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'Curating the Past: Blood and Money in London'

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Introduction

This essay explores two exhibitions with which the authors were involved, in order to think through issues around curating and displaying medieval Anglo-Jewry history. The exhibitions were *Blood: Uniting & Dividing* (5 November 2015-28 February 2016) and *Jews, Money, Myth* (19 March-17 October 2019) both of which were developed at the Jewish Museum London in collaboration with the Pears Institute for the study of Anti-semitism at Birkbeck, University of London.

Blood: Uniting & Dividing presented a discontinuous cultural history of blood, exploring the meanings that have been projected onto blood – and in particular, 'Jewish blood' - both symbolically and materially, throughout human history. It covered topics such as biblical *kashrut* laws, circumcision, the blood libel, and contemporary debates about genetics and 'race.' The exhibition subsequently toured in modified forms to two venues in Poland: the POLIN Museum for the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw (*Krew: łączy i dzieli,* 13 October 2017-29 January 2018) and the Galicia Jewish Museum, Krakow (*Krew: łączy i dzieli*, 15 May 2018 - 31 October 2018).

Blood embodies highly particular symbolic meanings in Polish society, entangled as it is with notions of martyrdom, patriotism and historic struggles for national independence. Following the formation of a majority Law and Order government in 2015 and the consolidation of nationalist politics in Poland, the topics that *Blood: Uniting and Dividing* grapples with became acutely aligned with Polish public discourse. The relevance of these topics was seen in the volume of visitors who attended the Warsaw and Krakow exhibitions. It was the most successful travelling exhibition the Galicia Jewish Museum had ever hosted, with more than 30,000 visitors; at POLIN, *Blood* attracted 45,000 people (nearly double the museum's target number) making it the most popular temporary exhibition to date at POLIN.

Jews, Money, Myth offered a cultural and religious history of money. Like *Blood: Uniting & Dividing*, the narrative of *Jews, Money, Myth* started with ancient and biblical Jewish material (e.g. early biblical coinage and Jewish attitudes to charity) and discontinuously ran to the present day, covering histories of 'usury', the image of Judas, court bankers of early modern Europe, and communism.

In this essay we offer an account of what we set out to achieve in our collaboration on these two exhibitions, focussing largely on *Jews, Money, Myth*. We raise some questions about the strategies for display and interpretation and some more detailed examination of the medieval sections of the exhibition. This allows us to explore issues around how the Jewish past is and might be remembered in England, how it can best be curated in a public history setting, and some of the historical and creative challenges that we met in the process of our collaboration.

This collaboration arose in 2013 after Anthony Bale and David Feldman were approached by the museum's Director, Abigail Morris, and curator Joanne Rosenthal to provide advice and expertise on ideas for exhibitions to explore antisemitism and Anglo-Jewish history, and to transform public debate about Jewish culture in the twenty-first century. As a group, we considered a number of themes that bridged Jewish and non-Jewish culture and at once fell within academic research and wider interest. We considered three key ideas: blood, money, and bread. All three themes could cover Judaism from the biblical period to the present day, and all three could involve global Jewish cultures and Jewish-Christians relations whilst having specific, retrievable histories concerning Anglo-Jewish history. More theoretically, we wished to introduce complexity and ambiguity to narratives of belonging and conflict; to address difficult, theoretical issues of antisemitism and symbolic violence; and to move towards challenging audiences with the kinds of material culture and theoretical questions that academics work with in the study of Jewish history.

The theme and topic of *Jews, Money, Myth* developed out of our shared interest in how the Jews of England have been remembered and how they continue to be perceived. This issue has taken on a new scholarly urgency, given Julie Mell's transformative study of the historiography of the myth of the Jewish moneylender. Mell has shown how both Jewish historians and historians motivated by antisemitism developed the historical narrative of Jewish moneylending as playing an essential economic role in medieval Europe, in such a way as diminished and discarded other kinds of Jewish historical experience in the Middle Ages.[1] Early in the planning stage of *Jews, Money, Myth* we orientated the section of the Jews of medieval England around the following key ideas and messages:

1. Patterns of medieval Jewish settlement and matters of the Jews' communal safety were closely linked to the Jews' economic proximity and utility to the Crown.

2. Jewish moneylenders were exploited by the Crown through high taxation.

3. Some Jews may have amassed very significant amounts of money but this came with persecution and threat of dispossession, and spoke to a wider precariousness amongst Jewish communities. Most Jews were not involved in

[1] Julie Mell, *The Myth of the Medieval Jewish Moneylender*, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017).

finance, and so what is the historical evidence of other kinds of economic activity - from charity to business - they were involved in?

4. With these issues in mind, can people such as the medieval English Jews be said really to have ‘possessed’ money? Medieval Jews sometimes 'had' money but that doesn't equate to 'wealth' or 'power' (the broader history of money is not about wealth: money is easily lost, or taken away). This question fed into the broader interpretative issue raised by the exhibition, about the symbolic, transient, and precarious nature of money. Who possesses money?

As this brief summary suggests, we were very aware that we were navigating sensitive and potentially incendiary territory with this material. We sought to question and explode the incorrect, simplistic but enduring narrative of the English medieval Jews as the ‘royal milch-cow’ but did not want to put a misleading or equally partial narrative in its place.

Finally, by way of introduction, we should note the demographic of the visitors to the Jewish Museum London in the period 2015-19, because the intended and actual audience of the exhibition necessarily played a key role in shaping the assumptions and content of what was displayed. Visitors to the Museum are mostly non-specialist, and include many children and young people. Thus the *academic* expectations, and the terrain of academic historiography, needed to be significantly filtered and rethought for a general public audience. The majority of visitors to the Museum are not Jewish, and one cannot take for granted that the audience will have any knowledge of Jewish religious customs, historic religious cultures, and pre-twentieth century history. *Jews, Money, Myth* was designed for the temporary exhibition space in the Jewish Museum London, a gallery of approximately 150 square metres. From the outset, the exhibition team sought to include both the Jewish Museum’s own holdings and loans from other collections, nationally and internationally.

Strategies for interpretation and display

Negotiating the many complexities and sensitivities underlying the exhibition’s narratives and themes required us carefully to consider our approach to interpretation and display. The curatorial strategies which we developed to engage visitors in the exhibition evolved in response to successive meetings and ongoing conversations between staff at the museum and the Pears Institute. Although perhaps not explicitly, these conversations were, to a large degree, centred on the challenges, in staging the exhibition, of managing the sometimes differing expectations of our respective audiences and stakeholders. The curatorial process that played out was one which took seriously the need to achieve the right balance between the museum’s concerns for accessibility and the Institute’s interest in foregrounding developments in historical scholarship. Whilst our previous experience working together on *Blood: Uniting and*

Dividing had set a precedent for this collaboration, we felt that the histories we were exploring in *Jews, Money, Myth* were considerably more familiar to the general public and more deeply entrenched in Jewish and non-Jewish collective consciousness. Consequently, we were acutely aware of the preconceptions and assumptions that the average visitor was likely to bring with them as they entered the gallery. This awareness prompted us to develop multi-layered and nuanced approaches to interpretation and display which aimed to engage, challenge and surprise visitors through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives.

The core framework of the exhibition's interpretation strategy adhered to a traditional hierarchy of text and interpretation commonly found in museum exhibitions (introductory panels, object labels, image captions). In addition to this we introduced other voices into the gallery, most importantly through a series of film interviews with the key academic advisors from the Pears Institute – Anthony Bale, David Feldman and Marc Volovici – which enabled the exhibition to present ideas and intellectual histories which are not easily conveyed through object-centred displays. Artist commissions were yet another mechanism through which to bring in different perspectives. Video artworks by Jeremy Deller and Doug Fishbone were installed at critical points in the exhibition, disrupting the visitor's journey through the chronological historical displays, as well as introducing humour, subjectivity, and contemporaneity.

Perhaps the most innovative of all the interpretation strategies we employed was through the creation of what we called 'alternative captions' which made visible to the public some of the invisible processes that go on behind the scenes in making exhibitions. Although framed as excerpts of fraught conversations that took place between the museum director and exhibition curator, these captions were the product of discussions and disagreements that were ongoing amongst us all throughout the gestation of the exhibition. Many of these disputes were generative. They served to further the exhibition narrative, to influence choices over object selections and to make key decisions on structural issues, such as how to end the exhibition. We decided to put this spirit of dispute and contestation on display in the exhibition itself, through these alternative captions, as a way of directly and transparently communicating to the visitor some of the challenges that were involved in putting the exhibition together. In total, ten alternative captions punctuated the visitor route through the gallery, inserting another layer of commentary in addition to the existing exhibition text.

The first of these 'alternative captions' was positioned adjacent to the exhibition title on the introductory wall which met visitors as they arrived in the gallery. Dwarfed in size by the huge letters spelling out the words 'Jews, Money, Myth', the first caption was only legible to those who drew near to it. The positioning was deliberate as this caption related to the exhibition title itself and the struggle the exhibition team had in reaching a consensus over what to call the exhibition.

The museum initially intended to call the exhibition *Loaded: Jews & Money*, a knowing and provocative title - with a useful dual meaning, connoting both 'obscenely rich' and 'heavy' or 'challenging' - which the museum felt could help to sell the exhibition

to an apprehensive public. The Pears Institute strongly opposed this idea and preferred instead a more restrained, descriptive approach such as *Changing Fortunes*, punning on the monetary vocabulary of change over time and good and bad fortune. Other ideas included *Profit & Loss* or a title involving circulation and exchange. Ultimately, none of these options met the requirements of the museum's marketing strategy, all of them failing when tested on audience focus groups. *Loaded* was deemed too risky and liable to cause offense, *Changing Fortunes* was considered lacking in mass appeal. After much deliberation we settled on the more literal and less contentious *Jews, Money, Myth*. By focussing on the mythic quality of money we were able to evoke the various contested and imaginative roles money has played in the construction of Jewish history and Jewish-Christian relations. Our initial discussions, and disagreements, about the exhibition's title reflect the risks and pitfalls of curating pasts which involve trauma, offence, dispossession, and contested narratives. The route through which we reached this decision is narrated in brief in the first of these alternative captions, allowing visitors a privileged insight into the fraught nature of the exhibition's evolution.

With the other 'alternative captions' we offered an insight into how we negotiated a range of contentious topics, such as how to explore the Jewish principle of charity (*tzedakah*) or contemporary Jewish philanthropy, without succumbing to a problematic, apologetic framing in doing so. Although relatively few in number, these captions were an integral element of the interpretation strategy, serving to destabilise the detached authority of the museum voice by introducing conflicting perspectives on key issues and directing the visitor's attention to the challenges we faced.

In a less explicit way, much of the exhibition interpretation manifested in the choices we made with regard to how to display the exceptionally rich collection of historical artefacts from the Jewish Museum's collections and those on loan from public and private collections worldwide. Through decisions regarding the placement of particular objects and the juxtaposition of carefully chosen groups of items, we were able to make important connections and convey points critical to the exhibition's messaging, whilst allowing visitors to make their own associations.

An important example of this relates to a particular display in a section of the exhibition entitled 'Bankers and Beggars' which explored how the economic status of Jews in Europe was transformed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the development of commercial life, and in particular, how contradictory stereotypes of the Jewish banker and beggar took shape in public consciousness. In this section, we drew heavily on the Alfred Rubens Collection of prints and drawings held at the Jewish Museum which encompasses a rich array of illustrations and caricatures drawn from society publications such as *Punch* and *Vanity Fair* featuring satirical and sometimes antisemitic depictions of Jewish wealth and financial power.

One of several of those we displayed which takes aim at the Rothschild banking family was *Die Generalpumpe*, a German caricature from the mid-nineteenth century. Although not stated as such, the figure in the centre is clearly a Rothschild. A towering presence emerging out of a sack of coins, he controls the global stage by pumping

money into the hands of world leaders and financial elites, whilst expendable soldiers and civilians suffer the consequences. The image is a powerful example from the nineteenth century of how critiques of capitalism and war often embraced antisemitic associations of Jews and money, fixating on the Rothschilds as symbols of imagined Jewish wealth and influence.

In presenting these political histories we were interested in forging connections where possible between the past and the present and directing visitors' attention to some of the ideological commonalities that emerge in material culture across centuries. The anti-capitalist inspired antisemitism evident in *Die Generalpumpe* is of course alive today in conspiracy theories that circulate in the form of internet memes and other popular forms of cultural expression. In the process of developing this exhibition and curating these pasts, an example of the very recent past became firmly lodged in the public consciousness when, in 2018, the then leader of the Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn, found himself at the centre of a media storm inspired by a Facebook post he had written over five years previously, in 2012, supposedly speaking out against the removal of a piece of graffiti art from a wall in East London.

The graffiti piece in question, *Freedom for Humanity*, was created by the American artist Mear One in 2012. Shortly after it appeared in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, the local council ordered its removal, on the grounds that it perpetuated antisemitic propaganda. The artwork showed a group of bankers sitting in a conspiratorial huddle around a *Monopoly*-style table propped up by the backs of hunched, naked figures. Although the artist firmly denied any antisemitic intent, insisting that the mural was purely about 'class and privilege', the bankers were widely understood to be represented as having stereotypically Jewish features, recycling the familiar trope of the Jew as exploitative capitalist.

The media storm in 2018 around this image initiated an interesting conversation in British society over the messaging of this artwork in particular, and more broadly, the pernicious ways in which the figure of the Jewish banker has been deployed in political propaganda and critique. Consequently, we decided to display *Die Generalpumpe* alongside a reproduction of *Freedom for Humanity*, inserting the twenty-first-century graffiti art into the nineteenth-century display, deliberately disrupting the chronological thread of this section. This enabled us to offer visitors important historical context and show how ideas of Jewish influence and power have circulated across time, finding their way into the public realm in surprising ways. In this way, displaying the two pieces alongside one another mutually reinforced the interpretation of both.

Underlying these strategies for interpretation and display was an agreement made early on in the process that we were developing this exhibition for adult visitors, roughly defining our target audience as young teens and older. This was in recognition that the historic objects, contemporary artworks and textual interpretation we would be presenting to the public carried meanings and explored issues that were not suitable for younger visitors. To this end, the main introductory text to the exhibition carried a warning which made this explicit. However, although the Museum defined the exhibition

as unsuitable for self-guided visits from younger audiences, it provided an incredibly rich platform for the Museum's Learning team to develop accompanying educational workshops for schools and other informal learning settings exploring the exhibition's topics in structured, facilitated contexts.

Curating medieval Anglo-Jewry

Amongst the Jewish Museum London's treasures are some medieval tally-sticks. These were amongst the materials we displayed in *Jews, Money, Myth*, as the exhibition was an ideal opportunity to recontextualise the tally-sticks amongst other monetary instruments from the period of Jewish residence in medieval England. The tally-sticks date from the thirteenth century and refer to tax payments made by English Jews; one shocks a payment, of 1s, by Issac 'Carnifice', the butcher, possibly related to the tallage on the Gloucester Jews of 1241. The other stick no longer has a name written on it but refers to a sum of £4 4s, as indicated by the four larger notches on the top edge and the four smaller notches at the bottom. Tally-sticks were notched to indicate the amount of each payment and the names of the debtor and creditor often written on them and then split into two 'receipts', which could be checked against each other, and payment made, by reuniting the two sticks. At the exhibition's press launch, several journalists who came, some of whom were from Jewish publications, were astonished that there would be this material evidence of Jews involved in professions like butchery - that is, Jews who weren't involved in finance.

The tally-sticks helped us show what we believed would be unfamiliar aspects of Jewish life and finance to visitors to the exhibition. First, Issac the Butcher's profession clearly showed that medieval Jews worked in professions outside finance. This is a simple point, but it is an important corrective given that the vast documentary evidence of Anglo-Jewry survives either in exchequer documents dealing with finance or in Christian textual productions such as chronicles and sermons which tend to be anti-Jewish. Secondly, the tally-sticks revealed, along with several documents they were displayed with, the English Jews' significant tax burden, as sophisticated systems of tallage were developed by the Westminster exchequer in order to extract monies from the Jews. Thirdly, the tally-sticks showed a kind of money, or financial instrument, that was credit-based and symbolic; neither a coin nor a promissory note, the tally-sticks suggest an advanced level of credit economy as mediated through ephemeral media that rarely survive.

The tally-sticks were just one artefact in the medieval section of *Jews, Money, Myth*. This section, one 'room' within the exhibition, contained, on the left-hand side, documentary and material evidence from the medieval English Jewish community and,

on the right-hand side, images and material concerning Judas and the medieval development of the figure of Judas as miser, culminating with the display of Rembrandt's famous, and rarely-shown, *Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1629), loaned by Mulgrave Castle, Yorkshire. Rembrandt's dazzling and ambivalent portrait faced a reproduction, on the opposite wall, of the famous tallage-roll caricatures of 1244 showing 'Mosse-Mokke' and 'Avegaye', Jews of Norwich, with Isaac of Norwich, one of the richest Jews of mid-thirteenth-century England. We were also fortunate to have on loan the original tallage-roll from the National Archives. Almost all presentations of this document have focussed exclusively on the image at the top of the document, as a piece of informal antisemitica, but we displayed it with the financial details of the tallage on display. We wanted to show this roll as a tax document so that it is more properly understood as a product of, and from within, the royal bureaucracy rather than some kind of 'popular' or transient 'doodle'. And this context helps us better to understand the image, which seems to be about the dispensation of justice, the punishment of Jews, and trials of Jews at the Tower of London. The connection between the worsening image of Judas on the right-hand side of the room and the documentary evidence of Jewish life and finance on the left was left implicit, but it was clear to the visitor that financial reality and theological rhetoric were in a toxic, if multivalent, conversation with each other.

The medieval 'room' of the exhibition was introduced by the following caption, which is reproduced here in full:

> **Jews came to England with William I soon after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Some were pushed into economic roles such as usury – lending money for interest – which the Catholic church regarded as sinful. Legally Jews and their financial contracts were the property of the king. They therefore had a degree of royal protection but their status was highly precarious.**
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> **The Exchequer of the Jews was a court at Westminster that was established in the 1190s to regulate taxes and financial cases involving Jews in England. Some Jews made money through money-lending but this did not necessarily translate into wealth. They were heavily taxed and exploited as a source of income for the king and often persecuted by those who owed them money.**
>
> **In 1275 Edward I's Statute of Jewry banned usury and completely transformed the status of Jews in England. No longer economically valuable to the crown, they were expelled from England in 1290 – the first expulsion of Jews in Europe.**

The challenge was to cover complicated and contentious historiographical terrain, and many sensitive issues, in a short text that was comprehensible to the general public. We drafted and redrafted the wording several times, aware that we would not be able to go into many of the academic arguments about terminology (e.g. the precise nature of usury, the multiple motivations for the 1290 expulsion). We did not include separate Jewish and Christian understandings of the Jews' legal and financial position, aiming instead to show the interrelation and interdependence of Jews within English institutions and authorities. We also aimed to emphasise that economic activities such as 'usury' were only practiced by some Jews, and that this was not a profession sought out by Jews but rather an economic role into which they were pushed by royal policy and use.

We briefly consider how visitors engaged and understood this section in further detail below. We sought to put together a set of materials that have never been exhibited together, and the vitrines of this section included a range of documents, coins and other items from the National Archives, the Westminster Abbey muniments, the British Library, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, Colchester and Ipswich Museums, and the Jewish Museum's own collections. We were thrilled by the generosity of these lenders in making their materials available, some of which are very precious indeed and are not easy to see even for academic researchers.

Amongst other materials included here were a deed of sale, from Westminster Abbey, for a homestead in Nottingham, dating from the 1240s (Westminster Abbey Muniments 6734**)**. We included this beautiful document because it is a legal transaction of land rather than money, and so it refocused the audience on other kinds of transaction from usury and debt. Secondly, because it is an early example of the Hebrew language appearing in a secular context, on the signature at the bottom of the deed and on the beautiful seal, which has Bonefay's name with the Tablets of the Mosaic Law. The transaction is between a man called Bonefey ben Brito (a Norman name, Bonenfaunt, Bonavie, probably a Frenchification of Benjamin, 'ben Brito' meaning son of the Breton) and one Roger Scot. The document also has the indenture – the teeth that mark its separation from the other portion – and therefore calls our attention to a missing part of the material text.

In the same vitrine we displayed a document from the National Archives **(**SC 1/3/87**)** relating to Licorica of Westminster – a well-known female Jewish financier – as we felt it was important to include this aspect of Jewish finance. Adjacent to this was the British Library record (London, British Library Add. Ch. 71355) for the rental of land in Northampton by the Jews for the town's Jewish cemetery from the Priory of St Andrew, the Cluniac house. The rent was half a mark per year, showing how money could flow *from* Jewish communities to Christian establishments, especially in terms of communal needs such as a cemetery, one of the first requirements of a Jewish community establishing itself.

Adjacent to these documents we showed a tiny part of one of the Colchester hoards, which may or may not be from a Jewish household. The hoard was found in 1969 in a tenement in Colchester's High Street that was certainly in an area of medieval

Jewish habitation.[2] In the exhibition we included a selection of coinage from the hoard and the battered lead canister in which some of the hoard had been buried. Adjacent to the various written financial deeds, the material from the Colchester Hoard foregrounded the materiality of money and also its precariousness, eloquently revealing how quickly fortunes can change.

Finally, one other document in this section deserves a mention here. This is a dorse, or reverse, a small and untidy document from the British Library (London, British Library Add. Ch. 1251). On the front of the document (i.e. not displayed in the exhibition) is a Latin record of the partial repayment of a debt in November 1182 by the Yorkshire Norman landowner, Richard Malbis, to the Jewish financier Aaron of Lincoln. On the back, as displayed in the exhibition, is an informal Hebrew note by one of Aaron's agents, Solomon of Paris, that acknowledges the payment saying that £4 has been received from Richard from his large debt by 'my master Aaron'. Solomon's Hebrew make a slightly convoluted pun here; Richard Malebisse's name in Norman French sounds a bit like Mal Bete – 'bad beast' - or in Latin 'mala bestia', and Solomon carried this pun through, writing 'Rikart Hayah Ra'ah' (Richard bad beast), i.e. Richard Malbis. It is a moment apparently of resistance and talking back within the archive. But this is also horribly proleptic, because it was Malbis who, in spring 1190, instigated the attacks on the Jews of the city of York that led to their mass suicide in Cliffords Tower.

This document, like those it was gathered with in *Jews, Money, Myth*, shows relations of power and dependency, but these are not necessarily the relations that the more general historical narrative often narrates. Money is always meaningful, freighted, but often in unpredictable ways that forge improbable links and uneasy dependencies between people.

This section prompted a number of questions about display strategies. For instance, the 1244 tallage roll is very small and delicate, even though it features the famous drawing of the Norwich Jews at its head. We included, on the wall, a magnified image of this image but, at the same time, we worried that we were unnecessarily, and crudely, focussing on one negative part of the document rather than its overall, if complicated, contents. And yet the image is a forceful negative stereotype of the medieval Jews, which helped frame the entire medieval section. The team involved in the exhibition had vastly different views on how big and prominent the reproduction of the Norwich image should be. In the end it was a rather discreet but clear reproduction, facing Rembrandt's haunting image of Judas. This reproduction partly drew visitors unfamiliar with the medieval material to the vitrines with medieval documents in them: much of this material was amongst the rarest and most interesting in the exhibition, but it did not have the visual impact, accessibility or direct narrative of some of, say, more modern material. We were aware, throughout the planning of the exhibition, that we would have to trust visitors to engage with unfamiliar material: we were careful not to

[2] For further details of the Colchester Hoard see https://www.britnumsoc.org/publications/Digital%20BNJ/pdfs/1974_BNJ_44_5.pdf

overwhelm visitors with too much detail, information, or too many examples but, at the same time, for the interested visitor there was a set of unusual and important medieval artefacts that could challenge any simplistic narrative of the Jewish past.

Reception and feedback.

In considering its reception and the feedback we received in response, it is important to highlight the unique political climate in which the exhibition opened. A perceived rise in contemporary antisemitic attitudes was receiving increasing attention in European and North America media - in Britain, largely in relation to an ongoing series of antisemitism allegations levelled at the Labour party. A wave of attacks on George Soros propagating antisemitic conspiracy theories was a recurring feature in the political landscape and in addition, a number of deadly antisemitic incidents had recently occurred, including a mass shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh just a few months before we launched the exhibition.

In producing an exhibition in this context that dealt with such difficult subject matter and presented often unsettling historical artefacts and artworks, we were conscious throughout of how *Jews, Money, Myth* would be received once it opened to the public. The museum's PR team gave careful thought to the media strategy and dedicated more time than usual to preparing staff and volunteers for tricky, possibly hostile feedback from the public.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the prominent discourse around antisemitism and the provocative nature of the topic at hand, that the exhibition received significant attention across local, national and international media outlets. This included features and reviews in the London *Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardia*n, *The New Statesman*, *Die Welt*, *Haaretz, The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*. Reviews of the exhibition were broadly favourable, applauding the museum for its approach in tackling the subject, many making specific mention of the 'long view' approach we took in historicising and contextualising the themes and narratives covered. This is evident in some of the headlines such as: "For 2,000 years we've linked Jews to money. It's why antisemitism is so ingrained"; "Jews have been seen as 'all about the Benjamins' for 2,000 years, new exhibition shows" and "Fighting myths for 2,000 years". Broadly speaking, the press focussed on the 'myth busting' angle of the exhibition in favour of reflecting on our interest in how the past is curated and the questions posed by the exhibition.

Feedback received from visitors who attended the exhibition is more challenging to summarise. This feedback reached us through three principle channels: a standard

visitor book positioned at the end of the section, in which the public were encouraged to share their thoughts however they wished; a feedback station entitled ‘A Penny for Your Thoughts’ positioned just beyond the visitor book, which asked them to respond to a series of questions and contemporary scenarios building on some of the themes of the exhibition; and verbal or written feedback presented in person to staff and volunteers.

Across all of these channels, one area that emerged with notable frequency was the question of ‘positive’ versus ‘negatives’ histories. Of the critical comments received, perhaps the most common was the accusation that the exhibition perpetuated ‘negative’ narratives and gave little or no space to ‘celebrating’ aspects of Jewish life and culture deemed ‘positive’ and worthwhile, such as charitable or philanthropic giving. Many such comments suggested a problematic or only partial engagement with the exhibition’s messaging, reducing the purpose of the exhibition to a binary ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ reading of Jewish history. A number of visitors wrote that they would have liked to see more ‘positive stereotypes’ or ‘positive counter arguments’. It is worth noting that not everyone agreed. In a seeming rebuttal of this, one visitor offered the following message: “Thank you for not sugarcoating, and abstaining from ‘positive messages’”.

The museum monitored the high volume of feedback throughout the exhibition's run and the issue of ‘positive stereotypes’ was something that we chose to address in one of two new ‘alternative captions’ which we produced and installed several months after the exhibition’s launch, as an attempt to engage visitors in a dialogue, and incorporate this dialogue in the exhibition itself. These captions, representing imagined conversations between the museum director and the exhibition curator, are explained in more detail in the above section on interpretation and display strategies. The alternative caption dealing with the issue of ‘positive stereotypes’ featured the following response from the exhibition team, presented colloquially in the voice of the curator:

> Exhibition curator: “The answer to visitors feeling uneasy about the difficult material in the exhibition can’t be to simply package up some ‘positive’ stories about Jews giving money to charity in the hope that this makes them feel better”. This “plays into all the wrong kinds of apologetic arguments that seek to absolve Jews of some imagined sin of greed, ironically reinforcing the stereotypes you’re wanting to counter.”

More broadly, much of the visitor feedback was preoccupied with the overarching purpose and value of the exhibition as an educational tool. Of the comments left in the visitor book, many congratulated the Museum, describing the exhibition with words like ‘necessary’, ‘urgent’, ‘important’, one visitor thanking the museum for “having the temerity to develop the exhibition”. Others described it as important but ‘upsetting’ or ‘unsettling’, with one individual expressing concern that the exhibition itself might fuel antisemitism, simply as a consequence of exploring these histories in an open, public

forum which includes non-Jews as well as Jews. A minority of people commented explicitly on the value of the exhibition's engagement with anglo-Jewish and pre-20th century history ("I was unaware of Jewish history in England", "I liked the older history provided".)

This broad trend in the reception of *Jews, Money, Myth* was continued in 2019 in the form of the Museums Association Museum Change Lives award, which was awarded to the Jewish Museum for the exhibition. The prize's judges, in their citation, described the exhibition as 'brave, fascinating, and timely'.

Finally, in terms of the public feedback, it is worth noting that the exhibition had an affective, emotional resonance for many guests. Visitors often qualified positive feedback ('a wonderful exhibition') with comments on how it made them react ('...but so depressing'). Public museum exhibitions, unlike academic publications, are very much designed as visitor experiences that seek to engage their audiences and are accountable to these audiences. Whilst the exhibition troubled some visitors, it was clearly impactful in causing visitors to think deeply about the topic, to explore their own engagement with it, and to articulate their feelings.

There is not scope in the present article to cover all the various reactions in the press, but it is useful to linger on one review, by Sara Lipton that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* ('A Terribly Durable Myth', June 27, 2019). Lipton, a medieval historian, opened not with the Middle Ages but in contemporary France, with a discussion about a Jewish man, Ilan Halimi, who was abducted and tortured in France because his murderers assumed that, as a Jew, he was wealthy. Lipton's brief account of this crime then framed her interpretation of *Jews, Money, Myth* as a confirmation that 'economic assumptions and personal and societal animosity are inextricably intertwined.' This accurately reflected one strong strand of our exhibition, but it did not reflect our inclusion of material on Jewish charity, philanthropy, and financial probity that ran throughout the exhibition, or our inclusion of non-religious approaches to money (e.g. the development of banking or of communism). Lipton went on to mention our inclusion of material about charity, but argued that

> The misconceptions concerning Jewish rapaciousness are perhaps widespread enough to justify opening with this theme. But a pitfall of doing so is that it echoes the anti-Semitic suggestion that Jews have a particular preoccupation with money, albeit one driven by philanthropy rather than avarice.

This reading of the exhibition did not reflect our thinking: we engaged with the topic of money not because of its 'Jewish' history but because of its universal history. We thought that we were presenting a range or spectrum of Jewish and non-Jewish interactions with money.

Later in her review, Lipton wrote that '[b]ecause *Jews, Money, Myth* focuses on Jews, it does not discuss Christian biblical interpretation or, for that matter, Christian economic activities. Yet this is the essential background for understanding the images

and objects in the exhibition.' This was not an accurate comment, as there was abundant Christian biblical material (especially about the development and degradation of the image of Judas) and Christian economic activities were entirely imbricated with all the medieval documents and many of the post-medieval artefacts on display. But Lipton's *sense* of a largely or exclusively Jewish narrative echoes other visitor and press comments, in which the exhibition was assimilated to the visitor's own, pre-existing narrative of a specifically Jewish past. We were always aware that we would have to meet our audiences on their own terms, but we remain surprised at how many visitors' prior assumptions about the history of money and antisemitism remained intact after engaging with *Jews, Money, Myth.* Or, to put it another way, binary narratives and lachrymose histories remain, even when an exhibition stages a strongly alternative narrative.

Similarly, a number of visitors charged the exhibition with being 'too negative', such as the following comment left in the 'penny for your thoughts' feedback box:

> Over emphasis on anti-Semitism and Jewish stereotypes and very little said about the positive contribution of Jews to ALL the societies they lived in. Leaves me feeling depressed, and a bad taste, unbalanced and anti-Semitic as a Jewish person who has worked in the NHS of 43 years.

There are several interesting elements to this comment. First, the visitor seems to have understood that by including negative *depictions* of Jews - most of them Christian in origin - we had articulated the Jews' negative 'contribution' to society. This is itself an antisemitic reading of the material we included, as *Jews, Money, Myth* made clear that imbalanced power relations always distort the interpretation of money and financial conduct. Secondly, this visitor seemed to understand the museum as a site of advocacy rather than as a stage for contested histories. We felt that our exhibition was balanced and various, but it certainly did not aim to advocate for one group, or 'disprove' obviously false allegations about Jews; rather, we contextualised the development of, for instance, the representation of Judas as miser.

Conclusion: the future of the Anglo-Jewish past.

In retrospect, *Blood: Uniting & Dividing* and *Jews, Money, Myth* both appeared in a specific moment of openness to experimentation, cultural diversity, and a confidence (in the face of resistance and anxiety) of a particular section of the secular Jewish community about its narratives, both public and academic. In this brief conclusion, we shall expand on these thoughts, in order to think about the future we believe would best serve the Jewish past, and the potential roles of exhibitions like ours in the specific context of British Jewish culture and history.

First, we found the relationship between museum curators and academics extremely productive and suggestive, at an institutional level and at an intellectual level too. Museums and universities traditionally have different audiences and respond to different pressures. We found that the dialogue enabled in our relationship pushed our

thinking to new and often difficult places, complicating the established narratives with which we had approached our topics. The encounter between curators and academics thus led to a kind of 'dismantling' of each side's expectations and introduced us to unfamiliar ways of working and many unfamiliar sources. From the beginning of our collaboration, different notions of truth and historical value came into play, and it was a positive challenge to negotiate how to work with these conflicting narratives and bring visitors into contact and dialogue with them. At the heart of both *Blood: Uniting & Dividing* and *Jews, Money, Myth* was an acknowledgement that this past is not 'over' or 'finished': it was not our role or aim to consign the past to a fixed version of that past. Rather, we sought to show how the artefacts of the past and our knowledge of the past runs into the present and connects with our identity, not as Jews or Christians, but as human beings interested in grappling with the entailments of identity.

The two exhibitions we were involved in at Jewish Museum London worked, to a significant degree, against one of the dominant modes, since the 1950s, of Jewish museums as 'memorial museums.' We did not wish our exhibitions to be lachrymose or to fetishize Jewish suffering. Our exhibitions sought to explore the diaspora experience, in which Jewish people have lived amongst their non-Jewish neighbours, in often harmonious, sometimes benign, but occasionally deadly proximity. Systems and structures of separation and difference were erected, but these were often to militate against sameness and similarity, not least in the fundamental theological relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Our exhibitions were intended to stimulate curiosity and challenge reductive accounts of the past, with discontinuous narratives that did not reflect one 'national' story or a single communal history. Instead, artefacts and individual histories spoke eloquently about their moment, and visitors could make their own connections with the materials on display and connect the universal topics of blood and money to their own lives and experiences.

At the time of writing (summer 2021), the British government's plans remain in place for a new 'Holocaust memorial and learning centre', adjacent to the Palace of Westminster, about the Nazi extermination of Jews during the 1930s and '40s. The government's narrative about the project reads thus:

> The new Holocaust Memorial will be the national focal point to honour the 6 million Jewish men, women and children who were murdered in the Holocaust, and other victims of Nazi persecution, including the Roma, gay and disabled people.
>
> The co-located Learning Centre will also focus on subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. The world-class facility will give visitors powerful and engaging experiences to learn about the Holocaust and subsequent genocides through a variety of mediums including historic photographs, film

footage and audio recordings so that the stories of survivors can be heard by younger generations, present and future.[3]

This new 'facility' is not described as a museum but as a space for education and honour. Yet, as its 'focus on subsequent genocides' makes clear, depicting humanity's crimes does not diminish humankind's ability or desire to repeat such crimes. One concern about the new government-backed Westminster memorial, due to be completed in 2024, is that it will seek to fix and encode a kind of 'preferred memory' (to use Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton's term).[4] In our view, contestation, confrontation, openness, and a variety of responses are integral to the memory-work involved in thinking about the Jewish past.

Moreover, many exhibitions about traumatic elements of the Jewish past (including antisemitism) focus on 'affect' and emotional response (horror, sadness, shock, disgust) without engaging visitors' intellectual capacity or challenging their received knowledge. An unquestioning response of appalled shock, for example, can also be a way of *not engaging* with the contents of an exhibition; as Marianne Hirsch, a leading theorist of memory, has argued, the spectator or museumgoer should retain the 'otherness of the other' rather than seeking to eliminate difference or confirm their own positioning.[5] Or, to put it another way, any curation of Jewish-Christian relations in the past needs to provoke rather than confirm habituated responses to violence, prejudice, and received memory.

At the same time, in recent months, the Jewish Museum London has announced a retreat from temporary exhibitions, which were often topical, challenging, innovative, and explicitly aimed at attracting new and diverse audiences. Instead, the Museum is focussing its resources on learning and community engagement programmes, with plans underway to transform the temporary exhibition gallery into 'an open access research library of books, objects and archives. Staff, volunteers and visitors will all be

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[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/planning-permission-granted-for-new-uk-holocaust-memorial

[4] See Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton, 'Introduction: Witnesses to Witnessing', in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* (New York, 2011), 1-10, p. 3. Indeed, many criticisms levelled at the Holocaust memorial project argue that it is only happening as it serves government agendas and detracts from the need for memorials in the UK to confront the history of the British empire and of slavery. Such an objection has repeatedly appeared in the press, for example: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/11/holocaust-slavery-atrocities-memorials-rivals; https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/10/londons-new-holocaust-memorial-should-not-ignore-roots-racism-shared-slave-trade;

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50287345

[5] Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,' *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001): 5-37, p. 11.

using this hands-on research, digitisation and participation area to explore the collection in a more accessible format than ever previously experienced.'[6] This reflects a museological move towards engagement and the museum-as-space. Yet this development does not seem to reflect other museological trends that foreground contestation, intellectual rigour, and problematic narratives. Accessibility is most valuable when it deepens knowledge, through the museum being engaged as a contested archive and as a space for historically-inflected debate.

In her recent book, *Exhibiting Atrocity*, Amy Sodaro describes the fraught terrain of the museum as a place for memorials of atrocity. Her examples include the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National September 11 Memorial Museum, institutions that mark specific atrocities and aim to join historical understanding to empathy, reflection, affective response, and cultural, social, or national memory. Thus, as Sodaro's work shows, contemporary museums emerge as a very complex space: on the one hand, they aim to help the visitor reflect and 'repair', acknowledging victimhood and giving a space for solemn and respectful remembrance. On the other hand, they often include moments of appalling horror, violence, and suffering, seeking to tell the truth and reveal the malign agency of past atrocities. This role of the museum, of 'telling history' through artefacts and documents, is necessarily disturbing and shocking, as museums aim to preserve evidence of what has gone before. Museums can, if they choose, handle these materials not only sensitively but also intelligently and productively, using contested or disturbing artefacts to conduct new research and as provocations to self-reflection on the part of both the museum and its visitors. Both *Blood: Uniting & Dividing* and *Jews, Money, Myth* dealt with very difficult and often offensive materials but sought to do so in a way that would stimulate comment, debate, new kinds of research, and critical reflection.

Such an approach is incompatible with an understanding of a museum as a place of triumph or celebration. Yet curating difficult materials should not necessarily be thought of as a form of 'moral education' or ethical improvement. As the reflections in this essay demonstrate, visitors take away a broad spectrum of reactions and learn very different things from an exhibition. This is consonant with our broader aim of stepping back from a didactic version of the Jewish past, or of rejecting a single narrative of history, and allowing the exhibition space to be a site of variety and contestation.

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[6]https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/JM_Lockdown-Impact-Report_INTERACTIVE.pdf