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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel B. Heimovics, *Managing Editor*

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Why Study Southern Jewish History?*

by

Gary P. Zola

In her fine dissertation on Jewish life in the South, Carolyn Lipson-Walker cites a delightful yarn about three Jewish mothers from New York who were bragging about how successful their sons had become. The first lady said: "my son has been quite successful in his career. He travels all the time for his work."

"Where does he travel?" the other two ask.

"He always travels to the West Coast," she tells them.

Not to be outdone, the second lady spoke up: "Thank God, my son is doing quite well, too. He does consulting work all over the country."

"Where does he consult?" the other two ask.

"Typically, he is asked to consult on the West Coast."

Finally, the third mother chimes in: "Well, thank God, my son is doing very well, too," she exulted. "He is a scholar and he lectures all over the South!"

"Where is the South?" the two New York matrons ask.

"Oh, its somewhere on the West Coast, too!"¹

* * *

As it is with all satire, this spoof employs irony to expose folly. In this case, the sally's target is a certain brand of

* This paper is based on an address that was given to the plenum of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, which met in Hot Springs, Arkansas, November 15, 1997.

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parochialism that characterizes the way in which many northern Jews view the South in general and, particularly, Jewish life in the South. In and of itself northern disregard for the South is a long and interesting story. Many historians assert that it was the abolitionist movement that successfully promulgated the notion that southern life was essentially an immoral culture. Others contended that the roots of the South's "benightedness" may actually be traced back to the early colonial period when the South as a region was frequently criticized for being more primitive, more violent, and lazier than the other colonial regions.²

Like other southern citizens, southern Jews, too, have frequently been disparaged by their co-religionists in the North. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, northern Jews were inclined to stereotype their brothers and sisters in Dixie as "bigoted and unsophisticated" southern toadies who were "not real Jews." The moral imperiousness of northern Jews, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, set the teeth of many southern Jews on edge. One southern Jew expressed his annoyance by grumbling: "They [northern Jews] think the Jews of the South are nothing and automatically assume you are George Wallace and worse. . ." ³

Long before the advent of the civil rights era southern Jews discerned this hauteur from their northern co-religionists, and their expressions of resentment can be found in the annals of history. In 1879, a colorful rabbi, E. B. M. Browne (1844-1928), criticized the leadership of the nation's first congregational alliance, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), because of what he perceived to be its near total disregard for southern Jewry. Another southern Jewish critic from Canton, Mississippi, advised his congregation in the pages of the *Jewish South* not to join the UAHC (which he sneeringly labeled the "Union of Happy American Cacklers") "until they shall evidence by their works they have an interest in our section."⁴

One of the most prominent chroniclers of Jewish life in the South, Eli Evans, noted that "non-southerners are stunned to learn that the South ever had any Jews at all." The tendency to ignore or overlook Jews who live west of the Alleghenies and east of the

Rockies persists. A cursory glance at the tables of contents for three of the most popular national Jewish magazines, *Commentary*, *Moment*, and *Tikkun*, underscores the contemporary relevance of Evans's observation. The roster of the editorial board or the list of contributing essayists seldom includes a Jewish name from the South or Midwest. Over the past three years, for example, writers residing in the South and Midwest regions of the United States comprised approximately 12 percent of the essays published in these magazines despite the fact that southern and midwestern Jewry constitute nearly 25 percent of the entire Jewish population in the United States.⁵

Moment magazine, for instance, regularly features two or three guest contributors who write essay/commentaries that deal with a diverse array of contemporary Jewish concerns. Not one of these commentators, however, lives or works between the coasts. This phenomenon is certainly no conspiracy. After all, 75 percent of United States Jewry lives in the major population centers of the eastern and western seaboard. Yet the Jewish "minority" that lives between the Atlantic and Pacific is hardly insubstantial; Jewish life in the Midwest and South has a vitality and relevance all its own. It should come as no surprise to *Moment's* editorial staff (or the editorial staffs of other Jewish journals seeking a national Jewish following) that at least some southern and midwestern subscribers might be wondering why the capable Jewish leaders who live in cities like Atlanta, Austin, Charlotte, or Memphis—a partial list of the southern metropolises with Jewish populations that have soared over the last two decades—rarely appear in the pages of their publications.⁶

Interestingly, this same habit manifests itself in the pages of *Reform Judaism*, the official publication of the UAHC, the umbrella organization of Reform Judaism in North America. Despite the fact that Reform Judaism constitutes the dominant expression of religious Judaism in the southern and midwestern regions of the United States, the magazine's roster of articles is written almost entirely by Reform Jewish leaders who live on either the eastern or western seaboard.⁷

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Assessing the significance of southern Jewry's overall contribution to the American Jewish experience remains a controversial topic to this day. Recently, Moses Rischin of San Francisco State University, published an essay reviewing four of Jacob Rader Marcus's (1896–1995) last publications. In it, Rischin labeled Marcus, the undisputed "father" of the field and "dean" of American Jewish historians, as the "historian-archivist of Jewish Middle America." This is a rather surprising moniker for an American Jewish historian like Marcus. After all, had not Marcus been the nonpareil student of American Jewry? His influence on the field has literally been immeasurable. By founding the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, he established an invaluable academic center dedicated to the process of gathering and preserving the primary documents that comprise the heart of academic research relating to the study of the American Jewish experience. So why would Rischin dub Marcus the "historian-archivist of Jewish Middle America"?⁸

Rischin based his designation on one of Marcus's many colorful aphorisms that appeared in the Preface to his magnum opus, *United States Jewry*: "I am . . . committed to the thesis," Marcus wrote, "that the story of the Jew in this land, lies not in the vertical eminence of the few, but in the horizontal spread of the many."⁹

For Marcus, the science of history was not comparable to a physical science. It was "a record of human behavior and human experience." By extension then, Marcus saw American Jewish history as the *cumulative* record of the Jewish experience on American soil.¹⁰

As one scholar correctly noted: "American Jewish history is not New York City Jewish history writ large." In other words, to fully and accurately reconstruct an account of the Jewish experience in America, the skilled historian must not concentrate exclusively on the large urban Jewish centers wherein live the *eminent* Jews who have, unquestionably, influenced the course of Jewish history. Although the historian of the American Jewish experience must never minimize the weighty significance of the nation's major Jewish population centers, it is nevertheless vitally

important for scholars to look beyond Jewry's megalopolitan communities in order to examine the workings of small communities and individual Jews of all varieties who collectively contribute to the totality we call American Jewry. This is what Marcus meant when he committed himself to the thesis that a truthful story of the American Jew must emerge from "the horizontal spread of the many" and not from the "eminence of the few."¹¹

Once Marcus's methodological approach has been properly explicated, does it necessarily follow that the study of the southern Jewish experience epitomizes the "horizontal spread" of which Dr. Marcus wrote? Could it not be argued that Jewish existence in the South is so fundamentally divergent from so-called mainstream Jewish life in the United States that its history sheds little light on the story of United States Jewry? In his landmark study on southern life, W. J. Cash noted that both northerners and southerners agree that the South is "another land." For some, this *otherness* is not benign but rather contemptible. Historian Howard Zinn recognized that for some this so-called "southern exceptionalism" is un-American: "a sport, a freak, an inexplicable variant from the national norm[,] . . . a stranger to the nation."¹²

The same alien nature of the South as a region has also affected southern Jewry. Frequently, northern Jews take it for granted that the distinctive quality of Jewish life in the South is fundamentally an anomaly. Jewish life in the South has long had to subsist with an extraordinarily challenging demography; only in the South has so large a percentage of the overall Jewish population resided in small, relatively isolated towns and rural settings that Eli Evans has aptly described as "the provincials."¹³

Consider the following demographics: of the twelve states customarily included in the Land of Dixie, four—one third of the total—(Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina) do not contain even one Jewish urban center numbering more than 4,000 Jewish souls, and most are much smaller than even 4,000. In another four states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Tennessee), between 40 and 50 percent of the Jewish population live in communities that number less than 1,000 Jewish citizens. Only four of the twelve southern states (Kentucky, Flor-

ida, Texas, and Virginia) have more than 60 percent of their total Jewish community living in enclaves that number 4,000 Jews or more.¹⁴

With so large a percentage of southern Jews living as “provincials,” does it necessarily follow that the small-town essence of Jewish life in the South is that which informs this region’s distinctive Jewish identity? To be sure, the nature of Jewish life in a small-town America, regardless of the region, has many commonalities.¹⁵ There can be little doubt that a significant aspect of southern Jewry’s regional identity can be traced to the fact that such a large percentage of the region’s Jewry lives in a small-town milieu. Yet the character of Jewish life in the South is not shaped entirely by this reality. Southern Jewry has been, and remains to this day, distinctive because of how its Jewish residents have attuned themselves to the region’s unique history, culture and state-of-mind. As one historian noted, “because of the vast area that is the South . . . [southern] Jews are not a cohesive community in the traditional sense of a small ethnic group. It would be more apt to label [southern] Jews as ‘a temporary recurring community’ within a region.”¹⁶

Still, the history of southern Jewry may be a fetching topic as an oddity or an intriguing curiosity but not necessarily as a significant theme in the history of the Jew in America. Indeed, it is entirely appropriate for a student to inquire: what use is there in the study of southern Jewish history?

* * *

Let us consider four principle arguments that historians have used in responding to the more fundamental question: Why study history? These justifications provide a helpful framework in addressing our more specific query: Why study southern Jewish history?¹⁷

The first possible response to this query suggests that the story of events past can be put to good use in our own day and age. Some have called this rationale the *utilitarian justification*. Accordingly, the study of history enables us to identify repetitive patterns of human behavior. Once we have discerned these patterns, we can learn both from past successes as well as

from bygone failures. The “utilitarian justification” could certainly validate the study of southern Jewish history because southern Jewish history offers a useful paradigm for the preservation of Jewish life in the face of daunting societal challenges.

Irrespective of their region of domicile, many American Jews share a much discussed concern: will Jewish communal life survive in the United States? Whether they live in the North, the South, the Midwest, or the West, a considerable number of American Jews worry about the numerous sociological challenges that appear to threaten the future of Judaism's corporate viability in America. Jews in the United States are disaffiliating, intermarrying, converting out, assimilating, aging, and Jewishly unschooled. Yet southern Jews—especially those who lived in the Deep South—have long faced many of these same social challenges, and the history of what many consider to be a Jewishly disadvantaged region like the South may prove useful to those who are seeking ways to preserve the vibrancy of Jewish communal life in North America.

In order to maintain their Jewish identities in the deep South's most remote localities, southern Jews learned by experience that they must remain linked to a broader regional community. Jews in the South understood that unless they continually created their own Jewish community, the future of Jewish life in their region would be at risk. Thus we know that Jews from Kaplan, Franklin, and Morgan City, Louisiana, willingly commuted to New Iberia in order to attend Shabbat services. Similarly, the handful of Jewish families who lived in Dumas and Dermott, Arkansas, drove to McGehee in order to participate in a synagogue. By gathering within the provinces, southern Jews have managed to establish and sustain a remarkable number of synagogues. In fact, not too many years ago, one demographer noted that southern Jews maintained one synagogue for every 700 Jewish souls while in other regions of the country there was one congregation for every 3,000.¹⁸

Today the essential character of Jewish life in the South seems to be in the midst of a transformation; southern Jewish

baby boomers have abandoned their isolated rural hometowns in the South in favor of life in larger urban centers. Consequently, many of the Jewish small-town communities in the deep South have dried up. The Jewish populations of several large urban centers, on the other hand, have exploded. Still, the basic elements that have long typified Jewish life in the South prevail; it is a region that contains a small, thinly dispersed Jewish population that still tends to rely heavily on interregional collaboration in order to meet their Jewish needs. It is a Jewish lifestyle that differs, as one scholar observed, “both qualitatively and quantitatively from that of northern Jewry,” and it is a *modus vivendi* that Jews who live in the sprawling megalopolitan centers on the coasts find quite difficult to fathom.¹⁹

Yet it may well be that this distinctive mode of existence has enabled the Jews of the South to fulfill their self-assigned role as custodians of an ancient tradition in spite of the many inharmonious societal realities that have characterized that particular section of the nation. The maintenance of a communal identification—the dogged attempt to preserve a civic link with other Jews—functions as a critical element in realizing what has of late been called “Jewish continuity.” In reflecting on the nature of Jewish life in the United States, Jacob Marcus once observed that the story of the Jew in this land is not a series of unrelated histories. “The leitmotif of Jewish history in this country,” Marcus wrote, “is the constant attempt, the determination, to create and further a distinct community with its synagogues, its schools, its charities. It is as simple as that. In Jewry where there is no community there is no history.”²⁰

One purpose, then, to the study of southern Jewish history derives from the remarkable patterns of Jewish identification and systems of communal association that can be instructive to all of American Jewry as it seeks to address its own contemporary challenges:

First, the demographic realities noted above have typically fostered a high level of regional collaboration among southern Jews. In cities where large numbers of Jews reside, the need for Jewish communal cooperation is much less prevalent. The

panoply of communal agencies and institutions, so commonplace in the larger Jewish population centers, has become a familiar characteristic of Jewish life in North America. Jews living in large urban centers boasting thousands of Jewish residents created synagogues and organizations that served their religious or communal needs. If one synagogue failed to meet the religious needs of its Jewish citizens, competing institutions arose to fill the gap. In this sense, the larger the Jewish community, the more unnecessary it was for the Jewish residents to work collaboratively. Jewish demographics in the South, particularly in small-town Dixie, mitigated this natural tendency toward institutional proliferation. Consequently, southern Jews rarely enjoyed the luxury of a Jewish institutional smorgasbord to which the Jews living in the coastal megalopolises have become so accustomed.²¹

Second, southern Jews have long experienced the challenge presented to them by the reality of diminishing communal resources. Typically, the larger the Jewish community, the easier it is to attract Jewish teachers, preachers, communal workers as well as Jewish bookstores, kosher butchers, and the like. These Jewish amenities were rarely available to the Jews who lived in small, isolated towns throughout the South. Consequently, southern Jews tended to foster a regional community whenever the local community was unable to provide its Jews with the accouterments of day-to-day Jewish life.

There are many examples of how regional collaboration among southern Jews enabled them to access Jewish resources even if they were not close at hand. Many of these practices still await the scholarly attention of historians and social scientists. Newspapers that addressed the interests of the Jewish South like Isaac M. Wise's *Israelite*, E. B. M. Browne's *The Jewish South* and, later, the *Southern Israelite*, strengthened the regional ties that united the Jews of the South. Southern rabbis, too, collaborated on a regional basis. In 1884, five years prior to the establishment of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, southern rabbis decided to create a regional rabbinical association called the Conference of Rabbis of Southern Congregations. This organization enabled them to collaborate on the development of curricula

for Jewish education and exchange views on a variety of contemporary communal issues they were facing in their own locale. In 1906, nearly two decades after the founding of the CCAR, the southern rabbis resurrected the idea of a regional rabbinical association under the name: Southern Rabbinical Conference. One of the conference organizers, Rabbi Henry Barnstein of Houston, justified the establishment of a regional rabbinical organization by suggesting that the CCAR did not fully meet the needs of southern colleagues.²²

Most southern Jews were compelled to rely on regional and not local experts. Replicating the practice of other religious denominations, southern Jews cultivated a system of *circuit-preaching* so that the Jewish needs of many isolated communities that were spread across a large geographical area could be served. In their functioning as *circuit-preachers*, the influence of local rabbis and scholars such as James Gutheim, Max Heller, Jacob Voorsanger, Henry Cohen, David Marx and Tobias Geffen, to name but a few, was felt throughout the South. In addition to the impact of the circuit-preachers, literally dozens of small-town synagogues throughout the South were able to maintain their own local Jewish presence over the course of many decades with help from the bi-weekly visits of rabbinical students from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.²³

Southern Jews willingly traveled long distances in order to participate in a wide array of regional gatherings that brought Jewish families and friends into periodic contact with one another. Around the World War II era, southern Jews instituted the concept of regional *courtship weekends*. These events brought together Jewish teenagers from across the South in the hope of strengthening their bond with other Jews and with Jewish life. The city of Birmingham, Alabama, sponsored an event known as Jubilee; the Falcon Picnic was held in Montgomery, Alabama; the Ballyhoo took place in Atlanta; and the Hollydays was an annual tradition in Columbus, Georgia.²⁴

This same regional spirit influenced the way southern Jews conducted their business. The Alsatian Jews who settled the Lou-

isiana area, for example, came to the South after having lived and worked in a comparable regional commercial structure that was indigenous to rural Jewish life in the Alsace-Lorraine region of southwestern Germany. These Jews made good use of their experience and Jewish businessmen in the commercial sectors of New Orleans interacted repeatedly with co-religionists who lived all across rural Louisiana. In addition to these regional business interactions, southern Jews supported regional lodges and orphanages under the aegis of *B'nai B'rith* just as they contributed to regional fundraising projects for other philanthropic causes such as the establishment of regional Jewish hospitals. A young Jewish woman who grew up in the South expressed her perception of these regional bonds by noting: "It was like you didn't just live in the your own town. You lived in the entire South."²⁵

The distinctive relationship between Jews and non-Jews throughout the South constitutes a third example of southern Jewish history's instructional attributes. Jews living outside of the South tend to assume that all of Dixieland was awash with virulent anti-Semitism. When Joe Marks suggested that his family move from New York to Georgia, his wife informed him she had no interest in moving to a region of "savages" where all they did was "beat up Jews." Despite the fact that southern Jews living in the Bible Belt confronted periodic bouts of intense bigotry and religious prejudice, it is also true that special bonds of affection and cooperation linked southern Jews and their gentile neighbors. Southern rabbis, in particular, played a pivotal role in profiling their community to the non-Jewish society at-large. Some southern rabbis established high-profile friendships with prominent members of the Christian clergy, and these relationships became exemplars to the entire community.²⁶

No matter how southern a Jewish citizen may have become, however, his non-Jewish compatriots rarely allowed him to forget his Jewish roots. The highly regarded lawyer and community leader, Joseph M. Proskauer, grew up in Mobile, Alabama, believing that he "lived in a wonderful world where [he] could love and be loved and all was 'right as right could be.'" In the next breath, Proskauer recalled being beat up in high school for being a

“Christ killer.” This same dichotomy afflicted southern Jews who entered the realm of politics; David Yulee and Judah P. Benjamin earned the public’s confidence and respect as competent statesmen but, simultaneously, their compeers rarely allowed them to forget their Jewish pedigree.²⁷

Finally, the demographic decline of southern Jewry in numerous towns and hamlets that once boasted noteworthy Jewish communities has, paradoxically, become a stimulant for upholding the region’s future by the very act of preserving its past. The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, established in 1989, serves today as a regional resource for rescuing and protecting artifacts from endangered Jewish communities throughout the South. Through the museum and its work, the history of now dormant Jewish communities will be written and conserved by Jews who live in other parts of the region.²⁸

The history of Jewish life in the South, then, teaches us a clearly discernable pattern of behavior that, when studied, may prove useful in helping contemporary American Jewry address many of its communal woes. Southern Jewish history demonstrates that a viable, committed, and resolute Jewry can indeed endure even in the face of ostensibly ominous societal conditions: assimilation, intermarriage, a shrinking demography and so forth. Even without the numerical advantages attendant to a large Jewish population base, and even without the communal benefits that derive from a propinquity of elaborate Jewish communal institutions, Jews persist in developing imaginative and enterprising modes of perseverance. As long as there is deep attachment to preserving the rudiments of a Jewish religious community, Jewish identity endures.

* * *

A second response to the question, *why study southern Jewish history?* has been called by some the *inspirational* rationale. According to this line of reasoning, knowledge of the past constitutes an essential element in a collective or a communal consciousness because the efforts and accomplishments of our forbears inspire us to face the challenges of our own day and age. American historian Allan Nevins observed that the study of

history functions as a source of inspiration “by giving peoples a sense of continuity in all of their efforts, and by chronicling immortal worth, it confers upon them both a consciousness of their unity, and a feeling of the importance of human achievement.”²⁹

By applying Nevins's insight, we see that, in addition to the many utilitarian functions noted above, the study of southern Jewish history can provide a sense of continuity with those Jews who preceded us, those who occupied our space before us. It provides us with an understanding of the past—an understanding that can make us appreciative and respectful of those who struggled to endure at a different time but in the same place. A compelling illustration of this aspect of Jewish life in the South comes to us from the letters of Charles Wessolowsky, an associate editor of the nineteenth century Anglo-Jewish newspaper, *The Jewish South*, that was published first in Atlanta and later in New Orleans. In 1878 Wessolowsky traveled to Meridian, Mississippi, to attend the dedication of that city's new synagogue building. Twenty-two families, Wessolowsky wrote, had “erected a structure which [stood] with its majestic towers in grandeur and splendor, as an honor to our people and a pride to the citizens of Meridian.” Moved by the event, the correspondent effused “Indeed, here we are made to feel and understand the meaning of the prophet: 'a few will become a mighty nation' and here we have seen it clearly demonstrated that Judaism is not dead . . .”³⁰

Jacob Marcus observed that “Jews glory in their survival. They refuse to disappear.” Even in the enigmatic land of Dixie, the children of Abraham and Sarah will never succumb entirely. Southern Jews have experienced the ravages of intermarriage, Jewish attrition, and societal acculturation more keenly than Jews who reside in the more densely populated Jewish centers. Nonetheless, in one way or another, southern Jewish history constitutes moving testimony on the Jewish will to endure. “Don't misread Jewish history,” Marcus repeatedly admonished. “Today we are few not because we were murdered throughout the ages but because we seceded, acculturated, voluntarily. Forget about numbers. Numbers are a myth. We have always lived through a few, a saving remnant.” In the South, as elsewhere, there will al-

ways be a small, zealous core of men and women who refuse to forfeit their Jewish heritage. For all who, like Charles Wessolowsky long ago, marvel at the Jewish people's will to survive, the history of southern Jewry serves as the embodiment of the Jew's remarkable drive to survive.³¹

* * *

A third justification for historical learning has been termed the *pedagogical* rationale. According to this notion, the primary role of history is to assist us by teaching us more about our world, about society, and about ourselves. This postulate is based on an assumption, difficult though it may be to prove empirically, that when we possess knowledge of the past, we have improved ourselves as human beings. Knowledge of our past enhances the cultivation and enrichment of the human experience. As American historian R. G. Collingwood noted: "Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done." The value of history, then, is that it shows us the extent of our potential by means of empirical lessons that emerge from the past.³²

This *pedagogical* argument, too, partially accounts for the impetus to study southern Jewish history. The study of southern Jewry inevitably widens the scope of our American Jewish *weltanschauung*, our conception of and perspective on the nature of American Jewry. The significance of this rationale vis-à-vis Jewish life in the deep South is compounded when we acknowledge the fact that this particular region's role in the shaping of American Jewish life has been routinely overlooked and undervalued by American Jewish historians. Consider the following illustrative items:

- A. It was in the South, in 1585, thirty-five years before the Pilgrim Fathers landed, that a mining expert named Joachim Gaunze, the first documented Jew in North America, stepped off the gangplank at Roanoke Island.

- B. It was in the South, only weeks after James Oglethorpe himself came ashore near Savannah in 1733, that a Prussian Jew named Benjamin Sheftall settled in the Georgia colony. Shortly thereafter, he was a co-founder of that city's first synagogue, perhaps the second oldest synagogue in North America, eventually known by the name Congregation Mickve Israel;³³
- C. It was in the South, in South Carolina, that Francis Salvador became the first professing Jew to serve in an American legislature. In fact, Salvador may have been the first unconverted Jew in history to be a member of a non-Jewish legislative body. It was this same Salvador who, fighting near Keowee, South Carolina, in 1776, lost his life and thereby memorialized himself as the first Jew to die for American independence;
- D. It was in Charleston, South Carolina, that the first organized attempt to reform Judaism and the first instance of Jewish prayer book reform in the "New World" occurred;
- E. It was the South that furnished American Jewry with its first munificent philanthropist, Judah Touro, who, upon his death at the age of 79 in 1854, bequeathed nearly \$500,000 to Jewish, Christian, and non-sectarian causes;
- F. It was in the South, in Charleston, S. C., that the female poet, Penina Moïse, published her volume *Fancy's Sketch Book* (1853) which is probably the first collection of poetry published by a Jewish woman in the United States;
- G. It was the South that sent the first two Jews to serve in the United States Senate: David Yulee of Florida in 1845 and Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana in 1852³⁴
- H. It was from six states in the South (Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas) that eleven southern congregations sent delegates to a con-

vention in Cincinnati, Ohio, on July 8, 1873, where the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (the first Jewish congregational union whose purpose it was to create and sustain an American rabbinical seminary) was established;

- I. It was the South that produced the first truly regional rabbinical association: the Conference of Rabbis of Southern Congregations;³⁵
- J. It was the South that spawned a remarkable number of merchant princes who cut their entrepreneurial teeth in Dixie's commercial milieu including Isidor and Nathan Straus (of R. H. Macy and Abraham & Straus fame), Adolph S. Ochs (publisher of the *New York Times*). Similarly, there were also a number of remarkable national leaders who were raised in the South and who were, at the same time, actively involved in Jewish communal affairs: Lewis N. Dembitz (a prominent Republican who was the uncle and beau idéal of Supreme Court Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis, Dr. Simon Baruch, quite likely the first doctor to successfully diagnose and remove a ruptured appendix, and his son, Bernard, the well-known statesman; and . . .
- K. It was in the post-World War II South that an impressive number of still largely unsung rabbinic heroes risked their livelihood and, in some cases, their very lives in support of their religion's prophetic commitment to social justice. Men like Charles Mantinband of Hattiesburg, Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, Jacob Rothchild of Atlanta, Milton Schlager of Meridian, and Malcolm H. Stern of Norfolk merit special mention.³⁶

In short, there is much we can learn about the entirety of the American Jewish experience when we study the history of Jewish life in the South. Regrettably, there are still many aspects of Jewish life in the South that have not received the scholarly attention they deserve. In October of 1976, when Eli Evans addressed the scholarly conference on southern Jewry that reinvigorated the

Southern Jewish Historical Society, he identified a half dozen or so research topics that deserved more in-depth examination. Twenty-two years later, most of the items still await scholarly attention.³⁷ A few additional recommendations might serve as a helpful supplement to Evan's original listing:

- A. There is much more to learn about the many southern Jews who devoted themselves to the belle lettres—newspaper publishing, journalism, and the like—from the days of Isaac Harby and Mordecai Manuel Noah to Harry Golden and beyond;³⁸
- B. Many have made passing reference to the role Jews have played in the ongoing evolution of the South's commercial economy. Our understanding of this phenomenon would be enhanced significantly by a comprehensive and comparative study;
- C. The distinctive role of the rabbi in the South, although frequently noted, deserves more scholarly attention. How have southern rabbis functioned in matters such as Jewish education, interfaith relations and the civic life of their communities?

A critical examination of these and other topics will expand our understanding not only of southern history in general and southern Jewish history in specific, but ultimately our understanding of American Judaism in its totality. The story of southern Jewry is much more than the tale of an exotic relic; it is the embodiment of Jewish endurance and survival in an open, democratic society.

* * *

Why study southern Jewish history? Ultimately, the answer to this question brings us to the fourth and certainly the most instinctive rationale for the urge to study history. Walter Raleigh once observed that history “has made us acquainted with our dead ancestors . . . [and] delivered us their memory and fame.” Put quite simply, the process of historical learning satisfies an innate human desire to find our ancestral roots: “Jews are eager to know

the history of their people; that is its own justification. Knowledge is identification, security."³⁹

During an 1878 political convention in Georgia, an anti-Jewish politician attacked Major Raphael J. Moses, a Confederate veteran. Moses, who was known throughout the South as a brilliant lawyer and gifted orator, responded to the bigot in an oft-quoted letter. As well as any ever spoken, the major's words capture both the pride and the promise that comes to one who has come to know the majesty and matchless nobility of Israel's past:

I feel it an honor to be one of a race whom persecution can not crush; whom prejudice has in vain endeavored to subdue; who, despite the powers of man and the antagonism of the combined governments of the world, protected by the hand of deity, have burst the temporal bonds with which prejudice would have bound them. . . Would you honor me? Call me a Jew.⁴⁰

Clearly, the major's knowledge of his Jewish heritage was, for him, a wellspring of pride. That same wellspring of pride becomes our own through the history of our forbears. History instructs us, inspires us, and makes us more self-aware. Yet, we know that, in the final analysis, we study southern Jewish history – indeed all history – because the past enchants and intrigues us. This is unquestionably what David Ben Gurion was thinking when he formulated that well-known phrase: “We Jews do not live in the past, but the past most certainly lives within us.”⁴¹

NOTES

1. The story is based on the version recorded in Richard M. Dorson, “More Jewish Dialect Stories,” *Midwest Folklore* 10 (1960): 132–133, as quoted in Carolyn Lipson-Walker, “Shalom Y’All: The Folklore and Culture of Southern Jews” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1986), 71–72.

2. Fred C. Hobson, “The Savage South” in Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords eds., *Myth and Southern History*, II (Chicago, 1989), 133–147. See also, David Bertelson, *The Lazy South* (New York, 1967).

3. Lipson-Walker, “Shalom Y’All,” 75.

4. For the quote mentioning George Wallace, see Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1973), 59. For other references, see Leah Elizabeth Hagedorn, "The Southern Jewish Ethos: Jews, Gentiles and Interfaith Relations in the American South, 1877-1917" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1988), 99. The colorful Edward Benjamin Morris Browne, nicknamed "Alphabet" because of his initials and academic credentials (he claimed to have earned an M.D. and a LL.B.), was born in Kaschau, Hungary, in 1844. He came to the U.S. shortly after the Civil War. See Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), and Louis E. Schmier, *Reflections of Southern Jewry* (Macon, Georgia, 1982), 17-18. Browne is also mentioned in Jacob Rader Marcus (ed.), *American Jewish Biography*. I, 80.

5. The Evans quote is in Lewis Lord, "Matzos and Magnolias: An Exhibit Explores a Lost World of Southern Judaism" in *U.S. News & World Report*, May 25, 1998, 53. For statistical information on Jewish population and demography in the United States, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (New York, 1990). The statistics relating to the journals were compiled by the author.

6. Dennis Prager (Los Angeles), Letty Cottin Pogrebin (New York), Francine Klagsbrun (New York), and Marshall Breger (Washington, D.C.) are regular contributors to *Moment*.

7. Cf., issues of *Reform Judaism* magazine from 1996 through November 1997.

8. Moses Rischin, "Jacob Rader Marcus: Historian-Archivist of Jewish Middle America," *American Jewish History* 85 (June 1997): 175-181.

9. Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985*, I, (Detroit, 1989), 19.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Mark K. Bauman, *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style* (Cincinnati, 1996), 6; Jacob Rader Marcus, *Colonial American Jew*, I (Detroit, 1970), xxiii; *idem.*, *US Jewry*, I, 16.

12. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), vii-viii. Howard Zinn, *The Southern Mystique* (New York, 1964), 217.

13. Evans, *The Provincials*.

14. See Marcus, *To Count a People*.

15. A few studies on Jewish life in small-town America have recently appeared. See especially, Ewa Morawska, *Insecure Prosperity: Small-Town Jews in Industrial America, 1890-1940* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1996), and Howard V. Epstein, *Jews in Small Towns: Legends and Legacies* (Santa Rosa, California, 1997). Hopefully, these studies will assist scholars in responding to Mark K. Bauman's insightful recommendation ". . . to begin associating the experiences of Jews in small towns of the South with their co-religionists in the small towns of Indiana and New England . . ." Bauman, *The Southerner as American*, 6.

16. For a case study that seeks to demonstrate how southern Jewish culture "differed markedly from their counterparts elsewhere in the United States," see Mark I. Greenberg, "Becoming Southern: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1870" *American Jewish History*, 86 (March 1998), 55-76. Similarly, Leonard Rogoff's article, "Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew," in *American Jewish History*, 85 (September 1997), 195-230, documents how southern racism impacted the nature of Jewish identity in the South. For quote, see Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'All," 46.

17. The analytical structure employed herein regarding the use of history has been influenced greatly by Theodore S. Hamerow's essay "What is the Use of History," in *Reflections on History and Historians* (Madison, 1987), 205-243. See especially, 238-243.

18. For the data on the proportion of congregations to population, see Harry Golden, "Jew and Gentile in the New South: Segregation at Sundown," *Commentary* 18 (1955): 407. See also, Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'All," 45-52.

19. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky eds., *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1979), ix. On current demographic trends, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People*, and Lewis Lord, "Matzos and Magnolias," 53.

20. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, I, 16.

21. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, eastern European Jewish immigrants settled in small southern communities, they frequently established new synagogues. Most of the small towns were unable to maintain a Jewish population large enough to support competing institutions and, within a generation, most of the eastern European congregations had either dissolved or merged with the preexisting synagogue. See Lee Shai Weissbach, "Eastern European Immigrants and the Image of Jewish in the Small-Town South," *American Jewish History*, 85 (September 1997): 231-262.

22. See Gary P. Zola, "Southern Rabbis and The Founding of the First National Association of Rabbis," *American Jewish History*, 85 (December 1997): 353-372.

23. On circuit-preaching, see Hagedorn, "The Southern Jewish Ethos," 88-109. See also, Hollace Ava Weiner, "The Mixers: The Role of Rabbis Deep in the Heart of Texas," *American Jewish History*, 85 (September 1997): 316-322. On Max Heller's circuit-preaching, see Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1997), 70-72. Tobias Geffen was known as "the dean of the Orthodox rabbis of the South," see Joel Ziff, ed., *Lev Tuviah: On the Life and Work of Rabbi Tobias Geffen* (Newton, Massachusetts, 1988), 37.

24. For more on the courtship weekends and the practice of regional networking among Jews in the South, see Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'All," 98-102 and 329-341.

25. See Elliott Ashkenzai, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana, 1840-1875* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1988), 3-15. For quote, see Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'All," 98.

26. For quote, see Lipson-Walker, "Shalom Y'All," 75-76. On Jewish-Gentile relations in the South, see especially, Leah Hagedorn, "The Southern Jewish Ethos." See also, Hollace Ava Weiner, "The Mixers," 289-332.

27. For quote, see Harold U. Ribalow, ed., *Autobiographies of American Jews* (Philadelphia 1965), 133. For an excellent summary of the love/hate relationship that characterized the non-Jew's attitude toward the Jew in the South, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *Uneasy At Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York, 1987), 73-102. See also, idem., *Antisemitism in America* (New York, 1994), 175-196.

28. On the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, see Lord, "Matzos and Magnolias"; Peter Applebome, "Small-Town South Clings to Jewish History," *The New York Times*, September 29, 1991, 1 and 28; and the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience's publication, "Keeping the Story Alive" (Utica, Mississippi, n.d.).

29. Allan Nevins in *The Gateway to History* (Garden City, New York, 1962) as quoted in Hamerow, "What Is the Use of History," 231.

30. As quoted in Hagedorn, "The Southern Jewish Ethos," 38-39. The Scriptural quote is from Isaiah 60: 22.

31. Jacob Rader Marcus, "Testament: A Personal Statement," as quoted in Randall M. Falk, *Bright Eminence - The Life and Thought of Jacob Rader Marcus: Scholar, Mentor, Counselor*,

for *Three Generations of Rabbis and Lay Leaders of American Jewry* (Malibu, California, 1994), 135-136.

32. R. G. (Robin George) Collingwood, *Idea of History* (New York, 1957), 10.

33. On Mickve (sometimes spelled Mickva) Israel and Savannah Jewry, see Saul Jacob Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983* (Savannah, 1983), and Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry*, I, 233-234.

34. Scholars differ on whether or not David Yulee had actually abandoned Judaism before becoming a senator. Jacob Rader Marcus claims that Yulee "lived as a Christian." See *idem.*, *United States Jewry*, I, 365; See also, Leon Hühner, "David L. Yulee, Florida's First Senator," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 25 (1917), and Samuel Proctor, "Pioneer Jewish Settlement in Florida, 1765-1900," *Proceedings of the Conference on the Writing of Regional History in the South with Special Emphasis on Religious and Cultural Groups*, convened in Miami Beach on February 15, 1956 (offset printing, 1956). In addition, four of the six persons of Jewish origin who had been elected to the United States Congress by the outbreak of the Civil War hailed from the South. See Ira Rosenswaike, "The Jewish Population of the United States as Estimated from the Census of 1820" in Abraham J. Karp *The Jewish Experience in America* (New York, 1969). On Judah P. Benjamin, see Eli N. Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate* (New York, 1987).

35. See Gary P. Zola, "Southern Rabbis and The Founding of the First National Association of Rabbis."

36. Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1997).

37. Eli N. Evans, "Southern-Jewish History: Alive and Unfolding," in Kaganoff and Urofsky, *Turn to the South*, 161-164.

38. On Harby's journalistic career in Charleston, see Gary P. Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1994). On Noah's contributions, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Manuel Noah* (New York, 1981).

39. Walter Raleigh, *History of the World* (Philadelphia, 1971), ed. C. A. Patrides, 48. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, I, 19.

40. As quoted in Jacob Rader Marcus, *This I Believe: Documents of American Jewish Life* (Northvale, New Jersey, 1990), 122-123.

41. Cf. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, *A Treasury of The Art of Living* (Hollywood, California, 1963), 246. The statistics relating to the journals were compiled by the author.