When is a project finished? Scholars, artists, and artisans of all types have grappled with this problem for generations. Plato argued that every human project was only an incomplete imitation of an immaterial ideal. The ancient rabbis, too, saw Torah study as an infinitely generative project that could never be finished. On the other hand, for them, a physical tool or vessel could be finished simply by means of “a thought” -- the craftsman’s decision to stop working on the object automatically renders the object “complete” (b. Shab. 52b). Modern theorists ply us with enticing models for thought such as eternal recurrence, différance, unfinalizability, and rhizomatic expansion that all resist and defy completion. And yet novels continue to be published, paintings continue to be framed and hung, and symphonies continue to be played (even the unfinished ones). Scholarship continues to be filed away as articles and books, completed, and are represented by static lines on a CV, with only new projects, often still in imagined form, listed as to be “in progress.”

And let’s not forget about the “in progress” rule of Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, a tenure that seems to continue indefinitely, without any finishing date in sight. This, despite massive Israeli street protests against his rule. And so for us, the concept “in progress” can prove to be both hopeful and daunting; hopeful for those scholars who experience the research and writing process as energizing; daunting for those who write under a cloud of anxiety that only lifts once the book or article is in print. And even then, the race to the next continues; and one’s life’s work often remains unfinished even after one’s death.

From the Editors
In this time of Covid lockdowns and unexpected duties of care — never mind our own illnesses — many of us have struggled with finishing projects we had imagined would be completed by now. Some of us have concluded, or come to the conclusion that projects we had hoped to finish may never be completed. Some of us may have felt daunted by the perceived gap between our own specific research interests and the enormous issues pressing down on us — also known as the “F--- 2020” phenomenon. In other cases, we have been compelled to stop working on a project and instead just put it out there before we feel it is truly finished. But even in the best of times, we leave projects unfinished. Sometimes we do so intentionally, to embrace the unresolved and open-ended, blurring the distinction between making and unmaking. Sometimes we do so unintentionally—we run into conceptual or empirical dead ends or simply run out of time.

This issue of Perspectives the AJSP celebrates the unfinished, recognizing that even a book or essay project that has just begun is an achievement. Some of these essays explore projects we have left unfinished out of necessity: unfinished research interrupted by illness, an unfinished dissertation left behind in the wake of a successful career, or a job application abandoned by scholars overwhelmed by the odds. Others ask whether something can ever be considered finished — when do we finish penning our diary? When is an interactive digital project ever finished? When have we completed our ethnographic studies of a living people? Still other essays grapple with the practical and pedagogical implications of incomplete unfinished study-abroad programs courses and interrupted learning.