

To Be a Jew in the Free World

Jewish Identity Through the Lens of Modern History

A new six-week course from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute

WHEN THE AGE OF FAITH GAVE WAY TO THE AGE of Reason and the modern world was launched, the Jewish people were profoundly affected. With the emergence of the United States and the enshrinement of religious freedom as a fundamental right of all citizens, the nature of Jewish life in the Diaspora entered a radically new era.

What does freedom mean in Jewish life? In the shtetl, Jews believed that G-d's immutable laws governed all of life. How did the encounter with modernity affect the Jews' understanding of identity and the relevance of Jewish law? Does a full Jewish life require its adherents to turn their back on modern-day liberties and try to survive in isolation? These questions are as important to answer today as they were in previous generations.

The latest sociological survey of American Jewry suggests that many Jews are trying to solve this conundrum by limiting the claims that Jewish identity makes on their lives. Yet, in some quarters, the freedom of the age has meant a freedom to discover profound

meaning in a life that includes full commitment to Jewish values and teachings. Beyond the apparent conflict, is there a possibility that the new age and an ancient tradition actually bring out the best in each other?

To Be a Jew in the Free World explores these issues through the prism of six historical events and phenomena. What are the challenges of this new world and what are its unique opportunities?

By showing how key issues came to the fore in the past and how they were answered, and by asking questions of our own and considering what we might learn from our experience, we will discover what it means to be a Jew in a free world.



Course Historian

Dr. Jonathan D. Sarna

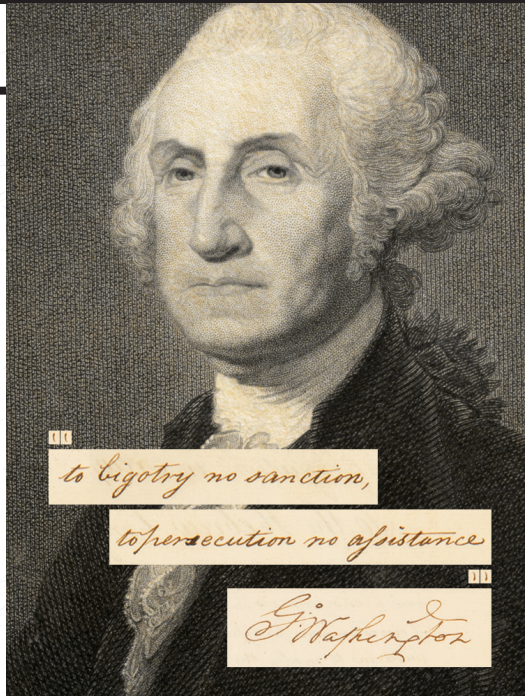
Professor of American Jewish History,
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LESSON 1

Once a Jew, Forever a Jew

THE FIRST LESSON EXAMINES WHAT HAPPENED WHEN the course of the Jews intersected with the elemental force that was Napoleon Bonaparte. His offer to free the Jews of age-old discriminatory laws required the Jewish people to redefine their own identity and forced them to pledge allegiance to him as the emperor and to the state that he embodied before all else. Napoleon's challenge is ongoing. Who are we? Is our Jewish identity our primary sense of who we are, or do we define ourselves by other things that we believe to be more significant than being Jewish?



LESSON 2

Freedom for All

THIS LESSON LOOKS THROUGH THE PRISM OF another great leader whose life overlapped Napoleon's—George Washington. He led a revolt in the name of freedom, yet established a disciplined army and a lasting and effectual united government.

He affirmed the freedom of America's tiny Jewish community, emphasizing that their freedom, as well as that of all citizens, is divine and inviolable, and not a commodity for which other humans can exact payment.

What do Jewish sources say about the nature of the freedom that comes from G-d? Did America's Founding Fathers see freedom the same way?

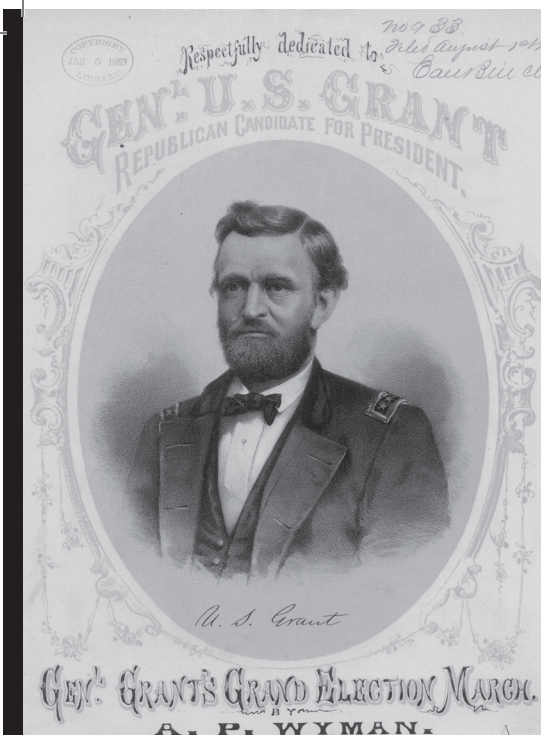
LESSON 3

Judaism of Our Choosing

THE THIRD LESSON LOOKS AT THE EFFECT OF THE American ethos of individual freedom on Jewish communities throughout the world. Just as Americans were empowered to remove governments that did not suit them, Jews began to flout Jewish communal norms and to forge with others or create their individual expressions of American Jewish life.

Looking closely at the failed attempt to establish a chief rabbi in New York in the 1890s, we seek to answer the question: how can Jewish life thrive when top-down organization has been replaced by individual autonomy as the prime mover of Jewish communal life?





LESSON 4

The Jewish Vote

THIS LESSON PROBES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the Jews and Ulysses S. Grant. As a general in the Civil War, Grant issued an order expelling Jews “as a class” from the area of his command. Grant’s command aroused deep fears that also America, when in crisis, could revert to the barbarities that the Jews thought were left behind. When Grant ran for president after the war, championing the cause of civil rights, the Jews struggled over whether they could vote for someone who had wronged the Jewish community in such a fundamental manner. This raises the still relevant question: Should our identity as citizens of a democratic state cause us to see our duty in a larger way, or is our first obligation to vote for what is good for ourselves as Jews?

LESSON 5

Antisemitism-free Jewish Identity

THE FIFTH LESSON EXAMINES THE TRANSFORMATION of antisemitism in the modern age. Whether in the Dreyfus case in fin de siècle France or Henry Ford’s eager dissemination of the Russian forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, hatred of Jews reappeared in the West in new and virulent forms. Why did the world’s new freedoms not result in the death of hatred? How do we identify and respond to the continuous morphing of antisemitism? To what degree are the Holocaust and antisemitism a necessary forces in molding the Jewish identity of future generations?



LESSON 6

Purpose for All Mankind

THE FINAL LESSON LOOKS NOT AT HOW THE WORLD of freedom affects Jews, but at how Jewish tradition can affect the world. The lesson examines the life of Menasseh ben Israel, who at the dawn of the Age of Freedom found a way to share the world’s dream of redemption and move England to readmit the Jews who were expelled centuries earlier. The lesson also explores a debate that reached the U.S. Supreme Court: the constitutionality of placing *menorot* in the public square. We then ask: What new opportunities do we Jews have to actualize Jewish tradition’s redemptive promises in new and powerful ways?

