

**WRITING US IN: JEWISH-AMERICAN
HISTORY FOR YOUNG READERS**

Norman H. Finkelstein

Association of Jewish Libraries Convention

Brooklyn Marriott

Brooklyn, New York

June 22, 2004

Description: American Jews have played an important role in U.S. history, but a student with access to only a history textbook could easily believe that Jews played no role in the building of America. Norman Finkelstein has written numerous books that highlight the contributions of the Jews in the U.S. and their experiences as Jewish-Americans. He will take us through the steps in researching and writing books that allow Jewish students to place themselves in the story of America and non-Jewish students to recognize Jewish contributions to the American experience.

Norman H. Finkelstein is a school librarian in the Brookline, MA Public Schools and an instructor at Hebrew College. He is the author of thirteen books for young readers and the recipient of two National Jewish Book Awards. His most recent book is *Ariel Sharon*.

Allow to me to begin by giving you a four question quiz.

Question 1: In what year did the pilgrims land on Plymouth Rock?

Question 2: What was the name of the ship they arrived on?

Question 3: In what year did the first Jewish settlers arrive in North America?

Question 4: What was the name of the ship they arrived on?

I usually begin my appearances before student groups with these questions. Most have difficulty with all four but some can usually answer the first two correctly. Hardly anyone ever guesses the answers to the last two. That's why I write.

Growing up, I sang "My Country 'tis of Thee" as lustily as my classmates. The words "Pilgrim's pride" and "land where our fathers died" were just that – words – repeated by rote and totally incomprehensible to me at the time. It eventually dawned on me that my *zayde* and their *zaydes* did not land on Plymouth Rock: they came from

Kilikiev and Cipeletsu in the early twentieth century. Although my family's American roots were planted later than the Pilgrims', I knew early on that didn't matter. My Yiddish speaking grandparents and I were as American as Miles Standish and John Wayne. This year we celebrate the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in our country - a perfect time to reflect on how far we've come and how much we need to do to insure the inclusion of Jews in the story of America.

Professionally, I am a public school librarian and a teacher at Prozdor, the supplementary Jewish high school of Hebrew College in Boston. Each venue allows me a perspective into the knowledge base of young people. The typical student, Jewish or not, is largely unfamiliar with the roles American Jews have played in the history of our country. They read of Roger Williams and William Penn but not of Asser Levy. They learn of Paul Revere and Thomas Jefferson but not of Haym Salomon. They hear of Susan B. Anthony but not of Henrietta Szold and Ernestine Rose. In an age of multicultural sensitivity, Jews are often written out of American history.

Indeed the blessings of America have become something of a curse. We Jews are indisputably a minority, yet to many of our fellow Americans we've become just another group of white folks, swallowed up into the mainstream. Because of this friendly assimilation, Jewish children experience a disconnect between their lives as Americans and Jews. That's where I come in.

Each of the thirteen non-fiction books I have written focuses on an era, theme or individual in history. As I wrote each book I knew two conflicting things about my readers. First, they do not want to be written to in a condescending manner. Second, they probably have little or no historical connection to my subject matter. So, I, as the writer,

had to be careful not to assume any prior knowledge while providing just enough background for my readers to understand what I am writing about. This can be dangerous. How much supporting information do I need to present? Where do I stop? What do I omit? It's a balancing act. If I'm not careful, the background information can quickly overtake the main subject of the book.

My goal is to write a book that is authoritative yet understandable. I want readers to enjoy reading it. Before even beginning preliminary research, I ask myself a couple of questions.

1. What will be the book's focus?
2. What do I want my readers to learn?
3. What do I need to learn?

All writers, no matter how old, come to their writing with certain "built in" experiences. Those of us over a certain age call it "life." Since young readers don't come to books with a comprehensive set of life experiences, a writer has to give readers an overview experience that provides context to a specific event. There is nothing I enjoy more than connecting with the wonderful world of archivists and librarians. Research visits to such various places as the American Jewish Historical Society, the Library of Congress, Jewish cemeteries and the Gomez Mill House bring me to primary source material that enrich my books. When I start a new book, I work from an outline to give me a "feel" for the entire book. Then, I treat each chapter as a kind of "mini" book that is self-contained with the topic at hand and necessary background information.

When I finally finish a first draft, I let my mind go blank – or at least as blank as a twelve year old’s mind can get – and go back over the masterpiece paragraph by paragraph with one important question in the back of my mind. Do I really get it?

My eight Jewish content books hold a special place in my heart. When Senator Joseph Lieberman accepted the 2000 nomination as the Democratic Party’s vice presidential candidate, he marveled aloud – “Is this a great country, or what?” I’ve grown up with the same “gee-whiz” wonderment. When I was a child, there were no Jewish United States senators, there were no women rabbis, only Jews ate bagels and the mere appearance of a Jewish entertainer on radio or television created excitement.

Times certainly have changed. Jews have gone from being insecure immigrants to full participants in every aspect of American public and social life. Since 1654 we’ve reshaped our culture and religion to fit a democratic America. In the process, we have influenced American society in many ways. It’s that message of inclusion that I try to convey in my writing for young Americans.

What do I want my readers to know?

First, I want my readers to realize that Jews have been involved in the building of America from the very beginning. In [The Other 1492](#) I trace the arrival of the first Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam in 1654 by highlighting their struggle for equal rights. I pay special attention to Asser Levy, the first authentic Jewish-American hero. He gets little notice in history book accounts of colonial America yet he “did more than gain equal rights for himself and the small group of Jewish refugees. As an outsider in a small settlement he risked social and economic isolation by his outspoken demands for

equality. He set the scene for an America where, years later, determined individuals could fight for rights and freedom for all citizens.”¹

Second, I want my readers to be aware of Israel. With Israel on the receiving end of so much negative publicity, it is important that Jewish children understand the special relationship between the United States and Israel. In Friends Indeed I try to explain why Israel is so often in the news. “When it is midmorning in New York, it is already late afternoon in Jerusalem. Sunday in Israel is a normal workday. Schools, businesses, and government offices are all open...In the United States, weekends are normally quiet news periods. But thanks to modern satellite communications, Americans can tune in to any of the Sunday morning network news programs and probably see a live report from Israel....”²

Third, I want young people with no historical memories to understand and appreciate the commitment of American Jews to the fight for civil rights. In an era when anti-Semitism threatens to remove all recognition of the role played by Jews in the fight for equal rights in the United States, I want them to fully understand just how much the shared history of both Jews and African Americans unite rather than divide them. In Heeding the Call I describe the friendship between the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel’s “lifelong study of the biblical prophets deeply affected his commitment to activism. When the civil rights movement developed in the late 1950s, Heschel responded not only with words but with deeds. His understanding of Judaism was based on the belief that religious thoughts must be accompanied by righteous actions in the secular world.”³

Finally, I want my young readers to find themselves in the history of America. I want them to understand the complexities of being both Jewish and America. I want them to appreciate how in the space of a century American Jews went from learners of American culture to its creators. I want them to feel a sense of pride in how far we've come. In Forged in Freedom I present a series of seemingly unconnected turning points that shaped who we've become as an American Jewish community. I introduce such diverse individuals as Clara Lemlich, Irving Berlin, Philip Roth and Bugsy Siegal. "In spite of this progress, American Jews, as a group, still feel insecure about themselves and their future. They are, after all, a shrinking minority. From a high of 4 percent of the American population in 1950 to somewhere around 2.7 percent in 2000, Jews are not numerically significant. ...Although the advances made by Jews ally them more to the mainstream than to the margins of American life, they still see themselves as a vulnerable minority. Their high profile has given them such exposure that many Americans, when asked to guess the percentage of Jews in the United States, frequently respond with answers of 40 and 50 percent!

As Jews became a driving force in the building of the United States, they also created a uniquely American form of Jewish community and religion. Many compared the Jewish experience in this country with the Golden Age of Jews in Spain centuries earlier. Yet, as in Spain, all was not perfect. In spite of many advances, American Jews have become increasingly concerned about their relationship with Israel, and the family and communal issues of intermarriage, assimilation, declining numbers and loss of Jewish literacy."⁴

Yet, from the very beginning, each new generation of Jewish immigrants faced these same dilemmas. As librarians, parents and concerned adults, we need to help children and grandchildren become historically literate about their Jewish-American heritage as they grow into positive, educated and committed adults. We need to make

certain that they find themselves written into the history of America. As we do, we need to keep in mind that despite the serious challenges which face us, we've managed to successfully balance our lives as Jews and Americans with every indication that we will continue to do so in the future. In his remarkable new book, American Judaism, Jonathan Sarna reminds us that "today as so often before, American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism." As we together continue to promote historical literacy for our young readers, it's that message that should give us hope.

¹ Finkelstein, Norman H. Heeding the Call (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 19-20.

² Finkelstein, Norman H. Friends Indeed (Brookfield, Ct. Millbrook Press, 1998), p. 133.

³ Finkelstein, Norman H. Heeding the Call (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), p. 148.

⁴ Finkelstein, Norman H. Forged in Freedom (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), pp. 186-187.