

L'dor V'dor History Project

A Public-Facing Exhibit on Jewish Life in Michigan

Joel Hill

Grand Valley State University

Abstract

The L'dor V'dor History Project involves the creation of a public exhibit documenting the history of Jews in Muskegon, Michigan through the members of Temple B'nai Israel. The purpose of this exhibit is to educate the community about Jewish history and life in West Michigan and to spread awareness and understanding of diverse populations in an increasingly antisemitic society. This project involved collaboration between temple members, museum staff, and GVSU faculty and students. Using interview data, as well as multiple dialogues and conversations with stakeholders, several themes were identified that will be used in the exhibit to meet the goals. These themes are: Holidays, Ritual, Identity, Tradition, and Tikkun Olam (healing the world). The exhibit not only tells an intimate story of the congregation but is also appropriate for various learning levels, accessible, interactive, and immersive. The design will be implemented at The Lakeshore Museum of Muskegon in fall of 2020.



Layout of Exhibit

Methodology

- Approached exhibit design using Community-Centered, bottom-up ideology. Used the temple members' interviews, ideas, input, and knowledge as the foundation of the exhibit (Macdonald, 2008).
- Analyzed data from the interviews and from my participant observation. Five central themes of Jewish life were identified: **Ritual, Holiday, Identity, Tradition, and Tikkun Olam** (healing the world).
- Reviewed literature and studied theories for exhibit curation and museum pedagogy.
- Sketched a preliminary design.
- Presented design to Temple Members and Lakeshore Museum for feedback.
- Partnered to brainstorm ways to make the museum further accessible and thought-provoking for all ages.
- Integrated specified artifacts, photographs, stories, audio clips, programming, and the agreed upon design tweaks.
- Designed digital walk-through exhibit.

The layout of the exhibit is designed to walk the audience through the life cycle of a member of the Temple. From childhood to adulthood, viewers begin at the history wall, move through a classroom, then into a main sanctuary hall that is a re-creation of the main Sanctuary of Temple B'nai Israel, then onto a home area set up for a Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner. The final activity is a small community art piece on Tikkun Olam in which every person will contribute a piece of paper scribed with their promise of what they will do to heal the world.



Classroom Area design



Home Area Design

J: *What is the most important part of being Jewish for you?*

Rabbi Alpert: *Love justice, practice mercy, and walk humbly with G-d.*

J: *That's it?*

Rabbi: *Yeah. Or the other one [teaching] is... this person was thinking about converting to Judaism, goes to a Rabbi and says, "tell me what Judaism is all while standing on one foot." And he says, "do not onto others what is odious to you. That is Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and learn." So, that's the thing...it's basically to be a good person. That's the most important thing.*

A transcription of one of the audio clips to be featured in the exhibit. These clips are pulled from the recordings of Temple member interviews.

Next Steps

Now that the exhibit design is complete, there are still several more steps toward creating the exhibit:

- Photo "party" on September 9th -Meeting with the temple members who've been there their entire lives to identify people in old photographs.
- Collect artifacts including Temple Members' personal photographs and Judaica (religious items).
- Design a digital program to showcase the audio recordings of interviews on iPads.
- Building or obtaining large "set pieces" such as the bema, chuppah, and kitchen in the home.
- Identify souvenirs to feature in gift shop.
- Finalizing specific labels for each portion of the museum.
- Plan programming around the exhibit such as community events and lectures.

Reflexivity

My original motivation for creating this exhibit was to help spread understanding and acceptance of diverse peoples in our increasingly antisemitic society. I'll never forget the moment I heard about the gunman that killed eleven people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pennsylvania. I was attending services at the Synagogue in Muskegon working on this project. It's not a moment that sticks with me because of its horror, which it undoubtedly holds, nor is it because of the crushing silence that immediately fell over everyone- unsure of what to say or feel. It's a moment that remains with me because if the immediate response of the Temple members. One of bravery, of life in the face of tragedy. "We can't let them stop us from living," they said. That's why this project is important. To help preserve the beautiful Jewish spirit of resilience and a fierce love of living a full life.

Works Cited

Macdonald, S. (2008). *Companion to Museum Studies*. Retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gvsu/detail.action?docID=284278>