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Exhibit Review

Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War. Curator: Ken Yellis. Presented jointly by the American Jewish Historical Society and the Yeshiva University Museum. Accompanying book: *Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War* (October 2013). Yeshiva University Museum at the Center for Jewish History, New York City, through August 2013; Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore, October 2013–February 2014. Website: <http://yumuseum.tumblr.com/CivilWar>.

On my frequent trips south of the Mason-Dixon line, I am always struck by how 150 years after the close of the Civil War that turning-point moment in American history continues to captivate the attention of southerners—Jews included. The many battlefield monuments, tours of those sites, and frequent full-dress recreations of what some still call “The War of Northern Aggression” certainly keep the memories of the Lost Cause alive. Perhaps the losers of this unforgettable struggle feel its reverberations in the driest of their very bones and thus recall the details of the war and its aftermaths more readily than do the winners. For me, as a dyed-in-the-wool northerner and New Yorker, the Civil War is a subject that looms prominently in our history books, but not in my consciousness. As a Jew it is a moment in time that until now has paled in significance to other themes in the nineteenth-century American Jewish narrative.

Thus, as a citizen of Gotham and as a Jew who was born and bred in the metropolis, I appreciate how much *Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War* has heightened my awareness of how important these four years of conflict were to my city and our people’s history in the United States. Throughout the display of some 275 intriguing objects and video commentaries, the New York story looms large, even if the next stop of this exhibit that ran in New York from March to August 2013 is the Jewish Museum of Maryland in Baltimore. Even before entering the galleries that contain the bulk of the rare documents and artifacts, visitors who start their tour in the Center’s Great Hall are immediately alerted to how important New York is to the curator’s vision. The three highlighted aspects include

the interesting changing vision of Lincoln among Jews, predictably the wartime experience of Jewish soldiers, and, significantly, the unique context of the War between the States and the metropolis.

Entry to the exhibition.

(Photo by Bilyana Dimitrova, courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society and the Yeshiva University Museum.)

Beginning with that thoughtful highlighting of my city, I was reminded throughout of how supportive many of its residents were of the secessionist position, with many of the articulate Jews in town constituting secession's key advocates. Not all Jewish voices were or could be heard. Poor folks rarely have time to write accounts for the later use of historians and curators. In all events, this "southern exposure" was deeply rooted in the need of the urban center's merchants for raw materials—particularly cotton—as well as their desire to sell finished goods in every region of the nation. In this business realm, I particularly enjoyed examining an advertisement for Solomon Brothers "segars [cigars] expressly manufactured for Georgia and Alabama" that were made in New York. Through the video clips that work well with the documents and clear text explanations, an articulate group of historians including Dale Rosengarten and Adam

Mendelsohn, whose work is well-known to the Southern Jewish Historical Society, complement the extant financial reports and advertisements with cogent explications of the symbiotic relationship between regions at war over slavery.

*Confederate bond and coupons displaying Judah P. Benjamin's image.
(From the collection of the American Jewish Historical Society,
courtesy of the exhibition.)*

On the crucial ideological and indeed theological issue of the status of African Americans, the exhibit emphasizes how in 1861 Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York City articulated perhaps the most definitive statement of biblical support for slavery. Passages through the Fire balances this well-known source with a display of intriguing documents highlighting the wealth of both critical and supportive Jewish reactions to Raphall's understanding of the tradition within and without Jewish Gotham. Here, too, the panel of scholars appearing in the video panels has the last words. Lance Sussman of

Philadelphia leads the discussion on the video screen as he notes the ancient Jewish sources that supported denigration of Negroes and explicates how modern rabbis of varying stripes interpreted controversial verses in light of their modern understandings of the faith.

Predictably as an exhibit on a military subject, there is much room allotted for the display of swords, pistols, and rifles owned and used by Jews as well as portraits of the more illustrious Jewish officers for the Union and Confederacy. I enjoyed more the daguerreotypes of enlisted men and draftees that remind us of the many unsung heroes of any tragic military confrontation.

*Mykell Myers Goldsmith, who gave his life for the Confederacy.
A 1st Lieutenant in the Georgia Reserves, Goldsmith was
accidentally killed near Macon in August 1864,
when the trigger of his rifle caught on barbed wire.
(From the collection of Dr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Oppenheim,
photo by Bilyana Dimitrova, courtesy of the exhibition.)*

The oft-told two major examples of antisemitism—the initial refusal of the army to allow Jewish chaplains to minister to Union troops until Lincoln interceded and Grant’s General Orders #11 that threatened to expel Jews “as a class” from occupied southern territories—are also given their just due. Once again the team of historians explicates the larger meaning of the events that are chronicled through the encased rare primary sources. They suggest that these attacks and other forms of Jew-hatred were generally aberrations and that Jews were ready, able, and accepted to fight in both armies. Their ability to be counted in was a statement of that minority group’s freedom in America.

As far as vignettes of tolerance rather than antipathy toward Jews was concerned, I was taken especially by a letter that General Robert E. Lee penned to Rabbi Max Michelbacher of Richmond, Virginia, declining his request to excuse Jewish soldiers from active duty during the High Holidays. Although the military leader did not accommodate the request that the persistent rabbi made three times during the war, Lee did allow Jews to celebrate their sacred days while on post and considered individual requests for furloughs. Most significantly, in thinking over the petitions, Lee presumed what was certainly true—that Jews “would not want to jeopardize a cause you have so much at heart.” In this case and elsewhere, Jews—whose patriotism was generally not questioned—were accepted as brothers under arms, blue and gray. Their service constituted a reaffirmation of Jewish emancipation in America. The ten thousand who served in one or the other army and the two thousand who, despite initial communal reservations, proudly came from New York, continued to pave the road toward full acceptance that Jews today enjoy comfortably in America, including New York.

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