

# THE JEWISH WOMEN'S ARCHIVE: PORTAL TO A RICHER AMERICAN JEWISH PAST

Karla Goldman

For almost ten years the Jewish Women's Archive (JWA) has been working to enrich popular and scholarly understandings of the American Jewish past. The 350th anniversary of American Jewish communal life being marked in 2004 and 2005 frames this effort with particular urgency. As this commemoration challenges Americans to come to terms with the significance of Jewish historical experience in the United States, JWA seeks to provide educators with accessible resources that can engage their students in a meaningful encounter with this past.

A look at previous commemorations emphasizes the importance of integrating women's stories and contributions into the narrative of American Jewish life that we share with our students and communities. During the 300th celebrations in 1954-55, scholars and popularizers showed that it is possible to present the history of American Jews with little attention to women. In 1954 Emma Lazarus was virtually the only woman who was necessary to include in the tercentenary's cold war narrative of "Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom."

Since that time, particularly over the last thirty years, scholars of Jewish women's history have been working steadily to change our picture of the past. Their work has revealed the centrality of women's contributions and lives in shaping American Jewish

community and experience. These advances of scholarship have led to the creation of important and powerful new resources. Most notably, the historical encyclopedia *Jewish Women in America*, edited by Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (1998), offers an unparalleled resource to teachers and students seeking basic data about hundreds of American Jewish women and women's organizations that have shaped

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America and American Jewish life. And yet despite this work and substantial scholarship devoted to American Jewish women's history, lack of direct access to the materials that yield women's stories can make it difficult for educators to bring these narratives to bear in their teaching.

The Jewish Women's Archive builds upon the availability of published volumes by providing online access to a variety of rigorously researched resources that can deepen students' study and understanding of Jewish women's lives ([www.jwa.org](http://www.jwa.org)). These resources enrich the study of Jewish women, whether historic or contemporary, extraordinary or ordinary.

JWA's online "Women of Valor" exhibitions feature women who transformed their fields or communities as they took on roles and responsibilities previously closed to women. These exhibits offer succinct

biographies of women of achievement ranging from Rebecca Gratz to Emma Goldman. The inclusion of digitized primary documents

(drawn from a range of relevant archives and published sources) within the Web sites offer students the opportunity to move beyond the JWA's narrative to their own encounter with some of the words, images, and artifacts that defined the women being presented.

These online exhibitions can spur further research or provide the context and sources necessary for students to prepare their own analysis of the archival documents presented. The richness and web-effectiveness of these biographies lend themselves to a variety of often surprising uses. For instance, AJS member Steven Weiland, professor of education at Michigan State University, reports using the JWA "Women of Valor" exhibitions for an online course entitled "Adult Career Development." Beyond the Web sites, JWA "Women of Valor" posters invite viewers to further consider these historic women of achievement.

JWA's growing Virtual Archive offers an online searchable database of information of archival collections around North America that relate to the lives and activities of Jewish women. The Virtual Archive can guide students to relevant sources for primary research. Even for those students who will not be venturing out to physical archives, the range of biographical information on hundreds of women included in the Virtual Archive can provide an introduction to the diversity of Jewish women's

careers and achievements in North America.

Other JWA programs and resources expose students to the diversity of contemporary Jewish women's lives. JWA's online "Women Who Dared" exhibition illuminates the grassroots experience of more than forty women who have worked for social justice in Baltimore, Chicago, and Boston. This exhibition showcases these women's own reflections on their work and on how their identity as Jews and as women has informed their social activism in a range of fields that include the fight for civil rights for African Americans, women, gays, prisoners, and Soviet and Ethiopian Jews; issues of Middle East and world peace; the environment; youth empowerment; public and women's health concerns; and fighting domestic violence.

JWA's national oral history project, "Weaving Women's Words," moves beyond understanding how women's careers and achievements fit into the context of their lives, to a focus on the totality of women's life experiences. The transcripts of JWA's interviews with a diverse range of women from Baltimore, Seattle, and Boston grant access to women, whether politicians, professionals, teachers, housewives, religious school teachers, *mikveh* attendants, or saleswomen, whose lives have spanned the twentieth century.

Beyond capturing the diversity of Jewish women in a given community,

these interviews are also attuned to capturing the rhythms and patterns of women's lives. JWA's soon-to-be-available guide to conducting gendered oral histories with Jewish women can teach students how to elicit this kind of narrative, offering



Cover of *The American Jewess*, April, 1895.  
Published by the Rosa Sonneschein Co., Chicago.  
Courtesy of the Jewish Women's Archive.

instruction on how to conduct interviews in a professional manner, while noting the life events and experiences that often distinguish women's lives from men's.

Finally, beginning this fall, JWA will be offering full, searchable online access to *The American Jewess*, a rich primary source that captures a crucial moment in the emergence of Jewish women's

activism and public voice at the end of the nineteenth century. Published between 1895 and 1899, *The American Jewess* reflected publisher Rosa Sonneschein's iconoclastic takes on issues that included women's changing roles in American society and Jewish community, Zionism, and the dangers or advantages of bicycle riding for women. It also offers compelling evidence of the ways in which American Jews tried to understand Jewish women's place within contemporary American constructions of race and gender. Text and images from *The American Jewess* offer both instructors and students a valuable resource for considering American Jewish life at the end of the nineteenth century.

A brief exploration of JWA's Web site will reveal these and other resources including a range of substantive features directly related to the 350th anniversary. The current commemoration challenges educators to convey the complexity and richness of Jewish experience in North America. JWA offers faculty flexible, accessible, and compelling resources with which to meet this

challenge as we seek to do justice to the advances of current scholarship and the historical and contemporary diversity of American Jewish life.

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