1. HAVEN: A SAFE PLACE TO LIVE. TO WORK. TO WORSHIP.

In 1654, a group of twenty-three Jewish adults and children arrived in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. They were seeking a safe haven after being expelled by the Portuguese conquerors of Brazil, where they had previously been living under Dutch protection. This group of twenty-three evolved into the first permanent settlement of Jews in North America.

By the 1740s, Jews were worshiping publicly in the port cities of New York, Newport, Rhode Island, Charleston, South Carolina, Philadelphia, Savannah, Georgia, and elsewhere. As a result, Jews chose independence from Britain in 1776 and many fought for freedom in the Revolutionary War.

Since then, other Jews have come to America seeking freedom from despair and persecution – German and Austrian Jews from the 1820s to the 1840s; Jews from the former Soviet Union and Arab nations fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930s and 1940s; and European Jews from the 1880s through 1923; Jews from Eastern Europe, 1880-1924.

2. AN AMERICAN JEWISH GALLERY: DIFFERING PATHS TO LEADERSHIP & DISTINCTION

Fighting for equality
Overcoming resistance, fighting for equality

The states adopted a new national Constitution in 1787 and George Washington became the nation’s first president. America’s 2,000 Jews looked to Washington to assure them that the national government would protect religious liberty. In 1790, Washington famously promised the Jewish Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island that the Federal government “shall give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” The First Amendment (1791) underscored Washington’s promise, but only applied to what Congress could do. Each state was still free to discriminate against Jews or other minority religions.

As late as 1820, Maryland and Massachusetts required that elected officials had to take their oath on a Christian Bible, effectively excluding Jews from office. After a long campaign, in 1825 the Maryland state legislature passed “The Jew Bill,” allowing Jews to substitute a declaration of belief “in a future state of rewards and punishments in taking an oath.”

5. CONFLICT AND CHALLENGES: AMERICAN JEWRY AND THE CIVIL WAR, 1860-1865

American Jewry divided over the issue of slavery. Those in the North generally opposed it, while in the South Jews sided with their fellow white citizens. When civil War came in 1861, approximately 7,000 Jews fought for the Union and 3,500 for the Confederacy. Judah Benjamin became Secretary of State for the Confederacy, the first Jew in a presidential cabinet.

On the Union side, General Ulysses S. Grant, signed the infamous Order #11 expelling all Jews from Tennessee and Kentucky. Jews nationwide organized to ask President Lincoln to intervene. Lincoln ordered immediate withdrawal of Grant’s Order #11.

6. THIS GOLDEN LAND: IMMIGRATION FROM EASTERN EUROPE, 1880-1924

Starting in the 1880s, millions of Jews came to America from Russia, Latvia and Poland. They were fleeing religious persecution, grinding poverty, and violent attacks against them known as pogroms. Once in America, they gathered in neighborhoods like New York’s Lower East Side and Boston’s North End. In 1883, Jewish author Emma Lazarus became the poet laureate of every American immigrant when she wrote the inscriptive words now inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor, your wretched masses, yearning to breathe free. I lift my lamp beside the Golden Door.”
7. CRISIS AT HOME AND ABROAD: ANTI-SEMITISM AND WORLD WAR, 1920-1945

By setting immigration limits in 1923, Congress effectively closed the Golden Door to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Unfortunately, the 1930s brought great crises to the Jews of Europe: the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party, which blamed the Jews for Germany’s economic woes. Hitler found Americas in Henry Ford of Detroit and Father Leonard Feeney of Boston, among others.

As the Nazi regime oppressed German and Austrian Jews, the U.S. government allowed a handful of Jewish intellectuals to find sanctuary in America. Eventually, almost 100,000 European Jews found haven in America, but they were only a small fraction of the 6 million who died at Nazi hands.

8. MUTUAL CARING, MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY: AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITAL PHILOSOPHY & ADVOCACY

To advance the social and political rights of Jews at home and abroad, American Jewry has established a network of volunteer and non-profit organizations.

The first was B’nai B’rith (Hebrew for “Brotherhood of the Covenant”), a fraternal organization organized in 1840. The Board of Delegates of American Hebrews was the first to advocate for Jewish political rights in the United States military since 1917. Hebrews founded Hadassah, an international women’s Zionist organization, in 1912; today, its concerns include the rights of American women along with the continued commitment to medical care for Jews and Arabs in Israel.

In major American cities, Jewish charities have organized into federations to eliminate wasteful competition in fundraising. Boston’s own Combined Jewish Philanthropies was the first federation in the nation.

HOME

9. HOME: A PLACE TO GROW, A PLACE TO FLOURISH.

American Jewry did more than find a haven in the United States. Protected by legal rights and political victory, they built at home. Like other ethnic and religious groups, they established communities that were fully American, yet distinctively culturally. In their businesses and professions, in the military, in universities and scientific laboratories, in urban enclaves and suburban neighborhoods, in politics and popular culture, in their synagogues and charitable organizations, Jews shaped their American and Jewish identities.

10. JUDAISM, AMERICAN STYLE: THE VARIETIES OF AMERICAN JEWISH BELIEF

Judaism has taken on great variety in America. Its different denominations or branches range from ultra-Orthodoxy, which stresses traditional observance, to Humanistic Judaism, which minimizes the significance of a deity.

In early America, Jews lived in “synagogue communities,” single congregations that provided for each member’s spiritual and ritual requirements, and provided charity in time of need. Synagogue communities broke down when subsequent waves of Jewish immigrants chose to worship in congregations reflecting the customs of their “Old” countries. In more recent times, the main-stream synagogues were slow to meet the needs of feminists, gays, students and others calling for literacies and practices that reflect their personal Jewish perspectives.

11. HOME AND HEARTH: JEWISH DOMESTIC LIFE IN AMERICA

American Jewish life has been lived in family networks. In the twentieth century, traditional Jewish holidays slowly converged with American celebrations, so that Passover, for example, is now called in some circles “the Jewish Thanksgiving.” Kosher (ritually pure) foods are central to American Jewish religious observance, and many ethnically Jewish foods, such as the bagel, have entered mainstream American cuisine.

12. IN THE POLITICAL ARENA: AMERICAN JEWS IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE

From the time of their insistence on rights in colonial New Amsterdam to Joe Lieberman’s presidential campaign in 2004, American Jews have encouraged individual and group participation in American life. The first Jew sat in Congress in 1840. Oscar Straus became the first Jew in a United States cabinet in 1906. President Woodrow Wilson appointed Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court in 1912.

13. PORTRAYING AMERICA: JEWS IN THE ARTS & POPULAR CULTURE

American Jews have pioneered in a number of areas of American arts and letters. In music, painting and literature, in particular, Jewish “spokesmen” with a distinctive voice. Among the popular entertainments that American Jews helped pioneer are the theater, film, comics books, Broadway musicals and rock-n-roll.

Much of American Jewish culture derives from the Yiddish playwrights, actors, poets and writers who came to America between 1887 and 1924. Pioneer entrepreneurs like David Sarnoff developed network radio and television broadcasting. Comedians from Sid Caesar to Gilda Radner have brought a Jewish sensibility to contemporary humor.

14. AMERICAN JEWISH WOMEN

From early in the 19th century, American Jewish women played active roles outside the home in Jewish philanthropy and education. Elizabeth Sady founded the first Jewish Sunday school in 1838. Nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish activists campaigned for birth control, women’s right to vote and property rights for themselves and other American women.

The last half of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of Jewish feminism and the assertion by women that they deserve an equal role in Judaism. Today, women routinely serve as rabbis and cantors in non-Orthodox congregations and as leaders in Jewish life.

15. AMERICAN ZIONISM: COMMUNAL, ADVOCACY AND ZIONIST ORGANIZATIONS

American Jewry’s hope to re-establish a Jewish homeland in the Holy Land is as old as the early nineteenth century. Effective concerted action to help Jews return to and sustain themselves in Palestine began in earnest just prior to WWII, with the establishment of Hadassah, the women’s Zionist organization, and Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis’ agreement to serve as head of the Zionist Organization of America in 1914.

After World War II and the destruction of much of Jewish life in Europe, the United Nations voted to divide Palestine and designate a portion of it for the creation of a Jewish homeland. In May 1948, President Truman recognized the new State of Israel. In the subsequent wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors, American Jewry has rallied to the Israeli cause. American political leaders often appeal to the nation’s Jewish voters by pledging support for Israel.