

JFest

AN ARTS FESTIVAL

for the JCC Movement

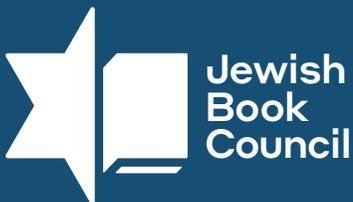
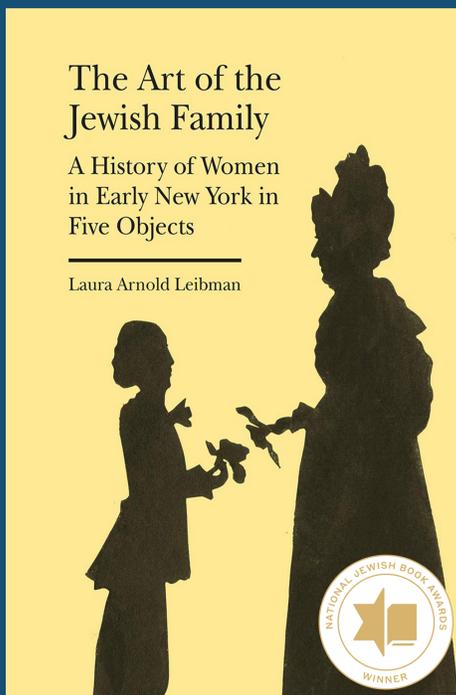
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Sparking the Jewish Story: The Objects That Define Us

A JFest Community Resource Guide

In Partnership with Jewish Book Council and Reboot



JCC Association
of North America

REBOOT

Contents

JFest Introduction.....	3
An Overview: <i>The Art of the Jewish Family</i>	4
Community Conversation Starters.....	5
Book Guide Questions for Discussion.....	7
Reboot: What Would You Bring?.....	10
Related Media and Reading.....	15
A Snapshot of Life: American Jewish Historical Society on Family Papers.....	16
Glossary.....	17
About.....	18

JFest

Introduction

Sparking the Jewish Story: The Objects That Define Us

The following pages serve as a multi-entry guide for you and your community to engage in “Sparking the Jewish Story: The Object That Define Us”, an event in JFest: An Arts Festival for the JCC Movement.

In partnership with Jewish Book Council and Reboot, this JFest event features Laura Arnold Leibman, author of the National Jewish Book Award-winning *The Art of the Jewish Family* in conversation with Noam Dromi, co-creator of Reboot’s “What Would You Bring” initiative. Together, they explore Jewish storytelling and resilience in a discussion moderated by Jewish educator and theatre-maker Kendell Pinkney.

You can experience and share this roundtable conversation anytime, via <https://virtualjcc.com/watch/art-of-jewish-family-jfest>.

The Guide

You can work with the guide in a variety of different ways. Whether you want to have a conversation with your family after watching the program or are reading “The Art of the Jewish Family” in your book club, or if you are looking to engage with Reboot’s “What Would You Bring?” refugee storytelling initiative, there are activities and entry-points for everyone in the following pages.

This guide begins with an overview of Laura Leibman’s book *The Art of the Jewish Family* and invites us to learn more about the objects that hold our family stories. You can refer to the Glossary and conversation questions as tools. We also share about Reboot’s

“What Would You Bring?” project and ways to interact and share back.

The guide also includes a “Related Reads and Media” section to continue exploring the themes of storytelling, resilience, and the objects that help us remember where we come from and who we are.

We look forward to hearing more about the ways this guide has helped you uncover and share your stories.

What is JFest?

JFest is a virtual Jewish Arts festival that marries high quality cultural and educational content delivered continentally via the Virtual J platform, with local engagement resources to you and your communities, deepening local connections as they help build community resilience.

Curated by JCC Association of North America and developed in collaboration with strategic creative partners and JCCs. JFest delivers virtual Jewish arts festival event clusters, broadly accessible to communities. When we provide digital access to arts experiences of excellence, we invite deeper local conversation supported by resources like these.

JFest is driven by the themes of storytelling and resilience in the JCC Movement and beyond.

All JFest events can be found on virtualjcc.com/channel/jfest-an-art-festival.

JFest is powered by funds granted by The Covenant Foundation with additional support from The Pertzik Fund for Arts and Culture.

An Overview: *The Art of the Jewish Family*

Below is a very brief overview of Laura Arnold Leibman's *The Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects*.

Introduction:

When you look at historical records, very little exists about Jewish women before the Civil War. There are accounts or letters from a handful of particularly wealthy and prominent women, but for the most part, there is silence around the lives of women in early America that stems from a lack of archival material. This book asks the question: for the people who don't have the power or education to leave a written record (i.e. archival material), how do we learn of their lives and tell their stories?

In the introduction, Leibman writes:

"I argue in this book that in order to examine the full range of Jewish women's lives in early America we need to (1) expand our definition of evidence and (2) listen to the silences in the archive. What were the structural reasons why women were less likely to create documents? What textual and nontextual sources did women in this era create and use? What forces kept these sources out of the archives and silenced early Jewish women's stories in later histories? By thinking about archiving as an active and ongoing process, I suggest that current stories told about Jews in early America are skewed. Expanding our evidence and listening to silences shifts the locus of Jewish identity out of the synagogue and political arena and into the familial sphere" (p. 5).

Five Objects:

"Paper Fragments": Using letters written by Hannah Louzada, this chapter examines the plight of poor women and the structure of Jewish communal charities; laws, particularly those around inheritance, that impacted women; and

"Pieces of Silver": Six silver beakers owned by Reyna Levy Moses (1753-1824) are the centerpiece of a discussion on marriage practices in early colonial times, the role of women in creating family and trade networks, and the use of silver among early American Jews.

"Portrait in Ivory": The chapter examines a miniature portrait of Sarah Brandon Moses, a woman who started life as a slave in Barbados and ended up being one of New York's wealthy Jewish elite. The discussion revolves around race and racecraft, social mobility, and the crafting of personal images.

"Commonplace Things": The commonplace book that belonged to Sarah Ann Hays demonstrates shifts in the roles, expectations, and relationships for women in general, and Jewish women specifically.

"Family Silhouettes": The silhouette of Jane Symons Isaacs and her family highlights the family's values, most particularly in promoting traditional Judaism and American Orthodox Judaism along with more visible and institutional roles for women within the Jewish community and the Jewish family.

For a more substantial overview of the chapters, see *The Art of the Jewish Family*, pages 23-35.

Community Conversation Starters

1. Bring in pictures of inherited items in your home. What types of objects are they? What are the stories behind them? What can you learn about your family or history from these objects? What don't you know about this heirloom? Is there research that you can do to learn more about the object? Discuss the role of mute testimony on that object.

2. Choose an everyday object from your life. Why did you select that object? What does it share about you and your life? How would it be viewed by total strangers? Now choose an object that might represent the story of your life as you want it to be told. What is that story? How is this object different from the first?

3. The idea of choosing what to keep versus finding what is left is one that separates archeology from a time capsule. Imagine what someone in the future might learn about your community from a geniza or a buried building structure? What would you hope they uncovered? Now think of what you would want to have included in a community time capsule? Are you telling the same story as the one that was uncovered or a different story? Listen to Dara Horn's podcast on Jewish practices creating time capsules (see the Related Media section), and discuss what it means to create a Jewish time capsule.

4. Choose an object that defines a powerful woman in your life (past or present). Think of the object that would define them on their best days, and why? On the most challenging days, and why? What was her impact? What limitations inhibited her? What kind of record did she leave?

5. Choose an object that is a modern equivalent to

one or all of the objects in the book (like a facebook or dating profile instead of the miniature). Why did you choose those objects, and in what ways are they modern versions of the five items that Leibman selected?

6. Does your family have interactive heirlooms? How has the heirloom changed over the years? What is the story behind each of those changes?

7. Would you consider recipes to be heirlooms? Do you have any heirloom recipes? Are those recipes interactive heirlooms? How have the recipes changed? Bring in a recipe and talk about the journey the recipe has taken.

8. Think of a famous story in American Jewish history (examples: the Newport Synagogue receiving a letter from George Washington in 1790; Emma Lazarus sitting down to write "The New Colossus;" Triangle Shirtwaist Fire). Reframe that moment in history to imagine the voices who were silenced.

9. Create a commonplace book. What does that look like today? What would you include (designs and artwork; poems, quotes, or passages; notes from loved ones)? Who would you ask to write in it? How would it differ from a social media profile, and how is it similar?

10. Leibman writes how most early Jewish community archives mostly reflect the wealthy male population. Envision an archive for your community that encompasses the full breadth of your community members. What is included in the archive? How do you accurately reflect the identity, issues, and customs of your particular community?

11. Create a family archive. What would you include? Would it be mostly photographs and papers, or would you add other items? If you already have a family archive, what will you be adding to it? (For more on family archives, see Jewish Book Council's [discussion guide for *Family Papers* by Sarah Abrevaya Stein.](#))

12. Leibman writes about her choice of examining material culture, that “turning to Jewish women’s material culture shifts the study of religion from the synagogue to the family, and, in doing so, clarifies a key change in Jewish life as ‘Jewishness’ began to dance on the borderline between religion and culture” (p. 6). Modern Judaism has a very clear distinction between religion and culture in many cases, with Jewish identities able to exist within one or the other, and also as a mix of the two. What forms your own Jewish identity? Consider clothing, appearance, food, education, holidays, religious observance, other customs, music, literature, nostalgia?

13. Many families, in both the Jewish and larger American communities, arrived in this country from somewhere else. Some were able to bring with them objects from their former lives. Reboot’s What Would You Bring initiative explore stories of home, new and old, inviting you to think about what we carry with us and what we might leave behind. We invite you to engage below with the WWYB resources to explore your community story.

Book Guide

Questions for Discussion

The questions below were written using ideas or references from *The Art of the Jewish Family* to spur conversations in your community.

- In the introduction, author Laura Arnold Leibman discusses the dearth of information on women in early America, due to a lack of archival material. She poses a central question of the book: “What social and religious structures... caused early Jewish women to disappear from the archives?” (p. 6). How would you answer that question?
- What other voices have been silenced by official archives? What are objects that could be/have been used to bring them into the conversation?
- In what ways does poverty affect histories and archives? How has the state of poverty changed? What do you think about the system of almshouses, the need to prove to be “worth” charity, and the synagogue systems of charity of the 1700s? Are they better or worse than what exists now?
- Remembering fragments of dishes found in a Barbadian synagogue compound while looking for official records, Leibman writes, “The fragments are symbols of the fabric of daily life, the things people typically think are not worth keeping” (p. 31). What do you consider to be “worth keeping”?
- In chapter five, Leibman explores family silhouettes and what they tell us about Jewish appearance, gender, and family structure. In thinking about Jewish appearance, it’s difficult to avoid a conversation about stereotypical Jewish imagery and “the Jewish head.” The conversation continues today with debates around whether or not non-Jews can play a Jewish role in film and tv—specifically female roles—and what that decision communicates about Jews. How do you think stereotypes about Jewish appearance can be used both positively and negatively and what are examples of this in literature and film? How have our conversations around the Jewish body evolved and how does it complicate our image of Jewish identity?
- On page 75, Leibman writes, “Giving heirlooms serves as a form of self-curation....As archeologist Katine Lillios explains, “Heirlooms serve to objectify memories and histories, acting as mnemonics to remind the living of their link to a distant, ancestral past.” ...Whereas the landed gentry or aristocrats in England relied on titles, land, or country houses to carry on a sense of the family, Jewish merchants tended to move frequently during this era and hence sought out small, transportable goods to pass to the next generation. Heirlooms connected future descendants to the past their ancestors had worked so hard to create.”
What do you think it means to consider heirlooms as a form of self-curation? Do you feel connections to your family or community through heirlooms? For families who don’t have heirlooms for whatever reason, how are those links maintained? Do you think physical heirlooms create stronger connections than intangible heirlooms (stories, rituals, cooking, etc)?
- Where is racecraft at work in our communities today (see Glossary page for explanation of racecraft)? How do we identify racecraft in our Jewish institutions?

- Sarah Brandon Moses was born an enslaved-Christian with a Black mother and a Jewish father, who, as an adult, lived in elite New York society as a white Jewish woman. During her lifetime, her background and ancestry was not a secret from her peers and community, as Leibman writes, “Sarah was not ‘pretending’ to be white; whiteness itself had changed, and she had changed along with it” (p. 131). However, her story was lost within three generations, and to remain utterly unknown until now. Why do you think Sarah’s origins became a secret? Sarah’s story comes as a surprise to many modern readers, yet was not unheard of at the time. What has changed that created silence around Sarah?
- Sarah Brandon Moses lived in a time when the concept of race was shifting, and Jews were increasingly viewed in “racial rather than religious terms” (p. 97). How did that view play into Sarah’s story? In what ways is that shift evident today?
- Many family histories have significant holes. What creates those gaps in knowledge? What reasons might we have to forget parts of our histories? What are the pieces of your own family history that are missing?
- What’s the difference between history, collective memory, historiography? What role does each play in how we tell the stories of the American Jewish community?
- According to Sarah Ann Hays, the woman whose commonplace book Leibman examines, “a Jewish woman’s deeds, memory, and love carried more weight than marriage or motherhood when it came to perpetuating tradition” (p. 167). Do you agree with that statement? Do you think it is still relevant today? Have you seen this to be the case in your own family?
- In her discussion of the silver beakers that belonged to Reyna Moses Levy and are now on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Leibman writes, “being collected as art also meant that Reyna’s cups were unlikely to be categorized as Jewish, since the way Judaica has been collected and displayed often limits the dimensions of what it means to be a Jewish object in a way that favor men” (p. 85). What does Leibman mean by this, and why would this be the case? Think of Judaica that you have seen displayed and whether it adheres to this statement. Has this started to change in any way? What makes an object Jewish? Do you have objects at home that are Jewish not because of what they are, but how they are used (p.209), objects that are not specifically for Jewish ritual/religious observance but that tell a specifically Jewish story about your family?
- In the late 1790s and into the early 1800s, high rates of intermarriage meant that there were many single women in the Jewish community. Around this time, women began to embrace living in a state of “single blessedness,” and single women were celebrated as more virtuous, helping in the community to found Jewish Sunday schools, orphanages, and maintaining family relationships (p. 81). The women found ways to connect with their communities, and strengthen them. Today, many Jewish adults are single; how does this dynamic play out in our communities today? Have those changes in views remained impactful? Many Jewish institutions focus a lot of energy on families, so what are ways that people not attached to families can engage and be celebrated?
- During the hundred or so years that are covered in *The Art of the Jewish Family*, marriages change from being arrangements that benefit families’ businesses and networks to chosen “love matches”. Family ties became more about kinship than business, and could be defined by people who have shared sentiments - both feelings and opinions but not necessarily blood relationships (p. 157). How has the definition of family continued to evolve? How has your family changed?

- In the last section, “Family Silhouettes,” the clothing choices of Jane Symons Isaacs’ family, particularly their headgear, set them apart as Jews but also within the Jewish community. In what ways can identity be represented? Are there ways in which you choose to present your identity? Are there ways in which you choose to present your Jewish identity? Have these choices changed? What do you think the differences are between how an those within a group construct and view their identities as opposed to those who are on the outside looking in?
- How do the objects we inherit affect the way we think about the past—do they hide as much as they reveal? How do portraits (paintings, daguerreotypes, silhouettes) present conscious retellings of history rather than objective reflections of it? What is the difference between the stories objects/keepsakes were crafted to tell, the stories that have actually been passed down about them, and the objective truth? What aspects of history are ignored or forgotten when we look solely at material legacy?
- What do we learn from objects that we don’t learn from written records and other forms of traditional archival material? What do we learn from written documents that we don’t learn from objects?
- In both the introduction and conclusion, Leibman reiterates that many questions will never be answered regarding these objects and the lives of the women who owned them. For each object, what question would you most like to have answered?
- As time progresses over the course of the book, the lives of the women shift. How do the objects themselves change?
- What role does education play for the five women profiled? How has the role of education changed from then to now?
- Leibman’s approach in this book is to “expand the definition of evidence” and “listen to the silences in the archive” (p. 5), arguing that that we should be thinking of archiving as “an active and ongoing process”. How has Leibman’s understanding and her book shifted your thinking in terms of historical documents? As new archives become available thanks to modern technologies, how do we approach them in a way that recognizes this approach?
- In discussion, Leibman quoted Marisa Fuentes who, in her book *Dispossessed Lives*, wrote, “The very call to “find more sources” about people who left few, if any, of their own, reproduces the same erasure and silences they experienced in the eighteenth century.” What do you think this means? How do you think Leibman is addressing this with her book?
- Why is the conversation around this book so important? What does listening to archival silences to do our understanding of our history and our current society?



What Would You Bring? is an online exhibition where you can discover refugee stories told through the lens of the objects they brought with them. What Would You Bring? is a Reboot production created and produced by Juliet Simmons with Noam Dromi. Reboot CEO David Katznelson is Executive Producer.

About the Project

[What Would You Bring?](#) is a digital media platform that asks people to stand in the shoes of refugees and to consider what they would choose to bring with them if they were forced to flee their homes. The project shares the stories and objects of refugees past and present through deeply personal testimonies that touch upon not only what was brought, but also what was left behind. Collectively, these stories show just how connected we all are.

For World Refugee Day 2021, Reboot and Simmons launched the first phase of the exhibit that explores the stories of five Jewish refugees who fled from various countries throughout recent history. Experience the journey of a doll, a bear, some teacups and more, each brought to life by a group of remarkable artists - and learn about the extraordinary people they belong to. Discover the stories of [John Hajdu](#), [Hedi Argent](#), [Aurora Zinder](#) and others [here](#).

Every family has a story. What are the objects that tell yours?

What Would You Bring?

What Would You Bring? invites you and your community to explore your own history and share with us the objects that are important to you and your family. By doing so you may discover how much you have in common with refugees around the world today.

Taken from the What Would You Bring educational toolkit, the following prompts will help you think of an object that is meaningful to you or to your family that you would want to pack and bring with you. It can be something that your family brought with them when they were moving to a new place or an item that you would want to bring if you had to leave home suddenly.

How will you decide which item to bring and what story to tell? Here are some questions to help you on your way:

- How did your family come to live where you do now? Reach out to a family member or friend and have them tell you the story.
- Is there a family heirloom that has been passed down for generations?
- If you were told you have to leave your house in 15 minutes, what would you put into your bag? Why?
- Do you have something that you hope to pass on to your children one day?

Pack Your Own Suitcase

Illustrator Lisa Brown has created an empty suitcase for you to fill with images, photographs and words which describe what your family brought with them—and to help you to imagine what you might bring with you if you were forced to leave your home and resettle in a new place.

Pack your suitcase and share it with us at info@whatwouldyoubring.com or post on social media with the hashtag #whatwouldyoubring and we will share a selection of your stories.

WHAT WOULD YOU BRING?

EVERY FAMILY HAS a STORY-
WHAT ARE the
OBJECTS THAT
TELL YOURS?

PACK your
SUITCASE
{DRAW/WRITE/
CREATE}

SHARE
WITH US at

LMB 2021

@REBOOTJEWISH #WHATWOULDYOUBRING
INFO@WHATWOULDYOUBRING.COM

WHAT WOULD YOU BRING?

REBOOT

Educational Resources

Below, artist Lisa Brown filled her family suitcase to share with us what she would bring:

WHAT WOULD YOU BRING?

MY GREAT-AUNT ADELE and HER COUSIN MEYER

GREAT-AUNT ADELE and HER MOTHER, SARAH

MY GREAT-GREAT GRANDMOTHER PESSIE PIATIGORSKAYA

MOST of MY FAMILY EMIGRATED FROM the PALE of SETTLEMENT (MODERN DAY UKRAINE) in the EARLY 1900s to ESCAPE FORCED ARMY INSCRIPTION and DEADLY ANTI-JEWISH POGROMS.

MY HUSBAND'S GRANDMOTHER, FATHER, and UNCLE FLED GERMANY in 1939 to ESCAPE the NAZI REGIME.

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER and HIS BROTHER-in-LAW CAME to the U.S. in 1912. WHAT WAS LEFT of their FAMILY FOLLOWED in 1922.

AS the STORY GOES, SHE HID DIAMONDS in the HOLLOWED OUT HEELS of HER SHOES.

AN EMBROIDERED CLOTH. IT SAYS "BON APPETIT" in RUSSIAN.

— LISA BROWN ILLUSTRATOR, WRITER, and CARTOONIST

LMB 2021

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER MAX BLOCK'S POCKET WATCH



The Inspiration Behind the Project from Juliet Simmons, Co-Creator of Reboot's "What Would You Bring?" initiative

Below is an excerpt from a [blog post](#) written by Juliet Simmons:



Before the pandemic, I used to volunteer at a centre for refugees and asylum seekers. I made cups of tea and handed out sandwiches. One week, a friend who also volunteered told me that she came because her grandfather had been a refugee and she felt like it was just luck that she was making the tea and not drinking it. My grandfather was a refugee too. I felt the same.

Sometimes, if it wasn't too busy, I'd chat with the people we were helping. As we sat together, they'd tell me how they made tea in their country, how having just the right amount of sugar or a bit of mint in the sweet liquid reminded them of home. They'd recall how some of their most precious belongings were things that we might have thought of as being inconsequential. Those conversations made me curious. I began to wonder if there was more that connected those refugees with my grandfather than just luck. Perhaps there were also real things – objects – that connected them too.

My grandfather died before I was born so I couldn't ask him what he brought with him when he travelled from Vienna to the UK in the 1930s. Instead, I began to research what refugees had brought from different countries at different times. In 2019, with the support of the Jewish arts and culture nonprofit Reboot, I began to explore the YIVO archives in New York. I was presented with piles of boxes filled with teddy bears and dolls, china and books, clothes and more. I began to see that the things that people brought with them before I was born were similar to the things that the drop-in centre refugees had told me about and I began to see that no matter where people travelled from or to or when they did so, the objects that reminded them of home were similar.

[To read Juliet's full blog post, click here.](#)

Bios for JFest: Sparking the Jewish Story

Noam Dromi is the Managing Director of Reboot Studios. He is an Emmy® Award-winning veteran writer/producer, marketing executive and digital strategist, specializing in creative content, media production and brand development for entertainment companies, consumer brands and non-profits. He is the co-creator of the Dolphin Tale franchise for Warner Bros and Alcon Entertainment. He won the first Prime-time Emmy® for VR in 2015 for his work as Producer of the Sleepy Hollow Virtual Reality Experience with the Fox Broadcasting Company. He was nominated again in 2018 for his work as Executive Producer of the AMC digital series *The Walking Dead: Red Machete*. He is an active member of the WGA, PGA, and Television Academy and serves as an adjunct screenwriting professor in the School of Film and Television at Loyola Marymount University.



Laura Arnold Leibman is a Professor of English and Humanities at Reed College. Her work focuses on religion and the daily lives of women and children in early America and uses everyday objects to help bring their stories back to life. She is the author of *Indian Converts* (U Mass Press, 2008) and

Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life (Vallentine Mitchell,

2012), which won a National Jewish Book Award, a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award from the Association for Jewish Studies, and was selected as one of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2013. Known, too, for her scholarship in Digital Humanities, Laura served as the Academic Director for the award-winning multimedia public television series *American Passages: A Literary Survey* (2003). Her most recent books are three-time National Jewish Book Award winner *The Art of the Jewish Family* (Bard Graduate Center, 2020) and *Once We Were Slaves* (Oxford University Press, 2021).



Juliet Simmons is a Creative Producer with a background in marketing and event production. Based in London, she has worked with blue-chip clients around the world and now works across the creative industries with

arts organizations and not for profits to help them make good things happen. She volunteers for a center for refugees and asylum seekers and is a trustee of the Wellspring Project.

Her grandfather was a refugee, moving from Vienna to London before the Second World War, and she often wonders what he brought with him on that journey.

Related Reads and Media

These books, articles, videos and more are either connected to the conversation topics mentioned in this resource, or provide additional information on aspects of the book *The Art of the Jewish Family*.

Books

America's Jewish Women: A History from Colonial Times to Today, by Pamela S. Nadell (W.W. Norton & Co., 2019)

Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice, by Rachel Gross (NYU Press, 2021)

City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York, by Tyler Anbinder (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016)

Cosella Wayne by Cora Wilburn; Jonathan D. Sarna, editor (University of Alabama Press, 2019)

Jewish Treasures of the Caribbean: The Legacy of Judaism in the New World by Wyatt Gallery; Stanley Mirvis, contributor; Jonathan D. Sarna, foreword (Schiffer, 2016)

Jews and the Civil War: A Reader, by Jonathan D. Sarna and Adam D. Mendelsohn, eds. (NYU Press, 2011)

The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million, by Daniel Mendelsohn (HarperCollins, 2006)

Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America, by Dianne Ashton (Wayne State University Press, 2015)

Refugee High: Coming of Age in America, by Elly Fishman (The New Press, 2021)

Vivian Gray, by Benjamin Disraeli (Henry Colburn Publisher, 1826), [available in the 1906 Century Co. edition at the Gutenberg Project](#)

Articles

Article on common place books: <https://culturex-change1.wordpress.com/2015/06/11/our-ancestors-had-no-computers-they-had-commonplace-books/>

Article on making a digital commonplace book: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/technology/personaltech/make-digital-commonplace-book.html>

Article on creating family archives: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/smarter-living/how-to-prepare-your-family-memories-letters-and-trinkets.html>

Media

Apps for creating a family archive: <https://www.rootstech.org/blog/10-apps-for-capturing-and-sharing-your-familys-story>

The American Jewess magazine: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/249386898086941038/>

Dara Horn's podcast on time capsules: <https://www.tabletmag.com/podcasts/adventures-with-dead-jews/episode-five-time-travelling-jews-cairo-geniza>

Family Papers: A Snapshot of Life

So much of what we know about history has come from inherited collections of documents. We asked American Jewish Historical Society's director of collections, Melanie Meyers, to share about archives' interest in these family papers.

Family papers are frequently the bedrock of archives and special collections, and some of the earliest materials in certain repositories. The papers of people and families have long been of interest to researchers of all levels, professional and amateur alike. Professional scholars and authors have always valued the historical insight to be gleaned from examining family and personal papers, but in recent years these materials have also been increasingly used in curriculum design, classroom settings, and by genealogists. Personal and family papers often give us a window into a certain time period—a snapshot of what life was like for the individuals whose lives are illuminated through these documents.

Years ago, repositories primarily collected the papers of individuals and families who were prominent in some fashion—wealthy, politically connected, or important artists or creators. As such, the lives documented in these early papers were not necessarily the lives of everyday people; they were not a representative example of most communities. Papers and photographs illustrated the lives of the factory owners, not those who worked the assembly line. But in this day, archives are increasingly collecting papers documenting everyday people, in order to expand that window of historical understanding to include a diversity of voices. For example, some of the most interesting items can be letters, correspondence from everyday people writing about their local communities but also their perception of national events. Or, what looks to be an album of typical family vacation photos takes on new meaning when you realize that the pictures were taken during the 1950's, and document the Jim Crow era South.

For those who are looking to preserve their own personal or family history, there are some online resources available to help in the early stages of that process. The National Archives has a wonderful website to give some basic facts on family papers, and how to preserve and organize them: <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>. The Society of American Archivists also has an excellent page on family papers, available here <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs>. And should you believe that you are in possession of papers that can provide a researcher with that critical window or perspective on life in a specific community, your local historical and/or genealogical society can help you discern what organization would be a good fit for your collection. Family papers are an important part of community memory on multiple levels, and there is room in every repository for many voices.

Melanie Meyers
Director of Collections,
[The American Jewish Historical Society](https://www.ajhs.org)



AJHS American Jewish
Historical Society



Smithsonian
Affiliates

This essay originally appeared in the JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide for Sarah Abrevaya Stein's *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the Twentieth Century*, [available here](#).

Glossary

You will see certain terms from *The Art of the Jewish Family* throughout this discussion guide. The terms are defined here using the book's own definitions as much as possible.

- Commonplace book -an early American genre, the “nineteenth century commonplace books were interactive, communal, and, above all, gendered. Although not used solely by women, they were an imaginative space where primarily women could create conceptions of themselves that were interwoven with the ‘central ribbon of family life,’ pasted together to create pastiches over time. While that communal interactivity has made them less valued as ‘literature,’ commonplace books are critical for understanding how women constructed their multifaceted identities” (p. 138). Commonplace books defy today’s definitions of art or literature and are “multiauthored and deliberately imitative; they float happily between prose, poetry and image, giving equal weight to all genres” (p. 139).
- Geniza - a room or storage area for Jewish ritual objects or texts that are too worn or no longer in use.
- Interactive Heirlooms - heirlooms that are meant to be used, not just displayed.
- Mute Testimony - the stories and history that are represented through visible changes. For example, the scratches and additional engravings that mark up Reyna Moses Levy’s silver beakers (p. 59).
- Silence - in this case, the silences of history and archives generated from a lack of documentation. Leibman quotes scholar Steffi Hobufs, “Silence is not only the absence of speech or absence of activity, but also a socially constructed space.... who gets to speak and who remains silent, which stories are chosen and which are sidelined’ is always subject to negotiation between archivists, curators, academics and descendants” (p. 13).
- Racecraft - term coined by Karen and Barbara Fields who wrote, “‘distinct from race and racism, racecraft does not refer to groups or to ideas about groups’ traits....It refers [instead] to mental terrain and to pervasive belief....racecraft is not a euphemistic substitution for racism. It is a kind of fingerprint evidence that racism has been on the scene’” (p. 97).

Sponsoring Organizations

Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture. Programs of the Jewish Book Council include National Jewish Book Awards, Paper Brigade literary magazine, JBC Book Clubs, and JBC Network — a program with roughly 120 member organizations across North America, including JCCs, synagogues, Hillels, Jewish Federations, and cultural centers — which provides over 250 authors a platform for sharing their books each year. Learn more at jewishbookcouncil.org.

JCC Association of North America leads and connects the JCC Movement, advancing and enriching North American Jewish life. With 1.5 million people walking through the doors of more than 170 Jewish Community Centers and Jewish Community Camps

(JCCs) each week, the JCC Movement is the largest platform for Jewish engagement on the continent. JCC Association, the convening organization of this dynamic network, partners with JCCs to bring together the collective power and knowledge of the entire JCC Movement, including 12,000 full-time and 41,000 part-time and seasonal professionals. By supporting them, together we enhance and strengthen Jewish life throughout North America. Learn more at JCCA.org or on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

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