

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Public History Reviews

Finding Judaism in the Holy City. Curated by Shari Rabin. Lowcountry Digital History Initiative, College of Charleston Libraries, <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/finding-judaism>. Reviewed May 2026.

“**F**inding Judaism in the Holy City,” a public history platform that “seeks to share South Carolina’s rich history with the College of Charleston (CofC) Community as well as the local and global public,” is part of The Lowcountry Digital History Initiative (LDHI), combining the work of academic specialists with graduate students from the college. To date, LDHI has produced nearly thirty online exhibits rich in illustrative material from CofC’s libraries with original texts narrating a wide range of topics. The exhibit “Finding Judaism in the Holy City” is curated by Shari Rabin, associate professor of Jewish Studies, Religion, and History at Oberlin College and president-elect of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. Rabin’s latest book, *The Jewish South: An American History* (Princeton University Press, 2025) was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. Dr. Laura Yares, Michigan State University, served as an Editorial Contributor to the exhibit. Previously, Rabin cocurated another online exhibit, *Mapping Jewish Charleston* (2020).

The goal of “Finding Judaism in the Holy City” is to offer “a more complete view of the historical landscapes of Charleston.” Charleston is religiously diverse, a mix in which Judaism could become “lost.” The 1669 Lockean *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* called for broad religious toleration. By the colonial period, several different faiths found a new home in South Carolina. The Anglicans established St. Michaels, the first

(<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/finding-judaism/synagogues>.)

(<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/finding-judaism/publicsquare>.)

church in Charleston in 1680, and by 1706 the Church of England was proclaimed the official religion of the colony. Having an established religion, however, did not diminish the possibility of religious diversity. The city's Circular Congregational Church was organized by English Congregationalists, French Huguenots, and Scots-Irish Presbyterians in 1681. German Lutherans built St. Johns in 1742. In 1787, Reverend Richard Allen took the first steps toward establishing Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Charleston's first Black church, and the city's first Catholic Church, St. Mary's, was also organized in the late 1780s.

Exactly when Charleston became known as the "Holy City" is a matter of debate. Although rooted in the city's founding principle of religious tolerance, other factors played a role in earning Charleston its spiritual nickname. Local laws restricted the height of downtown buildings to showcase the city's many church steeples. Perhaps even civic competitiveness motivated the building of fine religious buildings in the city. Newspaper columnist Frank B. Gilbreth Jr. popularized the name "Holy City" in the 1950s. The local tourist industry embraced the religious appellation for the city, a name seemingly appropriate for a city with approximately four hundred churches. The unusual number of churches in Charleston is abundantly clear to anyone who has visited even briefly.

The early history of the Jewish community in Charleston is well known. Sephardic Jews first arrived in the city in 1695. By 1749, they were able to establish Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), "Holy Community of the House of God," which modeled itself after the Bevis Marks synagogue in London. During the Revolution, a "Jews' Company" was mustered under the command of a Quaker, Captain Richard Lushington. The Jews of Charleston, along with members of other Jewish communities in the United States, sent a letter of congratulations to newly elected President George Washington. In the aftermath of the War of 1812, Charleston, with its large port and easy access to regional agricultural markets, including cotton, briefly became the home of the largest Jewish community in the United States. During the 1820s, Charleston was also the site of the first American Reform Jewish congregation and home to several of the leading Jewish cultural figures in the United States, including Dr. Jacob De La Motta, Isaac Harby, and Penina Moïse.

Rabin's framing of Charleston Jewish history in the exhibit is challenging and thoughtful. She primarily focuses on the nineteenth century and includes issues of both gender and race. "Finding Judaism in the Holy City" is not a tour guide, but an existential exploration of inner and public Judaism and their intersection in Charleston. Rabin begins with an analysis of the most visible Jewish place, the synagogue, and from there examines the home and, interestingly, the cemetery, as the private spheres of Jewish life. Special attention is paid to the role of women in the home. Finally, Rabin reports on Jews in "the public square," where both visible and invisible Judaism mix. It is interesting to see how Reform Judaism's doctrine of "the mission of Israel" blends traditional Jewish views of charity with general, communal charity. Similarly, Rabin reports on how Zionism is incorporated in local Jewish life where Gustavus Poznanski, "rabbi" of the city's Reform congregation, proclaimed in 1838 that Charleston was his Jerusalem.

Online exhibits offer universal, free access to the world of lifelong learning. The aggregate number of website visits to leading museums alone is literally in the hundreds of millions. "Finding Judaism in the Holy City" is a worthwhile stop on the web for students, adult learners, and even academics interested in a broad range of topics from American Jewish history to the history of Charleston, South Carolina. The clarity of its texts, choice of themes, and attractive illustrations make it a rewarding experience for all who view it and explore Judaism in the "Holy City" of Charleston.

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Holocaust Survivors in a New Land: The New Americans Social Club of New Orleans. Curated by John Menszer and Michael Jacobs. Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, New Orleans, LA.

The end of World War II left much of Europe devastated. In addition to millions of dead and wounded soldiers and civilians, the conflict created millions of refugees, including Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. While many Jewish refugees went to Palestine, over a hundred thousand

came to the United States, including around six thousand who passed through the Port of New Orleans between 1946 and 1953. Some stayed in the Crescent City, where they rebuilt their lives with the help of the city's Jewish community. They made New Orleans their home, and as survivors did in cities across the United States, found jobs, raised families, and established clubs and organizations to support each other and preserve their shared memories.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE) tells this story in its new exhibit, *Holocaust Survivors in a New Land: The New Americans Social Club of New Orleans*, which opened on March 20, 2026, and runs through the end of the year. Using artifacts, photographs, and oral history interviews with survivors, the exhibit explores how Holocaust survivors built new lives for themselves and their families in a city and a country that were deeply foreign to them.

Occupying a single large room on the museum's third floor, the exhibit is organized thematically around major moments in the lives of survivors as they came to the United States. It first contextualizes their story against the larger backdrop of U.S. refugee policy after World War II. Subsequent sections explore their efforts to adapt to American and New Orleans society, the assistance they received from Jewish organizations, and the challenges they faced as they assimilated into their new city, region, and country. The exhibit gives visitors ample opportunity to delve into individual survivors' stories and experiences at video and audio stations, which draw on extensive oral history interviews with survivors that New Orleans lawyer and photographer John Menszer collected in the 1990s. It also incorporates a series of portraits Menszer took of individual survivors, each of which has a brief description and a QR code linking to a web page where visitors can learn more about the survivor's story.

Survivors who settled in the United States did so with help from local and national Jewish organizations. In New Orleans, one of the most active groups helping newly arrived Holocaust survivors was the local chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), which in 1949 sent volunteers to the Port of New Orleans to greet new arrivals as they first set foot on American soil. The exhibit features an interview with Sara Berenson Stone, who as a young social worker was one of the volunteers who went down to the docks to greet survivors and help them get the

*"New Americans" arriving at the Port of Embarkation in New Orleans, 1949.
(Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience.)*

support they needed in New Orleans or on the way to their final destination elsewhere in the United States.

As survivors built new lives in New Orleans with the help of the city's Jewish community, they participated in early Holocaust commemoration ceremonies. As Hasia Diner observed in her 2009 book *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust*, survivors in the United States did not wait for the Holocaust to achieve wider prominence in American culture. Instead, they held informal gatherings to preserve the memory of the millions of Jews who died in the Holocaust and the communities they left behind. From a small commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in June 1951 to larger Yom

HaShoah ceremonies that continue today, Holocaust survivors in New Orleans educated the people of their adopted home city about the horrors they experienced and its lessons for future generations.

While MSJE's exhibit focuses on the New Americans Club of New Orleans, it includes numerous references to similar groups around the South. The challenges facing survivors were not unique to New Orleans, but shortly after their arrival, they received a stark reminder that the Holocaust remained disturbingly relevant. After the release of *Exodus*, a film which chronicled the founding of the State of Israel, George Lincoln Rockwell launched a "hate ride" to New Orleans in early 1961, ostensibly to protest the film. Racial tensions were high in the city following attacks on buses carrying Freedom Rider protestors who were headed for New Orleans. Upon learning that the founder of the American Nazi Party was in town, many New Orleans Jews vowed to confront him, including Holocaust survivors; only Rockwell's last-minute arrest by police prevented a larger incident. (The incident was documented in 2019 by Lawrence N. Powell in *Troubled Memory: Anne Levy, the Holocaust, and David Duke's Louisiana*).

The exhibit highlights some of the tensions that arose between New Orleans's established Jewish community and the newly arrived Jewish refugees. Similarly to what happened decades earlier around the turn of the twentieth century, when large numbers of eastern European Jews arrived in the United States, survivors coming from more traditional and Orthodox communities in eastern Europe encountered a Jewish community in New Orleans that was largely German and Reform.

For all the horrors that Holocaust survivors endured and the challenges they faced in adapting to a new city, country, and culture, MSJE's exhibit also celebrates their perseverance and success. A 1952 report by the New Orleans Section of the NCJW quoted in the exhibit proudly noted that most of them had become "useful citizens and integrated members of the New Orleans Jewish Community" and no longer needed their financial support. Many started families, and several went on to create successful businesses. Along the way, the New Americans Club provided community and support for decades as the survivors aged.

In addition to telling a fascinating and important story, MSJE's exhibit illuminates New Orleans's Jewish history in the twentieth century,

an area that remains largely unexamined in Southern Jewish historiography. Exhibits like this are a reminder that stories based around a single community's experience of globe-spanning events reveal a great deal about much larger topics such as the Holocaust and the Southern Jewish experience. The exhibit provides a model that historians can and should replicate with Jewish communities across the American South.

Sean Scanlon, The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, LA

Black and Jewish America: An Interwoven History. Four-part PBS documentary series, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., codirected and coproduced with Phil Bertelsen and Sara Wolitzky. Aired February 3–24, 2026.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. wades into tumultuous waters in this four-part historical survey of Black and Jewish relations in America — the next logical step in Gates's decades-long preoccupation with the fraught encounter. "Let My People Go," the opening salvo of the series, begins at a Passover seder, where the story of the exodus from slavery at the heart of both Black and Jewish traditions is told. Guests around the table include Antiguan American novelist Jamaica Kincaid, *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick, chef Michael Twitty, two rabbis (one Black, one Asian American), and sundry scholars, journalists, and community leaders, Black and Jewish and a few who are both.

Twitty, who is Black, Jewish, and gay, features the theme of creolization in his recipes for West African brisket, kosher soul collards, and kugel made from sweet and white potatoes. He claims kinship with Rabbi Shais Rishon, whose mother's ancestors had been practicing Jews since the 1780s. On the screen we meet an African-born Jew named Billy Simmons, known to have worshiped at Charleston's KKBE in the 1850s, and men of mixed race like Matthew Levy and Francis Cardozo, who had Jewish fathers but were Christians.

Through images and interviews, the series chronicles hundreds of years of history, from antiquity to the present. Episode 1 juxtaposes the experience of persecution and exile common to Jews and Blacks. Religious hatred in Europe fueled the Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews from

Catholic Spain and Portugal. In 1492, at the height of that exodus, Columbus set out on his fateful voyage, destined to open the Western Hemisphere to European colonization. In its wake, the Indigenous peoples of the region were eradicated, and the horrors of racial slavery were unleashed.

Over the next three and a half centuries, at least twelve million Africans were deported to the so-called New World and forced into perpetual servitude, while Jewish settlers eventually were accepted as full citizens, eligible to become members of the white establishment. As such, in both Southern and Northern colonies, they benefited from the system of Black enslavement as traders, masters and mistresses, and public officials.

While early American Jews generally did not extend the lessons of the Exodus story to Black people, the enslaved found voice in the Hebrew Bible, embracing Moses in clandestine religious services, music, and acts of resistance. I wish more time had been spent examining the roles Jews played in the Civil War and Reconstruction—subjects that have been the focus of productive new research. I understand, however, the need to leap to the twentieth century, where the story turns on two great migrations: the flight of eastern European Jews from the Pale of Settlement and the passage of southern Blacks to northern cities.

In both cases, there is push and pull—discrimination and pogroms in the old country, and economic opportunities in the new land. Both the Black press and the Yiddish press covered the resettlement of the two peoples and their different outcomes. A turning point in Black-Jewish relations came with the 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois, which propelled a coalition of Black and Jewish professionals and intellectuals to organize the NAACP. Here the storyline focuses on W. E. B. DuBois and Joel Spingarn, whose shared social conscience and friendship made them effective allies. Similarly, Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald's collaboration on building schools transformed the educational landscape for Black children across the South.

"Let My People Go" ends on a bleak note: rising white supremacy, a resurgent KKK, the lynching of Leo Frank, and the eruption of the eugenics movement at home and abroad. Episode 2, "Strange Fruit," celebrates connections between Black and Jewish creators in jazz and film in America, then shifts to dark clouds gathering overseas: the Nuremberg Laws that mirrored the American system of Jim Crow, the sidelining of Jewish

*Michael Twitty at the head of the Passover table in Black and Jewish America:
An Interwoven History. (PBS.com.)*

athletes in the 1936 Olympics in Germany, and the annihilation of Europe's Jews as witnessed by Black GIs. Racial disparities widened after World War II, with the GI Bill giving white veterans a leg up the socioeconomic ladder, while African Americans were barred from access to housing, schools, and jobs.

"The Grand Alliance" chronicles the brief Golden Age of Black/Jewish relations in the 1960s. Like Skip Gates, I came of age in this period and witnessed firsthand the coming together and breaking up of interracial activism. I spent Freedom Summer raising bail for Northern students, including my boyfriend, arrested in Mississippi. I was a member of Long Island's first youth committee on civil rights, demonstrating in support of SNCC and CORE until we no longer felt welcome and turned our outrage toward the Vietnam War.

In 1967, Israel's Six-Day War and the bitter battle over control of the public schools in the Ocean Hill/Brownsville section of Brooklyn further eroded bonds between Jews and Blacks. Episode 3 ends with the plaintive question: can the two peoples find common ground again? Contention flares in the final segment, called "Crossroads." Affirmative action, Zionism, the Nation of Islam, and rioting in Crown Heights find Jews and

people of color on opposing sides. In the face of white nationalist violence, however, both groups mourn the massacres at Mother Emanuel in Charleston in 2015 and at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh three years later.

Across these contentious decades, a remarkable cast of commentators—insightful, articulate, and ethnically diverse—keeps the narrative coherent. The depth and breadth of research is palpable in the film's high production qualities. An added dose of star power ups the ante. My favorite sequence among many is the interview with playwrights Anna Deavere Smith and Tony Kushner, who demonstrate the power of art to lay bare painful truths.

The lessons the series has to teach are more pertinent today than ever. At this moment, when books are snatched from library shelves and history is being erased, Gates courageously tackles a difficult subject in all its complexity, providing a blueprint for dialogue across differences and for a renewed alliance to save democracy.

Dale Rosengarten, College of Charleston

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