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# Beyond the Synagogue

## Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice

BY RACHEL B. GROSS

### Instructor's Guide

**Reveals nostalgia as a new way of maintaining Jewish continuity**

In 2007, the Museum at Eldridge Street opened at the site of a restored nineteenth-century synagogue originally built by some of the first Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York City. Visitors to the museum are invited to stand along indentations on the floor where footprints of congregants past have worn down the soft pinewood. Here, many feel a palpable connection to the history surrounding them.

*Beyond the Synagogue* argues that nostalgic activities such as visiting the Museum at Eldridge Street or eating traditional Jewish foods should be understood as American Jewish religious practices. In making the case that these practices are not just cultural, but are actually religious, Rachel B. Gross asserts that many prominent sociologists and historians have mistakenly concluded that American Judaism is in decline, and she contends that they are looking in the wrong places for Jewish religious activity. If they looked outside of traditional institutions and practices, such as attendance at synagogue or membership in Jewish Community Centers, they would see that the embrace of nostalgia provides evidence of an alternative, under-appreciated way of being Jewish and of maintaining Jewish continuity.

Tracing American Jews' involvement in a broad array of ostensibly nonreligious activities, including conducting Jewish genealogical research, visiting Jewish historic sites, purchasing books and toys that teach Jewish nostalgia to children, and seeking out traditional Jewish foods, Gross argues that these practices illuminate how many American Jews are finding and making meaning within American Judaism today.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Feeling Jewish*

The introduction argues that nostalgia—a wishful affection or sentimental longing for an irrevocable past—functions as religion for American Jews, complicating perceived divisions between Judaism, the religion, and Jewishness, the culture. The author argues that American Jewish nostalgia for Eastern Europe has become a *mitzvah* (literally, “commandment”; colloquially, good deed) for American Jews, something both praiseworthy and obligatory for them. Examining ostensibly secular nostalgic activities as American Jewish religious practices refutes the claims of proponents of the American Jewish “continuity crisis,” who worry that American Jewish religion is declining.

#### Questions for Discussion

- According to the author, what kinds of nostalgic stories do American Jews tell? What nostalgic stories are told by the communities in which you participate?
- The author identifies ways that Jewish nostalgia is communicated by materials and institutions. Name some examples of nostalgia taught through materials and institutions have you encountered in other contexts, not limited to the American Jewish community.
- The author describes nostalgia for Eastern European immigration history as a “public feeling,” an emotion that is shared and taught by families and institutions. Can you think of other examples of public feelings that are shared by communities?
- What is at stake in the author’s argument against the “continuity crisis” and her assertion that American Judaism is thriving, not declining? What might make this controversial?
- Are there things in your own life that you see imbued with religious value but that are not often recognized as religious?

#### Activities

- Write a short personal narrative about your relationship to nostalgia. Were you taught to feel nostalgia by parents, teachers, or others in your community?
- Share an object or an image that inspires nostalgia for you. How do your feelings about this object or image connect you to a broader community? Would you consider that connection to community to be religious?

## CHAPTER ONE

### *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Nostalgia?*

Nostalgic practices are part of the unrecognized religious practices of American Jews across and beyond denominational structures, divisions that have become increasingly fluid. Both religion and nostalgia are terms that are often taken for granted but which have complicated histories. The concept of religion is a modern, Protestant creation, and Jewish practices have frequently fit uncomfortably in the category of religion, despite the best efforts of Jewish thinkers to separate religious and cultural aspects of Jewish practice. American Jewish nostalgia draws upon both American Protestant and European Jewish sentimental precedents. As American Jews have grown increasingly distant from the objects of communal longing—urban immigrant neighborhoods and imagined Eastern European shtetl origins—popular culture and public history have played an increasingly essential role in American Jews' lives.

#### Questions for Discussion

- What is nostalgia? Why does nostalgia matter? How has the public perception of nostalgia changed over time?
- The author identifies children's books and restaurants as sites of public history. Can you think of other sites or materials that should be considered "public history" but are not usually classified that way?
- What are the political or social ramifications of arguing that religion is or is not declining in the United States or elsewhere? What is at stake in these arguments?

#### Activities

- Review highlights from a Pew Research Center's "[A Portrait of Jewish Americans](#)" and a local Jewish community study, if one exists. How do you think the authors of the study define religion? What choices do they make in how to measure Jewishness?
- Provide students with a list of definitions of religion by theorists and religious studies scholars. Ask them to rank them their favorite definitions. Why do they prefer some over others? What groups are left out by different definitions? Are there political or social implications to choosing one definition over another? Which of these definitions would include the kind of religious practices the author discusses?
- Provide students with different definitions of nostalgia. Which ones do students prefer? What is at stake in which activities are defined as nostalgic or sentimental?

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Give Us Our Name: Creating Jewish Genealogy*

Since its organizational beginnings in the 1970s, Jewish genealogy has offered an emotional and spiritual experience of Jewish history. Nostalgia helps Jewish genealogists connect their family histories, their experiences in the present, and communal narratives of the past. Genealogists' research creates new forms of Jewish lived religion, in which they establish their own authoritative place in Jewish history. The author argues that the emotion connecting them to familial and communal histories is a means to claim ownership over the past and make it one's own.

#### Questions for Discussion

- Have you researched your family's genealogy or do you have a relative who has? If so, what kinds of things did you learn? What kind of choices did you or your relative make about how to conduct that research?
- How might genealogists' research methods or publications be different from historians' research or publications?
- What do people mean when they talk about "Jewish genes"? What is at stake in conversations about Jews and DNA?

#### Activities

- Display or describe an object that tells you something about your family history. What emotions does that object make you feel? What family and communal stories does it connect you to?
- Explore your local Jewish Genealogical Society's website. How does the group describe themselves? Do they share resources with their members? What kind of events or publications do they have? Does what you found support the author's claim that genealogy can be nostalgic and can be part of American Jewish religious practice?
- Watch the [Entertainment Tonight clip](#) featuring Jessica Biel's appearance on *Who Do You Think You Are*. Biel says learning about her Jewish ancestry "changes everything." What do you think she means by this? What would this knowledge change?

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Ghosts in the Gallery: Historic Synagogues as Heritage Sites*

Historic synagogues are points where Jews and non-Jews find religious meaning by connecting to the past through the authorizing process of emotional responses. This chapter examines the Museum at Eldridge Street, the Touro Synagogue, the Vilna Shul, and the Jewish Museum of Florida. These institutions use longing for the past to teach a particular religious and civic vision of the future through a network of relationships involving Jews, non-Jews, and particular forms of ghostly ancestors. Creating, teaching, and participating in an elegiac nostalgia, staff members and visitors to historic synagogues participate in the dynamic religion of American Jews.

#### Questions for Discussion

- Can you think of a local example of a site that tells a nostalgic story? What choices does this site make in presenting itself to the public? Should you consider the site a religious site, and why or why not?
- What is the difference between tourism and pilgrimage? How do you know?

#### Activities

- Explore the website or Instagram feed of one of the historic synagogues discussed in this chapter or that of a local historic site. How do they present themselves to the public? What kinds of events do they have? What do they think potential visitors need to know about their institution?
- Read elegies aloud in class and reflect on how poets link mourning and remembering the past to religious experiences. Examples of elegies include Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Courtyard”; two nineteenth-century reflections on the Touro Synagogue, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” and Emma Lazarus, “In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport”; and a more recent example, Sam Sax, “The Politics of Elegy.” How are these poems similar to the way that staff members at historic synagogues tell elegiac stories about their buildings’ histories? Have students write an elegy for a historic site that they have encountered.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *True Stories: Teaching Nostalgia to Children*

Through children's books and dolls, American Jews teach their children—and other people's children—nostalgia for Eastern European Jewish immigration as practice of American Jewish religion and American civic religion more broadly. 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 characters of dolls to encourage a connection to a particular American Jewish narrative, even for children whose family histories differ from the normative. Building on the intimacy of historical 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.

#### Questions for Discussion

- How do the children's books discussed in this chapter teach nostalgia for certain historical eras?
- How are girls and boys depicted in the books discussed in this chapter?
- Did you read historical fiction as a child? Did these stories instruct readers to feel nostalgic for certain historical eras? What aspects of history might they have left out? What feelings or beliefs were these books trying to instill in readers by creating a relationship between readers and a particular past?

#### Activities

- Read one of the children's books discussed in this chapter or a similar book depicting American Jewish history aloud in class. How do the author and the illustrator depict American Jewish history? How do they help readers build an emotional connection to the past? What kinds of choices did they make in writing the text and creating the artwork?
- Examine the [PJ Library](#) website, especially the reading guides for books discussed in this chapter or other books depicting Jewish history. What values does the organization want to communicate to parents and children? How do they want Jewish and interfaith families to feel about certain Jewish histories?
- Explore the [American Girl](#) website, especially the content related to Rebecca Rubin. How does American Girl present early-twentieth-century American Jewish history? What relationship to the past are consumers of these products supposed to have? How do the American Girl products package and market nostalgia for particular eras, and how does this encourage a religious response to their products?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Referendum on the Jewish Deli Menu: A Culinary Revival*

In the early twenty-first century, there has been a nostalgic revival of Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine, dishes brought by Central and Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States around the turn of the century and developed in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Rather than simply reproducing recipes from Ashkenazi Jews' Eastern European pasts and immigrant heritage in the United States, restaurateurs and other entrepreneurs are deliberately making American Jewish food fit for the twenty-first century. They have lost faith in the legitimacy of American Jewish culinary norms and their institutions, namely, mainstream Jewish restaurants, delis, and manufacturers. Their work emphasizes sustainability, reliance on local goods, and the slow food movement. They tout their artisanal production, culinary creativity, or a playful irony—all of which demonstrate a campy nostalgia that makes American Jewish history meaningful in the present.

#### Questions for Discussion

- What counts or should count as “Jewish food”? Can non-kosher food be Jewish food?
- What is the relationship between New York and Jewish food? How do the restaurateurs and other entrepreneurs discussed in this chapter respond to that history?
- How is telling history through food different from other ways of telling historical stories?
- Can you think of types of food or restaurants in your community that tell a nostalgic story? Would you consider eating these foods or at these restaurants to be a religious activity?
- Have you ever made or ordered food that you did not necessarily want to eat because you wanted to experience something “authentic” or because you wanted to express something about yourself by eating it? Did making or eating it help you create an emotional connection to your family or to a community in which you participate?

#### Activities

- Explore the website or Instagram feed of a restaurant or other business discussed in this chapter or of a local Jewish deli, if one exists. How does the restaurant or business incorporate ideas about Jewish history? How does the restaurant present its own history?
- Create a menu or an advertisement for a restaurant that draws on nostalgia in producing and selling food. Think about recognizable dishes, creativity, stereotypes, and your intended audience as you produce this artifact.



## CONCLUSION

### *The Limits and Possibilities of Nostalgia*

Recognizing the dynamic practices, desires, pleasures, and play of American Jewish nostalgia as religious ones points us to the wide variety of ways that Americans find constitutive meaning in their lives beyond traditional denominational structures, in institutions and through practices generally considered secular. Redefining American Jewish religion expands where we see Americans finding meaning and emphasizes the relationship between families and institutions. The conclusion reflects on the role that categories of gender, age, race, and sexual orientation play in nostalgia for Eastern European Jewish history, as well as how the institutions of American Jewish nostalgia are changing in the twenty-first century.

#### Questions for Discussion

- How is nostalgia useful for communities? What work does it do?
- Is there harm done by nostalgia? Are there people or stories left out of American Jewish nostalgia for turn-of-the-century immigration from Eastern Europe?

#### Activities

- Read Joanne Oppenheim's *The Knish War on Rivington Street*. Is this a Jewish story? How do you know? Who do you think this book was intended for?
- As a class, make a list of where you see religion in your communities. Can you think of examples of institutions or materials that are not normally thought of as religious but could be considered so with a broad definition of religion?