Free and remote programming from Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun is on the history of Jews and Jewish communities

Lynne Kleinman | January 31, 2021 | 18 Shevat 5781

For a historian, documents are like building blocks. Letters written long ago, old ledgers and business records, photographs picturing structures or people long gone — these are all examples of the bricks, the raw materials, historians use to construct the stories that explain events of the past.

This was one of the key assertions made by Professor and Rabbi Gary P. Zola in a telephone interview Dec. 31, as he explained the importance of these “primary” or “original” sources in his own work and in the work of historians who, like himself, study the history of Jews and Jewish communities in the Western Hemisphere.

Zola is executive director of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives and professor of the American Jewish experience at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He will be Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun’s scholar-in-residence this month. The community is invited to attend a series of online presentations by Zola, illuminating the American Jewish experience.

“The task force chose Dr. Gary Zola as CEEBJ’s scholar-in-residence because, at this challenging time, we are all looking for answers as to how to move forward as a nation, as an American Jewish community, and for CEEBJ to move forward as a strong, engaging, and meaningful congregation,” said Susan Cosden, CEEBJ’s director of lifelong learning, in an email Jan. 3.
She said the congregation is currently exploring the Jewish value g’vurah (strength and power used for good), and that Zola’s presentation will provide the opportunity to learn about individuals from Jewish history who modeled g’vurah. Another highlight of the weekend program, Cosden said, will be Zola’s presentation on the American Jewish Archives itself, and on several historically significant documents from its collection. Housing more than ten million pages of documents, the American Jewish Archives is the world’s largest catalogued collection of documentary evidence on the history of North American Jewry.

“I think that primary source document research is more important today than ever before,” Zola said, . He said “the assault on truth has become so great in American culture” that he remains strongly committed to employing empirical evidence, such as contemporaneous documentation, in constructing an accurate historical record.

This has been Zola’s approach in his numerous books and articles related to various aspects of the Jewish experience in America. His recent publications include “American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader,” and “We Called Him Rabbi Abraham: Lincoln and American Jewry, A Documentary History.” He is also the editor of “The American Jewish Archives Journal,” an award-winning biannual publication.

* * *

How to go
WHAT: Congregation Emanu-El B’ne Jeshurun’s Scholar-in-Residence Weekend
WHO: Dr. Gary P. Zola, executive director of the American Jewish Archives and professor of the American Jewish experience at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati
WHEN: Feb. 19-21, 2021
WHERE: The community can join the program either on the synagogue website at Ceebj.org/watch or Facebook page at Facebook.com/Ceebj.
COST: There is no charge to attend.

* * *

Program Scholar-in-Residence Weekend
7:00 p.m. Friday, Feb. 19 — “Profiles in American Jewish Courage”
9:00 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 20 — “What an American Hebraist Can Teach Us About Song of Songs: Reflections on Gershom Rosenzweig (1861-1914)”
11:15 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 20 — “Fascinating Documents from the American Jewish Archives”
12:30 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 21 — “American Exceptionalism Past, Present and Future”