Repairing Jewish Pioneer Memory

What kind of *teshuvah*, repentance and repair, is appropriate for our communal role in colonizing America?

Jewish immigrants and Jewish Americans were a part of the broader project of "American Westward Expansion" that sought to destroy and replace Indigenous peoples and societies on lands west of the Mississippi. This lesson, based on the work of scholar Maxwell Greenberg, uses primary sources to explore a regional example of how Jewish American communities today have chosen to remember (and forget) their implicated roles in land theft, displacement, and cultural genocide in the American West: Jewish sacred sites that have undergone historical preservation in Southern Arizona. Participants will contrast the visual and narrative myths of the Jewish Pioneer with the histories of racialized violence, narratives recognizing Jewish immigrants as settlers living on stolen lands and consider Jewish responsibilities in connection Indigenous territorial sovereignty. What kind of teshuvah, repentance and repair, is appropriate for our communal role in the colonization of this area?

GOALS

- Learners will study the role and experience of Jews in Westward expansion of the United States
- Learners will explore Jewish responsibility for land stolen from Native peoples, and used for Jewish sacred purpose
- Learners will consider their own Jewish path towards teshuvah (repentance, return) for the use of stolen lands.

MATERIALS

- Images in Appendix A
- Appendix B: Excerpt from Rabbi Benjamin Barrett's RRA Journal contribution
- Appendix C: "An Old Jewish Cemetery Repaired"
- Appendix D: Photograph of the Bisbee Douglas Cemetery re-dedication plaque
- Appendix E: Jewish Cemetery Restoration as Anti-colonial Repair
- A smartphone for individually accessing https://native-land.ca

LESSON

Welcome and introductions: 10 minutes
What brought you to this lesson/workshop?

Part 1: Stepping back: Recognizing Jewish pioneers: 10 minutes

- Brainstorm: What have we previously learned about American pioneers? What are our associations with "pioneers"?
    - Who were the American pioneers?
    - Why were they pioneering?
    - Introduce the definition of pioneer: a person who is among the first to explore or settle a new country or area.
        - How well does this word capture what the American "pioneers" were doing?
- Image Study of Jewish pioneer books
    - What story has been told about Jewish pioneers? Examine the media (movie art and book covers from Appendix A about Jewish pioneers in the American West.
        - What details of each image stand out?
        - How do they portray being Jewish? Being a pioneer?
        - What do these images suggest about the role or experiences of Jews on the frontier?
        - What questions do they raise?

Part 2: A more critical history of Jewish pioneers: 15 minutes

- Read Appendix B, excerpt from Rabbi Benjamin Barnett article (Quoted from RRA Newsletter summer 2022) and the discussion questions.

Part 3: The Preservation of Pioneer Cemeteries- a study for teshuvah/reparations: 30 minutes

In the past several decades there have been several organized Jewish efforts underway to preserve "pioneer" cemeteries near the Arizona border.

[Facilitator note: For more background about the dispossession of Chiricahua Apache land, see "How to Cite- Interpret Royce Maps" https://jewsandrace.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/How-to-cite_interpret-Royce-Maps_Schedule-of-Indian-Land-Cessions.pdf]

- Read Appendix C, article "An Old Jewish Cemetery Restored" and then examine Appendix D, the photos of the front gate and dedication plaque for the Bisbee Douglas cemetery
  - What was the impetus for the restoration of this cemetery?
  - How do the restorers of the cemetery want to remember the people buried there?
  - How might this approach to preservation affect the Native peoples and their history in this location?
- Teshuvah: Scholar Maxwell Greenberg suggests that the preservation of these cemeteries could be an opportunity to consider teshuvah- as Jewish sacred space is cared for, how do we recognize the Jewish role in the destruction of Native space? Greenberg proposes using Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb's teachings about teshuvah as a mode of reparations. He adapts her teachings on the five steps of teshuvah to the case of caring for these cemeteries.
  - Take a moment to review the steps on Appendix E about teshuvah.
  - Which parts stand out to you as most important? What stands out as most doable?

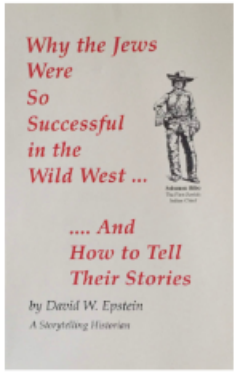
- The steps Greenberg suggests are open-ended. Pick one to focus on, and consider: what would it look like to accomplish this step of the *teshuvah* process in a meaningful way?
-

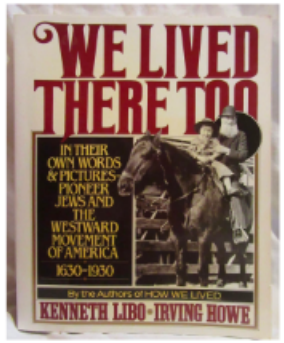
Conclusion/Wrap-up reflection: 10 minutes

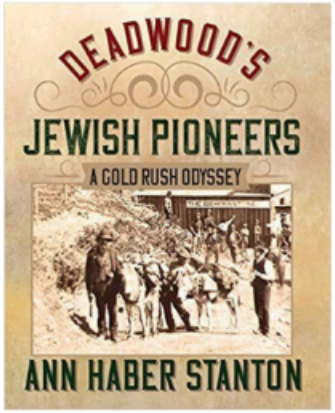
- Encourage participants to consider their personal stakes in this issue by learning which Native peoples occupied the land where they currently live. https://native-land.ca
- (Write and/or share together) Recognizing that we all live on land stolen from Native peoples, what is one new understanding or commitment that you want to take away from this lesson?

Takeaway #2: Jewish Pioneer Myths…

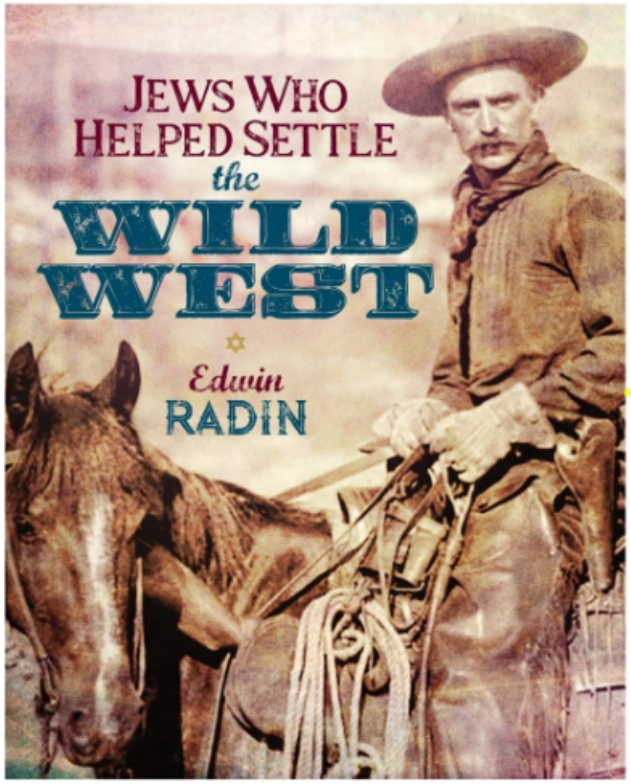
Remembering Jewish "western" history as single, colonial narrative







Appendix A



The Jewish “pioneer” myth confines Jewish history and memory to a narrative of white, Protestant supremacy in the American West.

Excerpt from Rabbi Benjamin Barnett article

Quoted from RRA Newsletter, Summer 2022

A few years ago, shortly after I arrived at Havurah Shalom, my congregant Becca Claren approached me wanting to do some Jewish learning about forgiveness and repair. She explained that she was a journalist who had been covering the American West for years, including significant time in and around Indigenous communities. Her work had taken a more personal turn, as her reporting in South Dakota- where her ancestors arrived as homesteaders after escaping persecution in Russia- led her to more deeply examine how her family endured and thrived there. They were beneficiaries of the Homestead Act of 1862, in which settlers received 160 acres for free if they could turn prairie into farmland. Of course, as Becca realized, the land her ancestors received was not actually "free." It was stolen, in the case of her family, from the Lakota.

Obviously, it wasn't Becca who stole the land. And while her ancestors might not be considered blameless, they also didn't directly steal from the Lakota. The United States government did. Through policies like the Homestead Act, they systematically dispossessed Indigenous tribes of land and resources. Becca's family, having survived horrendous violence and displacement themselves, accepted what their adopted nation gave them. On the South Dakota prairie, they endured harsh conditions and tremendous obstacles to build a life for themselves and their descendants, while bearing the horrendous trauma inflicted upon their family for generations. So, what responsibility is it of Becca to address these wrongs? And what might she do about it?

Discussion Questions:

- Why was Becca's family seeking land in South Dakota?
- What was the Homestead Act? And how (in general terms) was the US government able to give out so many acres to pioneer families?
- In what ways are Becca's family responsible for the dispossession of Lakota land? What might Becca do to address the wrongs of this land theft history that her family benefitted from?
- How does this story reflect on the bigger picture of Jewish life in the American West?

Appendix B

An Old Jewish Cemetery Restored

In the early 1993, Abe Chanin produced *Southwest Jewish History*,a print newsletter. The following typescript is from the Spring 1993 issue.

The old cemetery was in shambles and the members of the Cochise County Historical Society were not going to let it remain in that shameful condition. Jeanne Williams, a noted western writer who was president of the group at that time, called Bloom Southwest Jewish Archives. Could we help?

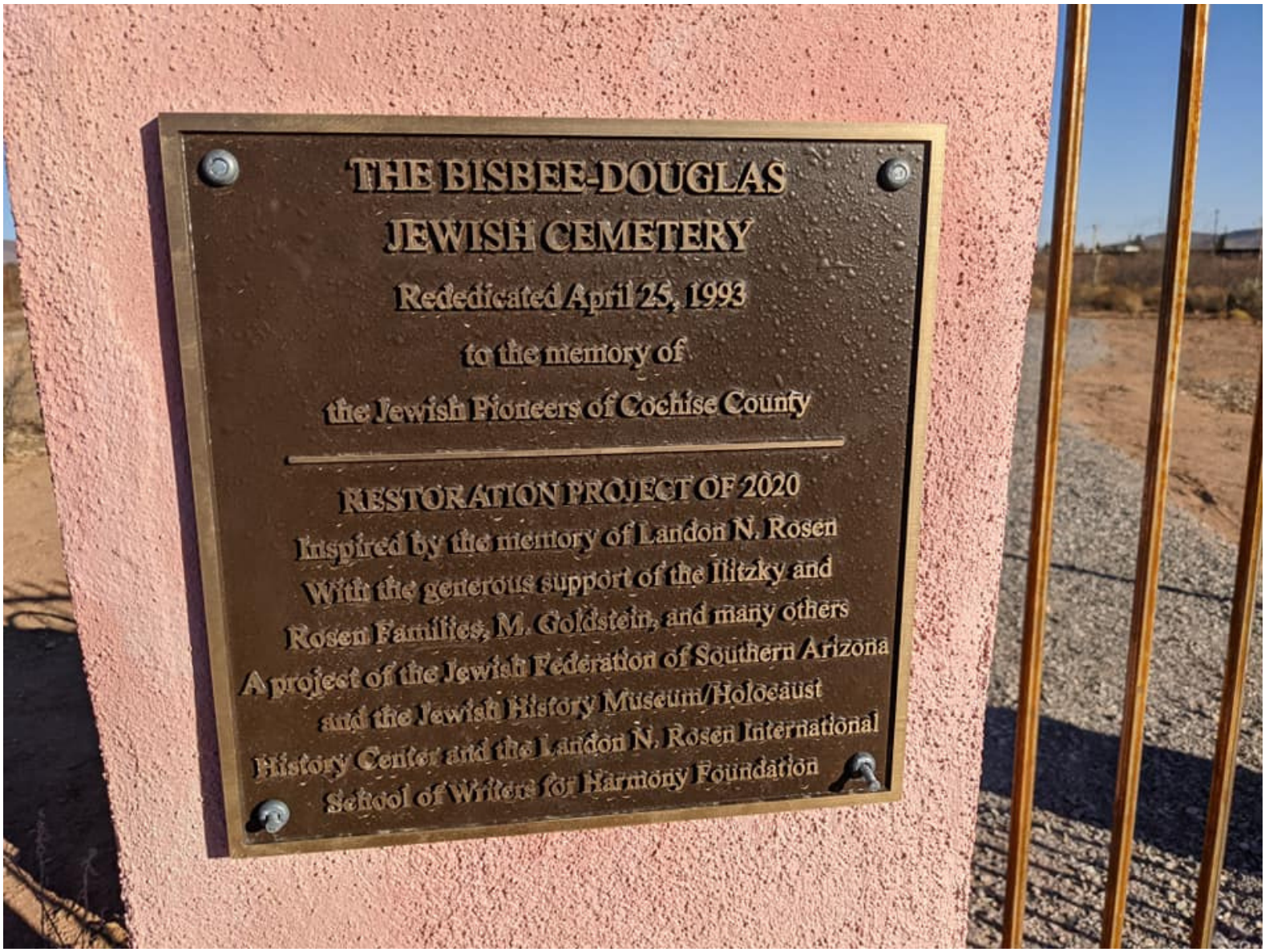
Could we help? We responded immediately and on November 22 we took students who were members of Hillel's Challenge organization at the University of Arizona and headed for Douglas. When we reached the cemetery members of the Cochise Society, a surprising number of volunteers, and probationers under the professional leadership of Edward E. Skinner were already at the work of restoring the old Bisbee-Douglas Jewish Cemetery. Throughout that day in 1992 the work went on--weeds were uprooted, broken headstones replaced and now the area, only a couple of hundred yards from the Mexican border, was gaining a look of respectability.

Several names on the headstones were identifiable and now some families have been traced and have contributed funds to aid the cleanup. Contributions also came in from throughout Southern Arizona, from people who had read of the project in newspapers. One woman--not Jewish--walked up to me in the cemetery. She said she had a very special feeling that she must help Jews and she wanted to contribute to the cleanup project. Her gift was substantial and will aid the restoration work.

David Eppele, who has a cactus nursery at Bisbee, decided the cemetery would hold its southwestern look if it was planted with cacti; he carried out the project himself. Tom Campbell, Superintendent of Schools for Cochise County, took it upon himself to do the grueling work of re-fencing the cemetery. Again the southwestern look was retained by restoring the barbed wire fence.

Cochise County has a long and colorful pioneer Jewish history. In that county before the turn of the century Jews were deputy sheriffs, mining entrepreneurs, cattlemen, lawyers, bankers and mayors. We shall tell that story in a future issue of Southwest Jewish History. Meanwhile on Sunday, April 25 at 1 p.m. the old Bisbee-Douglas Jewish cemetery will be re-dedicated. You are invited.

Login (https://swja.library.arizona.edu/cas)


THE BISBEE-DOUGLAS
JEWISH CEMETERY
Rededicated April 25, 1993
to the memory of
the Jewish Pioneers of Cochise County
RESTORATION PROJECT OF 2020
Inspired by the memory of Landon N. Rosen
With the generous support of the Ilitzky and
Rosen Families, M. Goldstein, and many others
A project of the Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona
and the Jewish History Museum/Holocaust
History Center and the Landon N. Rosen International
School of Writers for Harmony Foundation

Appendix D

Jewish cemetery restoration as anti-colonial repair (*teshuvah*)

1. awakening compassion הברת החטא (*hakarat ha-khet*) for harm, and embracing self-healing; 2. acknowledgment of the web of accountability and one's place in it חרטה (*kharata*); 3. publicly naming harms as articulated by those directly impacted by harm וידוי (*vidui*); 4. reparations for harm which includes rehabilitation, compensation, and satisfaction פרעון (*peiraon*) by those harmed; 5. guarantees of non-repeat of the harm that include an agreed upon system of accountability by victims of harm עזיבת החטא (*azivat ha-khet*) –Cited with gratitude from the collected writings of Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb	*Teshuvah* and Cemetery Restoration (example) 1. Name required violence of US settler colonialism (historic, ongoing) 2. Confront Jewish immigrant-settlers as implicated, beneficiaries of settler colonialism (past, present) 3. Public acknowledgement of Jewish ownership of stolen lands 4. Replace "pioneer" monuments. Reinvest accumulated capital into movements for land return 5. Guarantees of non-repeat will be established through building relationships of mutuality and solidarity

Appendix E