



*Photo of Naomi W. Cohen*  
(Courtesy American  
Jewish Archives)



*Photo of Naomi W. Cohen*  
(Courtesy Jeremy Cohen)

# Naomi W. Cohen as Teacher and Scholar

American Jewish history as a recognized academic field was inaugurated by Jacob Rader Marcus and a few others not much more than six decades ago. Naomi Wiener Cohen is one of the most distinguished contributors to it. She has produced a substantial oeuvre on the American Jewish past based on impeccable research, disinterested scholarship, and a deep connection to the Jewish people and Judaism. She did so while a full-time faculty member with few sabbaticals and many years of devoted service to her department.

Jack Wertheimer of The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) was one of the students in her graduate seminar at Columbia University. (Other members of that seminar, students who studied with her at Hunter College, and others who teach at The City University of New York [CUNY], have contributed to this special issue of *The American Jewish Archives Journal*.) He characterizes her achievement as follows:

The overarching theme of Naomi W. Cohen's research has been the ongoing and evolving efforts of American Jews to organize. She has been acutely conscious of the challenges faced by American minorities wishing to maintain a distinctive group existence, and she has also been alert to the great opportunities made possible by American voluntarism. In her historical research over the past four decades, she has analyzed the impact of Jewish leadership, the emergence of new types of agencies, and the role of ideology in forging unity in a highly disputatious American Jewish community. These have been her themes as she has examined the German-Jewish wave of immigration and its descendants and also the East European wave and its second generation. Even a cursory glance at the work of her students reveals just how profoundly her writings have shaped their historical outlook and preoccupations.

Jenna Weissman Joselit, who holds the Charles E. Smith Chair in Judaic Studies at George Washington University, studied with Naomi Cohen as an undergraduate at Barnard and subsequently as a graduate student at Columbia. She writes:

It has been nearly thirty years since I first met Naomi Cohen and what struck me way back when—and continues to strike me now—was not just the arc of her scholarship, her command of the classroom and the precision of her prose but her way of being in the world: at once crisp, no nonsense and straight-forward, warmhearted and caring, equally at home with books and people. I had never met anyone quite like her and I suspect I never will. What's more, at a time when female scholars were few and far between and the academy a somewhat chilly place for graduate students like me, Naomi Cohen brought an expansive, generous spirit to the entire enterprise. Leavening scholarship

with humanity, she gave her students the most wonderful of gifts: the capacity to find joy in and take pleasure from the discipline of history.

Cohen's many books and articles fall into five large areas: Jewish leaders, Jewish defense organizations, Zionism, antisemitism, and Jewish-Christian relations. (Full bibliographic information on her books and articles are given below.)

Her first publication, which drew on her Columbia dissertation, was a work on the public career of Oscar S. Straus, the first Jewish presidential cabinet secretary and, later, ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Her interest in prominent laymen who took on the burden of American Jewish leadership has continued throughout her career. Thirty years later came her study of Jacob Schiff, banker, financier, and prominent community figure. Related to her interest in Jewish organizations is *Not Free to Desist*, her history of the American Jewish Committee from 1906 to 1966. (The title is from *Pirkei Avot* 2:16, "It is not up to you to finish the work; yet you are not free to desist from it"—a dictum that epitomizes her also.) Her now-standard *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830–1914* moves back in time and widens the historical panorama.

A longtime interest in church-state relations developed into *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* as well as an edited volume titled *Essential Papers in Jewish-Christian Relations in the United States*. Many of the articles listed in the bibliography below, as well as in her books, speak to her research into antisemitism and Jewish responses to it. Investigations in the history of the Zionist movement were the subject of *American Jews and the Zionist Idea* and, thirteen years later, *The Year after the Riots: American Responses to the Palestine Crisis of 1929–1930*. In 2003 she gathered some of her studies, together with new pieces, in *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897–1948*. Yet another interest has been the history of the rabbinate in the United States. In 2008 she tapped the relatively neglected sermons of a wide range of rabbis, both traditionalists and reformers, when she published *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of Nineteenth-Century American Rabbis*.

As noted, Cohen contributed greatly to putting the communal history of American Jewry on a new level of sophistication. Much of her work concerns sober, flexible, ecumenically minded individuals respectful of Jewish learning, in love with American democracy, and dedicated to the survival of Judaism in the New World. By focusing on those who furthered Jewish adaptation to an unprecedented sociopolitical environment and by showing how they contributed to the furtherance of Jewish life in the American polity, Cohen played a major role in moving the study of this new branch of the Diaspora from an amateur preoccupation with ancestors and local gossip into a model for reconstructing the history of every American minority.

Born and raised in New York City, Naomi W. Cohen received her bachelor of arts degree from Hunter College of the CUNY, bachelor of Hebrew letters from the Seminary College of JTS, and master's and doctorate degrees from Columbia University. In 1948 she married the historian Gerson D. Cohen, who later became the chancellor of JTS. For thirty years she was a member of the history department of Hunter. She served on the faculty of the doctoral program in history at the Graduate Center of CUNY and held visiting professorships at Columbia and JTS. She now lives in Jerusalem, where she continues to do research and publish books and essays on wide-ranging subjects.

Among the many awards she received for professional achievement were those from the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Historical Society, the Cultural Achievement Award for Historical Studies of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, two National Jewish Book Awards, a presidential award for distinguished scholarship from Hunter College, and two honorary doctorates, including one from the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

At Hunter almost all of the courses Cohen taught were in general history, such as Twentieth-Century America, American Foreign Policy, U.S. Constitutional History, and Emigration and Ethnicity. Her signal contribution to the emergence of Jewish studies at Hunter was “HIST 357: American Jewish History.” In the mid-sixties there was resistance to introducing such a supposedly parochial subject into the secular university catalogue. The breakthrough Cohen accomplished was a harbinger of what was soon to happen across the country: recognition of the value of this subject in the context of an emerging, more complex vision of the components of American culture. At Hunter, the CUNY Graduate Center, Columbia, and JTS, she trained students who went on to accomplish a whole range of historical activities. Those enrolled in her courses as well as students she tutored were expected to read primary sources, such as runs of periodicals, and to understand how each American Jewish communal structure, from colonial to recent times, contributed to a unique Jewish Diaspora in the making. Among her students were those who furthered Jewish studies in academe or in Jewish communal associations, exemplifying her inimitable mix of scholarly dedication and ability to inspire. Her rigorous methodological and pedagogical standards brought her student evaluations on the highest level and elicit testimony from those who can be considered her disciples.

One such disciple is Professor Bernadette McCauley, who now teaches “Immigration and Ethnicity,” one of Cohen’s curriculum innovations at Hunter. McCauley recalls that Cohen insisted that any serious undergraduate term paper required exploiting the resources of the New York Public Library:

As a result, I learned to make myself fully at home there. Naomi’s advice was always clear, firm, objective, authoritative—yet reassuring. Several years later and no longer officially her student, she generously read a chapter of my

dissertation and suggested I drop a mass of details which had taken weeks to accumulate. The reader didn't need all that information, although I certainly did—sage advice I pass on to my students.

Roberta Newman, who went on to become an archivist and researcher for the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, writes that “the emphasis she [Cohen] placed on nuanced reading of primary source documents made a great impression on me. I have developed a deep love for pouring through crumbling papers in gray archival boxes. Professor Cohen was extraordinarily kind to me when I was her student, encouraging my interest in becoming a historian while gently correcting my many mistakes and oversights.”

Charlotte Bonelli, director of American Jewish Committee Archives, remembers that “Naomi Cohen was the outstanding professor with whom I studied while working on my M.A. degree. A commanding presence in the classroom, her meticulous preparation, immense knowledge, challenging questions, quick wit, and wonderful sense of humor resulted in lively and engaging classes. We were in awe of her.”

Jonathan D. Sarna, the Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, reports that “when he was a child the Cohens and the Sarnas often shared Passover seder and other occasions. She was highly respected in my parents' circle in the early 1960s for her success at being at once a faculty wife (and later the wife of the JTS chancellor), a dedicated mother, and a distinguished academic.” Sarna never sat in her classroom but carefully studied Cohen's books and articles as a student at Brandeis and Yale. “Her work—always exhaustively researched and properly contextualized—served as a model for what scholarship in American Jewish history could be. She understood that to write American Jewish history required a thorough knowledge of both American and Jewish history.” She generously agreed to read chapters-in-progress of what became his *American Judaism: A History*. “Naomi's careful comments on every chapter considerably improved my book,” he recalled. “Her broad knowledge of the field, impeccable scholarly standards, and sensitive literary ear all helped my manuscript immeasurably. I shall always be grateful for this and for her superb contribution to the field.”

Naomi C. Miller, a member of the Hunter College history department (for many years its chair), recalls that when Cohen was still a student at Hunter, academics questioned the legitimacy of Jewish history as a field of serious study:

When she told her Hunter advisor that she intended to specialize in American Jewish history in her graduate work she was warned that the field was too limited and would not offer her opportunities for professional advancement. At Hunter she taught courses mainly in U.S. twentieth-century history but eventually was able to offer a very successful course in American Jewish history from the colonial period to the present.

In addition to her scholarship and teaching, Cohen made significant contributions to the development of the Hunter Jewish Social Studies Program, which coordinates an interdisciplinary major for undergraduates and sponsors public lectures. She was a savvy statesperson and *eminence grise*, ready to give hard-headed, fair-minded, shrewd advice. To colleagues whose dedication and intelligence she respected and to students who showed a love of learning and a willingness to work hard, she was patient, considerate, supportive, and helpful.

In retirement she has continued to show by example how to live a good life. Laura Schor, a member of the Hunter history department, former provost of Hunter, and founding dean of the Macaulay Honors College, writes:

I met Naomi in her Jerusalem apartment several years ago and continue to visit with her there regularly. At the time I was working on a biography of Betty de Rothschild. I appreciated Naomi's effortless generosity; her recommendations of books to read and people to consult were always helpful. A visit with Naomi was a reminder of how to be a productive scholar throughout one's life. She has listened to many stories about my current research on Annie Landau and the Evelina de Rothschild School in Jerusalem. I look forward to continued opportunities to share ideas, test hypotheses, and benefit from her insightful suggestions for further inquiry.

I will add my own personal testimony. I have treasured her keen eye for detail and shrewd analysis. A draft of an essay shared with her came back with handwritten sheets of suggestions and polite notice of interpretive, factual, and even grammatical and spelling errors. I cherish her friendship, and it was a privilege to have been her colleague. I continue to be impressed by her ongoing contributions to scholarship. Since her retirement in Jerusalem, she has not paused in producing books and articles of great value, and I look forward to reading more of her insightful and finely crafted works of history.

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*Robert M. Seltzer, written with the help of Naomi Miller, Bernadette McCauley, and Laura Schor.*