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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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REVIEW ESSAY

More than Plantations and Pastrami:
Southern Jewish History Comes of Age

by

Kirsten Fermaglich

Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History. Edited by Mark K. Bauman. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 480 pages.

Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History. Edited by Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2006. 368 pages.

“**W**hen I told my father you were coming for dinner, I let him know you were Jewish. And he asked me ‘What’s a Jewish?’” My parents have never failed to delight in telling this story, recounted to them by a medical school classmate at the University of Kentucky in the 1960s. True or apocryphal, it symbolized for my parents, who grew up in the Bronx, both their distance from the southern culture in which they were living, as well as their acceptance by native Kentuckians, whose warm friendships and dry wit still nourish them today.

That tension between distance and acceptance has shaped much of the historical literature on southern Jewish life. At least since the publication of Eli Evans’s *The Provincials* in 1973, historians have been probing the myriad ways that Jews have integrated themselves into southern life, through politics, through commerce, through religion and through racial ideology, while at the same time navigating their distance from a culture that has

traditionally been religiously Christian and ethnically homogeneous (within the white population).

Despite the proliferation of recent historical works on southern Jewish life, however, Jewish men and women who have lived below the Mason-Dixon Line are still on the margins of American Jewish history and of the history of the South. The publication of two thought-provoking edited volumes on southern Jewish history in 2006 does indicate, though, that a cultural moment for the study of southern Jews may have arrived. Allowing southern Jews to take center stage, the essays in these volumes illuminate a significant historiographical debate over the nature of southern Jewish identity, while also painting a portrait of a southern Jewish community that is rapidly changing and filled with diverse experiences.

The essays in Mark K. Bauman's volume, *Dixie Diaspora*, reflect to some extent Bauman's argument in an earlier work, *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style*, that there is not much that can be called a distinctive southern Jewish identity. Instead, he argues in *Dixie Diaspora*, northern and southern Jewish communities featured very similar adaptive strategies, and much that has been identified as southern Jewish identity can in fact be found among Jews throughout the United States. "Jews benefited from the South and responded to regional peculiarities, but adaptation reflected a broadly-defined Jewishkeit" (355). Bauman has marshaled a good number of essays in his volume—all of them previously published elsewhere—that reflect this position. Leonard Rogoff's essay on Jews and whiteness, for example, traces ties between southern racism and racism in the North and throughout the world at the turn of the twentieth century: "Jews were not exclusively regional in their racial thinking anymore than other Americans," he notes (412). Through a description of the rising fortunes of the families of financiers Joseph Seligman and Henry Lehman, Elliott Ashkenazi describes the interrelated economic lives of Jews in the South and North, even during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. And Lee Shai Weissbach's description of the immigration of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to southern small towns challenges the dominant image of

southern Jews as Reform, acculturated, German Jews, instead pointing out fundamental similarities between northern and southern Jewish communities.

In *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, on the other hand, editors Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg explicitly argue against Bauman's portrait of a southern Jewry fundamentally similar to that of the North: "To dismiss the impact of region on Jewish identity is to underestimate the power of place." (18). And as in the case of Bauman, the editors have compiled essays—a few published elsewhere, others written solely for this book—that attest to this perspective. Articles by Eric Goldstein and Clive Webb, for example, emphasize the ways that Jews imbibed the racial mores of southern culture and tried to distance themselves from northern Jewish organizations and civil rights activists in order to preserve their own communities and their self-definitions as "white." Although both Goldstein and Webb complicate this distinctive southern racism—noting the existence of racism among northern Jews, as well as the exceptional Jews in the South who fought segregation—ultimately both of these authors paint a portrait of Jews in the South "who conformed to prevailing racial mores much more diligently than in any other region of the country." (150) Authors in *Jewish Roots* also point to religion as a distinctive component of southern Jewish identity: Reform Judaism flourished in the states of the former Confederacy in a way that was unparalleled in the North, West, or Midwest. Gary Zola's essay, in particular, offers a useful comparison between the three northern and three southern synagogues in the original British colonies, noting that by the twentieth century, the three southern institutions had become Reform synagogues, while the three northern synagogues maintained their traditional Sephardic liturgies and styles of worship.

Despite this substantial argument over distinctiveness, it is important to note that these two edited volumes share many similarities, indeed perhaps more similarities than differences. The historiographical debate over distinctiveness is a significant factor that divides the texts, but it does not define these works, just as it does not define southern Jewish history. For one thing, both texts

feature essays that explicitly argue against their editors' positions in the debate. *Dixie Diaspora*, for example, features an essay by Steven Whitfield on the "braided identity of Southern Jewry" that argues that "the very distinctiveness of Dixie, its singularity in comparison to the rest of America, also meant the accentuation of certain differences with Yiddishkeit elsewhere" (428). At the same time, an essay on peddlers by Hasia Diner in *Jewish Roots* powerfully suggests that "by looking at immigrant Jewish peddlers, the American South, long conceptualized by its own residents and by outsiders as unique, becomes like other parts of the United States and the modern world" (87). Indeed, the two volumes share five contributors, with one essay (Mark Greenberg's) substantially reprinted in both, and the volumes also publish articles that explore other common themes in southern Jewish history, suggesting that the debate over distinctiveness does not—and should not—dominate the historical discussion of southern Jewry.

Authors represented in both books, for example, work to complicate the static labels "Jewish," and "southern," by introducing readers to the diversity of people who fit those categories, and to the changing meaning of those categories over time. Greenberg, for example, in both volumes, notes the ways that Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews in Savannah before the war clashed over issues of religious ritual, as well as divergent historical pasts. Both volumes also publish essays (by Ira Sheskin in *Dixie Diaspora* and by Stuart Rockoff in *Jewish Roots*) that attest to the changing nature of the southern Jewish population in the 21st century, as the shift to a post-industrial economy and suburbanization has pushed Jews out of southern small towns and drawn northern Jews to southern urban centers like Atlanta and Houston. Each volume features one article about Jewish women, suggesting the ways that gender complicates the static labels of "Jewish" and "southern." In *Jewish Roots*, Jennifer Stollman describes the ways that southern Jewish women in the antebellum era defended the Jewish community from antisemitism, while in *Dixie Diaspora*, Deborah Weiner portrays the Jewish women of Appalachian coal towns as the sustaining core of their Jewish communities. And both books also offer fascinating portraits of

southern Jews who skirted or crossed the boundaries of the traditional Jewish community. *Dixie Diaspora* features an essay by Joshua Rothman about a Jewish merchant who established an interracial family with a free woman of color in antebellum Virginia, and in *Jewish Roots*, Emily Bingham describes the members of the Mordecai family who traveled in and out of affiliation with Judaism, as some married Christians and converted, while others redoubled their passion for the Jewish religion. The authors of all these essays share in a consensus, then, that southern Jewishness is rapidly changing and that there is no one archetypal “southern Jew.”

Then, too, the volumes also share similar lacunae. Each book features only one article specifically about Jewish women, and few other articles that employ gendered analysis, a shame when discussing a region where gender forms such an important part of identity. Moreover, other than one essay on the modern civil rights movement in each volume, the twentieth century is relatively absent from both books, at least as a specific subject of study (thematic articles in both books do address the twentieth century as part of a broader scope of change that they describe). Again, when discussing a region that encountered such profound change throughout the twentieth century, its absence rings loudly. Conversely, neither volume addresses very much the subject of race before the Civil War—Rothman’s article in *Dixie Diaspora* is a notable and intriguing exception, although one that does not probe Jewishness as much as it could. Recent work on Jews and race in the early modern world, particularly in port cities like Charleston, could have deepened and enriched both of these volumes.*

The publication of both of these admirable works, *Dixie Diaspora* and *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, in one year does indeed suggest, as Ferris and Greenberg write, that “[t]he study of Southern Jewish history has now come of age” (20). Certainly the demographic changes that these volumes describe—the growth of Jewish studies programs in southern universities, the migration of Jewish academics to the South, and the growth of museums dedicated to preserving the history of the Jewish experience in the South—help us to understand why the study of southern Jewish

history has proliferated and grown more sophisticated in recent years. The “coming of age” of southern Jewish history seems also to reflect a broader trend in Jewish history in general: that the study of marginal Jews, of people who seem to lurk on the edges of established, traditional, “normal” Jewish life, are coming to the center of academic study and helping us to rewrite the history of American Jews in general.

The publication of two such valuable works in the same year also suggests that the study of southern Jewish history will continue to grow. The argument over distinctiveness may not be as central as a comparison between these two works might suggest, although it is a productive and provocative debate, and one well worth introducing to both graduate and undergraduate students. Instead, it is these works’ attention to the fluid and rapidly changing nature of southern Jewish identity, as well as to the diversity of southern Jewish experiences, that makes both these books well worth reading, and that suggests the direction that the field will take in the future.

NOTE

* See, for example, Jonathan Schorsch, “Portmanteau Jews: Sephardim and Race in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *Jewish Culture and History* 4 (Winter 2001): 59-74; Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (New York, 2004); Gemma Romain, “Ethnicity, Identity and ‘Race’: The Port Jews of Nineteenth Century Charleston,” *Jewish Culture and History* 7 (2004): 123-140.