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PROGRAM

# Jewish Explorations

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## KEEPING UP WITH JEWISH NEWS

Dear Friends,

I can't keep up with the constant flow of news, the updates, and the never-ending changing websites. By the time I get well-informed on one issue, something new has already taken over the headlines.

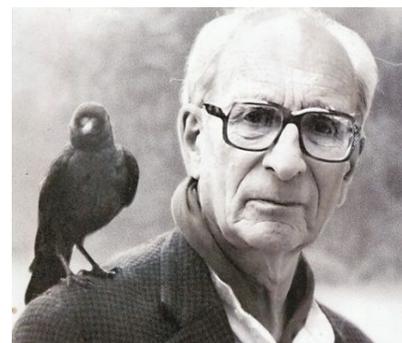
I know I am not alone in this struggle. If you google, "How to keep up with the news," you'll find dozens of advice-articles. Suggested strategies include: tune out completely, resolve to go online only once a day (or once an hour), or focus only on a few issues that interest you and ignore the rest.

I've developed a different approach, which I've been using in the course I am currently teaching, "Hot and Current in the Jewish Media."

In looking at a range of Jewish media outlets, hundreds of events around the Jewish world are covered in any given week: A desecrated cemetery, a professor speaking out against Israel, a Torah dedication in Prague, a Jewish actor wins an emmy, a politician goes public with the claim that she has Jewish roots.

The list goes on and on, but the broad, deep issues that the American Jewish community faces, persist with remarkable consistency.

I get this idea – that the news might be reduced to a few basic narrative arcs – from the seminal work of anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (pictured right). He became well known for collecting and analyzing vast numbers of legends, folktales, and myths told by tribal groups across the Americas. Weeding through the details of these tales, he found tremendous differences in plot, characters, settings and other details. In spite of the differences, however, Levi Strauss made the



remarkable observation that at their core, the stories bore striking similarities to one another.

Each and every story – regardless of how much it differed from another – was structured to help the storyteller and his or her listeners think through some deep aspect of the human condition. For example: the struggles between older and younger generations, the chasm between the earthly world and the realm of the spirit, or the challenge between good and evil.

As for the Jewish news cycle, the various stories in the press differ from day to day, even hour to hour. But, in thinking like Levi Strauss, I find there are really only a very few basic stories out there, which engage a limited number of core issues.

1. **IDENTITY:** Who is Jewish? Stories focusing on this issue address questions about how Jewish identity is (our ought to be) defined, how fluid (or not) this identity is, who has the authority to define Jewishness, and how this authority is bolstered or undermined. Look for example, at the media around Julia Salazar, democratic candidate for NY State Senate. Her slippery claims to Jewish identity have [angered some](#), and have been [embraced by others](#). Of course these stories are not only about Salazar herself. They also offer American Jews a stage for debating and working out questions about what, exactly, it means to be Jewish

2. **SURVIVAL:** How are Jews and Judaism thriving? Are they flourishing? Or are they under threat, and if so by whom? Reports on anti-Semitic incidents call attention to external threats. While discussions about the “[continuity crisis](#)” call attention to internal threats. Some critics, meanwhile, call for [new paradigms](#) for imagining a bright Jewish future.

3. **HOME:** Where should Jews consider their homeland/s? What exactly does “home” mean and what sort of work should Jews do in the name of building and maintaining healthy home. These questions of course get to the heart of ubiquitous debates around Israel: [How important are American Jews’ ties to Israel, and how should those ties be expressed?](#) But addressing questions about “home” are also shaped by Jews’ understandings about their social obligations here in the US, and as citizens of the world.

4. **CULTURE AND NORMS:** What are Jewish norms, rules, and cultural practices? Who has the authority to make these decisions? And how are these definitions changing? For this *sukkot*, the Jewish press shares information about the [origins of the etrog](#) (originally a Chinese fruit) and how it became integral to the celebration of the holiday across the Jewish world.



While trying to get a handle on the Jewish news of the day, keep this in mind:  
The particular characters and details in any given news article will come and go,  
but the big themes and issues will persist.

Best,  
Alanna E. Cooper  
Director, CWRU Jewish Lifelong Learning

***Interested in reading more? My previous columns can be found [here](#).***

