

JS/DH: Mapping the Jewish Experience

Michelle Margolis

Norman E. Alexander Librarian for Jewish Studies, Columbia University Libraries

If a picture is worth a thousand words, perhaps a map is worth a thousand data points. In this digital era, we have become accustomed to looking at online maps with data indicating various points of interest – where to shop, where to buy gas, and where to eat. In the world of digital Jewish studies scholarship, there are many maps as well, visualizing data across space. Some are more broad, with the potential to be used as tools by many, and some are more specific, focusing on a particular topic or time period. In this column, I will discuss a few projects in different research areas. While a map does not have to be geographic, the discussion here will focus on digital projects that deal with geographic maps.

One ambitious mapping project is “*Da’at Hamakom*”: *Center for the Study of Cultures of Place in the Modern Jewish World*, a project of I-CORE (Israeli Centers for Research Excellence), which is funded by the State of Israel “in consultation with the Israeli academic community.”¹ *Da’at Hamakom* hosts curated maps relating to different times, places, and events in Jewish history. There are six projects listed on their Research Projects page.² It appears that “[Jewish Cultures Mapped](#)” (JCM), while listed as one of the six projects, is also the platform on which these projects can be explored further. JCM includes 18 different maps relating to topics as varied as “[Early Modern Travelers to the East](#)” (101 data points), “[Jewish Communities in the Steven Spielberg Film Archive](#)” (20 data points), “[The Hasidic Niggun](#)” (88 data points), and “[The Hoffman Judaica Postcard Collection \(125 data points\)](#).” JCM seems like a good platform for small mapping projects looking for a home, but it is unclear how the database would handle larger projects with thousands, rather than dozens, of data points. A noticeable lacuna here was citations for the data – access to the original sources or the ability to download the data sets for further analysis and research would significantly enhance the project.

[Mapping Jewish Los Angeles](#) (MYLA) is a collaborative project and virtual exhibit space for research projects of all kinds. Originally started by Todd Presner, Chair of UCLA’s digital humanities program, the project has grown to encompass many of the Jewish studies faculty, students, and staff within the university. MYLA does not only contain projects with maps, but all of the projects that are part of this group focus on sites in geographic locations, such as businesses in particular locations. [Jewish Histories in Multiethnic Boyle Heights](#) combines maps, images from various archival collections, a timeline, and a digital archive to tell a broad and colorful story about the spaces of this neighborhood, featuring a bookstore, a cemetery, a hospital, a community center, and an old age home. An [exhibit on supermarkets](#) in the Los Angeles area, “From Grand Central Market to Supermarket: Los Angeles Jewish Grocers” does not show maps

1. <https://www.daat-hamakom.com/about-i-core/>.

2. <https://www.daat-hamakom.com/projects-category/research-projects/>.

specifically, but its “paths,” links on each page connecting the various parts of the exhibit, allow the user to navigate and travel among displays of the exhibition. Sephardic Los Angeles, which celebrates the long and diverse history of Sephardic Jewry in LA³ is yet another branch of this multi-varied collection of projects. Many of the exhibits in MYLA are created as part of pedagogy to teach students how to build narratives and showcase research in a digital environment. Importantly for the students and faculty interested in building on these projects, MYLA is committed to open data, making available or citing data sources and metadata for others to reuse for their own projects. Additionally, the leaders of the project collaborate with the UCLA special collections librarians to bring primary sources from the collections into MYLA, thus showcasing local collections within the online exhibitions.

Another location-based project growing out of course instruction is [Digital History of the Jews of Boston](#), hosted and edited by Simon Rabinovitch at Northeastern University. It began with two initial projects, both created by Harrison Beiser, Kayla Lavelle, and Shira Weiss: [Mapping Shared Spaces: A Visual History of Boston’s Black and Jews Communities](#) and [Shifting Neighborhoods: How Boston’s Jewish Communities Moved, 1850–2000](#), and has expanded with time and new courses led by Rabinovitch to also include “[Boston’s Jewish Advocate: A Visual History of a Publishing Landmark](#).” Projects created in Rabinovitch’s courses have also moved beyond Boston, as in a map highlighting 360-degree photography of historic synagogues in Baltimore created by Liza Sachs Sheehy called “[Architecture and Migration: Baltimore’s Historic Synagogues 360](#).”

The [Hamapah](#) project, led by Ellie Fischer and Moshe Schor at the University of Haifa, and a part of the University’s E-Lijah lab, started as an undertaking to map rabbinic networks based on rabbinic responsa (Jewish legal texts written in the framework of *she’elot u-teshuvot*, or questions and answers), which often include the location of the supplicant asking the legal question. The project has since branched out into [prenumeranten](#) lists, which were used beginning in the late eighteenth century as a sort of early modern Kickstarter, where interested parties could subscribe to a book prior to its publication. *Prenumeranten* shows the impact of a particular work or its author, since individuals subscribed to a work based on its author’s reputation or a book’s description. At this point, only selected data for both projects are available via the blog at the link above.

The Hamapah project is important because of yet another offshoot: in collecting large amounts of data, the creators identified a need for a broad glossary locating Hebrew place names, and created a reference tool that is of use to others as well. Hamapah’s [Searchable Map of Hebrew Place Names](#) is relevant to researchers who encounter historic place names in their scholarship, and by making it available broadly for use online, the creators have impacted many projects beyond their own. While other glossaries of place names exist, this one is free and open to anyone, and attempts to be as globally broad as possible.

3. Max Modiano Daniel, “The UCLA Sephardic Archive Initiative: Finding the Keys to an Untold History,” *Judaica Librarianship* 21: 38–48, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.14263/jl.v21i.533>.

[Diarna](#) is a mapping project with a goal to “digitally preserve the physical remnants of Jewish history” from the Middle East and North Africa.⁴ Led by a team of scholars with interdisciplinary knowledge of the Jews of Arabic lands,⁵ Diarna uses a map as a jumping off point to dig deeper into curated exhibitions and Jewish historical sites. Connecting pop culture to Jewish history, “[The Jews of Star Wars](#)” highlights Jewish sites in Tataouine, Tunisia, the real-life inspiration for Luke Skywalker’s home, Tatooine, in the famous film franchise. Another exhibit, “[D’Fina Jewish Morocco](#),” highlights the “d’fina,” or hidden, sites of Jewish labor camps in Morocco under the Vichy regime. Diarna’s resources are open to all and include photos, oral histories, documents, and written narratives contextualizing the sites and providing further information for research and learning.

As shown here, maps can be used quite effectively for teaching – both in the act of creating the maps, and for a user browsing a digital exhibition. As shown by *Hamapah*, maps can also be used for scholarship, as a way to visualize impact of a particular individual, idea, or movement. Given the diasporic nature of the Jewish past, maps can be particularly useful in showing movement both to and from various places. The projects showcased above give a few examples of the value of maps in teaching and learning, as well as in scholarship and study.

4. <https://diarna.org/about/goals>.

5. <https://diarna.org/about/team>.