

Beyond the Ivory Tower: Career Opportunities for the Jewish Studies Scholar

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As someone who comes from an academic family, it was a challenge for me to figure out how to be an intellectual outside of the academy.

- Graduate school didn't make the search any easier
 - not much support from advisors
 - or from career services – given the bad and very depressing advice to take my educational credentials off my resume when applying for non-academic jobs because I would look over-qualified and “too academic” – I have since realized this was misleading advice
- but I have found a place where I fit well, as Director of Education at the Jewish Women's Archive.

How many have heard of JWA?

- JWA is a national, non-profit organization founded about 10 years ago and headquartered in Brookline, MA.
- JWA is not a traditional archive. We are not a physical repository.
- Rather, we're a virtual archive, using the internet to convey and provide access to Jewish women's history. Please check out our website!
- Our mission is to increase the foundation of knowledge about Jewish women's history and make this history accessible to scholars, educators, students, and the general public.
- So the work that I do is public history.

My training:

- Trained as an historian, in an American Studies program.
- Though interested in Jewish history, chose American Studies because I knew I wanted to study women's history and thought I would find a broader context of women's history and gender studies in American Studies.
- I continued to research topics that were related to Jewish Studies, as well.

Path to JWA:

- Though I began grad school with the idea that I wanted a traditional academic job, I started to have some questions about my career path after a few years.
- Partially due to the usual concerns about moving to a place with no Jewish community, and partially due to an increasing feeling of isolation within the academy.
- I chose to study history because I feel that history is essential to our understanding of ourselves and our society and that any process of social change needs to be rooted in historical perspective.
- I was focusing on the history of women and social movements, and felt removed from where change was actually happening.
- I began to look for other ways to be involved outside of the academy – in part thru teaching adult education and high school, and in part thru JWA.

- First came to JWA as a research fellow on a project called “Women Who Dared,” about local women activists in Boston. There had been a public program and my job was to create a something more lasting from it.
- I did oral histories with 12 of the honorees and created an online exhibit that drew on the common themes and issues in their stories – relating to their Jewish identity and gender identity and activism – and gave information on the particular movements the women were involved in.
- I enjoyed the project – felt very connected to what I was studying and yet I could also see how this could be immediately useful, for teachers and students and the general public.
- Continued to work for JWA on a freelance basis for the next few years, as I wrote my dissertation.
- Also worked as adjunct during this time – not financial sustainable option
- When I finished, JWA was looking for a Director of Education, and they hired me. I was lucky to have had the opportunity to build this relationship during grad school and to be finishing at the right time.

About my job at JWA:

- JWA is a great bridge between the academic and non-academic worlds.
- I work with other PhDs, bringing insights of academy to broader audience, thinking about how these insights are relevant beyond the academy.
- As director of education, my job is to develop resources for educators and to help them teach material on Jewish women.
- I’m also expected to keep up with academic writing, attend and present at conferences (academic and non-academic) and do some writing and publishing of my own (mostly in non-academic publications).

Examples of projects I’ve worked on:

- “Making Our Wilderness Bloom”:
 - curriculum of American Jewish History through the lens of Jewish women’s experiences;
 - primary document based, so required finding documents, creating context for them, worked with educator who wrote lesson plan part.
 - I’ve also been teaching workshops on using this material, explaining why it’s important to teach Jewish women’s history (or American Jewish history at all) and how to work with primary documents
- “Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution” new online exhibit.
 - Tells the history of Jewish women’s leadership in American feminism and the impact of feminism on the Jewish community, through the artifacts and personal statements of 74 Jewish feminist activists.
 - I curated the exhibit – from identifying the women to target, working with them to get their submissions, editing their statements, writing all the text for the exhibit, creating a bibliography – and managed the project.
 - Now I’m also developing public programs and teacher materials around the exhibit.

- This is a topic that is particularly important to me, and the exhibit project has given me a chance to be involved in documenting and narrating the history of Jewish women and feminism.

What I like about my job

- Rooted in the historical material I'm interested in, and in the values that brought me to the study of this history
- The work that I do has a wider community reach than my academic work
 - For example, in the first two months since the launch of the feminism exhibit, over 8000 people have viewed it. Compare that to academic book sales.
- I like working as part of a team, on a project that feels bigger than myself, with collaborative co-workers
- My academic background is very much respected and understood, and I'm also learning a lot of skills of team work, project management, non-profit organization.
- Still have teaching opportunities
- Agenda of what we're doing is very clear and recognized. I always felt that my academic work was political in a sense, but in an academic context, it wasn't always ok to express that. In some ways, I'm more comfortable working in a context that is overtly about social change. (change the way history is researched, recorded, and taught, and make history and education more inclusive of Jewish women and their experiences).

What can be difficult:

- Some frustrations about non-academic – sometimes have to start with the most basic assumptions – what is women's history, why is it important, what are primary documents
- Miss flexibility of academic lifestyle (though love having evenings and weekends!)
- Hard to find time to research and write things longer than short articles (though there are precedents for people being given leaves to research and write)

Suggestions for finding Jewish Studies work in the non-academic world:

- Think about why your academic work is important to you, what about it drives you? (for me it was the power of historical knowledge, and realization there were ways to pursue this outside of academia).
- Get non-academic experience during graduate school – look for summer fellowships, research projects, articles to write, community teaching. Academic skills can certainly be translated into non-academic skills, but it's best to also have non-academic experience and contacts.
- Think about (and talk to others about) how to translate your academic skills/experiences into “real world” skills. The obvious ones are teaching, editing, and research. But also: managing large scale research project of dissertation over several years is a project management experience; being a head TA is a supervisory or team management role. Public speaking. Etc.
- Look for places where there are other PhDs – this means they value academic credentials and probably that you'll find co-workers you can relate to.