The Confederate Soldiers Section of the Hebrew Cemetery of Richmond: A Personal Journey of Historical and Moral Discovery

By Rabbi Scott Sperling

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For more than thirty years as a rabbi and educator, I taught American Jewish history to every age group from elementary school through adults. I used an excellent textbook that included a seventeen-page section on the Civil War, highlighting the internal political debate within the Southern and Northern Jewish communities, and providing a sophisticated and nuanced approach to the debate regarding the Jewish views of slavery. Yet, in my classes, I regularly sped through this chapter, giving it remarkably short shrift.

Perhaps I did so because, as a political and Jewish liberal who spent most of his life on the West Coast, I was uncomfortable contemplating this critically important dimension of American Jewish life. I did not want to acknowledge that there were prominent Jews in the Confederate government, that there were Jews who were slave traders and slave owners, that there were Jews who fought on the side of the Confederacy, and that some of my spiritual forbearers, that is 19th century Reform rabbis, found biblical support for the evil institution of slavery within the philosophy of our denomination.

It is in this context that in August 2004, I began an important personal journey of historical and moral exploration.

In that month, Hurricane Gaston ripped through a vast swath of the Mid-Atlantic, causing (among much other harm) severe damage to the historic Hebrew Cemetery, a Richmond landmark that had been established in 1816 by Congregation Beth Ahabah ("House of Love"). The cemetery included a number of re-interred graves from the original cemetery in downtown Richmond that had been built in 1791, and Congregation Beth Ahabah had been in the process of refurbishing and expanding the cemetery when Hurricane Gaston hit the city.

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At that time, I served as the denominational executive for the Mid-Atlantic region of the Union for Reform Judaism, and so received a report and photographs of the damage, together with a request from the congregational rabbi and president to come to Richmond to see the effects of this terrible storm. I arrived at the Hebrew Cemetery with a small group from the synagogue in the middle of a driving rainstorm.

As we finished surveying the damage, a peculiar sight caught my eye—a black wrought-iron fence with a plaque affixed to what resembled a

traditional headstone. I was stunned by the inscription: "To the Glory of God and in memory of the Hebrew Confederate soldiers resting in this hallowed spot." Cold and soaked to the skin, I stood transfixed and read the names of the thirty soldiers buried in that area that I have come to know by its official designation: the "Soldiers' Section," established by the Hebrew Ladies' Memorial Association in 1866. One of my hosts pulled me away, but by the time we'd gotten back to our cars, I realized that my preconceived notions about Jews and the Civil War had been shattered—broken into at least thirty pieces.

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I came away from that rainy day in Richmond determined to fill that gap in my historical understanding and to explore the prejudices that had kept me from seeing the information on the pages in front of me.[1]

Between 1850 and 1860, the Jewish population of the United States tripled to 150,000, and there were "160 identifiable Jewish communities with synagogues in America" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 27). Those Jewish communities were spread across the map of the United States, in both the North and the South, and they were as bitterly divided over the question of slavery as the rest of the nation. "There were many Jews who stood up for what they believed in on all sides of the issues, but on the whole Jews in both sections of the country, especially new immigrants, preferred political neutrality to outspoken participation in the bitter arguments over abolition" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 28).

The relationship between antebellum abolitionists and American Jewry was complex. Several highly prominent rabbis and laypeople added their voices to the calls for abolishing slavery and sought to create alliances with the Abolitionist movement, but many abolitionists also traveled in the same circles as evangelical Protestants who sought to convert the Jews. Such efforts hardly endeared them or their cause to Jews. That among the nation's most prominent Jews were Mordecai Noah, whose writings "alternately abhorred and supported southern slavery" ("Mordecai Manuel Noah"), and, of course, Judah P. Benjamin, slaveholder, U.S. Senator from Louisiana, and later a cabinet member in the Confederate government, added to the distrust in and disappointment with the Jews felt by many abolitionists in both the North and South. The distrust was mutual: "For the most part, Jews reciprocated this suspicion and disfavor" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 123). Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati, the founder of Reform Judaism in America and all of its institutions, "considered abolitionists to be reckless agitators and warmongering Christian zealots" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 123).

Although most Jews in the North and the South wanted to remain neutral, doing so was virtually impossible; the vociferous debate amongst the leading rabbis and other Jewish public figures compelled individuals to determine where they stood. Both Northern and Southern Jews became deeply and passionately committed to their regional cause. However, as my focus for this paper is on the "Hebrew Confederates," I will confine myself to the topic of Southern Jewry upholding and defending the nascent Confederacy.

Robert Rosen, a lawyer and historian from Charleston, South Carolina, lays out the basics of the Southern Jewish case in his book *The Jewish Confederates*. Most of the Southern Jews were recent immigrants, and many had fled political tyranny, which does much to explain their loyalty: "The Jews of the South were committed to the cause of Southern independence because they were committed to their homeland, their new Fatherland. The immigrants from Bavaria, Prussia, and Central Europe, struck by the freedom they now enjoyed repaid that gift with patriotic fervor" (Rosen xii). This loyalty helps explain what Rosen calls "the apparent irony of their story," that a people who each year "celebrated the Exodus from their own enslavement in Egypt" found their refuge from bondage in a society based on bondage (Rosen xi).

Many Southern Jews, including rabbis, offered articulate defenses of slavery, the Southern economy, and its way of life. Rabbi Max Michelbacher of Congregation Beth Ahabah in Richmond and Rabbi James K. Gutheim of New Orleans were vocal supporters of the Confederacy and fiercely loyal to the Confederate cause. After refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the Union when the Union army occupied the city, Gutheim led a large group of his congregants to relocate to Montgomery, Alabama. A prayer that Rabbi Gutheim offered from his pulpit embodies the deeply felt loyalty most Southern Jews held for the Confederacy: "Regard, O Father, in Thine abundant favor and benevolence, our beloved country, the Confederate States of America. May our young Republic increase in strength…Behold, O God, and judge between us and our enemies, who have forced upon us this unholy and unnatural war" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 243-44).

Acknowledging the unsuspected complexity and depth of feeling in the relationship between the antebellum Southern Jewish community and the

abolitionists has been an extremely important dimension of my struggle with the role of Jews in the Confederacy. Now that I live in a place where many people are still passionately involved in keeping alive the flame of the "Lost Cause" and are quick to defend their Southern heritage, I am better able to understand the argument that individuals fought on behalf of the Confederacy with complex motivations.

My experience over these past several years in coming to terms with the nuanced and multiple realities of Jewish life and thought in both the North and South retraces, in a way, the historiographic journey made between the 1880s and the publication of Korn's book in 1951.

Historians estimate that approximately 6,000 Jewish soldiers served in the Union army, about 2,000 in the army of the Confederacy. Of the latter, Rosen writes, "Jewish soldiers…fought for the South for many reasons, but the chief reason was to do their duty as they saw it." And they may have had a pressing additional reason, as Rosen goes on to explain: "It was a cardinal belief of anti-Semites and others in the nineteenth century that 'the Wandering Jew' was a citizen of no country, that they were cowards and they were disloyal…Thus like the African American soldiers who fought for the Union army to prove they were men and equals, many a Jewish soldier enlisted to prove he was a man and a worthy citizen" (Rosen xiii).

Rabbi Bertram Korn, a former World War II Navy chaplain, published twelve books dealing with Southern Jewry, approaching that theme with revolutionary and refreshing objectivity, most powerfully in *American Jewry and the Civil War* (1951). Before Korn, the history of Jews in the Civil War was shaped largely by the desire to create a specific narrative about Jewish life in America, one that bore little resemblance to the realities of their lives and stories. Jonathan Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn begin their recent *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader* with extended praise of Rabbi Korn. "The history of scholarship on the American Jewish experience of the Civil War can be neatly divided into two eras," they write. "From the 1880's—when Jewish participation in the conflict first attracted sustained attention—until 1950, the field was dominated by enthusiastic amateur historians" (3). These well-intentioned historians sought to render the place of Jews in this period of American history in rosy colors, to emphasize the patriotism, loyalty, and heroism of Jewish soldiers. Until Korn described the ugly stereotypes prevalent on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, most historians had glossed over the anti-Semitism that pervaded both the North and South. These prejudicial stereotypes gave rise to Grant's infamous Order Number 11, which expelled Jews from the General's military district, as well as to post-war claims that Jews did not fight in either army, and to accusations that Jews were war profiteers of the worst sort.

Korn opens the seventh chapter of his master work with these words: "Had the Grant affair been the one unique instance of anti-Jewish prejudice in action during the Civil War period, it would have to be recorded as an inexplicable aberration, an isolated freak of irrationality; but an extensive reading of the daily press and occasional literature of the period demonstrates that The Order was only one example of a series of anti-Jewish libels which were propagated during the War in both the Union and the Confederacy. Anti-Jewish prejudice was actually a characteristic expression of the age, part and parcel of the economic and social upheaval effectuated by the war" (156). Korn spends thirty pages, evenly divided between events in the North and South, detailing prejudicial newspaper articles, anti-Jewish accusations, and wartime regulations and actions designed to keep Jews from profiteering and to protect the Christian nature of the government and army.

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Instead of parroting a simplistic, inaccurate mythology of Jews during the Civil War, Korn's book took the first bold steps towards a more nuanced understanding, trying to identify and

understand the complex attachments, ideals, and lives of individuals who lived, struggled and fought on both sides of our nation's most profound conflict. My experience over these past several years in coming to terms with the nuanced and multiple realities of Jewish life and thought in both the North and South retraces, in a way, the historiographic journey made between the 1880s and the publication of Korn's book in 1951. In attempting to understand who those thirty soldiers in Richmond's Hebrew Cemetery were and who, by extension, their families and communities were, I have come to a very different perspective on the role of Jews in Civil War and most particularly, in the Confederacy.

Those families and communities, unsurprisingly, had everything to do with the creation of the Soldiers' Section. On June 5, 1866, Mrs. Abraham Levy, corresponding secretary of the Hebrew Ladies' Memorial Association, published an open letter, "To the Israelites of the South," beginning with the sentence, "While world yet rings with the narrative of a brave people's struggle for independence and while the story of the hardships so nobly endured for Liberty's sake is yet a theme but half exhausted, the countless graves of the myriads of heroes who spilled their noble blood in defence of that glorious cause, lie neglected, not alone unmarked by tablet or sculptured urn, but literally vanishing before the relentless finger of Time." With these words, Mrs. Levy put forth the call that let the world know that "It is our intention to mound and turf each grave and to place at the head of each a simple stone, inscribed with the name, State and time and place of death; subsequently to rear a monument commemorative of their brave deeds." Indeed, the money was raised, and a magnificent wrought iron fence, designed by Richmond artist Major William Barksdale Myers, was installed some time prior to 1873. The individual grave markers were removed during the 1950s, and a central granite marker was erected in their place.

Alongside the immigrant who so fervently took up the Southern cause, we have Private Edwin J. Sampson, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, who had been born and raised in Georgetown, South Carolina.

One of the few soldiers buried in Beth Ahabah's cemetery about whom we have substantive biographical information is Captain Jacob A. Cohen of Company A, 10th Louisiana Infantry, "who died along with 18 other men from his regiment on Aug. 30, 1862, in the desperate fighting along the railroad cut at the Battle of Second Manassas" (Berg). The men of the 10th Louisiana were "predominantly immigrant Irish, recruited in the tough New Orleans neighborhood known as the Irish Channel. Cohen, probably born in Dublin, was a laborer before enlisting" (Berg). Gordon Berg, author of the article I am quoting and past president of the Civil War Round Table of the District of Columbia, goes on to note that while his occupation may have been humble, Cohen was literate and, I would add, articulate as well. Robert Rosen also takes note of Cohen because of a telling exchange that Cohen had with one of the leading rabbis of the time, Max Lillienthal of Cincinnati, a loud and strong abolitionist voice. Cohen had received a lithograph of Lillienthal's picture, which he returned to Lillienthal with a highly critical message: "Sir, since you have discarded the Lord and taken up the sword in defense of a Negro government—your picture which has occupied a place in our Southern home we herewith return...". Cohen finished his message with a violent and threatening rebuke: "I shall be engaged actively in the field and should be happy to rid Israel of the disgrace of your life" (Rosen 37).

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Mill, one of General Robert E. Lee's 'Seven Days Battles' that stopped the Yankees from advancing on Richmond. Nineteen days after Pvt. Sampson's death, he was laid to rest in a graveside ceremony conducted by the spiritual leader of Richmond's Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalome" (17). Through Foster's research, she eventually learned that "her Jewish Johnny Reb's grandfather was among the 43 charter members of Charleston's Reformed Society of Israelites, which planted the seeds of Reform Judaism in American soil." Furthermore, "her Confederate soldier's sister had married a prominent, controversial rabbi. Another relative, a riverboat pilot and shipping agent on the New York-to-South Carolina seas, became a favorite cousin of financier Bernard Baruch. Indeed, the Sampson family offers more than a poignant Civil War narrative. This family's migrations westward, its social mobility, marriage alliances, and business ties illustrate the worldly lives and adventurous paths pursued by many of South Carolina's antebellum Reformers." (Weiner 18)

They fought and died, as did their comrades in arms, filled with a sense of profoundest commitment to the cause of the Confederacy.

And so we have in these two "Jewish Johnny Rebs" a microcosm of the history of Southern Jewry. Each of them, whether native born or an immigrant, took on the values and passions of their community and region. They fought and died, as did their comrades in arms, filled with a sense of the profoundest commitment to the cause of the Confederacy. It is however, equally important to note that despite their sacrifices, the Jews of Richmond, Charleston, New Orleans, Raleigh, Birmingham, Biloxi and Galveston and the Jews of Boston, New York, Chicago, Providence and Cincinnati still felt a deep unease about their place in America—both North and South. When Mrs. Levy and the Hebrew Ladies Memorial Association for the Confederate Dead sent out a call to the "Israelites of the South," she concluded with these cautionary and telling words: "'In time to come, when our grief shall have become, in a measure, silenced, and when the malicious tongue of slander, ever so ready to assail Israel, shall be raised against us, then, with a feeling of mournful pride, will we point to this monument and say: 'There is our reply.'"

Learning about the Soldiers' Section was a personal journey that I avoided taking for too long.

Despite months of research and solemn contemplation of a history that I had previously chosen to ignore, I confess that I am no more sympathetic to the cause of the Confederacy than I had been before this process began. I remain appalled at the notion that rabbis, scholars and ordinary Jewish citizens found the institution of slavery acceptable, I have, however, come to understand how it was that even those whose ancestral and personal histories bore grievous scars of prejudice could somehow adopt the social, political and racial structures of their adopted home. As historian Dianne Ashton writes, "Especially in the nineteenth century, Jews throughout the United States borrowed and adopted the attitudes common the regions in which they lived" (Sarna and Mendelsohn 284).

Learning about the Soldiers' Section was a personal journey that I avoided taking for too long. At the end of this journey, while I still find myself without empathy for the thirty Sons of the Hebrew Confederacy and all of our co-religionists who fought and died in a Confederate uniform in support of the execrable institution of slavery, I do feel compelled to offer my apologies for ignoring them, their cause and their memory. In correcting that oversight, I hope that I have honored the courage of their convictions and the sacrifices they made. *Zichronam liv'racha* – May their memories be a blessing.

Note

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