with balls and pincushions, it has a particular twentieth-century American history, as commercial artist Johnny Gruelle perfected the marketing combination with Raggedy Ann in 1918. As cultural historian Robin Bernstein identifies in her account of the racial politics of Raggedy Ann, “Book-toy combinations are powerful both as marketing tools and shapers of culture because they hinge a consumer product to a narrative and thus transform both books and toys into scriptive things,” directing children’s imagination and play.\textsuperscript{129} The Rebecca accessories, like those of other American Girl characters, closely mirror the books and encourage consumers to identify with Rebecca. American Girl advertises Rebecca’s school set by suggesting that consumers “Help her succeed in the classroom with this set.” Online reviewers of all ages report their approval that the tiny pencil included in the set can really write in the miniature notebook and that girls can “sing along” with Rebecca by following in the miniature sheet music for “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” Rebecca’s patriotic song of choice.\textsuperscript{130} American Girl’s Rebecca has had a powerful influence on how children—and adults—imagine and interact with the American Jewish past.

American Girl celebrated the debut of the Rebecca Rubin doll and books with a program in which parents could “spend a day with your girl in New York City,” “meet” the new historical character, and eat at the café in New York’s four-story American Girl Place on Fifth Avenue.

\textsuperscript{128} See Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel.
\textsuperscript{130} “Rebecca’s School Set,” \textit{American Girl}, http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/item/id/140657/ctc/SI.
before being transported to a special tour of the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side. There, girls, parents, and newly acquired dolls visited a recreated tenement apartment of 1916 where a costumed interpreter played its resident, 14-year-old Victoria Confino. The following month, at a similar program, girls, parents, and dolls could enjoy a cruise in New York City’s harbor and a “kosher-style” dinner. Kosher food could be specially ordered. Orchestrated by a subsidiary of the world’s largest toy company, these events are arguably a consumerist pinnacle of American Jewish nostalgia. By participating in the American Girl activities, girls and their parents could comfortably celebrate the dirt, noise, and poverty of the Lower East Side of the early twentieth century without doing more than alighting from their coach bus to a museum. (To be sure, Greene has made Rebecca’s family financially comfortable, the better for affluent consumers to relate, while her cousin and best friend Ana fulfills the obligatory role of living in a tenement.) American Girl’s celebration of Jewish nostalgia for the Lower East Side in American Girl’s historiography points to the overwhelming import of the trope, and the company’s promotional outings united some of the most conspicuous material manifestations of the sentiment: historic sites enshrined as museums, pilgrimage-like tours, children’s books and toys, and kosher-style food, drawing together the materials examined throughout this dissertation.

131 Unlike the fictional Rebecca Rubin, an Ashkenazi Jew of Russian descent, the Tenement Museum’s Victoria Confino is based on a former resident of the museum’s building whose Sephardic Jewish family emigrated from the Ottoman city of Kastoria, in what is now northern Greece. While Tenement Museum staff strive to demonstrate the diversity of Jewish and non-Jewish populations of the historic Lower East Side, many Jewish tourists persist in viewing the building’s history in line with predominant narratives the conflate eastern European Jewish ethnicity and religion. See Jack Kugelmass, “Turfing the Slum: New York City’s Tenement Museum and the Politics of Heritage,” in Remembering the Lower East Side, ed. Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 179–211.

American Girl’s Rebecca Rubin was not the first doll to depict American Jewish immigration history, though she is the most commercially successful. Rebecca was also by far the most nuanced American Jewish doll character, both in terms of historical accuracy and character development. One set of precursors, the Ellis Island Collection dolls, can be found in online and physical Judaica gift shops, including those in historic synagogues, such as the Jewish Museum of Florida. Copa Judaica, a Judaica wholesaler, began manufacturing these 20-inch porcelain dolls with stuffed bodies in the 1990s. Copa Judaica currently sells them online for $68; prices vary slightly among retailers. The Copa Judaica website states, “The features, costumes and background stories of the Ellis Island Collection of Porcelain Dolls are inspired by the collected memories of the descendants of Eastern European Jews who immigrated to America through Ellis Island in the late 1800s.” In naming its basis for the dolls as American Jews’ “collected memories” the manufacturer seemingly absolves itself of responsibility for historical facts; it correctly names its origin as the social memory of American Jewish nostalgia. The name of the collection, too, is significant: Ellis Island, the onetime federal immigration station turned heritage shrine, is widely understood as a way station between worlds. Ellis Island serves to connect many Americans to their immigrant ancestors and allows them to reaffirm the myth of America as a haven for the world’s “huddled masses.” For Jews in particular, the commoditized sentimentality surrounding this onetime federal immigration station has transformed it into a locus of nostalgic longing for Jewish ethnic and religious pasts.

Each Ellis Island doll comes with a “certificate of authenticity” and a card with a brief biography or inscription designed to place them in historical context: “Leah Lili,” for instance,

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“was from Bialystock [sic]. [S]he immigrated to America through Poland and Germany with her family in 1906 after the notorious June Pogroms in Bialystok during which her family’s home and[d] grainery [sic] business were destroyed.”

“Ruth” is accompanied by a poem that succinctly summaries American Jewish cultural memories of eastern Europe as miserable and the move to America as a dramatic change for the better:

In the shtetl the cold was fierce,  
damp snow and sleet were blowing.

Then one day did Papa say,  
“Pack up your things, we’re going!”

Here, American Jewish nostalgia is figuratively written onto the body of a child, inscribed on a card accompanying the doll. Anthropologist A.F. Robertson convincingly argues that collectible dolls should not be considered in the same category as children’s playthings. Nonetheless, in my ethnographic research at historic synagogues, I found that visitors not infrequently bought these dolls for children—typically, older patrons bought them for their grandchildren—as well as for themselves. Therefore, these dolls may be understood as predecessors to Rebecca, which, like other American Girl dolls, straddles the categories of collectible doll and child’s plaything.

The Gali Girls dolls, created by Aliza Stein, also aimed to be both collectible items and toys. From 2004 until the demise of the company in 2013, Gali Girls sold Jewish history-themed

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138 American Girl dolls are much more expensive than Ellis Island dolls, but they have a vinyl “skin” and damage to them can be repaired—for a fee—by the American Girl doll “hospital.” Ellis Island dolls, though less expensive, have fragile porcelain heads and limbs, making them less suitable as toys for young children. However, this does not stop some consumers from buying them for children.
soft-bodied 18-inch dolls that closely resembled those of American Girl. Stein’s dolls were specifically designed so that their clothing could be interchangeable with that of American Girl. Stein aimed to sell dolls that would allow Jewish girls to “learn something about Jewish culture and communities in the past and in the parts of the world they may know little about.”

Like American Girl, Gali Girls offered consumers a line of generic dolls whose coloring could be customized to suit young consumers and a line of historical characters accompanied by chapter books. When Stein created Gali Girls, American Girl did not sell a Jewish historical character; until 2009, consumers who wanted “Jewish” 18-inch dolls were limited to Gali Girls or supplementing other dolls with American Girl’s Hanukkah accessories. Still, while Gali Girls dolls were clearly modeled on American Girl dolls, Stein marketed her dolls as an Orthodox-friendly alternative to Barbie and Bratz dolls, which Stein believes direct sexually suggestive marketing to girls. “I’d noticed the growing popularity of dolls that equated femininity with girls taking their clothes off,” Stein told a reporter. While Gali Girls dolls do have higher necklines than American Girl dolls, sporting tops covering most of their necks to emphasize their accord with Orthodox standards of modesty for women, American Girl dolls are

143 Sally Kalson, “Gali Girls Line of Dolls Celebrates Jewish History, Values,” Pittsburg Post-Gazette, March 6, 2007, C1, C3. Stein’s comment about doll companies encouraging girls and dolls to take their clothes off is misguided. Doll companies are interested in selling doll clothes, not the lack thereof, even if they promote sexually suggestive clothing; it is girl consumers who are all too often interested in the destructive fun of ripping dolls’ clothes off, curious about what lies—or fails to lie—beneath.
hardly immodest. In a rare admission of her copycat strategy of American Girl, Stein admitted to a reporter, “Certainly we noted that it was a successful concept for American Girl, and we figured the formula could succeed for us.”

Like Stein’s dolls, the Gali Girls chapter books, which first appeared in 2005, closely mirrored those of American Girl, though both the dolls and the books were of cheaper production quality. Gali Girls’s characters included Miriam Bloom, who immigrated from an unnamed “shtetl . . . surrounded by the persecuting Cossacks” through Ellis Island in 1913; Reyna Li, a twelve-year-old merchant’s daughter in twelfth-century Kaifeng, China; and Shoshana, a Sephardic girl in seventeenth-century colonial New Amsterdam who befriends a Native American girl. (Shoshana clearly imitates American Girl’s Felicity character, set in colonial Virginia.) These books contain much less nuance and seem to be based on less historical research than Greene’s American Girl books. In Miriam’s Journey: Discovering a New World, Miriam and her sisters are unambiguously thrilled to leave Europe for America:

> “Guess what, girls!” Rose Bloom shouted, bursting through the door of their ramshackle house. . . . In Mama’s right hand was Papa’s latest letter, which had just arrived. . . . Mama waved the cards in the air and triumphantly proclaimed, “We’re finally going to America!”

> “HOOOORAAAY!” Miriam, Ida, and Sophie yelled, jumping like monkeys on the mattress they shared.

While many European Jews did regard America as a “goldene medina,” the golden country, prospective emigrants, even children, would likely have had some ambivalence about leaving

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144 Kalson.


behind the world they knew and facing the prospects of a difficult trip to a port, an unpleasant transatlantic journey in steerage, and starting over in a new country with a new language and different mores to learn. While American Girl’s Rebecca is unabashedly patriotic—Rebecca and her cousin Ana sing “You’re a Grand Old Flag” in Greene’s *Rebecca and Ana* and one can buy the a miniature American flag for the Rebecca doll as part of “Rebecca’s School Set”—the characters in Greene’s books do express a modicum of ambivalence about immigration. When Rebecca and her classmates explain the concept of patriotism to the recently immigrated Ana, Ana admits, “I love land of Russia,” before Rebecca teaches her to love her adopted country.

Literature scholar Lisa Marcus has written a trenchant critique of the Rebecca Rubin stories alongside other narratives of American Jewish girlhood, including the All-of-a-Kind Family series. Marcus writes, correctly, “the benefit of more historically complex fictions is not simply to teach children to see oppression in the past, but rather to acknowledge the structures of inequality and prejudice that call us to solidarity with others in the present.” Greene’s critique, however, does not take into account how Greene’s Rebecca books address the issues of poor working conditions for laborers and living conditions in tenements. While the Ellis Island and Gali Girls dolls may warrant such criticisms, Greene’s books address issues of economic disparity, labor rights, intergenerational conflict, and interfaith relations in a format accessible and understandable for young readers. While Rebecca and her family live comfortably in a row

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147 Though few historians of American Jewish immigrants have addressed the ambivalence Jewish immigrants felt about leaving their countries of origin, Rebecca Kobrin has written about the passionate connections American Jewish immigrants from Bialystok felt toward their former homes and their alienation from their new ones. Rebecca Kobrin, “Rewriting the Diaspora: Images of Eastern Europe in the Bialystok Landsmanshaft Press, 1921–45,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring–Summer 2006): 1–38.


149 Marcus, 33.
house, Rebecca expresses sympathy for the living conditions of their neighbors who live in crowded tenement buildings, including her cousin Ana and her family, in *Rebecca and Ana*. In *Changes for Rebecca*, Rebecca is horrified by her view of the working conditions at the factory where her uncle and cousin work and takes a stand at a factory strike.

Moreover, children’s historical fiction does not need meet Marcus’s standards to provide meaning for its audiences. The Rebecca books and doll, like the other books discussed in this chapter, provide a meaningful connection to the past that is independent of whether they become champions of social and political equality. As one user review on the American Girl online store commented on the Rebecca character, “Her story is very inspiring. My daughter loves to show her [doll] off and tell everyone she meets about being an immigrant and what life was like in NYC in 1914.” Another mother explained that her five-year-old daughter asked to make challah after reading about it in Greene’s books, exemplifying the Rebecca character’s role as a scriptive thing that suggests certain kinds of play. As girls play with the Rebecca doll, following American Girl’s scripts or making up their own stories through play that include her, they build a connection to a particular, intimately nostalgic view of the American Jewish past.

Marcus argues, “Narratives that stress immigrant assimilation and belonging not only promote an exceptionalist vision of America as benign, tolerant, and just; in their erasure of conflict, oppression, and resistance, they also fail to offer models for confronting injustice in a

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150 Greene, *Rebecca and Ana*.
complex world.” She is not incorrect: These children’s materials do simplify a historical narrative so that young consumers and the adults in their lives can easily understand it. But critiquing the authors of these books for failing to engage in the analytical complexity of academic prose misses the point. These books are not designed to be straightforward history lessons; they are designed to invoke certain emotions in their readers.

“It’s Their Story”

While I have focused on the reception of children’s books and dolls by Jews thus far, non-Jews have long been involved in the creation of the stuff of Jewish nostalgia and, more recently, have been a key part of its consumer base. Non-Jewish artists frequently illustrate children’s books with Jewish content published by mainstream publishers. As author Eric Kimmel told me in his colorful style, he imagines that having his books illustrated by non-Jewish artists allows him to follow in the tradition of the great Jewish synagogues of Europe, which were often designed and created by non-Jewish architects and artisans. Like other authors, Kimmel would prefer to have the best illustrator possible, regardless of the illustrator’s religious background. Like most authors, Kimmel rarely interacts with the illustrators of his picture books, but he recalled a rare instance of interaction with Barbara McClintock, the illustrator of When Mindy Saved Hanukkah. Kimmel wanted Mindy to be able to find a discarded Hanukkah candle on a shelf in the synagogue’s ark, where the Torah scrolls are kept, but he needed to find a way for his tiny character to climb up and down from the ark. After Kimmel and his editor, Dianne Hess, consulted with a rabbi and decided that it would be inappropriate to have Mindy climb up a Torah scroll, Kimmel decided to have Mindy reach the top of the ark by climbing on a lulav, the bound branches of the a date palm tree, myrtle, and willow, which, together with a etrog (citron,

a type of citrus fruit), are ritual objects for the holiday of Sukkot. As a ritual object, the lulav is not discarded after the holiday and it might be kept in or near the ark. The non-Jewish McClintock did not know what a lulav was and, in the early days of the Internet, in the late 1990s, Kimmel and Hess struggled to find one to send to her. In the end, he said, “It’s not the best picture of a lulav, but it works.” As in this instance, non-Jews as well as Jews have been integral in the production of American Jewish nostalgia at every level, literally shaping the way American Jews imagine the past.

Non-Jewish audiences are also key to the reception of Jewish nostalgic children’s materials. While both the book and the play versions of The Always Prayer Shawl depict Jewish immigrant experiences to North America, Sheldon Oberman, Boyd Mills Press, and those involved in theater productions encouraged generalizing its themes. “It seems as time goes on that this book gains an even wider audience,” said Rosler. “The story resonates universally with its exploration of tradition, heritage, and the immigrant experience.” Nor did you have to be a Winnipegger, or even Canadian, to relate to the story: Oberman’s original script is firmly rooted in Winnipeg, referencing landmarks of the North End, the immigrant Jewish neighborhood; Adam works at Oscar’s Delicatessen. “It’s very Winnipeg,” Oberman told a reporter. Nonetheless, throughout the play’s script, Oberman suggests that future performances of the play preformed elsewhere substitute local equivalents for landmarks, street names, and local

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155 Kimmel, interview.
industries of the early twentieth century, in order to make the story more relevant to future audiences.\textsuperscript{158}

As he read his book at schools and other venues in Canada and the United States, Oberman found that wherever he went, audiences told him that it was as though he had “told their own family story” of immigration. Audiences young and old related to the idea of inheriting heirlooms and connecting to the past through familial objects. “Whether it’s the charm bracelet, the Chinese tapestry or whatever they received, it’s still their story,” Oberman told a reporter.\textsuperscript{159} Students who heard Oberman read his story aloud in classrooms and those who attended his readings at bookstores felt compelled to tell the author where their grandparents came from. Oberman encouraged their stories, telling them “You may be the most important carrier on of a tradition.”\textsuperscript{160} Once, Rosler told me, after Oberman had recited \textit{The Always Prayer Shawl} at a professional conference, “A woman came up to him and said, ‘I wish I could tell stories like you. I could never tell them like you can.’ And he took the prayer shawl and put it on her shoulders and said, ‘Yes, you can. You can! You can do it.’ He was that kind of encouraging and positive person.”\textsuperscript{161} Oberman used his tallit to provide a material and emotional connection to the past that would encourage others to tell their stories.

Reporters, reviewers, and Oberman himself also broadened their interpretation of the play to encompass the general themes of immigration, toleration, and tradition: The CBC reviewer declared, “You don’t have to be Jewish to enjoy this play because it’s about family and tradition

\textsuperscript{158} Oberman, \textit{Always Prayer Shawl}, bound script.
\textsuperscript{159} Linda Rosborough, “Kids’ Story Fits Every Family Circle,” \textit{Winnipeg Free Press}, March 6, 1995, SOC, MSS 328, Box 6, Folder 3.
\textsuperscript{160} Long, 3F.
\textsuperscript{161} Rosler.
and growing up. Anyone will enjoy it.”¹⁶² Just as anyone could relate to the play, the play was designed to encourage audience members to relate to those who differed from them by custom, origin, or age: “The whole issue of tolerance is central to the play,” Oberman told a reporter. “I want people to have an understanding of not only Jews, but of older people as well.”¹⁶³ Like historic synagogues, The Always Prayer Shawl provides a means of exploring issues of immigration and tolerance, using early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants and their descendants as model citizens to which others are expected to relate.

Likewise, Jacqueline Greene was happy to find that both Jewish and non-Jewish readers who could relate to her Rebecca stories. Greene told me that as she toured the country doing readings of her book immediately after its publication, Jewish parents told her that the books provided an accessible entry into talking about their families’ pasts. “These books were a chance for us to begin talking about our own families’ background and where great-grandparents came from and where they lived. And we always wanted to talk about it but we never knew how to approach it,” Green recalled they told her.¹⁶⁴ On rare occasions, Jewish readers objected to the Judaism she portrayed. Once, when Green was signing books at the New York American Girl store, a “very Orthodox” woman encouraged her two granddaughters to approach Greene and ask why Rebecca’s fourteen-year-old sisters lit Shabbat candles on Friday night. “Why did you let Sadie and Sophie light Sabbath candles instead of Mama or Bubbe? Because my father said that until you’re married you can’t light Sabbath candles,” Greene recalled that they asked her. Greene told me that she explained that her books did not represent all American Jews, though she tried to base it on some of the most common experiences of American Jews. The books

¹⁶² Janet Dirks, interview by Terry MacLeod, review of The Always Prayer Shawl, CBC Radio Morning Show, transcript, SOC, MSS 328, Box 6, Folder 3.
¹⁶³ Harrison.
¹⁶⁴ J. Greene, interview.
represent “what one family might have been like and what they might have done in 1914. . . .

The idea was to say this is typical of how one family might have practiced their customs and
done the things that they felt were right for them.” She gave the girls a brief lesson in pluralism:

> The older you get and the more people you meet, the more you will discover that people
do things sometimes differently than the way you do it in your family. That doesn’t mean
that it’s wrong or right to do it just one way. It just means that different people do things
in different ways and it’s right for them. And it’s interesting to know about it and to talk
about it.\(^{165}\)

Greene hoped that this brief introduction to the diversity of Jewish practices would broaden the
girls’ perspectives and encourage future conversations. As at historic synagogues displayed as
heritage sites, fictional Jewish children are used as exemplars of diversity among Jews and
among Americans.

Greene also heard from non-Jewish immigrant parents, primarily Hispanic families and
also an Indian family, that reading the book encouraged their children to express the difficulties
they had encountered at school as immigrants or the children of immigrants, “because they didn’t
speak English perfectly or they looked a little different or they dressed a little different or they
had slightly different foods or customs.” As Greene recounted, these parents told her, “This gave
my children a chance to open up and share their experiences and talk to us. And these were
stories and experiences that they had had that we were hearing for the first time.”\(^{166}\) For Greene,
these testimonies of dialogue between parents and children were “the very best outcomes of

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\(^{165}\) J. Greene, interview. As part of his “mitzvah campaigns” encouraging non-observant Jews to
engage in traditional Jewish rituals, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Chabad rebbe,
began a campaign in the 1970s to encourage non-observant women to light Shabbat candles. As
a related move, he encouraged parents to have all girls over age three light their own Shabbat
candles. The Rebbe’s campaign had a dramatic influence on American Jews, though family
practices still vary.

\(^{166}\) J. Greene, interview.
writing a book.” Jewish particularism was successfully used in the service of universalism, or at least in constructing a palatable multicultural American identity.

Through children’s books and playthings, American Jews teach the core tenets of American Jewish identity, including nostalgia for the immigration era. Images of eternal grandparents and depictions of historical sites such as synagogues and ethnic neighborhoods as magical create intimate connections to the imagined past. These themes are interwoven in a variety of stories and accompany the created characters of dolls to encourage a connection to a particular American Jewish narrative, even for children whose family histories differ from the normative pattern, including Sephardic Jewish children, non-Jewish children, and Jewish children whose immigrant ancestors arrived in the U.S. long before their grandparents were born. Building on the intimacy of real or imagined family relationships, American Jews employ an intimate nostalgia that uses the past and present to construct one another and to shape the future.

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167 J. Greene, interview.
Chapter Four

“Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu”: A Culinary Revival

This is the delicatessen, circa 2011: beautiful and earnest young people in architect eyeglasses sipping wine and eating chopped liver on pletzel like a canapé. Is that so wrong?

On Tuesday evening, February 9, 2010, the owners of Saul’s Deli in Berkeley, California convened what they called a “Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu.” To the two hundred and fifty people assembled at their local Jewish Community Center and to those watching the live stream of the event from the comfort of their booths at Saul’s, deli owners Karen Adelman and Peter Levitt announced that they had a problem: The standard Jewish deli menu was simply too long, at four pages and counting. The menu that deli patrons had come to expect relied on industrial meats and produce shipped from far-off regions, which the environmentally conscious owners of Saul’s Deli wished to avoid. As Adelman explained to those assembled, “The idea is to get permission from our patrons to have the deli cuisine breathe like the seasons. And so perhaps you’ll have a cold borsht in the summer and a hot borsht in the winter.” Levitt jumped in, spelling out for their customers, “That means no chilled borsht in December.”

Adelman and Levitt had invited a few of their regular patrons and colleagues, including popular author and sustainable food advocate Michael Pollan, to join them in a public conversation on sustainability and the Jewish deli. With equal parts humor and seriousness, Adelman explained to the lovers of Jewish food who assembled there that a referendum is “when a body, in this case one deli, poses a question to people on issues that will affect them.

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Sometimes the results are binding; this is not one of those cases,” she added, tongue in cheek, because Saul’s was “not yet a fully democratic institution.” She continued, “We are hoping that by opening up the conversation that we have around our deli to a wider audience, we may all contribute to this cuisine that we care so much about.”2 They wanted a forum to explain to their customers why they had been changing the menu at Saul’s and why they would continue to do so, in order to serve more sustainable, local, and artisanal products. But Adelman and Levitt had aspirations beyond their own menu. They aimed “to make the Jewish deli cuisine actually a living, breathing cuisine. To drag it out of the museum.”3

In recent years, there has been a nostalgic resurgence of interest in Jewish food, which I refer to as a culinary revival. While the press and restaurateurs themselves often describe this resurgence of interest in Ashkenazi cuisine as a Jewish culinary renaissance, I find it more useful to describe this renaissance as a revival, emphasizing the religious and emotional nature of their work. Rather than simply attempting to reproduce old recipes that evoke Ashkenazi Jews’ eastern European pasts and immigrant heritage in the United States, new restaurateurs and purveyors of Jewish food are consciously making American Jewish food fit for the twenty-first century. Their work emphasizes sustainability, reliance on local goods, and the slow food

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2 Adelman, “Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu.”
3 Given the discussion of popular conceptions of museums as containers of dead objects in Chapter Two, this striking example of the attitude is noteworthy. In a more positive description of Jewish delis as museums, Nach Waxman, owner of the Kitchen Arts & Letters bookstore, writes in the foreword to The Artisan Jewish Deli at Home, “For me, America’s delis are, in the very best sense of the word, museums—collectively, a sprawling network of cultural institutions in which we can view and sample the edible artifact that evolved within one particular New World immigrant population.” Waxman lauds traditional American Jewish delis while praising the “artisan” approach of the culinary revival. Nach Waxman, Foreword, The Artisan Jewish Deli at Home, Michael C. Zusman and Nick Zukin (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2013), vi.
movement. They tout artisanal production, culinary creativity, or playful irony—all of which demonstrate a campy nostalgia that brings American Jewish history to bear on the present.

On the whole, the restaurateurs and food purveyors discussed in this chapter think carefully about the meaning that American Jews’ pasts hold for the present; the medium in which they express their conclusions—or their process of thinking through the question—is edible. I argue that this process, like the other case studies of this dissertation, is a religious one, even though many American Jews, including some of the culinary revivalists, see engagement with Jewish food as a “cultural” or “secular” activity when not in the context of holiday or Sabbath rituals and festive meals. Like genealogical research, heritage tourism, and children’s books and dolls, American Jewish foodways provide individuals with a sense of transhistorical community and belonging. Preparing and eating food places American Jews in a network of sacred relationships with family members, friends, and coreligionists living and dead, historical and
mythical. Jewish culinary revivalists both enthusiastically reaffirm nostalgia and proclaim that their approach to the past is as fresh as their ingredients.

Jewish culinary revivalists think carefully about the food they are creating, and others are eager to think about it with them. The Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu panel was among the first of what would be many public conversations about the tribulations of changing Jewish American commercial foodways, the ways that traditional Ashkenazi food is bought and sold in the United States. Mitchell Davis, executive vice president of the James Beard Foundation, a culinary non-profit organization, is in high demand as a panelist and a moderator for panels on Jewish food; Davis told me he had participated in eleven panels about Jewish food in 2013 alone. These panels are not only popular, they are passionate; participants and audience members care deeply about the subject matter, which builds on deeply personal responses as well as communal structures. Panels such as “Gefilte Talk” and “Let’s Brisket,” both organized by culinary curator Naama Shefi in New York, explored how Jewish food professionals are reconceiving humble staples of Ashkenazi cuisine. Other panels, such as the Referendum on the

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5 Mitchell Davis, interview by author, New York, August 15, 2013. Davis holds a Ph.D. from New York University in Food Studies, a program he helped to create by serving on its advisory board.

6 Gefilte Talk was held at the Center for Jewish History (CJH) in New York on September 6, 2012. Let’s Brisket was held at the CJH on December 18, 2012. Gefilte fish is a ball or oval-shaped cake of finely chopped fish, usually whitefish, pike, or carp, mixed with crumbs, eggs, and seasonings, cooked in a broth, and usually served chilled. Brisket is a cut of meat from the breast or lower chest of beef or veal. In Ashkenazi Jewish cooking, brisket is often braised as a pot roast. The cut became popular because it was one of the cheaper kosher cuts of meat.
Jewish Deli Menu, “Deli Summit: The Renaissance,” and “The Future of Jewish Food,” addressed broad changes in the direction of Ashkenazi consumption and culinary presentation.⁷

This chapter examines the commercial practices of a religious nostalgia that is simultaneously and alternately personal and communal. Nostalgia, like most aspects of American Jewish life, has become a commercial activity, and Jewish restaurants are places of industry, nostalgia, and personal and communal engagement. Like historic synagogues used as heritage sites, restaurants provide an appropriate venue for the religious work of American Jewish nostalgia. In its culinary form, nostalgia is consumable, in both the monetary and gustatory senses. The restaurateurs and purveyors of Jewish food examined in this chapter work to make sense of the influence of the past within the present, to honor their ancestors but not replicate their ways. Furthermore, because food is a marketable commodity, the nostalgia demonstrated in the Jewish food revival, like that of heritage sites and children’s books and dolls, has become accessible to non-Jewish consumers. Non-Jewish Americans can participate in the practices of American Jewish nostalgia both immediately and vicariously, raising questions about the boundaries of religious inclusion.

The revival of American Jewish food, like other nostalgic enterprises, centers on a search for authenticity. As in other searches for an authentic past, this culinary revival uses claims about historical continuity with the past as a source of authority in the present. Claims about culinary traditions and the religious culture in which it originated are expressed through making, selling, consuming, and talking about food. As Jewish historian Hasia Diner describes, nostalgic foodways usually involve the recollection of “iconic meals” which represent dishes as “the

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⁷ The Deli Summit was held at Saul’s Deli in Berkeley, California, on May 19, 2011. At that event, Levitt and Adelman continued the conversation of their Referendum with several of their colleagues in the Jewish deli business. The Future of Jewish Food, organized by Noah and Rae Bernamoff of Mile End Deli in Brooklyn, was held in New York on October 13, 2012.
treasured recipes of someplace called ‘back home,’” wherever that might have been. Unlike most other American immigrant groups, American Jews demonstrate nostalgic longing for a community of origin that no longer exists. While other groups are nostalgic for time periods that no longer exist, most can point to modern descendants of their communities of origin as authentic representatives of their ancestors. Chefs interested in Italian American cuisine, for example, can look to contemporary Italy as well as its American offshoots. But American Jewish chefs do see their analogue in contemporary European cuisines, as many European Jewish communities were destroyed in the Holocaust. The past was doubly destroyed. In some ways, this tragic history gives Jewish culinary revivalists more freedom to emphasize modern American revisions of an imagined authentic cuisine.

Through ethnographic research at restaurants and interviews with restaurateurs, I have found that the Jewish culinary revivalists demonstrate a certain kind of nostalgia: Drawing upon the work of Susan Sontag and Eve Sedgwick, I find that the Jewish culinary revivalists demonstrate a nostalgia of camp. Camp is the “sensibility of failed seriousness.” It rejects traditional seriousness and the binary of “fully identifying with extreme states of feeling.”

Campy nostalgia sincerely mourns that which has passed while playfully reframing select aspects of the past to afford meaning in the present. Campy nostalgia builds an emotional and sensory connection to the past, even as its practitioners recognize that their ephemeral, palpable creations belong to the present. Culinary revivalists honor the past in a way that self-consciously speaks to the concerns of the present and suggests directions for the future.

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The campiness of the American Jewish culinary revival is related to broader trends in American commerce emphasizing the aesthetics of earlier eras. Americans’ interest in the aesthetics of earlier eras comes in waves, and the current cycle of interest in an early twentieth-century aesthetic is often described as “hipster.”\(^{10}\) In its current usage, this label is slippery and I engage it, even briefly, with caution, because almost no one employs the term self-reflexively. It is best understood as a “marketplace myth,” a series of consumer practices united by the aesthetics of marketing strategies, rather than solely as a cultural identity.\(^{11}\) Conceptions of hipster commercial practices that define them involve a particular nostalgic attitude toward the materials of past eras:

Manifesting a nostalgia for times he never lived himself, this contemporary urban harlequin appropriates outmoded fashions (the mustache, the tiny shorts), mechanisms (fixed-gear bicycles, portable record players) and hobbies (home brewing, playing trombone).\(^{12}\)

Such contemporary employment of outdated styles is at once utterly ironic and utterly sincere. It is often impossible to distinguish between consumers’ sincere appreciation for the materials of the past and their employment of them ironically, because they are one and the same.

This mode of “ironic living” has been critiqued as a “self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise,” as scholar of

\(^{10}\) The term “hipster” has its cultural and etymological roots in the “hep cats” of Harlem musicians, performers, and other African American innovators of the 1930s. Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” (1957) reframed hipster discourse to be more relevant to the lifestyles available to white middle-class men. It was particularly associated with Beat Generation writers at mid-century. Beginning of the 1960s, the word “hippie” was applied to predominantly white, countercultural youth. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the term “hipster” was revived, first in reference to indie music culture and then, more broadly, in reference to other forms of demeanor, tastes, and fashion sensibilities, particularly those of young white men. Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson, “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 5 (February 2011): 791–806.

\(^{11}\) Arsel and Thompson.

French literature Christy Wample wrote in *The New York Times* in 2012. This highbrow critique restates longstanding criticisms of nostalgia, sentimentality, and kitsch. Like earlier critiques of nostalgia, it too easily dismisses modern methods of making meaning based on emotional relationships with representations of the past. One can be sincere and playful at the same time, seriously engaging cultural and religious memory while reviewing it from an ironic distance or engaging the playfulness of camp—and while making or spending money on the venture. Jewish culinary revivalists are among many entrepreneurs capitalizing on this broader interest in reimagining the materials, aesthetics, and tastes related to the early twentieth century. They apply contemporary commercial trends demonstrating campy and sincere longing for the materials of the past to American Jewish cuisine and its precursors in eastern Europe. Their work blends the aesthetics of contemporary commerce and Jewish nostalgia.

As one journalist wrote enthusiastically, Mile End, a Jewish deli with a primary location in Brooklyn and a sandwich shop in Manhattan that emphasize sustainable ingredients and dishes made in-house, “is, technically, a deli,” but it is better described as “a loving tribute to the deli tradition, whose guilty, cholesterol-laden pleasures are uplifted here with first-class ingredients.” The casual, updated classic aesthetic of Mile End’s tiny Brooklyn location, with wood-topped tables and bar, evocative of earlier Jewish delis with a contemporary appeal is almost as important as the food in marketing the restaurant, complementing the “loving tribute” of the food served there. Mile End’s appeal to Ashkenazi American pasts is usefully explained by the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch’s concept of “open nostalgia.” Jankélévitch contrasted “closed nostalgia,” a longing that can be fulfilled by a return to a homeland, with the open

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13 Wample.
variety, which cannot be assuaged and for which the longing is a destination in itself. The
nostalgia demonstrated by the Jewish food revival is very much open. Mile End’s menu, which
features playful adaptations of typically lowbrow dishes like chopped liver with duck jus,
demonstrates both nostalgic longing and fulfillment.

This chapter is based on ethnographic research at restaurants and interviews with
restaurateurs, entrepreneurs, and other food professionals. Below, I first explore the Jewish and
culinary trends that set the scene for the Jewish culinary revival and the narrative of the Jewish
culinary decline that enabled it. I proceed to examine the personal, familial nostalgic stories that
serve as a basis—or a marketing tool—for many of the revivalists’ enterprises. I then examine
the relationship between kosher-style foods and sustainable and local food trends. Finally, I
conclude with an examination of the relationship between irony and nostalgia, demonstrated by
certain decidedly non-kosher establishments. Like my approach to the case studies of preceding
chapters, this chapter is not a comprehensive study of American Jewish foodways, or even of
current trends in Jewish food, but a study of select examples of a current trend in commercial
foodways that further my analysis of American Jewish nostalgia.

Movements and Revivals

In May 2008, federal agents raided Agriprocessors, a kosher meat slaughtering and
packaging plant in Postville, Iowa, arresting nearly four hundred undocumented immigrants. The
raid and subsequent charges against Agriprocessors’ owners, the Rubashkin family, made Jewish
food production a topic of national debate and deep embarrassment for many American Jews.
The Rubashkins had revolutionized and dominated the kosher meat industry, bringing modern
industrial methods to the formerly negligible industry of glatt kosher meat, which adheres to the
strictest standards of kashrut (the practice of keeping kosher).\textsuperscript{15} The raid drew attention to other denouncements of Agriprocessors, which was accused by various groups of having atrocious working conditions that violated health, safety and labor laws, hiring illegal immigrants, intimidating workers, engaging in sexual coercion, abusing animals, and violating the ritual laws of kashrut. Regardless of whether they kept kosher, many American Jews were repulsed, angered, and deeply embarrassed to acknowledge that, as The Jewish Daily Forward reported, “in the kosher certification process, working conditions are not a factor, according to the largest certifying agency, the Orthodox union.” Postville became a rallying cry for Jewish activists who demanded that Jewish food industries—including but not limited to the kosher food industry—uphold ethical standards, giving them an opportunity to present their messages to wider and increasingly receptive Jewish audiences.\textsuperscript{16}

As American Jews responded to the ethical and ritual questions raised by the Agriprocessors scandal, they built on the foundation of Jewish food activism that preceded the Postville crisis. That foundation was formed by what has become known by the umbrella term of the New Jewish Food Movement, which refers to the Jewish ways of thinking about food,

\textsuperscript{15} Glatt means “smooth” in Yiddish and refers to a lack of blemish on the internal organs of a slaughtered animal. In the case of a scab or lesion on a cow’s lungs, most Ashkenazi Jews have traditionally held that if the animal is kosher if the patch can be removed and the lungs are still airtight, while Sephardic Jews and Hasidim have held that any sort of blemish on the lungs would render the animal not kosher. Glatt kosher meat, which is held to the more stringent requirements, was produced in extremely limited quantities until the mid-twentieth century. Interest in glatt meat rose in the 1960s and 1970s, as communal standards for kashrut in the United States became increasingly rigid. The Orthodox Union (OU), the world’s largest kosher certifying agency, adopted a policy of requiring exclusively glatt meat in the late 1970s. Glatt is now the dominant standard of kosher meat in America. Gil Marks, Encyclopedia of Jewish Food (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 225–227.

environmentalism and sustainability, and Jewish religious traditions that have developed over the last few decades. The Jewish restaurateurs, entrepreneurs, and food revivalists I examine in this chapter have built upon the groundwork laid by New Jewish Food Movement, even if they are unaware of their antecedents. A brief history of the movement is therefore in order.

The New Jewish Food Movement has grown steadily since the 1970s, when it began with the Jewish Renewal movement, a mystically inflected, radically egalitarian, liturgically innovative denomination whose influence on mainstream Jewish denominations far exceeds its small number of members. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a founder of the Renewal movement, coined the term “eco-kashrut” in the 1970s. Another Renewal leader, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, and his Shalom Center popularized the term in the 1980s. Eco-kashrut espoused worker’s rights, animal rights, and equitable distribution of food resources. The movement has grown over subsequent decades, becoming more diverse and mainstream, but has remained decentralized. In 2006, the Jewish communal leader and food activist Nigel Savage named the New Jewish Food Movement, an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of Jewish food activists, including Jews and Jewish organizations in every denomination and those not affiliated with any denomination.17

Two New Jewish Food Movement organizations, among many, are particularly noteworthy: Hazon (Hebrew for vision) and Adamah (Hebrew for earth). Founded by Savage in 1999, Hazon promotes “healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond” through its annual conference, which brings together farmers, nutritionists, chefs, food writers, and other food enthusiasts; its Jewish Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs; and its work as a philanthropic umbrella organization, distributing funds to New

17 Zamore.
Jewish Food Movement organizations and projects. In 2004, the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Connecticut founded the second major organization in the New Jewish Food Movement, Adamah: The Jewish Environmental Fellowship, a three-month leadership training program named for the Hebrew word for earth in which Jewish young adults learn about organic agriculture, farm-to-table living, Jewish text study, community building, and spiritual practices.

In December 2012, the boards of Hazon and the Isabella Freedman Retreat Center announced a merger of the two Jewish non-profits, to be called Hazon. As separate entities, Hazon and Adamah have each successfully encouraged participants to effect change in American Jewish foodways. Both organizations, and the New Jewish Food Movement more generally, are not exclusively concerned with kosher foods, though the language of kashrut remains an important cultural idiom, even for those who do not keep kosher.

The restaurateurs and entrepreneurs examined in this chapter may be seen as an offshoot of the New Jewish Food Movement, even if they are not aware of this history. Jeffrey Yoskowitz, co-owner of Gefilteria, a purveyor of gefilte fish, horseradish, kvass, and other “Old World Jewish foods” made from sustainable ingredients, embodies the connection between the

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19 “Vision and Mission.”
21 Alongside the secular organization Fair Trade USA, which certifies the payment of living wages to workers, Magen Tzedek (shield or star of justice; originally named Hechsher Tzedek, or certification of justice), created by Rabbi Morris Allen through the Conservative Movement certifies that kosher products adhere to ethical guidelines. The Orthodox social justice organization Uri L’Tzedek has also created a Tav HaYosher (ethical seal), certifying kosher restaurants that uphold “the right to fair pay, the right to fair time, and the right to a safe work environment.” “What Is Tav HaYosher?” Uri L’Tzedek, [http://www.utzedek.org/tavhayosher.html](http://www.utzedek.org/tavhayosher.html). Zamore, 92.
Movement and the revival. Yoskowitz was an Adamah farm fellow the summer after he graduated from Brown University. A year later, he returned to Adamah as a pickle apprentice, learning a trade he would employ as an entrepreneur. Yoskowitz has presented at Hazon’s conference and has been involved in planning its conference sessions, and he is on the board of Adamah. Both organizations served as a gateway into the network of the Jewish food world for him. Nonetheless, Yoskowitz found something missing from these organizations: an overt connection to Jewish history. “It’s the Jewish Food Movement but the food wasn’t Jewish,” he told me. It was “Jews doing organic food” rather than Jews making and discussing organic Jewish food. The germ of his business was born when he began to ask, “Why aren’t they doing gefilte fish? Why are they so focused on pasture-raised meats and yet they aren’t talking about pasture-raised Jewish brisket? Why aren’t they talking about pasture-raised pastrami in a deli and things like that?”

Yoskowitz and his compatriots take the Jewish-inflected environmental concerns of the New Jewish Food Movement and apply them to a longing for Jewish culinary pasts.

While the New Jewish Food Movement has unabashedly religious origins, Jewish food concerns have broadened to include those who do not identify their efforts as religious. In American religious traditions, revivals involve restructuring institutions and redefining social goals, and the food professionals I examine are reconsidering the American food industry’s reliance on manufactured and processed goods and accepted ways of making American Jewish cuisine. They have lost faith in the legitimacy of American Jewish culinary norms and their

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22 “About Us,” The Gefilteria, [http://gefilteria.com/about-us/](http://gefilteria.com/about-us/). Kvass is a fermented beverage made from black or rye bread that is popular in eastern Europe.
institutions, namely, restaurants, delis, and manufacturers. They are leading the call to redefine American Jewish cuisine according to various concerns of the New Jewish Food Movement and the sustainable food movement.

In framing this culinary trend as a revival, I claim that Jewish food preparation and consumption are religious engagements, particularly when tied to memory and nostalgia. As Vanessa Ochs explains, “in Judaism, the spiritual is material,” and so it is fitting that sacred relationships would be enacted through engagement with material culture such as preparing and eating food.25 I also make a further claim, identifying food as a subject of material cultural studies. Food is ephemeral, certainly, but no less substantially material in its transience.26

Figure 23. Gefilteria’s horseradish, beet kvass, and frozen gefilte fish. Used with permission of Jeffrey Yoskowitz.

26 For a study of food as material culture, see Isabelle De Solier, Food and the Self: Consumption, Production and Material Culture (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
“An Unjustified S(ch)mear Campaign”

While the New Jewish Food Movement focuses on environmental and ethical concerns in general, those involved in the Jewish culinary revival tell a specific story about the history of American Jewish food. Theirs is a declension narrative, not unlike the salvation stories told about the reconstruction of historical synagogues. But, in contrast to the narratives related to visitors at reconstructed synagogues, the culinary narrative is not quite a salvation story, as those in the Jewish food industry are not ready to describe their story as a success. Their narrative is very much still in progress.

In the declension narrative of American Jewish food, manufacturers and the mid-century desire for culinary convenience play the bad guy. Mitchell Davis writes in the introduction to his cookbook *The Mensch Chef: Or Why Delicious Jewish Food Isn’t An Oxymoron*:

> Somewhere between the Exodus from Egypt and the migration to New York’s Upper West Side, Jewish food got a bad rap. Perceived as old-fashioned, greasy, and overcooked beyond recognition, Jewish food has suffered from an unjustified s(ch)mear campaign begun by Borscht Belt comedians and perpetuated by guilt-stricken *bubbes* with heavy hands in the kitchen.27

Others simply declare Jewish food to be bad altogether. In a 2011 *Time* magazine article, food writer Josh Ozersky declared, “I’m going to just blurt it out. Jewish food is awful.” He enumerated:

> Dry and flavorless brisket, cooked in a salty fluid of Campbell’s beef broth and Lipton onion soup mix . . . tasteless matzoh balls . . . pasty, cold chopped liver with inexplicable pieces of hard boiled egg implanted in it; dense lokshon kugels, sweet noodle casseroles as unappetizing as a Christmas fruitcake; and of course, the always terrifying herring in

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27 Mitchell Davis, *The Mensch Chef: Or Why Delicious Jewish Food Isn’t An Oxymoron* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2002), ix. The Borscht Belt is a colloquial term for the mostly defunct summer resorts of the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York that were a popular vacation spot for New York City Jews from the 1920s to the 1970s. Many comedians began their careers by performing at Borscht Belt resorts.
cream sauces, a food so vile in appearance that it could turn a glutton anorexic overnight.\textsuperscript{28}

Tellingly, Ozersky largely conflates Ashkenazi Jewish food with processed American food, mentioning the brands Campbell’s and Lipton by name; it probably goes without saying that Manischewitz manufactured the matzah meal in his matzah balls. When critics speak of Jewish food as bad food, their image of Jewish food is tied to particular moments in mid-twentieth century America.

More historically-minded critics of Jewish foodways talk explicitly of the effect of the industrialization of American food on American Jewish food, associated with American Jews’ desire to eat like other Americans. In the late nineteenth century, proponents of scientific cooking and cooking school experts had urged immigrant families to give up the dishes of their homelands for a more uniformly “American” diet consisting of bland New England fare. But by the 1950s, American culinary trends broadened to accept adaptations of immigrants’ foodways. The \textit{Complete American Cookbook} (1957), included recipes for chow mein, Javanese rice, tamale pie, egg foo young, and Italian sausage in cabbage leaves.\textsuperscript{29}

As ethnic foods, including Jewish foods, were incorporated into the American palate, they were also subject to the enthusiastic reliance on manufactured goods sweeping the nation at mid-century. As David Sax writes in \textit{Save the Deli}, a popular book documenting his exploration of Jewish delis in North America and worldwide, “By the late 1950s, a housewife on Long Island could fill her cart with prepared, preserved, frozen or canned kosher Jewish foods ranging from Crisco vegetable shortening (eliminating the need for \textit{schmaltz}), to Manischewitz bottled \textit{gefilte}

\textsuperscript{28} Josh Ozersky, “The Kugel Conundrum,” \textit{Time}, April 28, 2011, \url{http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2067923,00.html}. Lokshen kugel is a traditional Ashkenazi dish of noodle pudding.

\textsuperscript{29} Jessamyn Neuhaus, \textit{Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 18–22, 177–178.
fish and powdered *matzo* ball soup mix (eliminating the need to cook)." These manufacturers changed the way Jewish food tasted, smelled, felt, and appeared visually. They also standardized expectations of what Jewish food tasted like, making it more homogenized and centered on certain recognizable, iconic dishes such as matzah balls and gefilte fish.

The declension narrative of Jewish food is also inseparable from the fate of the iconic American Jewish restaurant, the deli. The uniquely American innovation of the delicatessen has its roots in the grocery stores of Jewish and non-Jewish German immigrants to the United States, particularly to New York, beginning in the 1840s. Eastern European Jews who immigrated to New York in later decades built upon the establishments of their German predecessors, incorporating their own Romanian, Polish, and Russian foodways into an American commercial synthesis. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) estimated that there were about five thousand Jewish-style delicatessens in the New York metropolitan area in 1936, at the height of the deli’s heyday. But as the deli became more ubiquitous, its fare became more standardized. The quality of meat and breads in delis declined, and high food and labor costs made cooking, curing, and slicing their own meat an economic challenge for delis. By the end of the twentieth century, delis had lost much of their client base, as American Jews’ palates shifted. Along with other Americans, they sought diets with less fat and then those with fewer carbohydrates. By 2000, there were only about thirty-five delis left in the New York area, including only a dozen in Manhattan.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{31}\) Marks, 156–158.
As Sax told me, when he set out to write about American Jewish delis in 2005, the working title of his manuscript was “The Death of the Deli.” As Sax travelled from one deli to another, attitudes toward Jewish cuisine were changing in response to shifting trends in the broader American culinary world. Jewish chefs would draw upon the innovations of Italian and Asian chefs who had reimagined their fare, celebrating American versions of those cuisines and creatively adapting standard dishes. At their Manhattan restaurants, chefs Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone have paid homage to “their own true culinary heritage, as children more of New York than of Italy.” They emphasize the eclectic nature of Italian American food, including its influences from Ashkenazi Jewish and Asian cooking. “I thought: we need to play upon these things that happen in America,” Torrisi explained, and the pair became famed for “applying haute technique and the best local, seasonal ingredients they can find to the tired tropes of Italian-American cooking.” Chef David Chang, another Manhattan restaurateur, has done similar work for Korean cuisine, embracing its connections with Chinese and Japanese food in the United States, as well as other flavor profiles, including that of the American South. Jewish chefs soon followed the culinary zeitgeist. By 2011, when Ozersky declared, “Nobody is giving Jewish food the Torrisi treatment, raising [it] up to a world-class level and celebrating its flavor profiles,” he had clearly missed major changes in American Jewish cuisine. In fact, the Torrisi treatment is exactly what the Jewish culinary revivalists have been attempting to do.

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32 David Sax, telephone interview by author, July 23, 2013.
36 Ozersky.
Jeremiads about American Jewish food now end on an exultant note: “Posterity will show that the real savior [of the Jewish deli] will be the handful of second-wave Jewish delis that have opened since the dawn of the new millennium,” write Michael Zusman and Nick Zukin; the latter co-founded the Jewish deli Kenny & Zuke’s in Portland, Oregon. The owners of these new delis, crow Zusman and Zukin, “are seeking to learn the traditional ways, some nearly forgotten. But they are neither naïve nor enslaved by the past. . . . The modern Jewish deli artisans are updating and altering traditional forms.”

Mile End, Saul’s Deli, Gefilteria, Kenny & Zuke’s, and other restaurants and small businesses are elevating a folk cuisine to a higher culinary level and asserting a sense of place in their food, making a connection to an imagined authentic cuisine of Eastern Europe and Jewish immigrants as well as boldly embracing its adaptation in the United States. “It’s a late identity politics playing out in the form of a knish,” Mitchell Davis told me.

The declension-and-revival narrative of Jewish American food has been heralded in Jewish and mainstream media, with dozens of exuberant article titles—“Haimish to Haute in New York,” “The Gentrification Of The Gefilte,” “The Great American Deli Rescue,” “The New Golden Age of Jewish-American Deli Food”—proclaiming the rise of a new American Jewish cuisine, one that would return to an ideal Eastern European past and recreate it according to contemporary American tastes.

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38 Davis, interview. A knish is a turnover consisting of a filling, often mashed potato, covered with dough and baked, grilled, or deep-fried.
“Everything Shifted Into Focus”

“What we set out to do at Mile End was nothing if not a way for us to connect with our own pasts and families,” explains Rae Bernamoff. “Noah’s Nana Lee was the ultimate homemaker, while my Grandma Bea was (and still is) a high powered professional. . . . We wanted to take a cue from Nana’s old-world, made-from-scratch ethic and meld it with the forward-thinking ambition of my own grandmother.”

Black-and-white photographs of both grandmothers accompany her words in *The Mile End Cookbook*, a carefully designed hardcover book with a bright cover reminiscent of mid-twentieth century printing and filled with large, high quality photographs. Photographs of the Bernamoffs’ grandparents accompany Rae’s introduction, juxtaposed with a photograph of the young restaurateurs and their deli. Noah wears trendy, plastic-framed glasses and is fashionably if effortlessly scruffy; Rae wears attractive cat-eye glasses, has fashionably long bangs, and has pulled some of her hair back in a retro hairstyle. As the textual and visual depiction of the Bernamoffs and their origin story indicates, the Jewish food revival draws together both individual and communal nostalgias, both for restaurateurs and patrons. I focus here on the restaurant professionals, because their stories are more accessible for my research. In these restaurants, as in the practices of Jewish genealogy, individuals find authenticity in the connection between their family stories and the larger narratives of American Jewish history. At Mile End, Noah and Rae Bernamoff drew upon their attachment to their own family histories as well as playfully engaging a broader notion of Ashkenazi cuisine for both personal satisfaction and as a successful marketing strategy.

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Noah grew up in Montreal, and he named his restaurant after the Montreal neighborhood in which Jewish immigrants settled in the early twentieth century. (Like New York’s Lower East Side, Brooklyn and other urban areas where white ethnic communities settled in the early twentieth century and left for the suburbs in subsequent decades, Mile End is now undergoing revitalization.) Originally, Bernamoff intended to serve Montreal cuisine, such as poutine, smoked meat, and Montreal-style bagels. But his vision changed:

“My Nana Lee died a few months before we planned to open. This woman was the glue that held my family together. . . . Her food, and her huge Friday-night dinners, gave structure and substance to our lives. . . . Maybe I overreacted, but when she died I thought to myself: Is this the end? Will this food find someplace to live on in our lives?

Suddenly everything shifted into focus. This restaurant we were about to open had to be a Jewish restaurant.”

Bernamoff’s rhetorical questions—“Is this the end? Will this food find someplace to live on in our lives?”—are not only reflections about his own family, but imply broader concerns about the passing of the first and second generation of American Jews. His own personal story is presented as synecdoche for the broader story of North American Jews. Nostalgia for family histories and for larger American Jewish narratives cannot be disentangled.

Through their restaurant, the Bernamoffs communicate their personal, familial nostalgias to their customers, who may enter the restaurant with their own nostalgic attitudes toward Jewish food. Architectural historian Giovanni Galli’s analysis of nostalgia usefully explains the relationship between the nostalgias of restaurateurs and that of their patrons. Galli defines communal nostalgia as “a spiritual community of individuals, sharing just the sentiment per se and not its object.” He suggests, “At best, thinking about its most abstract forms, we could talk,
not about ‘collective,’ but of ‘shared’ nostalgia.”\textsuperscript{42} This identification of “shared nostalgia” works particularly well as a model for the nostalgia manifested in new American Jewish commercial foodways. As restaurants like Bernamoff’s demonstrate, owners and patrons may share nostalgic sentiments springing from individual sources while, at the same time, participating in a distinct narrative about Ashkenazi American pasts in Eastern Europe and in immigrant neighborhoods.

When I spoke with Noah Bernamoff over breakfast at Mile End—I had the “mish-mash,” eggs with onions, greens, and salmon; he had a large “appetizing platter” of whitefish salad, egg salad, and lox with a bialy—Bernamoff told me:

It was sort of in her passing that I felt more comfortable labeling this huge life-changing project that I was maybe doing “Jewish.” I didn’t have the confidence or inspiration until that point to feel proud to call this thing Jewish. But then I did, and it’s important that I did, because it’s been a large part of the narrative that we’ve been able to tell and part of narrative within which we’ve been able to create.\textsuperscript{43}

At a public panel, Bernamoff elaborated, “I felt it was an obligation, I felt a sense of responsibility for my future children, that I should be able to provide that warmth and that Shabbos table for them.”\textsuperscript{44} The incorporation of his family story, both in the past and in the imagined future, into the broader Jewish narrative became a religious obligation, a mitzvah. This religious obligation cannot be disentangled from his commercial enterprise, nor should it be—the Bernamoffs and their customers earnestly engage in a shared nostalgia that is complicated but not diminished by the financial exchange.

Family memories also inspired Shoshana Gross, co-owner of the Columbus food truck “Challah!” The name is a pun on the exclamation “holla!” and the truck’s distinctive logo is in

\textsuperscript{43} Noah Bernamoff, interview by author, New York, June 27, 2013.
the shape of a megaphone. To Gross, deli items like corned beef sandwiches are more than just symbols of comfort. “Jewish food is soul food to me,” she explained. “It reminds me of my childhood, sitting in the kitchen with my mom and sister talking about our personal histories and traditions.”\(^4^5\) Before opening Challah in 2013, Gross spent time thinking about her roots and her connection to the past. Jewish food, she came to realize, was “the thread connecting all of it.”\(^4^6\)

*The Mile End Cookbook* provided direction for Gross and her non-Jewish business partner, chef Catie Randazzo. From their food truck, they serve sandwiches made from seasonal and local ingredients that reimagine Jewish deli cuisine, like their house-smoked whitefish salad with fresh dill and horseradish aioli, served with a potato latke and pickled beets on a challah roll. Their menu draws upon Gross’s family background and Randazzo’s culinary training in restaurants in Brooklyn and Portland, Oregon, where Randazzo learned to brine pickles and butcher her own fish and meat.\(^4^7\) The food truck represents “a combination of those two lifestyles, which I like to call the Captain Planet effect,” explains Gross, referencing the early 1990s television show *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, in which the eponymous earth-saving superhero is summoned by the combined efforts of the Planeteers.

Gross and Randazzo’s campy nostalgia is summed up in the name of their truck, Challah, sometimes spelled with an exclamation mark. “With food trucks, you have to have a sense of humor. We wanted something that was fun,” says Gross. Randazzo’s sister suggested the name Challah. “We immediately liked the camp and kitsch of it. We liked that it described our point of

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\(^4^6\) Meiser.

\(^4^7\) Catie Randazzo in “Holler for Challah!” *Dykes on Mikes* podcast, hosted by Brooke Cartus and Lori Gum, June 28, 2013.
In both name and deed, Challah brings together Gross’s emotional connections to her family’s Jewish traditions and contemporary culinary and marketing trends in a campy nostalgia that reinterprets traditional foodways for the present day.49

The family stories of the Bernamoffs and of Shoshana Gross, retold and packaged as campy nostalgia, are in line with the declension narrative of American Jewish food: As commercial Jewish food is seen as overly processed and industrial, new restaurants emphasize their culinary origins in Jewish home cooking. Owners’ familial nostalgic tales provide credibility when they compete for business with Jewish delis that have existed for decades. David Sax explained to me that in his research for Save the Deli, he found that stories about owners’ nostalgia for their families’ meals provide a sense of authenticity that appeals to patrons and the media. “It creates a story around a dish. . . . It’s like, this is something that’s real. We’re getting the real deal now,” Sax said. With a family origin story, “this isn’t just some restaurant concept and some guy just taking a bunch of recipes.”50

Restaurateurs’ family stories serve the same purpose as the family photographs that traditionally lined the walls of Jewish delis. Indeed, Sax found that many new Jewish deli owners adorned the walls of their restaurants with “their grandparents’ photographs and the old Yiddish newspapers and their bar mitzvah photos.” This décor, and the stories that accompany them, convey the message to customers that “there is a real family behind this place.”51 Nonetheless, being good for business does not necessarily make a story less sincere. As always with camp, the Jewish revivalists’ approaches to their familial and communal pasts are at once sincere and serious, humorous and reflective. The culinary

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48 Gross, quoted in Meiser.
49 Gross, in “Holler for Challah!”
50 Sax, interview.
51 Sax, interview.
Noah Arenstein, a part-time lawyer and proprietor of the New York food stand Scharf & Zoyer (Yiddish for sharp and sour), was also inspired by family recipes and the desire to put his own, campy spin on the culinary traditions of his childhood. Arenstein grew up in Cincinnati, raised on his grandmother’s baking, his grandfather’s love of pickles, and tales of the fish store his grandfather had owned. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, his family went to a pair of shops for fresh bagels and lox. “It was a ritual, a weekend ritual, and that was the stuff I grew up loving,” Arenstein explained. He decided to pay tribute to these dairy and vegetarian Ashkenazi American culinary traditions by changing them, serving what he calls “global Jewish sandwiches” inspired by the food of Arenstein’s childhood as well as “the Jewish cooking of Georgia, North Africa and Spain, among others.”

In 2013, Scharf & Zoyer’s signature dish was the “ku gel double down,” a Jewish take on KFC’s Double Down, a sandwich of bacon and melted cheese and “secret sauce” between two fried chicken fillets. One version Arenstein created contained maple farmers cheese and a slaw of apples and onions between two pan-fried slices of noodle kugel. “In my less refined days we’d do it with bacon and cheese,” he told a reporter. Arenstein explained to me, “It’s all very tongue in cheek. A lot of the stuff on the menu is a joke, tongue-in-cheek kind of riff on what I

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52 Noah Arenstein, interview by author, New York, June 18, 2013.
56 Yeh.
enjoyed eating growing up.” Arenstein’s riff on the rituals of his childhood rests upon the playful juxtaposition of the traditional family dish of Ashkenazi noodle kugel and contemporary fast food. In reinterpreting familial and beloved cuisine in the style of a decidedly lowbrow contemporary dish, the Kugel Double Down expresses love for Ashkenazi culinary traditions in the style of campy, nostalgic appreciation.

Not all of revivalists’ campy reinterpretations of family stories fit the expected mold. Julia Hungerford is the proprietor of the vegetarian-Jewish food trailer in Austin, Texas that she has named Schmaltz, ironically referring to rendered chicken fat, a traditional staple of Ashkenazi cuisine, and its popular American referent of kitschy sentimentality. She serves vegetarian and vegan adaptations of classic deli sandwiches named after American Jewish figures like the Harvey Pekar Reuben, a homemade seitan and cabbage sandwich with vegan Russian dressing and optional Swiss cheese on rye bread, named for the comic book writer. Hungerford’s application of the names of writers, artists, and actors to her dishes—including a Gertrude Stein goat cheese sandwich and Gilda Radner mock tuna salad—is quintessential commercial camp. Hungerford’s tributes to outlandish personalities follows Sontag’s articulation that “as a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated,” and her choice to irreverently apply their famous names to sandwiches follows the playful logic of a campy sensibility.

57 Arenstein.
58 Seitan is a chewy, protein-rich food made from wheat gluten that is often used as a meat substitute.
59 Sontag.
While Hungerford’s sandwiches are inventive takes on Jewish culinary heritage “with a modern, Austin flair,” her vegetarianism is in line with her family tradition. Hungerford was raised vegetarian in Tennessee, and her vegetarian grandmother, a Polish Holocaust survivor, influences her cooking. “My grandmother is a great cook—the holidays that we celebrated were always around food such as Passover and Rosh Hashanah. She didn’t have recipes, you just put these things together,” Hungerford told a reporter. A Jewish newspaper reassured readers, “Hungerford’s grandmother, now 91, is kvelling over her granddaughter’s new trailer, and called the other day from Tennessee to let her know.”

Even as restaurateurs build on their own family backgrounds, they are also constantly competing with Jewish customers’ nostalgic memories. Ken Gordon, owner of the artisan deli Kenny & Zuke’s, which features house-made pastrami, told me, “Everyone is an expert on Jewish [d]eli—or they think they are—and no one is shy about letting us know about it.” He told a reporter:

Everybody has a frame of reference for delis. Everybody was . . . in a city with good delis, of which there are many. Everybody has had pastrami, or rye bread, or pickles, or whatever it is, and it’s something everybody has an opinion on. Or they taste something we make and it’s not like their grandmother made it. Oh, when was the last time you had your grandmother’s blintzes? “Oh, it was when I was four.” Oh, so you remember that real well, don’t you?

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63 Ken Gordon, email to author, July 18, 2013.

American Jewish customers’ personal nostalgic attachment to Jewish food can be an impediment to change in the cuisine. Zach Kutsher, owner of Kutcher’s Tribeca, named for his family’s famed Jewish resort in the Catskill mountains in upstate New York, complained to me about customers coming into his restaurant “with a bad attitude,” those who expect the food they remembered from the restaurant’s eponym and were invariably disappointed by his Tribeca restaurant’s changes to traditional dishes. As Gordon said, Jewish restaurants are compared to “one’s ideal, not necessarily reality. It’s this fuzzy-lensed memory of something a lot of people had as a child—like their grandma’s matzo ball soup. Which may or may not be worthy of the adulation.” For Gordon, dealing with customers’ unreasonable expectations is “both incredibly annoying and frustrating, and a lot of fun!”

The successful Jewish culinary revivalist manages to strike a balance between personal nostalgia and culinary innovation. Their food must “look familiar and taste familiar and smell familiar, but also taste delicious,” in the words of Theo Peck, a descendent of the owners of the famed Lower East Side Jewish restaurant Ratner’s, who opened a Brooklyn café called Peck’s in 2014. For its most ardent admirers, Gefilteria finds that balance: A reporter found that some patrons sampling wares from Gefilteria’s booth at the Hester Street Fair on the Lower East Side in 2012 “were practically having a religious experience.”

A woman named Hillary McGrath took one bite of the gefilte crostini and seemingly went into a trance. I’ve never seen fish affect someone like that. “This was the first time

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66 Gordon, email.
67 Moskin.
in fifty years that I had that same exact sensory feeling as I had eating my grandparents gefilte. It really brought me back to my childhood,” she said.  

Gefilteria draws its claim to authenticity from multiple strands, connecting to Jewish culinary traditions, to contemporary sustainability trends, and to the campiness of the hipster aesthetic. When combined with the sensory experiences of personal memories, it can be a powerful experience—and, its owners hope, a lucrative market for a boutique purveyor.

“Caretakers of this Planet”

Whether or not Jewish culinary revivalists serve kosher food, they continue to think about kashruth. For Jewish culinary revivalists, kashruth remains a standard of culinary authenticity, even as it is one that they continually challenge. Even if they profess no interest in kashruth, potential Jewish customers’ complaints insure that the revivalists continue to think about the category. (A typical comment on a Jewish newspaper’s online article about kosher-style restaurants reads, “I can’t get past the fact that for anything to be considered [sic] real Jewish food it should be KOSHER.”)

A long history of non-kosher Jewish American cuisine exists, and standards and popular expectations of kashruth have changed dramatically over the course of American Jewish history. “For centuries, if not millennia, fidelity to the complicated laws of kashruth was an axiom of faith and practice within the Jewish community,” explains historian Jenna Weissman Joselit. But with the advent of modernity, newly emancipated Jews, now able to enter mainstream non-Jewish societies, began to question the legitimacy of these culinary traditions. In nineteenth century America, Reform Jews questioned the “the religious, cultural, social and even aesthetic significance” of a practice that set them apart from other Americans. They did their best to

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69 Shmuel Ben Eliezer, comment on Sussman.
reframe Judaism as a matter of belief and moral behavior rather than of consumption. Radical reformers regularly accused their traditional opponents of practicing “kitchen Judaism” which should be relegated to “the antique cabinet where it belongs.” As historian Lance Sussman notes, the term “kitchen Judaism” dismissed kashrut as both an “unthinking folk religion” and as women’s work, and therefore not worthy of modern religious practice, which was the domain of rational men.

For other modern American Jews, not caught up in these debates, “growing apathy or indifference, rather than fervent ideology” led to the abandonment of inconvenient restrictions on consumption. Nonetheless, even as a growing number of modern Jews came to disregard the laws of kashrut, many retained the culinary preferences that had been shaped by it. Many American Jews have avoided pork and other overtly non-kosher food products. At the same time, they have indulged in foods like Chinese cuisine, in which the traif (non-kosher) products were less overt. In the early to mid-twentieth century, Chinese food, in which meat is minced and disguised in sauces, became “safe traif,” less threatening and more attractive than other non-Jewish or traif cuisines. Still, in Weissman’s words, American Jews “held on to their affinity for gefilte fish, brisket, and blintzes, chipping away at the identification between ‘Jewish’ and ‘kosher’ in the process.” Food that engaged Jewish culinary traditions but was not kosher came to be known as “kosher style,” a term whose precise definition varies among restaurateurs and

71 Sussman, 35.

“Elevated to a new status, what we once thought of as lowly Jewish fare, now suggests a heightened sense of group belonging.” What became known as kosher-style or Jewish-style deli food changed as American Jews’ practices shifted. The decidedly non-kosher Reuben sandwich, attributed to the German-Jewish immigrant Arnold Reuben, has become a staple of the “Jewish deli” menu, even as the sandwich of sour rye with Russian dressing, sauerkraut, corned beef, and Swiss cheese boldly violates kosher prohibitions against mixing meat and diary products. At the same time, kosher style restaurants brought Jewish cuisine into a general marketplace, introducing non-Jews to Jewish food as their owners competed with other non-kosher restaurants for both Jewish and non-Jewish customers.

Some Jewish revivalists eschew kashrut altogether, viewing the division between kosher restaurants and non-kosher restaurants as stark: Ken Gordon of Kenny & Zuke’s explained to a reporter that he began serving bacon because there were so many requests for bacon and eggs by his patrons, most of whom are not Jewish. “If you’re not Kosher, you’re not Kosher,” Gordon said. “There’s no in between.” Gordon believes that biblical kashrut laws “were instituted for some very real health and sanitation concerns” that no longer exist. “I think one of the things that draws me to Judaism is not the orthodoxy or the strictness of the laws, but its tolerance and

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74 Joeslit, 173.
76 Marks, 111.
acceptance of change,” including in religious dietary regulation, he told me.  

Despite Gordon’s assertion about the black-and-white nature of kashrut—with which some who keep and regulate kashrut would likely agree—there is, in fact, a wide spectrum of “in between,” which includes American Jews who respond to the tradition of kashrut regulations in different, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, ways.

As I conducted my research, the restaurateurs and food experts with whom I spoke frequently held up Jeffrey Yoskowitz as the revivalist concerned with kashrut and as their Jewishly observant colleague. Yet even Yoskowitz and his business partners in Gefilteria, Elizabeth Alpern and Jackie Lilinshtein, have a complicated relationship to certified kashrut. Producing a kosher product was important to Yoskowitz, who wanted to be able to serve his fish at meals with his family, who keep a kosher home. When Gefilteria began in early 2012, it was too small to pay the fees for a hechsher (kashrut certification by an agency, denoted by a symbol) and its required supervision by a mashgiach. Its creators attempted to compromise by operating their small business out of the kosher kitchen of an Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan’s East Village. By the following year, Gefilteria had grown sufficiently to pay for kosher certification by the world’s largest kosher certification agency, the Orthodox Union (OU), for its gefilte fish and horseradishes. Nonetheless, kosher certification is expensive and difficult to manage for a small organization, particularly when dealing with a major certifier such as the OU. Gefilteria’s team chose to certify their beet kvass and other products through a local certifier, the Va’ad Harabonim (rabbinic council) of Queens. Yoskowitz praised his experience with the Va’ad of Queens, but refused to go into detail about his dealings with the OU, and made clear that it was

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78 Gordon, email.
not altogether pleasant. Because of the niche nature of its business, kosher certification makes sense for Gefilteria’s packaged goods; the lack of certification would probably eliminate a significant segment of its market. At the same time, because of the small scale of its operation, when it sells fresh food such as cheese blintzes at pop-up markets in New York, as it did at Paper Magazine’s pop-up Super Duper Market in August 2013, Gefilteria does not pay for a mashgiach to certify that its products are kosher.

Gefilteria’s kosher certification is the exception in the field. Julia Hungerford, proprietor of the Austin, Texas food truck Schmaltz, sees the vegetarian, non-hechshered food she serves as in line with Jewish American tradition. She told a reporter that American Jews’ varieties of kashrut practice have inspired vegetarian recipes: “If you keep kosher,” explained Hungerford, “you can’t eat milk and meat together, and you have to use separate sets of dishes for the two. It’s a hassle, and you can imagine a lot of vegetarian food came out of that.” *(In kosher practice, parve food is that which is not classified as either meat or dairy and can be eaten with either category.)* Hungerford’s vegetarian menu nods to kashrut laws but is not bound by them, equally drawing upon Jews who observe some level of kashrut and contemporary vegetarians and vegans, making it appealing to both Jewish and non-Jewish customers in food-conscious Austin.

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80 Julia Hungerford, quoted in Lebwohl.
The Bernamoffs’ emphasis on sustainability as an alternative to kashrut is more common for revivalists than Hungerford’s vegetarian approach. Over breakfast at Mile End, Noah Bernamoff told me that “as a Jew who believes in the Jewish tradition as the most powerful element of our people and our nation [rather] than the religious aspects, I feel like I can very much rationalize the non-kosher food that I serve” in terms of environmental and ethical concerns. “I’m sourcing incredible ingredients; we’re buying products from farms, we’re buying products from cattle that’s been raised with respect for the animal, respect for the earth; fish that have been caught in a sustainable fashion, not with nets, not where you . . . keep half the fish.” Customers at Mile End are not fed meat from animals treated with hormones and antibiotics. For Bernamoff, environmental sustainability is a universal concern; at the same time, he believes he has a special responsibility to maintain the earth as a Jew, one that he demonstrates through the food served at Mile End. “To serve matzah ball soup with unkosher chicken that’s pastured and

Figure 24. The Gefilteria team, from left to right: Elizabeth Alpern, Jeffrey Yoskowitz, and Jackie Lilinshtein. Used with permission of Jeffrey Yoskowitz.
raised by an Amish family in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to me is a better chicken soup than
buying [Empire] kosher chicken, which is factory farmed, where the chickens are shitting all
over each other. That’s kosher, [but] that’s not Jewish to me. That doesn’t fall in line with what I
think are my Jewish ethics.” For Bernamoff, Mile End respects Jewish traditions because of the
meat it serves, not in spite of it.

Kosher meat is typically more expensive than non-hechshered meat, and sustainable
kosher meat is extremely expensive on a wholesale scale. “Kosher meat basically sucks,” Ken
Gordon told me, speaking of non-sustainable kosher meat:

It’s not of the highest quality, is charged a ridiculous premium for, and the local, natural
beef we use is far superior. So the question is—do we adhere to some outdated and
unnecessary dietary laws and eat inferior quality beef, or do we produce a superior
quality product that’s—in fact—healthier and doesn’t deplete the Earth’s resources in
transporting it, something that we need to consider as the caretakers of this planet.

For Jewish chefs like Gordon and Bernamoff, serving sustainable meat is a Jewish obligation.
Eating kosher meat is not part of their Jewish practice, and serving it at their restaurants is out of
the question.

In discussions about kosher style cuisine, language quickly becomes confused, even for
professionals in the Jewish food industry. In the same interview, Kutsher told me that his
restaurant was not kosher and that it does not serve traif meat. In these seemingly antithetical
declarations, he meant that it served meat only from kosher animals (beef, chicken, and duck) but
that it did not buy meat that had been slaughtered and certified as kosher, nor was the restaurant
itself certified as kosher. His business partner, the eccentric entrepreneur Alan Wilzig, asserted
on a blog in advance of the restaurant’s opening, “There will be a GREAT many items on the

81 N. Bernamoff, interview.
82 Gordon, email.
menu for ‘all but the most Glatt’ of Kosher guests.” Wilzig explained that since most American Jews do not keep kosher, the menu would be approachable for most American Jews, even those who keep a variation of kashrut, such as eating only meat from kosher animals, regardless of whether it was properly slaughtered and certified a kosher. There would also be options for the smaller number of Jews who “eat dairy out,” eating only fish and vegetarian items at non-kosher restaurants.

Nonetheless, despite confusion of language, restaurateurs have a sense of what fits and what does not fit within their cuisine. “I’m not serving people bacon-wrapped matzah balls,” Bernamoff told me, referencing Jewish chef Ilan Hall, winner of the second season of reality TV show Top Chef, who serves bacon-wrapped matzah balls at his Los Angeles restaurant, the Gorbals. “I don’t believe in that from a food concept,” Bernamoff continued. He is insistent that even as his restaurant is innovative, it remains true to the spirit of the cuisine. “You wouldn’t go to a great Italian restaurant and get steak and egg lasagna. Lasagna is lasagna and matzah ball soup is matzah ball soup.” At the same time, Bernamoff has no problem serving bacon, the quintessential non-kosher item, within the confines of a breakfast sandwich. “What is special about that breakfast sandwich to me,” he told me, is “that’s the breakfast sandwich I ate every Sunday morning with my dad. That’s the bacon and eggs that I had that to me became religion in some way, in that sort of routine.” For Bernamoff, a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich represents his Jewish family experience, without contradiction, and his experience is

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85 N. Bernamoff, interview.
representative of many American Jews. In contrast, other restaurateurs have employed non-kosher items for different purposes, as discussed below.

**New York and Other Places**

As in other cases of Jewish nostalgia discussed in previous chapters, New York looms large in American Jewish cuisine. A “New York deli” is roughly equivalent to a kosher-style or Jewish deli, a manifestation of Jewish ethnic identity having been subsumed into the melting pot of New York ethnicities. “The sights, sounds, and tastes that tell us we are inside a Jewish delicatessen were all formed over the past century and a half as the delicatessen emerged and evolved in New York City,” says Sax.\(^{86}\) As Jews who had first settled in New York left that city for other parts of the country, they opened “New York style” delis in major cities as a way to market Jewish food without restricting their clientele to solely Jewish customers.\(^{87}\) For both Jewish and non-Jewish customers, the descriptor “New York” serves as a mark of authentication, pointing to the development of American Jewish cuisine in New York and, beyond that, to its origins in Eastern Europe. For non-Jewish customers in other parts of the country, a New York deli serves as a point of origin in which to act as a culinary tourist, more accessible and familiar than a kosher-style or Jewish deli. For Jews outside of New York, the label explicitly ties American Jewish eating habits to the dominant narrative of American Jewish migration history.

In marketing their sustainable gefilte fish, the co-owners of Gefilteria have drawn upon the commercial vintage aesthetic and nostalgic images of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. At the Gefilte Talk panel, Jeffrey Yoskowitz described Gefilteria as having a “Lower East Side, 1920s, pushcart aesthetic.” He and his co-owners began the company by initially envisioning “a pushcart on every corner.” Conflating the Lower East Side with the eastern European origins of

\(^{86}\) Sax, 5.
\(^{87}\) Berg, 198.
Jewish immigrants, Mitchell Davis, moderating the panel, described the company’s image as “shtetl chic.” Gesturing at Yoskowitz, who was wearing suspenders, Davis invoked “the hats, the beards, the suspenders” of the style.\textsuperscript{88} These vague images blended nostalgia for images of early twentieth-century Jews, associated with the Lower East Side, with contemporary hipster appeal, associated with particular parts of Brooklyn. Beyond the physical location of their production in Brooklyn, both Gefilteria’s hipster aesthetic and their sincere connection to Jewish pasts place them ideologically in New York.

Other culinary revivalists, located outside of New York, find the pervasive association with that city to be more of a problem. By now, Ken Gordon told me, customers’ ideas of the New York deli is “the friggin’ gorilla in the room!” at his Portland Jewish deli. Customers constantly compare Kenny & Zuke’s to their ideal of a New York deli, even if they have not been to an actual New York deli in years, and reviewers do not hesitate to do the same. Yet, as Gordon wrote to me in an emphatic email, “in the 7+ years we’ve been doing this, not once . . . not one single time . . . have we ever referred to ourselves as a NY Deli. Or a NY-style Deli! Never . . . Ever!”\textsuperscript{89} Likewise, Adelman and Levitt list “Why isn’t there a good New York deli in the Bay Area?” as a frequently asked question on Saul’s website. They explain to customers, “Saul’s is not a New York deli, and its non-New Yorker, 21st century audience has a different palate and different cultures and politics informing their dining desires. . . . Recreating the New York deli is not our charge. Food, authenticity, flavor, sustainability, survival, and being true to the values of our culinary roots are our first priority.”\textsuperscript{90} Gordon, Adelman, and Levitt, like

\textsuperscript{88} Recording of Gefilte Talk panel, “September 6, 2012: Gefilte Talk,” Past Programs, Center for Jewish History, \url{http://www.cjh.org/p/45}.
\textsuperscript{89} Gordon, email. Ellipses in original.
\textsuperscript{90} “About,” Saul’s Restaurant and Delicatessen, \url{http://saulsdeli.com/deli/category/about/}. 
other revivalists, attempt to alter customers’ framework of authenticity from emulation of an ideal place to contemporary concerns about the taste and origins of the food they consume.

When Adelman and Levitt bought Saul’s from its founding owners, many of the restaurant’s ingredients were shipped from New York to Berkeley. Adelman and Levitt began to buy more of their ingredients from local sources, including rye bread from the Berkeley-based Acme Bread and fish from Bay-area sources. As they began to serve more seasonal foods, they ran into a pickle problem: As Levitt explained to those assembled at the Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu, regular customers of Jewish delis expect a half sour pickle to be consistently available, but they probably do not know that a half-sour pickle is an “open, fermented pickle that’s made from a fresh cucumber that’s ready six, seven days later and ready only up to fifteen, twenty days later.” Levitt and Adelman had chosen to serve pickles made from local cucumbers, grown between June and November, but they would only be able to serve half-sour pickles alongside their sandwiches for a short time, and at greater expense. Levitt explained, “We’ve become ossified. The Jewish deli has to have a half sour pickle all year. But what happens in the middle of winter? There are no [fresh] pickles close to New York or L.A. or Berkeley” at that time. Customers would have to put up with only having half-sour pickles at Saul’s in seasonally appropriate months, along with a lesson in agriculture and geography.

As Adelman told me, she and Levitt are broadening the geographic and historical scope purview of their Jewish delicatessen. “We see ourselves in a continuum,” she said. The deli’s “principal story is Ashkenazi Jews from the Old World and then New York, and then they continue, going west,” until they reach California, where Saul’s is located. She continued:

We absolutely recognize and use as a major resource Poland and Russia and the whole Ashkenazi Jewish experience. And then we also quote and use and revel in New York,

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91 Levitt, “Referendum.”
although we don’t feel it’s necessary to fly our ingredients out from there—although there are a couple products that for nostalgia’s sake we will, like Fox’s U-Bet syrup. In addition to broadening the contemporary geographic purview of Jewish food beyond New York by using local sourcing, Adelman and Levitt are expanding the Jewish pasts represented at their deli. While their menu remains focused on eastern European inspirations, they also offer a number of dishes from Middle Eastern cuisine, inspired by Sephardic and Mizrachi Jewish pasts. Serving selective Middle Eastern dishes also allows Saul’s to serve more vegetarian dishes, which is important for a restaurant in Berkeley in order to accommodate vegetarians, but can be challenging for a Jewish deli. “Broadening that story a little bit . . . [is] a little sidestep that’s challenging for a Jewish deli.

Karen Adelman, telephone interview by author, August 1, 2013. Fox’s U-Bet chocolate syrup is considered by many to be an essential ingredient in a classic egg cream. Saul’s Deli makes its own chocolate syrup for use in egg creams within the restaurant, but customers may buy Fox’s syrup for take-out or retail purposes. Adelman, interview.
inclusive” of both more Jewish pasts and more customers and allows Saul’s to “continue to tell the story” of Jewish cultures and Jewish food.93

Even within New York, some revivalists are deemphasizing the idea of that city, though change remains difficult. Montreal-born Noah Bernamoff’s creation of Mile End in Brooklyn began with his “quest to make smoked meat, the most sacred of Montreal delicatessen foods. It started out as homesickness, a longing for familiar flavors that New York’s pastrami and corned beef couldn’t quite replicate.”94 Nonetheless, as discussed above, Bernamoff ultimately chose to emphasize the Jewish nature of his restaurant rather than its Canadian roots, both because of personal convictions and economic considerations. “There’s a million Jews in the city and there’s only a couple thousand Canadians,” Bernamoff told me, laughing at his original naiveté.95

“A Little More Conflict”

In 2010, Jewish culinary camp took a different turn. In the middle of Passover, Jewish chef Jason Marcus and his non-Jewish girlfriend, Heather Heuser, opened a restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn that they named “Traif,” the Hebrew and Yiddish word for non-kosher. As the New York Times reported, Traif is located “in the valley of the shadow of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, where bearded Hasidim cross paths with mustachioed steam punks.”96 Ultra-Orthodox Hasidim had moved to Williamsburg along with other Jews leaving New York’s crowded Lower East Side in the years before World War II; after the war, large numbers of Hasidic Jews from Hungary and Romania who had survived the Holocaust moved to the

93 Adelman, interview.
95 N. Bernamoff, interview.
96 Ligaya Mishan, “Traif,” The New York Times, August 10, 2010. Hasidic Judaism (practiced by Hasidim, plural of Hasid) is an ultra-Orthodox branch of Judaism that emphasizes mysticism and spiritual fervor. Each of the many Hasidic dynasties follows their own principles and spiritual leaders.
neighborhood. In recent decades, artists and musicians have moved to the neighborhood, and the culture clash between Hasidim and hipsters has been widely reported. Several tongue-in-cheek responses to the culture clash have emerged, including the Tumblr blog *Hasid or Hipster*, largely a compilation of photographs of bearded men in hats of uncertain designation. “Two divergent cultures in Brooklyn’s melting pot seem to be converging on common modes of dress,” explains the blog’s anonymous curator. The contrast between these two neighboring cultures was ripe for parody.

With Traif, Marcus and Heuser took the juxtaposition of cultures a provocative step further, creating a restaurant “celebrating pork, shellfish and globally-inspired soul food” on Broadway Avenue, the current dividing line between the two residential communities. The restaurant’s striking icon is a silhouette of a pig inscribed with a heart. As a reporter astutely commented, “Some would call this wit, others blasphemy. No matter. The name generated plenty of buzz before the place opened . . . which was presumably the intent of the owners.”

Traif’s name highlights the supposed irony of a Jew owning a restaurant devoted to non-kosher food, particularly in Williamsburg. It also demonstrates multivalent attitudes toward traditional Jewish dietary rules. On one hand, it celebrates freedom from the burden of kashrut. On the other hand, by referencing non-kosher food in terms of its relations to traditional Jewish dietary laws, it still maintains a relationship with kashrut. By doing so, to some extent, it continues to uphold them, if only nostalgically, in an emotionally conflicted memory of the past.

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100 Mishan.
Kashrut is presumed to loom in the family history of the Jewish restaurateur or customer. The name also acknowledges that others—notably, the restaurant’s Hasidic neighbors—continue to adhere to these religious regulations, though they become walking embodiments of the past.

Marcus has repeatedly explained his restaurant’s name and menu are not antithetical to his Jewish identity. “I don’t think I’m being un-Jewish by eating un-kosher foods. To me, it’s the same as not wearing yarmulke or growing a long beard” like ultra-Orthodox Jews, he told reporters.101 Owning a restaurant called Traif fits with the rest of his lifestyle as a nonobservant Jew, he says. “I don’t see a contradiction between eating bacon and all the other [religious] things I don’t do.” The name “represents who I am, [and] I’m proud of who I am.”102 Nor is the restaurant’s concept a rebellion against his upbringing; he proudly tells reporters about his “lobster-loving Jewish grandmother,” making it sound as though Traif, for him, is not so dissimilar from Hungerford’s vegetarian food truck.103 Marcus has explained that the restaurant’s name refers to more than an opposition to religious dietary laws. It “really represents our philosophical view of how restaurants should be free of rules,” he said.104 Nonetheless, his insistence that his restaurant concept is not deliberately antagonistic is undermined by the story he tells reporters about his mother—who grew up in a family that mostly kept kosher within the home but not at restaurants—objecting to the name, asking him, “Do you have to call it Traif?”105

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101 Brown.
105 Yoskowitz, “Promised Land.”
The name of Marcus and Heuser’s restaurant is a campy conceit; the humor lies in appreciation of its seeming irreligion. As queer theorist Eve Sedgwick explains, “Unlike kitsch-attribution . . . camp-recognition doesn’t ask, ‘What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?’ Instead it says what if: What if the right audience for this were exactly me?” While many of his customers do not know what traif means, Marcus counts on other Jews hearing about his restaurant and thinking, “Cool, I’m a non-kosher Jew too.”

Jewish Studies scholar Jeffrey Shandler’s identification of Yiddish as a postvernacular language, a language with a meaning other than its use as a language of daily life, one that is a response to its previously widely used Jewish vernacular, is helpful here. I view Traif and similar works of American Jewish camp, such as Bad Jew BBQ sauce—“It takes a bad Jew to make good BBQ,” as the tagline goes—as post-nostalgic, negative but playful reactions to the sentimentality of nostalgia. Post-nostalgic camp ostensibly rejects the sentiments of nostalgia and mainstream American Jewish practice but nonetheless engages in a relationship with them, maintaining the nostalgic attitude toward the past even as it refines it.

The humor of Jewish culinary camp playfully engages the chef and the consumer, cheerfully turning the joke on them. Traif is far from the first restaurant to employ irony in its ambiguous relationship to Jewish culinary traditions, though it has the boldest name. As mentioned above, Ilan Hall has become infamous for his bacon-wrapped matzah balls. At JoeDoe, a small, cozy restaurant in Manhattan’s East Village, non-Jewish chef Joe Dobias and his Jewish business partner and girlfriend, Jill Schulster, served what they call “aggressive American” cuisine, “a combination of bold bright flavors with nods to Jewish, Italian, Asian, and

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106 Sedgwick, 156.
107 Yoskowitz, “Promised Land.”
Irish cultures.” Since Schulster is Jewish and Dobias grew up surrounded by Jews on Long Island, they explain, Jewish influences “seeped naturally into the food.” Dobias’s engagement with Jewish cuisine became more explicit with the debut of what became the restaurant’s signature dish, the “Conflicted Jew,” sandwich of liver, onions, and bacon on challah. He explained to a reporter that it had its origins in a chopped liver dish that did not sell well:

I always had chopped liver left over—and also bacon and challah. One day we threw it all together in a sandwich for fun; I gave it the “Conflicted Jew” moniker. It’s become cultish; we get people requesting a “little more conflict” when they order. The Conflicted Jew was not the only way Dobias and Schulster engaged Jewish cuisine. They served dishes like a Mexican adaptation of matzah brei (matzah fried with eggs; Joe Doe’s version was made with cilantro, cotija, and sambal honey), and Schulster designed cocktails incorporating Manischewitz, a sweet wine by the leading kosher brand. They held communal Passover meals where guests drank “Drunken Pharaoh,” a Manischewitz-and-bourbon cocktail, and matzah ball soup featuring dumplings stuffed with foie gras. Dobais explained that he did not think that their playful approach meant that “took religion out of the holiday, but we made it approachable to everybody.”

As Svetlana Boym identifies, “contrary to common sense, irony is not opposed to nostalgia.” Irony is an outlet for a sense of superiority, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon writes, “the special ‘intellectual satisfaction’ felt from dealing with ambiguity and paradox, contradiction and incongruity, including the delight in one’s own interpretive virtuosity, of

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111 Young.

112 Young.

course.” The relationship of irony is “the result of bringing—even rubbing—together the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other.” Traif deals with the seeming paradox of being Jewish and enjoying foods forbidden by kashrut observance. But that paradox does not reject the language of Jewish nostalgia; rather, it engages with it, as interpreters of irony have to understand the attitudes they wish to undermine even if they do not share or appreciate those attitudes. Irony is relational, operating between meanings and people. As it engages a notion of Jewish authenticity, the irony of Traif relies a post-nostalgic relationship with Jewish culinary history.

That Traif and JoeDoe are both run by non-Jewish as well as Jewish owners is not incidental. The materials of Jewish nostalgia, including kosher-style food, have become big business in the United States, consumable and, as Dobias says, approachable by Jews and non-Jews. It is not surprising that non-Jewish restaurateurs, particularly those with Jewish partners, would feel empowered to provide new perspectives on Jewish traditions. Heuser, who manages Traif, told a reporter that she thinks the restaurant takes from Judaism what she appreciates most about her partner’s religious background: an emphasis on “family, rituals, and people coming together around food.” Their restaurant’s tapas-style menu was designed so that every dish can be shared. While I do not know of any rituals, in the conventional sense, that occur at Traif, Heuser’s comment underscores the religious nature of their playful engagement with Jewish cuisine. It also demonstrates how emotional engagement with Jewish pasts has become open to both Jews and non-Jews, expanding the boundaries of a religious community.

115 Hutcheon, 58–59.
116 Hutcheon, 42.
117 Yoskowitz, “Promised Land.”
“A Knish Going Glam”

In July 2013, writer A. Pontius reviewed the Brooklyn restaurant Potatobird, which serves updated versions of knishes, on the website Tables for One. “The knish,” declared Pontius, “feels like a weird relic of New York, although unlike most relics, you can eat it with mustard.” Potatobird offers knishes to be eaten with other condiments, too, offering knishes made with maple syrup and bacon, wasabi knishes, pulled pork barbecue knishes, hushpuppy knishes, and aloo gobi knishes, among others. “These are decidedly non-kosher knishes,” Pontius concluded.

Katherine Bernof, the proprietor of the Potatobird, explained her restaurant concept, saying, “I like the idea of the knish going glam for a day. It’s like dressing up your grandmother in your leather jacket and adding some sparkly sunglasses.”118 Though the review referred to knishes as a New York food, they are one of a number of iconic Jewish foods that have been symbolically tied to New York; Berg identifies knishes as the “most ethnic and least assimilated” iconic Jewish food.119 In merging the knish with the cuisines of other cultures, Potatobird made explicit the culinary fusion of American and European Jewish cuisines that had occurred gradually throughout twentieth century.

I planned to visit Potatobird and interview Bernof for this dissertation, but, strangely, while I could locate the address of Potatobird provided in the review on Google Maps, I could not find Potatobird’s website or any other reviews. To my increasing frustration, I was also unable to locate Bernof’s contact information, no matter how many times I typed various combinations of the search terms “Katherine Bernof,” “Potatobird,” and “knish” into Google’s search engine. After spending an embarrassingly long time searching for traces of Potatobird and Bernof online, I finally realized that the website Tables for One posts reviews of fake restaurants.

119 Berg, 55.
The creation of designer Evan Johnston, the blog served as a “little world,” snapshots of “another New York City,” in which Johnston, under the nom de plume A. Pontius, reviewed restaurants of his own imagining.120

While this review seems to be a practical joke at my expense, it also signifies how widespread a phenomenon Jewish culinary nostalgia has become. It is so recognizable that websites like Tables for One can parody it, imagining an entirely plausible restaurant that playfully reimagined the knish “dressed up” in the guise of other recognizable cuisines. In fact, Potatobird was not so far off. Knishery NYC, the creation of Noah Wildman, offers sweet and savory knishes at booths at street fairs and at the specialty shops such as Malt and Mold on the Lower East Side.121 Wildman told a reporter, “It’s time for the knish to get a modern update.”122 While his knishes are not quite as outlandish as those of the imaginary Potatobird, Wildman has been known to make mushroom quinoa, curry sweet potato, broccoli cheddar and hazelnut chocolate cheese knishes.123

The campy and ironic nostalgias of the Jewish culinary revival have become a widespread phenomenon, as the Potatobird review demonstrates. Jewish culinary revivalists engage nostalgia even as they push back against it, forming dynamic relationships with imagined

120 Sally Schneider, “Table for One’s Fab Imaginary Restaurant Reviews,” The Improvised Life, April 5, 2013, http://www.improvisedlife.com/2013/04/05/table-for-ones-fab-imaginary-restaurant-reviews/#more-29201.
123 Strom. Evincing the impact of journalism and scholarship on the Jewish food industry, Wildman was inspired to create Knishery NYC after hearing journalist Laura Silver speak about her research on the history of the knish in advance of the publication of her book on the subject. Laura Silver, Knish: In Search of the Jewish Soul Food (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2014).
pasts and complex religious communities in the present. Nostalgia calls attention to what no longer exists, longing for an irrevocable past. But even in its melancholy, nostalgia can be playful and celebratory, not only of the past, but of the emotional effect of the past upon the present, like a knish going glam for the day.
**Conclusion**

**Material and Immaterial Nostalgias**

Every object, my father used to say, is also a concept. If you place two or three or ten things next to each other that have never been next to each other before, this will produce a new question. And nothing proves the existence of the future like a question.


“Carved From A Hard Resin And Painted, The Detail Of This Tzedakah Box Will Make You Feel That You Are Standing In Front Of The Touro Synagogue,” claims the Judaica website “Traditions Jewish Gifts.”¹ The six-inch-tall replica of the oldest synagogue building in the United States may or may not make viewers believe they are standing in front of the two-story Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. But even if the advertisement’s extravagant claim is hard to believe, it still suggests an important question: What feelings does this object engender in those who view it and engage with it? Such hollow, miniature resin replicas of synagogue buildings, each with a slot in the roof to deposit loose change to be collected for charity, are ubiquitous in Jewish gift shops and on online Judaica retailers. They are the kind of kitschy, sentimental object that might be easily dismissed as immaterial, not significantly representative of Jews’ beliefs, values, and practices. One can find replicas of the grand synagogues of Europe, the landmarks of ancient Israel, and American synagogues. They are kitschy precisely because they are formulaic miniatures and replicas designed to evoke vicarious experiences. While detractors of kitsch assume that the emotions it induces are too easily induced to have real import, as the bold language of the Traditions’ advertisement suggests, these tzedakah boxes are designed to draw upon the widespread phenomenon of American Jewish nostalgia, an

emotionally potent longing for irrevocable pasts that builds upon personal, familial, and communal memories.

In this dissertation, I have examined nostalgic representations of American Jewish history, including that of the actual Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building in the United States. Used to deposit loose change that householders may or may not remember to eventually donate to a charity of their choice, the mass-produced tzedakah box seems to invite quick, easy participation in communal history as owners drop a few coins in the box or patrons view it in a Judaica gift shop. I argue that this engagement, however fleeting, is indicative of a broader, normative phenomenon of American Jewish nostalgia, a longing for supposedly more authentic American Jewish eras. Neither the fleeting encounter with communal memory, the miniaturized reproduction of the synagogue, nor its kitschy sentimentality reduces the significance of the invoked connection to the past, nor does the commercial nature of the sale of the item diminish the religious practice. In many ways, this is American Jewish religion: an emotional encounter with the past through a tchotchke. The materiality of the tzedakah box is not incidental to its role in American Jewish identity politics, but integral to it. The material is not immaterial. Those who drop a few coins into the Touro Synagogue tzedakah box fulfill the modern mitzvah of nostalgia as well as the traditional mitzvah of giving charity.

To analyze the materials and practices of American Jewish nostalgia, I have examined the case studies of genealogy and family history, historic synagogues, children’s books and dolls, and Jewish restaurants. I have argued that American Jewish nostalgia, encountered through these and other material forms, is a guiding feature of American Jewish practice that challenges understandings of Jewish religion and culture as discrete categories. By enacting a longing for

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2 Tchotchke is Yiddish for knickknack or trinket.
American Jewish immigrant pasts in eastern Europe and in urban neighborhoods in the United States, American Jews draw upon imagined familial and communal histories to construct meaning for the present and articulate guiding values for the future. These functions are always both religious and cultural.

Like other Jewish renewals and reconstructions, American Jewish nostalgia is a search for the authentic. As scholar of religion Stuart Charmé observes, authenticity has become a key term in Jewish identity politics more broadly. Continuity with future generations is seen to depend on direct emotional connections with “authentic” versions of the past. As American Jews worry about how they and their children form these attachments to the past, the materials of American Jewish nostalgia teach American Jews how to engage and construct images of the authentic past.

In this dissertation, I have focused on four particular case studies that illuminate the workings of the Jewish nostalgic search for the authentic in different ways. The nostalgia of genealogists negotiates facts and family legends to provide an emotional intimacy with an authentic past, establishing the authority of both the subject and the genealogist. At historic synagogues used as heritage sites, staff members use the authentic space of the historical building to encourage patrons to feel an elegiac nostalgia; in doing so, they authorize visitors to become interpreters of the past. Illustrated books and dolls teach children and their families an intimate nostalgia that relates idealized family relationships in the present to those in an imagined authentic Jewish past, instructing children and their families in how to perpetuate the mitzvah of nostalgia. Nostalgia can also be campy, at once serious and playful, and even ironic,

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as the culinary revival of Ashkenazi American food demonstrates restaurateurs’ and patrons’ reimagining of a purportedly authentic cuisine.

These case studies usefully illustrate my argument that the nature of American Jewish nostalgia is at once individualistic, familial, and communal, as well as commercial, cultural, and religious—and, in all cases, heavily reliant on material culture to teach and induce emotional connections to a purportedly authentic past. Nonetheless, they are not the only case studies of American Jewish nostalgia I could have chosen for this dissertation. I might have conducted a more thorough study of tchotchkes, particularly items sold in Judaica gift shops and online, such as the tzedakah box described above. Indeed, retailers of Jewish cultural and religious objects, found in synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish museums, and online are ripe for analysis of American Jewish material religion.⁴ I have examined one facet of Jewish heritage tourism within the United States, but I could also have examined American heritage travel abroad, both in Europe and in Israel. As Shaul Kelner argues regarding Taglit-Birthright Israel, the free heritage trip to Israel for Jewish young adults that began in 1999, such heritage tourism is ultimately intended to shore up American Jewish personal and communal identities.⁵ Organized summer tours to Europe for American Jewish teenagers, which bring participants to old Jewish neighborhoods and Holocaust sites, have long functioned in a similar manner. These trips utilize emotional responses to spaces identified as ancestral to strengthen participants’ personal identities as American Jews and their attachment to the concept of “the Jewish people,” a term which itself evades distinctions between religion and culture.

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I could also have chosen to look more closely at the uses of Yiddish, including its appearances in tchotchkes, as Jeffrey Shandler has done.⁶ As Shandler identifies in Adventures in Yiddishland, in some ways, Yiddish itself has become kitsch, its use intended to evoke nostalgic attachments to an authentic image of Jewish culture and religion. Shandler’s identification of Yiddish as a postvernacular language, a language with a meaning other than its use as a language of daily life, has influenced my analysis of materials throughout this dissertation. Many American Jews profess a profound attachment to the idea of Yiddish without being fluent in the language, just as they are nostalgic for homelands and time periods they may never have encountered. When parents teach their toddler Yiddish words by reading the PJ Library book Nosh, Schlep, Schluff: Babyiddish, they recite, “If you want to start a ruckus, wave your arms and shake your TUCHES!”⁷ The Yiddish words in the book evoke the communities in which Yiddish was spoken regularly, providing a fleeting, emotionally based encounter with the language and the culture it suggests. Within the rhyme’s amusing advice, the Yiddish word tuches (backside) serves as a nostalgic symbol in the service of teaching children and creating community.

Moreover, even as the number of non-Hasidic native Yiddish speakers declines, interest in learning to speak Yiddish is on the rise, and I could also have examined Yiddish language and cultural programs. One particularly exciting site for research is the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky as an effort to preserve Yiddish books. The institution is now housed on Hampshire College’s campus in an interconnected complex of work, exhibition and performance spaces designed to resemble nineteenth-century

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eastern European Jewish towns. In that space, it hosts a number of programs, including a seven-week intensive course in Yiddish language and culture for college students. Other Yiddish programs are closely related to the new Jewish foodways of the culinary revival: Yiddish Farm in Goshen, New York for instance, is a Shabbat-observant organic farm that hosts Yiddish educational programs. Like the restaurateurs and food purveyors of the culinary revival, participants in the Yiddish revival are interested in both preserving a tradition and making it meaningful for personal, cultural, and religious identities in the present.

Closely related to the use of Yiddish words is the rising interest in klezmer music, another important form of American Jewish nostalgia. As literature scholar Jonathan Freedman identifies, the klezmer revival has two parts: It functions as a mainstream component of American Jewish culture, a staple of programming at local Jewish Community Centers and synagogues as well as the ritualized parties of weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs. At the same time, it also has a parallel role in the musical avant-garde as versatile musicians engage it in dialogue with other musical forms, including jazz, hip-hop, Balkans music, and classical. Freedman describes the current revival of interest in klezmer as a “postklezmer moment” in which klezmer has become accepted as a routine part of America’s musical soundscape while, at the same time, “klezmer experimentation continues to transform even as it is transformed by the

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9 Yiddish Farm, [https://yiddishfarm.org/](https://yiddishfarm.org/).

10 The documentary Hava Nagila: The Movie examines the most ubiquitous of Jewish folk songs, commonly played at Jewish weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs. Roberta Grossman, director, Hava Nagila: The Movie (Katahdin Productions: 2012).
manifold musics of America.” Complementing the material cultures of American Jewish nostalgia, the klezmer revival indicates an auditory- and performance-based practice of nostalgic longing for authentic Jewish pasts that is being creatively reworked to suit the needs of contemporary identity politics.

In fact, klezmer and Yiddish are not incidental to the case studies of material culture that I have pursued. The Museum at Eldridge Street, for instance, often holds concert performances of klezmer as well as Jewish liturgical music from other periods and regions. Hanna Griff-Sleven, the museum’s program director, describes the best of these concerts as spiritual experiences. On one Sunday afternoon in 2012, the Joey Weisenberg Ensemble led about one hundred and fifty visitors in singing niggunim, wordless Jewish songs intended to reflect the spiritual experience of intense prayer. In fact, these were new tunes of Joey Weisenberg’s creation, though they were in the style of traditional niggunim. “I feel like everyone transcended,” Griff-Sleven told me later. “They got into the space and the music. . . . I just remember beaming faces uplifted. It was just great. That was amazing.” This moment of spiritual uplift at a historic synagogue reinterpreted as a concert venue and a heritage site sheds light on the inadequacy of divisions between culture, religion, and spirituality in discussions of American Jewish practice. The event was a contemporary adaptation of traditional Jewish spiritual practice, in a historic synagogue building open to the general public as a museum. It included no assertions of faith, no liturgical texts, no traditional rituals, but it used a musical style associated with Jewish spiritual and cultural traditions.

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12 Hanna Griff-Sleven, interview by author, New York, February 8, 2013.
Despite the rich possibilities of these additional case studies of American Jewish nostalgia, I have chosen to emphasize material culture because of the pervasive connections between material culture and American Jewish religion and spirituality as well as the connections between materiality and the commerce of nostalgia. Yiddish programs and the klezmer revival are immaterial in the sense that they are not as firmly grounded in objects and bodily practices as that of the material cultures I have examined. Sally Promey and Shira Brisman argue in favor of the study of the sensory cultures of religion, “encouraging consideration of the whole human sensorium,” including vision and hearing.\textsuperscript{13} While I appreciate the significance of studying religious experiences in relation to all of the senses, I continue to recognize a distinction between interaction with the material and the immaterial.

Each of my material case studies also highlights different ways that American Jews collaborate on nostalgic projects and different methods of teaching Jewish nostalgia to others. Jewish genealogy is an apparently individualistic enterprise, focused on investigating particular lineages and family histories. Nonetheless, genealogists collaborate through Jewish Genealogical Societies and online portals, and they learn from each other through books, conferences, and blogs. Historic synagogues used as heritage sites are more clearly communal spaces, generally run by not-for-profit entities. Within these buildings, staff members, individual visitors, and families negotiate constructions of the space as a heritage site and as a synagogue. Through contestations over the meanings of these spaces, these buildings serve as spaces in which to ritually and publicly practice nostalgia for American Jews’ pasts. Likewise, children’s books are written and illustrated by individual authors and artists and ultimately consumed by families. In

between their creation and consumption, illustrated books and dolls are published and distributed by the mediating forces of for-profit and not-for-profit institutions with aims of their own. Finally, examining the Jewish culinary revival provides the most literal study of consuming American nostalgia, as restaurateurs and purveyors run businesses that connect them to their family histories and encourage patrons to feel emotional attachments to their own familial and communal pasts through purchasing and eating the food.

For American Jews, to wax nostalgic through these materials is a positive engagement with community that fulfills a mandate to honor ancestors both real and imagined and conveys desires for the future. As a mitzvah, it is one that accommodates the diverse religious needs of American Jews, providing meaning on personal, familial, communal, and institutional levels. It is a normative function of American Jewish religion and culture that is mediated and standardized by certain materials and institutions. At the same time, as an emotion and a practice, nostalgia remains intensely personal. The material practices of American Jewish nostalgia create an affective connection to the past that establishes communal, religious meaning in the present and conveys desires for the future.
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