
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience
Between Uniqueness and Commonality:
Reflections on the Cincinnati Jewish
Experience

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The history of Cincinnati's Jewish population can be viewed from some perspectives as a microcosm of the more general experience of the Jews in America. To be sure, Cincinnati did not even exist when the first Jews migrated to New Amsterdam (or New York as it later became), to Newport and Boston, to Philadelphia and Charleston in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But from the relatively early 1800s the emerging Jewish community in Cincinnati took on many of the characteristics of similar communities that began to appear in the new urban settlements that dotted the expanding new nation. Indeed it is sometimes a challenge to sort out what is common to most American Jews and what is unique to those in Cincinnati.

How does one begin to approach a subject most people know only through the screen of family myth and the recollections of friends? He goes to the library and to the archives in the hope of finding a few general works that will sum up the rich and significant history of Cincinnati's Jewish community. And what he finds is singularly meager. There is a solid dissertation by Stephen Mostov,¹ but unfortunately it deals only with the period between 1840 and 1875. Barnett Brickner's 1932 dissertation,² which does attempt to span the century between 1817 and 1932, strikes me as distressingly lacking in critical evaluation. It is a work of boosterism, however much it may contain of useful material. Otherwise, we have to make do with some congregational histories of varying quality and with a few relatively superficial biographies to supplement the handful of more specialized studies that are available.

American Jewish Archives
Early Homogeneity

What strikes me about even the early history of Cincinnati's Jews is how homogeneous the community was from the very beginning. To be sure, the first really documented Jewish settler came from England—appropriately enough from Plymouth—and some East European Jews came to this bustling river town as early as the 1820s, but the heart of the migration came not only from Germany, nor even mainly from Bavaria in southern Germany, but in large part from a single area in northern Bavaria, supplemented by emigrants from eastern Prussia. As in other migrations, Jewish and non-Jewish, there was a kind of chain reaction as friends and relatives encouraged others to come and share their experiences of the new land. Mostov is persuasive, I think, in arguing that economic reasons were much more important than religious or political concerns in motivating the difficult and daring journey from Europe to frontier America. Frontier, yes, but remember that pre-Civil War Cincinnati was the largest city in the West—and as such came to have the largest Jewish population.

The literature tells us a good deal about what the pioneer Jews—mostly young adults—did for a living in Cincinnati. Starting mainly as peddlers, clerks, traders of some sort, a surprising number of them were quite successful. Gradually, men's apparel, tobacco, liquor, jewelry, a bit later cigars became the predominant employment industries. Mostly these enterprises were self-contained, that is, there was an internal Jewish system of credit supply, even though one can find instances of Jewish-non-Jewish cooperation and even occasionally partnership.

What one does not find—or so it seems to me—is any major involvement in the rich, exciting, and sometimes dangerous ferment of ideas that characterized Cincinnati before the Civil War. For example, during this period, reformers like Robert Dale Owen and Fanny Wright spent time in Cincinnati; America's first anarchist—an extreme individualist named Josiah Warren who turned out to be unusually successful as a merchant—was active here; a group of anti-slavery advocates from Lane Seminary in Walnut Hills made their way to northern Ohio, where they founded Oberlin College, which incidentally was also the first coeducational institution of higher education in the country. There appears to be no indication that any of this ferment

really touched the small Jewish community. In relatively short order its leaders—at least its economic elite—can be seen as a tightly homogeneous group with extensive social and family connections.

Evidently, however apart Cincinnati Jews were from the broader community—and it is clear that they were apart, whatever the tendency of later mythology to deny it—however apart they were, they shared the same mainstream values that characterized the non-Jewish community. Isaac M. Wise's denunciation of abolitionism and tenderness toward Southern secessionism is an obvious and by no means isolated example. It must be kept in mind, of course, that Cincinnati's Jews were a small and vulnerable group, trying hard to "make it" in a new and difficult environment. At the same time, examples of somewhat greater involvement or risk taking are easier to find in New York, for example, or even in Chicago than in Cincinnati. For the most part, the early Jewish community appears to have been, as its later successors, with some conspicuous exceptions, have been, a relatively conservative society in most of its relationships with the broader community.

Religious Radicalism

Where the "German" Jews of Cincinnati were radical, of course, was in their religious and communal affairs. From the first the early immigrants set out to establish the full range of "religiously required" institutions, and later, when the migration of less-favored and perhaps initially less-adaptable East European Jews took place, their successors undertook to provide a whole panoply of social services that stamped Cincinnati not as the sole, but as one of the more "progressive" of the Jewish communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But the real radicalism came in the establishment of American Reform Judaism. Why in Cincinnati? Why not in St. Louis, for instance, where a similar migration of Jews from Germany was taking place? Was it the uniqueness of Cincinnati Jews that made them take ideas that had developed over decades in Europe and adapt them dramatically to their American environment? Hardly. By the third decade of the nineteenth century the size, the influence, even the prosperity of Cincinnati Jewry were being paralleled in other cities of the West. It

seems clear that by far the main reason for Cincinnati's becoming the ideological and institutional center of the Reform movement in the United States was accident—primarily the accident of the calling of Isaac M. Wise to Bene Yeshurin Temple, and secondarily the appointment of Max Lilienthal to the rabbinic post at Bene Israel. More than enough has been written about Wise, in particular, to make clear how his—and in many ways it was *his*—ideology, as one author has put it, “legitimized the changes taking place in the life-style of the community and gave direction to further changes that were desired.” National institutions—Hebrew Union College, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations—solidified the leadership of Cincinnati in the Reform movement, only to see its comparative position decline in the twentieth century with the emergence to prominence of the Jewish communities in other parts of the country. I suspect that the comparative decline might have been substantially faster had it not been for a succession of able and nationally effective rabbinic and educational leaders—David Philipson and Victor Reichert, James Heller and Samuel Wohl, Julian Morgernstern, Nelson Glueck, and Alfred Gottschalk. And the same may be said of the Conservative and Orthodox communities as one thinks of the contributions of a Louis Feinberg or an Eliezer Silver.

The Coming of the East Europeans

By far the most unusual curiosity in the history of the Jews of Cincinnati is the lack of attention to the increasingly important throngs of East European Jews who began to change the character of Cincinnati Jewry after 1881. Brickner and now Jonathan Sarna and Nancy Klein do indeed have something to say about this group.³ Benny Kraut has recently published some valuable work on both German Jewish and East European Jewish Orthodoxy,⁴ and Abraham J. Peck and Uri D. Herscher on the Jewish refugees who came to Cincinnati from Nazi Germany,⁵ but otherwise we have only bits and pieces, no *World of Our Fathers* for Cincinnati, for instance. There are some references to the rise of Russian Jews to economic independence, to the movement from the West End to the Hills, whether to Avondale or to Price Hill, to the establishment of new institutions—new synagogues, the Orthodox Old Age Home, a Talmud Torah system, a Hebrew Free Loan

Society, and so on, and so on. But what seems to me to be missing are the detailed descriptions of life in the West End—of the complex, difficult, teeming society that was made up of the pious and the unbelieving, Zionists and socialists, all of the bewildering variety of elements that came swarming into this country in the wake of the assassination of Alexander II. Just as observers have studied the role, say, of City College, in the upward mobility of several generations of New York Jews, so is there reason for Cincinnatians to pay some attention to the hundreds of second-generation children who made their way through Woodward High School in the basin of the community and then on to careers in the professions, the arts, and the whole range of opportunities that were beyond the earlier dreams of their parents.

The role of the original Jewish “power structure”—almost but not quite entirely made up of German Jews—in facilitating the integration of the new immigrants has been better documented than most of the rest of the history. The rapid development of the social services and educational facilities is an accomplishment that continues to draw admiration to this day, whatever may have been the motivation—self-defense or pure *tsedaka*. Cincinnati again was a leader in the organization of such services, although one would be naive to assume that the result for a couple of generations was any meaningful integration of the Jewish community. “Two nations”—the Central European Jews and the East European Jews—continued to exist side-by-side and significantly apart at least until the Second World War, the impact of the Holocaust, and the ever more important pressures of economic and professional intermingling encouraged change.

Hebrew Union College

Another curiosity. There is available a good deal of material about the long and distinguished history of Hebrew Union College, but so far as I am aware there is very little about the implications of the presence of this world-class institution upon the life of the relatively small Jewish community in Cincinnati. In a populous Jewish area such as New York or Los Angeles the question might be of little significance. A Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion or a Jewish Theological Seminary or Orthodox Yeshiva University can be overshadowed by the sheer size of the community and the number of different institu-

tions it maintains. In a community such as Cincinnati, surely the patterns were different. I would think that scholarly attention to the relations between HUC and the various Reform temples—their rabbis and their congregations—might be quite instructive. What was it like, for example, to be a rabbi in a smallish community in which one's teachers were the specialists on the wide spectrum of Judaic questions? To whom did non-Jews turn for authoritative comments on a variety of Jewish concerns? What effect, if any, has the existence of HUC almost directly across the street had on the development of a Judaic Studies program at Cincinnati's major university? What about funding? Perhaps these are questions that are better left unexplored, but for the historian they are not only intriguing but important. To the extent that they have not been studied they will eventually have to be carefully explored.

Civic and Political Involvements

Still another "reflection." Much is sometimes made of the role of Cincinnati's Jews in a variety of civic movements. Mostly these seem to have been in the cultural and educational spheres, where Jews played an enormously crucial role in a variety of endeavors. In the area of civic political reform, however, despite our rhetoric, our role has been less evident. Obviously, I know more than a little about the contributions of the late Murray Seasongood, a champion of good government in Cincinnati. Indeed, I serve on the board of the Seasongood Good Government Foundation, one of the heritages of Murray and Agnes Seasongood. And I take great pride in the work on civil rights in which a relative, Mike Israel, was a pioneer in our community. He was one of a handful—and it really was only a handful—of the Jewish community who dealt head-on with some of the basic issues that were at the heart of our society. But on the whole, in either of these two areas or more generally in the arena of innovative political leadership, Cincinnati's Jews have been cautious and proper, accepting the conventional wisdom of the moment and rarely challenging its clichés. I have a great deal of respect and even admiration for much of that leadership. But of the notion that Jews have been in the forefront of most movements for governmental or legal reform in this country, I see inadequate evidence as yet, despite the assertions I read in the literature, to persuade

me that such has been the case in Cincinnati. And currently, as I recently observed in another connection, we are nibbling away at the edges, so quietly and so much behind the scenes that we may often be failing to confront the social issues in which we have such a huge stake. Is it possible, I asked, that as the Jewish community becomes increasingly absorbed in the characteristic and diverse activities of the broader community it will lose some of the additional sensitivity to questions of social justice that characterized at least some of our leaders in the past? I still hazard no answer to this question, but content myself with the truism that Cincinnati really is a very conservative city and, understandably, seems on the whole to have produced a subset of relatively conservative Jews.

Demographic Changes

I am sure that many readers will disagree with many of my comments, but however that may be, what else may I briefly say about the present? I share with many commentators the sense that the Cincinnati Jewish community is a rapidly changing one. Once again I draw upon my own experience for guidance. Having lived in Cincinnati for ten years, I left in 1940 and did not return, except for visits, until 1977. In those forty years major changes had taken place, the most obvious of which, as I have already noted, was the erosion of the separation between the two Jewish groups. The changes are most evident in the character of the Reform temples, at Hebrew Union College, and even in the observable patterns of social life, though it must be said that occasionally some traces of older attitudes can still be experienced.

Much more important at present, I think, are other demographic shifts that are taking place. The earliest Jewish inflow into Cincinnati was composed, as is true of most such immigration, mainly of men and later of women who had the drive and the motivation to change their lives in the most drastic of fashions. It was a young community. As time went on, of course, it aged, so that by the late twentieth century it had not only overtaken the general community in average age but had gone beyond it. A recent survey sponsored by the Cincinnati Jewish Federation, for example, indicates a rather dramatic growth in the proportion of the elderly among our Jewish community—considerably more, comparatively, than in the community at large. One out of

seven persons in Greater Cincinnati is over sixty-five. The figure for Jews is one in five. The reasons for the disparity are no doubt complex—the outmigration of younger Jews, perhaps intermarriage, may be even a lower birthrate among younger Jews, to say nothing of the immigration of other groups from Appalachia and the deeper South. The reasons may be less important than the implications. Certainly, as has been pointed out again and again, the cost to the Jewish community of providing for the kind of care the elderly will require is bound to go up considerably, both for the organized community and for individual families, in the years ahead. But a second consequence is that the Cincinnati Jewish community appears to be shrinking and is likely to continue to shrink in the years ahead. I understand the arguments of those who, quite rightly, point out that our figures are for the most part estimates, but I do not find persuasive the conclusion that somehow the apparent loss of Jewish population in Cincinnati is a myth. And it is quite conceivable that loss of population will be accompanied by at least some loss of influence in the community, particularly as other groups increase very substantially in numbers.

At the same time the physical distribution of the Jewish community is changing quite rapidly. In a recent symposium at the University of Cincinnati, the Jewish Federation's Connie Hinitz called attention to this phenomenon. Whereas in the past, the overwhelming majority of Jews were to be found in what has been called our own American ghettos—the West End, Avondale, then Bond Hill and Roselawn, perhaps even latterly Amberley—the extreme concentration of Jews in certain areas no longer exists. Hinitz notes the widespread residence patterns that now prevail, stretching from Blue Ash to Montgomery and Mason, in Wyoming and Finneytown, on the western side of town and in Hyde Park and East Walnut Hills, to say nothing of the older areas. She suggests that in the twenty-first century there will be fewer distinctive Jewish communities.

The Shape of Things to Come

If that should be the case, then real questions begin to emerge about the character of Cincinnati's Jewish institutions in the future. When the Jewish community was concentrated in one or two areas, then readily accessible temples, synagogues, schools, community centers

could be established and could flourish. The import for Orthodox and some Conservative Jews is clear. The gradual wasting away of some of the older congregations is not only likely to continue, but it may or may not be accompanied by the emergence of smaller congregations located in various of the newer areas of residence. But even for the large Reform Jewish element and most of the Conservatives, whose religious practices do not prevent mobility on Shabbat and on the religious holidays, one has the sense that the central institutions, whose location is based on changing residential patterns, are likely not only to be weakened, but also that present efforts to maintain a strong sense of community will have to be very much strengthened. Just as an aside, although no one my age is likely to be around to see it, I have no doubt that sometime in the twenty-first century there will be a consolidation of several of the Reform congregations presently rubbing shoulders with one another in Amberley. Even though there are clear variations among these temples along the liberal-traditional axis, demographic realities will make for increasing pressure in that direction. And my guess is that the resulting congregation will probably be not much bigger than any one of the constituent parts is at the present time.

At one time in the nineteenth century, the Cincinnati Jewish community was the largest, most influential, and most prosperous in the West. That is no longer the case, but despite its growing heterogeneity, on the average it is still an affluent group. Again the consequences are not easy to analyze, but some scholars have been studying the effects of relative affluence—particularly the attitudes that often seem to accompany it in our contemporary environment—among our younger Jews and Jews in general in the United States. I am aware of no evidence that would suggest that Cincinnati is different. Such affluence on the whole appears to lead to greater participation in the whole range of broader community activities and often, though fortunately not automatically, to a lessening of involvement with exclusively Jewish concerns, whatever they may be.

Israel

Finally, let me be a true Cincinnati and touch very cautiously on the issue that comes up whatever may be the Jewish subject under discus-

sion. In the nineteenth and well into the second quarter of the twentieth century, the dominant German and Reform Jewish leadership in Cincinnati tended to accept the contention of Isaac M. Wise, later of David Philipson and others, that we are Jews in religion only and American in nationality. A minority among them, and a larger group among the later East European Jews, demurred, pointing to the extensive community life centered not only in religion but in philanthropy, in social activities, in various mutual aid and fraternal bodies as indications that Judaism was much more than simply a religious commitment. For many who accepted the tutelage of Rabbi Wise, the emergence of Zionism was regarded at best as an irrelevance, at worst as a seeking after foreign allegiances that would jeopardize all that had been achieved in taking a proper place in American society. Cincinnati Reform Judaism was one of the centers of anti-Zionism for quite some time, despite the differing views of occasional dissenters, including Reform rabbis such as a James Heller and various members of the Hebrew Union College faculty.

I need not comment on the changes that took place as a result of the emergence of Nazism, the experiences of the Second World War, above all the horror of the Holocaust and the subsequent founding of the State of Israel. Zionism, translated into support for the new State of Israel, became a moral and thus a political imperative for all but a tiny minority of Cincinnati Jews. For a time, here as elsewhere in American Jewry, unquestioning support for the Israeli state and its policies became a compelling necessity. But as time has gone on, there appears to be some change, slight though it may be, taking place among the college students I have known for more than forty years; to illustrate, young Jewish students, as the years have passed, have step by step become no more knowledgeable about what has happened in the twentieth century and what this has meant for the lives of their fellow Jews than are their non-Jewish classmates. And it is no exaggeration to observe that many of their elders no longer feel the urgency about the "Jewish condition" that stemmed from the outrage and grief of a half century ago.

All of this contributes, I think, to a slight shift away from an Israel-oriented set of attitudes. The more recent history of Israel has led numbers of Cincinnati Jews—like their fellows country-wide—to raise questions about how far they should go in blind and uncondi-

tional support of every action and every policy of the Israeli government. In foreign policy, actions which most Jews probably still consider to be tragic necessities are seen by an apparently growing minority as wrong-headed undertakings which, if undertaken by their own leaders in the United States, they would criticize and try to change. Indeed, as the demographic composition of Israel changes, it becomes in some ways more difficult for Cincinnati Jews—whatever their religious practice or European roots—completely to understand. Perhaps this is another way of saying that Jews in Cincinnati are an integral part of an American Jewry that does, of course, share fundamental beliefs and values with Israeli Jews, but which is also different in significant ways. It is ironic that in some ways we have almost come full circle. The uniqueness of American Jews so esteemed by the nineteenth-century reformers has become our contemporary reality. There are, it would seem, two distinct major Jewish societies and cultures, the Israeli and the American, of which Cincinnati Jewry is a part—and they may well become more different in the years ahead. And what, one may well ask, does this have to do with a commentary on the Cincinnati Jewish experience? Merely that the patterns and the problems of that experience as they are projected into the future will undoubtedly be more and more influenced by how close our relations may be with that other Jewish experience in Israel and indeed by the character of those relations as well.

In any case, the century-and-three-quarters history of Cincinnati's Jews is a fascinating chapter in the remarkable story of American Jewry as a whole. It has been a constantly changing history—even in a community where everything seems to move slowly—and clearly there has been much more that is admirable and splendid than there is to be deplored. Let us hope that the same will be said of those who come after us.

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Notes

1. Steven Mostov, "A 'Jerusalem' on the Ohio: The Social and Economic History of the Cincinnati Jewish Community, 1840-1875" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1981).

2. Barnett Brickner, "The Jewish Community of Cincinnati, Historical and Descriptive, 1817-1933" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1933).
3. Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati, 1989).
4. Benny Kraut, *German Jewish Orthodoxy in an Immigrant Synagogue: Cincinnati's New Hope Congregation and the Ambiguities of Ethnic Religion* (New York, 1988).
5. Abraham J. Peck and Uri D. Herscher, *Queen City Refuge: An Oral History of Cincinnati's Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany* (West Orange, N.J., 1989).