The movement of Jewish ceremonial objects from synagogues and homes to museums was relatively recent. It was not until the late nineteenth century that they began to be systematically exhibited in expositions and specialized museums across Europe. A novel feature of the movement of Judaica to museums was that it was fostered largely by Jewish collectors and scholars. In contrast, museums’ acquisition and display of religious objects from western civilization’s other “others,” especially those in Africa, East Asia, and the Americas was led by outsiders: European explorers, colonizers, traders, and tourists.

Abt’s talk addresses several questions raised by this phenomenon: What changes in Jewish religious and social thought made the museological display of religious objects both possible and necessary? How did the emerging disciplines of ethnography, social history, and art history affect interpretations of these objects to Jewish as well as non-Jewish publics? More broadly, what are the implications of the Jewish community’s secularization of its ceremonial objects for studies of Jewish collecting and museums?