

Hannah Zaves-Greene  
DHA Award Conference Write-Up

This past May, I had the privilege of attending and presenting at the Biennial Meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS). Through the overarching leitmotif of building bridges, the conference emphasized recognizing the breadth of both the American Jewish community and the community of scholars who study it. The opening panel featured Jews and Jewish academics whom the field has typically considered “other” or “outsiders.” They spoke movingly about the need to make conferences like this one inclusive of scholars who do not feel welcome in the current paradigm, in this instance primarily because of race. Their remarks have a wider applicability as well and speak to the need to ensure that conferences are accessible to individuals with diverse class backgrounds, disabilities and medical conditions, and those outside of the white, heteronormative mainstream.

One panel stood out to me as particularly meaningful. Four scholars discussed the nuances of Chinese and Asian immigration in various geographical locations in the United States. In addition to its thought-provoking content, the hybrid form of the panel drew my attention, as both one of the panelists and the moderator presented remotely via Zoom. The remote panelist currently teaches as a professor at NYU’s Shanghai campus and is currently unable to travel due to lockdown, while the moderator could not attend the conference in person because of the health risk and her family’s logistical circumstances. In both cases, the remote technology and AJHS willingness to use it allowed participation from academics who otherwise could not have shared their critical scholarship. As an academic who similarly could not attend conferences in person throughout the pandemic because of health issues, I am particularly attuned to the value of a remote option, even as I could finally attend my first conference back in person.

In my own panel, I presented part of my research on how actual or presumed impairments, and governmental officials’ interpretations thereof, functioned as obstacles for

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immigrants who desired to enter the United States in the early twentieth century. My paper explored the role that leading American Jewish attorneys played in helping individual immigrants gain admission through contesting the public charge provision first passed in 1882. I examined how they marshalled their resources to challenge and circumvent the law, offering alternate conceptions of disability and addressing the associated question of eligibility for prospective citizenship. Through exploring American Jews' responses to public charge's classification of immigrants into "desirable" and "undesirable," I considered how their efforts facilitated their political growth and amplified their public voices. The constellation of papers on the panel, dealing with the complex and multifaceted relationships between disadvantaged groups and state-run institutions, sparked a discussion regarding which societal groups have historically held responsibility for assisting those in need. Ultimately, in the question-and-answer section, we returned to a central theme of my own work, as we explored how physical, mental, and economic conditions shape immigration to and naturalization in the United States, and quite literally immigrants' ability to become American.