



The Jew in the Museum

An essay commissioned by The Jewish Museums Project
March 2024

An initiative of jMUSE, **The Jewish Museums Project** explores how archives, libraries, and museums use their unique strengths and collections to spotlight Jewish history and culture, combat antisemitism, and create lasting change.

The Jewish Museums Project experiments with ways to present important ideas and innovative content; supports the dissemination of knowledge; works to ensure that Jewish museums can serve as the backbone of Jewish cultural engagement in communities around the world; and invites online visitors to learn more about the vast potential of these institutions.

jmmuseums.org

Written by Marjorie Schwarzer & Mitchell Schwarzer

Edited by Michael S. Glickman and Elaine Valby

Commissioned by jMUSE, March 2024

This work is licensed under Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International ©



About the authors:

Marjorie Schwarzer (MBA: University of California, Berkeley) is a retired professor of museum studies with over 40 years of experience in museum education. She is author of over fifty museum-related articles and essays and the award-winning book, [Riches, Rivals and Radicals: 100 Years of Museums in the United States](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 3rd edition, 2020). She lives with her husband, Mitchell Schwarzer, in Oakland, California.

Mitchell Schwarzer, (PhD: Massachusetts Institute of Technology) is professor emeritus of art and architectural history at California College of the Arts. He is author of over 100 articles and essays including [The Architecture of the Talmud](#) (2001) and [Hella Town: Oakland's History of Development and Disruption](#) (University of California Press, 2021). This is the first essay he has co-authored with his wife Marjorie.

The Jew in the Museum: Four Questions for all American Museums

"Who is wise? He who learns from every person." (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

The ancient Jewish tradition of the Passover seder marks the seasonal transition from winter to spring. Its rituals bridge annual agricultural cycles and one-of-a-kind historical events, linking past generations to those who live today. As such, its primer, the *Haggadah*, encourages commemoration, story-telling, and continual probing. These ideas are apt to the museum world.

Museums are in the midst of a generational change in their workforce. The baby boomers who led the late 20th century growth spurt are retiring. A new, more diverse generation of professionals is charged with bringing these institutions into the present and future. As they deal with typical challenges – attracting audiences, balancing the budget, updating approaches to exhibiting and educating – they also find themselves in uncharted waters. A culture war is rumbling in exhibition halls, conference rooms and Zoom screens.

Generational changes are nothing new, nor are culture wars. American museums are accustomed to battles about censorship, funding sources, stodgy canons, provocative content, inadequate nods to multiculturalism and, more recently, the looted objects they hold in their collections. But why is this culture war different from all other culture wars? Because, in some instances, museums in the United States have become battlegrounds for the political and religious struggle in the Middle East. Activists are agitating for museums to take a stand on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and choose between the Israeli and Palestinian people. In some cases, they are demanding that “Zionist museum trustees” resign, presuming that those with Jewish-sounding last names are Zionists. In other cases, they are accusing Jewish artists of “cultural appropriation” of everything from wild poppies to hummus. These and other actions cross over into antisemitism. How did this come about?

Over the past several decades, anti-racist and decolonization initiatives have gained a foothold in the museum field. Jewish-American museum professionals pioneered many of these movements, at institutions ranging from the Getty Museum to the Boston Children’s Museum. More recently, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have been recast within the museum field as DEAI, adding A for access. Much good work has been done to redesign spaces and amplify the voices of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. At the same time, those groups have become primarily identified with people of color. Yet until the early 1970s, Jews were highly discriminated against in American museums. “No Jew need apply” for a director job, a curator at MoMA wrote in a 1968 *Art News* editorial, “unless he [sic] has changed his name and religion.”

Younger generations are unaware of a long history within American museums where having more than one Jew on staff was frowned upon. Now, for purposes of DEAI, Jews are considered white. And as the ideology behind DEAI initiatives has gained strength, being white has come to mean being privileged and occupying the status of an oppressor.

“Whereas a Jewish presence in institutions was once viewed as a symbol of American progress over its prejudices,” journalist Jacob Savage observed in February 2023, “Jewish ‘overrepresentation’ is now viewed as a problem to be solved.”

In the February 2024 issue of *The Atlantic*, the journalist Dara Horn summed up the problem well when she wrote:

“DEI efforts are designed to combat the effects of social prejudice by insisting on equity. Some people in our society have too much power...and are overrepresented, so justice requires leveling the playing field. But anti-Semitism isn’t primarily a social prejudice. It is a conspiracy theory: the big lie that Jews are supervillains manipulating others. The righteous fight for justice therefore does not require protecting Jews as a vulnerable minority. Instead, it requires taking Jews down.”

Things came to a head after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and the aftermath of Israel's response to those atrocities. Jewish museum professionals who have long been allies to progressive causes saw antisemitic posts on their media feeds. Some staff endured verbal harassment and cyber-bullying focused on their Jewish identity. Antisemitic flyers were posted in bathrooms. Public programs featuring Jewish speakers were disrupted by loud protesters. People stormed out of meetings. There were death threats and physical altercations. And in more than one institution, human resources officers dismissed and overlooked these concerns.

Eight different Jewish museum and cultural professionals detailed to us their personal experiences with the incidents described above. Understandably, because their status in the museum field is precarious, most requested anonymity. But in March 2024, Sara Fenske Bahat, interim CEO of the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco and a Jewish American, posted her resignation letter to her LinkedIn account: "The vitriolic and antisemitic backlash directed at me personally...has made being here intolerable. I no longer feel safe in our own space, including due to the actions of some of our own employees."

The trend is clear; many Jewish-American museum professionals are feeling disenfranchised from a community they helped to build. What happened to museums' stated commitment to making everyone feel welcome? Is it possible for museums to emerge from the current battles unscathed and stronger? Can our elders offer wisdom for navigating this storm? Here we turn to the spirit of inquiry embedded in the Passover ritual of "The Four Questions," and pose the following to the next generation of museum professionals.

A question about silence.

In 2009, a white supremacist murdered a security officer at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. In the early 2020s, Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis vandalized and/or called in bomb threats (“swatting”) to Jewish museums and memorials in Alaska, Georgia, Florida, Oklahoma and Oregon. After the October 7 Hamas terror attacks in Israel, a Holocaust memorial was defaced in Philadelphia and brawls took place in front of the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance. New York’s Neue Gallerie’s windows were plastered with swastikas and anti-Zionist signs. The list goes on.

While politicians, the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, and Jewish institutions have addressed these hate crimes, the larger independent museum community has not. Consider that American museums and their network of professional associations publicly condemned the 2020 George Floyd murder, attacks on Asian-Americans during the COVID pandemic, and violence against cultural sites in other nations.

Why have museums remained virtually silent about hate crimes against Jewish-American cultural organizations?

A question about hiding one's identity.

The military-led actions that rage in Gaza are reverberating on American soil. Acts of violence and threats against Jewish Americans have reached an all-time high. Since October 7th, the number of American Jews who conceal their Jewish roots in public settings doubled. Other peoples (Muslim-Americans, LGBTQ+ and QTIPOC communities, Mormons) are familiar with "closeting" who they are in order to avoid physical harm or social shunning. In the corporate world, this is known as "covering," downplaying your identity so you will not be stigmatized, have to explain yourself, or potentially lose out on a job. For younger Jewish-Americans, these fears are not unfounded.

In November 2022, resumebuilder.com surveyed 1,311 hiring managers about their attitudes toward employing Jews in their companies. 26% said they are less likely to move forward with Jewish job applicants. The top reason for this bias was their belief that Jews have too much power. 17% said that leadership flat-out told them not to hire Jews. While we have heard many stories anecdotally, there is no comprehensive data on whether Jewish museum staff are closeting or covering their identities; Jews come in all colors, mixed heritages, and last names. Because some people "cover" so well, it is hard (even for American Jews, of course) to know who identifies as Jewish and who does not. But the question remains.

Would learning that someone on your team was Jewish impact the way they are treated in the workplace?

A question about constructive dialogue.

Like all peoples, Jews are complicated. In the tradition of “two Jews, three opinions,” Jews don’t agree with each other on minor issues (e.g., whether matzoh balls should sink or float), nor do all align on high stakes situations like Israeli and Palestinian politics. Disagreement is necessary in healthy relationships; it results in constructive dialogue and new insights. But when workplace discussions devolve into personal attacks, faulty logic, falsehoods, and gaslighting, we are violating every rule of civilized debate we learned in middle school. Assuming that all Jews have a polarized political position on Israel – either “pro-” or “anti-Zionist” and nothing in between – is an example of binary thinking that elides the complexity of Israeli and Palestinian existence and global politics.

As journalist Nathan Weisman notes in his book *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*, the notion that “Anti-Zionism is not antisemitism” is dangerous.

“Anti-Zionists maintain they have ‘nothing against Jews’... but legitimate criticism of the Israeli government is different from demanding that American Jews renounce Israel as a precondition for tolerance or blaming American Jews for Israel’s failures. This is when a political position swerves into a racist one.”

And so we get back to the question of constructive dialogue.

How can museums use their expertise in progressive education, object-based learning, and diverse modes of interpretation to encourage constructive dialogue and greater civility among people who disagree?

The question of democracy.

When we look at the history of how Jews have navigated the American museum field since the mid-19th century, four salient themes emerge. The first is persistent discrimination and hate crimes against Jews, while others stay silent. The second is the pattern of individuals downplaying their Jewish identity within the cultural sector. The third is constant intellectual debate and disagreement among Jews, in a tradition of constructive dialogue adhering to the rules of logic and fact-finding.

The fourth trend is perhaps the most important for today's museum professionals to consider. Jewish communities thrive in cultural milieus that relish open dialogue and civil debate: in other words, democracies. Isn't the threat of intolerance or fundamentalism a danger to all Americans: whether we are social justice warriors, progressive educators, or simply people wanting a safe place to work and live?

Are American museums willing to be places that use everything in their power to promote and model the principles of democracy?

Right now, the greatest dangers to Jews in museums (and universities, and other cultural arenas) are: ideological polarization that leads a lack of acceptance; a climate of fear; and an absence of meaningful communication. Just as the Netanyahu government in Israel and Hamas control of Gaza should not be conflated with the Israeli and Palestinian peoples (nor with American Jews and Muslims), so too believing in Zionism – and thus supporting the existence of the State of Israel – should not be conflated with settler colonialism and genocide.

We need to turn down the heat and listen to each other, calmly. We have to stop shutting each other down. Cultural institutions like museums must maintain a safe space for dialogue and, ideally, for working toward understanding and collaboration. American museums should never let themselves, metaphorically speaking, mirror the scorched-earth character of the destroyed Israeli kibbutzim or the leveled Gazan cities.

Activists must not be allowed to poison the museum's critical role as interlocutor in discussions of complex historical and cultural issues. It is our hope that emerging museum professionals will take seriously their responsibility to uphold one of the museum's most important functions: serving as a bridge across the ages and cultures, so that important stories will survive and be retold and reinterpreted year after year.

Perhaps on this Passover, during a time when we retell what is in fact a polarizing religious story of liberation, we might question why the Israelites are painted so positively and the Egyptians so negatively, as oppressed and oppressors. We might ask about the contributions of the Egyptians to Israelite and world culture, and reconsider the gulf the Bible constructs by dividing the Israelites from others like the Canaanites. We might accept that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in large part driven by divisive religious dogma. We might in the spirit of democracy consider Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims, not through our enmity but through our commonality.

As stated by the great 12th century Spanish-Jewish thinker Maimonides: *the "great upright path is the middle path... equally distant from the two extremes, not being too close to either side."*

As much as we want Israelis and Palestinians to move toward a middle path, we also want this for Americans, including those who work in our nation's museums. We need to realign with one of our field's own core principles: serving as a "third place," a safe and healthy space where everyone can gather together in community.



Further Reading

In addition to the [materials](#) available at jMUSE's [The Jewish Museums Project](#), the authors have annotated the following selection of books and articles that helped inform this essay and tease out the themes of silence, hiding, civil discourse and democracy.

Ornstein, P. (1887). [Anglo-British Exhibition Catalogue](#).

As the term antisemitism was beginning to circulate in Germany, an unprecedented public exhibition about the Jewish people opened at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Organized by a committee composed of Jewish businessmen and scholars, the 1887 [Anglo-Jewish Exhibition](#) had an opposite goal to the vitriolic literature coming out of German intellectual circles. The optimistic vision mirrors a belief that museums still hold to be true: displays of resonant objects can tell an eye-opening story that fosters greater understanding and civility.

The three-month-long exhibition of historical documents, artwork, and religious ceremonial objects coincided with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. The committee felt the same sense of urgency that many American Jewish museum professionals feel today. England's [Jewish emancipation laws](#) were now a generation old; younger Jewish-Britons had not been alive when discrimination against their own people was legal. Moreover, many Victorians were wary of the Jews who lived and worked among them. To counter stereotypes that Jews lived in filth and were disloyal citizens, the exhibitors showed how 19th century Anglo-Jews kept orderly homes and read a prayer for the royal family in English-speaking synagogues. To educate younger Jews about British history that wasn't taught in school, they documented England's long history of blood libels, expulsions, and forced conversions of Jews.

Hess, T. (1968). 'Editorial,' *ARTnews*, Vol. 65, No. 7.

Until the 1960s, very few Jews worked in American museums (see Goodwin's article, annotated below). In 1968, Thomas B. Hess, ARTnews editor and a former curator at MoMA, went on record about it. His editorial reveals the field's antisemitism, what he calls the "most widely known, unspoken fact in the field." According to Hess, trustees were having a hard enough time dealing with American Jews "inching their way" onto boards and "brushing aside Jockey Club protocols." Hess's conclusion: "No Jew need apply" for a director job, "unless he has changed his name and religion."

Hightower, J. (1970, September). 'AAM General Session,' *Museum News*.

After protestors from the group "Art Strike Against Racism, Sexism, Repression and War," stormed the American Association (now Alliance) of Museums' annual meeting on June 1, 1970, MoMA's director John Hightower told AAM delegates that his museum was not "consciously anti-black or anti-Puerto Rican, only anti-Semitic."

Miller, J. and Cohen, R. I. (1997). 'A Collision of Cultures: The Jewish Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1904-1971,' in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 311-361.

The first Jewish museums in the United States opened as part of Hebrew seminaries in Cincinnati, Ohio and New York City. In 1904, at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, acting president Cyrus Adler developed a library that included Torah scrolls, illuminated manuscripts, and Hebrew grammar books. This was the genesis of what is now the Jewish Museum on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Its inaugural mission was to serve as a "medium for inter-racial tolerance and understanding."

In 1939, a few months after Kristallnacht took place in Germany, the New York Jewish Museum building was vandalized by local children who shattered its windows with pebbles. Rather than punish these youngsters, the museum invited them and their teachers inside for tours. The personalized and compassionate approach worked, and the museum expanded its space as well as its programming through the 1940s. Nonetheless by the end of 1949, a survey of 209 highly-educated non-Jewish professors and scientists revealed a "shocking level of ignorance about and prejudice against Jews." Respondents openly accused Jews of aggressiveness, hyper-sensitivity, and looking down at Christian cultural practices.

The 1960s are characterized by generational disagreements within the museum about the programmatic balance between contemporary art (not necessarily by Jewish artists or devoted to Jewish content) and more traditional topics and collections.

Goodwin, G. M. (1998). 'A New Jewish Elite: Curators, Directors, and Benefactors of American Art Museums,' *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 47-79.

This lengthy article discusses the antisemitism that was baked into American art museums from their 19th century beginnings in the United States all the way through the 1960s. With the exception of Cyrus Adler, an “honorary curator of oriental antiquities” and librarian at the Smithsonian Institution in 1880s, Jews were largely absent from the museum profession until the mid-20th century. Those who managed to “enter the inner sanctum” downplayed their Jewish roots by hiding their identities, changing their names, and, most interestingly, not encouraging the hiring of other Jews. Goodwin surmises that these pioneers “felt vulnerable to criticism [of] ... bring[ing] too many Jews to the Museum.” How many Jews was too much? The answer seems to have been “more than one.” The fear of having “too many Jews” was so ingrained that trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) waited until its first Jewish board member (George Blumenthal) died before electing another Jew to the board. In 1960, the first Jewish director of the Met, James Rorimer, anglicized the spelling of his name. He also advised a young Jewish curator he wanted to hire to mask his religion from the Met’s trustees.

By the 1990s, Jews had broken the barriers and were occupying many of the top positions in the museum world including the directorships of the Smithsonian, American Museum of Natural History, and National Gallery of Art. Goodwin notes that these directors were hired after successful careers in the worlds of finance and/or university administration, and had not climbed a career ladder within museums. As an indication of how sensitive calling attention to (“outing”) Jewish museum professionals was when this article was written, Goodwin apologizes to those “readers who consider Jewish identity to be a private matter.” But he also admonishes them for hiding. “Many Jews attracted to museum work have been highly ambivalent about, if not conflicted by, their Jewishness ... [and use museums as] a way of forgetting, denying, and escaping their roots. Too many Jewish curators and directors lack Jewish knowledge, involvement, self-respect, and pride.”

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998). 'Exhibiting Jews,' in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 7–128.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett analyzes world's fairs' and international expositions' treatment of Jewish content between 1851 and 1940. In her telling, the organizers of the Anglo-British exhibition (1877) sought to connect younger audiences with older Jewish ethical values and spiritual practices. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that "With such high stakes – freedom of religion, safe haven from persecution, social integration, group survival, statehood – some Jews seized on the opportunity ... to be amplified by international exposition, while others cautioned against such hypervisibility." She notes that at Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition, Jews declined the invitation to design a sculpture explicitly about Judaism. Instead, they commissioned a sculpture about religious liberty for all. Today it is displayed at the entrance of The Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also observes that at Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Jews sought to "construct an identity within European and American power structures as equals, not 'exotic others.'" Nonetheless, a portrait book at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition includes an "Oriental Jewess," and notes her facial features and foreign costume. (The depiction of Mizrahi Jewish women as exotic "Oriental Jewesses" was common in Europe in the late 19th century, a way to "other" Jews and distinguish them from Christian citizens.)

Freudenheim, T. L. (2001). 'The Obligations of the Chosen: Jewish Museums in a Politically Correct World,' *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Autumn, 80–90.

This is a smart review of the history of Jewish museums in Europe and the U.S. as places for identity-formation for secular Jews as well as sites that "declared" the concept of Jewish identity to others. As the early 21st century culture wars were bubbling in the arts and cultural sector, the author predicted "interesting times ahead" for Jewish museums. He also describes controversial exhibitions such as the Jewish Museum's "Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities," (1997–1998) which showed work by Jewish artists who questioned their identities.

Greenberg, R. (2002). 'Jews, Museums and National Identities,' *Ethnologies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 125–137.

The Nazis closed or destroyed all of the Jewish museums in Europe, and it was not until the mid-1980s that some reopened, and new museums were planned in cities like Berlin and Warsaw. These post-World War II museums have three aims: 1) to commemorate loss through the display of Jewish ritual objects; 2) to document Jewish history including the Shoah; and 3) to educate the public about the need for tolerance. Greenberg is especially keen on the Warsaw's POLIN Museum's integrative approach to Polish history and storytelling. As founding chief curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has said, "Jews were an integral part of Polish history, and Polish history is incomplete without the histories of the Polish Jews. The museum itself is part of that history." (We note that this universalist narrative structure is similar to that of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American Art and History in Washington, DC, which was developed around the same time as POLIN.)

Shohet, A. (2012). *Jews of Pinsk, 1881 to 1941*. English translation by Faigie Tropper and Moshe Rosman, Stanford University Press.

This long book about the early history of Jews in this small Belorussian city discusses philosophical clashes between Bundists (Marxists) and Labor Zionists in the 1890s. Bundists believed that "a better brighter socialist world" for everyone would improve the "plight of the Jews" in the region. In contrast, Zionists believed in the concept of a "Jewish peoplehood" and the reestablishment of a "Jewish homeland." We might compare them to today's "progressive separatists," who advocate that people embrace their identity as a form of survival in a hostile community.

Struggles within Jewish "factions" were based on wealth, class, and ideology; internal clashes were bitter and occasionally violent. For example, in 1905, Jewish Bundists attacked the Poalei Zion and killed a Zionist. Most Jews allied with neither group, preferring to focus on their families, faith, and scraping together a living. But Russians seized on the divisions and circulated a flyer calling on peasants to beat up any Jew they could find, no matter their philosophy. A period of "great violence" continued, followed by "starvation, massacres of Jews."

Rothstein, E., (2016, February). 'The Problem with Jewish Museums,' *Mosaic*.

Art critic Edward Rothstein's essay brilliantly interconnects the history of Jewish museums with general museum history. Is there an "unbridgeable gulf" between Jewish museums and their non-Jewish counterparts? Certainly, this was the case in Europe during the 19th century. In the U.S., the problem is more nuanced. Jewish museums are categorized as part of the genre of "the identity museum." These include museums that focus on identities such as African-American; Arab-American; Asian-American and so on. But, according to Rothstein, Jewish museums veer. Rather than telling stories of overcoming hardship and discrimination, they "transfigure" American Judaism into "a kind of Jewish-inflected, progressive-style-Americanism" including "supporting the global struggle for human rights." In other words, they don't probe their unique identity; they hide it. "In no other setting of which I am aware is group identity defined by the abnegation of one's own group identity."

Berger, N., (2017). *The Jewish Museum, History and Memory, Identity and Art from Vienna to Bezalel National Museum, Jerusalem*. Brill.

Berger traces the genesis of Jewish museums in 19th century Europe and Great Britain through the establishment of the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem in the early part of the 20th century. In Europe, Jews were absent from historical narratives constructed by major urban museums. They created their own museums in cities like Vienna, Prague and Budapest to position themselves as educated, cultured citizens. Until they were disrupted and destroyed by the rise of Nazism, Jewish museums in Europe sat "between traditional Jewish religious practice and radical assimilation." This was not the case for museums in Israel, which took a more traditional route of being part of nation-building, a common role museums have played in nations throughout the world.

Weisman, N. (2018). *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Written in the shadow of Donald Trump's statement about Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 "Jews Will Not Replace Us" hate march, this book is a call to alarm for Jews about the dangers of the growing right-wing MAGA movement. Even though Trump claims he is the "least anti-Semitic person you've ever seen in your life," Weisman reminds us that the alt-right backs Israel because it is a place to which they can "evict American Jews" and restore America as the "White Homeland." In their view the killing of Arabs by Israelis is an "added benefit." The right's intertwined antisemitic and Islamophobic mentality is why the author believes the far right in the U.S. is a greater threat to Jews than the left. Nonetheless, he cautions against fuzzy thinking on the part of left-wing anti-Zionists. He calls on American Jews to "assert a voice in the public arena" to fight against hate.

Wecker, M. (2019, May). 'The Wreck of the Jewish Museum,' *Mosaic*.

The themes of hiding one's identity are embedded in the May 2019 issue of *Mosaic* magazine. Journalist Menachem Wecker's essay criticizes the Jewish Museum in New York for "submerging Jewish identity in a sea of universal values ... that surrender to blithe breeziness." He feels the Museum is "dumbing down" Judaism, for example, by displaying a sculpture of the Yiddish word "Oy." The question of "dumbing down" content to appeal to a larger, more diverse audience is common within the museum field. Former Jewish Museum curator Thomas Freudenheim's response to Wecker's article flips his argument upside down, reminding younger curators of generational differences within the Jewish community. In his world, "Jews lowered their voices to whisper the word 'Jewish' in restaurant conversations." He asserts that "American Jews can be rightly proud of ... the Jewish museums their communities have developed and supported that ... serve as models for other ethnic- and group-based museums."

Barlow, E. (2020, September 3). 'Wake Up America, and Smell the Anti-Semitism,' *Tablet*.

British writer Eve Barlow observes that “In America, anti-Semitism seems to render American Jews further from their Jewish identity and closer to a desire to blend in – as leftists, as allies, as Americans.” We fail to see antisemitism as a “two-pronged nightmare,” between “classical loony [right wing] conspiracy theories” and “[left wing] bullying.” She reminds Jewish Americans that if they don’t stand up to antisemitism, no one else will.

Pace, J. (2021). *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*. Rowman and Littlefield.

Education professor Judy Pace’s framework for teaching controversial issues derives from her book. It is a helpful tool not only to museum educators who might deal with controversial material in gallery tours and programs, but for DEI and other trainers who want to lead discussions about emotional or difficult material. Among Pace’s recommendations include: 1) cultivating a supportive environment; 2) selecting issues that can be explored from multiple, legitimate perspectives; 3) preparing thoroughly; 4) choosing an appropriate pedagogy that does not set up a “false equivalence” or normalize ill-informed or offensive viewpoints; and 5) creating space for people to reflect and process their emotions.

Mounk, Y. (2023). *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Penguin Press, New York.

Written before the events of October 7, this book is an enlightening analysis of the DEI movement and what the author calls “the identity trap.” While Mounk, a professor of International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University, has previously focused his writings on exposing the dangers of right-wing authoritative populism, here he turns his lens onto the progressive left. He praises the positive intentions behind DEI. He also meticulously dissects where things have gone wrong. He believes that the left’s healthy resistance to injustice has “transformed into a counterproductive obsession with group-identity.”

Mounk summarizes and traces the intellectual lineage of some of DEI’s foundational theories, including Marxism, post-colonialism, intersectionality, and critical race theory. He then shows how these movements have lost their logical coherence. “Ironically, many of the early thinkers [e.g., Gayatri Spivak, Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw] have expressed serious misgivings about the way in which their work has transformed the left.” (p. 76).

Mounk is critical of “intersectionality,” a seemingly common-sense idea that has been co-opted to mean that “all forms of oppression are connected.” This leap of logic has “influenced younger staffers at institutions that have historically focused on a clearly circumscribed issue” [e.g., the Sierra Club] to conflate different political causes.

The dangers of “the identity trap” include undermining free speech and potentially setting up “zero-sum competition between mutually-hostile identity groups.” (p. 286). Mounk concludes by advocating for universalist humanism.

Kazakina, K. (2023, October 12). [‘Where are you people? The Art World’s Deafening Silence after the Hamas attack in Israel,’ Artnet.](#)

In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, art critic Katya Kazakina contacted numerous major museums and galleries in the U.S. in an attempt to come to grips with their silence.

THE
JEWISH PROJECT™
MUSEUMS
POWERED BY J MUSE