

On November 8, 2020, the Board of the Southern Jewish Historical Society adopted the following statement:

RECONSIDERING THE FIELD OF SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY IN RESPONSE TO SYSTEMIC RACISM

In October 2019, the Southern Jewish Historical Society convened its annual conference in Charlottesville, VA, where white supremacists had targeted both Jews and people of color in the violent 2017 Unite the Right rally. Our aim was to provide a scholarly framework for better understanding these events, and to grapple with how antisemitism and white nationalism have animated and informed one another, both historically and in our own times.

Tragically, the year since the conference has seen the murder of George Floyd and many other acts of racist violence. These events have challenged us to further consider the historical contexts that have fostered such violence in the United States and especially in the U.S. South. Like Charlottesville, they have propelled our thinking about how a deeper consideration of the history of American and southern racism can reshape the way we understand the history of American and southern Jews.

The events of 2020 have made clear that racism is not simply an ideology expressed by a fringe group of torch-carrying extremists. Because these acts of racist violence were perpetrated in many cases by law enforcement officers, they have thrown a spotlight on racism as a deep systemic problem that has played a central role in structuring American social relations and institutions. These insights demand that historians move beyond viewing racism and white supremacy as discrete themes in U.S. and Southern history and more consistently foreground how they have shaped and informed the full range of human experiences, relationships, and worldviews.

The implications of this approach for research, writing, and study in the field of Southern Jewish history are manifold. Although scholars in our field have long produced important studies of African American-Jewish relations, Jewish involvement in civil rights causes, and the ways in which southern Jews grappled with segregation and Jim Crow, we believe there is much more we can do as a scholarly community to situate Jewish history within a framework that acknowledges the endemic nature of racism in the South.

For example, we might ask more explicitly how native-born whites viewed Jews within a larger racial landscape, and how the politics of racial hierarchy and white supremacy shaped the terms of Jewish integration and acceptance. Similarly, our studies of how Jews “became southern” could include greater consideration of how they “became white,” since becoming a part of the dominant culture meant, at least to some extent, absorbing and accepting the norms of a segregated society. The study of antisemitism in the South might yield new and helpful insights if we considered it more fully against the broader backdrop of segregation, lynching, and racist violence in the region, and explored the extent to which different forms of racism overlapped and informed one another.

We know that there have been Jews of color in the South for centuries, yet they rarely appear on our historical docket. What new insights might we gain if we moved beyond the assumption that Jewish experiences were white experiences? Similarly, while people of diverse backgrounds already participate in SJHS activities, we are conscious of the need to create an even more welcoming environment for people of color, in order to help bring new and different perspectives to bear on the writing and interpretation of Southern Jewish history.

While the type of scholarly reorientation described here is unlikely to happen overnight, we are committed as a community to the ongoing discussion and consideration of these issues in the planning

of our conferences; the editing and publishing of our journal, *Southern Jewish History*; and the making of grants to researchers and institutions. We invite the active participation of our members and the broader public in this effort.