

Rabbi Morris Newfield: Ambassador to the Gentiles, a Balancing Act

Scott M. Langston



Morris Newfield (1869–1940)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Morris Newfield served as rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Birmingham, Alabama, from 1895 to 1940. During his tenure, he distinguished himself in several ways, one of which was in his relations with the local Christian population. Scholars have often described Reform rabbis as serving as “ambassadors to the gentiles” or “ethnic brokers,” and Newfield has certainly been cast in this mode. Two documents housed in the American Jewish Archives (AJA) illustrate the balancing act rabbis like Newfield have undertaken when attempting to fill this role. Acting as spokespeople for their Jewish communities, they have attempted to forge common grounds and alliances, shown similarities between Christians and Jews, and actively contributed to civic reform and uplift.

Additionally, especially as the representative Jew in smaller Jewish enclaves, they have had to defend the community against insensitive remarks and overt antisemitism without fomenting further antagonism.¹

Jews had resided in Birmingham almost since its founding in 1871, when a few moved there to open businesses. By the end of the city’s first decade, Jews constituted about 1 percent of the population, and in 1882 some of them formed Temple Emanu-el. Many played prominent roles in the business community, held positions as aldermen, served on various city boards, and as a whole did not experience overt antisemitism, although they were excluded from the most prestigious social clubs. The 1910s, however, presented considerable challenges to the Jewish community. With the annexation of several suburbs, many “pietistic Protestants” entered the city’s voting pool. At the same time, Birmingham changed its government from an aldermanic system with elections by individual wards to a three-member commission elected at large, thereby lessening Jews’ chances of being elected to these positions. During this decade the “moral elements” and the “liberal elements” also battled over a number of

issues, including Prohibition, prostitution, and movies shown on Sundays. This latter issue provoked Rabbi Newfield to challenge the “pietistic Protestants.”²

Using American Identity to Challenge Christians

The first document reprinted here is a letter written on 27 April 1918 to the Reverend P.B. Wells, chair of the publicity committee of Birmingham’s Pastors’ Union, as part of a struggle over whether movies should be shown in the city on Sundays.³ In 1915 the city had allowed labor unions and small theaters to show Sunday movies, prompting protest from the Pastors’ Union, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and other Christian organizations. The issue came to a head in 1918, when it was referred to the city’s voters. During the days leading up to the referendum, the Pastors’ Union, composed primarily of Protestant pastors, charged in a newspaper advertisement that a petition circulating in favor of Sunday movies included the names of every prominent Jew in the city. To thwart this support, Wells sent a letter (17 April) on behalf of the Union to Jewish voters urging them not to vote, repeatedly emphasizing that the election was “strictly a Christian issue” over “a Christian institution.” Wells noted that the Union represented more than one hundred churches and almost fifty thousand people and that Jewish participation in the matter would “undoubtedly create an undesirable end” and “most unfortunate friction.” He closed by assuring his Jewish readers that “we have the most kindly feeling for our Jewish friends.” Given that the Union had publicly raised the issue of Jewish participation, Newfield responded with a letter (20 April) published in the paper wherein he challenged the notion that Jews should not vote in the election, as well as the assertion that every prominent Jew in the city supported showing Sunday movies. Newfield assured Wells that he had congregants who supported both sides and that he had discovered “numbers of the most prominent men of my congregation who did not sign the petition.” Wells then issued another public letter (25 April), affirming the Jewish right to vote and characterizing the Union’s appeal as merely “a friendly suggestion of one religious faith to another,” while also asserting that the United States was a Christian nation, Christianity was “the secret of America’s greatness,” and the Christian Sabbath was “fundamental to the Christian faith.” The pastor reminded the rabbi that he had immigrated to the United States and “sought a refuge in the land of the Christian Sabbath and the Protestant Christian faith.”⁴ Two days later, Newfield, a native of Hungary who had arrived in the United States in 1891, wrote the letter reprinted below.

The letter is brief and to the point, but it illustrates an important—and sometimes overlooked—concept pertaining to rabbis being ambassadors to the gentiles, namely, Newfield’s willingness to challenge Christians both publicly and privately. As has been well chronicled, Jews living in areas where Christian fundamentalism exerted tremendous influence could quickly find themselves

in a precarious situation. Such was the case with Newfield and his congregants. According to Mark Cowett, Newfield's biographer, many of Birmingham's evangelical Protestants had "mixed emotions about Jewish merchants," valuing their economic contributions to the city but also being suspicious of their status as non-Christians. When threatened, these Christians could react negatively, making it risky for Jews to issue challenges. Newfield, however, took the risk, most often addressing these concerns in sermons delivered at Temple Emanu-El.⁵ Though these were public settings, most who heard his views were Jews rather than Christians. There certainly were risks involved in making controversial statements from his pulpit, but at least in those settings he addressed a somewhat friendly audience. The setting in which Newfield dealt with the Sunday movies issue, however, was much more risky. He now addressed Christians directly, both publicly through his letter in the newspaper and privately through his letter to Wells, who was an important representative of the Christian majority and in this case acted basically as an ambassador to the Jews, albeit one on a mission to exert Christian hegemony. Furthermore, by responding in the newspaper, Newfield immediately publicized his views to a much larger audience. In one letter he received from "A Christian," he was congratulated on having failed "to deliver our Christian Sabbath into the hands of her enemies—Anti-Christians and Non-Christians." The anonymous correspondent reminded Newfield that, "The Jews have come to this our Christian country with its Christian Sabbath, and have prospered through the kindness and patronage of Christian people, and it seems to many of us very unkind in them & in you their pastor & advisor to join with the forces opposed to the retention of our sacred institutions." He then concluded, "We as Christians know better now where you stand, your attitude toward our ideals, and are better prepared to place you."⁶

The arguments Newfield made in his final response to Wells are noteworthy because they demonstrate how the rabbi tried to balance cooperating with Christians while defending Jews. In the second paragraph, he disavows having been the instigator of the public challenge but notes that he responded in the forum Wells himself chose. In the following paragraph, he denies interest in the outcome of the election as a motivating factor for his response. Instead, he focuses on the equal status of Jews in civic matters. In other words, this was not a Christian issue, as Wells had asserted, but a civil matter, something on which the Jews of Birmingham had just as much right to vote as Christians. Newfield thus challenged Wells's efforts essentially to disenfranchise Jews on this particular matter. Newfield was treading the precarious ground of politics and religion, but as an ambassador to the gentiles he felt it necessary to risk challenging Christians. For Newfield, acting in this role not only carried with it the responsibility of educating Christians about Jews and smoothing the way for better Jewish-Christian relations, but it also meant defending Jewish rights as American citizens. The differences between Jewish and Christian

Sabbath observance—Friday night/Saturday versus Sunday—were obvious in this instance and could easily have driven a wedge between the two communities. The rabbi, however, attempted to ameliorate the repercussions of his challenge when he tried to refocus the pastor’s attention on their commonality as Americans. This meant that both shared a concern for “our country” and working together during the time of its “great need” (that is, World War I). Thus, Newfield used the status of Jews as Americans to challenge Christians, as well as overcome differences.

Ultimately, Birmingham’s voters prohibited showing movies on Sunday. Rabbi Newfield had still taken the opportunity to remind Birmingham’s Christians that, although differences existed in their religious beliefs and observances, nothing separated them when it came to exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens. While he may not have succeeded in convincing many of this equality, he nonetheless illustrated that being an ambassador to the gentiles sometimes meant challenging Christians and even making religious differences explicit.

Using the Bible to Work with Christians

The second document reprinted below is the text of remarks that Newfield made to the Conference of Social Workers of Alabama.⁷ Although undated, clues exist concerning the date he delivered the address. The letterhead on which the remarks are printed identifies the rabbi as holding a Doctor of Letters degree (Lit.D), an honorary title that the University of Alabama awarded him in 1921. Newfield was also quite active in various social work organizations. In the spring of 1921, the Conference of Social Workers of Alabama, better known as the Alabama Conference of Social Work, held its annual meeting in Montgomery and elected Newfield as its president. The roots of this organization stretched back to 1901, and



Top: Birmingham’s original Temple Emanu-El, Fifth Ave. and 17th St. North

Above: The new Temple Emanu-El, 2100 Highland Ave.

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Newfield had been involved since its inception. In 1922, the conference met in Birmingham from 26–28 May, with Newfield remaining as president. In the document reprinted here, Newfield thanked the pastor and members of the Independent Presbyterian Church for “graciously tendering to us this their place of evening-worship.” The Independent Presbyterian Church had been meeting in Temple Emanu-El’s facilities since its founding in 1915, as well as holding evening services in the Lyric Theater. Its pastor, the Reverend Henry M. Edmonds, was a close friend of Newfield’s and had organized the church after resigning from the Presbytery of North Alabama over theological disputes. Newfield almost immediately offered use of Temple Emanu-El to the fledgling church. As the Social Work Conference met, the church was nearing completion of its own building but was still holding services in Temple Emanu-El and the Lyric Theater, a vaudeville-era theater and movie house opened in 1914. Thus, it appears likely that Newfield’s remarks were made in 1922 at the Alabama Conference of Social Work annual meeting in Birmingham. The program included Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago’s Hull House, as a speaker.⁸

Newfield sought to promote unity and strong ties with Christians in several ways. His friendship with Edmonds is implied in his address and reflected in how each supported the other by offering their facilities for purposes with which the other was involved.⁹ Newfield also joined in common causes with Christians, in this case, social issues. The Alabama Conference of Social Work certainly included religious personnel, but its members came from various fields, reflecting its character as more than purely religious. Knowing the religious setting of the meeting place and revealing his own Reform ideology/theology, Newfield emphasized the connection between religion and social work.

Rather than simply arguing from the general nature of religion, Newfield used the Bible as a tool to cross the boundaries between Jews and Christians. Asserting that Judaism and Christianity expressed themselves supremely in social work—a theme affirmed by the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, as well as the Social Gospel movement—he pointed to the example of the prophets as contained in “our Bible.”¹⁰ This emphasis on meeting social needs, therefore, was not unique to Reform Judaism; according to the rabbi, it was the hallmark of “the faith” and “the Scriptures,” something Jew and Christian shared. Newfield also invoked the Ten Commandments, a favorite text of both religions, as well as other passages in the “Pentateuch,” a term more familiar to Christians than its synonym, the “Torah.” After using the Bible to construct a bridge between the two groups, Newfield added further reinforcement by referencing the common challenge they faced to “our civilization.”

Newfield had invoked various commonalities to overcome differences with Christians, but it was the Bible in this instance that he emphasized primarily. The Bible was a powerful and influential text among many Americans and

could easily be used to divide Jews and Christians, something that Newfield readily recognized and admitted. Yet the rabbi also knew that it could provide a common vocabulary, ideology, and platform on which to work together. He therefore capitalized on the Bible's status and influence in American culture to promote Jewish-Christian harmony, and in doing so, demonstrated another function he performed as ambassador to the gentiles—that of facilitating interfaith understanding and cooperation.

The Skilled Ambassador

These two documents illustrate the balance that Newfield attempted to maintain in dealing with Christians, and they also reveal the complexity of being an ambassador to the gentiles. He was not simply dealing generically with Christians; he had to recognize and react to the differences among Christians themselves. Rev. Wells represented the “pietistic Protestants,” or those who held views about the Bible and social issues that differed somewhat from liberal Christians like Rev. Edmonds. Newfield and Edmonds formed a close friendship and more than once banded together to combat what they perceived to be threats from Christian groups like the Pastors' Union. Newfield also maintained good associations with others who were amenable to his views.¹¹ Even though, in keeping with his Reform ideology/theology, Newfield embraced tolerance and endorsed values that transcended specific religions, he still did not hesitate to challenge religious expressions he deemed as dangerous. Rather than publicly challenge the Pastors' Union on the biblical interpretation of the Sabbath—a debate that may have proven difficult to win, given the centrality and symbolism of Sunday observance in Christianity, especially among many of Birmingham's Christians—Newfield emphasized their commonality as American citizens. Yet when joining with more compatible Christians to address social problems, he selected certain biblical texts on whose interpretation both generally agreed, thereby solidifying mutual goodwill. His interaction with Christians, therefore, had to be skillfully shaped in light of the peculiarities of each situation, demonstrating the difficulties and risks involved in such undertakings.

*Scott M. Langston has taught American history and religious and biblical studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels for about twenty years. He has written numerous essays and books, including most recently, *Exodus Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006) and “Interaction and Identity: Jews and Christians In Nineteenth Century New Orleans,” reprinted in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, edited by Mark Bauman (University of Alabama Press, 2006). He is currently president of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and a Lecturer in Religion at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.*



Temple Emanuel

Rabbi Morris Newfield

Higdon Ave. and Twenty-First St.

Birmingham, Ala., April 27, 1918

Rev. P. B. Wells,
Chairman Publicity Committee,
Pastors Union,
City.

Dear Sir:-

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your communication of the 25th instant, and to assure you that I noted its contents with proper consideration.

I am in no wise responsible for the publication of your first letter in last Saturday's Age-Herald. After your letter was given publicity in the press I was compelled to give my letter similar publicity.

I am not concerned in the outcome of the election on Sunday movies. I protested against the separate grouping of citizens of Jewish faith in civic matters.

I do not wish to lend myself to propaganda, pro or con, on the issue involved in the election, hence I deem that I should not make further reply other than to say that I trust we may continue to find, in this time of our country's great need, repeated opportunities to work together for the common good.

Yours fraternally,

Morris Newfield

Letter from Morris Newfield to Reverend P. B. Wells, 27 April 1918.

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Temple Emanu-El

HIGHLAND AVENUE & TWENTY-FIRST STREET
RABBI MORRIS NEWFIELD, LIT. D.
BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

Ladies & Gentlemen:

The Confer. of Social Workers of Ala. are deeply grateful to the Pastor and members of the INCL. PRESBYT. CHURCH for their courtesy in graciously tendering to us this their place of evening-worship for our inspirational meeting. We appreciate this courtesy all the more for their readiness to join with us in this community-gathering in lieu of their regular religious service. They of the Church and we of this Conference are akin in the thought that Religion ^{Service} and Social ^{Service} work go hand in hand; that both are manifestations of the longing of man to serve God by serving humanity. We all have come to realize that religion is not exclusively doctrines of theology; that the religious ideal must seek its expression in the social ideal; and must find its practical application in social needs of man.

A study of religion, certainly of the religion of Christianity as well as Judaism, as seen in the life and work of the Prophets of our Bible, will tell us that the chief concern of those inspired men was to minister to the social needs of their age and of every age. The very genius of the faith as revealed in the Scriptures was intensely social in outlook. The message of the prophets was preciously social. And because it was social it has lived these 3000 years and will survive until it shall have wrought itself into the life of the ages. Their memorable utterances are conscience-cries the echoes of which lay bare our social wrongs.

Study the Ten Commandments and you will find that seven of them are social in content and scope. Read the legislative code of the Pentateuch and you will be struck by the fact that its provisions are instinct with care and concern for the poor and the oppressed; and this not in the spirit of almsgiving but of that ^{Justice} which is synonymous with justice. This message of the prophets, the message of social living, is needed in our age to restore peace to the warring and discordant elements in our civilization.

Text of remarks made by Morris Newfield to the Conference of Social Workers of Alabama, ca. 1922.

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Notes

¹Malcolm Stern has argued that one of the main functions of the southern rabbi was “interpreting the Jew to the non-Jewish community”; see his article, “The Role of the Rabbi in the South,” in *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 27. Gladys Rosen, in “The Rabbi in Miami—A Case History” (also in *Turn to the South*, 35, 38, 40), describes the rabbi as a “representative to the general community” and to gentiles, as well as the “spokesman for the Jewish community.” The idea of “ethnic broker” is discussed in Mark K. Bauman and Arnold Shankman, “The Rabbi as Ethnic Broker: The Case of David Marx,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 2 (Spring 1983): 51–68; and Bauman, “Role Theory and History: The Illustration of Ethnic Brokerage in the Atlanta Jewish Community in an Era of Transition and Conflict,” in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K. Bauman (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 236–261. For background on Newfield in this role, see Mark Cowett, *Birmingham’s Rabbi: Morris Newfield and Alabama, 1895–1940* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 68–78. For examples of other rabbis acting in this role see George R. Wilkes, “Rabbi Dr. David Marx and the Unity Club: Organized Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Liberalism, and Religious Diversity in Early Twentieth-Century Atlanta,” *Southern Jewish History* 9 (2006): 35–68; Hollace Ava Weiner, *Jewish Stars in Texas: Rabbis and Their Work* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860–1929* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1997); and Scott M. Langston, “Interaction and Identity: Jews and Christians in Nineteenth Century New Orleans,” *Southern Jewish History* 3 (2000): 83–124; and idem, “James K. Gutheim as Southern Reform Rabbi, Community Leader, and Symbol,” *Southern Jewish History* 5 (2002): 69–102.

²Cowett, 20–27, 57–60; Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 1–9; 22–37.

³Morris Newfield Collection, SC-10577, 45/2/4, American Jewish Archives (AJA), Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁴Cowett, 75–77; “The Pastors’ Union of Birmingham to Dear Friend,” 17 April 1918; “Morris Newfield to Rev. P.B. Wells,” 20 April 1918; “P.B. Wells to Rabbi Morris Newfield,” 25 April 1918, Morris Newfield Papers, File 817, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama.

⁵Cowett, 70–75.

⁶“A Christian to Rabbi Newfield,” 7 May 1918, Morris Newfield Papers, File 817, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama.

⁷SC-10577, 45/2/4, AJA.

⁸Cowett, 82–85; No author given, “Alabama Conference of Social Work,” *Alabama Social Welfare* 3 n.5 (May 1938): 4.

⁹Edmonds describes his relationship with Newfield in his book, *A Parson’s Notebook* (Birmingham: Elizabeth Agee’s Bookshelf, 1961): 194–199. While these reflections were made several decades later and are somewhat nostalgic, they nonetheless reveal the strong bond between the two men. Edmonds remarked, “A Jewish rabbi, I learned from watching Dr. Newfield, feels it his duty to lead his people in service to the community” (197). He also recounted a time when Newfield filled Edmonds’s pulpit in his absence and spoke on, “A Jew Looks at the Christian Church.” One of his church members later remarked, “We’ll never get over the drubbing that he gave us,” but also characterized it as being “so delicately and so humbly handled” (196).

¹⁰Cowett, 78, notes that Newfield and other liberal clergy in Birmingham embraced and promoted the Social Gospel. Jonathan Sarna points out that prophetic Judaism, that is, the Reform emphasis on universalism and social justice, paralleled the Social Gospel movement. See Sarna’s *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 151, 195. Egal Feldman highlights the ecumenical activities and dialogue sparked by the Christian

Social Gospel and Reform Judaism's emphasis on social justice but also asserts that the Social Gospel "accomplished little in improving the relationship between Christian and Jew" because its proponents continued to dispense misrepresentations of Judaism and, in so doing, even contributed to a rise in antisemitism. Feldman, "The Social Gospel and the Jews," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 58 (March 1969): 308–322. According to Michael A. Meyer, prophetic Judaism began addressing specific social issues rather than focusing only on an individual's conduct under the influence of Progressivism and the Social Gospel. In 1918, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted the "first social justice platform of Reform Judaism." Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 287–288.

¹¹In addition to Edmonds, Newfield had good friendships and working relationships with other Christian ministers in Birmingham, including Middleton S. Barnwell of the Episcopalian Church of the Advent, Alfred J. Dickinson of the First Baptist Church, E.C. McVoy of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and Father Eugene L. Sands of St. Paul's Catholic Church. During the 1920s, Newfield, Edmonds, and Sands held a series of interfaith forums designed to expel stereotypes related to each religion. Cowett, 87–88, 141–143.