



*Listen and Tell*

## **ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS**

Resource Packet for Jewish Educators

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## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Jews have always been storytellers. But there is a difference between the past, comprised of our collective memories, and what we call “history,” which is the record that people (mostly those in positions of power) have created, preserved, and transmitted. Oral history takes place in between these two categories. Collected in deliberate, one-on-one interviews, oral history allows people to participate in the making of history that reflects the individual experiences that are often forgotten or absent from the historical record. Oral history informs the history we learn from textbooks and classes and has the power to expand and change our understanding of past events. In addition, oral history infuses dates, timelines, photographs, and other historical information with names, faces, and first-person accounts that connect us to generations past.

## WHY ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history expands our records of the past and allows us to see a more complete picture of our world. Oral history also brings two people—narrator and interviewer—together in a participatory experience. While the interviewer decides which questions will be asked, the narrator shapes the questions; “she simultaneously reinterprets as well as remembers the past.” This back and forth generates new relationships and a deeper understanding in both participants. *For more on oral history, please read the Oral History Primer in this packet or In Our Own Voices, edited by Jayne K. Guberman and available at <http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/guide>.*

Additionally, learning from the lives of older relatives improves the kind of emotional health young people will call upon more and more as they grow through their adolescence. The research, by Emory psychologists Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke, and former Emory graduate student Jennifer Bohanek, was recently published in Emory's online [Journal of Family Life](#). Their findings connected the sharing of family stories with an increased ability for young people to problem solve and develop coping mechanisms in difficult situations. In other words, the more young people know about their families and the individual experiences of their relatives, the better they can understand and navigate the twists and turns of growing up. By helping our students collect family and community history, we not only transmit rituals and traditions, but also important life skills that young Jews can carry into adulthood. (You can read about the study here:

<http://shared.web.emory.edu/emory/news/releases/2010/03/children-benefit-if-they-know-about-their-relatives-study-finds.html#.UfJzg2RAQ6o>)

## **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ORAL HISTORY AND STORY COLLECTING?**

Oral history interviews are conducted through a long process with several steps. The interviewer begins by conducting advance research about the narrator using a Pre-Interview-Questionnaire as well as about the historical context of her story (researching primary and secondary sources about the events and history over the course of her life). This allows you to refer to life events and people, as well as to larger historical events and themes, during the interview.

Oral historians also do a lot of work after the interview to log, transcribe, edit the transcript, get it approved, and share it in some way—perhaps in a book or on a blog, in an archive, or some sort of exhibition.

It is possible to do these kinds of projects with your students, but more likely, you will be doing smaller story collecting projects. This includes some of the same elements—devising questions, conducting an interview, sharing it—but not on the same scope or level as an oral historian might. If you would like to do a year of immersive, project-based study, it may be practical to adapt elements of the oral history collecting process to your students' age level. If that is not the route you choose to take, shorter projects, a series of short interviews with different people around one theme or idea, or other small, story collecting projects are all fantastic ways to use the principles and develop the skills of collecting oral history with your students.

## ORAL HISTORY PRIMER: A Brief Overview

Oral history is the collection of stories and historical information from people and events through planned interviews. Often, these interviews are documented with video or audio recordings, or through transcriptions. Each individual's story will relate to historical events and characters, but will include the subjective opinions and experience of the narrator (the person telling the story/being interviewed).

While oral history interviews are often conducted by historians and preserved in archives and libraries, these interviews can also be done within families in order to collect family history. They provide a unique learning opportunity and a launch pad for intergenerational conversations.

### VOCABULARY:

- The **narrator** is the person who is being interviewed because they are telling their story. The narrator answers the questions in a way that is comfortable—the narrator does not have to share anything that he or she doesn't wish to tell or talk about.
- The **interviewer** is the person asking the questions. The interviewer should focus on listening actively—this is not the time to give advice or encouragement or critique. Instead, listen closely and encourage your narrator non-verbally (smile, nod, etc.), and when appropriate, ask clarifying questions.

### TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Here are a few things to remember while you are conducting the interview.

#### Do

- Start with easy questions about basic biographical information to help your narrator feel comfortable. Leave more difficult questions until later, when you have established a connection with your narrator, and he/she has become more comfortable speaking honestly with you.
- Follow up with additional questions that encourage your narrator to say more about his/her experience. If you are interested in hearing more about something he/she shares, just ask.
- Even though it is hard to wait, do allow long pauses or silences. Sometimes it takes a moment for the narrator to collect his/her thoughts.
- Do keep the focus on your narrator's story—try not to share your own experiences or feelings.

## Don't

- Don't interrupt your narrator while he/she is in the middle of a story. Instead write other questions down so you can ask them later.
- Don't ask leading questions that make assumptions about what your narrator thinks or feels. Instead ask open questions to understand how he/she feels.
- Don't express encouragement with phrases like "uh huh" or "oh, wow," because they can interrupt the narration. Instead show your appreciation or understanding through eye contact, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signs.

## Interview Location and Time

- Conduct the interview at a time and place that are convenient for your narrator. The more comfortable the narrator feels, the more likely he/she will relax and enjoy the experience.
- Make sure that there is as little noise as possible. The sound of ringing phones, barking dogs, fans, air conditioners, refrigerators, or other electronic equipment can create background noise that will disrupt the interview.
- If possible, arrange the interview so that as few people as possible are present. The presence of others will change how the narrator answers some questions or how comfortable he/she feels sharing certain stories.
- Limit interview sessions to no more than one and a half to two hours. It may be tiring for the narrator to remember so much and to talk for such a long time. You can always do several short interviews instead of one long one.

## HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

### Two Kinds of Questions

Oral historians ask two kinds of questions when they are conducting interviews—closed questions and open questions.

1. Closed questions are important for finding out short pieces of factual information. Questions about dates, names, etc. are essential but they don't make for very rich or exciting stories. Examples of closed questions include:
  - What year were you born?
  - What were your parents' names?
  - When did your family come to this country?
  - What high school did you attend?
2. Open questions, on the other hand, allow you to draw out your narrator's memories, opinions, and points of view. These questions make the narrator's story interesting and fun. Open questions often begin with:
  - Why?
  - Can you describe...?
  - Tell me about...

- What was that like?
- How did you feel when...?
- What were your expectations about...?
- What challenges did you face when...?

### **The One-Two Punch Method**

In order to record a well-balanced oral history, try using the one-two punch method. First you ask a closed question to learn a fact or get a specific answer. Then follow with an open-ended question to allow the narrator to say more about his/her response.

Here are some examples of pairs of closed questions and open-ended questions:

**Closed:** What was your mother's name?

**Open-ended:** Describe your relationship with your mother when you were growing up.

**Closed:** When did you move to the new house?

**Open-ended:** How did you feel about moving to a new house and a new neighborhood?

**Closed:** When did you graduate from medical school?

**Open-ended:** What it was like being one of only three women in your medical school class?

Once you come up with a list of questions, put them in an order that makes sense to you. Are there some things that you need to know before you can ask about others? Decide which questions are more important or interesting to you and make sure you put them at the top of the list in case you run out of time.

### **FURTHER READING**

For more resources on formulating questions, recording interviews, and collecting family history, see the Oral History Resource List included in this packet.

## SELECTED FAMILY AND ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES

### Research and Collection

- **JewishGen**—online Jewish genealogy resources affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage.  
<http://www.jewishgen.org/>
- **Ancestry.com Jewish Family History Collection**—the world’s largest online collection of Jewish historical records formed through a partnership between JewishGen, the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the American Jewish Historical Society, and The Miriam Weiner Routes to Roots Foundation, Inc.  
<http://www.ancestry.com/jewishgen-all>
- **Preserving Family Papers**—tips for preserving historical documents collected in your family and links to additional resources for preserving documents and family papers for the future.  
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/preservation>

### Oral History How-To

- **In Our Own Voices**—a guide to conducting life history interviews with American Jewish women, edited by oral historian Jayne K. Guberman. Full PDF of book available.  
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/guide>
- **20 Questions to Ask the Important Women in Your Life**—a list of 20 questions to use as conversation starters.  
<http://jwa.org/stories/how-to/20questions>
- **Family History Tool Kit**—an adaptation of JWA’s adult oral history guide, the tool kit walks young women (and parents) step-by-step through the process of conducting an oral history interview. Designed specifically for girls as part of *MyBatMitzvahStory.org*.  
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/familyhistorytoolkit>
- **Stories of Survival: Creating and Sharing Oral Histories in the Classroom**—The Contemporary Jewish Museum and StoryCorps in San Francisco have put together a how-to guide for teachers who want to use technology to collect and share stories with students and communities.  
[http://www.thecjm.org/storage/documents/education/2013/Oral\\_History\\_Curriculum\\_Resource-FINAL.pdf](http://www.thecjm.org/storage/documents/education/2013/Oral_History_Curriculum_Resource-FINAL.pdf)

## Educational Resources

- **Taking Risks, Making Change: Bat Mitzvah and Other Evolving Traditions**—one of JWA’s Go & Learn lessons featuring three age-appropriate activity guides (for teens, family education, and adults) about the history and changing tradition of bat mitzvah. Includes an oral history activity about coming of age.  
<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/mar09/>
- **Interview Guide for B’nai Mitzvah Tutors (or Parents) and Students**—an interview protocol for opening up the conversation about bar or bat mitzvah between young Jews and the adults who support them.  
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/system/files/Interview%20questions%20for%20tutors%20and%20students.pdf>
- **Museum of Family History Lesson Plan**—walks educators (or parents) through the process of doing a family history project. Includes different ideas for extending the activity or using different themes as a focus of study.  
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/content/museum-family-history>
- **Our Heroes Lesson Plan**—using the Internet, oral history, and other research outlets, this lesson helps students explore what it means to be a role model and learn more about the people they look up to.  
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/content/our-heroes>

## Suggestions?

If you have suggestions of additional resources for doing family history projects and oral history with young people, please contact us by calling 617-383-6763 or emailing [education@jwa.org](mailto:education@jwa.org).

## Tell your story

*Jewish educators come to this work for a variety of reasons and by following many different paths. Conducting these short interviews will give you a chance to learn about one another's experiences and explore similarities and differences between one another's motivations and goals.*

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### **DIRECTIONS**

- I. Introduce yourself to your partner. Make note of who, what, and where they teach.
- II. Take a few minutes to look over the question list on page 11 and formulate a series of questions for your interview. Feel free to write your own or use some from our brainstorm.
- III. Interview your partner about their path to becoming a Jewish educator.
- IV. Switch roles so that whoever was the narrator is now the interviewer, and whoever was the interviewer is now the narrator.
- V. Switch to a new partner and discuss the Questions for Reflection on page 10.

The **Sample Questions for Practice Interviews** that follow are taken from the *In Our Own Voices: A Guide to Conducting Life History Interviews with American Jewish Women* sections on education (pp. 46-47) and work (pp. 50-51). The full text of this guide is available online: <http://jwa.org/mediaobject/In-Our-Own-Voices-PDF>.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

**Now**, find a different partner. Use the following questions to reflect on the experience for a few minutes with your partner.

### **Questions for after the interview:**

- What was it like to tell your story?
- What was it like to be the interviewer/listener? What did you learn that surprised you?
- How, if at all, did learning about your partner's experiences change the way you think about your work? How, if at all, did learning about your partner's experiences change the way you think about the field of Jewish education?
- Is there anything "universal" about the experience of being a Jewish educator? If yes, what? If no, why not?

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE INTERVIEWS**

- As a child, where did you go to school?
- What school experiences stand out as being most formative? What classes did you enjoy most? What did you enjoy least? Why?
- Describe the experience of being Jewish in your school.
- Describe any educational experiences outside of school that were important to you as a child (i.e. camp, classes, clubs, etc.)
- What did you want to be when you grew up? Why? Were there careers or professions of interest that you did not feel were open to you for some reason?
- What were the expectations and standards in your family regarding post-secondary education?
- What were your personal goals for your education? Looking back, how would you evaluate your experience overall?
- What formal Jewish educational experiences did you have as a child? What were your most and least favorite subjects?
- Did you have any particular role models in school (K-12, Jewish education, or post-secondary education), such as teachers, coaches, or adult advisors to extra curricular activities? Describe your relationship to them and their impact on your life.
- As a young person, what expectations did you have regarding your working life? If you chose to work or not work in paying jobs, what factors influenced your decisions?
- What factors led you to working as a Jewish educator?
- What do you find most challenging about your work as a Jewish educator? What is most rewarding about it?
- In what ways does your work contribute to your school/organization? To your community? To the Jewish community as a whole?
- What do you consider to be your greatest achievements in your Jewish educational work thus far?