

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Identity



Ryan Collard for The New York Times

The National Museum of American Jewish History: A display of Jewish posters from World War I (including one in Yiddish, far right) at this new museum in Philadelphia, adjacent to Independence National Historical Park.

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PHILADELPHIA — Not far from where the National Museum of American Jewish History is opening its new building on Friday for a weekend of celebrations, the Liberty Bell can be seen with its biblical inscription: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” The balconies of this \$150 million museum overlook [Independence National Historical Park](#), where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed. The [National Constitution Center](#) is on the other end of the park, and next month, just across the mall, the President’s House — the executive mansion where George Washington and John Adams lived when Philadelphia served as [the nation’s capital](#) — will be the site of a [museum](#), with a focus not just on liberty, but also on slavery.

So the location of this new Jewish museum is weighty with significance, and the museum has embraced the possibilities. Freedom — American freedom — is its theme. And while Philadelphia does not instantly come to mind as a national center for Jewish culture, this emphasis, and sheer ambition, give the museum an immediate importance, while highlighting both its weaknesses and its potential.

Founded in 1976 in a 15,000-square-foot building a half-block away, the museum was planning new construction when it learned that the KYW Newsradio building was for sale. That structure was razed, and in its place the museum erected this 100,000-square-foot, glass-and-terra-cotta-cloaked monument, designed by [James Stewart Polshek](#) and [Ennead Architects](#) and topped by an LED sculpture beaming light. It stands adjacent to the mall making its own proclamation of liberty “unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

The institution, which will close on Monday for private events and reopen on Nov. 26, bills itself as “the only museum in the nation dedicated solely to telling the story of Jews in America.” Under the guidance of a panel of scholars, led by Jonathan D. Sarna, that story unfolds over three floors, each offering a [historical chapter](#): “Foundations of Freedom, 1654-1880,” “Dreams of Freedom, 1880-1945” and “Choices and Challenges of Freedom 1945-Today.” The exhibitions — designed by [Gallagher & Associates](#), with the curatorial help of Josh Perelman, the museum’s deputy director — give a capsule survey of the trials and triumphs of Jews in America, from their cold reception in New Amsterdam to the enthusiasms of recent pop culture. The path never strays too far from familiar terrain, drawing on the museum’s collection of 25,000 artifacts along with lent objects, reproductions, video screens and museological play areas for the younger set.

In this sweep of history you may miss some of the unusual documents: a 1722 brochure by R. Judah Monis, explaining why “the Jewish Nation are not as yet converted to Christianity,” though Monis had converted in order to teach Hebrew at [Harvard College](#). Or a remarkable 1789 prayer for the new country from a synagogue in Richmond, Va., celebrating the ratification of the Constitution with a Hebrew acrostic spelling “Washington.”

And throughout the 25,000 square feet of exhibition space are chronicles of migration, assimilation and invention. There are images of 19th-century Jewish settlers in Texas and New Mexico, and costumes from 19th-century Jewish charity balls; accounts of Jews in crime and in entertainment; examples of Jews as Confederates and as Union soldiers; anecdotes about Jews as distillers and as philanthropists. From more recent times we see displays of a baseball autographed by [Sandy Koufax](#), a video of the comedian [Sarah Silverman](#), [Bella Abzug](#)’s hat and [Rebecca Rubin](#), a 2009 doll from the popular American Girl series, meant to be the daughter of Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Near the narrative’s end displays on the suburbs and [the Catskills](#) yield to a three-screen theater space with film clips from 1960s counterculture and the feminist movement; then come Jewish-related record albums, television skits, campaign buttons and the open-ended future.

This museum shows the Jew as American, present at the country’s founding and at each turning point. It is the latest incarnation of the “identity museum,” a genre that typically celebrates hyphenated American identity. These museums are expressions of triumphs by minorities, announcing their allegiances, accounting for their hardships, chronicling their political awakenings, recalling their contributions. In a sense the identity museum is a morality tale about success in the cooled-off melting-pot of contemporary democracy; it is a declaration of political power to outsiders, an affirmation of shared experience to cohorts.

As in other identity museums, there is a Hall of Fame here, in this case a multimedia area in the lobby called the “‘Only in America’ Gallery,” with images and artifacts honoring 18 Jewish-Americans selected by voters [on the Internet](#). But the museum’s hand is evident in the careful distribution of honorees: [Irving Berlin](#) and [Leonard Bernstein](#), [Albert Einstein](#) and Estée Lauder, Golda Meir and [Barbra Streisand](#), [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#) and Mr. Koufax.

The museum’s argument is that the success of the Jews in the United States can be attributed to the unprecedented character of American liberty. And that becomes evident. The museum is careful too not to turn celebration into a cartoon; there are many struggles along the way. It also

points out that not all Jews were unambiguously devoted to ideas of freedom, nor, as it notes in passing, was liberty always an unalloyed blessing for Jewry — it implicitly accommodated assimilation and intermarriage. (One 1735 portrait here shows a Philadelphia Jew, resonantly named Phila Franks, who eloped to marry Oliver De Lancey, a Calvinist Huguenot.)

We learn of the development of Reform Judaism, which in its embrace of American liberalism rejected so many Jewish ritual obligations that when its seminary in Cincinnati, the [Hebrew Union College](#), celebrated the ordination of its first rabbis in 1883, it served what became known as the [Trefa Banquet](#). The menu, seen here, was dominated by “treyf,” or nonkosher, foods, including oysters, clams, shrimp and frogs’ legs, while readily mixing milk and meat.

But with its preoccupation with liberty, the museum has also given American Jewish history a spin. Freedom’s importance surely includes freedom to worship, which has been far from guaranteed in Jewish history. It also includes freedom to participate in civil society as a secular citizen, and this too, even in Europe after the Enlightenment, could hardly be taken for granted. The United States has been the great exception. But then the museum leans heavily toward the right-hand side of the Jewish-American hyphen, being more preoccupied with the freedom Jews had to become Americans, than the freedom they had to remain Jews.

It is as if the museum so wanted to generalize from the Jewish experience and justify its mission as a beacon celebrating political and ethnic freedom, that it misses much of Judaism’s particularity. The outline of the story becomes generic; it simply taps into the contemporary identity narrative. We never really understand what Judaism has been as a religion, as a collection of beliefs and laws; so we never see how those beliefs and laws might have been consistent with American visions of liberty. Nor do we understand how they might have contributed to the success of Jews in America or even shaped their lives in secular society.

The museum’s focus is on particular Jews, their migrations, their political positions, their achievements, their enjoyments of American possibilities — all social or material aspects of identity. This is one reason so much of the final gallery is given over to the ’60s counterculture, to feminism and to political protest: the emphasis, here as elsewhere, is on *civil* rights (though there is little exploration of why so many Jews were drawn to the counterculture).

Similarly, in the exhibition as a whole, Reform Judaism gets extensive attention, because close association with civil and secular life was one of its initial preoccupations. But we hardly learn anything about the growth of the other distinctive American Jewish movements, including [Conservative](#), [Reconstructionist](#), varieties of [American Orthodoxy](#), or even, in more recent decades, Hasidism’s resurrection as a potent religious (and political) force. The exhibition makes it seem as if the culmination of the American-Jewish experience was an amorphous cultural Judaism.

Something important is missed as a result. In European countries the administration of Jewish communities was typically highly centralized; these communities were answerable to central governments as alien bodies. Even where the [Ottoman Empire](#) ruled, Jews were considered metics — foreign resident groups, with semi-autonomous deferential administrations.

In the United States all that was thoroughly overturned. It wasn't just freedom of worship that changed things. It was a spirit of individualism. Communal Jewish regulation was weakened and possibilities multiplied. Without any central authority and spread over wide geographical distances, Jews could choose a community, a house of worship and, in a sense, a set of beliefs — or not. Independent movements could proliferate and gather adherents more easily than in Europe, which may be one reason American Jewish denominations have had such a profound impact. The United States inspired a kind of libertarian Judaism that led to strange tensions, given the traditional rigors of Jewish law and community life.

The museum's focus on freedom is actually too constrictive. It limits the ways Judaism can be understood, gives too much emphasis to some things, ignores others. The museum is partly correct about the emergence of cultural Judaism — without ever using that phrase — but we don't come closer to understanding it. What we are offered instead are glimpses into a remarkable history. We are also challenged — and perhaps this is sufficient — to make sense of its connection to the political culture that took shape a few hundred yards away.

The National Museum of American Jewish History, at 101 South Independence Mall East in Philadelphia, opens on Friday for celebrations running through Sunday; most events are sold out. It will then close, and reopen on Nov. 26; (215) 923-3811, nmajh.org.

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http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/12/arts/design/12museum.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=national%20museum%20of%20american%20jewish%20history&st=cse