

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*

bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

sclangston@charter.net

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Jeremy Katz, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*

jrkatz@hamilton.edu

Shari Rabin, *Website Review Editor*

srabin@oberlin.edu

Lance J. Sussman and Karen S. Franklin

Memoirs Section Editors

lancejsussman@gmail.com, karenfranklin@gmail.com

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Founding Managing Editor*

2023
Volume 26



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, please contact the editors at journal@jewishsouth.org.

Southern Jewish History

Editorial Board

Ronald Bayor
Charles L. Chavis, Jr.
Miriam Sanua Dalin
Paul Finkelman
Joshua Furman

Michael Hoberman
Adam Mendelsohn
Allison Schottenstein
Marcia Synott
Diane Vecchio

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: Josh Parshall, *President*; Eric Goldstein, *Vice President and President Elect*; Anna Tucker, *Secretary*; Jay Silverberg, *Treasurer*; Jay Silverberg, *Immediate Past President*. BOARD OF DIRECTORS: Rachel Barnett, Gemma Birnbaum, Catherine R. Eskin, Karen Franklin, Joshua Furman, Stephen Krause, Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, Anna Tucker, Ellen Umansky, Ashley Walters, Steve Whitfield; Bernie Wax, *z"l*, *Board Member Emeritus*.

For submission information and author guidelines, see <http://www.jewishsouth.org/submission-information-and-guidelines-authors>. For queries and all editorial matters: Mark K. Bauman, Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 6856 Flagstone Way, Flowery Branch, GA 30542, e-mail: MarkKBauman@aol.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising: Bryan Edward Stone, Managing Editor, PO Box 271432, Corpus Christi, TX 78427, e-mail: bstone@delmar.edu. For membership and general information about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, visit www.jewishsouth.org or write to PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601.

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 History Society Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

Full-text content of recent issues is available to subscribing libraries on EBSCOhost Academic Search Ultimate. Full-text content of most back issues is available free on Academia.edu at <http://independent.academia.edu/SouthernJewishHistory>.

Exhibit Review

Beth-El Civil Rights Experience. Curated by Melissa Young and Margaret Norman. Temple Beth-El, Birmingham, Alabama.

“**T**ake a second to look, really look, at the second storefront from the corner of 20th [Street] and up to 2nd Avenue North. Can you imagine this space as a bustling department store?” So begins one of the virtual displays of the Beth-El Civil Rights Experience, a multimedia digital exhibit that tells the story of the civil rights movement through the perspective of the Jewish community in Birmingham, Alabama. The storefront in question is the Parisian, an apparel store intermittently owned by members of the Hess, Abroms, Litchenstein, Salit, and Holiner families from 1920 to 1996. The story of the Parisian is a familiar one to southern Jews, who more often than not earned their livelihoods as merchants. As the civil rights movement gained momentum during the early 1960s in cities across the South, Jewish store owners frequently found themselves in unenviable positions.

Although Jewish merchants were more likely than non-Jewish white southerners to do business with Black customers and, in some cases, employ Black workers in their stores, their businesses were frequently the target of desegregation efforts. In 1962, when African American student activists in Birmingham embarked on a selective buying campaign, the Parisian became one of the stores targeted by the boycott. The Hess family, owners of the Parisian at the time, found themselves under an enormous amount of economic pressure to desegregate their store and would have liked to do so, yet local city officials, like public safety

commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor refused to entertain even the most moderate gestures toward integration. In an oral history featured on the website, Donald Hess recalls, "Even as a teenager, I was aware of the tension that my parents were experiencing and was certainly aware of the fear that came from threatening phone calls to our house. Dad, who had been the president of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, was a convener, bringing the various groups together. These were extremely difficult times."

The story of the Parisian and Birmingham's Hess family is one of a dozen points of interest that comprise the Beth-El Civil Rights Experience multimedia digital exhibit. The exhibit features images and archival materials, including clips of oral histories, with the goal of putting voices of those who lived through the civil rights movement into conversation with one another. Each marker on the map leads to a series of related images and a short narrative about a particular person, place, or incident that is significant to Jewish Birmingham's civil rights history. Increasing the exhibit's accessibility, each page's narrative is available in print and as a recording — the stories are read by exhibit producers and interns, in addition to longstanding members of the local Jewish community.

At the heart of this exhibit is a desire to acknowledge the co-existence of many truths" during this momentous period, whether it be the experiences of the Jewish community members who marched in the streets, those who negotiated quietly in the background, or those who remained silent. From an overview of the history of Jewish life in Birmingham, to efforts by Joseph Gelders, a Jewish intellectual and Birmingham native who worked to desegregate the city as early as the 1930s and was kidnapped and beaten by the Ku Klux Klan for his efforts, to the mixed response of Birmingham Jews toward the arrival of civil rights workers from the North, the exhibit presents and accounts for a variety of perspectives. Non-Jewish residents of Birmingham occasionally make an appearance. For example, the story of Birmingham resident Karl Friedman and the American National Bank incorporates a testimony from J. Mason Davis, the Black president of the Birmingham Bar Association, about Friedman's legal work on behalf of the Black community. By bringing to life stories from stakeholders with different social, economic, and moral interests in Birmingham, the viewer gains a better understanding of what life was like for Jews during this time.

*Visitors to the Beth-El Civil Rights Experience
during the exhibition's opening event, May 2023.
(Courtesy of Margaret Norman, Temple Beth-El, Birmingham.)*

The Beth-El Civil Rights Experience would make an excellent teaching tool in college classrooms, especially given how narrative overviews of the general history are interwoven with oral testimonies and images. The inclusion of a variety of Jewish perspectives would also encourage generative conversations about how this pivotal moment in American history was experienced differently by members of the same Jewish community. The exhibit is not comprehensive in its scope, nor does it aspire to be. In fact, a perusal of the exhibit will leave the viewer desiring to know more—more about the history of the Jewish community in Birmingham, their lived experiences as Jews in the South, and the various responses and activities of Jews during the civil rights movement in Birmingham and beyond. Instead, the creators aim to foster reflection, a love of learning, and a desire to know more about this history, as well as a commitment to having important conversations about our present moment. In this sense, this historical exhibit is rather forward-facing and underscores the mission so many educators carry into the classroom each day.

Ashley Walters, College of Charleston

The reviewer can be contacted at waltersa1@cofc.edu.