

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

2007

Volume 10



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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, and *Journal of Southern History*.

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation of New York and the Gale Foundation of Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Framing Florida Jewry

by

Stephen J. Whitfield

Florida is more than the twenty-seventh state to have joined the Union. Florida is also a state of mind. But too few historians of Jewry have managed to pay much mind to the state itself. At least until fairly recently, it has been the stepchild of Jewish historiography, even though census-takers count twice as many Jews in Broward County as in Moscow, for example. The Jews who live in Miami-Fort Lauderdale, a Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area, or CMSA, outnumber the Jews who live in Paris.¹ Or take another way of measuring demographic power. The best-selling fiction in American history is Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind*, the pre-millennial dispensationalist series that has sold a staggering sixty million copies. According to its evangelical eschatology, the rapture will lift up all true Christians into heaven, leaving behind "the great tribulation," a seven-year struggle against the antichrist that will require as many as 144,000 Jews to disseminate the true knowledge of God. Yet over four times that theologically decisive number can already be found living in Florida.² It happens to have been the third state to secede from the Union (right after South Carolina and Mississippi). Yet even specialists in southern Jewish history have tended to neglect Florida. The temptation therefore cannot be resisted to proclaim that the Sunshine State has largely been forgotten (except by the future, dangling forever before those poised to make their homes or their fortunes there).

The Historiography Considered

Surprisingly, the first conclave on the subject of Florida Jewry was held slightly more than half a century ago. On February 16, 1956, a Conference on the Writing of Regional History in the South took place in Miami, sponsored by the University of Miami, the Historical Association of Southern Florida, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS). Speakers included the Librarian of Congress as well as two past presidents of the Southern Historical Association. On that occasion, a message was read from the formidable Allan Nevins, the Columbia University historian, who lamented that the broader regional context of southern Jewish history was blurred and elusive. It was presumably “so full of vitality, color and promise, [yet] remains to be told; not only are its details largely unascertained,” he acknowledged, “but even its broad outlines are not accurately known.” At that conference the JTS announced “the preparation of the history of Jews in South Florida,”³ a promise that was not kept. Indeed, even though professional historians of the next generation or so would begin serious research into southern Jews, little scholarly attention has been focused on their coreligionists in South Florida. And to highlight this neglect, the argument of this essay is framed primarily in terms of the scholarship on southern Jewry.

Less than two decades ago, for example, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience was built in Utica, Mississippi, near Jackson. Since 2000 the museum has flourished under the auspices of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, and its writ officially extends to retrieving and making accessible the Jewish heritage of an even-dozen states. Ten of them—all of which had belonged to the former Confederacy—are there, plus two that did not secede from the Union. One is Kentucky (the home state of Abraham Lincoln). The other is the Sooner State, which ranks lowest among “southern” states when pollsters ask Oklahomans whether they think of themselves as southern. No extra credit is given for guessing which state is formally outside the range of interest of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, despite the secession of Florida from the Union a century and a half ago.⁴

Isidor Cohen.

The first permanent Jewish settler in Miami arrived there in 1896. In 1912 he helped found the first Jewish congregation in Miami. In 1921 he helped write the Miami City Charter.

(Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)

The author hastens to add that *Southern Jewish History* itself is not guilty of the sin of omission. To date the nine annual issues of the journal have included the publication of two excerpted memoirs on Florida, plus two scholarly articles, and one book review dealing with historical events in that state. This is a respectable and defensible proportion of the pages allotted to scholarship on southern Jewry.

Another way of gauging the attention paid to Florida Jewry is to examine what scholars call canonization. By reprinting or commissioning articles in a field that is lively enough to attract a cohort of researchers, editors of anthologies draw from the pool of talent. Thus they present work that helps to define the contours of a field and to address its major themes and problems. The historiography of southern Jewry has been punctuated by six such anthologies.

The earliest was *Jews in the South* (1973), edited by Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson.⁵ They reprinted twenty articles, nine of which could be said to focus upon particular communities or states. One deals with Florida, or at least with a Floridian, by profiling David Levy Yulee, the first Jew to serve in the United States House of Representatives and then in the United States Senate. Leon Hühner's biographical article was originally published in 1917 (which was only a little more than two decades after the city of Miami was incorporated). Three years after the publication of *Jews in the South*, a conference was held in Richmond to revive the Southern Jewish Historical Society. The papers presented at that 1976 conference were published three years later as *Turn to the South*, edited by Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky.⁶ Their book consists of fourteen chapters, of which three could be characterized by communal specificity. One article is devoted to Florida, or at least to a Floridian: Rabbi Irving Lehrman, who had delivered one of the two scholarly papers at the Miami conference on regional history in 1956 (and who also coauthored a pioneering pamphlet, "The Jewish Community of Miami Beach"). Gladys Rosen's profile of Lehrman has the virtue of putting his career at Temple Emanu-El on Miami Beach within the setting of Jewish history in that community, a context that Hühner could not have found and therefore could hardly have been expected to portray in his article on Senator Yulee in *Jews in the South*.

A slim volume, *Jews of the South* (1984), edited by Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier with Malcolm Stern, plucked presentations from conferences of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. This anthology includes Joseph Gary Adler's article on Senator Yulee's father, "Moses Elias Levy and Attempts to Colonize Florida," the latter an impractical enterprise that was probably doomed even before Seminoles burned down Pilgrimage Plantation in 1835. An entrepreneur who was also a utopian, a slaveholder who also wrote in favor of abolitionism, Levy was an unusual figure, having come to Florida from the Caribbean, dreaming in vain of turning Pensacola into "the New York of the South." He is finally the subject of an excellent 2005 biography by C. S. Monaco.⁷ Because *Jews of the South* has only 130 pages of text,

the attention given to Florida cannot be considered disproportionately small.

But the career of one of the editors of this anthology reveals the extent of the lacunae. Proctor himself graduated from the University of Florida in 1941, earned his doctorate there in 1958, and taught for half a century in Gainesville, where he edited the *Florida Historical Quarterly* for three decades. The leading academic specialist of his generation on the history of Florida did much to promote and to publicize its past. He was also unashamedly Jewish. Yet Proctor produced only one article dedicated to the Jews of Florida. The essay is neither analytical nor synthetic but was described, when delivered at the Miami conference in 1956, as a "recital of the various personalities who emerged in Florida's history." The chronological thrust of Proctor's piece on pioneer settlements stops in 1900,⁸ an ironic date because 1900 is the start of the century when South Florida shows such cultural divergence from the rest of the South.

A more specialized anthology was published in 1997: *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*.⁹ The struggle for racial equality that crested in the 1960s was famously waged outside of Florida. Perhaps St. Augustine was the only site of a significant civil rights battle, in 1964, even though segregation was entrenched throughout the state. Only about half a century ago, in downtown Miami, a black customer was forbidden to sit down for a cup of coffee in a department store or at a five-and-ten. Even in Dade (now Miami-Dade) County businesses could not defy with impunity the laws passed by a vehemently segregationist legislature in Tallahassee. On the other hand, Miami was no Montgomery (where heroism was required to challenge white supremacy), and the dependence of South Florida on wish-you-were-here tourism helped make racial attitudes more progressive.

When bus stations in Miami—where diversity went beyond the bifurcation of race—had to put up signs that read "Reservados Para Hombres Blancos" and "Reservados Para Señoras Blancas," the irrational and anachronistic character of Jim Crow had become obvious. After all, Miami has been closer culturally as

*Blanck's Department Store.
At the northwest corner of NW Third Street and
Miami Avenue, Miami, the store was founded in 1914.
Members of the family and two employees stand in front.
(Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)*

well as geographically to Havana than to Tallahassee. Even in the 1950s, waitresses working at Woolworth's felt obliged to serve coffee to dark-skinned customers—if they spoke Spanish. However, no more in Florida than in the Deep South could violence be avoided with bombs going off or intended to go off in Jewish communal institutions in Jacksonville and Miami.¹⁰ But in such communities, rabbinical courage and consciences were not tested as they were elsewhere in the region. Florida was marginal to the crisis of civil rights in the 1960s, a status which has generated such limited scholarly interest that the state is justifiably omitted from *The Quiet Voices*.

Last year two anthologies appeared that update the process of canonization. A coeditor of *The Quiet Voices*, Mark K. Bauman has chosen sixteen articles to be reprinted in *Dixie Diaspora* (2006).¹¹ Half of them address states or local communities; and

once again Florida is presented in biographical terms in the form of Canter Brown, Jr.'s, lively revision of his 1992 article on two brothers, businessmen who had immigrated in their youth from Prussian Poland. Morris Dzialynski served as mayor of Jacksonville; Philip Dzialynski lived in smaller towns such as Madison, Bartow, and Palatka. Brown does a gallant job of setting the lives of these Jewish provincials within a setting at the outer edges of communal life. In these five anthologies, it may neither be accidental that all three chapters incorporating Florida's past are biographical, nor that all are restricted to the nineteenth century as well. They retrieve the lives of individuals, who were, in the formal classification devised by the Harvard social scientist Robert D. Putnam, *machers* rather than *schmoozers*.¹² The three aforementioned articles do not depict Jewry, but instead evoke an era before much of a community existed in the southernmost state of them all. The paradoxical fate of Florida Jewry is that, even when it became a demographic powerhouse, its authenticity and seriousness came to be doubted.

Following very quickly in the wake of *Dixie Diaspora* was *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, coedited by Marcie Cohen Ferris and by a former student of Proctor's, Mark I. Greenberg, who serves as director of the Florida Studies Center and Special Collections Department at the University of South Florida.¹³ Greenberg's own contribution to the anthology, however, is a study on Savannah. *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil* highlights no other cities, and only one other contributor focuses upon a single state (South Carolina). Florida is therefore treated no differently than other southern states, and such editorial decisions are neither unfair nor unjustified. The scholarly literature on Florida Jewry that could have been plucked from journals to reprint is meager, and neither Proctor nor any other historian has contributed in any substantial way to an examination of the meaning of the Florida Jewish past. These six anthologies on southern Jewish history signify the liveliness of the field. But a prospective historian of Florida Jewry must feel, in the phrase of Nora Ephron, like a wallflower at the orgy; and these half-dozen volumes deserve mention as reflective of the need to enlarge and enhance the geographic scope of their topic.

The need for revision becomes more pronounced when assessing the work of the most influential contemporary author to have tackled the southern Jewish experience. Eli N. Evans has been a foundation executive based in New York rather than an academic. But no one deserves more credit for persuading historians of American Jewry to resist the temptation to focus on Evans's adopted city. Until the 1973 publication of *The Provincials*, which Evans has revised and updated (most recently in the spring of 2005), too many scholars and writers never got past that last exit to Brooklyn. He put southern Jewry on the map—and not the one that Saul Steinberg drew in 1976 as a *New Yorker* cover (“View of the World from 9th Avenue”) in mocking the provincials who happened to live in Manhattan.

On the other hand, Evans has not exactly encouraged the growing ranks of historians of southern Jewry to venture much below the Suwannee River. For example, by 1997, when an expanded edition of *The Provincials* appeared, the author had ample opportunity to reflect on the staggering growth of Florida, and especially of the gold coast counties (Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach). But while noting that “major centers are growing in northern [*sic*] Florida,” he insisted that “all eyes are on the new Atlanta, the bellwether and the leading edge of the Southern Jewish revival.” An extensive separate chapter in the expanded paperback traces the resurgence of Atlanta,¹⁴ as though South Florida were not integral to the story of *The Provincials* at all.

Even if the highest population estimates are accepted, which is that about 120,000 Jews now live in Atlanta, such demographic growth represents only about a sixth of the Jewish population of the three contiguous counties along the east coast of Florida. Where do Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach Jews fit in the continuing saga of southern Jewry? In an interview that appeared on the website of the University of North Carolina Press in 2005, Evans was asked about the future. His reply was upbeat, with special attention to the impressive spike in Atlanta, Austin, Charlotte, and at the research triangle of Chapel Hill-Durham-Raleigh. He added that the “Jacksonville-Tampa-Orlando area is also growing dramatically.” As for Jewish life in any community south

of Orlando, he was silent, as though he had just been read his Miranda rights. One need not be a statistician to notice an inconsistency as well. For the purpose of counting Jews, all of Florida gets included—from 382,000, when *The Provincials* was being written, to an estimated 1.2 million in 2004.¹⁵ But when it comes to studying and reflecting upon all the Jews of Florida, suddenly half of southern Jewry vanishes.

In this respect little significant advance has been achieved over the approach taken by Harry Golden, the editor of *The Carolina Israelite*. He was arguably the most prominent Jew to have lived permanently in the postwar South—at least until prize-winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer and mobster Meyer Lansky each decided (independently) to move to Miami Beach. A pamphlet that Golden published in 1955 claimed that his “sociological generalizations” about the Jews of the Carolinas were applicable to the entire region of Dixie, “excepting of course Florida, and probably Louisiana.”¹⁶ In those two states, presumably, the Jews did not go native. The author did not try very hard to test his generalizations, however. In doing the research for his 1974 book on *Our Southern Landsman*, Golden did not bother to travel below Jacksonville (to which four pages are devoted), as though fearful of the old maps that warn: there be monsters here. He thus emulated the travels of the most famous of northern visitors in the antebellum period, Frederick Law Olmsted, whose illuminating account, *The Cotton Kingdom* (1861), gets its author down to Savannah, where he moves west across Georgia and Alabama, and then picks up a steamer in Mobile on his way to New Orleans. In two subsequent trips Olmsted also skipped Florida.¹⁷ To be sure *Our Southern Landsman* does devote two paragraphs to David Levy Yulee, and does briefly mention Miami twice (one in conjunction with the arrival of Cuban Jews after Fidel Castro took power). The inclusion of Miami does suggest, however fleetingly, that it belongs in a book on southern Jewry. But evidently the author did not consider the city important enough to observe directly.¹⁸

Perhaps the most concise account of the Jewish experience in Florida remains the sixteen pages of text serving as the historical

introduction to *Mosaic*, the catalogue to the exhibition that opened in 1991 and then toured the state under the creative leadership of Marcia K. Zerivitz, later the founding executive director of the Jewish Museum of Florida. That introduction does not profess to be interpretive or analytical. But it does succinctly depict the evolution of Florida Jewry.¹⁹ The cover photograph, taken in 1916, nonetheless reflects the elusiveness of this topic. A child is shown with a fake alligator, a prop that places him uniquely in Florida. But no Jewish symbols, objects, or foods are in sight. What is his ethnic identity? His name was Felix Glickstein, who grew up to become my dentist in Jacksonville, where I myself grew up. The ambiguity of the cover photo of the catalogue means that, valuable as it is, *Mosaic* opens rather than settles questions of the meaning of Jewish life in Florida. Not until a decade and a half later did an anthology of essays devoted to the *Jews of South Florida*, edited by Andrea Greenbaum, appear. The dust jacket photo is striking: a Torah is propped on a beach chair in the sand.

Paradigm Lost

Of course, explanations for the neglect that this essay underscores can easily be summoned. Brevity is the signature of the history of the Florida Jewish community. In 1881 a survey found only 772 Jews in the entire state. Paradoxically, much of the scholarship on Florida Jewry has been concentrated on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the demographic base was so tiny and fragile, and when its place among their coreligionists was so negligible. To be sure the dramatic belatedness and compression of communal history can be considered a microcosm of the national experience itself. When a promising young scholar named Eric Foner felt the allure of dedicating himself to the American past, his tutor at Oxford University, a specialist on the English Church of the fourteenth century, was dismissive. "In other words," Foner was warned, "you have ceased to study history."²⁰ Although no city in the U.S. is older than Saint Augustine, the state itself is a latecomer; and the national importance that Florida has exercised has accelerated only in the most recent decades. At the dawn of the twentieth century, perhaps no southern state was

drowsier. Indeed, until the end of the 1960s, even the legislature met in Tallahassee only every other year and for a session of sixty days. Why bother to do more?

Before World War II, no state seemed more remote from the acute challenges that urbanization was posing elsewhere. In 1940 no southern state had fewer residents. Yet before the end of the twentieth century, Florida became the nation's fourth most populous state, and is coming on so fast on the outside track that the prospect of outpacing even New York is no longer unimaginable. (The 2000 census revealed that the Jewish population of New York City dropped below a million for the first time in over a century.) Florida has become so appealing that it became the first state of the former Confederacy where whites born outside the region have constituted a majority. And that is not counting the 70 million tourists who visit annually.²¹

The startling suddenness of this transformation is the way that Jewish life in Florida must look as well. That topic seems so fresh and so recent that it resembles sociology or journalism more than history. Though the first Jewish cemetery in Florida began in 1857, and the first synagogue was built in the centennial year of 1876, Florida provides a supremely twentieth-century paradigm. Miami was incorporated in 1896, only a year after the first Jew arrived there. Though the Jewish community of Los Angeles got bigger, no large American Jewish community that got started later grew faster than Miami. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, only about 2,500 Jews lived in the entire state of Florida. It was soon attractive enough for a wealthy Jewish businessman, the protagonist of Abraham Cahan's novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), to visit there—and to find himself “falling in love with a rich girl.” Even though David Levinsky returns to New York, the demographic momentum of relocation was unstoppable; and by the 1950s, the Jewish population had risen to 70,000.²²

The true historic baseline was the World War II, when the Army Air Corps took over most of the hotels and assigned many northern Jews for training in the Miami area. Thousands of G.I.'s were thereby introduced to its allure—and, lo and behold, it turned out that some liked it hot. According to historian Deborah

Dash Moore, the former servicemen and their families would return to install a distinctive “mixture of glamour and grit, of elegance and *hamishness*, of ostentation and intimacy, of Old World and New.”²³ Not everyone was enthralled. On his way to Havana in 1953, the bohemian poet Allen Ginsberg called Miami a “dream of rich sick Jews.” Visiting Florida for the first time in 1949, the mandarin literary critic Edmund Wilson described Miami in terms of “unimaginable awfulness . . . on an unprecedented scale,” and dismissed Miami Beach as “a great insipid vacuum.”²⁴

To others, however, such emptiness constituted a challenge. Rabbi Leon Kronish, who arrived in 1944, called Miami Beach “the American Negev,” ready to bloom. It also became a playground for the *nouveaux riches*. In New York the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) feared that vulgarity was helping to perpetuate antisemitism and assigned one of its officials to try to regulate Jewish conduct along the following lines: “Dress conservatively. Don’t be loud in public. In Miami Beach don’t wear a mink coat over a bathing suit. . . .”²⁵ The effectiveness of this particular ADL campaign can be doubted.

Two Miami Beach landmarks were born in the 1940s. In 1940 Ben Novack arrived and, in the following decade, would conceive and build the Fontainebleau Hotel, instructing his architect, Morris Lapidus, to make it “the world’s most pretentious.” (The architecture of the Fontainebleau Hotel was famously curved, like Einstein’s universe.) In 1943 Wolfie Cohen arrived and opened up an eponymous sandwich shop on Collins Avenue and Twentieth Street. Wolfie’s whetted the appetites of both tourists and locals for “New York cheesecake” and other delicacies that were deemed even more exotic elsewhere in the South. After the war, the comforts of air-conditioning and the defeat of mosquitoes with DDT represented the conquest of nature—even in what had been advertised as paradise.²⁶ Many northerners and midwesterners found it easier to be enticed because of the interstate highway system that crisscrossed the nation beginning in the 1950s. The decision of once-famous airlines such as Pan American, Eastern, and National to locate their corporate headquarters in Miami also

Wolfe's, Lincoln Road, Miami, c. 1950.

(Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)

symbolized the ease and frequency of commercial flights to and from South Florida. Thus were its temptations facilitated.

In the 1980s no Jewish population in the nation grew faster than Broward County. In the next decade no Jewish population grew faster than Palm Beach County. Retirement communities were pivotal to such growth. With 12 percent of South Floridians living in Jewish households, demographer Ira M. Sheskin has conjectured that "only the New York metropolitan area may have a larger percentage of Jewish households than South Florida."²⁷ So conspicuous did they become that the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury has proposed to solve the Middle East imbroglio by establishing a new Jewish homeland in South Florida instead of the national refuge the Zionists created. It is disturbing to quote his addendum: "People think I'm joking when I say that." Perhaps Bradbury did not realize how superfluous such a resettlement would be, since a *moshav* was built in Israel named *Me 'Ammi*.²⁸ The startling and vertiginous growth of South Florida Jewry was reflected in the experience of Debbie Wasserman Schultz,

a 41-year-old U.S. congresswoman representing Florida's 20th District in the House of Representatives. Born on Long Island, she arrived in Gainesville for her freshman year at the University of Florida, where she met a classmate who told Wasserman that she was the first Jew whom she had ever met: "I've seen pictures, but I've never seen a real one before."²⁹

The velocity of the demographic change has therefore posed a challenge to one particular academic fashion, which is to explore what the French historian Pierre Nora defined as the sites of memory. There past and present form a continuous if contentious thread, where remembrance blends with mythology, and where institutional effort at retrieval blurs into imaginative reconstruction and even into invention. Stephen Foster, for instance, never visited Florida. But though his "Old Folks at Home" is the nostalgic state song, Nora's intergenerational project seems a little implausible when *les lieux de mémoire* are supposed to include Boynton Beach or Pembroke Pines or Sunrise, which are now part of the CMSA of Southeast Florida, the sixth largest core Jewish metropolitan population in the world (498,000). The most recent estimate of the total Jewish population of Florida is 653,435.³⁰ So huge and sudden a rise is problematic. Historians are usually less interested in the jump-starts of communal life than in the deeper continuities, and like to trace evolution and growth. Leaving the big bang to the physicists, historians prefer to detect the structural resilience beneath the surface of change. What has happened in South Florida cannot be fit into the paradigm that bewitches some students of southern Jewry.

That paradigm is basically a nineteenth-century saga. The small town is its setting. The mercantile class dominates its social structure. Moderate conservatism defines its political sensibility. Classical Reform Judaism serves as its most authentic religious expression. Germany rather than eastern Europe formed its origins. Ethnic distinctiveness was repudiated and tribalism was an affront, because everyone was supposed to be either black or white. This nineteenth-century paradigm survived through the first half of the twentieth century as well. Our southern *landsman* did not typify those whom Annie Hall's "Grammy" would have

called “real Jews,” but was ersatz, seeking to blend seamlessly into the region. Many did so with such thoroughness that their Jewishness could not have been better concealed than had they participated in a Witness Protection Program. The paradigm worked well enough to make memories of the South tenacious. Adolph S. Ochs spent most of his life in New York fashioning an ornament of the nation’s journalism. But the *Times* publisher still considered Chattanooga to be his home, and he insisted that Tennessee flora decorate his grave site.³¹

The energies that once animated small-town Jewry, however, are now virtually depleted. Take Mississippi, where its overwhelmingly rural Delta has been called “the most Southern place on earth.” Maybe 1,500 Jews call it home. That is the size of the membership roll of a Miami Beach synagogue, such as Temple Beth Sholom, when Leon Kronish served as its rabbi. Three times that number are estimated to have worshipped on the High Holy Days at another Reform synagogue, Temple Israel, which has had to hire the Miami Beach Convention Hall because so many congregants wished to welcome the New Year and to atone for their sins. To paraphrase the title of a 1960 film that is set on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale, Mississippi is basically where the goyim are. For example, in one of its towns, Brookhaven (population twelve thousand), only three Jews remain. Even though one of them, Harold Samuels, who was until recently the mayor (the third Jew in the history of that town to hold that office), could not forestall the inevitable. Small-town southern Jewry is toast.³²

Fewer Jews live in Arkansas (under two thousand) than belong to the largest synagogues in South Florida. (Whether all the worshippers actually pay their dues cannot be verified.) The glum prospects for mythic locales such as the Mississippi Delta are symbolized in the history of what became Stein Mart, which had been based in Greenville. Stein’s Self Service Store was the biggest merchandising emporium in the entire Delta, covering an entire city block, with mouthwatering discounts promised on discards from Manhattan operations such as Saks Fifth Avenue. But in 1984 Jay Stein, the grandson of the founder, moved corporate

headquarters from Greenville to Jacksonville, Florida. By the dawn of the new century, as Stein Mart was racking up \$1.2 billion in sales earned in 260 stores,³³ the Delta origins of the company had receded into the distant past.

One important *lieu de mémoire* of the former Confederacy is Montgomery, where southern independence was declared early in 1861. Only about 1,200 Jews live there now, among perhaps 9,000 in the entire state of Alabama. (In contrast the Jewish population of Fort Myers, Florida, is only slightly smaller.) Little remains of the texture of the paradigmatic southern Jewish experience. In the hamlets that once shaped it, the tumbleweeds blow down the main streets where dry-goods stores and hardware stores always seemed open for business. What is left are decayed mansions, defunct synagogues, cemeteries where an occasional fresh grave has been dug (and maybe the local Chabad house).

Oddly enough the power of the paradigm has ensured that southern Jewry historiography has flourished. This paradox needs to be emphasized. The Southern Jewish Historical Society was revived just early enough to capture what was extant before it would become extinct, as Macy Hart, the president of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, has poignantly phrased it. The academic panels and programs of the society keep expanding, as do the pages of its annual scholarly journal. With this 2007 issue, *Southern Jewish History* will turn ten years old; admittedly its editorial stance is hardly committed to validating the paradigm. Nevertheless, if present rates of growth can be sustained, more scholars might be investigating the Jewry emblematic of the region's small towns than ever actually lived in them.

In this context the geographical anomaly of Florida helps to explain the neglect of its Jews. As though an aberration, Florida is often displaced from the South. Such disarray is peculiar because Florida has exhibited many characteristics that historians have taken to be regional tics. A slave state became a segregationist state and produced its share of politicians who scorned the Constitutional pledge of equal rights. Such officials were generally

representative of their constituents. In the Democratic Party's Senatorial primary in 1950, George Smathers, a graduate of the University of Florida's law school, vowed to provide legal help *pro bono* to cops charged with brutalizing any of the state's black citizens. (Support your local police.) He won the primary and was of course elected to the U.S. Senate, where he joined Spessard Holland, who would later describe himself as a "hopeless reactionary."³⁴

American historians usually peg the 1920s as the apogee of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1927, for example, it was natural for the Klan to provide a float in Miami's Fourth of July parade. The national decline of the KKK began by the end of that decade. But the Invisible Empire hardly vanished in Florida, where members continued serving as poll watchers in close elections, became important donors and supporters of politicians, got appointed as state investigators of racial crimes, and perhaps most significantly belonged to local police forces. In 1952 the KKK's state president—a Grand Dragon—addressed a meeting of the Florida Sheriffs' Association and was applauded for denouncing a civil rights worker who had recently been murdered. Not until the 1970s did police forces seek to eliminate the Klansmen working in their midst. Raymond A. Mohl's monograph on the postwar civil rights struggle in Miami is a reminder of how southern even that city was. Although 20,000 black Baptists managed to hold a convention on Miami Beach in 1953, Jewish hotel owners and restaurateurs who operated there were generally reluctant to lower barriers against black patrons and customers, and did not finally and consistently do so until the 1970s.³⁵ By then some leftist Jewish activists who had moved from the North had worked hard to breathe life into the egalitarian promise that the founders of the Republic had enunciated.

What is southern has been determined by attitudes and not merely by latitudes. The region has been defined not only by geography but also by ideological commitment through the filter of self-consciousness. White southerners are people who identify themselves as such. For them the Stars and Bars is not merely a flag of convenience. The distinctiveness of the region, which

*Klan in Fourth of July Parade, 1927, Miami.
The Klan was a very public presence in Florida,
participating actively in many community events.
(Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach.)*

outsiders so often sense, makes it difficult for South Florida Jews to imagine themselves as southerners. Puzzlement has not been confined to Jews as recorded in the urgent question that the Canadian Shreve McCannon poses as a Harvard undergraduate in the fall of 1909 to his Mississippi roommate, Quentin Compson: "Tell about the South. What's it like there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."³⁶ Among northern Jews the sense of strangeness and even of weirdness has endured. That reputation was most recently encapsulated in a conversation between Bill Clinton and a former *New Yorker* editor, Robert Gottlieb, whom he picked to edit his presidential memoirs. After Clinton submitted a

couple of hundred pages on his Arkansas boyhood, Gottlieb phoned the author to tell him: "I really like this." "Well, you got any questions?" "Just one." "What is it?" "Did you know any *sane* people as a child?" Gottlieb wondered. Clinton replied: "No, but neither did anybody else. I was just paying attention more than most people."³⁷

In what was once the most thoroughly Protestant slice of the Western Hemisphere, difference inevitably stood out. Homogeneity heightened the difficulty of figuring out if Jews were merely white, or whether they were also distinctive in ways that could be not fully absorbed or accepted. The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (1980), for example, includes the category of White Southerners, but of course the reference work also includes Jews, who could be appreciated and even assimilated. But sometimes their status as a religious minority was accentuated. A group of country songwriters and singers was once gathered at Johnny Cash's home near Nashville, a locale famous for its barbecue. Suddenly Joe Carter (a cousin of Cash's wife June Carter) discerned a certain division among the musicians. He asked Bob Dylan: "You don't eat pork, do you?" The young outsider's reply ("Uh, no, sir, I don't") offered a very faint echo of the divergence among the merchants of early modern Venice,³⁸ as Shylock defines the rules of engagement in his encounter with Bassanio: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you . . . but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you" (I:3). I'll jam with you. I'll compose music for you. I'll even sing a duet with you on the *Nashville Skyline* album. But if you insist on wolfing down *chazerai* from the local Pig 'n' Whistle, I won't eat with you. Difference could play out multifariously, however, in South Florida, where the Eden Roc Hotel has featured a kosher Chinese restaurant.³⁹

When civil rights activists directly challenged white supremacy, some Jews in the Deep South felt compelled to become more vociferous in their regional allegiances. For example, a Jewish plumbing contractor in Birmingham named Bernard Lewis was fond of reassuring the city's segregationist mayor, Art Hanes, and his gentile drinking buddies: "It wasn't the Birmingham Jews who

*Coronado Hotel brochure,
(detail), c. 1940.
One of Miami Beach's beachfront
hotels that openly advertised
for a "gentile clientele."
(Courtesy of the Jewish Museum
of Florida, Miami Beach.)*

killed Jesus. It was the Miami Jews."⁴⁰ This eccentric reading of the New Testament did at least suggest the extent to which the Miami Jews could appear alien to the South for much of its twentieth-century history. Birmingham Jews tried hard to fit in to the local environment. Miami Jews *altered* their environment instead. Currently they are among the least likely to jettison religious particularity. They rank near the top, in comparison to others cities, in the proportion that put a mezuzah on the front door, and that claim to keep kosher outside as well as inside the home. Even the intermarriage rate is significantly lower than elsewhere,⁴¹ which makes Miami one of the least southern places on earth.

By the final decade of the twentieth century, only half the residents of Florida were willing to call themselves southerners. By a slight margin, even more Oklahomans were willing to designate themselves as southerners than were Floridians.⁴² It is a safe guess that the proportion of Jews in Florida who call themselves southerners is significantly lower than the state's average of 51 percent, maybe even coming in under radar. It is unlikely that, to themselves, they feel like genuine legatees of the land of cotton; old times there were long forgotten. (The state doesn't even offer sites of major Civil War battles to visit; there were none.) The central institution of nineteenth-century southern Jewry—the general store—could be contrasted with a typical institution of modern Florida Jewry: Century Village. Before there were general stores, there were peddlers. Eli Evans once asked an elderly Jew in a very obscure crossroads town in North Carolina why he had settled there. The answer was probably apocryphal, but here is the reply: "The horse died."⁴³ Contrast the necessary means of transportation in South Florida, where the archetypal joke has two elderly women in a car. "Sadie," one exclaims, "you just ran through a red light!" "But Esther," Sadie replies, "I thought *you* were driving." Small-town southern Jews had to listen to rebel yells; Florida has echoed to the sounds of *oy vey*. Such contrasts need not be infinitely extended.

Culture is the rationale offered by Eli Evans and by the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience for omitting South Florida from consideration. That view is shared by Carolyn Lipson-Walker, who is the leading student of southern Jewish folklore. (Scratch that; she's actually the *only* student of southern Jewish folklore.) Her unpublished doctoral dissertation argues that southern Jewry has been marked by "self-perceived unity and a common set of traditions . . . and [a] worldview *not shared by others*." Lipson-Walker warns, however: "I am excluding the Jews of Southern Florida from this study because they have, for the most part, merely transplanted their Northern culture to a warmer climate."⁴⁴ Such an opinion was more generally recorded as early as 1939 in the WPA guide to the state: "Its northern area is strictly southern and its southern area definitely northern."⁴⁵

Some reinforcement of this claim also comes from the coeditor of *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, Marcie Cohen Ferris, who is also the associate director of the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies at Chapel Hill. On southern Jewish foodways, she is the leading authority. (Scratch that; she is actually the *only* authority.) Her recent book, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo*, which converts the kitchen into a portal to the southern Jewish past, devotes virtually no attention to Florida. Of those whom she interviewed, only two informants can be identified as Floridians—and one, Paula Shapiro Zielonka, was born and raised in Shreveport before studying at Newcomb College in New Orleans.

The author of *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* describes “the Jewish landscape in the South” as “constantly changing. While some Jewish communities in the Sunbelt are growing, being a Jewish southerner still requires a level of commitment and a consciousness of identity that sets this region apart from others.”⁴⁶ How that self-definition might be determined can be hazy. Nor is it obvious that newcomers to North Carolina’s research triangle, or even Jews residing in Austin, show less of that “level of commitment” than, say, inhabitants of Fort Lauderdale. The continuities as well as the contours of southern identity remain elusive. How evident is the literary lineage that a Texan like “Kinky” Friedman could trace all the way back to the first notable southern Jewish poet, Penina Möise of Charleston? Texas seems different from, say, South Carolina, where a black Jew, Reuben Morris Greenberg, currently serves as the police chief of Charleston. So implausible a top cop raises the question of what still sets the region apart from the rest of America. Or take Houston. Is such a city, which is associated with oil rather than with cotton, supposed to be more southern than, say, Miami, which heavily pivots on tourism but which is even less associated with cotton?

If Miami seems so discontinuous from a past that exalted the desire to live and die in Dixie, that may well be because that nineteenth-century paradigm was so binary. It assumed that the dichotomy between black and white was decisive. Not that contemporary Miami has transcended division. But it is more obviously associated not with race but with class,

with the widening gap between haves and have-nots. That is the split that has mattered. The wealthiest community in the U.S. can be found on Fisher Island, embedded in a city that suffers from the nation's third-worst poverty rate. Throughout the state twice as many children live in poverty as do the elderly. Nor can many students in the Miami-Dade public schools, where the high school graduation rate is 45 percent, expect to afford homes in a metropolitan area that has recently brandished one of the country's highest house prices (a staggering median of \$372,000).⁴⁷

Such have been the repercussions of a civic failure to realize that in dreams begin responsibilities. The glad hand that for a century Florida residents have extended to tourists and to land developers, to senescent retirees and to spring-break hedonists has been so accepted that the consequences have been appalling: dangerous environmental degradation, maddening traffic congestion, and the sort of sprawl that implies a fervent commitment to ugliness. The much-touted attractions of the state—its sublime and tranquil beauty, its glistening beaches and its come-hither climate—have become all too apparent. A stunning growth in population has facilitated not only spectacular prosperity but also resulted in the consequences of uncontrolled growth.

A Plea for Inclusion

However these problems can or might be resolved, and wherever the borders of the South are drawn, the incessant change to which Marcie Cohen Ferris referred means that the former Confederacy has become much less homogenous and cohesive. That is why it is permissible to speculate that *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* may be among the last major scholarly books covering the expanse of southern Jewry that can get away with ignoring Florida. Indeed the combustible heterogeneity of Florida casts some doubt on the very meaning of regionalism, the organizing principle to which many an American historian and social scientist has subscribed. Texas can at least be inserted into the West. But if Florida does not belong to a region that includes, say, Alabama or Arkansas, where does this behemoth fit?

A partial solution has been devised by the social historian responsible for the fullest scholarly account of Miami. Deborah Dash Moore's *To the Golden Cities* makes no effort to place the city within the rest of Florida, much less within the region, but instead twins Miami with Los Angeles. She emphasizes the similarities between the two Jewish communities divided by a continent. What links them is obviously not the geographical propinquity with which regionalists wrestle, but rather the challenges and responses that the Sunbelt generates. Its demographic importance is undeniable. The Sunbelt has reshaped the landscape of American Jewry, as Mort Sahl observed as early as the 1950s when he used a pro-Zionist allusion to remark of Palm Springs: "You've got to admire those people, carving out a nation in the desert."

But the Sunbelt is too broad a concept, with too much variation within it to be analytically useful. The neo-populist Jim Hightower, who hailed from Denison, Texas, on the banks of the Red River, claimed that "we used to say of Arkansas that God created it so that the Okies would have someone to look down on."⁴⁸ The notion of the Sunbelt ignores such tensions, and also ignores the persistence of regional distinctiveness. Florida should still be stuck, somehow, into the South that was long preceded by the adjective "solid," even though such an emplacement raises the question of how the archetypal features of regional identity are thereby altered – and even rendered suspect.

To make Florida part of the larger story of southern Jewry is to acknowledge the force of historical evolution in defining Dixie, which has long exalted order, stability, and tradition. But opposition to change is truly a lost cause. The South is hardly frozen in the antebellum plantation legend and has come to terms with the actualities of diversity and with the constrictions of homogeneity. Only about a tenth of white southerners own a Confederate flag anyway, and even fewer display it.⁴⁹ The opportunity to include South Florida Jewry in the saga of the southern experience has never been less obstructed. Indeed, already a bit more than half a century ago, a past president of the Southern Historical Association, Dr. Thomas D. Clark of the University of Kentucky, told those convening in Miami: "Here, the Jewish people have

found an hospitable place; and their story is much more now a part of ongoing Southern history than it has ever been in the past."⁵⁰

He was right. By incorporating the dynamism of South Florida into the annals of southern Jewry, historians and other scholars would enhance their understanding of the richness, complexity, and pungency of their subject, and would make students of the South itself more appreciative of the inclusiveness and vitality of their region as well.

Appendix

Editor's Note: Because of the historiographical issues that the author raises in this article, the editor offers the following bibliography of additional works devoted to Florida Jewry.

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NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Gimmelstob Symposium in Judaic Studies, "The Jews of Florida: A Rich History, an Evolving Identity," held at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, January 14–15, 2007. The author is very grateful to Dr. Frederick E. Greenspahn for an invitation to participate in that symposium, and to Dr. Mark K. Bauman for his considerable and constructive editorial advice thereafter.

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