

TO OUR READERS...

For those looking for some lighthearted historical entertainment, a new publication titled *Napoleon's Hemorrhoids: And Other Small Events That Changed History* may just fit the bill. This volume does not purport to be an interpretive or analytical history; it merely presents a string of disconnected and entertaining historical anecdotes. The author justifies his riant effort by making an observation that, despite the book's jocular title, merits some sober reflection: "Tiny events [have] had big impacts. Some changed the world. Some changed individuals' lives and their contribution to the world. Some would have changed the world if matters had turned out just a little differently."¹

David Hackett Fischer, the distinguished historian, has taught this same lesson in his thoughtful observations on Emanuel Leutze's iconic painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware." The artist's depiction of that historical event radiates with a dramatic aura of epic proportion. Yet the crossing itself was a relatively small matter, especially when compared to so many other dramatic military encounters that have shaped American history. Nevertheless, Fischer insisted that Leutze's lofty rendering befits the crossing's significance as a symbol. "The painting reminds us" Fischer aptly observed, "that size is not a measure of significance."²

The articles in this issue of our journal illustrate this same important lesson. Each one of the essays focuses on a discrete historical occurrence that may initially seem small, especially in contrast to the many watershed events that have taken place during the course of the American Jewish experience. Thanks to our authors' meticulous research and their interpretive analyses, we can see that each of these happenings teaches us a great deal about the larger contextual panorama in which each has been embedded. By situating these occurrences into their cultural and societal circumstance, the authors bring the historical significance of these events into bold relief.

It would be a challenge to find a more ephemeral event in all of American Jewish history than the establishment of Mordecai Manuel Noah's "city of refuge" for the Jews—Ararat—which was to have been located on Grand Island, New York. Noah orchestrated an elaborate dedication ceremony for Ararat in September of 1825, and an engraved dedication stone was unveiled for the

occasion. Despite the extraordinary show of pomp and circumstance, Ararat was an entirely stillborn project. Some years later Lewis F. Allen (1800–1890), a prominent Buffalonian and a founder of the Buffalo Historical Society, published one of the first accounts of Ararat’s momentaneous existence. Allen acknowledged that Ararat came to nought:

Major Noah, a day or two afterwards, departed for his home in New York; the “corner-stone” was taken from the audience-chamber of the church, and deposited against its rear wall, outside; and the great prospective city of Ararat, with its splendid predictions and promises, vanished, “and, like an insubstantial pageant faded—left not a rack behind.”³

Why was Ararat dead on arrival? According to Allen, the project’s founder had made “two grand mistakes.” First, Noah had “no power or authority” over the Jewish people and, second, the Jewish people had no interest in the endeavor.⁴ Allen’s points are valid but insufficient to explain why the effort came to an end with the conclusion of the dedication ceremony.

Professor Eran Shalev strives to explain this phenomenon. He argues that the very idea of a “city of refuge” for the Jews was fundamentally incompatible with America’s political and legal culture. Not only were Jews disinterested in Noah’s project but, as Shalev stresses, “an attempt to congregate a religious and ethnic minority on an island located within the jurisdiction of an existing state was perceived as a challenge that American federacy would not tolerate.” Viewed from this perspective, Ararat’s fleeting and seemingly inconsequential existence illustrates a much larger and genuinely significant issue confronting antebellum America: Could various ethnic groups that had recently immigrated to the United States establish competing sovereignties within a sovereign state in the Union? The delicate balance of power between federal and state sovereignty left no room to create levels of governmental polities. Although Ararat was essentially nothing more than an idea, it was structurally incompatible with America’s political and legal context. American Jews could not sustain interest in any project that was not infused with an American spirit. Jews were determined to support the Constitution and the American way of life.

In March of 1914, the litterateur Margaret Anderson (1886–1973) began publishing a literary journal titled *The Little Review*. Its contributors included future luminaries such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein. Yet Anderson’s decision to serialize James Joyce’s then-unpublished novel, *Ulysses*, in 1918 provoked the U.S. Postal Service to burn the entire press run of four

of the journal's issues in an effort to protect the reading public from exposure to obscenity. Book burnings have been traced back to antiquity and continue today. As one historian observed, "The public bibliocaust was a dramatic, fearful reminder to the citizenry of what happens to those who express impious, obscene, heretical, and seditious views."⁵

Over the course of Jewish history, Jews have burned books they feared, and they have had their own books burned by others. The Nazi regime took the public bibliocaust to new heights. The world watched silently as countless repositories of Jewish knowledge and Jewish religious life went up in smoke over the course of the Third Reich. Ironically, on 14 June 1945, only days after the Nazis surrendered to the Allies, a group of Orthodox rabbis—members of Agudat HaRabbanim—gathered in New York's McAlpin Hotel to publicly excommunicate Mordecai Kaplan and ceremonially burn a copy of a new prayer book he had recently published.

According to Zachary Silver, the symbolic burning of this one prayer book "sent a jolt through American Jews' collective conscience." Silver argues that this singular incident assumed an even larger symbolic significance, particularly because it occurred in the shadows of the Nazi era. The rabbis representing Agudat HaRabbanim actually believed that a public excommunication and a book burning would vividly demonstrate to pious American Jews that Kaplan and his prayer book were a mortal threat to the future of Jewish life. Yet, as Silver points out, the event produced the opposite result. Most Jews—even many Orthodox partisans—were appalled by actions that seemed so eerily reminiscent of Nazi brutality.

American Jews were participants in the surge of universalism and pluralism that swept over the nation in the post-World-War-II era. Silver's thoroughgoing reconstruction of this troubling event underscores, again, the irresistible influence of American cultural values on Jewish life. At a time when Jews were eagerly entering the American mainstream, the acts of excommunication and book burning marginalized those who promoted an "insular, centripetal model of Jewish religious life." This relatively small incident taught many Jews an important lesson: To "make friends and win people over" in the America context, traditional Jewry needed to be guided by "moderate people with deep faith."

Rudolf B. Schmerl's interesting and touching essay on his uncle's struggle to make a life for himself and his family in America provides yet another perspective on the importance of small and transitory events. Schmerl's essay is

based on a file of correspondence between his uncle Erwin—a German Jewish refugee who managed to immigrate to the United States in 1939—and Professor David Riesman (1909–2002), a noted sociologist and highly regarded academic. During World War II, Riesman was active in The American Committee for the Guidance of Professional Personnel, an organization that assisted refugee professionals in finding gainful employment. For a year and a half, the author’s uncle corresponded with Riesman who tried to help him find permanent employment. This correspondence, commonplace in so many ways, serves as a compellingly and informative case study on the lives of thousands of refugees who were painfully disrupted by what Schmerl properly calls “enormous events ... the war, the subsequent turmoil, the Nazis ...”

On one hand, this brief exchange of correspondence, preserved in the New York Public Library, constitutes the mostly prosaic and voluntary efforts of an established American academic trying to assist a German Jewish refugee who is struggling to find his way in a new and unfamiliar world. On the other hand, the contents of these letters—so movingly supplemented by the author’s very personal description of his relationship with a much-beloved and respected uncle—drives home a powerfully immense lesson: “what matters is people’s loyalty to one another, not to abstractions from history.”

The brilliant Scottish educator and writer, Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), famously asserted: “The history of the world ... [is but] the biography of great men.”⁶ Most historians would argue that, at best, Carlyle overstated. The history of the world is not merely the biography of great men. It is not even the collective accounts of great men, great women, and great events. The history of the world is the story of the lives and experiences of the everyday people who struggle to sustain themselves as they confront life’s daily challenges.

As the articles in this particular issue of our journal demonstrate, when capable researchers examine small events and set them into their proper context, we enhance our understanding of the broad, unifying themes that give the historical enterprise its coherence.

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Notes

¹Paul Mason, *Napoleon's Hemorrhoids: And Other Small Events That Changed History* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), vii.

²David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

³Lewis F. Allen, "The City of Ararat on Grand Island—By Mordecai M. Noah," *Buffalo Historical Society Publications* 1: 305–328. For quotation, see 322–323. Allen also provided an enthralling history of Ararat's "corner-stone." Before it found a place of honor in the Buffalo Historical Society, the "corner-stone" had a rather inglorious existence. It was moved from farm to farm on Grand Island and, according to Allen, the venerable monument actually did a stint in an outhouse. *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴*Ibid.*, 312.

⁵Haig A. Bosmajian, *Burning Books* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006), 7.

⁶Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1905), 18.