

TO OUR READERS...

This 2005 edition of *The AJAJ* commemorates the 350th anniversary of Jewish communal presence on these shores. The contents of this volume do not focus strictly on the 350th activities that occurred during 2004–2005, nor do they aspire to provide the reader with a comprehensive interpretation of the American Jewish experience over the past three and a half centuries. Instead, we attempted to imbue this issue with a commemorative mood. We refer to this mood as a “Commemorative Collection” because we hope that this edition of our journal (which will actually appear in 2007) will, in a modest way, contribute to the interpretive process that must inevitably occur now that the 350th anniversary “belongs to the ages.”

Some have begun to suggest that a growing interest in the American Jewish experience may be attributed, in part, to the widespread public attention that the 350th anniversary attracted. The establishment of a Jewish American Heritage Month, for instance, constitutes one tangible outcome of the 350th. U.S. Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Florida) was the architect and prime mover of a concurrent resolution adopted by both chambers of Congress on January 6, 2006. This resolution urged the President of the United States to issue a proclamation calling on American citizens to commemorate a Jewish American Heritage Month. President George W. Bush did just that in May 2006 when he issued a proclamation that called upon the American people to “celebrate the rich history of the Jewish people in America and honor the great contributions [Jews] have made to the country.”¹ President Bush reissued his call for a Jewish American Heritage Month in May 2007. According to Congresswoman Wasserman Schultz, “The decision of the President and Congress to commemorate Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM) followed the highly successful celebration of the 350th Anniversary of American Jewish History in 2004–2005.”²

While several important new syntheses were produced for the 350th, new documents and fresh interpretive analyses of the kind contained in this issue inevitably prompt novel questions that future historians will need to engage. The articles and documentary analyses in this commemorative edition highlight this phenomenon. As is often the case with *The AJAJ*, this issue concentrates on selected moments in American Jewish history. However, we have made a conscious attempt to include analyses that examine at least one topic relating to each of the centuries that have passed since 1654, when Jewish communal life in America first took root. Considered in its totality, this issue seeks to underscore one of the 350th anniversary’s most important lessons: We are never done interpreting history! The work of uncovering and reinterpreting the past is never completed.

This issue begins with an article reexamining the history of the Jewish communal settlement that took place in New Amsterdam in 1654. Professor Leo Hershkowitz has devoted much of his productive career to the study of New York

City's history. Over the years, he has uncovered many significant documents that have cast new light on the early history of its Jews. Professor Hershkowitz's essay, *By Chance or Choice: Jews in New Amsterdam 1654*, teaches us that the iconic story of America's first Jewish community is actually an admixture of fact and fiction. He reminds us that it is critically important for the historian to distinguish between demonstrable facts and figments of the imagination. Ultimately, he asks us to reconsider whether it is accurate to assert that the story of Jewish communal life in North America begins in 1654.

Revising history and the importance of distinguishing fact from fiction also play a critical role in Lance Sussman's thought-provoking article on the history of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's infamous "Trefa Banquet," the 1883 feast marking the ordination of the first four rabbis educated at the Hebrew Union College. The event's renowned menu — the only surviving copy of which is preserved in the American Jewish Archives — abounds with nonkosher food items. Sussman's research has convinced him that many of the historical writings on this celebrated banquet are laden with errors and inaccuracies that historians have uncritically accepted and repeated over the years.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, Chabad-Lubavitch became the fastest growing of all American Jewish religious movements. This is a remarkable development for a Hasidic Jewish group that holds to a conspicuously distinctive dress code and a lifestyle that separates adherents from the American mainstream.³ Despite the dynamic growth of Hasidic life in America, historians have given this movement very little attention. Ira Robinson hypothesizes that the scholarly inattention may be due to the fact that the Hasidim themselves were largely oblivious to the historical enterprise and tended not to write memoirs and historical narratives. That American Hasidim were the objects of so much traducement from both Jews and non-Jews, Robinson continues, contributed to this historical blind spot. Robinson's scholarly work on the Hasidim in America begins to address this historical lacuna and, as Robinson himself notes, this new field of study will add greater texture to our overall understanding of the East European immigration and its influence on American Judaism.

This issue's readers will explore four interesting, documentary-based historical studies. First, we include a previously unpublished letter written in 1784 by Rebecca Franks (1758–1823) to her cousin and confidante, Williamina Bond Cadwalader. Rebecca — the daughter of David Franks and Margaret Evans — was born and raised in Philadelphia. As a married woman, she lived in England. Many sources refer to Rebecca as "the Jewish belle" of Philadelphia (though, as Mark Stern points out in his introduction, Franks's mother was not Jewish, so Rebecca was — halahically speaking — not a Jew). This letter constitutes a colorful reflection on Franks's social life in Philadelphia. Stern draws our attention to the fact that though Rebecca and her father sided with the British, this did not seem to impair their associations with those loyal to the revolutionary cause.

Our second document pertains to an interesting eighteenth century American *lu'ah* that comes to us from the remarkable private collection of Arnold Kaplan, a dedicated member of The Marcus Center's Ezra Consortium. This *lu'ah* is a Jewish calendar that, among other things, enabled its owners to mark the onset of Sabbaths and holy days during the revolutionary period. This particular *lu'ah* is unique in that it is the earliest surviving Jewish calendar that is clearly intended to be used by a woman. As Professor Jonathan D. Sarna points out in his helpful annotation, this document sharpens our understanding of the nature of traditional Jewish practice during the early national period.

Finally, the two documentary analyses compare two significant artifacts that relate directly to the commemoration of the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America. First, Ira Rezak has contributed a comparative examination of the medallions that were struck to commemorate the 250th, 300th, and 350th anniversaries of Jewish life in North America. Although the three medallions share numerous commonalities, Rezak illuminates how each of the three medallions literally bespeaks its *sitz im leben*. Second, we have reproduced images of the rabbinic proclamations that were issued on the occasion of the tercentenary commemoration in 1954 and compared these documents with the joint rabbinic proclamation that was promulgated in 2005 in conjunction with the 350th anniversary. Frederic Krome shows us that the rabbinic proclamations, like the commemorative medallions, testify to the changes that have reshaped the American Jewish community during the last half of the twentieth century.

Aristotle taught his students that “if you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development.” It is our hope that students and researchers will return to this commemorative edition of *The AJAJ* having been reminded that the historical enterprise fosters a never-ending process of new discoveries and fresh insights and that historical anniversaries, such as the 350th, frequently fertilize the soil of historical analysis. Ultimately, the more we discover about our past, the better we know ourselves. Or as the distinguished American litterateur, Robert Penn Warren, once noted: “History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”

GPZ

Cincinnati, Ohio

Notes

¹Jewish American Heritage Month, A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America, April 20, 2006, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA), Cincinnati, Ohio.

²Letter on the JAHM, August 2006, AJA.

³Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 297–298.