

TO OUR READERS...

The iconoclastic and sardonic English novelist, Samuel Butler (1835–1902), is credited with having coined the phrase, “God cannot alter the past, though historians can.”¹ Butler may have been writing facetiously, but there is truth in his observation. Historians rightfully take great pride when they can lay claim to being the first to reconstruct some aspect of our collective past. As time goes on, additional historical research inevitably leads to the discovery of new information that clarifies, sharpens, or enhances our knowledge of past events. There are even instances when new historical methodologies or new sources of information surface, and then historians strive to revise the historical writings of their predecessors or, to borrow Butler’s words, they “alter the past” in light of new data. This particular edition of our journal will serve to illustrate these interesting phenomena and, in so doing, our reader will again have the opportunity to experience the historical enterprise as a stimulating and dynamic process.

Students of the American Jewish experience who studied with our institution’s founder, Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995), are familiar with his many historiographical and methodological “principles” that “The Doctor” called (with tongue in cheek) “Marcusian Laws.” Some of Marcus’s rules were sobering. He insisted, for example, that Jewish indestructibility was directly attributable to a law he dubbed “Omniterritoriality”—the enduring necessity of maintaining numerous centers of Jewish life all over the globe. Many of these Marcusian laws were intentionally humorous: “The mind can absorb only as much as the *derrière* can endure” or his famous and oft-repeated paraphrase of the Scottish writer John Wilson’s immortal sentence about the sun forever shining on “His Majesty’s dominions.” According to Professor Marcus’s rendering, “the sun never sets on a graduate of the Hebrew Union College.”²

Marcus frequently admonished his students to eschew declaring that “so and so” was the first Jew to live in a particular place or to do a particular thing. The minute that sentence was uttered, he would solemnly warn, someone would inevitably prove that there was another Jew who merited that historical distinction! The first article in this issue of our journal serves as a colorful illustration of this intriguing phenomenon.

American Jewish historians have noted that the first women to function in a cantorial capacity were the “chazantes” who sprang up during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The story of the “chazantes” is fascinating. In 1918, the famous impresario of Yiddish theater, Boris Thomashevsky (1868–1939), produced a full-scale musical comedy based on the story of a cantor’s wife called “*Di Chazante*.” The wife of a cantor may have been a likely foil for the Yiddish stage, but a half dozen years later thousands of American Jews would be enthralled by the appearance of an American original: women who sang cantorial music

in public concerts. These women were Jewish trailblazers because, according to the ancient rabbis, the sound of a woman's voice evoked a seductive aura that fostered immoral thoughts that led a man's mind astray. Traditional Jewish custom therefore frowned on the idea of having women chant the traditional Jewish prayers when men were in the audience. That a woman would be permitted to chant the prayers during a formal worship service was unthinkable to traditionalists. Yet the coalescence of Jewish and American cultures during the 1920s gave rise to a remarkable new phenomenon: the "chazantes."

In Yiddish, "chazante" literally means "the cantor's wife." Yet beginning in the 1920s, a startlingly large number of women artists began to call themselves "chazantes," meaning "women who sang cantorial music" or even "female cantors." Among the best-known "chazantes" were Sophie Kurtzer (1896–1974), Bernice Kanefsky, a.k.a. Bas Sheva (1925–1960), Jean Gornish, a.k.a. "Sheindele di Khazante" (1915–1981), Perele Feig (1910–1987), Goldie Malavsky (1923–1995), and Fraydele Oysher (1913–2003). It has been noted that the most famous of these "chazantes" shared a number of characteristics. They were all dynamic, modern-thinking women with extraordinary vocal talent; each was a woman who had been steeped in Jewish tradition from childhood; and they all possessed a genuine love for *chazzanut* (i.e., Jewish liturgical music). Significantly, the professional careers of these pioneering "chazantes" coincided with the rise of recording, radio, and broadcasting technologies in the United States.³

Many have suggested that these "chazantes" marked the beginning of women in the cantorate. Gornish has frequently been called the "first" woman cantor because, in contrast to her peers, "Sheindele" always performed in the satin robes of a cleric with the distinctive cantorial mitre on her head.⁴ Although she never led prayers inside of a synagogue, Sheindele "approached the stage as if it were a pulpit and her audience as if it were a congregation."⁵

The first article in this edition of our journal compels us to revise the history of women in the American cantorate. As a result of Judith S. Pinnolis's meticulous research, we now know that Sheindele—despite her many noteworthy achievements—was definitely *not* the first woman cantor. That honor apparently belongs to a talented female opera star named Julie Rosewald, who actually led services at Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco. Why has Clio, the muse of history, been seemingly blind to Rosewald's fascinating cantorial career until now? Perhaps because, in contrast to the twentieth century "chazantes," whose liturgical interpretations were "broadcast, recorded, and preserved for future generations," Rosewald's cantorial endeavors occurred long before the age of recording and broadcast technology.

Pinnolis has meticulously reconstructed the entirety of Rosewald's fascinating and far-reaching musical career. She documents how, as a result of the sudden death of Emanu-El's beloved cantor, Max Wolff, in August of 1884,

the congregation elected to invite Rosewald to fill the gap. As the child of a cantor and a talented musical artist in her own right, Rosewald possessed all of the qualifications to step in and assist the congregation bereft of its cantor. She succeeded impressively, and the fact that she was a woman cantor did not seem to concern this religiously liberal Jewish congregation. For nearly a decade Rosewald served as Emanu-El's "Cantor Soprano," and Pinnolis proves that this capable prima donna actually led the congregation in worship.

Another one of Dr. Marcus's historical principles was an admonition that "the fact scrubbed clean is more eternal than perfumed or rouged words." A willingness to expose facts and concomitantly to "interpret them properly" was one of Marcus's cardinal values as a historian of American Jewry. The second article in this issue of the journal illustrates how the revelation of historical facts enhance our ability to analyze and interpret the past.⁶

In his study of the early history of Yeshiva College's student newspaper, *The Commentator*, Zev Eleff examines how the Orthodox seminary's pioneering student journalists struggled to negotiate two frequently conflicting instincts. On the one hand, these young Orthodox correspondents wanted to assert their constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of the press—even the student press at Yeshiva College. This instinct spurred them to engage periodically in testy battles with the school's administration. It is difficult for young people of any background to challenge those who are in authority—particularly when those authorities are capable of wreaking havoc on their youthful futures. Eleff points out that this was intensely true in the case of the young journalists of Yeshiva College. These concerns were compounded in the lives of the young Orthodox correspondents, who were reared in "a culture that preached obedience to wiser and more experienced elders."

This article also examines how *The Commentator* involved itself in campus politics. Most readers will be fascinated by Eleff's reconstruction of the political intrigue that engulfed Yeshiva College in the aftermath of founding president Rabbi Bernard Revel's death in 1940. Many may be surprised to read about the heated battle that involved none other than "The Rav"—Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (1883–1993), a towering scholar and one of the most venerable and esteemed figures in the history of twentieth century American Orthodoxy. Eleff presents our readers with the "facts scrubbed clean," and we learn that students associated with *The Commentator* as well as the student council vehemently opposed those who wanted Soloveitchik to become Revel's successor as president of Yeshiva. Eleff's documents provide us with a sophisticated understanding of the religious and political struggles that swept through this academy in the aftermath of Rabbi Revel's death.

Marcus frequently referred to himself as "primarily a fact man," and the significance of facts was one of the foundational ideals in his historical methodology. The powerful impetus that drove him to create a major archival center

in Cincinnati, Ohio, was fueled by his conviction that an assemblage of facts was indispensable to the historical enterprise. "I believe," Marcus asserted, "that in every discipline, every area, every subject there has to be at least one work which supplies the *Stoff*, the raw material, if only for others to summarize, to reevaluate, and even to reject."⁷

Future historians will be grateful to Robert Tabak for his efforts to create a foundational reconstruction of the history of Jewish health-care chaplaincy in America. His essay begins by noting that although many histories strive to document the evolution of Jewish military chaplaincy, little has been published on the historical development of Jewish health-care chaplaincy. According to Tabak, the true professionalization of Jewish health-care chaplaincy begins in the aftermath of World War II. Interestingly, the unprecedented surge in the number of Jewish military chaplains during World War II may have actually spurred rabbinical interest in a venue of religious service that was based on "interreligious cooperation," "a shared sense of mission," and pluralistic values. Tabak proceeds to document the steady development of health-care chaplaincies in various cities during the last third of the twentieth century, culminating in the founding of the National Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC) in 1990. This article constitutes a pioneering effort to preserve the basic data relating to the professionalization of Jewish health-care chaplaincy. In due time, others will no doubt come forward to enlarge and reevaluate Tabak's groundbreaking effort.

The leading military historian, Michael Howard (b. 1922), once posited that "historians have a responsibility to make some sense of the past and not just to repeat it." Each author of the major articles in this edition of our journal strives to make sense of the past by analyzing and reinterpreting the primary source documents that have been put at their disposal. The American Jewish Archives takes pride in preserving historical documentation and making it readily accessible to those who, as Mr. Butler noted, must inevitably alter history in order to make better sense of it.

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Notes

¹Butler's quote in full is, "It has been said that although God cannot alter the past, historians can; it is perhaps because they can be useful to Him in this respect that He tolerates their existence." Cf. Samuel Butler, *Erewhon Revisited Twenty Years Later, Both by the Original Discoverer of the Country and by his Son* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 169.

²Wilson first coined this famous phrase while writing under his nom de plume, Christopher North, in *Blackwood's Magazine* (April 1829). Wilson wrote, "His Majesty's dominions, on which the sun never sets." This sentence was later transformed into the more familiar phrase, "The sun never sets on the British Empire." Cf. Fred R. Shapiro (comp.), *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 555.

³See Arianne Brown's pioneering work on this subject, "The Khazntes—The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Khaznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavsky, and Fraydele Oysher," *The Journal of Synagogue Music* 31 (Fall 2007): 51–79. This list of "chazantes" is hardly complete. See also Ari Y. Kelman, *Station Identification: The Culture of Yiddish Radio in New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁴The website of the Jewish Women's Archive (JWA) notes that Jean Gornish "was believed to be the first woman to perform Jewish liturgical music." See "Jean Gornish" on the JWA's website, <http://jwa.org/archive/jsp/perInfo.jsp?personID=147> (accessed 4 January 2011).

⁵Ari Y. Kelman, "The Girl in the Silk Skullcap," *Guilt & Pleasure*, available at http://www.guiltandpleasure.com/index.php?site=rebootgp&page=gp_article&id=72 (accessed 4 January 2011).

⁶Herbert C. Zafren and Abraham J. Peck (comp.), *The Writings of Jacob Rader Marcus: A Bibliographic Record* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1978), front matter; *American Jewish Year Book* (1997): 639.

⁷Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776*, vol. 1 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), xxvi.