

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2015

Volume 18



Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, *Index to Jewish Periodicals*, *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Southern History*, RAMBI-National Library of Israel, Immigration and Ethnic Historical Society Newsletter, and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Exhibit Reviews

The Life of the Synagogue, from the William A. Rosenthal Judaica Collection. <http://lifeofthesynagogue.library.cofc.edu>. Created and maintained by the Marlene and Nathan Addlestone Library, College of Charleston. Curated by Samuel D. Gruber, Sarah Glover, and Amy Lazarus. Reviewed May 2015.

The visually appealing and engaging online exhibit the Life of the Synagogue should be of interest to a diverse audience. Skillfully curated by Samuel D. Gruber, an expert in the preservation of Jewish historic sites, and archivists Sarah Glover and Amy Lazarus, the exhibit presents a selection of materials from the William A. Rosenthal Judaica Collection at the College of Charleston, which, the curators explain, is “one of the largest accessible collections of imagery related to synagogues and other aspects of Jewish life and culture around the world.” From that collection, the curators have chosen a sampling of engravings, lithographs, postcards, newspaper illustrations, and other materials from which to explore the religious practices and public activities of Jewish communities. The exhibit is divided into nine sections: “Siting the Synagogue,” “Building and Dedications,” “Inside the Synagogue,” “Rabbis,” “Life Cycle,” “Fasts and Festivals,” “Women,” “Patriotism,” and “Education.” With its clear presentation of images and historical background, the exhibit should engage experts in Jewish history as well as more casual online visitors, including those with limited familiarity with Jewish history and customs. The exhibit might be usefully employed in the classroom, from primary school classes to introductory university courses.

The exhibit makes no attempt to present an exhaustive study of synagogues throughout history. Rather it is the selected presentation of a single collector’s interests. In 2007, the College of

Home page, <http://lifeofthesynagogue.library.cofc.edu>.

Charleston Special Collections acquired the Judaica materials that Rabbi William A. Rosenthal had collected throughout his life, selecting pieces from print and antique shops, bookstores, and flea markets, aided by suggestions from personal and professional correspondents. While the exhibit's curators inform viewers that the collection includes material "drawn from every continent except Antarctica," the online presentation places heavy emphasis on nineteenth-century western Europe. For many viewers, the focus on the merits of the selected materials may be a relief from exhibits that attempt—and inevitably fail—to present exhaustive surveys of Jewish religious and cultural activities.

"Bear in mind that images are not neutral," the curators instruct the viewer in the introduction to the exhibit, providing an important reminder for experts in visual culture and those new to this kind of analysis. Many of the selected images demonstrate how relationships between Jews and non-Jews have been negotiated through visual images. Not only were many of the synagogues designed and built by non-Jews, but many of the images, especially earlier ones, were created by non-Jews for a

variety of polemical purposes. Such images, for example, may have been included in antisemitic tracts or may have been intended to help non-Jewish viewers understand Jews as fellow citizens, as in an 1886 engraving of the inauguration of the synagogue in Lechenich, Germany, depicting the event as a public affair including Jewish and non-Jewish functionaries. Images created by Jews, on the other hand, often suggest a longing for imagined Jewish pasts, as in the images of life cycle events by famed artist Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, who created widely reprinted images of life cycle events in the Jewish ghettos that appealed to cosmopolitan Jews who had abandoned or felt ambivalent about traditional Jewish lifestyles. As the curators correctly suggest, the distribution of these images created a shared Jewish visual culture of nostalgia for communal pasts.

While the curators have done an admirable job of assembling a cohesive and coherent presentation of diverse materials, they might have taken more advantage of the online format. Viewers can peruse the images page by page as in an exhibit catalog, or they can click on images of their choosing within each section. Nonetheless, the page for each image does not indicate which section it is in. Rather than citing sources used on each page, the exhibit concludes with a single bibliography, a page that seems quaintly out of place in a virtual exhibit. The curators and designer might have included more hyperlinks—both internally, linking to related content in different sections, and externally, linking to related online sources for future exploration of the subjects included in this exhibit. Curators and designers of online exhibits have an opportunity to encourage further study in a more direct manner not available in traditional physical exhibits. In addition, many of the images include minute details that viewers should be encouraged to explore by looking at larger versions of the images than those presented in the exhibit. (Computer-savvy viewers can right-click and open the image in a new tab to view a larger version of the images, but not all viewers will think of doing this.)

To the curators' credit, Jewish and non-Jewish women appear in images and as authors of texts in every section in the exhibit—not a given in an exhibit on the synagogue, primarily

*“Rosh Hashanah card,” <http://lifeofthesynagogue.library.cofc.edu>.
The Yiddish poem reads: “Grandfather goes away to shul / Mother lights the
candles with tears / ‘God in heaven, May you with joy /
Bring us the New Year!’” (Courtesy of Special Collections,
College of Charleston Libraries.)*

men’s space throughout much of Jewish history. The curators have also chosen to mimic the layout of traditional synagogues by including a separate section labeled “Women.” Within this section, the curators acknowledge that a focus on historical materials related to the synagogue means a predominant focus on representations of men. This acknowledgment might be better placed in the introduction to the exhibit, where attention should be drawn to women’s absences and presences within materials throughout the exhibit. To the casual viewer, the current presentation may uphold the notion that men are unmarked Jews—a Jew, without further description, is a man—while women are marked as a secondary category of Jews. Each of the six items chosen to be included within the “Women” section might have been included

within another section where they could have inspired questions about the materials surrounding them. For example, an undated Rosh Hashanah postcard published by a Polish company and printed in Germany depicts women lighting candles as an elderly man leaves the room and includes a Yiddish poem beginning with the line, "Grandfather has gone to shul." This item might have been included in the "Inside in the Synagogue" section, where it would have more clearly raised questions about who has and has not sat in synagogues in different periods of Jewish history. Penina Moïse's 1839 hymns for the dedication of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim's new temple in Charleston already do this in the "Synagogue Building and Dedications" section, besides appearing in the "Women" section.

As physical buildings and images, synagogues have long been representative sites of Jewish communities. Who has been highlighted and who has been marginalized in these representations? How have the roles of rabbis and congregants, men and women, and students and teachers changed over time within these buildings? How have congregations participated in nation-building in their respective countries? *The Life of the Synagogue* provides a space for scholars, teachers, and students to ask questions about the history of the images of Jews and Jewish spaces.

Scholars of southern Jewish history will find a few images that directly relate to their work, such as the aforementioned Penina Moïse hymns. The exhibit also includes an undated painting of the interior of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim's 1794-1838 synagogue building by Solomon Nunes Carvalho; a photograph of Washington Hebrew Congregation's confirmation class of 1925; and a postcard of the Expressive Modernist temple of Congregation B'nai Judah in Kansas City, Missouri, built in 1969. More broadly, scholars of southern Jewish history will find the exhibit useful as a way to help place their own work within broader historical and geographical contexts, just as the curators' discussion of Beth Elohim's interior places it within the context of Sephardic architectural traditions exemplified by the well-known Bevis Marks Synagogue in London and the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam. As this exhibit demonstrates, southern Jewish syna-

gogue buildings and congregations should be understood within the broader contexts of Jewish congregational and architectural changes around the world, and studies of southern Jewry provide valuable contributions to interpretations of Jewish communities and spaces in other regions. As scholars of southern Jewish history and other subfields of Jewish history will find, the *Life of the Synagogue* is a wide-ranging, beautiful, versatile, and thoughtful contribution to online resources about Jewish history and visual culture.

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Of Passover and Pilgrimage: The Natchez Jewish Experience.

Presented originally in 1994, running continuously. Curated by Marcie Cohen Ferris with the assistance of Kenneth Hoffman and Marie Owen. Temple B'nai Israel, Natchez, Mississippi. Visits by arrangement only, <http://www.isjl.org/natchez-site--exhibits.html>.

Nestled in the red brick and oaks of one of the oldest cities and neighborhoods in the Deep South, Temple B'nai Israel is a breathtaking testament to the power of historic preservation. The temple and exhibits inside help communicate the historical complexity of Natchez, Mississippi. The city of Natchez has spent decades crafting itself as a heritage tourism destination. Ample signage, historical markers, and informative didactic displays mapped throughout the historic districts provide rich context in which to experience a remarkable piece of cultural heritage such as Temple B'nai Israel.

The exhibit, *Of Passover and Pilgrimage: The Natchez Jewish Experience*, which details the long and complex history of Jewish Natchez, is tucked away in one corner of the former religious education space in the temple's basement. The exhibit premiered as part of the Natchez Jewish Homecoming celebration in 1994. Marcie Cohen Ferris, now a noted scholar of southern foodways and a professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina,

curated the original *Of Passover and Pilgrimage*, and it was later included with the Natchez component of the three-city exhibition *Alsace to America: Discovering Southern Jewish Heritage*, curated by Dr. Pamela Dorn Sezgin in 1998.

Visitors should note that Temple B'nai Israel is only open to the public through appointment. Contact information for access to the temple is available through the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) website. While the historical marker for the temple and the building are well represented in Natchez's heritage tourism promotions, there is no mention of the exhibit still on display, and the ISJL website includes it only as one part of the "Natchez Jewish Experience," alongside guided tours of the temple, a documentary film, and group tours of historic sites and Jewish homes "by special arrangement." Despite the difficulty in reaching the exhibit and visiting the temple, the few remaining members of the congregation who have taken on the responsibility of maintaining the building, in addition to coordinating irregular temple services, take great pride in their community and are immensely accommodating to visitors interested in exploring Natchez's history by experiencing its distinctly Jewish heritage.

The nine overflowing panels in *Of Passover and Pilgrimage* are arranged more or less in chronological order, with numerous reproductions of images and documents, most of which have held up remarkably well with little fading. The exhibit tells a comprehensive history of Natchez from the Jewish perspective beginning with the first settlers in the late eighteenth century. The narrative of the integral role of Jews in Natchez continues through the expansion of the cotton economy, the Jewish community's significance in helping Natchez rebound after the Civil War, then again after the hardships of the boll weevil and the Great Depression, and ultimately until the precipitous decline of the Jewish population in the city after the 1950s. An important achievement of the exhibit is the personalization of this story, as the congregation continues to negotiate its profound existential crisis. Many of the Jewish family names in Natchez's long history are shown in image captions and on reproduced documents, connecting the

place and its history to the people who helped build the community.

One inescapable conclusion the exhibit communicates and that remains clear and enlightening more than two decades later is that Jews made an enduring impact on Natchez. At one point in the late 1800s, one third of the businesses in Natchez were Jewish-owned. Women in the Jewish community such as Emma Marx were key leaders in the early development of the historic “pilgrimage” concept and rebranding of the city as a well-preserved example of the Old South. Jewish-built mansions are home to many of the famed bed-and-breakfasts that exist in the city today. Images of the extravagant wedding reception for Hortense and Sol Benjamin, recorded in 1903 and set amid the rich interiors of the Benjamins’ mansion, illustrate the status they shared with other Natchez Jews, even as the city as a whole struggled to regain a fraction of its antebellum wealth.

The exhibit introduces the long decline of the Jewish community in Natchez after its population peak in 1906. The narrative explains the broad economic and social factors that began the diaspora of Natchez’s Jews: the impact of the boll weevil on cotton production; the attrition caused by the deaths of older members; youth increasingly lured to larger cities such as Memphis and New Orleans; and the changing role of Natchez as a commercial center as the railroads overtook the Mississippi River as the dominant means of transporting goods to national and international markets. Interspersed with the history of declension are photographs showing the committed congregation members who were still actively working on behalf of the community through the 1980s. Those images help continue the story established by the numerous photographs of old Natchez, many of which come from the remarkable work of the Henry and Earl Norman studio. (The Norman studio photographs are part of the Thomas H. and Joan Gandy Collection archived at Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections, which includes more than twenty thousand images documenting one hundred years of Natchez history.)

One last particularly impactful aspect of the exhibit is pictures of children’s education classes and camp trips that took

Temple B'nai Israel, Natchez, Mississippi. (Library of Congress.)

place as late as the 1980s. By this time, the congregation was already aware of its limited future. In the early 1990s the congregation entered into a preservation agreement with the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE), later known as the ISJL, in order to save the temple building and its holdings. The exhibit includes display copies of the agreement and related memoranda, which represent one more lasting example of the forethought of Natchez's Jewish community and the dedication of its members to contributing to the culture and vitality of their city.

The agreement with the MSJE dictates that if the congregation ever declines to a level that is no longer viable, control of the temple would transfer to the MSJE, and it would become a permanent museum in memory of Natchez's Jewish heritage. The agreement garnered the MSJE and Temple B'nai Israel an award from the national organization Partners for Sacred Places. In the not-so-distant future, the temple hopefully will become an active museum, open to the public, preserving the legacy of Natchez's once vital Jewish community, and engaging the stewardship of its public memory.

There are opportunities two decades after its creation to make the exhibit's core content even more effective in communicating Natchez's Jewish history. Disassembling the nine-panel design in favor of freestanding displays would create a more immersive, physically interactive experience that, were it to remain in the temple's basement, would also help integrate the historical materials into the historic space. More consistent identification of the sources of the objects included in the exhibit would help establish richer historical and intellectual context. Curators could also employ different media, such as samples of the documentary film or audio recordings of members of the congregation, to create greater dimensionality, help personalize the stories, and allow further interactivity. The temple itself has numerous artifacts, from library card catalogs to classroom objects, sacred objects, and community relics that could be incorporated into an augmented exhibit. With the wealth of content already collected and displayed, the exhibit could use hands-on materials and infographics to help achieve educational objectives and which could prove very

useful for K-12 teachers and other educators and students. Whether Of Passover and Pilgrimage is still there, or revamped installations attempt to fill B'nai Israel's hallowed halls, the important story of Natchez's Jews will continue to be told.

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