

TO OUR READERS...

It was one of New York Jewry's most distinguished historians, Moses Rischen, who cautioned fellow researchers never to forget that "American Jewish history is *not* New York City Jewish history writ large."¹ Those who ignore Rischen's counsel are quite likely to oversimplify the diverse historical character of American Jewry. Students of history must avoid drawing broad generalizations based *exclusively* on source materials derived from the nation's five or six large urban Jewish centers. Although the importance of these major centers of Jewish life must never be understated, a robust understanding of the American Jewish experience must incorporate a discussion of Jewish life outside of the megalopolitan communities. What is the story of American Judaism and American Jewry in regions like the South, the Midwest, the Old Southwest, the western frontier, and the Pacific Northwest? Those who strive to reconstruct the nature of Jewish life in these localities contribute significantly to our understanding of the American Jewish past, and the study of the southern Jewish experience is a case in point.

In 1940, W.J. Cash published an important volume titled *The Mind of the South*, which argued that southerners possess a distinctive set of cultural and sociological values. The book constitutes a landmark publication that has sparked an ongoing historiographical controversy as to whether or not a "southern mindset" exists in the twentieth century and beyond. Although historians and sociologists continue to debate the uniqueness of southern culture, there is truth in the observation that "what makes the mind of the South different is that it thinks it is."²

Jews in the American South have long been cognizant of their distinctive regional identity. In 1879, for example, one of America's most colorful rabbis, Edward Benjamin Morris Browne³ (1844–1928), bitterly criticized the leadership of the nation's first congregational alliance, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), because of what he perceived to be its near total disregard for southern Jewry. In the pages of the *Jewish South*, another southern Jewish critic from Canton, Mississippi, advised his congregation not to join the UAHC (which he sneeringly transposed as an acronym for the 'Union of Happy American Cacklers') "until they shall evidence by their works they have an interest in our section."⁴

Historical interest in southern Jewry evolved slowly over the twentieth century. From the establishment of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892 until the 1950s, relatively few studies focused on topics relating to the history of Jewish life in the South. These first fruits included biographical studies of southern Jews and pioneering reconstructions of sundry historical events that pertained to Jewish life in the American South. Many important

documentary analyses were published by so-called amateur historians, and their original research would eventually benefit the subsequent work of professionally trained historians who produced thematic studies on the region.

It is hardly a coincidence that the first critical and interpretive studies of Jewish life in the American South began to appear in the 1950s, shortly after the 1947 founding of the American Jewish Archives (AJA). The AJA's founder, Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995), observed that the “library of the American Jewish Historical Society, situated in the city of New York, has an excellent collection of both manuscripts and printed records, but because of the accident of its geographic situation, [the AJHS] serves primarily, but by no means exclusively, those who dwell in the New York metropolitan area.” Therefore, Marcus declared, “the time [had] come to make provisions . . . to offer study opportunities to the 1,100,000 Jews living in the Mississippi basin.” The AJA quickly began to assemble a rich collection of primary source materials from communities located “between the Rockies and the Cumberland Plateau,” and within a few years Marcus and his protégés, Malcolm H. Stern (1915–1995), Bertram W. Korn (1918–1979), and Stanley Chyet (1931–2002), began to research and publish critical studies on Jewish life in the South and the Midwest.⁵

In the mid-1950s, a cadre of leaders of the American Jewish Historical Society who were particularly interested in studying Jewish life in the American South founded the Southern Jewish Historical Society. The new society began publishing a journal that appeared irregularly between 1958 and 1963.⁶ In retrospect, however, it seems as though the publication of Eli Evans's *The Provincials* in 1973 greatly invigorated the study of southern Jewish history. Evans's intensely personal account of Jewish life in Durham, North Carolina, was stimulating and insightful, and the book appealed to the scholarly and casual reader alike. Evans attributed the book's popularity to the public's fascination with what many perceived to be an exotic topic. “Non-Southerners” he noted “are stunned to learn that the South ever had any Jews at all.” In October 1976, Evans participated in a small gathering of scholars and independent researchers who were interested in revitalizing the field of southern Jewish history. This colloquium breathed new life into the Southern Jewish Historical Society, and the papers that were delivered at that conference were subsequently published.⁷ From that point forward, the academic field of southern Jewish history has experienced steady and impressive growth.

In recent decades, an increasing number of American Jewish historians have examined the story of Jewish life in the Land of Dixie, and the current issue of our journal powerfully demonstrates this remarkable efflorescence. Mark K. Bauman's valuable historiographical essay, “A Century of Southern Jewish Historiography,” provides readers with a pioneering reconstruction of the history of southern Jewish scholarship. Dr. Bauman properly summarizes his analysis by observing that despite the many fine studies on southern Jewish

history that have appeared over the past three decades, much remains to be done in the years ahead.

In response to this challenge, we asked Professor Bauman to invite four scholars to contribute new documentary analyses that would enrich this issue's focus on Southern Jewish history. Two of the four contributors selected documents—all of which are among the holdings of the American Jewish Archives—that enhance our understanding of the role of the rabbi in the South. Scott Langston's analysis of Rabbi Morris Newfield's letters written in Birmingham, Alabama, deepens our understanding of the delicate role the rabbi played as an ambassador to the non-Jewish southern community. Shuly Rubin Schwartz offers a fascinating look at some highly introspective correspondence of Paula Ackerman, an extraordinary woman who unexpectedly became the rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Meridian, Mississippi, after the death of her husband in 1950. Alan M. Kraut's essay on the 1873 yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Tennessee—based on a captivating diary that memorialized the experience—sheds light on the contributions of A.E. Frankland, who remained in the beleaguered community and ministered to the many sufferers, Jew and non-Jew alike. Judah P. Benjamin's March 1858 Senate speech, examined by Maury Wiseman, provides readers with his nuanced and oftentimes paradoxical view on slavery, one that was as much rooted in British and American legal codes as it was in the implicit pragmatism of that society. We are deeply indebted to Dr. Bauman for his dedicated contributions to the development of this issue on the southern Jewish experience.

Today, the essential character of Jewish life in the South seems to be in the midst of a transformation. Southern Jewish baby boomers have abandoned their isolated rural hometowns in favor of larger urban centers. Consequently, many of the Jewish small-town communities in the Deep South have dried up. The Jewish populations of several large urban centers, on the other hand, have exploded. Still, the basic elements that have long typified Jewish life in the South prevail; it is a region that contains a small, thinly dispersed Jewish population that still tends to rely heavily on interregional collaboration to meet its Jewish needs. It is a Jewish lifestyle that differs, as one scholar observed, “both qualitatively and quantitatively from that of Northern Jewry,” and it is a *modus vivendi* that Jews who live in the sprawling megalopolitan centers on the coasts find quite difficult to fathom.⁸

Yet it may well be that this distinctive mode of existence has enabled the Jews of the South to fulfill their self-assigned role as custodians of an ancient tradition in spite of the many inharmonious societal realities that have characterized that particular section of the nation. The maintenance of a communal identification—the dogged attempt to preserve a civic link with other Jews—functions as a critical element in realizing what has of late been called “Jewish continuity.” It was Jacob Marcus who taught that the “leitmotif

of Jewish history in this country is the constant attempt, the determination, to create and further a distinct community with its synagogues, its schools, its charities. It is as simple as that. In Jewry where there is no community there is no history.”⁹ As this edition of our journal demonstrates, the unrelenting determination to preserve and promote Jewish life in the American South is a story that continues to spark keen historical interest.¹⁰

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Notes

¹Moses Rischin, “Jacob Rader Marcus: Historian-Archivist of Jewish Middle America,” *American Jewish History* 85 (June, 1997):175–181 (emphasis added).

²Joseph L. Morrison, *W. J. Cash: Southern Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 5.

³Browne is better known by his nickname, “Alphabet” Browne, so named by his contemporaries because of his flagrant brandishing of his many academic degrees (i.e., Rabbi E.B.M. Browne, LL.D., AM, BM, DD, MD). See Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, Vol. III. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 127.

⁴Leah Elizabeth Hagedorn, “The Southern Jewish Ethos: Jews, Gentiles and Interfaith Relations in the American South, 1877–1917” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina, 1988), 99.

⁵Jacob Rader Marcus, “The Program of the American Jewish Archives,” *American Jewish Archives* 1, n. 1 (June, 1948): 2.

⁶The original founders of the Southern Jewish Historical Society included Saul Viener (1921–2006), who worked on the history of Congregation Beth Ahabah in Richmond, Virginia; Louis Ginsberg (1920–1989), who published a volume on the history of Jewish life in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1954, and the distinguished genealogist Malcolm Stern (1915–1995).

⁷Nathan Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, VA: American Jewish Historical Society, 1979).

⁸*Ibid.*, ix. On current demographic trends, see Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585–1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990) and Lewis Lord, “Matzos and Magnolias: An Exhibit Explores a Lost World of Southern Judaism,” *U.S. News and World Report* 124 (25 May 1998): 53.

⁹Marcus, *United States Jewry*, Vol. I (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 16.

¹⁰See Gary Phillip Zola, “Why Study Southern Jewish History,” *Southern Jewish History* 1, n. 1 (1998): 1–21.