

An Interview with Wilfred McClay & Daniel Kane



Wilfred McClay wrote *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* because he believed that America had lost the thread of its own history, that students were being taught either nothing coherent about the American past or a narrative organized around repudiation. The book, which has sold nearly 200,000 copies since its publication in 2019, was an attempt to restore what he calls a community of memory through a shared story that gives citizens something to which they can return and belong.

The Tikvah edition of *Land of Hope*, developed in partnership with Tikvah alumnus Daniel Kane, asks what it means for Jewish day school students specifically to find themselves inside that story. The answer required more than a new preface. Kane adapted the text for Jewish students, added primary sources and discussion questions, and built parallel chapters tracing the American Jewish experience alongside the larger American one. This conversation with Professor McClay and Kane explores what was at stake in that effort, and why it matters that Jewish students understand themselves as heirs to both the American and Jewish traditions.

—Jonathan Silver

JONATHAN SILVER: The story here is *Land of Hope* and the way it was transformed into Tikvah’s Jewish *Land of Hope* edition through your joint work. Professor McClay, you wrote *Land of Hope*. Why did you feel that the American story needed to be retold?

WILFRED MCCLAY: I can date the impetus to 2014. That year the College Board decided to revise its standards for U.S. History, and they revised them in a very bad direction. They de-emphasized, and in some cases completely omitted, mention of the founders, the Constitutional Convention, and the debates over ratification of the Constitution. Those aspects of American history were pushed to the back burner in favor of analysis rooted in a kind of neo-Marxist interpretation of the economic history of the United States, with a great deal of emphasis on the slave trade.

I read this framework and was appalled. Some like-minded colleagues and I wrote an open letter to the College Board saying, “Please don’t do this.” They backed off somewhat and made some improvements. But here’s the problem—though it seemed like the good guys won a victory, the text-

books had already been changed. And the AP exam had become the gold standard of what’s taught.

People began saying to me, “Look what’s happened to the textbooks. Somebody needs to write a new one. Why don’t you do it?” I said, “I think it’s a great idea. I hope you find somebody to do it because I’m not going to.” But eventually Roger Kimball convinced me, and we published the book in 2019.

We’ve sold somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 copies, but most of those have been to adults. We haven’t penetrated the public-school market yet. I say “yet” because we’re preparing a second edition that’s more tailored to how teachers use textbooks today: more maps, more images, sidebars, and timelines. So we’ll see what happens. But I’m optimistic.

JS: Daniel, you’ve helped turn *Land of Hope* into something Jewish day schools can actually use. Before we get to the Tikvah edition, tell us what drew you to Bill’s book in the first place.

DANIEL KANE: *Land of Hope* is an extraordinary textbook. It’s an epic, narrative-driven history of

America. As Professor McClay noted, in some ways it responds to worrying trends in American education, where history is often reduced to shallow binaries—oppressors versus oppressed, and so forth. His account is far richer and more complex, and ultimately far more compelling. That’s what drew us to it.

In the 2022–23 school year we worked with some teachers to pilot the young readers edition in Jewish schools.

JS: For middle-school students?

DK: That’s right. What we discovered, however, was that there were significant obstacles to adopting it in Jewish day schools. The original version of *Land of Hope* was not written as a typical textbook. It didn’t include timelines, discussion questions, comprehension exercises, or primary sources—only the core narrative. And the text itself remained fairly challenging.

So we decided to make this a much larger project: adapting, modifying, and expanding Dr. McClay’s original work so Jewish schools would want to use it. We also added a new dimension by connecting the American narrative to the American Jewish experience and creating parallel chapters on American Jewish history. Every four to six chapters, students pause and consider what American Jews were experiencing during that same historical moment.

JS: Bill, who did you imagine as the audience for the book?

WM: As I wrote, I imagined smart, literate high school juniors.

JS: And for that kind of student encountering the subtitle “The Great American Story,” what greatness do you hope they see?

WM: The greatness lies in the fact that never before in human history had a nation done anything like what the United States did with the Declaration of Independence—declaring that all men are created equal and making that principle the aspirational

basis of national life. That is the core of our story, a watershed moment in human history.

One problem with the way we teach U.S. history is that we leave out the centuries of darkness, cruelty, and despair that preceded it, and the centuries through which the Jewish people survived and managed to thrive. I like to think there was a providential place for them in the American story. The Jewish edition of *Land of Hope*, with Daniel and Tikvah, brings that dimension out even more clearly.

JS: Daniel, in the preface to the Tikvah edition you write that Americans have lost the thread of their own history. What do you mean by that?

DK: At the national level—both for America and for the Jewish people—there’s been a move away from narrative-driven history. More recently we’ve seen the rise of a narrative of repudiation. History is taught less as a story that gives people something noble or aspirational to hold on to and more as something to reject.

The result is that we’re unmoored. Without a shared story we lose a sense of who we are, and that makes it much harder to chart a course forward.

JS: Bill, you’ve argued that history is not only a truth-telling science but also a form of memory. Why does that matter for democratic citizens?

WM: In a republic you have to return to your beginnings from time to time. Renewal requires a return to origins.

Those origins aren’t always historically verifiable in every detail. If you focus only on whether, say, the crossing of the Red Sea occurred exactly as described, you miss the point. What matters is the story’s power as a touchstone of identity. That’s why even secular Jewish families celebrate the seder—it’s a way of remembering who they are.

JS: In fact, there’s something about the Jewish experience that instructs the American one. We are who we are because we remember things in common. Americans are Americans because they remember the American story together.

WM: That’s exactly right. A community of memory is something different from a merely constitutional or legal arrangement. There’s no substitute for the sentiment of “this is my land, this is my story.”

JS: That brings us to the Tikvah edition. Bill, tell us about the Jewish adaptation.

WM: In the original *Land of Hope*, there is a philo-Jewish, even philo-Israeli undercurrent. But it’s just that, an undercurrent. I mention, for example, Truman’s identification with Cyrus.

People at Yeshiva University noticed this and were very interested in it. That led to a series of lectures and conferences, urging teachers and administrators at Jewish day schools to impart to their students the ways that the American tradition is deeply informed by the Jewish tradition. Then came a directly-related book, *The Jewish Roots of American Liberty*, which I co-edited with Rabbi Stuart Halpern, and which highlights the central importance of Jewish antecedents, such as the Exodus story, to American history and to the entire Western tradition.

That all naturally tied back into Tikvah’s idea of a Jewish edition of *Land of Hope*, which says to Jewish students and teachers, especially in Jewish day schools (where American history is sometimes neglected) that they need to engage seriously with America’s founding documents. They should read George Washington’s letter to the congregation at Newport and see that America has had not merely a policy of tolerance toward Jews, but a genuine affinity with them.

That’s one of the central messages of Tikvah’s *Land of Hope*: Jews are at home in America.

JS: Daniel, what are some concrete ways the Tikvah edition differs from the original?

DK: In volume two, for example, students study Tocqueville. Dr. McClay already writes extensively about him, so we added an extract from *Democracy in America* in which Tocqueville describes the American Sabbath, how widely and intensely it

was observed and how beneficial he believed it was. That passage speaks especially to Orthodox Jewish students.

We also added ten chapters on American Jewish history across the four volumes. These chapters aim to do for the American Jewish story what Dr. McClay does for the American story more broadly.

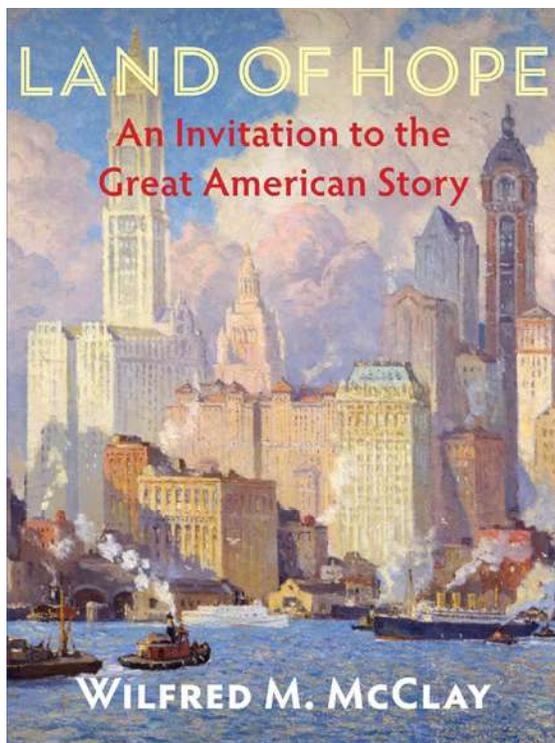
We begin with the Inquisition and trace the path of Portuguese Jews through Holland and eventually to North America. The goal is to show how the institutions and ways of life that define American Judaism emerged, and to help young Jews understand the challenges earlier generations faced.

JS: The Jewish chapters are anchored by particular figures.

Tell us about a couple.

DK: One is Menasseh ben Israel, who appealed to Oliver Cromwell to readmit Jews to England. It’s a remarkable story of partnership between Calvinist Puritans and Jews, and it ultimately helped pave the way for Jewish settlement in the Americas.

Another is Mordecai Manuel Noah, the most prominent American Jew of the early nineteenth century. He began thinking seriously about what America meant for Jewish life and even launched a project to establish a Jewish settlement on Grand Island. In his words, he hoped that there, “under the influence of perfect freedom, they may study laws—cultivate their mind, acquire liberal principles as to men and measures, and qualify themselves to direct the energies of a just and honorable government in the land of the Patriarchs.” His story illustrates how America could serve as a place of Jewish renewal.



JS: With those aspirations in mind, how should Jewish students understand their place in the American story?

DK: Jews have occupied a remarkable position in America. They have been a minority but have generally been accepted as fully American.

Our goal is to cultivate both gratitude and agency. Students should feel gratitude for the extraordinary opportunities America has provided, and they should also recognize the responsibility that comes with those opportunities—to become stewards of both the American Jewish story and the American story more broadly.

JS: What does American Jewish history reveal about America itself?

DK: Jews have often been the quintessential American “other” outside the dominant Protestant consensus. In that sense, they served as a test of the American creed from the beginning.

JS: If you’re a middle-school student encountering the Tikvah edition today, is America still a land of Jewish hope?

DK: There is real anti-Semitism in America today. But it isn’t “unprecedented,” as people often say. It has never been dominant. It remains a threat that Jews have faced, and successfully confronted, before.

One goal of this textbook is to equip young Jews with that historical knowledge and to introduce them to the heroes who faced those challenges in the past.

JS: Is there anything else you’d like to add about the project?

DK: Much of the anti-Semitism we see today is tied to debates about Zionism. We didn’t want to avoid those debates in the textbook.

Louis Brandeis gave an extraordinary speech on American Zionism addressing the charge of “dual loyalty.” He argued that mutually reinforcing loyalties—to faith, to friends, and to country—are not a problem but a strength. That perspective helps students see that these debates are not new, and that our tradition offers powerful answers.

JS: Bill, a final question. As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, what should young Americans, especially young Jewish Americans, understand about the country they will inherit?

WM: They should understand that diversity is not only about the identity categories we hear so much about today. It also includes traditional Judaism, which happens to be one of the foundations upon which Christianity itself rests.

And so they should remember that it is possible to be Jewish and unashamed, observant, and fully part of American life. ♣

Wilfred M. McClay holds the Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization at Hillsdale College. He was previously the G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma, and is the author of Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story.

Daniel Kane is senior editor of Tikvah educational initiatives.