

## Preface

I had long been bothered by the often repeated “truth” about post–World War II American Jewry’s Holocaust avoidance, an assertion that to this day runs through the literature on American Jewish history. It struck me as wrong in and of itself and because it almost always came with little evidence to back it up. But since I had done no research on that era, I could not mount a sustained critique. I could only rely on feelings and my own recollections. Every time I taught the American Jewish history survey course, I confronted the well-worn statements in the books I assigned my students, and generally I mumbled something to the classes to the effect that I had my doubts as to the accuracy of what they had just read.

When Todd Endelman invited me to the University of Michigan to give the David W. Belin lecture in 2004 and recommended that I focus on some relatively contemporary aspect of American Jewish history, I decided that the time had come to try my hand at this topic. I set aside a few months to see what I could find and kept myself open to the possibility that the scholarship had been right all along. The opposite happened, and as a result of a summer’s research to prepare for the Michigan talk, I had to buy myself a four-drawer file cabinet to house the material that demonstrated a widespread and intense American Jewish engagement with the Holocaust in precisely the years when silence had supposedly reigned, and this only after having gone through fairly obvious published material. So, my first thanks goes to Todd for inviting me and suggesting that I tailor my talk to the recent period.

At just about the same time, Paul Melrood invited me to Milwaukee to speak to the International Association of Yiddish Clubs on the theme of that year’s conference, Yiddish and the Holocaust. A few more weeks of research to prepare a talk for this popular presentation provided me with even more material, more than my new, but already filled to brim, file cabinet would hold. Speaking to this group of ardent Yiddishists and local Milwaukee Jews convinced me of the importance of the topic, especially because the women and men of the audience, none of them historians,

all of them active and engaged Jews, lovers of Yiddish, refused to believe anything I said. So deeply had the truth of postwar American Jewish Holocaust avoidance taken root that, as typical of such audiences, they bombarded me with heated statements of disbelief. Nothing I said could shake them from what they knew, with utter conviction, that in the years after the war, American Jews, in whatever language they expressed themselves, had little or no interest in the Holocaust.

I came away from this lecture with an equally strong conviction that the subject deserved a book. This then pushed me into years of research and sent me to an array of libraries and archives, and here I would like to thank the staff members of these various repositories who extended themselves to help me in my quest for materials.

Out of alphabetical order, I want to begin by offering my special gratitude to the librarians and archivists at the American Jewish Historical Society and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, both housed in the remarkable Center for Jewish History in New York City. I did the lion's share of my work there and am completely indebted to them. Having the two repositories in the same building, sharing a reading room, demonstrated the organic flow of Jewish history from and between eastern Europe and the United States. In addition, the American Jewish Archives in Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, not only houses one of the richest collections in the field, but its staff knows how to accommodate scholars and to make them feel as though the facility exists for them.

I received excellent assistance and found massive troves of material at the Chicago Jewish Archives of the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, as well as its Asher Library, the Marvin Gelman Library of George Washington University, the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion's Klau Library in New York, the Fales Library and Special Collections of Bobst Library at New York University, and the Tamiment Library of the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, also at my home institution, New York University. Research trips to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America's Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, the New York Public Library's rich Library for the Performing Arts and its Rare Books and Manuscript Division, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Library's Manuscript Collection, the Administrative Archives at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and Yeshiva University's Archives all yielded remarkable material. I am deeply grateful to the librarians and archivists at each of these places. I wish I could name these staff members one by one, but the list would be too long.

Moving from institutions to friends and colleagues, I again express how thankful I am for their time and insights. The individuals whose names appear here encouraged me but also challenged me when they believed that to do so served my best interest. They had no problem telling me when they thought I might be off target, or when they decided that I had meandered in some problematic directions.

First in that long list is Lynn Gordon of the University of Rochester, who read a manuscript version of this book that ran even more pages than this one. She offered to read its subsequent, shorter versions, something I could not inflict on such a dear person. A critical reader and superb editor, she suspended her important role of friend to stand back and critique this work.

Tony Michels and Rebecca Kobrin also read the long and unwieldy first draft, and they offered important insights that helped me frame, redirect, and cut. I thank them. My wonderful colleagues Marion Kaplan and Ron Zweig worked through these chapters and provided me with many comments, delivered over copious cups of coffee at the Washington Square Diner.

The list goes on, and I hope that I will not leave anyone off. Diane Ashton and Rakefet Zalashik read all or parts of the manuscripts and told me exactly what they thought. Lawrence Baron played a role in chipping away at the dominant paradigm, and I learned much from him. Yigal Sklarin took a graduate seminar with me at Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School on post-World War II American Jewish history. I assigned a version of this book in manuscript form, and while I learned much from the reactions of all the students in that class, Yigal, without my asking him to, marked the pages up, and he has continued even up to this late date to send me references germane to the world of postwar Orthodoxy.

Several of my students from NYU's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies supplied me with information that they found in their own journeys to archives, and they gave me leads to rich veins of material. In the process they asked me great questions that stimulated my thinking. Here I want to mention Natalia Aleksun, Daniella Doron, Laura Jockusch, and Josh Perelman. Shira Kohn, Rachel Kranson, Lara Rabinovitch, and David Koffman all gave me important feedback and encouragement.

In addition, lengthy conversations and electronic communications with such scholars and colleagues as Alan Kraut, Dan Katz, John Bodnar, Gary Gerstel, Michael Meyer, Judah Cohen, Zohar Segev, Ofer Schiff, Michael Galashinsky, Derek Penslar, Jeffrey Shandler, Marc Saperstein,

Marsha Rozenblit, Odeda Arad, Robert Cherry, and David Levering Lewis made me feel that I had embarked on a project worth undertaking and that I had indeed asked an important question.

Vivian Mann helped me track down an elusive illustration. Mark Epstein did yeoman's service organizing my notes, preparing the bibliography, and tracking down wayward footnotes. Tina Tyrrell scanned images for me. Shayne Leslie Figueroa seemed to always be there to help me with a myriad of problems and pitched in with the many chores that multiplied as the process of writing this book went on its course. Despina Papazoglou provided great help as well.

Eric Zinner, my editor at New York University Press, gets a paragraph of his very own. He functioned as more than a good shepherd for this book. He expressed both enthusiasm and skepticism for what I did and how I did it. The former kept me going, and the latter made me clarify to myself, to him, and I hope to my readers what I was doing, and why.

I must note here the very special role played by Alex Goren in the making of this book. I cannot fully express how honored I am that the Cukier, Goldstein-Goren Foundation chose to fund a center for the study of American Jewish history at New York University in the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. His generosity and belief in scholarship based on the vision of his father, Avram "Dolphy" Goldstein-Goren, is inspiring. In his lifetime Avram made a commitment to fostering the highest-quality Jewish studies scholarship here and in various places around the world.

As is customary in acknowledgments, one does not forget one's family, and I am blessed with an almost embarrassment of riches when it comes to the number of historians in mine, those closest to me who had no choice but to listen, read, and comment on all the details of this project, in its many stages. The next three names ought rightly to have been listed with the professional colleagues who helped me. But since my family in fact stands in a class by itself in my heart, they deserve to be singled out. My husband Steven Diner, way too busy as Chancellor of Rutgers University–Newark, not only read a draft but listened incessantly to me talk about this. With all his insights as an American historian, he asked probing and hard questions. My son, Eli Diner, now a student in the Ph.D. program in history at UCLA, had much to offer in our constant discussions of this book, and I derived much from our conversation based in part on his reading a lot of it. Eugene Sheppard, my newest "son," is a professor at Brandeis University, a scholar of German Jewish intellectual history. He is a great reader and sharp thinker. He simultaneously praised my work and

cajoled me to go in directions that I had not thought to before. Finally Shira Diner and Matan Diner, my oldest and youngest children, may not be historians (or in Matan's case, not yet), but their constant interest, support, and love mean the world to me. These five truly make my journey a rich one.

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