

# Jews You Can Use

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*Famous Jews: from left, writer Gloria Steinem, diplomat Henry Kissinger, singer and actress Barbra Streisand, pitcher Sandy Koufax, comic Sid Caesar. (From left: Bettmann-Corbis; JP Laffont / Sygma-Corbis; Bettmann-Corbis; Mark Kauffman / Time Life Pictures-Getty Images; Wegee / ICP-Getty Images)*

There is no particular reason why the National Museum of American Jewish History should be located in Philadelphia, rather than, say, Brooklyn, except that it happened to have been founded there in 1976, by members of Congregation Mikveh Israel. Itself dating to 1740, Mikveh Israel was in the right place and time to become known as “the Synagogue of the American Revolution,” the place where the Founding Fathers would have gone for services, if any of them had been Jewish. So five years ago, when the museum began planning a new \$150 million building within sight of the Liberty Bell—opening on Nov. 26—it made sense to adopt “freedom” as the theme, rather than, say, “comedians” or “delicatessen.” The design by celebrity architect James S. Polshek embraces its historic location with glass-walled galleries on each floor overlooking Independence Mall. The exhibits, according to museum president Michael Rosenzweig, are meant to “inspire all Americans to a greater appreciation of the contributions American Jews have been able to make by living in freedom.” Unquestionably, America would be a very different country without Jews. No bagels. No Levi’s. No—irony of ironies—“White Christmas.” And absent the polio vaccine, we’d mostly all be dead anyway.

But the question Rosenzweig, a former law professor at the University of Michigan, had to ask himself is whether Americans really need more reminders of Jewish accomplishments. Nearly a century after Louis Brandeis became the first Jew on the Supreme Court, does it matter to anyone—except, of course, anti-Semites—how many others there have been? Or perhaps some Jews still care, but Rosenzweig points out that “if we are of interest only to Jews, we won’t have succeeded in our mission.” Part of that mission is to attract enough visitors to break even. Rosenzweig is certain that the American Jewish experience will resonate with other ethnic groups whose ancestors came to these shores in search of liberty and opportunity, even if the only Jews they’ve ever seen were the ones in [Annie Hall](#).

So once you get past Irving Berlin's piano and Albert Einstein's pipe and the obligatory tribute to Sandy Koufax, the museum's exhibits are intended to provoke more thought and discussion than pride and bombast. With diligence, you might discover that Jews are represented in the ranks of American scientists, performing artists, and political figures, but, says, Rosenzweig, "we didn't view it as our role to be unquestioning cheerleaders for the American Jewish community. This is not about counting Nobel Prizes." (Or Jewish Miss Americas, which are easier to count. There was one.) Its very name, which puts "American" before "Jewish," emphasizes how much like their gentile countrymen Jews actually are—that they play baseball, not that they can pitch four no-hitters. A baseball signed by Sandy Koufax gets no more display than a bowling shirt from a B'nai Brith team in El Paso. (It wasn't a chess match that the gambler Arnold Rothstein fixed: it was the World Series!) The glass wall that looks out on the Mall also looks in. Its transparency signifies Jews' visibility in American life, while a faint scrim of embedded lines symbolizes how Jews are woven into the fabric of the nation. Visitors are expected to leave understanding that Jews really are just like other Americans. Only funnier.

Did you know, for instance, that Jews, except for the ones on Seinfeld, live in suburbs? It's true—the museum devotes considerable space to celebrating Jewish participation in America's postwar exodus from the downtowns where Jews first settled after getting off the boat from Hamburg. A wall of honor salutes the places where Jews first set foot on suburban lawns—Shaker Heights, Evanston, Silver Spring, Brookline, the Five Towns—and proclaimed their Americanness with swoop-roofed glass-walled synagogues designed by Frank Lloyd Wright or Philip Johnson. There is a reconstruction of a mid-century kitchen and a copy of that quintessential document of the era, Hebrew National's "31 Ways to Make Meals Out of Hot Dogs." A love seat faces a mock-woodgrain black-and-white television, on which "Mrs. Goldberg" (the actress Gertrude Berg) yodels her cheery yoo-hoos and Sammy Davis Jr. confides how much he "digs" Manischewitz wine. This is a museum for all the Jews who never got to the Supreme Court. They were salesmen and tailors and even farmers, although the museum's representative North Dakota homesteading family seems to have beat it back to Minneapolis as soon as they decently could.

This approach also puts NMAJH in the forefront of the trend among museums toward interactivity and visitor participation. The humblest podiatrist who comes through the door has his own place in the collection, a point made explicit by a wall of photographs that indiscriminately mingles the famous (Henry Kissinger, Gilda Radner, Jerome Robbins) with the unheralded likes of the Helzner family, Morry, Isabel, and Steve. The museum's newsletter acknowledges gifts of artifacts including collections of family photographs, kitchen implements from the 1940s, and "a collection of Breakstone Dairy containers." Any visitor, whether Jewish or just someone who knows a Jew, can take a place in one of the video-recording booths and declaim for posterity a tribute to Aunt Ruth's brisket. It's every bit as good at Bess Myerson's or Estée Lauder's. After all, we are all museumworthy, all fiddlers on the same American roof, sawing away at our own songs.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/11/11/the-american-jewish-museum-oy-vey-or-mazel-tov.html>

