

Regardless of the container, it is impossible to discern the age or quality of a wine without having some background in wine-tasting. All too often our Jewish museums are displaying the artifacts of Jewish life without educating the visitor to the significance. Without education we run the risk of serving stale vinegar instead of the complex wine of life.

Wine is best enjoyed in context, be it with food or other people. All too often the content of our Jewish museums is placed in isolation, away from larger historic events or peoples. The exploration of artifacts within their larger context — say, Jewish history — brings wider recognition to the objects as well as, to the history.

Furthermore, we should not necessarily assume that our audience is solely Jewish. If our museums are to be viewed as equals to the great museums of the world, we must be creative and attentive to both the vessel and the contents.

Seth Kamil is Director of Big Onion Walking Tours in New York City.

The container is our museum, but if you look at what is in it, you will find our 2,000-year-old Bukharian Jewish heritage. The roots of Bukharian Jewry go back to the first dispersion of the Jews to Babylonia in 586 BCE. When Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Israel, some chose instead to travel along the Great Silk Road, eventually settling in what is now the region of Bukhara. After 2,000 years, this community is leaving the land that was home, dispersing to many different lands. Many of us ask, how will we transmit the riches of our ancient culture?

A poet once wrote, "The flow of the river of time carries away people's deeds and drowns empires, kingdoms, and kings, but memory does not allow culture, tradition, and names to fall into oblivion." Our museum is a repository of memory, history, culture, and traditions for the generations and also a vehicle for enhancing Jewish identity for all Jews.

Our children will learn about the attempt and failure of many — Soviet, Russian, and Mongol — to erase Jewish life. They will learn about how our mothers and fathers prevailed and created a vibrant and vital culture and tradition that has lasted more than 2,000 years by entering the "container" and seeing, touching, smelling, and listening to its contents.

Aron Aronov, who arrived in New York eleven years ago, is Coordinator of the Queens office of the New York Association for New Americans, Inc., Executive Director of the Bukharian Museum, and an activist in the Bukharian community in Queens.

Traditionally, Jewish museums not only collect and preserve examples of Jewish material and artistic culture, but we also use these objects to teach, inform, and interpret the Jewish experience to a variety of audiences. Every object, be it a humble challah cover or a magnificent painting, has multiple stories to tell. Each visitor, whether the art connoisseur or the eager fifth grader, relies on his or her own past experiences when encountering these objects.

Some of us work in "new containers" — beautiful, welcoming institutions where the age-old story of the Jewish people is told and retold. Others of us work in "old containers" — historic synagogues and former residences that have been brought to life by innovative interpretations of the Jewish experience. Our buildings are artifacts themselves, reflecting the enormous diversity of American Jewish life.

It is incumbent on the American Jewish community to view Jewish museums as partners in both preserving heritage and conveying its beauty and meaning to the next generation.

Adele Lander Burke is Director of Museum and Education at the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles.

רבי אומר אל תסתכל בקנקן. אלא במה שיש בו. יש קנקן
חדש מלא יסון. וישן שאפילו חדש אין בו
משנה אבות פרק ד:כו

Rabbi Meir said: Don't look at the container; rather, look at what is in it, for a new container can be full of aged wine, and an old container can be full of new wine.
Pirkei Avot 4:27

Warning us that the external may only be a veneer and the true value lies beneath the surface, Rabbi Meir examines but one aspect of the complex relationship between outward representation and inner meaning. The very choice to package old wine within a new vessel is itself significant and revealing; it tells us something both about the nature of the old wine and the identity of the person who selected and used the container.

Museums are sometimes criticized for focusing on the external trappings of life; studying old and new vessels. Yet these vessels provide important lessons about the nature of their contents, about the artisans who crafted the receptacles, and the people who used the wares.

Jewish museums are, in their own way, new vessels containing old wine. They provide innovative, user-friendly environments for the exploration of Jewish heritage, culture, and history. They also offer diverse audiences a range of vessels; treasured ancient artifacts are studied as evidence of history, beauty, and meaning, and new interpretations of Jewish experience are offered through contemporary art, high-tech virtual encounters, and critical scholarship.

Gabriel Goldstein is Curator of the Yeshiva University Museum.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."