## TO OUR READERS...

It has been realized of late that, next to the retrogression of war, the greatest threat to the preservation of modern archival material is overrapid development in peace.

Renowned Jewish historian Cecil Roth (1899–1970) could not have anticipated the invention of email or the proliferation of digitized and born-digital material when he wrote these words more than fifty years ago in a monograph published by the American Jewish Archives, titled On the Study of American Jewish History. However, Roth understood well that the quick pace of change—on every rung of society—would be the fundamental impediment to recording, preserving, and, eventually, critically examining the events of our recent past. Roth had a particular interest in the modern Jewish experience, and he singled out American Jewish organizations as embodying this notion of "rapid progress." His concern about the difficulty of documenting this progress was highlighted by his insistence that the history of these agencies was not only essential to an understanding of world Jewry, but civilization: "The role and contribution to humanity of a body such as the B'nai B'rith," he writes, "are certainly far greater than those of some of the new sovereign states."

It has been the role of archives such as the AJA to properly preserve and make available for research the relevant records of our collective past. Organizational records, in particular—such as those of B'nai B'rith, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the World Jewish Congress (WJC), National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS, now Women of Reform Judaism, WRJ)—will receive increased attention in the next decade with the continued rise (or revival, really) of transnational and comparative history.2 In his foreword to the American Historical Association's series, Essays on Global and Comparative History, historian Michael Adas notes that "the best recent works on global history also display a far greater sensitivity... to cultural nuances and the intricacies of the internal histories of the societies they cover." In the field of Jewish history, fleshing out the inherent transnational nature of American Jewish organizations will ultimately lead to a more complex picture of American Jews vis-à-vis other Jewish groups as well as in relation to a larger global community. While much new work based on personal

papers and diaries has focused on familial networks, these stories will need to be embedded in histories of Jewish nonprofits and agency relationships. The macro and the micro will necessarily inform each other.

The three articles in this volume of *The American Jewish Archives Journal* all make use of the organizational records held at the AJA to further populate the map of our global communal history. Jessica Carr explores how images of Palestine were used in the Jewish art calendars of National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) from the organization's founding in 1913 through to the creation of the State of Israel. Carr shows how this transcultural interaction affected the organization's sense of itself, its attitude to the new Jewish state, as well as its place in the broader historical and cultural narratives of gender, religion, and art.

Perhaps the best example of a transnational Jewish organization is the World Jewish Congress, founded in 1936. Zohar Segev, in his article on the organization's efforts to rescue thousands of European Jewish children through Portugal during World War II, shows how the WJC operated fundamentally as an American Jewish organization on the international stage. While its short-term aims and activities overlapped and conflicted with those of other Jewish organizations operating in Europe, particularly the Joint Distribution Committee, the WJC claimed that its long-term political goals and interests set it apart. Other organizations "were unable to confront the Jews' existential crisis that began in the 1930s," Segev argues, whereas WJC leaders "saw no contradiction between their Zionist leanings and activity with the WJC. They fought diligently for the establishment of a Jewish state, while at the same time striving to empower the ethnic identity of Diaspora Jews" (19).

Finally, the AJA's executive director, Gary P. Zola, marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of what is today the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) with an analysis and discussion of the organization's founding. The beginning of this organization can be traced to January 1939, when two hundred delegates met in Cincinnati to establish a nationwide outlet for young people to engage in Reform Judaism. However, Zola shows how the conversation surrounding how best to engage youth in the movement started as early as the late nineteenth century. The organization has been a source of leadership development and creative activity for the movement and beyond since its inception. Like WRJ, which today has five hundred sisterhood affiliates

representing approximately 65,000 women worldwide, NFTY has its roots firmly planted in American soil but has grown internationally over the years to include Canada and Israel.

To conclude, in keeping with Cecil Roth's concern for the preservation of archival material, we have to wonder how history of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century will be written when so much of the digital record has not been preserved due, in no small measure, to the "overrapid development" of the period. While that large topic is beyond the scope of this essay, a closely related topic should be considered here: As more and more archival material is mounted online in some sort of digital framework, the act of researching and writing global, comparative, transnational histories changes as well.4 Historians will have to travel less and less to conduct the bulk of their research. The Internet gives the illusion that materials are all in one place. We should not forget that this digital material was once only found in an archive where it was and continues to be, in the words of Roth, "harnessed to the service of scholarship." While digitization certainly has its advantages, it should also cause us to pay closer attention to the "history" of the digitized material itself, particularly the question of where it was created and where it ended up. Since scholars will be less likely to follow the documents physically, the movement of these records must be kept in mind and followed virtually. Oftentimes the story of how records came to a particular archive is as exciting and fundamental to the story they tell as the "documents" themselves.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cecil Roth, *On the Study of American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1963), 1–2.

<sup>2</sup>For more on this revival, see the new volume edited by Adam D. Mendelsohn and Ava F. Kahn, *Transnational Traditions: New Perspectives on American Jewish History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Michael Adas, "Foreword," in John H. Morrow Jr., *The Impact of the Two World Wars in a Century of Violence: Essays on Global and Comparative History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2011), vii.

<sup>4</sup>For a recent discussion of this topic, see Seth Denbo's article "Ghosts and Monsters:

Human Scale Digital History at #RRCHNM20" in the January 2015 issue of *Perspectives on History*, 17-18.

<sup>5</sup>Roth, 3.