

# War on the Willamette

1880

Only too frequently, in pioneer Jewish communities, there is bitter, internecine strife in the slowly emerging Jewish congregation. One may call this growing pains. Struggling to survive, buffeted about by misfortunes in a strange, new country, men vent their frustrations on one another; leaders abuse their subordinates; old-timers raise themselves by stepping on newcomers; the latter, frightened and insecure, resent the arrogance, selfishness, and condescension of the aristocrats who arrived but a decade earlier.

Some of this tension — so typical of most early American Jewish communities — is reflected in the following newspaper accounts of a “shooting” in Portland, Oregon, on the morning of October 1, 1880. It took place as President Rutherford B. Hayes was visiting the city, and the firing could well have been heard in the hotel where he stayed. The President and his escort, William Tecumseh Sherman, Civil War heroes, may well have imagined that they were both back on the battlefields where they had won their laurels.

## PASTORIAL RELATIONS

### How Rabbi May and Brother Waldman Serve the Lord

Friday morning at 9:30 the hilarious pop of the little pistol was heard on Front Street. People who rushed in that direction saw the Rev. Rabbi [M.] May and Mr. [A.] Waldman, of Beck & Waldman, engaged in a melee which resulted something in this style: The Rabbi shot twice at Waldman, and tore a piece out of his coat, and came near killing an honest man, and Mr. Waldman put a pair of beautiful rings about the Rabbi's eyes.

As far as can be learned, bad feeling has existed between the parties for a long time, and it culminated Friday in the shooting scrape. It seems that while Rabbi May and [a] Mr. May, of Hexter & May, were standing on the street engaged in a close conversation, Mr. Waldman walked up to them unnoticed by either and, grabbing the Rabbi by the coat collar, struck him two severe blows in the face, smashing his spectacles and injuring him severely. The Rabbi then dived for this temporal ammunition and fired at Waldman twice, as related above. He was then knocked

down by Mr. Morris Isaacs, and he voluntarily threw his pistol into the store of Hexter & May. Waldman then bounced [pounced] on his adversary and administered a severe castigation before they could be separated.

The affair caused intense excitement on account of the standing of the parties. Mr. Waldman is a well-known and highly respected citizen, while the Rabbi May has had charge of the Synagogue Beth Israel for the past four years. Waldman was arrested in the afternoon by Constable Sprague and taken before Judge Bybee and fined for assault, but, as far as can be learned, Rabbi May was not molested. To get at the root of the matter, our reporter visited both gentlemen and obtained statements from both in regard to the unfortunate affair.

#### MR. WALDMAN,

Who was found in his store, said, in effect, that for a long time trouble had been brewing in the congregation over the doings of the Rabbi, who was not only deficient mentally, but also morally, and who would have long ago been kicked out of his charge but for the sympathy which was expressed for his family. A Sunday School had been started, and Mr. Waldman was appointed secretary, and was required to make an annual report of its workings. Mr. Waldman made said report about a week ago, and in this he used this language: "The progress of the school would have been more encouraging but for the ungentlemanly conduct of Rabbi May towards both scholars and teachers." The Rabbi took great umbrage thereat, and last Monday shouted to Waldman as he went past his store, "You are a liar!" The Rabbi, who was too far off to be caught at that time, was told he would be thrashed the next time he was met with. Friday, he was seen talking to a gentleman on Front Street, and, to use Mr. Waldman's words: "I went up to him and caught him by the coat collar, to give him warning of my presence, and then struck him twice with my open hand; he then fired at me, and you know what occurred after that." "The Rabbi," said Mr. Waldman in conclusion, "has been guilty of telling lies on numerous occasions, and as his moral reputation is very bad, he has split the congregation all up. It is reported, though I cannot vouch for its truth, that the Rabbi fired at his wife one day; indeed, the mark of the bullet can be seen in his own house. These things will

give the public an idea of how the Sunday School was conducted, and of what led to the report.”

#### RABBI MAY,

On the other hand, said that a year ago he was called a liar by Mr. Waldman, and ever since had been annoyed by him in all possible ways. At the former time he received an anonymous letter threatening that he would be killed with the same pistol which an evil and false report said he had once fired at his own wife. This, the Rabbi suspected, came from Waldman, though he would not assert that it did. In religious matters Waldman annoyed him continually, interfering with him and wishing him to teach the religion of Waldman instead of that of Moses, and because he did not has been trying to ruin him by setting adrift reports about his moral standing, which the Rabbi characterized as false, shameful, and hollow.

The day after Waldman made his report the Rabbi met him on First Street and told him that he was telling lies about him. This was the last he saw of him until Friday. At 9:30, he was standing on the corner engaged in conversation with a friend, when all of a sudden he felt some one grab him roughly from behind and he received two terrible blows in the eyes. His glasses were smashed, and how it comes that his eyes were not cut out he does not understand. Not knowing who his assailant was, the Rabbi drew his pistol, which he had always carried since he received the anonymous communication, and, dazed and blinded, fired in the direction of the blows. Just as he fired he recognized Waldman, and as he was coming toward him in a threatening manner he fired again. “I would have killed him if I could,” said the Rabbi, “and would have done so to even my father or brother had they treated me as this man Waldman did. I am sorry that it has happened now, but this is the truth in regard to the matter.”

The public can now make up its mind as to the real culprit in the case. (*Daily Standard* [Portland, Oregon], October 2, 1880.)

#### A SHOOTING AFFAIR

Yesterday forenoon, about 10 o'clock, an affray occurred on Front Street opposite the store of Hexter & May, which attracted much attention at the time and has been the subject of a great deal of public comment since.

The actors in the affair are Rev. Dr. M. May, the well-known Jewish rabbi, and Mr. A. Waldman, of the firm of Beck & Waldman. Some misunderstanding of a personal nature arose between these parties a few days ago, when it is alleged some hot words were indulged in. Waldman and May met yesterday on the street, when hostilities were renewed. Mr. Waldman struck Dr. May twice in the face, when the latter drew a pistol and fired twice at him. Fortunately, neither shot took effect. Parties interfered and separated the belligerents. Subsequently both Waldman and May were arrested by Constable Sprague. (*Daily Oregonian* [Portland, Oregon], October 2, 1880.)

#### A VERKEHRTE WELT

Rev. Mr. May, of Portland, Oregon, took offense at Mr. Waldman, member of his congregation, for having reported him incorrectly, and upon meeting him in the public street — right under the window of the hotel where President Hayes was stopping — fired two shots at his alleged traducer. Mr. Waldman was not hurt, but the rabbi was soundly thrashed for being such a poor marksman. But then Mr. May is not to blame, as it is not to be supposed that either he or his father ever fired a shot — but then did you ever hear of a rabbi carrying a pistol?

Mr. Waldman is a very respectable citizen of Portland, and Mr. May, though not recognized as a rabbi (but merely tolerated, on account of relationship, as a *Shatz Matz* [a religious factotum]), has ever been well spoken of, and we can not understand how a man of a family can take his life in his own hands, especially when he knows as little how to pull a trigger as he knows of the *Shulchan Aruch* [the standard Jewish code of laws]. There is, of course, a vacancy in the Portland congregation, and poor May will either have to go to peddling or join the shooting Baptists. It is a pity that Israel should have produced a shooting clergyman, and still more pity that the Christians in Portland believe that May is a high-priest in the synagogue. (From the accounts in the Portland papers, we should judge that, although not justified in shooting, Mr. May acted as he did under very great provocation. — Local Ed.)

Is it not about time that the doctors, the rabbis, and reverends should be graded? (*American Israelite* [Cincinnati], October 22, 1880.)