

Beyond the American Exception*A proposal for a theme year submitted to the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies*

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An American exception has marked the study of modern Jewish life. From immigrants' self-conscious assertions that America was—or would be—a promised land to their progeny's pride that only in America could Jews thrive and survive so handily, the narrative of American exceptionalism has anchored Jewish self-understanding. At the same time, it has shaped scholarship on the modern Jewish experience.

The notion that “America is different” constitutes a bedrock in the study of American Jewish life—a field that has existed as a genuine area of academic inquiry for only about fifty years. The foundations of this young scholarly discipline rest in an interpretation of the United States as offering a wholly distinct experience from previous Jewish histories, particularly European ones. In many ways, American Jews defined themselves in contradistinction to European precedents, and the scholarship that emerged in the late-twentieth century followed suit. At the heart of these assessments lay claims that American Jews faced neither the struggle for emancipation nor the virulent political antisemitism that gripped parts of Europe. According to this paradigm, these differences allowed Jewish immigrants to assimilate successfully and to blend their ethnic and national identities more seamlessly than Jews in other countries. American exceptionalism has served as a broad explanatory framework for everything from Jewish mobility to educational and cultural attainments to economic and political success and more.

Yet our moment in time demands a reassessment of American exceptionalism as a guiding paradigm of modern Jewish studies. Recent scholarship has noted, for example, that many countries lacked a protracted struggle for emancipation and that antisemitism could be found in American settings, even if not on the scale of pogroms and genocide. At the same time, cataclysmic movements of globalization, punctured by resurgent strains of American isolationism and fervent nationalism, present new challenges to the orthodoxy of American exceptionalism and compel us to rethink how we tell the history of modern Jewish life. Not only must we ask whether America is truly different from the other places in which Jews have created their homes; we also must take stock of those structures and historical forces that have fostered belief in American exceptionalism. In doing so, we expect that we will surely move beyond the American exception as ideology, allowing it instead to become a subject of inquiry with diverse implications, as well as a narrative ripe for revision.

During the 2020-2021 fellowship year at the Katz Center, we propose convening a broad and interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore how thinking “Beyond the American Exception” could enable a re-envisioning of modern Jewish history and experience. The theme offers multiple entry points into some of the most pressing debates within US history and Jewish history; it also intersects with many concerns shaping Jewish cultural studies, literary theory, and social scientific inquiry. In these diverse disciplines, consideration of Jews as exceptional has framed the types of questions asked, discouraged explicitly and implicitly comparative approaches, and often determined to set Jews, Jewish culture, and Jewish society apart from major trends in both US and Jewish history. A reassessment of American exceptionalism will reframe central questions from varied disciplinary perspectives related to diaspora, transnationalism, colonialism, capitalism, liberalism, cultural production, gender politics, and more. Furthermore, it will require placing the

study of American Jews in direct conversation with studies of non-American Jewish communities and non-Jewish American communities. A critical perspective on American exceptionalism forces a new epistemology when it comes to understanding modern Jewish history.

Most fundamentally, “Beyond the American Exception” proposes that scholars reconsider longstanding and powerful narratives of progress. The extraordinary staying power of the thesis of American exceptionalism reflects its equal embrace by historical subjects and their scholarly interpreters. Whether “a city upon a hill” or “an errand to the wilderness,” the roots of American colonial thought and colonial history were firmly implanted in American exceptionalism. This pattern, blurring the self-consciousness of American subjects with assessments of their later scholarly observers, has strengthened the hold of American exceptionalism. More than a rhetorical tool, American exceptionalism has been invoked as a call to action, at home and abroad. Various rendered through economic terms, intellectual developments, literary achievements, cultural production, and political and judicial transformations, the exceptional nature of America has hinged upon its unending march toward progress. Indeed, even those scholarly circles that have produced critical scholarship about the United States have tended to draw their criticism as a comparison against the true promises of America, often articulated as “the American Dream.” Thus, such scholarship re-inscribes exceptionalism as the guiding motif of inquiries into American life.

Particularly for scholars attentive to modern Jewish experiences, the American exception has largely reigned supreme. The Americanists among them established the field of American Jewish studies as an exemplar of American exceptionalism. They justified the field of study by its ability to reveal the true nature of American democracy, liberalism, and capitalist opportunities. In American Jews’ unprecedented socioeconomic successes, the singularity of the United States became starkly visible, especially when measured against alternative economic and political systems from which American Jews emigrated. Yet American protections and opportunities have not served all citizens equally, and new research in US history is providing clear evidence of the inequalities central to the functioning of the American state. Scholars of American Jewish life have only started to examine the terms of Jewish privilege and power in light of this research on the American state. A critical perspective on American exceptionalism promises to expand this scholarship and bring it to bear on new questions about modern Jewish history and US history.

Europeanists, in their own way, have bolstered American exceptionalism as much as Americanists. In their reluctance to recognize the value of studying American Jewish history, they have tacitly acknowledged its exceptional nature. If, for many of these scholars, Europe was the truer, deeper, and more authentic space of Jewish life, then America was defined as wholly different, albeit often in contemptuous ways. In this arena, the issue of language looms large, since only a small number of American Jews had facility with Hebrew—regarded as the Jewish language of the elite—and even Yiddish, considered a lesser and often more feminized European Jewish language, had little staying power in the United States. Perhaps more pointedly, many European scholars implicitly suggested that the exceptional ease and superficiality of Jewish life in the United States spelled the demise of rich Jewish culture and thought. Still, these scholars could not help recognize that the magnitude of Jewish loss in Europe far exceeded whatever the nature of the losses, most importantly via assimilation, in the United States. Only in the rise of more transnational scholarship that has traced migrations of peoples, capital, and ideas have scholars started to question the divide between European and American Jewish life and, thus, challenge the exceptional nature of American Jewish life and its division from European patterns and forces. Indeed, the transnational turn in Jewish studies has the potential to inform and unsettle the very notion of American exceptionalism

American exceptionalism has also occupied a special position in the field of Palestine/Israel studies, which emerged by defining a clear, often ideologically motivated, rupture between Zion and the diaspora. For the period after Jewish statehood, diaspora became almost entirely synonymous with the United States, and scholars created two poles of Jewish exceptionalism: Israel and the United States. Unsurprisingly, these two poles functioned in a close and, often, mutually-reinforcing relationship with one another. However, as Israel grew into a powerful nation-state, scholars have increasingly questioned its exceptionalism in terms of politics, economics, and society, as well as its exceptional relationship with the United States and American Jews.

Finally, rising scholarly interest in Sephardic and Mizrahi experiences has exposed the Ashkenazi normativity that guides much of Jewish studies and anchors claims of American exceptionalism. Looking at American Jews—the vast majority of them Ashkenazi—through the eyes of scholars who study Sephardim and Mizrachim, reveals very different understandings of the varieties of Jewish communities and offers resistance against classifying American Jews as a particular exception to a contested norm.

Clearly, American exceptionalism has been used for varied scholarly ends and, also, has met challenges, best understood by looking well beyond American borders. By devoting a year of sustained study to the topic, scholars will be able to delve into its formation and its fissures, all while working to explore why it has maintained such steady dominance in narratives of modern Jewish life. What explains its hold on American Jews and its explanatory appeal to scholars? Researchers whose primary focus is not Jewish studies will contribute to these discussions by helping to suggest the contours of American exceptionalism within other fields. For example, scholars of American liberalism have recently suggested that New Deal reforms and Great Society programs after World War II were exceptional within American history and provided an unprecedented and ultimately unsustainable period of broad-based economic growth, particularly for among white ethnic Americans. If this period of social progress was itself exceptional and limited and, also, was the cradle of the thesis of American exceptionalism in modern Jewish studies, then these revisionist scholars may help explain its power and its significant limitations.

For its geographical, methodological, and disciplinary capaciousness, “Beyond the American Exception” promises to create scholarly conversations across several divisions. This fellowship year has the ability to bring together scholars of modern Jewish experience who specialize in a variety of regions, subjects and disciplines. It will also attract Israeli, European, Asian, and American academics whose work intersects with the study of Jews.

Research topics that could fit well into this frame include:

- **Nationalism in an Age of Globalization:** Globalization politics and economics as agents in the creation of Jewish identification, transaction, and mobility, and the role of isolationist and hyper-nationalist movements (including antisemitism) in reshaping Jewish possibilities. This may include specific studies of American Zionist politics and their transformations, and the role of Jews as colonial subjects and colonial powers throughout the modern world.
- **Religious Experimentation:** The rise of new forms of Jewish religious life and liturgy in the United States, especially in comparative perspective to other American religions, the status of religion in American legal and political thought, the relation of religion and state, and religious innovations in Judaism outside of the United States.
- **Civil Society and the State:** The role of non-governmental organizations, nonprofits, and philanthropic entities in defining or defying American exceptionalism and its connection

- to the American state as well as other nation-states. How have these modes empowered liberal capitalism to serve as a force of social good beyond income generation?
- **Gender and Sexuality:** Gender and sexuality in comparative contexts and as producers and resisters of American exceptionalism and Jewish roles within it. How do gender theories inform Jewish life in different national and regional contexts? How might they shed light on economics, policy matters, cultural productions and expressions of feminism as they take shape in the United States and beyond?
 - **Modern Jewish Thought and Nationalism:** How have Jews contributed to the intellectual life of various nation-states and to ideologies that transcend territoriality; how have they theorized national difference and American exceptionalism; and how have they been used as subjects of that theorization—“good to think with”—for their disruptive or paradigmatic relationship with modernity and its pressures?
 - **Systems of Justice:** Continuities and discontinuities between practices of incarceration and jurisprudence within American, Israeli, and other national contexts. May include studies of prison practices and the literature of criminality as modes for national self-definition and the creation of naturalized hierarchies.
 - **Aesthetics:** Aesthetic modes and cultural productions, including the visual arts, film, television, theater, music, literature, and performance, as sites for mobilizing or undermining American exceptionalism and its power in Jewish life. How do such cultural products travel across geographic and imagined boundaries and acquire different valences as they circulate, challenging what is exceptional and what is exemplary?
 - **Linguistics:** Studies of the languages that represent—or undermine—the role of American exceptionalism in Jewish life. How have fusion languages, vernaculars, translations, and sacred languages been imprinted with ideologies of American exceptionalism and how do these compare to the formations of Jewish languages in other global contexts?
 - **Mobility and migrations:** How can reconceptualizations of mobility and migration resituate Jewish patterns within global trends? How do families, intimate relationships, and communities respond to disruptive movements and engage in processes of reconstruction? What kinds of narratives might emerge that envision migrations as constitutive of modernity rather than just an exceptional feature of the American narrative?
 - **Urbanism:** Cities and their suburbs have provided the locale for many Jews in the modern era and comparative studies of such spaces would surely disrupt exceptionalism. These could range from port cities in the 17th and 18th centuries to industrial cities in the 19th and 20th centuries to post-industrial world cities in the 20th and 21st centuries. Metropolitan architecture, spatial forms, social relations, religion, and culture all point to potential modes of urban study across national boundaries.

The following is a list of scholars whose research would fit well into the theme:

- Michael Alexander (University of California, Riverside)
- Gur Alroey (Haifa University)
- Joyce Antler (Brandeis University)
- Leora Auslander (University of Chicago)
- Dianne Ashton (Rowan University)
- Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University)
- Shirli Breitbart (Nevada State College)
- Courtney Bender (Columbia)
- Sarah Bunin Benor (HUC-JIR)
- Aviva Ben-Ur (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)
- Sara Blair (University of Michigan)

- Tobias Brinkmann (Pennsylvania State University)
- Judah Cohen (Indiana University)
- Michael Cohen (Tulane)
- Marni Davis (Georgia State)
- Hasia Diner (NYU)
- Marc Dollinger (San Francisco State University)
- Jodi Eichler-Levine (Lehigh)
- Zev Eleff (Hebrew Theological College)
- Ayala Fader (Fordham University)
- Sara Farris (Goldsmith College, University of London)
- Marjorie Feld (Babson)
- Jonathan Freedman (University of Michigan)
- Joshua Friedman (Rutgers University)
- Elisabeth Gallas (Hebrew University)
- Gerald Gamm (Rochester University)
- Libby Garland (Kingsborough Community College)
- Gary Gerstle (Cambridge)
- Jennifer Glaser (University of Cincinnati)
- Susan Glenn (University of Washington)
- Chad Goldberg (Wisconsin)
- Eric Goldstein (Emory University)
- Karla Goldman (University of Michigan)
- Rachel Gordan (Hadassah Brandeis Institute)
- Jaclyn Granick (Oxford University)
- Cheryl Greenberg (Trinity College)
- Geraldine Gudefin (Posen Fellow)
- Jeffrey S. Gurock (Yeshiva University)
- Kathryn Hellerstein (University of Pennsylvania)
- Michael Hoberman (Fitchburg State University)
- David Hollinger (Berkeley)
- Sarah Imhoff (Indiana)
- Matthew Jacobson (Yale University)
- David Jünger (Free University of Berlin)
- Lori Harrison Kahan (Boston College)
- Marion Kaplan (NYU)
- Jonathan Karp (SUNY Binghamton)
- Mira Katzburg-Yungman (Open University of Israel)
- Ari Kelman (Stanford)
- Shaul Kelner (Vanderbilt)
- Melissa Klapper (Rowan University)
- Mark Kligman (UCLA)
- Miyuki Kita (University of Kitakyushu)
- Rebecca Kobrin (Columbia University)
- David Koffman (York University)
- Moshe Kornfeld (Washington University)
- Markus Krah (University of Potsdam)
- Michael Kramer (Bar-Ilan University)
- Rachel Kranson (U of Pittsburgh)

- Michal Kravel-Tovi (Tel Aviv University, anthropologist)
- Mikhail Krutikov (University of Michigan)
- Nathan Kurz (Birkbeck College, University of London)
- Josh Lambert (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)
- Eli Lederhendler (Hebrew University)
- Laurel Leff (Northeastern University)
- Julian Levinson (University of Michigan)
- Laura Liebman (Reed College)
- James Loeffler (University of Virginia)
- Maud Mandel (Brown University)
- Mary McCune (SUNY Oswego)
- Adam Mendelsohn (University of Cape Town)
- Tony Michels (University of Wisconsin)
- Andrea Most (University of Toronto)
- Mina Muraoka (National Defense Academy of Japan)
- Pamela Nadell (American University)
- Anita Norich (University of Michigan)
- Annelise Orleck (Dartmouth College)
- Noam Pianko (University of Washington)
- Riv-Ellen Prell (University of Minnesota)
- Shari Rabin (University of Charleston)
- Marc Lee Raphael (William and Mary)
- Gil Ribak (Oberlin College)
- Cara Rock-Singer (Columbia)
- Katherine Rosenblatt (University of Michigan)
- Jonathan Sarna (Brandeis University)
- Anne Schenderlein (German Historical Institute)
- Jonathan Schorsch (University of Potsdam)
- Zohar Segev (Haifa University)
- Jeffrey Shandler (Rutgers University)
- David Sorkin (Yale University)
- Daniel Soyer (Fordham University)
- Ronit Stahl (University of Pennsylvania)
- Michael Staub (Baruch College)
- Oren Stier (Florida International University)
- Britt Tevis (University of Madison-Wisconsin)
- David Weinfeld (University of Toronto)
- Jack Wertheimer (Jewish Theological Seminary)
- Cornelia Wilhelm (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München)
- Hana Wirth-Nesher (Tel Aviv University)
- Sunny Yudkoff (University of Chicago)
- Steve Zipperstein (Stanford University)