

Top 10 Ways to Fix American Jewish Heritage Month

Taking a proactive approach towards a much needed Jewish cultural education in America

27 APRIL 2017

SUMMARY

This year, more than ever, American Jews should truly care about AJHM. It is perhaps the best answer to the epidemic of hate and antisemitism that has recently swept the United States. Encouraging a positive and proactive approach could lead to better cultural education and build bridges of understanding. Jack Gottlieb, founder of the World Jewish Heritage Fund suggests 10 practical ways the US can step up to the plate this May, taken straight from the Old World's playbook.

On May 1 we will be celebrating American Jewish Heritage Month (AJHM), a month dedicated to highlighting the numerous achievements of Jewish Americans. Yet, as in years past, a few days before the official launch at the White House, it is still one of America's best kept secrets! You hear very little about it in the Jewish media, even worse from Jewish organizations, Jewish museums, and Jewish educational institutions. That lapse of attention has not gone unnoticed in the past which is why every few years pundits write articles with such titles as "[Why does no one care about American Jewish Heritage Month?](#)"

This year, more than ever, American Jews should truly care. It is perhaps the best answer to the epidemic of hate and antisemitism that has recently swept the United States. Until now the variety of responses (condemnations, vigils, etc) by the Jewish community to these threats has been reactive. These actions are strong, but there is another, more positive and proactive approach we could take, that is, making a concerted effort to celebrate AJHM.

Why can AJHM be an effective answer? Since hatred stems from fear, and people fear what they don't understand, cultural education is still the strongest antidote to hate. This is why Congress set up a governmental mechanism to commemorate the contribution of different ethnic heritages (Indian, Irish, Jewish, etc.) to the story of the United States. Typically, the government sponsors a [government website](#) dedicated to the month, an archive of virtual exhibitions, and a kick off ceremony at the White House. We just finished celebrating African-American Heritage Month in February and Irish-American Heritage Month in March.

It is clear that such a dedicated time of education and cultural activity can teach citizens about a culture to which they might not normally be exposed. Thus, the AJHM in May is a golden opportunity to promote and highlight the achievements and contributions of Jewish Americans to the American

narrative. Until now, unfortunately, the lack of promotion of the AJHM has rendered the event a severely underutilized asset. To go further, we need a stronger top-down approach to unify our work to honor the story of American Jews.

Fortunately, we do not need to reinvent the wheel. Every September, a European Jewish heritage organization (the AEPJ) celebrates [Jewish Heritage week throughout Europe](#), and their incredible annual celebrations are truly the gold standard. In 2016, they logged about 126,000 visitors to 1,245 activities in 363 cities across Europe. We need only look towards our European brethren for inspiration and clear directive on how we can improve our efforts. It is important to note that a good percentage of the visitors were NON-JEWS!

Here are ten specific ways the US can step up to the plate this May, taken straight from the Old World's playbook:

1. Plan far ahead: The European event is planned nearly a year in advance. As late as March 2017, the [official website for the US May heritage month](#) still reflected old 2016 events. We must be much more advanced in our thinking if we are going to have any kind of far-reaching impact
2. Choose a meaningful theme in a timely fashion: only on March 6, 2017, barely two months in advance, did the current AJHM management make an [announcement](#) that this year's theme is the contribution of American Jews to medicine. An announcement of this order 1 1/2 months before the launch of an event of this magnitude is too little too late. Curators need a good 6-12 months to research, organize and produce meaningful exhibits.
3. Appoint regional coordinators: Each observing region in Europe has it's own coordinator (about 30 coordinators in total), and America should be no different. Such a coordinator would serve as a liaison between local municipalities and the national movement, as well as to foster cross-pollination and exposure within their own territory.
4. Create a strong, centralized website: [The European website](#) is clean, engaging, and, most of all, consistently updated. It provides easy access points for communities who'd like to get involved, clear avenues for assuming local or regional leadership, and a thorough detailing of events. Such accessible infrastructure is one of the first necessary steps to building a strong and enduring event cycle.
5. Expand the number of cultural heritage professionals in the national steering committee: A movement about cultural heritage simply cannot be effectively conceived or executed without the guidance of pertinent professionals representing diverse areas of the country. Europe has consistently elevated such professionals to leadership positions, and it shows in the heart and foresight behind its annual commemorations. America has no shortage of such professionals, and must make use of them to its best advantage.
6. Produce annual outcome reports: Was 2016 a success? Was 2015? Does anyone know? How do we measure it? Unfortunately, the answer in the US is that we *don't* measure it. The European effort includes annual evaluation reports of the successes and shortcomings of the year's activities, including a variety of metrics and outcomes. It's only by turning a critical eye on what we've

accomplished and where we can improve that such improvement could be possible.

7. Invite Jewish organizations and corporation to be active stakeholders: The American Jewish community already has strong, wide-reaching infrastructure in place. Few localities are untouched by wider Jewish organizations. By inviting these umbrella organizations to be stakeholders in the event, many other pillars of the month will naturally fall into place. By *not* issuing this invitation, we also risk alienating those who could be our strongest leaders. Europe has demonstrated the importance and doability of uniting various Jewish communal arms for a concerted cause.
8. Institute a pay-to-play methodology for issuing high-profile invites: For some years (before substantial budgetary cuts), the White House held a special reception for American Jewish Heritage month. Recognizing and including those who put the sweat in (whether organizationally or financially) is an obvious and necessary way to encourage greater independent leadership in the movement. The more you “pay” into the production of the event, the more you should get to “play” at its culminating moments.
9. Synchronize global activities: Many thanks to Assumpcio Hostas de Rebes, an AEJP leader, for this suggestion. Why not have the American, Canadian, and European festivities occur at the same time, with the same theme? This would encourage cross-pollination of ideas, tourism, and create a camaraderie and united front among global Jewish communities. As Anshel Feiffer of Haaretz noted, this recent spate of anti-Semitism “could be a pivotal moment, not only for American Jews, but for the creation of a new global Jewish identity.” This is our chance to come together.
10. Remember forgotten heroes: Every culture highlights its deepest values and greatest achievements through memorials to its heroes, and Judaism is no exception. Curiously, however, Jewish American heroes are relatively unknown compared to those in Europe. Kudos to the [Schustermann Foundation](#) for pushing this idea. By the way, who is your Jewish American hero? What are your ideas for Jewish American Heritage Month?

Let me make it clear: there is leadership in place to make this work, if the highest echelon can give a strong initial push. My organization, [World Jewish Heritage](#) is ready and eager to contribute to making AJHM a shining example of how promoting cultural heritage can mitigate hate. Identification of the contributions of members of different American populations, such as Irish, Italian, African-American and Jewish heroes, makes everyone understand that the United States was built on the backs of immigrants who represent a diverse palate of cultures and ideas. It also makes us understand that American cultural heritage is part and parcel of a bigger collective heritage.

This message could not come at a more crucial time when anti-semitism is running rampant in our society, and we must decide to take the reins. The road to capturing the imagination of this generation and generations to come is to shine a light on the sterling examples of our past.

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ABOUT WORLD JEWISH HERITAGE

The World Jewish Heritage Fund, Inc. is a non-profit organization established in 2011.

Our mission is to preserve Jewish heritage worldwide and promote tourism to a variety of sites and cultural events around the world that are of great importance to the Jewish heritage continuity. We are here to stand up for our heritage, giving it back its long-lost voice, in honor of past generations, and in favor of those to come.



World Jewish Heritage newsroom