Inside Out

American Jews and the Jewish America at the National Museum of American Jewish History

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Abstract

It has been said that the quintessential Jewish perspective is standing outside, looking in—that Jews are the world’s outcasts. When the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) opens its new building on Fifth and Market Street in Philadelphia, however, it will tell a different story. Jews at the museum are quintessential *insiders*, model citizens who teach the nation how to be American. Building on the narrative of liberty already present on Independence Mall, the architecture and content of the museum’s new building construct an image of an American Jewish community which celebrates, embodies, and defends American liberty. At the NMAJH, Jews force America to live up to the image it projects. The museum’s new core exhibit casts Jews as the guardians of American liberty, constantly fighting to make American society more egalitarian. Where America is passive or discriminatory, Jews appear active and inclusive; when America fosters prejudice, Jews point the nation toward its Constitutional promises of justice and liberty, interpreted from a post-Civil Rights perspective. Constantly reaching out to the underprivileged and advocating on behalf of persecuted groups, Jews at the NMAJH defend and uphold American ideals when the nation itself does not. They reveal America’s hypocrisy by embodying its imagined identity. And, since their advocacy results in expanded civil liberties, they make the United States *American* by helping the nation become the land of freedom and opportunity it proclaims to be. Jews, in other words, render the nation honest.

The museum thus Americanizes Jews and judaizes America. Casting the American Jewish community as the embodiment of national ideals, the NMAJH constructs an image of America that depends on Jews to actualize its imagined identity. Jews, in this narrative, *Americanize* America. That is, they force the nation to uphold equal opportunity and justice for all. America, in this narrative, has Jewish roots. At the same time, the museum Americanizes
the country’s Jewish population. As champions of equality and justice, American Jews embody the definition of liberty provided by the museum. They are model American citizens.
Introduction

“One might say that the essential Jewish perspective is standing outside, looking in.”

_The Tribe_

_The Tribe_ advertises itself as “an unorthodox, unauthorized film about the Jewish people and the Barbie doll . . . in about fifteen minutes.” It is, however, also a witty commentary on the complexities of modern American Jewish identity. According to the film, Barbie is America’s “quintessential insider,” famous, popular, and above all absolutely American. Jews, in contrast, are the world’s outsiders, heirs to a long history of expulsion, persecution, and marginalization. _The Tribe_ orients its message around the apparent irony that Ruth Handler, a Jewish woman, created the Barbie doll. In the film, Barbie symbolizes the Jewish desire to assimilate into America, a country which supposedly “loves stories of outsiders becoming insiders.” But the American Jews featured in _The Tribe_ exhibit signs that they have not yet achieved this status. The film ends with a montage of American Jews. As each figure appears on the screen, either the narrator or the individual states his or her preferred label: cultural Jew, culinary Jew, agnostic, unaffiliated, bad Jew, feminist, Jewess, Jew-ish. One seems hesitant and unsure about his Jewish identity; one asks defensively, “Who wants to know? Are you Jewish?” None express their Jewish affiliation simply and confidently. Most poignantly, the montage concludes the film with one woman’s recitation of a rhythmic poem about her experience with anti-Semitism:

_You’re Jewish? Wow! You don’t look Jewish. You don’t act Jewish. And he says it in this tone that sounds like he’s complimenting me. And I say . . . and I say . . . nothing. I say nothing which combined with a flirty smile says . . . thank you. I say nothing ’cause I’m drunk on denial coladas. I say nothing ’cause I got a contact high at someone’s anti-Semitic crack-pipe. I say nothing because somewhere along my life’s path I’ve been swayed to think that being Jewish is not too cool, not too sexy."

This woman, like the other young Jews represented here, expresses anxiety about her Jewish identity; she does not want to be recognizable as a Jew. Despite growing up in “a multicultural
world where cultures now circulate and intermix freely” with the ability to “redefine and reclaim their connection to tradition,” these American Jews are still uncertain about their Jewish identities. In *The Tribe*, Jews still feel like outsiders, even in America, even today.

When the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) opens its new building on Fifth and Market Street in Philadelphia, it will tell a different story. Unlike the quintessential outsiders of *The Tribe*, Jews at the museum are quintessential insiders, model citizens who teach the nation how to be American. Building on the narrative of liberty already present on Independence Mall, the architecture and content of the museum’s new building construct an image of an American Jewish community which celebrates, embodies, and defends American liberty.\(^1\) This vision of American Jewish identity rests first and foremost on the museum’s definition of *American* identity. Like almost all the nation’s historic sites, the NMAJH celebrates the “American heritage of liberty,” locating freedom at the core of American identity. The liberty celebrated at the museum, however, derives from the twentieth-century rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, not the country’s eighteenth-century foundations. For the nation’s founding fathers, liberty primarily meant freedom from monarchical authority. For King, it meant freedom from injustice—freedom as equality and opportunity. By interpreting the Constitution, and all of American history, through the lens of King’s vision, the NMAJH constructs an America that has always defined itself as a land of opportunity and a haven for the oppressed. At the same time, the museum constructs an America

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\(^1\) The information and interpretations contained in this paper are subject to change. Because the Museum will not open until the summer of 2010, materials for the new exhibit are under constant revision. In the course of a week or two exhibit designs and object lists can vary significantly. Additionally, the curators and storytellers have not yet written introductory texts and object labels, finalized object lists, or created the media displays. I have therefore based my conclusions on the materials available to me—primarily a narrative overview written by Josh Perelman, the Museum’s historian, and tentative object lists. To the best of my knowledge, all information was up-to-date as of March 22, 2009. The curators will undoubtedly modify the overall narrative, case contents, and exhibit design between now and the museum’s opening, possibly transforming the museum’s construction of American and Jewish identities as well. It remains to be seen whether the building on Fifth and Market Streets a year from now will communicate the same message I discern today.
which celebrates itself as the embodiment of an ideal which it does not uphold. Throughout the exhibit, American society appears discriminatory and apathetic, persecuting minority groups and ignoring the plight of oppressed people. This is an America that imagines itself falsely, failing to act like the nation it claims to be.

At the NMAJH, Jews force America to live up to the image it projects. The museum’s new core exhibit casts Jews as the guardians of American liberty, constantly fighting to make American society more egalitarian. Where America is passive or discriminatory, Jews appear active and inclusive; when America fosters prejudice, Jews point the nation toward its Constitutional promises of justice and liberty, interpreted from a post-Civil Rights perspective. Constantly reaching out to the underprivileged and advocating on behalf of persecuted groups, Jews at the NMAJH defend and uphold American ideals when the nation itself does not. They reveal America’s hypocrisy by embodying its imagined identity. And, since their advocacy results in expanded civil liberties, they make the United States American by helping the nation become the land of freedom and opportunity it proclaims to be. Jews, in other words, render the nation honest.

The museum thus Americanizes Jews and judaizes America. Casting the American Jewish community as the embodiment of national ideals, the NMAJH constructs an image of America that depends on Jews to actualize its imagined identity. Jews, in this narrative, Americanize America. That is, they force the nation to uphold equal opportunity and justice for all. America, in this narrative, has Jewish roots. At the same time, the museum Americanizes the country’s Jewish population. As champions of equality and justice, American Jews embody the definition of liberty provided by the museum. They are model American citizens.
This paper will explain how the museum composes this picture of America and its Jewish community. The first chapter addresses issues of physicality, location, and space. I trace how the symbolic location on Independence Mall prepares visitors to celebrate freedom and encounter paradigms of American citizenship. Moving from the museum’s surroundings to its physical presence, I analyze the significance of the new building’s architecture, which shapes visitor experience of the museum’s core exhibit. In the second chapter, I consider the exhibit itself, exploring the NMAJH’s use of narrative and display strategies to construct meaning. Looking particularly at the museum’s treatment of anti-Semitism, iconic moments in American history, and activities within the Jewish community, I explain how the exhibit structures collective memory, redefining what it means to be both Jewish and American in the United States. In order to draw parallels between various parts of the museum’s exhibit I will not address the galleries in order. To help readers follow my location in the museum, I have included detailed floor plans of the exhibit design in Appendix A. Approaching the exhibit in this manner allows me to identify core exhibit themes and trace the museum’s construction of American Jewish identity. By linking seemingly disparate parts of the museum’s exhibit I will explore how the NMAJH reverses the argument of The Tribe by transforming Jews into America’s quintessential insiders. Turning the traditional narrative of Jewish history inside out, the National Museum of American Jewish History Americanizes Jewish identity and judaizes the United States of America.
Chapter 1
Preparing the Visitor: Space and Meaning at the NMAJH

The National Museum of American Jewish History’s new building will stand in the center of a symbolic landscape. Situated in the center of Independence National Historical Park, halfway between the National Constitution Center and Independence Hall and across the street from the Liberty Bell, the museum’s new location is loaded with significance (see Appendix B, Figures 1 and 2 for a map of the museum’s future location). Associated with the nation’s foundational myth, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, Independence Mall is a national sacred space, with a narrative of liberty all its own. This narrative will profoundly affect visitor interpretations of the NMAJH, which celebrates the same definition of freedom exhibited on the Mall. A staging ground for the museum’s performance of American and Jewish identities, Independence Mall shapes visitor experience by presenting a particular vision of America’s imagined identity.

The Mall

The Liberty Bell Center and the National Constitution Center both celebrate freedom as a defining aspect of America’s national identity. They also raise questions about how the nation has manifested this quality in its cultural and political activities. The Liberty Bell Center opened its doors in 2003 after a long public controversy about the nature of American freedom. This controversy began with Edward Lawler, Jr.’s revelation that during Philadelphia’s brief stint as the nation’s capital, George and Martha Washington housed eight slaves in the presidential

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2 The museum is well aware of the significance of its surroundings. “It’s Your Story,” a promotional film for the museum’s expansion, asks viewers to “Imagine, in the place where freedom was born, a museum that celebrates the Jewish experience with freedom” (It’s Your Story, 2007).
mansion. These slaves lived in the building’s rear quarters, which were located exactly where the Park Service planned to display the Liberty Bell. Initially, the Park Service refused to acknowledge either the irony of the Bell’s new home or the issue of slavery in the Center’s exhibit. Washington’s slaves and the Liberty Bell were two different stories, so they claimed, that should be treated separately. Including both, they argued, “would create a design dissonance between the two features, potentially causing confusion for visitors.” The idea that national heroes like George Washington owned slaves conflicted with the Park Service’s plan to commemorate an American ideal, not an American reality. All previous exhibits of the Liberty Bell were highly patriotic, venerating America’s dedication to freedom without raising questions about how the nation manifested that dedication in reality.

In March of that year WHYY aired an interview with Gary Nash, an historian and author of First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory, who strongly opposed the Park Service’s position. The issue quickly became a public controversy. By May the Park Service had changed its tone, postponing the opening of the Liberty Bell Center and collaborating with scholars to include the story of Washington’s slaves in their new exhibit. The narrative of America on display at the Liberty Bell Center today is the product of this collaboration and accounts in part for the NMAJH’s ability to tell the story it does. Whereas previous exhibits of the Liberty Bell focused on a patriotic acceptance of America’s dedication to freedom, today’s Center celebrates the Liberty Bell as a “symbol of liberties gained and a reminder of liberties denied.” It highlights the irony of the Bell’s trip to Charleston in 1902, when legal segregation abounded in the South, and its appropriation by the struggle for women’s

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3 Further information on the President’s house controversy, including press articles, letters to the Park Service, and Park Service announcements, can be found on the Independence Hall Association’s website: http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/index.htm.
suffrage in 1915.4 As for the slavery controversy, the Center devotes a large portion of its exhibit to abolitionism, emphasizing national efforts to include African-Americans under the protective wing of a very particular notion of American freedom.

By highlighting issues like suffrage, abolitionism, and integration, the exhibit at the Center narrates the Liberty Bell from a post Civil Rights perspective. Liberty, here, is not freedom from taxes, freedom to own land, or freedom to pursue happiness in some vague, abstract way. It is not even as simple as freedom from enslavement. Liberty, on Independence Mall and at the National Museum of American Jewish History, is equality, opportunity, and justice. It is the freedom of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Era, but not the liberty envisioned by the founding fathers, many of whom owned black slaves.iii King’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “I Have A Dream” speech on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. forever changed America’s definition of freedom, redefining it as the abolition of injustice and inequality. Responding to eight white Alabama clergymen who opposed his public demonstrations against segregation, King wrote, “I am in Birmingham because injustice exists here. Just as . . . the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home and town.”iv For King, the “gospel of freedom” is the antidote to Birmingham’s unfair and unjust treatment of its African-American population. Freedom here goes beyond an end to the commoditization of human beings inherent to the slave trade. Instead it requires an end to racism and discrimination, an end to disenfranchisement and prejudice as well as slavery.

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4 A caption from 1915 reads “The original Liberty Bell announced the creation of democracy; The Women’s Liberty Bell will announce the completion of democracy” (Davis 2004, 966).
Freedom, according to King, requires absolute equality, a concept more forcefully articulated in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington. After welcoming the multitude on the National Mall to the “greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation,” King lamented that one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation “the Negro is still not free,” drawing on segregation, prejudice, exile, and poverty as evidence of African-Americans’ continued enslavement. Addressing proponents of civil rights, he called their fight a “thirst for freedom” and insisted that the “sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent” be followed by “an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.” At the end of the speech, he coupled the eight famous “I have a dream” statements—hopeful visions of equality, understanding, and an end to racism—with the same number of equally famous exhortations to “Let freedom ring” across America. Emancipation, for King, did not equal freedom so long as discrimination and injustice persisted. True freedom could only find expression in equality, fairness and opportunity. This is the freedom the Liberty Bell Center, the Mall, and the NMAJH appropriate to describe America.

It is a freedom that also requires constant protection by the American people. At the Liberty Bell Center, a caption suggests that, “the preservation of the bell, like liberty itself, is an ongoing process.” Liberty, here, is just a word engraved on a bell until realized in the actions of American people; it is a process—an icon pointing to an ideal, not necessarily an American reality. The Liberty Bell Center, then, does not celebrate America as a free country, but as a country that espouses freedom. It renders liberty central to American national identity while reminding visitors that this liberty, on its own, is only an idea. Only Americans can ensure that it becomes a reality. Just as the Park Service must work to preserve the Bell, Americans must work to protect the freedom it represents.
The National Constitution Center presents a similar construction of American identity but places greater emphasis on the role of Americans in the realization of Constitutional promises. The Center makes a concerted effort not to put words into the mouths of its visitors, providing primarily interactive exhibits that provoke questions and include numerous opportunities for visitors to offer their own responses. Here, one cannot take the definition of freedom and the meaning of American identity for granted. The “talkback” bulletin boards that fill several times a day with visitors responses to questions like “What does it mean to be an American?” and the well-used discussion areas set aside for debate and dialogue testify that visitors get the picture.5 This museum encourages visitors to clarify their own definitions of liberty and American identity, leaving room for dissent as much as affirmation. An area known as Signers Hall contains two large books in which visitors can sign their names. One is for those who accept the Constitution’s formulation of America and one for those who reject it. Only the dissenters have the opportunity to explain their reasons for declining to “sign” the Constitution. The Center, in other words, presents the Constitution as one possibility for the nation’s identity, thereby authorizing visitors to consider alternatives as well. Interactive displays like these encourage visitors to become the kinds of Americans who enact the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

Framing its narrative as a series of choices and questions, the Constitution Center’s exhibit emphasizes active engagement with national ideals and acceptance of them. By encouraging visitors to ask themselves about the meaning of liberty and American identity, the Center makes the act of defining those terms itself an important part of American citizenship. At

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5 The National Museum of American Jewish History will have similar boards in its Contemporary Issues Forum at the exhibit’s end. Some questions under consideration for this gallery are “Does inter-marriage pose a threat to the future of Judaism?” “Should American Jewish organizations continue to send millions of dollars to Israel?” and “Is it fair for rabbinical seminaries to refuse to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis?” (National Museum of American Jewish History 2007).
the same time, it forces visitors to recognize the ambiguity and polysemous nature of such categories.

Furthermore, the Constitution Center emphasizes the role Americans play in the construction of national identity. In the introductory multi-media presentation, “Freedom Rising”, an actress asks, “We the people. Who are we? What makes us a people?” The rest of the presentation proceeds to answer these questions. The use of rhetorical questions, however, encourages the audience to think that they have come to these conclusions on their own. In the rest of the presentation, the Center emphasizes the uniqueness of the American concept of liberty and the role of ordinary people in its creation. With declarations like “History turns here when we declare ourselves to be independent; when we say our country shall be free the world changes,” and “we build a free nation which over time has helped others save theirs,” the actress suggests that American independence forever altered the course of world events and that the subsequent institution of American liberty was a unique and profound moment in history. America, in this narrative, brings salvation to the oppressed world. More importantly, though, “Freedom Rising” presents this salvation as the production of everyday, ordinary people. According to the performer, “The American Revolution pits a homegrown army of shopkeepers and farmers against the mass forces of the most powerful nation on earth.” Here “shopkeepers and farmers” stand in for the idea of ordinary people—individuals just like the Center’s imagined visitors. These visitors already know that the merchants and farmers won the war. They have also learned from the presentation that the outcome of this war will affect shopkeepers and farmers worldwide. Ordinary people, in other words, facilitated the world’s deliverance by celebrating, upholding, and fighting for American liberty. The net effect of these proclamations
is that visitors walk away with both with a sense of pride in American freedom and a sense of responsibility to manifest that ideal in their own American identity.\textsuperscript{viii}

Finally, the Constitution Center’s core exhibit significantly appropriates the first three words of the Constitution in its title, “The Story of We, the People.” The choice to highlight “We, the people” over other emblematic concepts in the preamble emphasizes the role of ordinary Americans in the production and maintenance of America’s imagined identity. Equally powerful exhibits could have been created around ideas like “Justice”, the “more perfect Union,” or “the Blessings of Liberty.” But, none of these terms point to the central role American citizens played in the nation’s founding. In the Constitution, “We, the People,” indicates the new country’s desire to establish a state in which “people—not the king, not the legislature, not the courts—are the true rulers in American government.”\textsuperscript{vi} The National Constitution Center builds on these associations. By emphasizing that the founding fathers wanted America’s people to take an active role in the country’s leadership, the Center also suggests that people, not the government, are responsible both for defining and expressing national ideals and American identity. The Center’s appropriation of “We, the People” empowers American citizens by indicating that they are the true force behind American identity.

Exhibitions like these prepare visitors for their trip to the NMAJH by articulating American freedom in the terms laid out by Martin Luther King, Jr. Leaving the Constitution Center, visitors expect ideal American citizens to act on their principles. More specifically, they will expect model Americans to fight for their interpretation of freedom. Although the exhibit claims to allow visitors the freedom to define liberty for themselves “Freedom Rising actually frames it in the terms of the Civil Rights Movements. As the performer speaks about the influence on world events, images like the fall of the Berlin Wall and World War II victories
appear on the large screens at the top of the theater. Combined with a trip to the Liberty Bell Center, visitors will be sure to understand that on Independence Mall ideal American citizens fight for fairness, equality, and justice. Even if visitors to the NMAJH avoid the other museums on Independence Mall, their presence is enough to link liberty to America’s national identity. The Liberty Bell’s name alone invokes the idea of freedom while Independence Hall and the National Constitution Center carry strong connotations of the origins of American history and the formation of American identity. The outside wall of the Independence Visitor Center, directly across the street from the Liberty Bell Center, identifies this freedom as the liberty envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. A public art piece by Allison Sky entitled “Indelible” (figures 1 and 2) displays the original version of the Declaration of Independence, which included a passage condemning slavery, printed on large panes of glass. Set into these panels are selected quotations on freedom from “those left out of the
‘all’” in “... all Men are created equal” of the Declaration of Independence and the “... all the Inhabitants Thereof” inscribed on the Liberty Bell. “Indelible” includes comments from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abigail Adams (wife of John Adams and an advocate for women’s rights), and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. Finally, the opening words to the Constitution emblazoned in large letters on the façade of the Constitution Center (figure 3) suggest the responsibilities of American citizenship and remind museum-goers that the nation was founded on the idea of public participation. Entering the National Museum of American Jewish History from this environment, visitors will evaluate the nation’s past in these terms. Individuals who embrace America’s promise of freedom and actively defend equal opportunity will appear to exemplify the Americaness articulated by the Mall. Discrimination, indifference, and passivity on the part United States citizens will signal America’s hypocrisy and the nation’s failure to manifest the ideals it espouses.

The Museum

The National Museum of American Jewish History connects itself to themes of Independence Mall even before visitors enter its doors. Already, more than a year before the new building’s debut, the museum has begun to construct its image of American Jews as model Americans in a public way. Banners celebrating individual American Jews hang on the fence surrounding the construction site. Captions proclaiming their achievements indicate the Americanness of their identities in large, bold lettering (figure 4): Estee Lauder—“She
democratized beauty;” Louis Brandeis—“He was a Zionist and a Supreme Court Justice;” Betty Freidan—“She invented the feminine mystique;” Sandy Koufax—“He was America's hero and Judaism’s faithful son;” Moses Seixas—“He blessed the Revolution from his temple pulpit.” Long before its exhibit opens, the museum is preparing visitors to receive its messages. These banners link prominent American Jews to national ideals (like democracy) and iconic moments in American history (like the Revolutionary War), Americanizing the Jews they celebrate. By representing the American Jewish community’s embrace of American culture and ideals, the museum Americanizes the nation’s Jewish community. But the museum is adamant, too, that American Jews are still Jewish; they have not assimilated completely. The signs for both Sandy Koufax and Louis Brandeis highlight their dedication to both their American and Jewish identities. This prominent display suggests that their ability to balance an ethnic or religious identity and a national identity ought to surprise the Mall’s visitors. We will see in chapter 2 that the plan for the museum’s new exhibit emphasizes precisely this aspect of American Jewish life. Celebrating America as a place that allows Jews to participate fully in both American and Jewish communal life, the museum honors America’s
imagined identity as a land of refuge and equal opportunity. It also testifies to the prospect of social mobility while also maintaining a strong Jewish identity, something the museum will suggest may not be possible outside the United States. In doing so, the museum celebrates the uniqueness of America’s promise of liberty, interpreted through the lens of the Civil Rights movement and addresses an anxiety expressed at the end of The Tribe, a fear of looking or acting too Jewish to be accepted in American society.

Before we examine the contents of the new building, however, there is much left to explore outside the museum’s walls. When the museum moves to its new location, it will take with it Sir Moses Jacob Ezekiel’s statue, Religious Liberty (figure 5). This allegorical statue debuted in the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, in what is now Fairmount Park. At that time, Jews were one of six religious and ethnic groups invited to create monuments for the exhibition, but they were the only group to include no explicit references to their own identity in their submission. Instead, the statue appealed to a national ideal, freedom of religion, reflecting Ezekiel’s desire never to “be stamped with the title ‘Jewish sculptor’” and the mission of the statue’s sponsor, the Independent Order B’nai B’rith, to alter the status of Jews in America through image management. At a time in America when Jews felt threatened—Protestants were lobbying to declare America an explicitly Christian nation—Ezekiel addressed this anxiety by universalizing it: “With fundamental constitutional guarantees of religious freedom now under attack, the Benai Berith fought back on constitutional grounds. Liberty for all religions, rather
than a defense of Judaism, was appropriately registered in the genteel and universalizing medium of fine art.”

Ezekiel designed *Religious Liberty* to obscure its Jewish origins. In its original context, the statue did not illustrate a particularly Jewish experience with constitutional guarantees, only the promises themselves.

In 1985, the statue was relocated to its current location, on the 5th Street side of the National Museum of American Jewish History. By moving the statue, the museum significantly altered its meaning, despite Ezekiel’s original intentions. Explicitly associated with a Jewish institution, the statue now represents a particular moment in American Jewish history. It still defines freedom as a universal American ideal, but its proximity to the museum emphasizes Ezekiel’s Jewish identity. In its new location, the statue glorifies the celebration of American liberty by an American Jew. *Religious Liberty* still exalts American Constitutional liberty but it also helps the NMAJH compose a particular image of American Jewry. Precisely because the composition and content of *Religious Liberty* minimizes its Jewish particularism, the statue helps the museum define American Jews as paradigmatic champions of American freedom. Jews like Ezekiel, the statue says, praise and defend Constitutional liberties on behalf of all Americans, not only the Jewish community. Celebrating national ideals on a universal scale, Jews at the NMAJH model American citizenship for the entire nation.

When the museum relocates in 2010, so will *Religious Liberty*. Its new location will place it much farther from the museum than it currently stands (see Appendix B). Centrally located on Independence Mall, across the street from the future NMAJH, the statue will serve as a visual link between Independence Hall, the Constitution Center, the Liberty Bell, and the new Jewish museum. On one of America’s sacred grounds, the presence of *Religious Liberty* will associate Jews with America’s ideal of freedom even more strongly than it does in its present
location. Symbolically, it will facilitate the image of the NMAJH and American Jewish history as a manifestation of the national identity symbolized by the Mall itself.

The Architecture

The museum’s physical structure is as much a part of its narrative as the objects and images it displays within its walls (and, in the case of the NMAJH, outside them as well). In recent years the architecture of museum buildings has become particularly important to museum discourse. Since 1939 when the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York completed its first permanent building, which was “everything traditional museums were not,” structural designs for museums have become increasingly symbolic. A modest-sized building on a side street fronted by an abstract, geometric façade, the 1939 MOMA stood in stark contrast to the classical structures typical of large survey art museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum. Its design, however, fit perfectly with the works it contained and reflected contemporary artistic trends. Since the MOMA’s debut in 1939, museum architecture has become increasingly innovative and publicized. From the Guggenheim Bilbao to David Liebenskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin, the buildings themselves are as much objects of display as the collections they house, integrally tied to location, narrative, and constructions of meaning. xiii

In line with these trends, the architecture of the NMAJH’s new building will be contemporary in style and reflect the themes supported in the museum’s core exhibit. The design for the new location includes several symbolic elements, which have been widely publicized already and may find further explication in future museum publications. The façade of the building will consist of four stories of plate glass (figure 6). According to James Polshek, the museum’s architect, this transparent wall has numerous indications. First and foremost it mirrors
the transparency of Jewish life in this country, suggesting that “today Jews need not hide in America.” Regardless of whether visitors pick up on symbolism of the glass medium, the distinctiveness of the façade and prominent location of the building itself will make that statement on their own. No other building in the surrounding area comes close to the museum’s modern architecture. The museum’s new home will stand next door to the Bourse, a red stone and buff brick building dating from 1891 which was once used as Philadelphia’s stock exchange. Across Market St., to the museum’s other side, stands a drab, brick building with dark glass windows. In this environment, the four story glass wall of the new NMAJH will be eye-catching, increasing the probability that passersby will pick up on the symbolism of the façade and indicating the significance of the museum’s prominent location. When the new NMAJH opens on Independence Mall, Jews will have a highly visible institution adjacent to a national landmark. The distinctive and symbolic façade is intended to heighten awareness of that accomplishment. Surrounded by the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and the National Constitution Center, the NMAJH’s new building will testify to the wonders of American liberty, celebrating the opportunity America provides and the achievements of American Jews.

The glass façade demonstrates, as well, how “American values are inseparable from Jewish life.” Structurally, glass is as close as an architect can get to eliminating building materials altogether, symbolically erasing the juncture between within and without. The glass face of the building thus builds on the museum’s integration of Jewish and American identity. It suggests that...
what lies on one side of the façade—a specifically Jewish history—is synonymous with what lies on the other—an American celebration of national freedom. Visually, the front wall of the museum will force associations between the two narratives. Inside the building, the new museum will celebrate Jews as the archetypal expression of American identity. Outside, visitors will see Independence Mall—an icon of liberty, American origins, and national identity—reflected in the façade of the Jewish museum. At the very least, this will provoke questions about why the museum belongs on the Mall in the first place, questions which the museum’s narrative will attempt to answer (see Chapter 2).

Finally, Mr. Polshek associates glass, particularly the large quantity on display at the museum, with fragility. The museum’s four stories of plate glass therefore indicate “that one should not take for granted the freedoms supplied by a democracy.”xvi Polshek’s sentiments are perfectly in keeping with the construction of American freedom and American identity present on Independence Mall. Like the narratives of the Constitution Center and the Liberty Bell Center, the museum’s architecture will support an image of freedom that requires active protection by American citizens. The façade of the new building will present this dependence on individual action as fragility. Like glass, liberty is easily destroyed if not well-guarded by America’s devoted citizenry.

The façade’s facilitates the museum’s attempt to model Jews as quintessential Americans from within the new building as well. The museum’s divides its new core exhibit into five sections (see Appendix A, figure 1). Three of these form the core of the main exhibit narrative and consist of floors unto themselves. The fourth, called “Only in America,” shares a space with the museum’s lobby and celebrates the achievements of individual American Jews. Because the significance of these four areas depends upon their display of objects and narrative content, I will
address them in Chapter Two. The current plan for the fifth section, however, contains no artifacts, narrative labels, or storytelling media displays. Its significance to the museum is utterly dependent on its location in the new building. “Questions of Freedom,” as the space is tentatively entitled, rises vertically through the three floors of the museum’s main exhibit, just inside the façade (see Appendix A, figure 1). The area will be nothing more than a hallway with one glass wall, which will provide visitors with an expansive view of Independence Mall. The museum plans to exhibit several text panels bearing questions related to freedom along the glass wall. In this space, at the beginning of each floor, visitors will confront America’s imagined identity as a manifestation of liberty. Faced with questions about the reality of freedom in America, visitors will be reminded that liberty is subjective and therefore contingent on the action of human beings. From the post-Civil Rights perspective advocated by Independence Mall and the museum’s narrative, this amounts to suggesting that, as citizens, museum-goers have a responsibility to defend equality and justice for all Americans. In doing so, these galleries encourage visitors to associate ideal citizenship with those who advocate for equal rights and opportunity. Since the museum’s narrative frames Jews as the ultimate proponents of Civil Rights, “The Freedom Experience” helps the museum identify Jews as model Americans.

Encased in the upper corner of this glass façade, an 8-foot flame will burn eternally, intended as “a beacon that will represent both American freedom and the permanence of the Jewish people.”\textsuperscript{xvii} Appearing at the upper left corner of the museum’s façade when facing the museum on Independence Mall, the flame’s location mimics that of the torch in the Statue of Liberty’s right hand. This torch, too, is often called a “beacon,” as in Emma Lazarus’ poem engraved on the statue’s pedestal: “A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame/ Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name/ Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand/ Glows world-
wide welcome.” xviii The last six lines of this poem, now commonly associated with the Statue of Liberty, establish America’s identity as a land of refuge: “Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp,” cries she/ With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,/ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me./ I lift my lamp behind the golden door.” xix As suggested by this poem, the Statue of Liberty is an emblem of America’s imagined identity as a refuge for the oppressed; like Lady Liberty, America believes itself to be a “Mother of Exiles.” The flame at the NMAJH, with its links to this national icon will bolster the museum’s construction of an America whose national identity rests on the notion of freedom. It will serve as a permanent reminder for visitors to the NMAJH and to Independence Mall that America believes itself to be a land of opportunity and welcome, thereby calling into question any violations of these ideals visitors encounter at the museum or in their lives.

For Jewish visitors to the NMAJH, the flame will also conjure up associations with the ner tamid (eternal flame), a light suspended over or placed nearby the synagogue ark containing the Torah scrolls. A symbolic reference to the menorah at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the ner tamid has many interpretations, including as a sign of God’s eternal presence among the people of Israel or the spiritual light which emanated from the temple. In any case, it indicates the Jewish diaspora’s distance from their original place of worship. Like the flame’s connection to the Statue of Liberty, its evocation of the ner tamid will therefore endorse the museum’s image of America as a sanctuary, a haven for the persecuted and oppressed. It will also be a symbol of the continuity of the Jewish community in America, supporting the museum’s construction of an American Jewish identity that continues despite, or because of, its ability to adapt to American circumstances. Countering the Zionist argument that Jews are never truly at home outside of
Palestine, the museum proclaims that American Jews have accomplished much in America, despite all odds and that this nation has become a second homeland for the Jewish people. Like the eternal flame in the building’s architecture and in synagogue sanctuaries, the Jewish community is here to stay.

The new building’s interior architecture will also evoke community. A four story “light-filled atrium” will dominate the space. This atrium will be crossed by bridges and stairs connecting the floors and providing pathways between introductory galleries and the main exhibit (see Appendix A, figure 1). According to Susan Sirefman, “Much like the suburban mall, the museum has evolved into a place not just to see but a place to be seen.”\textsuperscript{xx} This will certainly be true at the NMAJH where visitors, moving along the bridges and stairways, will be able to see down to the lobby, into galleries above and below them, and onto the other bridges. The atrium demands looking—at space, at architecture, at the exhibit, and, particularly, at other people. Although museums are public spaces with or without atrium-like areas, they easily become areas for private encounters with art or artifacts rather than communal interaction. This will not be possible at the NMAJH. Every time museum-goers leave a floor or exit an introductory gallery, the atrium will remind them that they are part of a community of other individuals. By including a large communal space devoid of objects and designed to attract visitor’s attention in its plan, the NMAJH creates an area in which visitors become the objects on display. As a space, the atrium functions similarly to the “We, the People” on the façade of the National Constitution Center. By focusing visitors’ attention on people rather than institutions or objects, both serve as a reminder that America’s citizenry defines the identity of the nation and that American liberty triumphs only when sustained by public action.
On a more symbolic level, the atrium emphasizes the continuity of community by creating a visual link between the four floors of the museum’s main display areas. At any point in the atrium, visitors can see the three floors of the museum’s narrative exhibit and the lobby containing the “Only in America Hall of Fame.” In this space, one can never forget that both American and Jewish life in the United States have persisted for over three centuries. Regarding the Jewish community, it speaks to questions of perseverance. It reminds viewers that the entire history of American Jewish life has turned on maintaining a balance between participation in American life and maintaining a unique Jewish identity, as displayed in the museum’s core exhibit (see Chapter 2). It also addresses issues of division within the Jewish community. There is a common saying in Jewish circles that any two Jews will have three opinions, particularly when it comes to Jewish issues. This reflects the ongoing debate among Jewish scholars and religious leaders about the nature of Jewish identity, and particularly about American Jewish identity. These debates are reflected in the museum’s core exhibit. For example, in the gallery that includes the birth of Reform Judaism in America (Appendix A, figure 1, gallery 4.7), the museum highlights the debate between Isaac Leeser, David Einhorn, and Isaac Mayer Wise, each of whom articulated a different opinion about what Judaism should look like in America. The atrium, by linking the three floors of the museum, reminds visitors that despite these debates all American Jews belong to the larger Jewish community. The atrium proclaims a similar sentiment to the rest of American society, reminding museum-goers that all citizens of the United States are Americans, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or race. The museum’s exhibit defines America as a nation of immigrants. The atrium, by visually uniting the three floors of the exhibit and encouraging visitors to look at and identify with each other, emphasizes the

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6 The fifth floor, which is reserved for museum events, changing exhibits, and storage, will not be open to the atrium.
diversity of American society. We are all Jews, the atrium says; we are all Americans. And, most importantly, we can all see this to be true.

The Legacy of Jewish Architecture

The symbolism of the new NMAJH follows in a long line of symbolic Jewish architecture. When Daniel Liebeskind won the architecture competition for the design of a Jewish extension to the Berlin Museum, architectural representations of Jewish identity became a part of international consciousness. Liebenskind’s design for the building emphasized brokenness as a symbol of the fractured history of German Jews caused by the Holocaust. Numerous architectural components contribute to this construction. As visitors move through the jagged, lightning-bolt shaped building, only accessible from underground, they periodically encounter large “voids,” empty spaces which reach the entire height of the building; in the “Garden of Exile,” Liebeskind planted trees on top of tall concrete columns, locating the actual garden beyond visitor access and creating a permanent sense of instability; finally, long slits in the aluminum plating of the building’s exterior create the impression of violent slashes so even the museum’s façade looks broken. The overall effect is an aura of violence, insecurity, and emptiness. As much a sculpture itself as a building to house them, the museum attracted huge crowds, even devoid of objects, when it opened with the galleries empty in 1999.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (HHM) on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. emphasizes brokenness in a manner similar to the Berlin Jewish Museum. As a national museum located in a place with strong ties to American identity, however, it shares the nation-building objectives of the NMAJH. Both the D.C. and the Philadelphia museums celebrate freedom as an American ideal and articulate “America’s self-idealization as haven for the world’s oppressed.”xxx The designs for the two buildings, however, are quite different. The
interior of the Holocaust Memorial Museum resounds with the same echoes of fractured identity and absence as Liebenskind’s structure. Skewed angles, exposed trusses, and broken walls evoke instability, ruin, and hostility. Visitors following the events leading up to Hitler’s “Final Solution” move through increasingly narrow hallways that make sharp, unexpected turns building a sense of increasing danger and oppression. Because of the Fine Arts Commission’s strict guidelines for building on the National Mall, the museum’s exterior cannot reflect the same dark mood. The museum uses this to its advantage, though, integrating its fractured interior and coherent exterior with its narrative. As a national institution, the Holocaust Memorial Museum seeks to celebrate American national identity and so it represents the Holocaust, which took place in foreign land, as a memory of old world events carried to American shores by immigrants seeking refuge. The museum follows its somber narrative of destruction in Europe with a story of “return to life” in America, representing the United States as a place to rebuild lives destroyed by the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{xxii} The fractured interior and unified façade of the building manifests the broken memories of European catastrophe preserved in the minds of rejuvenated American immigrants. As visitors leave the museum and step out onto the National Mall, they too leave behind chaos and recover order, carrying only memories of destruction and persecution into America’s land of freedom, opportunity, and restoration.

In contrast, the NMAJH, though it celebrates a similar image of America, is not at all fractured. Its interior and exterior do not present a dichotomy; in fact, the glass façade makes them appear to slide together seamlessly. Unlike the Holocaust Memorial Museum, the NMAJH’s narrative content does not pose a conflict to the national narrative retold on Independence Mall. They are perfectly integrated and visitors can glide from one to the other without a sense of discontinuity. We see this in the downward spiral of the exhibition’s design,
which transfers visitors smoothly from the museum to Independence Mall just as the exhibit content moves smoothly from history to modernity in the “Transition to Present-day” gallery (see Appendix A, figure 3, gallery 2.7) and the “Contemporary Issues Forum” (see Appendix A, figure 3, gallery 2.8). Finally, although it divides the interior of the new building into two parts, the atrium, unlike the voids of Liebenskind’s museum, does not represent absence, emptiness or brokenness. Instead, as we have seen, it unites visitors in a communal space and translates the museum’s historical narrative into evidence of community continuity. Visitors to the NMAJH do not find themselves in a dark, hostile world but a light-filled welcoming environment. In conjunction with the museum’s narrative, which celebrates American liberty by way of Jewish achievement, the architecture of the NMAJH locates visitors in a visual atmosphere of freedom and acceptance.
Chapter 2
Creating American Jews: Narrative and Display Strategies in the Museum’s Core Exhibit

The ability of the National Museum of American Jewish History to redefine what it means to be an American Jew is due in part to its status as an institution. It is part of a much longer narrative about the relationship between museums and the individuals who frequent them. From the very beginning, these institutions have been sites for the expression of communal desires and ideals, constructing and performing national and communal identity for their visitors. The Louvre, often cited as the first modern museum, was born in the wake of the French Revolution as a public expression of revolutionary ideals. By displaying works of art previously in the hands of churches, monarchs, or nobles and redefining them as national treasures, the Louvre turned each object into “a concealed allegory of liberty.”xxiii Just as the new state brought freedom to the people of France, the museum liberated art from the private domain of princely collections, making it available to all people regardless of class. The chronological organization of the galleries exhibited Enlightenment notions of ‘progress,’ with each art historical period developing on the innovations of the last and prefiguring the next; the past explained how the present came to be. A visit to the Louvre was more than an opportunity to see otherwise inaccessible art. It was a lesson on the ideals of the French Republic, a performance of French national identity. The many national museums which sprang up in the wake of the Louvre served a similar function in their own countries.

Like other museums, the NMAJH has inherited this legacy of performing identity. As a modern museum, and especially as a modern national museum, it communicates ideas about what it means to be American and about the ideals with which this country identifies. Like the
Constitution Center, the NMAJH asks and answers the question, “What makes us American?” But it adds a second question as well. But, as a museum about American Jewish history, it also conveys notions about Jewish identity, asking “What makes someone Jewish?” In the process of answering these two questions, the museum delineates the boundaries of three categories and three communities: “Americans,” “Jews,” and “American Jews.” The museum makes particular choices about who and what belong under these titles. Not everyone included in one or another category would necessarily agree with the museum’s choice to place them there. Nor would they necessarily accept the institution’s inclusion of others in the same category. By including a variety of individuals under each label, however, the NMAJH indicates and creates common bonds of identity, constructing apparently unified categories out of diverse groups of people.

Like the Louvre, which employed chronology, rhetoric, and fine art to construct the idea of “Frenchness,” the NMAJH communicates these categories of Americanness and Jewishness through its narrative structure and strategic displays of objects. Narrative is one of the primary ways people construct meaning. The stories we tell and the ways in which we tell them communicate important cultural values, define significant historical moments, create a sense of national, communal, or individual identity or do all these things at once. What we include or exclude when we tell stories and the order we choose to recount events can reveal as much about us as it does about the content of those stories, defining who we are and who we want ourselves to be. Narrative, in other words, simultaneously invents both its subject (what the story is about) and its narrator (the one telling the story).xxiv

Museum narratives serve a similar function for the communities they serve, locating and creating significant events and ideals as a performance of collective identity. All exhibits tell a story. Fine arts museums tell stories about artistic trends, cultural productions, or even about
national identity; one function of science museums is to tell stories about technological developments and scientific discoveries; and history museums, like the National Museum of American Jewish History, tell stories about people. These stories, however, are no less the constructions of museums than novels are the productions of their authors. What we encounter in history books and museums is not just a conglomeration of data; it is a narrative already filtered through the historian’s gaze. And as with any other story, decisions about what and whom to include or omit, highlight or skim over, describe first or last convey particular messages. The narrative strategies of the storyteller or curator affect the significance of the account.

Unlike novels and literary narratives, however, museums tell stories through objects as well as words. People go to museum exhibitions to see things and to learn something about them. But, as Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims have eloquently pointed out, “the problem with things is that they are dumb.” Objects cannot speak for themselves. They have no inherent meaning without people to define their value and significance. In her analysis of the souvenir, Susan Stewart has shown how objects are generated by the narratives we construct around them. Souvenirs rarely have monetary value, but are extremely important sentimentally because their presence resurrects the memory of their acquisition. This narrative of origin, the memory, not the item’s inherent value, lends the souvenir its significance. Museum objects perform a similar function for collective memories. Particularly in history and ethnographic museums, where many exhibited artifacts have little economic value, the story the institution tells about an object defines its significance. Museums, however, build their narratives both linguistically and visually. In addition to the textual frame which surrounds a given object in a museum (provided by wall labels, audio tours, booklets, and catalogues), museum objects are
juxtaposed visually with photographs, films, and other objects. The museum object thus becomes the site where visual and linguistic contextual frames interact to express that object’s particular significance.

The conceptual substance of this context, however, is not self-evident: “Context is not given put produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies.” xxix An object does not have an inherent significance so it does not belong to a single context. A kiddush cup on display in a museum means something different than a kiddush cup on a Shabbat table in someone’s home. And even in a museum, “there are as many contexts for an object as there are interpretive strategies.” xxx The same cup displayed in two venues can tell a different story. Exhibiting it along with other kiddush cups from various time periods highlights the cup’s visual and material qualities, making it stand for artistic trends and regional style, and designating it as an item of primarily visual interest. In a case filled with objects belonging or related to a specific individual, however, the kiddush cup tells viewers something about the life of a particular person. It may indicate the individual’s religious observance, interest in the cup as a collector’s item, or serve simply as evidence that he or she existed. In this instance, the person, not the artifact, is the object of attention.

Exhibit designers and curators carefully choose what information to include in an object’s contextualizing framework. By selecting objects, writing labels, and arranging the exhibit space, museum curators create environments designed to shape the way visitors interpret the objects on display. These environments range from life-size period rooms to mural-like panoramas to minimalist wall labels that include only the work’s title, creator, and medium. More recently, interactive exhibits, immersive environments, and soundscapes also play a significant role in shaping visitor interpretations of objects, and therefore, of history. In each case, what we see,
read, and hear in the area around an object affects what we take away from the experience, what we learn about that object, and what it seems to say to us. In a museum, an object’s surroundings define its significance, preventing the object from remaining dumb.

Museums thus build their narratives rhetorically, linguistically, and visually. How the NMAJH structures its own story and displays its own objects, therefore, will help reveal the kind of American Jewish identity it constructs. Which stories and individuals it includes in its exhibit and which it excludes, the order in which it tells its story, and how it narrates objects will help us understand what the NMAJH defines as American and Jewish and how it characterizes American Jewish identity—a sub-category of Americans who are also called Jews. A detailed look at the museum’s narrative and display strategies will also reveal the ideal American and Jewish identities it performs for its visitors.

American Liberty and American Jews: Defining the Terms of the Debate
The new core exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish History will consist of five sections. In the last chapter, we saw how one of these sections, “Questions of Freedom” helps the museum define ideal American citizens as those who advocate for equality and freedom of opportunity by linking the museum to the narrative of liberty on Independence Mall. The other four sections, which form the core of the main exhibit, reiterate this construction of American identity and reveal Jews to be model Americans. They also define the boundaries of the American Jewish community by identifying who and what qualifies as Jewish or American. Finally, these exhibition areas link Jews to iconic people, places, events, and expressions of popular culture throughout American history. Through a calculated use of narrative and display strategies, these galleries both Americanize the Jews of the United States and judaize America.
In no gallery is this double project more apparent than in the “Only in America Hall of Fame,” located on the ground floor of the museum (see Appendix A, figure 4, gallery 1.2). Its location adjacent to the building’s lobby makes it an immediate object of attention for museum-goers, though the core exhibit design, which begins on the fourth floor and moves downwards through the museum, locates it at the end of the museum’s story. According to the museum’s narrative overview for the new core exhibit, this area will “feature interactive stations that focus on individual American Jews—some famous and some who should be more famous than they are—exploring and celebrating their contributions in America and to America.”xxxi This section of the exhibition will simultaneously display the incredible diversity of American Jews celebrated by the NMAJH and support the museum’s construction of America as a land of opportunity. The museum will not yet release the names of those individuals to be included in Only in America but Josh Perelman, the Museum Historian and Deputy Director for Programming, has said that portraits on the cover of a fundraising brochure are “certainly representative of the individuals being considered for the gallery.”xxxii Taking this brochure as our guide, then, the individuals celebrated in “Only in America” will cover a wide range of accomplishments (see figure 7). Rabbis, actors, scientists, military heroes, colonial merchants, Zionists, comedians, bankers, philanthropists, politicians, entrepreneurs, composers, and writers all have their representatives. Every
visitor to the museum is bound to recognize at least a few of the individuals honored here, not necessarily because of their participation in the Jewish community, but because of their contributions to American life and culture. In many cases, visitors may be surprised to learn that a given individual is Jewish. In fact, the museum expects this to be the case. In a promotional film for the institution, David Grubin, the museum’s filmmaker and storyteller, says, “Most Americans, even most Jews don’t know this story. How many people know that Irving Berlin, a Jew, wrote ‘White Christmas,’ and ‘The Easter Parade?’” Then, as “God Bless America” plays in the background of the film, he adds, “And this one?” Irving Berlin will be included in “Only in America;” the museum an agreement with the owners of his piano and has set aside a space in this gallery to display it. If Berlin is any indication, part of the museum’s project consists of revealing the Jewish identities of people and things generally thought of as American, not Jewish. By exposing the Jewish roots of American tunes like “White Christmas” and “God Bless America,” the museum judaizes American popular culture. In this regard, “Only in America” actually judaizes American identity by revealing the Jewishness of central players in all aspects of American public life (politics, culture, religion, science).

At the same time, this exhibit also Americanizes Jewish identity. Visitors already consider songs like “God Bless America,” and people like Sandy Koufax (included in a mock-up of this display) to be American; “Only in America” does not deprive them of that association. It simply adds Jewish to the list of adjectives describing them. This act—disclosing the Jewishness of American public figures—constructs a category of Jewish identity that allows for full participation in American life. This kind of Jewishness, furthermore, does not require Jews to publicize their Jewish identity. If it did, the museum would expect visitors to know that these figures were Jewish before entering its doors. As Grubin’s comments reveal, however, this is not
the case. The NMAJH anticipates a certain degree of visitor ignorance about the Jewish backgrounds of certain prominent Americans and Americana. And yet, by displaying them in its galleries, the museum celebrates them as Jews. That is, the NMAJH recognizes them as acceptable examples of what it means to be Jewish, constructing the category “Jews” to include people who are quietly or privately Jewish.

In addition to the Jews who contributed to American life at large, “Only in America” also celebrates those Jews who maintained and developed Jewish communal life in this country. These individuals, too, belong to and help define the museum’s category of “American Jews” and their non-Jewish compatriots. These Jewish Americans represent a diverse crowd. Rabbis of the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements; Zionists who advocated supporting Israel in a variety of ways; and editors of Jewish journals, in English and Yiddish, all appear on the museum’s promotional brochure. The NMAJH certainly celebrates Jews who maintained their Jewish identity in the home, expanding the category of “Jew” by authorizing private expressions of Jewish identity. Here, the museum defines the boundaries of the Jewish community by celebrating diverse contributions to the development of Jewish life in America.

Just as “Only in America” added “Jewish” to the list of adjectives describing well-known “Americans” so it adds “American” to the list of Jews addressed here. All these Jews helped adapt Judaism to fit the American cultural and social scene; all created new ways for American Jews to express their connection to the Jewish community and demonstrate their identity as Jews. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan broke away from the Conservative movement to found Reconstructionist Judaism; Louis Brandeis directed American Zionism away from immigration to Palestine; and Abraham Joshua Heschel reinterpreted the Hebrew prophets as a call for social
action in the United States. *American* Jewishness at the NMAJH involves adaptation, not simply a continuation of tradition.

No ultra-Orthodox Jews appear on the capital campaign brochure or in the museum’s narrative. As a movement, the ultra-Orthodox oppose any deviation from traditional Jewish law (*halacha*) including attempts to alter Judaism to fit the ‘spirit of the time.’ They wear distinctive clothes and stand apart from American society. Although the museum recognizes that they are the “most *visible* Jewish group in America today [emphasis added],” they are far from the most visible Jewish group in the museum. There are no objects in the exhibit related to the ultra-Orthodox, though their culture involves a repository of very specific items and they appear only once in the overview for the new core exhibit, as part of a single interactive display which explains *all* the Jewish denominations active in post-World War II America. This group of Jews looks too Jewish to fit into the Americanized Judaism constructed and celebrated by the museum. In the museum’s version of American Jewish identity, Jews blend in to mainstream American life. They retain a distinct, Jewish identity, certainly, but it always remains subordinate to their identity as Americans. The ultra-Orthodox, in contrast, organize their lives around their Jewish identity first; they follow *halacha* to an extent that prevents them from blending into American society. In an exhibit that creates a category of “American Jews” which look like all other Americans, participate actively in American public life, and propagate a Judaism that adapts to its American surroundings, there is little room for a community like the ultra-Orthodox. These Jews do not belong in the museum’s portrait of American Jewry.

As a point of contrast, the promotional brochure *does* include a picture of Joe Lieberman, and artifacts related to his campaign for vice president appear in the museum’s final object-based gallery, “Transition to Present Day.” Lieberman describes himself as an “observant Jew,” not an
Orthodox one, but his practices are “best described as modern Orthodox.” Modern Orthodoxy accepts some degree of adaptation and “tries to integrate the observance of Jewish law with participation in contemporary life,” in contrast to ultra-Orthodoxy’s rigidity. In other words, modern Orthodoxy accepts change where ultra-Orthodoxy does not. This seems to be the museum’s interpretation as well. In past exhibits, the museum has narrated Orthodox practice as static and foreign. For example, “From Generation to Generation” (2002) displayed photographs of Orthodox communities across America by Bernard Mendoza. In the artist’s statement, Mendoza describes Orthodoxy as a transplanted, foreign practice, not an American one. According to him, contemporary Orthodox communities are remnants of pre-Holocaust European Jewry. Those who practice ultra-Orthodoxy in America are “émigrés,” not immigrants; from Mendoza’s perspective, America is exile for them and change is blasphemy. If this is the image of ultra-Orthodox communities propagated by the NMAJH, then it is not surprising that the museum marginalizes them in its exhibit. Where integration and adaptation are key to American Jewish identity, the highly visible ultra-Orthodox must occupy only a minimal role.

“Only in America” therefore celebrates two categories of American Jewish accomplishment: contributions to American society and contributions to the Jewish community. Together they constitute the museum’s construction of an American Jewish community that adapts to American culture but retains a distinctive Jewish identity. Under the exhibit’s title, these categories construct a particular image of America as a land of opportunity and a haven for the oppressed. Since most museum-goers pick up a museum guide or look at a plan of the exhibit before they enter the galleries, exhibit titles are an important early opportunity to shape visitor interpretations of display areas. Thus, even for those who follow the museum’s exhibit
design and experience “Only in America” at the end of their visit, its title alone is significant. The words, “Only in America” immediately indicate that this gallery’s contents communicate something unique about the United States. Since “Only in America” celebrates the achievements of American Jews, whether within the Jewish community specifically or in wider American society, its title suggests that these accomplishments could not have occurred elsewhere, that such widespread and uninhibited success is possible only in America. These three small words construct an America that stands in opposition to other nations insofar as it provides opportunities for Jewish achievement and social mobility. At the same time these words imply that no other country has provided a safe environment for Jews, not even Israel, whose history of violence and turmoil precludes the security of American society. America, in contrast, is a land of refuge, a homeland where Jews can flourish as well as merely live.

The title, "Only in America" also works in tandem with the names of the three main exhibit sections on the upper floors of the museum (see Appendix A). As visitors cross the atrium from each floor's introductory gallery to its main exhibit space, they will be greeted by an expanse of wall which reaches almost all the way across the museum. On this wall, the NMAJH prominently displays the floor's title, a short phrase intended to suggest the exhibit themes visitors are about to encounter. Beginning on the fourth floor and traveling downward, following the pathway created by the exhibit designer, these titles are "Foundations of Freedom" (fourth floor), "Dreams of Freedom" (third floor), "Choices and Challenges" (second floor), and of course, on the first floor, "Only in America." As these names indicate, “freedom” will be the unifying theme of the core exhibit, drawing the various events and people that constitute American Jewish history into a coherent narrative. Together, they help link the museum's vision of American freedom to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, and
Independence Mall. The words “only in America,” in conjunction with these floor titles, imply that the individuals celebrated on the ground floor owe their achievements to the freedom established in the narrative on the floors above them. The connection between “Only in America” and the term “freedom” in these floor titles suggest two key points: that the story of freedom is unique to the United States, and that in America, freedom means equal opportunity. In other words, these titles reiterate the Civil Rights interpretation of freedom performed on Independence Mall. Through them, the museum links freedom, as equality and opportunity, to a unique American identity. This early connection between liberty, equality, and American identity, in addition to the preparation they received on Independence Mall will shape visitors’ interpretation of historical figures and events throughout the exhibit. Jewish individuals who promote civil rights and equal opportunity will now appear to defend a uniquely American ideal. Those that deny equal rights or oppress minority groups, on the other hand, will undermine America’s claim to a national identity rooted in freedom

The floor titles alone also link King’s vision of America to the freedom celebrated at the museum. King’s construction of America rested on his interpretation of liberty articulated in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Calling these documents “promissory notes to which every American was to fall heir,” King declared them “a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the ‘unalienable Rights’ of ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’”xxxviii The National Museum of American Jewish History assumes that this promise of liberty is a Jewish inheritance, too. Yet it is not the freedom envisioned by the founding fathers, many of whom owned black slaves. Reading his own construction of liberty as equality into these iconic documents, however, King claimed that “America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.”xxxix America’s
treatment of African-Americans constituted a violation of the nation’s foundational promise to its people. By equating the liberty invoked by the Constitution and Declaration with freedom of opportunity and equality, King constructed an America that failed to live up to its foundational principals—an America that failed to manifest its imagined identity as a “sweet land of liberty.” King’s rhetoric created an American identity dependent on his own imagined ideal. In King’s America, the absence of equality (read King’s construction of freedom) revealed the nation’s failure to act American, to provide liberty and justice for all.

The NMAJH echoes King’s construction of American liberty and American identity in its floor titles. The words “foundations of freedom” and “dreams of freedom” suggest that there were moments in the nation’s history when Jews did not yet have access to American liberties. In contrast, the title of the second and final floor in the exhibit, “Choices and Challenges of Freedom,” indicates that in the time after World War II, America had finally achieved its goal—for Jews at least (we will see later how the museum addresses the struggles for equality undertaken by other minority groups during this period). The floor titles thus indicate a progression from the absence of freedom in American Jewish life to the achievement of it. In keeping with King’s construction of an America that does not live up to its own imagined identity as a free country, the museum creates an image of America which failed, for most of its history, to provide Jews with the constitutional guarantees of freedom and justice for all.

The first few galleries of the core exhibit solidify the museum’s appropriation of King’s vision of a fallen America. In “First Communities,” the first large gallery of the main exhibit (see Appendix A, gallery 4.3), the museum displays a traveling Hanukah lamp that belonged to the Mendes family. The bottom of the bench-shaped lamp uninges to reveal eight compartments for oil and wicks (figure 8). Although this may simply have been a convenient
design for travelling Jewish merchants, previous NMAJH exhibits have always used it to construct America as a destination for persecuted Jews. In these exhibits, object labels link the lamp to the Spanish Inquisition, identifying it as an invention of Sephardic crypto-Jews, who masqueraded as Christians while secretly maintaining their Jewish identities. According to this kind of narrative, the Mendes family left Spain seeking refuge from injustice and found it in America. The lamp testifies to the persecution they experienced in other countries, and to the freedom they expected to encounter in America. Like the title of “Only in America,” the lamp represents the freedom which should distinguish America from other nations: the liberty, equality, and opportunity of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement.

For those who still fail to associate King’s notion of liberty with the freedom of the NMAJH, the museum reiterates this connection in the next section of the exhibit: “The American Revolution” (see Appendix A, gallery 4.4). This gallery focuses on the Constitution, celebrating its unique promise of liberty, justice, and religious freedom. According to the narrative overview for this section of the exhibit:

The Revolution ushered in a new historical era and transformed America into a society constituted on the basic premise that all people deserved to live in freedom... Visitors will understand that the Constitution’s promises created a unique a [sic] climate of political, economic, and religious freedom. Nowhere else had Jews been guaranteed the right to participate fully in a democracy and establish communities on their own terms.

The language used here echoes King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, referring to freedom as a “premise,” a “promise,” and a “right,” but never as a reality. For the museum, as for King and the Liberty Bell Center, the Constitution is no more than a piece of paper unless Americans
implement its words in action. Those that do so embody the identity King defined as American and transform the United States into the nation it supposedly claims to be.

**In Defense of Liberty: American Jews and the American Community**

By the time visitors reach the museum’s third gallery, Independence Mall and the NMAJH have already fully prepared them to encounter moments in American history when the United States fails her people, despite her promises of liberty, fails to provide freedom to certain populations. At the same time, they have learned to associate freedom with American identity and to recognize it as an American value in the very terms that Martin Luther King laid out and, most likely, in the very terms that most contemporary Americans associate with notions of freedom. At those moments in the museum’s narrative, then, when American society refuses minority groups, both Jews and others, the rights and freedoms available to the majority, America appears to be denying its self-defined ideals. Similarly, when individuals, organizations, or minority groups advocate for freedom (read equality and justice), they seem to embody Americanness, even when the rest of America disagrees with them. At the museum, these individuals and organizations are Jewish.

The first few galleries of the main exhibit area solidify these associations and begin to tie American Jews to model America activities. The first episode in the museum’s historical narrative provides a case in point. After the fourth floor’s introductory gallery, the core exhibit opens with the story of twenty-three refugees from Recife, Brazil who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654 (see Appendix A, gallery 4.1). For over a century, Recife had served as a safe haven for Spanish Jews fleeing the Inquisition; but, in 1654, the Portuguese gained control of the colony, ousting the more tolerant Dutch leadership, and sending Jewish residents fleeing. A group of refugees found their way onto the *St. Catrina*, a Dutch trading ship headed for New
Amsterdam. Arriving there, they faced opposition from the colony’s governor, Peter Stuyvesant, who wanted to preserve the colony’s Catholic demographic. According to the museum’s narrative overview for this floor, Stuyvesant “had no tolerance for pluralism and considered a diverse population as a potential threat to his authority.” In this description, the museum transforms Stuyvesant’s opposition to the Jewish refugees into a selfish action, an attempt to retain his colonial authority. Although the United States did not exist in Stuyvesant’s time, museum visitors will interpret the exhibit from a contemporary perspective, in a modern country that espouses democracy. Stuyvesant’s affinity for power conflicts with the claim emblazoned on the Constitution Center and celebrated at the NMAJH, that “we, the people” determine the nature of American freedom. To visitors prepared to encounter an America which proclaims the freedom consecrated on Independence Mall—the freedom of the Civil Rights Era—Stuyvesant’s discriminatory actions will seem highly incongruous. Viewed from this perspective, liberty and tolerance go hand in hand. Since the Mall and the museum have already established a connection between a Civil Rights notion of freedom and American identity, this episode brands Stuyvesant a definitively un-American individual; not only does he harbor un-democratic political desires, he also violates American civil liberties, denying America the identity King, the Mall, and the museum claim for her. At the same time, the conflict with Stuyvesant Americanizes the Jews from Recife. Where King has set the terms for debate, the Jewish refugees’ struggle for tolerance and equality becomes an expression of American ideals. Embodying values that would become national ideals, these foreign immigrants already appear more American than the colonial authorities.

In the core exhibit, the museum links this episode in American Jewish history to what the museum calls “iconic images.” As visitors cross the atrium from the fourth floor’s introductory
gallery to the main exhibit, where they immediately encounter the story of the Recife Jews, they are met by a large wall stretching across most of the building’s width. This original plan for this wall included “a variety of images, including New Amsterdam’s harbor, a ship like the *St. Catrina*, which brought a group of 23 Jewish [*sic*] who had been expelled from Brazil, the *Mayflower*, and a Dutch slave ship.”xlv Although the design for this wall has since changed and the museum no longer plans to show multiple ships, the original description is valuable for its ability to reveal the museum’s objective at this point in the exhibit. The depiction of New Amsterdam’s harbor with multiple ships was carefully constructed to shape the visitor’s conception of colonial American and Jewish history. The museum once planned to exhibit the *St. Catrina* and the *Mayflower* together. Yet the *Mayflower* never dropped anchor in New Amsterdam; the Pilgrims settled in what would become Massachusetts, not New York. If the museum’s sole intention was to suggest the kinds of people who lived in New Amsterdam at the time of the Recife Jews’ arrival, this display would never have included the *Mayflower*.

This wall serves a different purpose at the NMAJH, however, which is completely absent from the museum’s exhibit description. The Pilgrims appear nowhere else in the narrative overview; the *Mayflower* was to play its role by association only. Including the *Mayflower* along with the *St. Catrina* linked the Recife Jews to the narrative of Plymouth Rock. The foundational myth of America is the story of seventeenth century religious refugees arriving by boat and settling here. The “iconic images” on the fourth floor, visually link the Recife Jews to this narrative, even if the museum only includes an image of the *St. Catrina*. Like the Puritan Pilgrims fleeing persecution in England, the museum says, the first American Jews came looking for freedom to practice their religion. Furthermore, for those familiar with the Pilgrim’s
subsequent intolerance for dissenting opinions, these images suggest that Jews, not the Puritans, were the original advocates for American freedom as King and the museum define it.

Lastly, the link between the Recife Jews and the Pilgrim fathers establishes the immigrant story, long associated with Jewish history, as the central narrative of American history. Whether Jewish or Puritan, this image says, immigrants founded America. As viewers exit the elevator on the fourth floor they encounter a panel with the floor title and a large quotation. In the design booklet from July, 2008, the most recent available, this quotation is Oscar Handlin’s: “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants WERE American history.” Even if the museum cuts Handlin’s comment from the final display, its inclusion here reveals the importance of immigration to the museum’s project.

NMAJH curators, in their discussions with the exhibition designers, have clearly indicated the import of defining immigration as an American, not particularly Jewish, phenomenon. All Americans were once foreign immigrants, the museum argues. And, like the Pilgrims and the Recife Jews, they have made this country their home.

The museum’s story did not have to begin with the refugees from Brazil. There is evidence that Jewish merchants had landed and traded on American shores beginning as early as 1585, and even that Jews may have accompanied Columbus on his historic voyage across the Atlantic. Previous core exhibits have explained this discrepancy by arguing that “what distinguished these bedraggled refugees was their desire to settle down permanently.” In this case, the significance of the Recife Jews becomes their desire to form a community in the American colonies. The new core exhibit will treat this issue similarly, representing the new arrivals as “early Jewish settlers” whose role in American Jewish history included “establish[ing] communities.” However, this image of the Recife Jews is also problematic. The Jewish
community they established in New Amsterdam was extremely short-lived. By 1665, only one Jew remained in the city. The rest had scattered, leaving the city for other American colonies or for the Netherlands after numerous unfriendly encounters with local authorities. Though later groups of Jewish arrivals may have “fit perfectly” with colonial society, as the museum’s narrative suggests, the Recife Jews clearly did not.

Why, then, does the museum begin its narrative with this group of Jewish refugees? Why not choose a later date and a group of immigrants who created a more permanent community in America? For one, as we have seen, the encounter between the Recife Jews and Governor Stuyvesant immediately establishes a tension between America’s professed ideals—freedom, equality and tolerance—and the actions of American society. It also provides an opportunity to link American Jewry to the nation’s founding myth, a vital component of any national identity. Finally, locating the origins of American Jewish History with the Recife Jews ensures that visitors imagine a Jewish presence at the earliest points of American history. This presence is not necessarily an obvious one; the history of colonial America tends to focus on founding Protestant groups and individuals such as the Puritans, the Quakers, and Roger Williams. In the traditional narrative of American history, Jews do not make a major appearance until the influx of immigrants from Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. By locating American Jewish origins here, right at the founding of the nation, the NMAJH reconfigures collective memory of the Colonial Period and America’s founding narrative to include a significant Jewish presence. Like the Zionist argument which claims that Jews have a stake in Palestine because they have always lived there, the museum argues that Jews belong in America because they have always been here. Unlike other Jewish communities, America is, and has always been, a home for Jews. Furthermore, in contrast to the later group of immigrants, colonial Jews arrived in and settled a
land that had not yet firmly established its founding ideals or national principles. By locating American Jewish origins in the Colonial Era, at the very time when the colonies were beginning to form their own sense of identity, the museum generates an America in which Jews have always played an important role in the articulation of American identity. The story of the Recife Jews, in other words, helps the museum present an America constructed by Jews, in which they can serve as model Americans.

The fact that no Jews signed the Declaration of Independence or helped draft the Constitution complicates the museum’s project. These two documents are the literary icons of America’s birth. More importantly, with their rhetoric of liberty and equality, now read through the lens of the Civil Rights Era, they represent the museum’s strongest claim that American identity is founded on notions of freedom. For a museum about Jewish participation in the creation of American identity, this presents a problem. The notable absence of a Jewish voice in these founding documents might suggest to visitors that Jews simply accepted the articulation of national identity defined by the non-Jewish majority. And yet, the museum features the Constitution prominently in the gallery on the American Revolution. Adopting King’s vision of America, the museum presents Constitutional rhetoric as an ideal, which the nation professed at its birth, but did not immediately embody. The “American Revolution” gallery (4.4) contains a number of objects which announce America’s early proclamation of freedom, including among other items a letter from George Washington to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island. This letter is a response to Moses Seixas’ address on behalf of the Newport congregation congratulating the new president and celebrating the new nation. In America, Seixas saw a nation “erected by the Majesty of the People--a Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously affording to All liberty of conscience and
immunities of Citizenship . . ."lii The epistle on display at the NMAJH is Washington’s far more famous response:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily, the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.liii

Through Washington, Seixas’ words have become a cherished part of the national lexicon. In popular memory, this letter demonstrates “America's abiding commitment to safeguard the rights and freedoms of all its inhabitants."sliv At the NMAJH, however, it exposes the pretense of this image of America. The museum reveals that a Jewish leader, not the nation’s first President, coined the most famous words of this exchange. Jews, not George Washington, first celebrated America’s imagined identity as a land free from bigotry and persecution.

Moreover, the museum follows this display with a “coda” on anti-Semitism, setting a pattern for many of its galleries. According to the narrative overview, this area will reveal that “the freedoms promised in America’s founding documents did not come easily or immediately."sliv Here, the museum exhibits a description of the Maryland legislature’s debate over the so-called “Jew Bill.” In 1818, more than twenty-five years after the Revolution, Maryland Jews still struggled for the right to hold government positions. Until 1826, when the Jew Bill finally passed, all elected officials had to swear on their faith as Christians to enter the state legislature, a law which effectively barred Jews from holding office. A facsimile of Article Six of the Constitution, which prohibits the use of religion as a requirement for holding office, is on display in the same gallery.iv By juxtaposing these documents, the museum constructs a hypocritical America. By prefacing this “coda” with Washington’s letter, the NMAJH reveals America’s failure to live up to its own professed ideals. Despite its rhetoric of religious freedom
and equal protection under the law, post-Revolutionary America failed to safeguard the rights of its Jewish citizens.

Even the inclusion of non-Jewish support for the Maryland Jew Bill facilitates this image of a fallen America. Although the museum indicates that Thomas Kennedy, a non-Jewish politician, greatly influenced and rejoiced in the bill’s passing, it also notes that Kennedy lost his seat in the legislature for maintaining this position. His non-Jewish constituency, the museum implies, strongly opposed the Jewish struggle for equal rights. At the NMAJH, Post-Revolutionary America prevents the nation from actualizing its lofty constitutional rhetoric. In contrast, Thomas Kennedy and Maryland’s Jewish community represent the identity America supposedly claimed for itself by continuing to fight the state’s injustice. At the museum, American Jews model national values for the rest of society, insisting that the nation live up to the visionary ideals of its founding documents.

The museum’s treatment of the Nones Affair in the same exhibit area performs a similar function. In 1800, an editorial appeared in the Gazette, a Federalist publication, accusing Benjamin Nones of unworthiness because he was “a Jew, a Republican, and poor.” Nones, a Revolutionary War veteran who freed his slaves after Independence, replied in vehemently patriotic language, reproduced at the NMAJH. After proudly asserting that yes, he was Jewish, he argued that being a Jew made him a Republican because “in republics [Jews] have rights, in monarchies we live but to experience wrongs,” and that although his large family was poor, they were “soberly and decently brought up” and “not . . . taught to revile a Christian because his religion is not so old as theirs.” This incident rearticulates the museum’s dichotomy between Jewish and non-Jewish Americans established by Stuyvesant’s encounter with the Recife Jews. Like Stuyvesant, Nones’ opponent appears to reject ideals like equality, democracy, and
tolerance. And, like the Brazilian Refugees, Nones’ seems to embody these principles, identified by King, the museum, and Independence Mall as qualities America has claimed for itself. After the museum’s emphasis on the Constitution’s establishment of ‘political, economic, and religious freedom,’ the Nones’ incident constructs a post-Revolutionary America that by 1800 has already forgotten the principles on which she was founded. Together, the letter from Washington, the Nones Affair, and the Maryland Jew Bill represent the persistence of American injustice and a Jewish quest to abolish it in the earliest moments of American history. By ending this early portion of its narrative with a reference to these events, the museum constructs an America that cannot see itself for what it is. This America imagines itself falsely, failing from birth to live up to its own ideal of freedom.

And so America’s Jews render the nation honest, expressing an abiding commitment to this national ideal. According to the museum’s narrative overview the “American Revolution” gallery, will emphasize the “impact of the Revolution and the Constitution . . . through key stories and documents, including the “creation of synagogue ‘constitutions’ that reflected America’s new political realities.” Although these objects will certainly illustrate the ‘impact’ of Independence on the Jewish community, they also create an image of an American Jewish community which fully supported and actively celebrated the ideals expressed in the Constitution. This community did not passively accept the changes that befell them; they wrote constitutions for their own institutions which mimicked the new American document and wrote letters about their vision of America to the nation’s first President. The gallery’s inclusion of objects connected to Haym Saloman, who supported the Revolution financially, and American Jewish soldiers, who supported it physically, demonstrates the American Jewish community’s defense of Constitutional liberty. Post-Revolutionary Jews, the museum suggests, were avid
patriots, even if they did not draft the nation’s foundational documents. The post-Revolutionary American Jews in this gallery lived what others merely wrote, supporting and defending foundational ideals of freedom and equality.

The credibility of this construction of Jewish identity rests on the museum’s ability to create viewers who can identify with the American Jewish community and who believe that Jews can identify with them. The emphasis on patriotism is an important part of this project. One of the first objects visitors see as they enter the “American Revolution” gallery is a period rifle. There is no indication that this rifle ever belonged to a Jew, but on display in a Jewish museum, that is the implication. Visually, including it in the display suggests that Jews participated in the battle to create the United States out of the British colonies. The rifle helps the museum identify colonial Jews as some of the first American patriots, the first real Americans.

Jewish allegiance to America is a particularly contentious issue because of the Zionist movement and, later, the establishment of Israel. With a homeland in Palestine and a life in the United States, Jews have been accused of harboring divided loyalties. According to this argument Jews appear to serve two masters, one in Washington, D.C. and one in Jerusalem. The NMAJH addresses this potential site of conflict by making the question irrelevant, presenting Jews as the ultimate patriots and Israel as mere imitation of America. In addition to the rifle on display in the “American Revolution,” gallery, each subsequent war-time gallery incorporates at least one uniform worn by an American Jewish soldier. As America’s loyal protectors, soldiers are icons of national allegiance, risking their lives in defense of national ideals, and military uniforms symbolize their ultimate commitment to the nation’s preservation. The full military regalia on display at the museum include Jews in this category; like all military personnel, Jews, too, stand watch over America.
The museum also addresses the Zionist question, by narrating Israel as a younger version of America. The exhibit on Israel appears on the second floor of the museum (gallery 2.3), after visitors have encountered many examples of Jewish contributions to American life and culture. Only three cases in the whole core exhibition tell the story of Israel. According to the narrative overview, the first case explains how the nation was created and raises questions about the meaning of its existence to both Jews and non-Jews, including among other issues an allusion to charges of dual loyalty against American Jews.\textsuperscript{ix} The second and third cases combat this accusation. In one, the museum celebrates the American Jews who helped establish the state and explains the relationship between the American government and Israel, “noting that Israel too was a nation of immigrants in search of national identity and the significance of the appearance of a democracy in the Middle East during the Cold War.”\textsuperscript{xix} The parallels drawn between American and Israeli identity are striking. As a ‘democracy’ and a ‘nation of immigrants,’ Israel sounds like a fledgling America. With this construction of Israel, the American Jews who participated in its establishment do not exhibit a divided loyalty. On the contrary, their dedication to Israel is a manifestation of their allegiance to American ideals. Spreading values the museum defines as American to the other side of the globe, these Jews seem to embody an unquestionably American identity. Finally, the museum fills the last case on Israel with objects produced in Israel or related to the folk culture of Palestine. The museum intends these items to “illustrate how American Jews actively supported the new Jewish state by purchasing goods produced there and developed cultural connections with their Jewish brethren through activities such as Israeli dance.”\textsuperscript{xxii} In essence, this case limits American Jewish support of Israel primarily to cultural and commercial connections. American Jews, this exhibit says, have no interest in
abandoning the United States. Their primary political allegiance lies first and foremost with America, their country and their homeland.

Patriotism and loyalty, however, do not alone transform Jews into model Americans. For Jews to serve this function at the museum, their patriotic actions must stand in contrast to anti-American activities carried out by other citizens. The museum accomplishes this by means of “codas,” like the “Revolutionary War” gallery’s area on the Nones Affair and the Maryland Jew Bill. In this gallery, the coda’s main function was to reveal the contingency of America’s Constitutional rhetoric of liberty and to define it in the terms laid out by Martin Luther King, Jr. It also, however, contrasted Jewish patriotism during and immediately after the war with the presence of anti-Semitism in American society. The first section of this gallery, focused on the Revolution and the Constitution, exhibited Jewish expressions of American identity in terms to which most Americans can relate: military service and patriotic language. The coda on Nones and the Jew Bill, in turn, constructed an American majority which failed to recognize the Americanness of these American Jews. This America defined Jews as “other,” separating themselves from their Jewish compatriots, rather than celebrating a shared American identity.

A similar coda appears in the gallery on Antebellum Jewish philanthropy (see Appendix A, gallery 4.8). This area, entitled “Choices and Challenges,” centers on the Purim Ball, a charitable gala hosted by affluent Jews in the late-nineteenth century. Here, the museum constructs its image of American Jewry by producing a visitor particularly sympathetic to Jews, rather than exhibiting the patriotic actions of the American Jewish community. In addition to objects used at the galas themselves, this gallery includes items related to the institutions which benefited from the balls. In a case on the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, visitors find applications for admission, images of children receiving dental care, and photographs of infant orphans.
These objects invite visitors to meditate on the lives of those who grew up in the orphanage, eliciting admiration for the Jews who made it possible. Pictures of children engaged in sewing and Hebrew classes communicate to museum-goers that the institutions supported by Purim Balls provided education in addition to food and housing. The organizations Jewish philanthropy funded provided underprivileged children with opportunities otherwise beyond their reach. Combined with the museum’s appropriation of Civil Rights notions of liberty, which equate freedom and opportunity, these objects testify to American Jewish efforts to extend American freedoms to orphaned children, once again modeling national values. More significantly, however, they simply construct an image of an American Jewish community which cares for the disadvantaged. The late-nineteenth century Jews who frequented Purim Balls could have spent their money on any number of things, and most likely, many did so. At the NMAJH, however, antebellum American Jews use their affluence to help others. They are paradigms of generosity and charitable giving.

Figure 9: “Grand Union,” from Puck, 1877. Image Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.
As visitors leave this area, filled with admiration for Jewish philanthropic efforts, they encounter the museum’s coda on the Seligman Affair, an anti-Semitic incident which became a national controversy. In 1877, the exclusive Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York, owned by Judge Henry Hilton, refused to admit Joseph Seligman, a prominent Jewish banker. The so-called “Seligman-Hilton affair” resulted in both the vocalization of widespread anti-Semitic sentiments and a boycott of Hilton’s other commercial ventures. The museum’s exhibit, narrates this event through two political cartoons from *Puck* and *Harper’s Weekly* (figures 9 and 10). Humorous and visually-oriented, these objects grab visitors’ attention and testify to the presence of anti-Semitism in the era of the Purim Ball. Both represent Jews stereotypically, with thick Yiddish accents and hooked noses. Despite their best efforts to assimilate into upper class American society, Jews in these cartoons appear visually and aurally distinctive. Precisely the opposite case presides at the museum. The new core exhibit teems with images of American Jews, and in several locations the museum displays multiple portraits concurrently. As on the promotional pamphlet indicative of “Only in America,” the Jews in these portraits look like all other Americans; there are no black-hatted men with side curls here.

Figure 10: From *Harper's Weekly*, 1877. Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.
None look *too* Jewish. The thirteen portraits on the “Colonial Portrait Wall” in the “First Communities” gallery (see Appendix A, gallery 4.3), for instance, *look* exactly like portraits of other prominent colonial Americans. Unlike the visually distinctive ultra-Orthodox Jews and the stereotypes from the *Puck* and *Harper’s Weekly* cartoons, Jews at the NMAJH do not stand out from American society because of the clothes they wear, the words they speak, or the lives they lead. After seeing how Antebellum Jews brought opportunity to needy children, the sentiments embodied in these cartoons seem wildly inappropriate and incompatible with the museum’s depiction of the generous American Jewish community. Where prominent Jews applied their status to supporting those on the bottom rungs of society, wealthy non-Jews employed theirs to discriminate against well-meaning Jews. The museum’s use of the Seligman-Hilton affair sets American anti-Semitism against Jewish philanthropic efforts. By juxtaposing the orphanage items and the Seligman cartoons, the NMAJH constructs a positive image of American Jewish life that stands in stark contrast to the hostility of other Americans. Furthermore, it constructs an America that fails to provide freedom of opportunity and freedom from oppression—the liberty of a distinctly post-Civil Rights era—to all its citizens. Jews at the museum defend a Civil Rights interpretation of freedom. Non-Jews subvert it.

This dichotomy between Jews and the rest of American society continues throughout the exhibit. As visitors make their way through the museum they learn about Jewish participation in the trade union and labor movement of the early twentieth century, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, and the campaign for Soviet Jewry in the 1970s and 80s. In each case, American Jews stand up in defense of King’s vision of freedom, a freedom which ensures all people equal rights and opportunities. At the same time, they learn about American anti-Semitism, prejudice, and indifference. That the museum actively produces this construction of
America is apparent in its treatment of a more ambiguous event in American Jewish history. In the gallery on the 1920s and ‘30s, the museum devotes a display to Jewish involvement in left-wing political movements like Communism and Socialism (gallery 3.8.3). While hindsight clearly commends participation in the Civil Rights struggle and other such movements, modern views of radical politics are arguably less sympathetic. In the wake of the Cold War and with knowledge of restricted civil liberties under Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, contemporary Americans may find it more difficult to consider Communism and Socialism laudable aspirations. The NMAJH, however, carefully prepares its visitors to see mainstream Americans, not Jewish advocates of radical politics, as misguided. At this point in the exhibit, visitors have just left a gallery on World War I in which they discovered heroic Jewish soldiers and generous of American Jews who raised money for refugees in Europe. Like the Purim Ball and Revolutionary War galleries, this part of the exhibit constructs a patriotic and compassionate image of American Jewry. And, following the pattern established in the other two galleries, the area on World War I ends with a coda on freedoms denied, pointing to the rise of nativism, restrictions on immigration quotas, and persecution of left-wing political groups which followed the war. Like Hilton’s treatment of Seligman in the “Choices and Challenges” gallery, the activities of mainstream America included in this coda now appear irrational and un-American. How could a nation whose identity rests on a Civil Rights notion of freedom persecute anyone, immigrants and radicals included? Why would a country identified as a land of opportunity and asylum close its gates to European refugees? Like those that preceded it, this coda disillusions museum-goers. Despite America’s rhetoric of freedom, interpreted from a post-Civil Rights perspective, American society continues to persecute minority populations.
After constructing America’s failure to manifest its imagined identity in this way, the museum invites its now disenchanted visitors to learn about the Jewish community’s reaction. According to the museum’s narrative overview, Jews were equally discouraged by America’s hostile policies. Thus, “radical politics became an important avenue for American Jews seeking to make claims to the rights promised by American Democracy. As they became more integrated into American society (and as the New Deal absorbed some of the ideas of the left) Jews began to move into the political mainstream.” In other words, from the perspective of the NMAJH, Jews were only radical so long as it was necessary to improve America. At the museum, the oppressive nativist atmosphere of interwar America necessitated political extremism. Radical politics forced America to realize its constitutional promises, as King and the museum define them. American Jews at the NMAJH advocate for a freer, fairer America, even if it means supporting Communism and Socialism. By the end of this gallery, the so-called “radical” Jews of the 1920s appear to have fought for American Democratic ideals—for equality and freedom—all along.

Similar patterns of Jewish advocacy and mainstream American indifference or outright antipathy recur throughout the museum. In each case, Jews emerge from the exhibit advocating for liberty and equality, and therefore protecting America’s supposed identity, while mainstream Americans appear oppressive and closed-minded. Jews are active and determined; America, when not actively discriminatory, is passive and apathetic. The construction of this dichotomy is particularly apparent in the gallery on World War II (3.7). Here, the museum reverses its previously established display strategy. Instead of dedicating a large area to celebrating American ideals, as expressed by Jews, and following it with a coda on anti-Semitism, the museum treats the rise of fascism in Europe and the ambivalence of American public policy in
the gallery’s main section. It designates the smaller, concluding section, to the rescue efforts orchestrated by American Jews. This choice emphasizes American apathy, maximizing its obstruction of American Jewish efforts to alleviate the suffering of European Jewry. Soundless newsreels from the 1930s and early 1940s line the upper edges of displays in this area, surrounding visitors with constant movement and creating a sense of relentless Nazi activity. In conjunction with the museum’s display of graphics and objects, they also testify to American awareness of the situation in Germany all along. Newspaper headlines announcing key events such as the Munich book burning and the expulsion of Polish Jews, and advertising campaigns from the Jewish Labor Committee and the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League further support this claim. Because contemporary museum-goers know the catastrophic outcome of the events portrayed in these newsreels and newspaper articles, it seems shocking that Americans could sit at home on their couches, watching these events unfold before them and remain unconcerned. But that is precisely the story the museum tells. In the entire area, not a single non-Jewish American makes an appearance defending Jewish rights, combating Nazi propaganda, or fighting Hitler’s Germany. On the other hand, two notorious anti-Semites, Father Coughlin and Breckinridge Long, are both featured prominently, as is the 1939 voyage of the St. Louis. Roosevelt denied this ship, carrying more than 900 German Jewish refugees, permission to disembark in America; most of its passengers returned to a Europe about to be enveloped by Hitler’s Germany. Visitors to this gallery also discover that President Roosevelt continued to focus on war tactics rather than rescue strategies despite entreaties to do otherwise from his American Jewish friends and advisors. The July 2008 design booklet for the new exhibit includes a large silkscreened graphic of a 1942 telegram to the World Jewish Congress. The telegram reads,
“Have received through foreign office following message from Riegner Stop Received alarming report that in Fuhrers headquarters plan discussed and under consideration all Jews in countries occupied or controlled Germany Number 3-1/2 to 4 million should after deportation and concentration in east at one blow exterminated to resolve once for all Jewish question in Europe.”  

Displayed in this manner, the telegram will be unavoidable. The message of the gallery is clear: Hitler’s “Final Solution” was no secret in America; there was no reason not to act. By featuring this telegram prominently, the museum leaves Americans and the Roosevelt administration with no excuse for their hesitation to rescue European Jews. Because the museum constructs an American identity that sees itself as a haven for oppressed people, America’s failure to act on behalf of suffering Jews reflects on the nation’s inability to live up to its own imagined identity. Once more, the museum constructs an America that does not uphold its own ideals.

In contrast, Jewish efforts to raise awareness and take action appear to be as much a fight to preserve American identity as to rescue other members of the global Jewish community. Although the museum points out that even American Jews did not really do everything in their power to rescue Holocaust victims, it attributes this ambivalence to “Jews’ hesitancy to jeopardize own [sic] aspirations for social integration, a symptom of the pervasive anti-Semitism the [sic] exited [sic] in American society at the time.” Thus, the inability on the part of American Jews to protect the freedom and democracy of Jews in Europe becomes a product of a hostile American atmosphere. According to the museum, American Jews could not have done more to rescue Jews in Europe without endangering their own precarious position in America. The museum makes what could be considered a failure on the part of American Jews, a failure on the part of America. American anti-Semitism, not Jewish indifference, muted American Jewish protests.

But, Jews still protested. In the face of anti-Semitism, Jews still raised the alarm, to an extent. Posters and handbills distributed by Jewish organizations and committees appear
throughout the gallery and visitors learn about American Jewish heroes who as soldiers and civilians risked their own safety to save their European co-religionists. The museum dedicates a prominent case in this area to rescue efforts initiated by American Jews. The NMAJH celebrates endeavors like Ruth Gruber’s participation in the removal of 1,000 refugees to Oswego, NY; the rescue efforts of B’Rith Shalom; and Hadassah’s Youth Aliyah, an effort to send Jewish children to Palestine. Visitors do not, however learn about Varian Fry, a non-Jewish American, who helped save thousands of Jews including Hannah Arendt, Max Ernst, and Marc Chagall. In fact, there is no mention in the narrative overview or the tentative object lists of any non-Jewish efforts to raise awareness about Hitler’s regime or to rescue European Jews. Walking out of this gallery, it appears that American Jews did all they could to alleviate the dire situation in Europe while the American majority allowed six million to die.

As in the Purim Ball gallery, the World War II area celebrates American Jewry by creating sympathetic viewers. The display case on American Jewish rescue efforts draws together objects related primarily to those who were rescued, not the American Jews who delivered them to safety. In doing so, the case highlights the experience of the survivors while still honoring American Jewish rescue missions. Objects like a pair of pajama bottoms and a Steif teddy bear owned by Helga Weiss, one of fifty unaccompanied children rescued by Eleanor and Gilbert Kraus around 1939, are particularly moving. Although Helga made it to safety, her belongings suggest absence and loss, evoking the many children who were not as lucky. In Helga’s case, this sentiment is particularly strong since the museum also displays a 1947 notice informing Helga of her mother’s death in a Polish deportation camp five years earlier. Contemporary visitors to this gallery, seeing objects like these, cannot but celebrate the rescue efforts of American Jews and condemn American indifference. Even more than the
philanthropists honored in the Purim Ball gallery, these Jews bring the benefits and opportunities of American freedom to oppressed populations. By contrasting American Jewish rescue efforts with the contemptible indifference of mainstream America, the museum constructs an American Jewish identity in which Jews are more American than the nation’s non-Jewish majority, modeling national identity and embodying American ideals.

And so America, at the NMAJH, needs the Jews to save itself, or more appropriately, to be what it aspires to be. Through narrative strategies like this one and that of the “American Revolution” gallery, in which America’s active discrimination or passivity in the face of injustice contrasts with Jewish activism and preservation of freedom, the NMAJH constructs an America that which has always depended on its Jewish citizens to remain devoted to its Constitutional guarantee of liberty. In keeping with its post-Civil Rights image of freedom, the museum insists that actions, not words, constitute true expressions of American identity and provides examples of Jews acting this part. In this construction, the people who enact Civil Rights ideals of liberty and equality, not Constitutional promises, embody American identity. The museum thus performs a history of America in which Jews play a key role. Jews, in this story, created America not by writing its founding documents but by insisting that the nation live up to its own ideals and identity, as filtered through a Civil Rights Era lens. Jews, in other words, help America become the nation King and the museum imagine it to be. America, at the NMAJH, is indebted to Jews for keeping it true to its vision of itself, for making and maintaining its national identity.
Commerce, Culture, and Catastrophe: Maintaining the American Jewish Community

In order for the museum to celebrate this judaized America—the America whose national identity is sustained by Jews—the American Jewish community must be recognizable as Jews, not just as Americans. Few of the Jews who participated in the creation of this America, however, were particularly distinguishable from the rest of American society. Nor did they necessarily consider themselves distinctive. They shared many of the same concerns as their non-Jewish neighbors and sometimes observed minimal religious rites. In order to celebrate these individuals as American Jews, therefore, the museum must propose a definition of “Jewishness” that includes them. At the same time as it creates a judaized America in which Jews constantly expand the boundaries of American freedom, the NMAJH constructs an Americanized Jewish community which redefines the category “Jew.”

Throughout the exhibit narrative, the museum describes Jewishness as a flexible identity. American Jews at the NMAJH embrace innovation and experimentation. According to the museum’s narrative overview, colonial Jews “lived by and improvised Judaism . . . maintaining Jewish identity, yet observed Jewish law with flexibility.” Here, the museum authorizes improvisation and flexibility as acceptable ways to practice Judaism, a construction of authentic Jewishness that would not be accepted by all Jews. To many in the Orthodox community, for instance, Jewish law (halachah) is non-negotiable. For these circles to consider someone authentically Jewish, the individual must accept all the halachic commandments as they have been preserved; to alter, re-interpret, or improvise the law, as other Jewish denominations have done, steps outside the boundaries of Judaism.

At the NMAJH, however, Jewishness is not just a matter of religious observance. It is a matter of affiliation, a sense of belonging to a larger Jewish community and actively working to
preserve that relationship. At the museum, Jews are what Jews do with and for other Jews. In this rubric, anything that maintains a sense of communal identity is an authentic expression of Jewishness. Thus, at the museum visitors learn that American Jews cultivate Jewishness in a variety of ways. Food in particular plays an important role in the museum’s construction of American Jewish identity. In a third floor gallery on the domestic lives of immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century (3.3.1) Jewish foodways dominate the exhibit. This display includes everything from pans used to make mandelbrot and blintzes to Breakstone’s containers, Horowitz kosher-for-Passover spices and coffee, and a Crisco tin and recipe book. Here the museum associates these items with the experience of Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Similar items, however, also appear in a later gallery spotlighting suburbanization in the era after World War II (2.4). Here visitors can explore an immersive environment reminiscent of a mid-century suburban home. On a bookshelf in the kitchen area they will find Grandma’s Kosher Recipes: 209 Jewish Dishes, Modern Style; A Menu for Every Day: Modern Jewish Meals; and The Molly Goldberg Jewish Cookbook. Nearby drawers contain matchbooks from various Jewish delis and kosher restaurants and a kitchen shelf holds an almond macaroon can, kosher-for-Passover candy, kosher pickle jars, and a container of Morton’s kosher salt with both English and Yiddish labels. Finally, a design booklet for the new exhibit pictures the front of the refrigerator silkscreened with text about Jewish dietary laws (kashrut). The proliferation of Jewish food items indicates that Jews were enough of a presence in the United States that American companies marketed products specifically to them.

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7 The Jewish dairy, Breakstone’s, was the first to mass-produce cream-cheese.
8 When Procter and Gamble began selling Crisco, the marketed it to Jewish consumers as an alternative for butter that could be used with meat dishes without violating Jewish dietary laws.
9 Molly Goldberg was the protagonist in the popular 1950’s television show, The Goldberg’s. Molly’s character, a suburban Jewish housewife, countered anti-Semitic stereotypes of nagging, overprotective Jewish mothers by emphasizing the nurturing, community-centered aspects of maternal figures.
Moreover, these displays suggest that buying these products—keeping kosher and/or eating so-called “Jewish” foods—was and is one way of expressing an American Jewish identity.

The immersive environment of the suburban home also indicates a domestic aspect of American Judaism. Viewing these objects, museum-goers interact with tangible expressions of American Jewish identity in a space that is familiar to them, regardless of their own religious affiliation. At the NMAJH, immersive environments teach visitors that authentic expressions of American Jewish identity occur outside as well as inside the synagogue. In addition to the suburban home, visitors to the museum pass through a turn-of-the-century streetscape on New York’s Lower East Side (3.3), a suburban synagogue (2.6), and a Jewish summer camp (2.6). In fact, the summer camp, synagogue, and suburban house are all part of the same exhibit area. In contrast to the emphasis on kashrut found in the domestic environment, however, the summer camp display contains few references to religious observance of any kind. Leaving an exhibit area devoted to new articulations of Jewish religious identity (including a section called “Personalizing Observance”), the camp scene will seem a particularly secular space. Fully equipped with a scenic wood camp sign, a bunk-bed-shaped display area, and outdoor lounge chairs (figure 11), this environment exhibits children’s letters home, canteen menus, postcards (with images of campgrounds and celebrations on the establishment of Israel), and photographs of children engaged in recreational activities. This camp looks just like those frequented by non-Jewish Americans. Jews, the museum argues, live
like all other Americans, participating in the same activities but experiencing them in a Jewish way.

Furthermore, although most Jewish camps included religious services as part of the itinerary, few objects on display in this area relate to religious ritual. Kippot (traditional head coverings) decorated with camp insignias and kosher canteen dishes are the only indications of traditional religious observance in this exhibit. Jewish parents, at the museum, did not expect their children to learn rituals at summer camp, but to cultivate their Jewish identities by interacting with other Jewish children. Jewish campers were not always engaged in Jewish activities, but by sharing experiences with other Jews they participated in the creation of a nation-wide Jewish community. In this display, religion becomes just one of the many valid expressions of Jewish identity fostered at Jewish summer camps, along with Zionism, ethnic identity, and development of the Jewish community.

The use of an immersive environment in the “Choices and Challenges” gallery (4.8), also declares activities unrelated to religious observance authentic expressions of Jewish identity. Here, Purim Balls not only indicate the Jewish community’s generosity but American Jewry’s dedication to maintaining that community. Although Purim Balls do not feature prominently in the comprehensive histories of American Jewish life by Jonathan Sarna or Hasia Diner, preeminent scholars of American Jewish history, the NMAJH devotes a particularly stunning gallery to the galas. With a chandelier hanging from the center of the ceiling, wall graphics designed to look like columns and arches, silhouettes of well-dressed men and women, and a case containing an ornate evening gown, museum-goers entering this gallery seem to walk into the middle of a packed ballroom. This could be any elite party of the antebellum period, but at the NMAJH it is a particularly Jewish event. In addition to invitations for the “Third Annual
“Ball of the Hebrew Caritable Society” and the “Grand Carnival Ball, Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society,” display cases contain event-specific dishware from the Grand Charity Fair for the Jewish Hospital in Brooklyn and ephemera related to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Although these masquerade balls were often held in association with Purim, a religious holiday, few objects in this exhibit point to the religious associations of the galas. And yet the museum narrates participation in Purim Balls as an expression of Jewish identity. At the NMAJH, these Jews expressed a Jewish identity by sustaining a connection to Jewish organizations and the Jewish community, not through religious observance. Using ephemera to indicate the Jewishness of the organizations which benefitted from these events and the benefactors that attended them, the museum translates Purim Balls into evidence of an Antebellum Jewish community. In this gallery, the museum celebrates Jews involved with these events as active participants in the preservation of Jewish identity in America.

Similar philanthropic endeavors appear throughout the exhibit. In the third floor introduction (see Appendix A, gallery 3.1), organizations like the National Council of Jewish Women and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society feature prominently. These organizations helped primarily Jewish immigrants complete the naturalization process, locate family members, and find places to live and work in America. Later, in the “World War I and End of Immigration” gallery, the Jewish Welfare Board and the Joint Distribution Committee illustrate American Jewry’s dedication to suffering European Jews. The NMAJH could easily have linked Purim Balls and aid societies to religious observance through the idea of tzedakah (the halachic obligation to give charity) but the exhibit’s narrative overview reveals no trace of this intent. Nor does the museum insist that participants were religiously affiliated in any way. Although several of these organizations initially offered religious services as well, at the museum they serve
primarily political and philanthropic roles, providing aid and assistance to underprivileged populations. What the NMAJH defines as Jewish in these organizations is not a dedication to traditional religious observance but a maintenance of the Jewish community. Linking Jews of vastly different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, Purim Balls and aid organizations helped create and sustain a sense of shared identity within an increasingly diverse Jewish community. Featured prominently at the NMAJH, they authorize philanthropy as a valid demonstration of Jewish identity, regardless of religious observance or affiliation.

Just as philanthropy links Jews across social boundaries, commerce and disaster unite them across geographical and political borders. According to the narrative overview for the new exhibit, Holocaust memorialization became an important venue for Jewish expression after World War II: “American Jews . . . engaged the European catastrophe as an important component of their identities through commemorations, remembrance prayers, and public ceremonies." Like the philanthropic organizations of the early twentieth century, Holocaust memorials illustrate an American Jewish sensibility that links its identity with that of other Jewish communities. The museum’s narration of American Jewish support for Israel also serves this function. By emphasizing commercial and cultural links to the Israel, the museum minimizes the religious significance of a Jewish state in Palestine in addition to contesting the claim that Jews serve two masters. Once again, maintaining communal ties to other Jews, not traditional religious observance, indicates and fosters a strong Jewish identity.

This is not to say that the museum dismisses religiosity altogether, only that it represents religious observance as one of many equally valid ways to express Jewish identity. American Jewishness at the NMAJH is multi-faceted; from philanthropy, to summer camp, to synagogue attendance, American Jews nurture a vibrant community in a variety of ways. The museum even
diversifies the category of religious observance itself. At various points in its narrative, the museum highlights rabbis from the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox movements. In each case, the exhibit celebrates a given religious leader’s adaptation of American Jewish life, not their adherence to the status quo. The museum’s treatment of the infamous “treyfa banquet” demonstrates the museum’s expanded definition of Jewish religiosity. In July, 1883, Hebrew Union College, a Reform institution and the oldest seminary in America, ordained its first graduating class. The menu for the celebratory meal, however, included a number of non-kosher (treyfa) foods, shocking and offending many observant guests. The NMAJH never suggests that the individuals responsible for this event failed to maintain their Jewish identities. Rather, according to the narrative overview, the banquet spotlights how post-bellum “institutions sought to articulate an American Judaism.” At the museum, serving non-kosher foods at a major Jewish event does not indicate the dissolution of Jewish identity but the struggle to define the boundaries of that category. The NMAJH’s refusal to condemn the banquet, and by association the Reform movement which sponsored it, actually condones it, adding Reform Judaism and non-kosher foodways to the list of authentic expressions of American Jewish identity. The treyfa banquet, in the museum’s galleries, becomes a way to illustrate American Jews’ active engagement with the question of Jewishness and the emergence of an American Jewish community that includes multifaceted expressions of Jewish identity.

Even when addressing synagogues, customarily associated with religious observance, the museum articulates new roles for these traditional institutions. In the “Competing Visions” gallery on the third floor (3.5), a subsection reveals the “importance of transition” in the development of American Judaism during the interwar years. During the depression, synagogue membership declined drastically. According to the NMAJH, the religious leaders and
institutions responded by adapting to “the ethos of the era.” Synagogues transformed themselves into “vital communal institutions befitting of contemporary American life” by adopting new policies and programs “linked . . . to American social and political developments.” Tied to politics and American social life, synagogues at the NMAJH provide far more for the American Jewish community than just a space for worship. Similarly, on the second floor, the museum devotes a large section of the exhibit to religious life in the mid-twentieth century, including an immersive media environment shaped like a suburban synagogue (2.5). Inside the “synagogue,” a media display leads visitors on a tour of some of the most spectacular synagogues of twentieth-century America. The museum also intends this installation to “chart how synagogue buildings were used for worship, social activities, education, and other activities, how these uses may have changed over time and the significance of those changes.” According to the narrative overview, the entire gallery is intended to indicate how “Jews ‘pioneered’ new religious spaces, creating synagogues that took on all the functions once served by the ethnic neighborhood.” In both the “Competing Visions” gallery and the synagogue environment, the museum’s language implies that an Americanized Judaism must consent to endless adjustment. Without a willingness to adapt to contemporary society, Judaism at the NMAJH is not American.

The synagogue, suburban home, summer camp, and nineteenth-century dance hall environments play an important role in the museum’s construction of a diverse Jewish community. These are very different spaces, but as viewers move through them they learn how each venue provides unique opportunities for American Jews to express their Jewish identities. One need not attend synagogue or believe in God to be Jewish, these displays suggest, though that is one way to affiliate with the Jewish people. Philanthropic endeavors, summers spent at
camp, and kitchens filled with “Jewish” items, however, are all equally valid expressions of Jewish identity at the NMAJH. For Jewish museum-goers, these spaces encourage active engagement with the nature of their Jewishness. The Constitution Center, at least in theory, encouraged visitors to ask themselves what it meant to be American; the exhibit at the NMAJH asks visitors to question what being Jewish means to them and to cultivate a strong Jewish identity in response.

By celebrating the ingenuity of historic American Jews in their answers to this question, the museum encourages visitors to come up with their own answers. The core exhibit even culminates in a gallery devoted exclusively to questions and includes numerous venues for visitor responses. The “Contemporary Issues Forum,” which concludes the main section of the museum’s exhibit, is a large round gallery (2.8). Through newspaper clippings, computer printouts, expert opinion videos, and visitor responses the walls of this space provide various opinions on contemporary issues such as intermarriage and the future of the American Jewish community, homosexuality in the clergy, and American Jewish financial support for Israel. At the center of the room is a large interactive table which will allow visitors to explore a particular issue in depth and engage with others interested in the same topic. This gallery is all about fostering dialogue, cultivating community, and creating active visitors in the sense that the Constitution Center creates active citizens. It asks museum-goers to apply the themes they learned about in the exhibit to their own lives in contemporary America, implicitly encouraging them to carry the museum’s message beyond its walls. For Jewish visitors, this mean actively engaging with their Jewish identity and inventing new modes of Jewishness, or participating in old ones, to ensure the survival of the American Jewish community in the contemporary world. For non-Jews it means engendering an America which lives up to Martin Luther King’s vision of
freedom, a nation where black, as well as white, as well as Jew share the same opportunities for success and achievement

As visitors return to the lobby of the museum after this experience, they pass by “Only in America” once more. This time, however, the Jews celebrated in this exhibit appear even more exemplary of the museum’s construction of American and Jewish identity. Taking advantage of the nation’s imagined identity as a land of opportunity and equality, these individuals invented new modes of Jewishness which allowed them to participate in American social and political life while maintaining strong ties to their own Jewish community. Contributing to the development of both the American and the Jewish society, they appear truly American Jews.
Conclusion

Like the congregational synagogue or the JCC, the landsmanshaft or the havurah before it, each of which redefined both the terms and the terrain of Jewish communal life, contemporary Jewish museums represent an alternative, yet equally viable, way for modern-day American Jews to belong to something larger than themselves.\textsuperscript{xxxvii}

-“Best-in-Show,” Jenna Weissman Joselit

On May 30, 1891, the single largest crowd New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art had ever seen streamed through its doors. Eleven policemen stood watch outside the building and additional guards monitored all the galleries. These hoards, however, did not come to see a new loan, acquisition, or exhibit and they were not the museum’s typical crowd. Primarily working class immigrants, including many Jews, these visitors came because, for the first time, they could. After a heated controversy, the Met had finally agreed to open its doors on Sunday afternoons, increasing accessibility for the working class whose jobs often demanded a six-day work week. At first the Met declined the request of approximately 100,000 petitioners, nearly half of which were immigrant Jews, on the basis that opening its doors on Sunday would profane a holy day, encouraging people to go to the museum instead of to church, and that it would bring the wrong kind of crowd to the museum. In response, petitioners argued that opening the Met would provide a cultured alternative to saloons, which already did a steady business on Sundays. The working class wanted the opportunity to engage in “what was rapidly becoming a perquisite of modernity and a mark, even a ritual, of urban citizenship: a public encounter with art.”\textsuperscript{xxxviii}

The museum eventually acquiesced, though it kept extra police and guards on duty to prevent theft and vandalism at the hands of the supposedly uneducated, uncultured masses. In the end, the museum’s trustees had little reason for concern. According to a front-page article in The New York Times following the first experimental Sunday, “A more orderly crowd never entered the building. . . . Those who expected to see Essex Street Polish Jews and 39th Street and
Eleventh Avenue hod carriers in ragged clothing and dilapidated hats were agreeably disappointed."\textsuperscript{lxxix} The new visitors dressed up, acted politely, and proceeded through the galleries in an appropriately reverential manner. The only job for the policemen at the front entrance was to make sure young children avoided hitting their heads as they went through the turnstiles.\textsuperscript{lxxx} The immigrant Jews and their Lower East Side neighbors proved to the trustees that they, too, knew how to appreciate the city’s cultural treasure trove and that they would acquiesce to the demands of the institution to access it.

A century later, in 2002, New York’s Jewish community was once again at the center of a major dispute involving a prominent city museum. This time, however, the Jewish Museum, not the Met, was at the center of the controversy and the terms of the debate had altered drastically. Instead of requesting access to the institution’s cultural repository as part of a modern civilizing ritual, the Jewish community of the twenty-first century vehemently protested one of the museum’s major exhibitions. The installation in question was “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art,” which aimed to show the impact of the Holocaust on contemporary art. It included, among other pieces, a concentration camp made out of legos and a photograph of emaciated prisoners at Buchenwald digitally manipulated to include a picture of the artist holding a can of Diet Coke. The Jewish community was horrified. They denounced the exhibit as inconsiderate and offensive and staged protests outside the museum. The Jewish Museum tried to placate some of the detractors by placing signs throughout the exhibit warned visitors that they were approaching some of the more disturbing pieces. Their action did not produce the desired effect. One offended community member retorted, “It’s moving anthrax from one part of a building to another. For Holocaust survivors it’s not less morally repugnant because people are warned. What’s objectionable is that they’re in the Jewish Museum at all.”\textsuperscript{lxixi} No longer
deferential to the museum’s expectations or reverential of its contents, the Jewish community in 2002 expected the museum to acquiesce to its demands. They wanted the Jewish Museum to reflect the sentiments of the Jewish community.

In her essay, Jenna Weissman Joselit uses these two moments in the history of New York City’s cultural institutions to demonstrate the contemporary role of Jewish museums in American Jewish life. According to her, the demonstrations against “Mirroring Evil” indicate that by the twenty-first century, American Jews had come to expect a Jewish museum to “serve as an agent of community rather than merely a passive recipient—and custodian—of its patrimony, as it long had been.” Contemporary Jews wanted Jewish museums to affirm their Jewish identities and to engender a sense of community. They went to museums to feel a sense of belonging, not to participate in a ‘civilizing ritual’ dictated by the American elite.

The National Museum of American Jewish History will serve as an 'agent of community,' in precisely this manner. Highlighting the role of American Jews in United States history, the NMAJH will counter The Tribe's image of Jews as outsiders. Celebrating Jews as vital members of the American community, the NMAJH wil encourage both Jews and non-Jews to retain an image of America which not only includes but depends on its Jewish citizens, all while simultaneously maintaining the distinctiveness of Jewish identity. American Jews who walk through its doors will encounter an uplifting interpretation of their heritage and history. They can be proud of their role in America's development and their ability to sustain the Jewish community in a sometimes hostile environment. In short, they can delight in their American Jewish identity. It will also be a place where they can share that pride with other Jews. By defining the American Jewish identity as diverse and inclusive the museum will create a space in which American Jews of various affiliations can feel part of something larger--the American
Jewish community.

In doing so, the NMAJH follows in a long line of American Jewish institutions which contribute to the continuity of the Jewish community by redefining the terms of Jewish engagement. Like the suburban synagogues, philanthropic institutions and summer camps the NMAJH highlights in its exhibit, the museum is a part of the American Jewish tradition of innovation and experimentation. It sustains the American Jewish community in new and inventive terms, uniting Jews in a celebration of historic narratives, images, and artifacts rather than a shared spirituality like the havurah or a shared geographic origin like the landsmanshaft. The National Museum of American Jewish History celebrates American ideals, adopts American rhetoric, and integrates into the American scenery all while retaining a distinct Jewish identity. It is, in other words, an integral part of the very narrative it constructs.
Notes


xii Ibid., 88.


xxii Ibid., 52.


xxviii Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, 132-69.


lxix Ibid., 7.
lxx Perelman, "2nd Floor Walkthrough," 3.
lxxii Perelman, "3rd Floor Walkthrough," 8.
lxxiii Ibid., 9.
lxxiv Ibid., 9.
lxxvi Ibid., 6.
lxxviii Ibid., 143.
lxxx Ibid.
Figure 12: Cross-section of the building plan for the National Museum of American Jewish History. Note: The gallery titles in this image are outdated. “Freedom Experience” is now called “Questions of Freedom” and “Responsibilities of Freedom” is now called “Choices and Challenges of Freedom.”

*Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History*
Figure 2: “Foundations of Freedom” (fourth floor) exhibit layout. Gallagher & Associates.

*Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.*
Figure 3. “Dreams of Freedom” (third floor) exhibit layout. Gallagher & Associates,

*Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.*
Figure 4: “Choices and Challenges of Freedom” (second floor) exhibit layout. Gallagher & Associates.

Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.
Figure 5: Museum lobby and “Only in America” (ground floor) exhibit layout. Gallagher & Associates.

*Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.*
Appendix B: Maps of the future location of the National Museum of American Jewish History

Figure 1. Architect’s rendering of Independence Mall showing locations of major landmarks in relationship to the future site of the National Museum of American Jewish History. Aerial View. Polshek Partnership Architects, LLP. Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

Figure 2. Architect’s rendering of Independence Mall showing locations of major landmarks in relationship to the future site of the National Museum of American Jewish History. Plan View. Polshek Partnership Architects, LLP. Courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.
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Monk, Linda. Preamble.


National Park Service. The New Colossus.


Sky, Allison. *Indelible.*


