

“From a Camp, Somewhere in the Woods”: Choosing Jewish American History Topics for NHD Projects

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When choosing a topic for National History Day® (NHD), students are encouraged to find compelling stories that connect personal voices to larger historical events. Jewish American history offers a wide range of such stories that are rich in detail, diverse in perspective, and deeply woven into the fabric of national and global histories. One such example comes from the Civil War letters of Myer Levy, a Jewish Union soldier whose words capture both the intensity of wartime and the lived experience of Jewish Americans in the nineteenth century.

“It is my candid opinion,” wrote Myer Levy to his father in June 1865, “that if I am not home on or before the fourth of July, I’ll be home for the fall hollidays [sic]. Give my love to all the family.”¹ Myer’s hopeful (if not harried; he signed his letter, “Your busy son,”) letter is evocative of a sigh of relief, an exhale after a long service in the Union Army during the Civil War, and a marked change in tone from letters sent previously.

Prior communications to his family described his experiences—from harrowing close calls with bullets to mundane regimental inspections—along with an undercurrent of worry and anger over the capture of his friend, Elias “Ely” Hyneman. In a letter dated almost one year before the letter to his father, Myer wrote to his brother:

It will be a sad blow to Mrs. Beckie Hyneman, after losing Bart to hear of Ely being a prisoner, or what is more probable, dead, and maybe shot in cold blood . . . I do not hate any living mortal, but if they [the Hynemans] still hope that the south may conquer, may they know no peace on earth, and damnation in the world to come, although it will not give me back my friend.²

These moments of vitriol and high drama are familiar threads to pull when studying or learning about the American Civil War. But Myer Levy’s letters also reveal something less often explored: the Jewish experience during this era. His mention of returning home in time for the fall Jewish holidays reminds us that even amid the chaos of war, religious identity and tradition remained an important part of life for Jewish soldiers.

¹ Levy Family Papers (Collection No. 1645), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. Read more about the Levy family papers at discover.hsp.org/Record/ead-1645.

² Unbeknownst to Myer at the time, Elias Hyneman died during his imprisonment by the Confederate Army in Andersonville Prison.

Letter from Myer Levy to his father, June 1865. Levy Family Papers (Collection 1645, Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

Camp June 7th 1865.
Dear Father
I was glad to get your letter though it was a short, and in return I'll write a short one. I am very busy now making out Clothing, Camp & Garrison Equipage Returns and Quartermaster's Returns for the month of May, and when I get through, I'll have to make them out to the time Lt Rienecker gives up the command of the company, and as I've written to Ben you will have to excuse the brevity of this. The weather is very oppressive and the flies distressing. I have something under my arm that I will sell.

In the face of the sprawling breadth and depth of history, there is a tendency to compartmentalize its study. This inclination can be born of the best intentions and can serve true pedagogical purpose: when addressed as discreet boxes of event or era, history can be more approachable and digestible. The pitfalls of this approach, however, are often most keenly observed in minoritized groups, whose vital and substantive roles in history can be subsumed by a larger narrative.

Jewish stories are often packaged in the classroom through studies of the **Holocaust** and **immigration**. These are pivotal subjects for educators and students alike to learn, and should absolutely inform the study of history as a whole, including tracing issues of violence and **antisemitism** as they erupt throughout history. To relegate Jewish stories to those discrete “boxes,” however, is a disservice.³ Myer Levy’s letters are both familiar anecdotes of the Civil War and anathema to its largely understood narrative as not a “Jewish” story because, to Myer Levy, it was. Levy’s quiet hopes for spending **Rosh Hashanah**, **Yom Kippur**, and **Sukkot** with his family, his references to “the World to Come” (an English translation of the **Hebrew** phrase **olam ha-ba**) and more in his writings speak to the importance of finding, embracing, and elevating Jewish voices and stories throughout history.

Centering diversity in historical inquiry is essential to understanding the past as it truly was, which can in turn allow us to better understand the diversity and complexity of our own time. An NHD project offers teachers and students alike the perfect opportunity to grapple with this important work.

THE CHOICE TO EXPLORE

Student choice is an integral and enticing aspect of an NHD project. The ability to pursue a topic that is a personal interest (not to mention the ability to share their findings in a variety of creative ways) encourages student participation and inquiry-based learning. Students are given the ability to delve deeper into a subject they may have covered only briefly in the classroom or embark down a path paved from personal interests and outside inspiration. Along the way, from topic inception to research to project completion, students use the annual theme as their guide. The **theme itself** is broad, and students should have little difficulty aligning their chosen topics to its guideposts.

As students consider a topic for their NHD project, it is okay to start big! Students should be encouraged to refine their topics during initial phases of research, and think critically about the sources they find. Primary sources are the foundation of historical research and NHD projects by extension, but secondary sources and scholarship from which to draw are also necessary to an NHD student. Topics less than 20 to 25 years old will suffer this lack of sources and so will subsequent analysis; students with more contemporary interests should be encouraged to find analogous figures, events, or movements from earlier in history.

“GOOD TO THINK WITH”

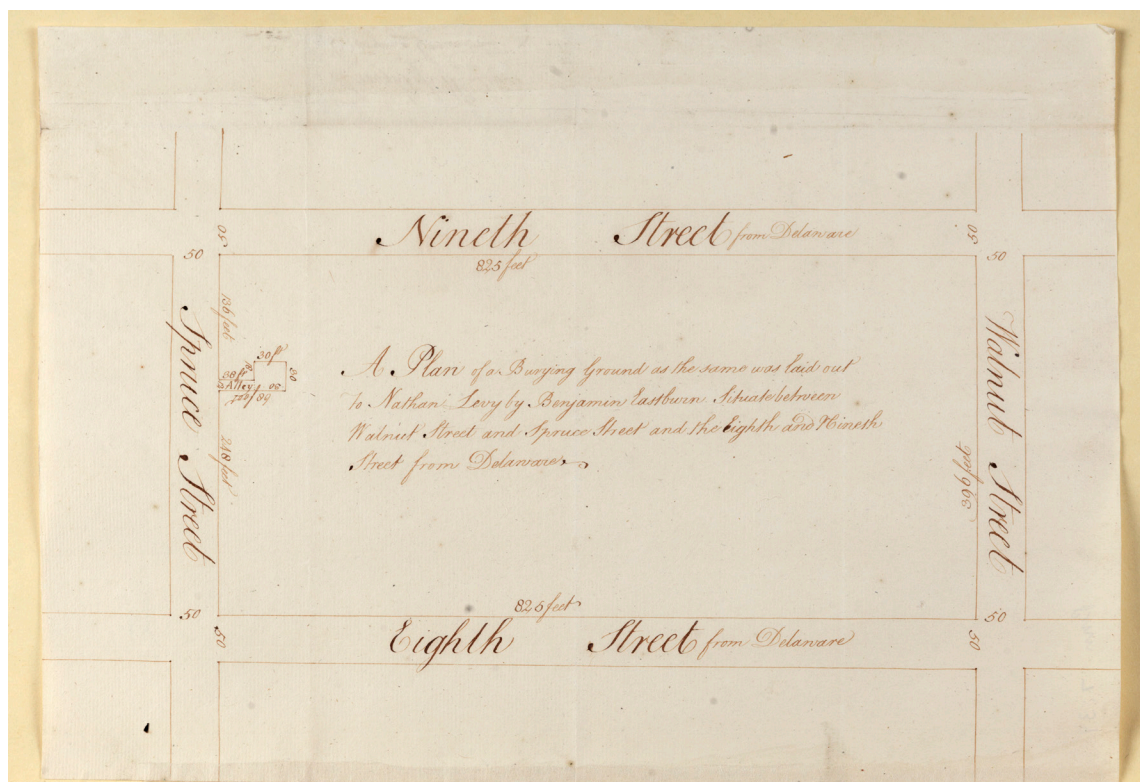
No single qualification elevates a person or community to the level of “worthy of consideration” in the grand scheme of history, because all are! Of Jewish history in particular, author Jason Lustig offers the following: “The history of the Jews shows that a group need not be large to be important or worthy of examination. This is in itself a powerful lesson. What is more, Jewish history is ‘good to think with,’ a useful case study in which we can apply a whole range of important questions and issues.”⁴

³ For an expanded discussion on this point, see the article addressing antisemitism by Miriam Eve Mora, also in this volume.

⁴ Jason Lustig, “Explaining Why Jewish History Matters: Drawing Big Lessons from a Small People.” Center for Religion and the Human, Indiana University, accessed November 21, 2024.
<https://crh.indiana.edu/teaching-religion-in-public/trip-engaging-religion/essays/lustig-essay.html>.

This is a helpful framework to consider, and can offer guidance in navigating historical inquiry with the explicit intention of integrating Jewish voices. Encouraging students to think outside traditional narratives, and specifically through a Jewish lens, can illuminate the past in a way that is otherwise lost. When considering the Colonial Era in a place like Pennsylvania, for example, Quakers often take center stage. William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, was a Quaker, and his religious and personal values informed the formation and management of the colony. When left unexamined, however, this narrative contributes to an overly sanitized version of colonial history and does not speak to the diversity present and supported by the historical record. Consider the following for examples of ways to explore the same place and time from different perspectives.

In 1740, Nathan Levy applied to Thomas Penn, son of William Penn and Royal Proprietor of Pennsylvania at the time, for a plot of land to serve as a place to bury his son in accordance with his Jewish faith. The application was approved, and the plot of land expanded and eventually served the broader Jewish community of Philadelphia as the beginning of Congregation Mikveh Israel, the oldest continuous **synagogue** in the United States.⁵



Deed granting Nathan Levy land to be used as a burial place given by Thomas Penn (1740) and a sketch of the site. From the Penn Family Papers (Collection 0485A) at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Volume 7, page 39.

Years later, as revolutionary fervor fermented in the wake of the Stamp Act, you can observe the growth of the Jewish community in the city through some of the names affixed to the six pages of signatures on the *Resolution of Non-Importation Made by the Citizens of Philadelphia*, outlining their opposition to British taxes they deemed unfair and the decision to cease imports in protest.⁶

⁵ Nathan Levy's application to Thomas Penn is a part of the Penn Family Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Learn more at hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/p/Penn0485A.html.

⁶ The Resolution of Non-Importation Made by the Citizens of Philadelphia is archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: discover.hsp.org/Record/ead-Am.340.

A helpful exercise is to consider these moments in the context of a past National History Day theme, like *Communication in History*. In both Nathan Levy's letter and the *Resolution of Non-Importation*, ink was put to paper to achieve a specific end. What can these communications tell us about the structure of colonial government, and the rights of its citizens? To what effectiveness was writing used as a catalyst for change? And what does the Jewish presence in these documents add to our understanding of this time and place?

ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS, AND SOURCE DIVERSITY

Jewish history does not comprise one simple narrative, nor are its people or practices monolithic. The inclusion of multiple perspectives is essential to a nuanced discussion of history and is, unsurprisingly, key to a successful NHD project. Exploring the diversity of Jewish experiences can enhance both.

Students interested in the Women's Suffrage Movement, for example, can deepen their understanding of the topic by investigating beyond more well-known names to find figures like Caroline Katzenstein. Katzenstein's tireless efforts for women's rights illuminate the complexities and tensions of the suffrage movement. She served on the national membership committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which advocated for a state-level approach to securing suffrage but saw its failure firsthand in a Pennsylvania referendum on the issue in 1915. Katzenstein rededicated her efforts to the National Woman's Party, and the fight to pass an amendment at the federal level.⁷

The Labor Movement in the United States is another popular area of inquiry for students to explore for an NHD project, and is one that will benefit from investigating organizations such as the Workmen's Circle, a national Jewish fraternal organization founded by Russian Jewish immigrants in 1892. The Philadelphia branch records of the Workmen's Circle outline the issues facing and concerning this specific group, and illuminate the community-building and advocacy undertaken to provide for its members.

Workmen's Circle members were active in advocating for fair labor practices, including increased safety and better wages, but also spent considerable time and resources on preserving and developing the **Yiddish** language and Jewish traditions in the United States, through special schools and educational initiatives.⁸



Portrait of Caroline Katzenstein, 1911. Caroline Katzenstein Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Collection Am.8996).

⁷ Caroline Katzenstein's papers are archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. You can read more about her efforts for women's suffrage and continued advocacy at hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/k/KatzensteinAm8996.html.

⁸ The Philadelphia District Records of the Workmen's Circle are archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Learn more at discover.hsp.org/Record/ead-MSS045/Description#tabnav.

Starting from the “Big Idea” phase of the Labor Movement, students can begin to connect the dots of other important facets that contributed to solidarity and activism, including a Jewish identity. This, in turn, can encourage students to apply analytical tools they already know, such as examining the various positive and negative factors that drive migration, and how these influences shape immigration and community building. What does the multitude of organizational efforts tell us about the needs of this particular community? What can this tell us about the societal forces and prejudices that are necessitating these efforts?

Exploring topics that relate to or incorporate Jewish history will also enable students to widen their net when considering potential sources, including those in a variety of languages. Primary sources from organizational records to letters to newspapers may be written in Yiddish, **Hebrew**, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, and many, many more! Students with knowledge of languages other than English should absolutely explore what records and stories they might find within a different alphabet. Jewish history is not limited to the history of **migration**, but it can be enhanced by its consideration, including the addition of non-English sources.



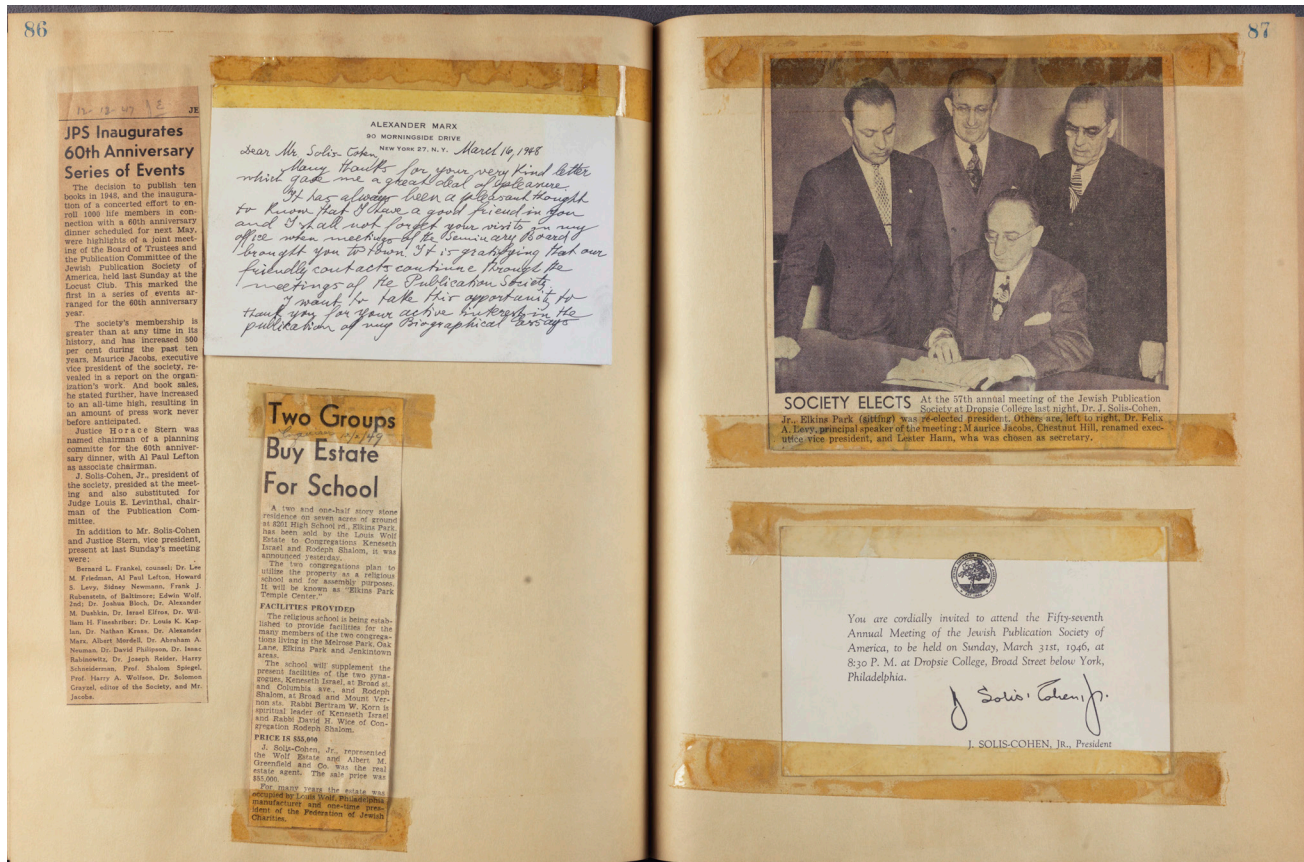
Rosh Hashanah postcard with New Years greetings in both Hebrew and English, unused and undated. From the Workmen's Circle (Philadelphia District) Photographs at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Collection PG127).

TOPICS BIG...AND SMALL!

Just as it is okay for a student to start big and narrow their NHD topic down, it is okay to start small! Family history, local history, and genealogy can be great platforms on which to build a project. After all, these topics may be a part of the everyday for students, and examining the community and history of which you are a part is a vital step to creating thoughtful, engaged citizens.

The personal scrapbook of Jacob Solis-Cohen, Jr. is an example to this end. Within its pages are newspaper clippings related to his career in real estate, but also community events and wedding invitations.⁹ These breadcrumbs invite us to dig deeper into local history and provide avenues through which to do so. Local newspapers, community bulletins or publications, and more are excellent snapshots into issues that impacted a specific person or community, while encouraging students to consider how personal narratives contribute to our understanding of history. Personal family records or photographs are an excellent starting point for such investigations, and local historical societies, libraries, and houses of worship are fantastic places to find them. These repositories may house smaller collections, but an archive's size is not reflective of its strength, nor of a source's importance to the historical narrative.

⁹ The Jacob Solis-Cohen, Jr. Papers are archived at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Learn more at discover.hsp.org/Record/ead-MSS014.



Jacob Solis-Cohen, Jr. Scrapbook. Jacob Solis-Cohen, Jr. Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Collection MSS14).

Consideration of local sources also helps combat the idea that a person's importance to history is measurable only by their relative impact. There is no minimum requirement of contribution to history for a story to be important. In fact, judging people and communities by their contributions is a reductive line of thinking. A person need not be well-known or famous for their story to be meaningful to history; their existence is enough.

CONCLUSION

A National History Day project is an excellent opportunity for students to explore the many facets of Jewish history. The diversity of Jewish stories and sources is an incredible well from which to draw a deeper understanding of historical events from perspectives they may not have previously considered. This perspective is essential not only for deepening our understanding of history but also for dispelling dangerous misconceptions and disinformation in today's world.