

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Bryan Edward Stone, *Associate Managing Editor*

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

Phyllis Leffler, *Exhibit Review Editor*

2013

Volume 16



Southern Jewish History

Editorial Board

Robert Abzug	Adam Mendelsohn
Dianne Ashton	Dan J. Puckett
Ronald Bayor	David Patterson
Hasia Diner	Jonathan Sarna
Kirsten Fermalicht	Lee Shai Weissbach
Alan Kraut	Stephen J. Whitfield

Southern Jewish History is a publication of the Southern Jewish Historical Society available by subscription and a benefit of membership in the Society. The opinions and statements expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the journal or of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

Southern Jewish Historical Society OFFICERS: Dale Rosengarten, *President*; Ellen Umansky, *President Elect*; Phyllis Leffler, *Secretary*; Les Bergen, *Treasurer*; Jean Roseman, *Corresponding Secretary*; Stuart Rockoff, *Immediate Past President*. BOARD OF TRUSTEES: Rachel Bergstein, Barbara W. Bernstein, P. Irving Bloom, Stephen Bodzin, Robert Gillette, Gil Halpern, May Lynn Mansbach, Beth Orlansky, Dan Puckett, Lee Shai Weissbach. Bernard Wax, *Board Member Emeritus*; EX-OFFICIO: Rayman L. Solomon.

For authors' guidelines, queries, and all editorial matters, write to the Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 2517 Hartford Dr., Ellenwood, GA 30294; e-mail: Markkbauman@aol.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising, write Rachel Heimovics Braun, managing editor, 954 Stonewood Lane, Maitland, FL 32751; or e-mail: journal@jewishsouth.org; or visit www.jewishsouth.org. For membership and general information about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, write to PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601 or visit www.jewishsouth.org.

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*, *Journal of Southern History*, *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*, *Immigration and Ethnic Historical Society Newsletter*, and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

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

Copyright © 2013 by the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

ISSN 1521-4206

PERMISSION STATEMENT

Consent by the Southern Jewish Historical Society is given for private use of articles and images that have appeared in *Southern Jewish History*. Copying or distributing any journal, article, image, or portion thereof, for any use other than private, is forbidden without the written permission of *Southern Jewish History*. To obtain that permission, contact the editor, Mark K. Bauman, at MarkKBauman@aol.com or the managing editor, Bryan Edward Stone, at bstone@delmar.edu.

Book Reviews

Prophet in a Time of Priests: Rabbi “Alphabet” Browne, 1845-1929: A Biography. By Janice Rothschild Blumberg. Baltimore: Apprentice House, 2012. 410 pages.

In her latest work, a biography of her maternal great grandfather, Janice Rothschild Blumberg has again made a genuine contribution to the historical study of Judaism in America. She has combined herculean research, sustained by genuine family love, with a stance of detachment and full disclosure of the facts as she has discovered them. The result is a highly detailed, historically critical, but touchingly sympathetic portrait of a maverick rabbi who rose and fell countless times during a long, bizarre career.

In fact, Browne’s career is so strange that it is difficult to compress it in a brief overview. Born in Slovakia as Moshe ben M’hader Yaakov Braun, Edward Benjamin Morris Browne was a brilliant Talmud student who earned a “theological degree” after one year at a local rabbinic school and then, without explanation or cause, moved to America. There he was privately ordained by Isaac M. Wise. But Browne also earned a genuine “doctor of medicine” degree and a law degree, as well as several other academic diplomas. Thus he gained the nickname of “Alphabet” Browne. Although he did not practice medicine, he did occasionally dabble in the law, usually with disastrous results. His career was nevertheless remarkable. Browne served in as many as eighteen pulpits, from Reform to Orthodox, offered opening prayers on Capitol Hill in Washington, was given honors as pallbearer for former President Ulysses S. Grant, and personally supported and communicated with Theodore Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement. The polyglot Browne also seems to have learned English effortlessly.

Although an extreme example of a late nineteenth-century American rabbi, Browne exemplifies a little-understood period in the history of Judaism in the United States. First, during the second half of that century, Judaism had not yet settled into the three-track denominational system that characterized much of the twentieth

century. Secondly, if the last quarter of the nineteenth century was, as historian Jonathan D. Sarna suggests, the “Great Awakening of American Judaism,” Browne’s career indicates more a rude awakening than a golden dawn. This was also an era when congregational presidents—a role that cries out for intense historical research—served long terms, and rabbis turned over rapidly. Few rabbis, however, could match Browne’s eighteen pulpit turnovers! Blumberg also demonstrates that internecine rabbinic politics were often (and still might be) just as rough as the conflicts between rabbis and lay leaders. In a certain sense, *Prophet in a Time of Priests* could be read as a cautionary tale. Ambitious rabbis seeking to hit a rabbinic grand slam to propel them into fame and the shifting world of clerical influence are thus warned.

Browne worked mostly at the “right” of the Reform movement, when it was tilting to the religious left because of the challenges that Ethical Culture, Unitarianism, and modernizing influences posed. He therefore generally found himself at odds with major trends in his home movement. Thus, in order to participate in Grant’s funeral, which was held on a Saturday, Browne needed to seek out permission to walk in the procession while other clergy rode. Similarly, he was a steadfast opponent of the Sunday Sabbath movement of Reform Judaism in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, like some progressive rabbis, he embraced biblical criticism and the Darwinian theory of evolution, which pitted Browne against more established leaders like Wise and David Einhorn.

Blumberg, a native Atlantan, is particularly sensitive to Browne’s self-conscious efforts to define a specifically “southern Jewish” identity, a quest that persists to our own day. In large part, this was accomplished by the creation of the *Jewish South*, a regional newspaper that Browne published from 1877 to 1881 and was the first of its kind. The South, Blumberg shows, like the Midwest and the East Coast, constituted a regional factor in the dynamics of American Jewish life. Because Wise’s main base was in the Midwest, he doubted that he could allow Browne to build his own base in the South, a section where Wise needed to check the influence of the radical reform rabbis in the East. Although at first actively cultivating Browne as a disciple, Wise cut him down in the national

rabbinic arena and ultimately bought and closed down the *Jewish South*.

Browne also played a role in anchoring the American Reform movement in Talmudic literature, thereby giving it much needed religious *gravitas*. After Wise invited Browne to prepare a translation of the Talmud shortly after his arrival in the United States, the young immigrant scholar pounced on the offer and completed the formidable project in record time (perhaps relying on a German translation). Wise, who had publicly debated the role of the Talmud in Reform Judaism and conducted negotiations on this question with Isaac Leeser at the Cleveland Conference of 1855, envisioned the sponsorship of a translation of the Talmud as critical to reinforcing his legitimacy as a rabbinic leader. An American Talmud, moreover, would further his goal of creating a rabbinic school, which he did in Cincinnati in 1875. Lastly, though the translation was never published due to inadequate funds, such failure was typical of the age. Even Marcus Jastrow had to rely on the children of his religious school to raise money to pay for his famed 1903 Talmudic dictionary. The irrepressible Browne made the best of the situation and was able to mine his Talmudic “research” for years to come.

Finally, a word about the title of this book. In the context of Reform Jewish history, the role of prophet is generally viewed as superior to that of priest. For the prophet, in this view, ethics trump ritual. A prophet, moreover, is a leader ahead of his time. From this perspective, the title of this biography is apt. Perhaps the unpredictable behavior of prophets should also be considered in this regard. Indeed, Browne appears to have been generally maladjusted (a claim that Blumberg sustains) and was compelled to wander from pulpit to pulpit throughout his long and tumultuous career, a sharp contrast to stereotypically politically motivated, dynastic priests deeply anchored in institutional polities.

Prophet in a Time of Priests is somewhat diminished by the “student press” quality of the publication and the unfortunate lack of an index, which hopefully will be prepared as a helpful addendum in the future. Given the complexity of Browne’s career, a basic chronology would also have been useful to the reader. Moreover, Blumberg’s explanation of Wise’s private ordination of Browne should have been linked to Wise’s long rivalry with Isaac Leeser and his rabbinic

school, Maimonides College, which did graduate rabbis in the late 1860s (15). Also, Baltimore's famed Lloyd Street Synagogue is misidentified as being on Floyd Street (117). None of these errata are serious and do not detract from the important contribution Blumberg has again made to the study of the American Jewish experience. Thanks to her, the maverick Rabbi "Alphabet" Browne is firmly implanted into the memory bank of Judaism in America. That story is now both more colorful as well as darker than ever because of the impressive research efforts of Janice Rothschild Blumberg.

Lance Sussman,

Senior Rabbi, Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Elkins Park, PA
The reviewer may be contacted at kirabbiljs@aol.com.

Rich's: A Southern Institution. By Jeff Clemmons. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013. 223 pages.

When the last book about Rich's department store was published in 1967, the Atlanta-based regional chain was still thriving and expanding, one hundred years after the Hungarian Jewish Rich family had founded their first retail business. *Atlanta Constitution* columnist Celestine Sibley wrote her adulatory *Dear Store* that year, testifying to Rich's role in Atlanta's history and the deep affection and loyalty Rich's had fostered in the city. Hers was the third book written about Rich's in fourteen years—a volume of attention that might perplex anyone not already devoted to the topic.

Today Rich's is no more. A buyout by a holding company terminated its family ties to Atlanta in 1976. The store was merged with Macy's in 2003, and the Rich name was expunged from the business altogether two years later. Now that Rich's is defunct, its full history—not only its rise and its heyday, but also its decline and absorption into a national retail conglomerate—has been written by local historian Jeff Clemmons.

While Sibley reported on her subject with undisguised warmth and a willingness to leave out unpleasant incidents (more about this presently), Clemmons aspires to greater objectivity and thoroughness. He achieves this, in part, by focusing on the workings of the

company itself. In the process he leaves mostly unexamined the individuals and communities who founded, ran, worked in, and shopped in the store—their motivations, their circumstances, their inner thoughts and lives. Leon Harris, author of *Merchant Princes: An Intimate History of Jewish Families Who Built Great Department Stores* (which includes a chapter on the Riches), began his book by declaring it to be “not about stores but about storekeepers and their families.” Clemmons might have led off with the inverse: his is a book about a store, not so much about storekeepers or their families. Call it the “Citizens United” approach, in that it assumes corporations are as interesting as people.

Clemmons’s contribution to the chronicles of Rich’s channels an astonishing amount of detail about the business of the store. He documents the cost, construction, and design of its buildings, all the way down to square footage, architectural features, and floor layout. We learn about the prices of merchandise: in May 1917, for instance, customers could buy “a ten-piece Chinese Chippendale dining room set for \$225.00, originally \$305.00” (51), and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower spent \$73.92 on four pairs of curtains in 1956 (74). The text is peppered with sales figures, both for individual stores and for the company as a whole, most frequently in the hundreds of thousands or multiple millions. But were these sales figures impressive compared to other local or national department stores? How did Rich’s prices compare: did Mrs. Eisenhower get a bargain on those drapes? Were Rich’s stores bigger, more lavish, than other stores? Did the cars that could fit in Rich’s parking lots (the quantity of which the reader will come to know) outnumber the cars that could fit in competitors’ lots? We are never given any context or contrast for these details, and so we never learn how to understand these figures or why they matter.

Clemmons is especially attentive to Rich’s public relations triumphs, which were crucial to maintaining the company’s presence and stature in Atlanta’s culture. Their fashion shows brought internationally renowned designers to the South, and their popular Charga-Plate program enabled middle-class and working-class customers to purchase consumer goods that otherwise would have been out of their reach. Rich’s Pink Pig children’s monorail ride and their enormous annual Christmas tree were both seemingly irresistible

destinations for families visiting downtown Atlanta during the holidays. Clemmons also notes the company's philanthropic efforts, which were substantial. All of these phenomena are catalogued with thoroughness and enthusiasm, and anyone interested in Atlanta's commercial and civic life will likely find utility in his descriptions. These too, however, are presented without analysis; again, the cultural context within which these projects were conceived and executed is absent.

For instance: what might we learn about Atlanta's Jewish community, or about religion in the South, that a prominent Jewish family yearly erected a gigantic Christmas tree festooned, at one point, with "900 ornaments that were twelve inches in diameter; 600 ornaments that were six inches in diameter; 13,000 lights; 900 non-lighted ornaments; and a seven-foot-wide star on its crown"? (95). (I believe the word Clemmons is looking for here is *ongepatshket*.) Further questions: Can Rich's abandonment of downtown Atlanta and relocation to the suburbs, not to mention its creation of all those parking spaces, shine a light on other changes in the city's demography and economy since World War II? Was the 1976 buyout of Rich's by Federated Department Stores, and Federated's subsequent bankruptcy, indicative of broader transformations in American capitalism? Clemmons's discussion of these issues is woefully shallow. These are missed opportunities to make a case for the company's broader historical importance.

Clemmons does devote significant attention to the sit-ins and anti-segregation protests that staggered Rich's management in 1960. The story of the Magnolia Room—Rich's posh restaurant where African Americans worked as servers but could not dine—and its significance to civil rights history has already been told a number of times, most recently and masterfully by Kevin Kruse in his 2005 book *White Flight*. Kruse's meditations on the protests and their consequences are far more potent, and interesting, than Clemmons's. Still, considering that Sibley ignored the sit-ins entirely (even though she wrote her book nearly a decade after they happened), Clemmons's attention to them is exceedingly welcome.

Marni Davis, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

The reviewer may be contacted at marnidavis@gsu.edu.