

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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# In the Shadow of Hitler: Birmingham's Temple Emanu-El and Nazism

by

Dan J. Puckett

The Nazi persecution of the Jews that began in 1933 and ended with the mass murder of six million by 1945 profoundly influenced the Jewish community in Birmingham, Alabama. In the 1930s, the Jewish community, which had been socially divided between German Reform Jews and Conservative and Orthodox eastern European Jews, began to work together in the interest of aiding and later rescuing European Jews who suffered at the hands of the Nazis. Birmingham's United Jewish Fund, created in 1936, served as the primary organization that both German Jews and eastern European Jews used not only to aid persecuted European Jews, but also to contribute to the overall well-being of their community. Although they did not see eye-to-eye on many things, such as religious rituals and practices or the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, Nazi Germany provided a common threat that helped bridge the community divide. Their response to Nazi persecution in the 1930s forged closer ties within the Jewish community, and the revelations of the Final Solution in 1942 contributed greatly to the acceptance of Zionism within Reform Temple Emanu-El, further eroding divisions.

During this period, roughly 4,500 Jews called Birmingham home. The city had three synagogues: Emanu-El, founded by German Jews in 1882; K'nesseth Israel, the Orthodox congregation organized by eastern European immigrants in 1889; and Temple Beth-El, a Conservative congregation established in 1907 by change-minded members of K'nesseth Israel. Temple Emanu-El

## 2 SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

was the most prominent and wealthiest of the three. Birmingham's gentiles recognized Emanu-El's Rabbi Morris Newfield as the spokesman of the city's disparate Jewish community. Prominent members of Emanu-El achieved public positions of influence not only in the city, but also statewide. In the late nineteenth century, businessman and educator Samuel Ullman presided over the Birmingham Board of Education. In the late 1920s, attorney Leo Oberdorfer became president of the Birmingham Bar Association and, in 1933 and 1934, presided over the Alabama Bar Association. Milton Fies, the vice president of operations for DeBardeleben Coal, had been president of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, and investment banker Mervyn Sterne led numerous civic organizations including the Birmingham Community Chest.<sup>1</sup>

The eastern European Jews of Beth-El and K'neseth Israel could not claim the same prominence in civic affairs, although they comprised the largest and arguably the most vibrant element of the city's Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> Economic and social disparity had existed between the city's Reform Jews and eastern European Jews since the latter's influx in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless some of Emanu-El's members were of eastern European origin, including Rabbi Newfield who emigrated from Hungary in the late nineteenth century and married Samuel Ullman's daughter. By the 1930s, Birmingham's Jewish community began to come together. In his history of the city's Jews, Mark Elovitz argues that such movement toward unity was marked by "accommodation, blurring of disparities and a growing, though perhaps unconscious, expression of a willingness among the 4,500 Jews of Birmingham to coexist and even draw together for their mutual well-being."<sup>3</sup> The closing of America's shores to new immigrants and the gradual acculturation of the eastern Europeans, coupled with their economic gains and entrance into the middle class in the 1920s, as Elovitz notes, accounts for the change, although this cooperation did not fully bridge the social divide between the two subcommunities. The first critical turning point occurred when both consciously and deliberately worked together, primarily to aid persecuted European Jews. The United Jewish Fund served as the vehicle for this intra-community

*Rabbi Morris Newfield.*

*Newfield served as rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, from 1895 to 1940.*

*(Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives.)*

#### 4 SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

cooperation even as it also maintained services to local and national charities. The prewar and early wartime Nazi persecutions and finally the mass killings of European Jews convinced most Reform Jews of Emanu-El of the necessity of a Jewish homeland, providing the second turning point. In this sense, they began to see themselves as part of the larger Jewish community. Birmingham's Jewish experience, in all of these matters, mirrored those of Jewish communities throughout the country, offering an excellent illustration of adaptation and change wrought by external and internal forces.<sup>4</sup>

##### *The Milieu*

A majority of Alabamians, especially those in the press, condemned the Nazi regime from its inception. Their condemnation stemmed primarily from the brutal, aggressive nature of Nazism, which they deemed incompatible with American democracy. The Nazi suppression of democracy and civil liberties in Germany, their oppression of political opponents, and their persecution of Jews solidified this initial impression. By 1934 an editorial in the *Birmingham Age-Herald* confirmed that this reaction to the Nazis went beyond objections to the treatment of the Jews: "what has happened, what is still happening, to the Jews of Germany is . . . abhorrent to every instinct of decency and justice. That would be sufficient to make generous and enlightened spirits active in the amelioration of such brutality. But that would not serve as the explanation of that vast public indictment which has been launched against the 'New Germany.'"<sup>5</sup> This intensely negative view of the Nazis colored both journalists' and the public's reaction to Germany until well after the end of the war.

Deborah Lipstadt has pointed out that the American press did not consider antisemitism a fundamental tenet of Nazism.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the press in Alabama saw it as part of a larger Nazi concern with Aryan supremacy and racial purity that it did consider fundamental to Nazism. This view by the press led it to characterize the outbursts of Nazi antisemitic violence as episodic anomalies rather than a governmental-sponsored program of violence directed at Jews. The Birmingham newspapers regularly

reported and commented on persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany throughout the 1930s and intensively covered the Jewish plight in Europe more so than any other news organization in the state (with the possible exception of the *Montgomery Advertiser*). Their attention can be attributed directly to the sensitivity of the editors to Jewish concerns.<sup>7</sup> Birmingham's Jews, especially those of Emanu-El, had extensive connections with both civic leaders and the press. Emanu-El's Charles Feidelson, an editor and columnist of both the *Birmingham News* and *Birmingham Age-Herald*, even helped to craft the papers' editorial policies that kept the Jewish plight in Europe and American antisemitism in the public eye.

Birmingham's Jews actively engaged in raising money for Jewish relief organizations, conducting seminars and lectures, drafting petitions, and cultivating political connections on both the state and national levels in a largely futile attempt to alter the course of events in Germany.<sup>8</sup> As previously indicated, the United Jewish Fund contributed greatly to these efforts. The fund had been in the planning stages since shortly after the Nazi regime seized power in Germany in 1933, as representatives from various local groups and charities worked to alleviate any conflict or jealousy that might arise from the allocation of funds. Once established, the United Jewish Fund not only supported numerous and varied Jewish charities—sixty-five different agencies in 1936 and 1937—but it also became the main vehicle for Birmingham Jews to aid persecuted Jews abroad through its contributions to such varied organizations as the Joint Distribution Committee, the United Palestine Appeal, the National Labor Committee for Palestine, Hadassah and Junior Hadassah, and yeshivot in Europe and Palestine. Moreover, the organization financially sponsored refugees and found jobs for them in the Birmingham area.<sup>9</sup> The fund, with the strong support of the rabbis of the three congregations as well as their most prominent congregants, helped to unite the Jewish community by appealing to its generosity and willingness to aid Jews in distress.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the prominence of Emanu-El's members in Birmingham's economy and civic society, the gentile community considered Rabbi Newfield the spokesman for the city's Jews

despite the fact that the eastern European Jews, who belonged to the less prosperous K'neseth Israel and Temple Beth-El, outnumbered the Reform Jews and played the most active roles in supporting and perpetuating Jewish life and culture in the city as well as serving as the driving force behind many of the relief efforts. Although Newfield believed that "the United Jewish Fund was the spokesman for the Jewish people" of Birmingham, the ecumenical nature of the Reform tradition caused gentiles, including those in the press, to look to Newfield and Emanu-El for the Jewish perspective, and they did not consider that the other rabbis and congregations might have different views.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the phenomenon of the Reform rabbi as a cultural broker or "ambassador to the gentiles," a role that Newfield filled so well, can be seen elsewhere, as Hollace Ava Weiner has noted among the rabbis in Texas and as Mark K. Bauman, Arnold Shankman, and George R. Wilkes noted of Atlanta's Rabbi David Marx, Newfield's friend and colleague.<sup>12</sup> Although the press dutifully reported the activities of the Jewish community, such as events at the Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA), it rarely commented editorially, covered in depth, or granted any great importance to the activities at K'neseth Israel and Beth-El unless Newfield or Emanu-El also participated.

Although both central and eastern European Jews supported the relief efforts toward the persecuted Jews in Europe, they disagreed over Zionism. The eastern European Jews who immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought with them a strong adherence to Jewish tradition and the vivid memories of persecution and pogroms. As Melvin Urofsky notes, among European Jews, "messianic hopes for redemption had always existed in the midst of Jewish misery."<sup>13</sup> Birmingham's eastern European Jewish immigrants were no exception. The wealthier, established members of Emanu-El did not embrace the eastern European immigrants' devotion to the Zionist idea. Most Reform Jews supported the position of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), which, until 1937, opposed the establishment of a Jewish state. Many of the older members of Birmingham's Emanu-El rejected Zionism because

*Rabbi Morris Newfield, chaplain in World War I.*

*The photo of Newfield was taken at Camp McClellan, Anniston, Alabama.  
(Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.)*

they did not consider Judaism a nationality; indeed, they saw themselves as Americans and worried that any support for Zionism would single them out “as somehow separate from home town and local traditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet Zionism flourished in Birmingham primarily among eastern European Jews. The Birmingham Zion Association emerged out of the Federation of American Zionists, which had been founded a year after the First Zionist Congress convened in Basle in 1897. Although the association lasted only four years (1898–1901), supporters attempted to revive it by changing its name to Tikwath Zion. In addition to Tikwath Zion, Young Judean clubs, formed between 1910 and 1912, and a Hadassah chapter, established in 1915, helped maintain enthusiasm for Zionism until the Nazi persecutions fueled the growth of the movement during the 1930s. Birmingham attorney and Zionist leader Abe Berkowitz admitted that it “was not generally a major concern on the agenda

of the Jewish community in Birmingham" from 1923 to 1932, and "the Reform group had nothing whatever to do with Zionism. . . . It is fair to say that, maybe with a mere exception, they generally viewed Zionism as synonymous with Russian or Polish Jews." As the Nazi persecutions progressed in the 1930s, however, Zionism became more attractive and acceptable to Reform Jews who had been opposed, and in some cases hostile, to the movement. From 1933 to 1936, Birmingham's Zionist organization grew to six hundred members, and, according to Berkowitz, it "was the most well attended organization in the city."<sup>15</sup>

Birmingham's Zionists consistently and severely criticized the Reform position. Mark Elovitz argues that prior to and during the Nazi era, the "unrelenting" attacks and disparagement of the Reform stance by the city's "indomitable Zionists" created "a small, though sometimes bitter, minority of local Jews" who never embraced Zionism. Prominent investment banker Mervyn Sterne, who had been elected the first president of the United Jewish Fund and who actively supported relief and rescue operations for European Jews, adamantly rejected Zionism. Sterne later said that he faced more discrimination from other Jews than from gentiles because he was the "wrong kind of Jew."<sup>16</sup> It is doubtful that Sterne suffered discrimination from other Jews since he commanded the respect of all of Birmingham's Jews and gentiles, and he closely worked with Zionists on behalf of the United Jewish Fund. More likely, he had a thin skin concerning the frequent, and often harsh, criticism of his position on Zionism. While no in-depth study surveys the Jewish experience in Alabama outside of Birmingham, it is clear that the Nazi persecutions in Europe drove many Reform Jews statewide toward a greater concern for Jews worldwide, if not outright acceptance of the creation of a Jewish state, a trend observed among Reform Jews throughout the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Both Zionists and non-Zionists in Birmingham worked to open Palestine as a haven for the persecuted Jews in Europe partly because the United States State Department had severely limited its own Jewish immigration into the United States. Great Britain during this period issued a series of white papers that restricted

the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine, and the British Colonial Office severely limited Jewish visas in order to placate Arabs who strongly opposed Jewish immigration or a Jewish state. In October 1938, upon hearing news that Britain was considering repudiating the Mandate and closing Palestine to Jewish refugees, an emergency committee of the United Jewish Fund, led by Newfield, wired Secretary of State Cordell Hull in protest. Newfield also led a group to meet with Speaker of the House William Bankhead and his brother, U.S. Senator John Bankhead, at the Bankhead family home in Jasper, Alabama. Zionists and non-Zionists comprised the group that met with the Bankheads, which included Sterne, Oberdorfer, and William Engel, three of the most prominent members of Emanu-El, and Leo Steiner, Mosely Shugerman, and Birmingham's most ardent Zionist, "Uncle" Ike Abelson.<sup>18</sup> The delegation urged the brothers to use their considerable influence with the State Department to help Palestine remain open to refugees, and the Bankheads agreed to do so. At Newfield's urging, Christian leaders and educators in the area petitioned President Franklin D. Roosevelt to use his influence with the British government on this matter.<sup>19</sup> Despite the prominence and influence of Alabama's congressional members in Washington, their protests on behalf of the Jews had absolutely no effect on British policy, and no effect that can be ascertained on Roosevelt or the State Department. A few days after the meeting with the Bankheads, the *Age-Herald* commented favorably on the Zionist movement, although one of its editors, Charles Feidelson, opposed Zionism. Feidelson consistently and vehemently condemned Nazism and stressed the need to open Palestine for Jewish refugees. He could understand the compelling desire for a Jewish homeland, but he considered Zionism "untenable."<sup>20</sup>

Newfield, who had been president of the CCAR in 1931, also opposed Zionism, as did most Reform rabbis prior to 1937. In the face of Nazi persecution, Newfield, like many other Reform Jews, reexamined his position. According to his biographer, Mark Cowett, Newfield's opposition stemmed from his belief that "an American Jew's allegiance belonged first to the United States. As a Jewish clergyman in a city where conformity to American ideals

was expected, he perhaps believed that Jews had constantly to prove their commitment to those ideals." Indeed, Newfield hewed closely to the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 during his long tenure at Emanu-El. In regard to the Zionist cause, he referred to himself as a "non-Zionist" rather than an "anti-Zionist," one who saw Palestine as a refuge for persecuted European Jewry, not as a Jewish political state, a belief shared by Sterne and many members of Emanu-El. By 1938, Cowett argues, the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany transformed Newfield into a Zionist.<sup>21</sup>

While some of Emanu-El's congregants underwent a conversion to Zionism, owing largely to the tragedy of *Kristallnacht*, Newfield's position on Zionism is not entirely clear. He continued to support rescue efforts for the persecuted European Jews and "was clearly distressed" about British policy in Palestine. In the 1920s and 1930s, he had "supported Jewish colonization in Palestine," and, as Cowett observes, this "indicates that his non-Zionist position was never very far from a Zionist stance."<sup>22</sup> Yet, he never joined a Zionist organization or worked directly for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, and his position on the Columbus Platform of 1937 is not known. His meeting with the Bankheads and collaboration with Christian ministers does not necessarily mean, as Cowett argues, that Newfield became a Zionist. It does mean, however, that he and other non-Zionist members of the emergency committee desired to keep Palestine available as a refuge for persecuted Jews, working with and even taking instruction from the World Zionist Organization.<sup>23</sup> As Cyrus Arfa observes, even when Reform rabbis vehemently opposed a Jewish state in Palestine, they "were willing to do whatever was possible within their power to restore the biblical land as a Jewish cultural center and provide a homeland for those Jews who needed it or desired it as a haven."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Newfield's association with Zionism failed to influence the older, staid members of Emanu-El who so revered him. Indeed, this issue seems to have driven a wedge between some of them and Milton Grafman, Newfield's successor and an active Zionist. Yet, Newfield's embrace of Zionism, if it can be considered an embrace, provided a greater

awareness for the Zionist effort among Birmingham's gentile leaders and the press.

Many of the prominent business professionals in Newfield's congregation, such as Mervyn Sterne, Leo Oberdorfer, Milton Fies, Joseph Loveman, and Rabbi Newfield's eldest son, Dr. Seymon Newfield, adhered to the Classical Reform position that saw assimilation into the larger American culture as the key to success. These individuals did not believe in drawing attention to themselves, and they were uncomfortable with Jews being in the public eye. Although this attitude cannot be attributed solely to the South or to southern Jews, the conformity of Jim Crow society reinforced it and suggested to them that anything less than one hundred percent commitment to American or southern ideals could arouse suspicion. Support for another political state, such as a Jewish state in Palestine, could easily raise the issue of dual loyalty. Zionists, they believed, were too particular about their Jewishness, and less universal in their approach to the larger gentile culture.<sup>25</sup> As Myron Silverman, Emanu-El's assistant rabbi, told the Birmingham Rotary Club in August 1939, Christianity and Judaism "stood unalterably opposed to fascism and communism," and the Nazis' persecutions were shortsighted because "the German Jew is as much a German as any German citizen . . . just as an American Jew is an American. Every contribution they make to the culture of the country in which they live is made as a native of that country, not as a Jew. They are loyal to their adopted countries."<sup>26</sup>

Although antisemitism flourished in the United States and in the South at the time, the Protestant fundamentalist culture of the South did not object to the creation of a Jewish state; indeed, in such a culture the creation of a Jewish state was a necessity. The Protestant fundamentalist culture that dominated the South often emphasized millennialism, the belief that a resurrected Israel fulfilled biblical prophecy. Southern Baptists, the largest Christian denomination in the state, greatly influenced, if not dominated, all aspects of life in Alabama during the late-nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. During the 1920s and 1930s, nativist sentiment produced waves of prejudice across the United States, most

notably anti-Catholicism and antisemitism, rooted in questions about communism, subversion, and immigrants' loyalties. Such widespread prejudice supported the growth of racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the True Americans.

Alabama's Baptists as well were not above such bigotry. As historian Wayne Flynt notes, Jews, and especially Catholics, bore the brunt of Baptist prejudice in the 1920s, even more so than African Americans. In 1920, for instance, a specialist on Jewish evangelism warned the Alabama Southern Baptist Convention that "Zionism made it harder to evangelize Jews" and that England alone kept civilization alive in the Middle East. Throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s, L. L. Gwaltney, the editor of the *Alabama Baptist*, characterized Jews as greedy financiers, purveyors of Hollywood smut, and dangerous radicals, while other Christians sometimes condemned Jews as Christ-killers.<sup>27</sup> Such antisemitic rhetoric often targeted eastern European Jews and, less so, the more acculturated Jews of Emanu-El. At the time, Jews often belonged to the same civic organizations as did Klan leaders. Glenn Feldman notes in his study of the Klan in Alabama, that some of Birmingham's gentile "business leaders remarked that 'Russian Jews of the low intelligence type' comprised the leadership cadre for Alabama's black communists."<sup>28</sup> When well-respected attorney Irving Engel, a member of Emanu-El, fled Birmingham and the South because the city had "accepted complete domination by the Klan," Klan leadership urged him to reconsider leaving because he "was not the kind of Jew they were after."<sup>29</sup> Even after the Klan's demise in the late 1920s, antisemitism endured. Because the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine fulfilled biblical prophecy, antisemitism and Zionism, at least for fundamentalist Christians, could exist comfortably and without contradiction.

A pivotal moment in the growth of the Zionist movement in Birmingham also occurred when Rabbi Solomon Goldman, president of the Zionist Organization of America, addressed a packed crowd at the YMHA in March 1940. Goldman came to Birmingham "to help swell the ranks of those inspired Jews who sincerely believe that in Palestine lies the Jewish

salvation . . . [and] to enlist new members in the Zionist movement." Not all eastern European Jews had "fully committed" to Zionism, but Goldman's appearance convinced almost all of them to embrace the cause.<sup>30</sup> The local press gave favorable coverage to the event, and the *Age-Herald* described Goldman's lecture as a powerful "voice of faith," but it noted, the "implication was plain that the preservation of identity as a people and the growth of a great racial tradition were embraced in the Zionist dream." The need to maintain identity, religion, culture, and tradition "are deeply understandable and natural human urges that command general support among tolerant, liberal peoples everywhere," the *Age-Herald* commented, but it asked "how far should there be emphasis on racial separateness in countries other than the homeland?" This question no doubt made many Reform Jews uneasy.<sup>31</sup>

Two months after Goldman's appearance in Birmingham, Rabbi Newfield died. Newfield had been ill for some time, and his effort on behalf of Palestine in 1938 took its toll. He collapsed shortly thereafter. For the two years preceding his death, he remained largely bedridden.<sup>32</sup> Although Newfield had worked hand-in-hand with the Zionist movement, few members of Emanu-El spoke in its favor. As before, the Jews of Beth-El and K'nesseth Israel played the leading roles in the Zionist movement in Birmingham, and prominent members of Emanu-El headed the United Jewish Fund; their desire to alleviate Jewish suffering abroad was not abated. As Fannie Newman Goldberg, a member of K'nesseth Israel, explained, the Reform Jews "were interested not in Zionism as we were interested in Zionism, but in saving the lives during the time of Hitler." By late 1941, Emanu-El appointed Milton Grafman, a Zionist, as its full-time rabbi, replacing Myron Silverman, assistant rabbi under Newfield and his replacement. Unlike Newfield, Grafman vocally supported Zionism and attracted a number of prominent eastern European Jews to Emanu-El from nearby Beth-El. Only after the "outflux of Jews from Temple Beth-El that went into Emanu-El and under Rabbi Grafman," Goldberg recalls, did the Jews of Emanu-El become "more interested in Zionism."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the lack of outspoken support for Zionism among Emanu-El's members prior to Grafman's arrival, the congregation enthusiastically welcomed Grafman as rabbi, and his pro-Zionist position apparently aroused no noticeable resistance or controversy. A number of congregants remained ardent anti-Zionists, but Zionism did not become a dominant issue at Emanu-El during the war. As was the case throughout the nation, the safety and well-being of the large number of its members who actively participated in the war effort was of far greater concern and significance to the congregation than Zionism.<sup>34</sup>

*Rabbi Milton Grafman*

Milton Grafman came to Birmingham as the United States entered the war. Indeed, he arrived in the city the very day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Installed as the congregation's rabbi a few days later, thirty-four year old Grafman led Emanu-El until his retirement in 1975 and remained active in the community until his death twenty years later. His dynamic personality and effusive enthusiasm provided a striking contrast to the staid Newfield, who had led the congregation since 1895. Prior to coming to Birmingham, Grafman served as rabbi of Adath Israel in Lexington, Kentucky, and worked with Hillel groups locally at the University of Kentucky and Transylvania College. He quickly connected with the youth at Emanu-El, and this connection came at a momentous time as Emanu-El's young men prepared for war. As one soldier wrote to Grafman during the war, "My father was very fond of Dr. Newfield. I thought him a lovable, understanding man, too. Yet there was something I didn't cleave to. To me you are the very best of modern Jewry."<sup>35</sup> Another Emanu-El soldier, also writing from the battlefield, confided to Grafman, "you're really the first one we've ever had that I could turn to."<sup>36</sup>

Grafman entered the rabbinate at a time when Reform Judaism underwent significant change, especially regarding Zionism. Cyrus Arfa has argued that since 1895 Reform Judaism experienced a "gradual but relentless self-transformation" towards a pro-Zionist position, accepting it in the CCAR's approval of the Columbus Platform of 1937 and finally embracing an active

*Rabbi Milton Grafman.  
Grafman came to Temple Emanu-El in 1941.  
This photo dates from the early 1950s.  
(Courtesy of Stephen Grafman.)*

Zionist stance after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.<sup>37</sup> The Columbus Platform resulted because “many of the younger rabbis were more self-assured than the older classical Reformers such as Newfield, and could more easily accept notions of cultural pluralism, or more specifically ideas of ‘dual’ loyalties, without fearing adverse Christian responses.”<sup>38</sup> Grafman almost certainly voted in favor of the Columbus Platform in 1937, and he definitely can be characterized as a self-assured young rabbi who fervently embraced the pro-Zionist position well before his appointment to Emanu-El.<sup>39</sup>

During the summer of 1938 while he was still serving in Lexington, Grafman toured thirteen European countries including Nazi Germany. His three month sojourn was under the auspices of the American Seminar, affiliated with the International YMCA. He held the title “lecturer” rather than rabbi. He also carried a State Department letter introducing him as “Mr. Milton Grafman.” He witnessed Nazi barbarity firsthand: “I’ve had a remarkable experience, but a very sad and sobering one too. I thought Berlin was horrible, and Warsaw depressing, but Vienna was the saddest experience I’ve ever had. I’m afraid that no one will believe my story when I return. All I can say now, is that you can believe anything you hear or read about Nazi treatment of Jews. Their cruelty is beyond description and nothing they would do would now come as a surprise. . . . But perhaps worse than anything, this antisemitism is spreading like a poison. You can see it everywhere you go.”<sup>40</sup> Grafman’s intimate exposure to the harsh realities of Nazi antisemitism and the enormous threat it posed to Jews everywhere, together with his acute sense of social responsibility and staunch Zionism, helps to explain his intense motivation to serve his congregation during the war and his zeal for the many relief and rescue efforts on behalf of European Jews.

Grafman’s early years in Birmingham proved to be extremely productive both for himself and for Emanu-El. Grafman remained actively engaged in the war effort on the home front and his leadership of Emanu-El resulted in dramatic membership growth. The attraction of Reform Judaism, as well as Grafman’s dynamic personality, encouraged many families to move from Temple Beth-El

to Emanu-El. At Beth-El, there had been growing unease over how many of the old traditions should be retained or discarded among the acculturating immigrant generation and especially their children.<sup>41</sup> As Elovitz observes, even with “all the bluster and fanfare aside, Temple Beth-El was, in spite of its protestations to modernity and progressivism, still ‘definitely an Orthodox house of worship’ in 1939.”<sup>42</sup> Social, as well as religious, divisions remained within the Jewish community. Reform Jews of Emanu-El had their own country club, the Hillcrest Club, while eastern European Jews followed suit by forming the Fairmont Club. Nonetheless by the 1930s and 1940s, the acculturated children of the eastern European immigrant generation had achieved economic success and a measure of social visibility, and Emanu-El’s prominence, the nature of Reform Judaism, and Grafman’s personality attracted many of these members of Beth-El. Grafman further appealed to those who felt uncomfortable with Classical Reform services by reviving some traditions that Newfield had abandoned. His fervent embrace of Zionism at a time when European Jewry faced annihilation provided an additional appeal for these people.

The dislocations caused by the war created significant challenges for Grafman and Emanu-El, not the least being the many members who departed Birmingham in the service of their country. Emanu-El responded as did other congregations across the nation. Its members joined civilian defense groups, volunteered for the Red Cross and the USO, and participated in various other programs and service organizations in the city and region. Emanu-El members also continued to lead Birmingham’s Jewish organizations, and these organizations proved to be vital components of the local and state war efforts. The United Jewish Fund continued to aid transients and contributed to the general welfare of Jews at home and abroad. Besides acting as the organization coordinating aid to Jews in Europe, the fund helped locate missing relatives, advised people how to ship needed goods overseas, and kept track of the city’s Jews who served in the armed forces. The Jewish War Veterans and the Jewish War Veterans Auxiliary, established in 1936, helped both Jewish veterans and soldiers still

in the service. The auxiliary post had over two hundred members who volunteered, visiting hospitals from Tuscaloosa to Anniston to minister to the recovering servicemen.<sup>43</sup>

In 1943 Grafman began a newsletter called the *Serviceman* to keep in contact with his parishioners in the military and boost their morale. He used the bimonthly, four-page newsletter as a "clearing house for news of Emanu-El service men" and a "medium of contact between our boys and [the] congregation."<sup>44</sup> Grafman later said, those "boys [in the service] . . . are the congregation of tomorrow. If they were in town they'd be in the Temple but I can send my services to them abroad and make any foxhole a bit of Birmingham." By doing this, Grafman became what he described as a "chaplain behind the lines, a rabbi [who] would dedicate 24 hours of every 24 to the war front at home."<sup>45</sup> The *Serviceman* became Grafman's and Emanu-El's most direct contribution to supporting the troops. His extensive experience with the Hillel groups in Kentucky certainly helped to foster a strong bond with the young men of Emanu-El, but Grafman also took seriously his responsibilities as the leader of his congregation, and he had, even at his young age, a well-developed sense of moral and civic duty. The *Serviceman* was but a manifestation of this duty.

The newsletter was wildly successful. Initially, Grafman intended it to be for those in the service, but the first few issues had such a wealth of information about the men that all of the families at Emanu-El as well as friends began requesting copies. Shortly after it first appeared, other congregations throughout the United States requested copies and sought advice on starting a similar newsletter for their members.<sup>46</sup> Almost all the letters from Emanu-El's soldiers in Grafman's files express their appreciation for, and their anticipation of, receiving the newsletter. By late 1944, the circulation of the newsletter had reached over seven hundred, with 170 of them going to the men and the one woman in the service.

Grafman wrote and published the *Serviceman* with limited secretarial assistance, and Emanu-El and the Sisterhood funded the operation.<sup>47</sup> The news about the various Emanu-El men in the service came from soldiers' letters sent either to Grafman or to

*The first issue of the "Serviceman," August 1943.  
The publication drew a wide readership among Emanu-El  
congregants serving in the military and those at home.  
(Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives.)*

their families, who then shared the news with Grafman. In most issues, the content focused on the soldiers: their whereabouts, exploits, or views about the war, and often it reported about those killed or missing in action. Frequently information concerning someone's whereabouts led to a reunion of old friends, whether stationed overseas or stateside. The *Serviceman* also included news about the home front. The Birmingham newspapers allowed Grafman to use their articles in the newsletter, and popular items, such as sports columns, frequently appeared. Every issue described the weddings, births, and services that took place in Birmingham since the last issue, including how Emanu-El members contributed to the war effort, such as those training to be registered nurses, or the campaign to collect books and magazines for soldiers overseas. In addition to the *Serviceman*, the Sisterhood put together care packages for the men at Grafman's suggestion, and he made sure that they received them, especially on important days such as Hanukkah. The soldiers stationed overseas and stateside, as well as the entire congregation, appreciated the efforts of Grafman and the Sisterhood.

After Hitler's extermination program became public knowledge in 1942, the press in Birmingham publicized and condemned the mass killings through articles and editorials. Jews and gentiles, Zionists and non-Zionists, could not help but recognize the threat that Nazism posed to Jews worldwide.<sup>48</sup> At Emanu-El, the revelations of the Nazi mass murders in Europe profoundly influenced their perception not only of Jewry worldwide, but also of their own identity as Jews. Rarely had the vulnerability of the Jews to antisemitism been so starkly exposed. Many in Birmingham's Jewish community had lost contact with relatives and friends in Europe, and the Birmingham press's ample coverage of the mass murder of European Jews left little doubt as to the fate of those relatives and friends. To illustrate the stakes the war against Nazi Germany had for Jews, and how Jews should respond to the threat, Grafman wrote in the *Serviceman* about a former Emanu-El member in the service, Henry Birnbrey, who had emigrated from Germany in 1938 as part of the German Jewish Children's Aid. The Birmingham section of the National Council of Jewish Wom-

en sponsored Birnbrey who resided in Birmingham for ten months. On Sundays, Birnbrey "made the church circuit, speaking to churches about what was going in Germany." According to Grafman, he went from being a "Hitler victim to American soldier in the cause of freedom," and had "a very personal stake" in the war as his "father and mother died in Germany from the persecution suffered in Hitler's concentration camps."<sup>49</sup>

Some of Birmingham's Jews believed that they, like Birnbrey, had "a very personal stake" in the war against Nazi Germany. Many of the letters Grafman received from Emanu-El's members in the military illustrated this belief as they confronted the horrors of Nazi antisemitism first-hand. Toward the end of the war, as Harry Boblasky moved through Germany with his company, he and five other Jewish soldiers held a seder the first night of Passover in a small German village with gefilte fish that one had received in a care package from home, matzo rations, and two bottles of wine, which they had "liberated" from the Wehrmacht a few days before. The following evening, Boblasky and his comrades entered Rheydt, the birthplace of Joseph Goebbels, where they held services and another seder with other Jewish troops in the area. Although he described the seder in that location as "an ironic pleasure," Boblasky wrote that he had not seen any synagogues in his trek through France, Belgium, Holland, or Germany, "but before this war is over it is my sincere desire and wish to attend services in one of our Temples in Germany, if only the pillars are left."<sup>50</sup>

Another Emanu-El member, Malvin Mayer, also depicted how the Nazis had decimated the Jewish population in Europe. He recalled his surprise at seeing a burned out synagogue upon entering a small German town, and he later learned that over three hundred local Jews had perished. Only one "disabled, beaten seventy-six year old man" remained. Mayer and the twenty-five other Jewish soldiers in his battalion repaired the synagogue and held Friday evening services, although they could not help but notice that "all that remains . . . of its past glory is a broken tablet honoring all those who died fighting for the Kaiser." "Ironic, you say," he wrote to his family, "[it is] all too common in

*Temple Emanu-El of Birmingham.*

*The Reform congregation, founded in the nineteenth century,  
erected this synagogue in 1914, at 2100 Highland Avenue.*

*(Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives.)*

this lovely but accursed land." Mayer's outfit had liberated four Polish Jews who related their horrific treatment at the hands of the Nazis. These accounts so impressed Mayer that he described them as "stories that the world should know and yet I hesitate to say them to my own family; they are so horrible."<sup>51</sup> Boblasky and Mayer, as with so many other soldiers from Emanu-El, conveyed in their letters to Grafman a deep sense of their own identity as Jews, something described in Deborah Dash Moore's *GI Jews* as "an imposing and powerful force."<sup>52</sup> Just as their sense of identity emanated from their letters, so too did their strong feelings of accomplishment and victory. Although Moore examines men from the northeast in her study of Jewish soldiers during World War II,

their experiences closely corresponded to their Emanu-El counterparts.

In addition to being a "chaplain behind the lines," Grafman played a leading role in the Zionist cause.<sup>53</sup> The Birmingham press had been attentive to Jewish issues during the 1930s, but after the war began in Europe it spent the majority of its news and editorial space on war news. Once the news of the Nazi atrocities became public in late 1942, both the press and Alabama's politicians, prodded by Zionists, paid more attention to the need for creating a permanent homeland for the Jews, although not all Jews supported the cause.<sup>54</sup> In one instance, both Grafman and Mesch of Beth-El publicly rebuked opponents of Zionism, mainly Reform rabbis and laypeople who formed the American Council for Judaism and who called the Zionist movement "inconsistent with Jewish religious and moral doctrine." Grafman and Mesch joined 733 other rabbis nationwide in declaring that "the defeat of Hitler will not of itself normalize Jewish life in Europe," and that "Europe will be so ravaged and war-torn that large masses of Jews will elect migration to Palestine as a solution to their personal problems." The press noted Grafman's stance as "significant" given his position as a Reform rabbi.<sup>55</sup>

#### *Immigration, Antisemitism, Lobbying, and Race*

Other Zionist leaders, such as attorney Abe Berkowitz of Beth-El, lobbied Birmingham's representatives in the Alabama legislature, Representative Sid Smyer and Senator James Simpson, to sponsor a resolution in May 1943 that called for the "establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine" due to the extermination of the European Jews by the Axis powers. This was the first resolution of this type passed in the United States. The joint resolution stated that the "policy of the Axis powers to exterminate the Jews of Europe through mass murder cries out for action by the United Nations representing the civilized world." Not long after, Grafman chaired the newly created Birmingham Emergency Committee for Palestine, on which a number of Emanu-El members served. This committee convinced the Jefferson County and Birmingham City commissions to pass similar resolutions

supporting a homeland for the Jews. These resolutions were a part of a national drive coordinated by the American Zionist Emergency Council to get Congress to approve such a resolution in order to pressure Britain into opening Palestine for Jewish refugees and, ultimately, for the creation of a Jewish homeland.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to political lobbying on behalf of Zionism, speakers frequently came to Birmingham to lecture on Jewish suffering in Europe. In May 1943, in a well-publicized event, national Zionist leader Ludwig Lewisohn attended a memorial for the Jewish dead in Europe at the YMHA and later spoke to a crowd at the Tutwiler Hotel. Lewisohn told the crowd that "Germany . . . is already insane," and had "physically exterminated 2,000,000 Jews and a quarter of a million Poles." Of the severe immigration restrictions that hampered Jewish rescue, he said, "if the free nations don't want us, they don't have to have us. But, give us Palestine." Although critical of the British resistance to opening Palestine, he praised Alabama for its legislation endorsing a homeland for the Jews.<sup>57</sup>

The British White Paper of 1939, which had severely limited Jewish immigration to Palestine, also stipulated that after March 1944 all Jewish immigration would be contingent upon Arab permission. Britain's military weakness in the Middle East and its desire to prevent Arabs from joining the Axis convinced British leaders of the necessity of appeasing the Arabs. Ultimately, this perceived necessity outweighed public opinion that called for the opening of Palestine to Jews. As 1944 approached, protests came from the press, the pulpits, politicians, and even from organized labor across Alabama. One of the state's most influential newspapers, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, argued that opening Palestine would save "thousands who will otherwise be massacred," and blamed "the dead hand of Chamberlain's appeasement politics [for] keeping the door of Palestine shut against the Jews of Europe." By opening the "Gates of Hope," Britain could save the Jews from "perhaps the worst Captivity in their long and tragic history."<sup>58</sup> By late 1943 the *Birmingham News* acknowledged that "two or three million European Jews have now been liquidated. The five million still alive would be facing a future bitter enough,

if no White Paper were casting a shadow on them." To shut the remaining Jews out of Palestine "is in effect to clinch a Hitler victory, whatever happens on the battlefield."<sup>59</sup> The *Age-Herald's* front-page syndicated columnist John Temple Graves also weighed in:

They say that 2,000,000 Jews have been murdered in Europe. Certainly the Jewish people in Axis-held lands have suffered as they nor any other people have ever suffered before. And all over the earth as they seek refuge they find quotas and immigration restrictions shutting them out. If the civilized world in whose name we make war is to prove its right to the name, something generous and brave must be done for the persecuted Jewish people. If the America in whose democratic and humanitarian sign we are defeating Hitler is worth its victory, something heartfelt and loud must go from here to England in protest against the cruelty and cowardice of the White Paper.<sup>60</sup>

Rabbi Stephen Wise, prominent Reform rabbi from New York and cochairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council, toured Alabama in January 1944, lecturing to civic and religious groups, where he urged Alabamians to "do all they can to prevent the enforcement of the document." In Birmingham, he spoke to the Kiwanis Club and to the YMHA.<sup>61</sup> Politicians also sent telegrams and letters to the White House calling for action. Lobbied by Berkowitz, Cooper Green, president of the Birmingham City Commission, contacted Alabama's representatives in Washington and urged them to support resolutions calling for the opening of Palestine.<sup>62</sup> Green supported the Zionist efforts, as did many Alabama politicians including Senator Lister Hill and Representatives John Sparkman and Luther Patrick. Berkowitz and Grafman heavily relied upon them as their voices in Washington.

Americans overwhelmingly supported the attempts to rescue European Jews by opening the doors of British Palestine, but when it involved opening the doors of the United States to save the same Jewish lives, support dwindled. When German troops occupied Hungary in March 1944, they began to deport Hungarian Jews with the Hungarian government's collaboration to the extermination camp at Auschwitz. Because any effort of direct

*Temple Beth-El of Birmingham.*

*A Conservative congregation established in the early 1900s,  
their synagogue, at 2179 Highland Avenue, dates from 1926.*

*(Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives.)*

rescue of Hungarian Jews had little chance of success, the War Refugee Board (WRB) began a campaign designed to pressure Hungary to stop the deportations. The WRB urged prominent individuals and groups, Zionists included, to aid the campaign. Alfred E. Smith, former governor of New York and one-time Democratic presidential candidate, crafted his own statement of support for the Hungarian Jews and urged that the United States offer "all available facilities to save nearly one million Jews facing extermination in Hitler occupied Hungary and . . . [establish] refugee havens in this country and allied countries as means of encouraging marked victims to escape from Nazi-ridden countries . . . as evidence of our good faith."<sup>63</sup> Seventy-one "prominent

Christians, including nearly a score of governors and four Nobel Prize winners," signed Smith's statement. When contacted for support, Alabama Governor Chauncey Sparks "heartily" embraced the idea, but only if refugees were "subject to repatriation after the war if [the] immigration quota is exceeded."<sup>64</sup>

Many Alabamians missed Sparks's caveat of repatriation and quota limits. Birmingham attorney Joseph Mudd feared that the increased immigration would exacerbate "class antagonisms." He pointed out that Albert Einstein had earlier fled from Nazi persecution but now sponsored anti-poll tax legislation, and argued that "this is a sample of what will come from the other refugees." Mudd's antisemitism and xenophobia were readily apparent. As he further explained, "there is no such thing as 'temporary refuge.' Once they are admitted to this country there will be every reason on earth why they should remain here permanently. They will argue loudly that there is no other place to go; to oust them would be inhumane." Indeed, the irony of inhumanity was lost on Mudd. He echoed so many others who fought increased immigration: "[The] refugees can certainly escape the persecution of Hitler short of traveling thirty-five hundred miles. There must be many places of safety within a radius of a thousand or two thousand miles of Hitler dominated territory."<sup>65</sup> Mudd gave no clue as to where these places might have been.

Reactionaries like Mudd often brought tremendous pressure to bear on public officials at both the state and local levels, and such demagoguery produced, if not direct results, a *Sturm und Drang* that increased tension. For instance, at his lecture at the YMHA in Birmingham, Stephen Wise "violently denied" that he supported unlimited immigration into the United States.<sup>66</sup> Other white reactionaries, such as Augustus Brenners, a Birmingham attorney and columnist for the white-supremacist *Greensboro Watchman* and *Southern Watchman*, targeted Charles Feidelson, the liberal Jewish editor and columnist for the *Birmingham News* and *Age-Herald*, as part of a "Communitic program" that opposed things such as the poll tax. Brenners characterized Feidelson as part of a group who "cannot pronounce the word 'America' but who lustily sing their anthem about God blessing it, are 'adopted'

citizens of this country and are very anxious to become its foster parent. They never had a country of their own, but are full of expedients as to how this one should be run."<sup>67</sup> The antisemitism demonstrated by Mudd and Brenners, by no means uncommon and by no means confined to southern reactionaries, helps to explain why the United States faltered when faced with the greatest moral and humanitarian crisis in its modern history.

Mudd's antisemitic characterization of immigrant Jews, in this case refugees, as radicals or outside agitators was typical of the southern reactionary obsession over race. Although such antisemitism recalled the nativist reactions of the 1920s, the memory of the Scottsboro case in the early to mid-1930s exacerbated both racial suspicion and antisemitism in the state. The latter provided the reactionaries the nexus between African Americans and Jews due to the participation of defense attorney Samuel Lebowitz, a Jew, and the communist International Labor Defense. By the late 1930s and during World War II, southern conservatives and reactionaries worried about maintaining white supremacy in the midst of increasing liberalism and racial activism. Consequently, Brenners's denunciation of Feidelson was symptomatic of part of the environment in which the Jews of Birmingham lived.

Conservatives and reactionaries might connect Jews and African Americans, but Jews in Birmingham did not champion black equality. Some, such as Newfield and Grafman, openly chastised extremist organizations and advocated, along with Sterne, Fies, and others, that greater educational and economic opportunities be provided for African Americans. The majority of the Jewish community in Birmingham, like other Jewish communities throughout the Jim Crow South, remained ambivalent and silent regarding black civil rights.

Nonetheless the refugee German Jewish scholars at the neighboring African American Talladega College outwardly protested, albeit in a limited fashion, Jim Crow segregation. Unable to find employment at white universities, some refugee Jewish scholars from Germany found employment at black colleges and universities. The three German Jewish refugees at Talladega discovered the same discrimination and oppression that they had

fled in the 1930s, except that in Alabama, African Americans, not themselves, comprised the oppressed minority. Viewed with suspicion by the local white gentile community, and immersed physically and intellectually in the culture of the black college community, these professors offered what little protest they could by refusing to patronize segregated businesses in town.<sup>68</sup>

Limited evidence is available concerning African American views of Jews in Birmingham during this period. The black press wrote little on the subject and nothing about Zionism. When it did mention Jews, it often mentioned them in connection with the antisemitic persecutions and racial worldview of the Nazis. In 1941 an editorial in the African American *Birmingham World*, while warning of the danger to blacks from Nazi racism, pointed out the harsh conditions under which German Jews lived. "This is no brief for the Jews," the editorial stated, "many of whom are responsible [for] some part of our oppressions. But would Hitler be less harsh [on a] race which he considers even lower than the Jews?"<sup>69</sup> This dichotomous view of Jews as both a persecuted minority and part of the oppressive larger white majority existed easily for African Americans, just as antisemitism and Zionism co-existed for fundamentalist Christians.

As African Americans shared similarly ambivalent attitudes toward Jews, they also shared the antipathy and fear of Nazi racism and persecution that Jews expressed. What differed, however, was their willingness to connect Nazi racism with Jim Crow racism. Shortly after the Nazis seized power, African Americans began comparing Nazism and Jim Crow segregation, using the term "Hitlerism" to describe instances of discrimination and racial violence that they faced. Although African Americans condemned Nazi antisemitic persecution, and most certainly the mass killings publicized by 1942, they drew different conclusions, preferring to stress the dangers of racial supremacy in the United States rather than the consequences it had for the Jews. When the black *Birmingham World* described the mass killings of the Jews in a front-page article in January 1945, it used such terms as "lynched" and "segregated Jewish concentration camp," phrases that obviously resonated with its readers.<sup>70</sup> A cartoon published in the *World* a

few months later used the image of murdered, emaciated bodies of Jewish prisoners to illustrate southern white intransigence toward greater black rights. As African American editor Robert Durr noted after the war, the Nazi criminals executed at Nuremberg "were all antisemitic. They were all likewise anti-human. The two always go together."<sup>71</sup>

The concerted effort by Zionists and non-Zionists to pressure the British to rescind the White Paper and open Palestine failed, but it vividly illustrated the influence of the well-coordinated Jewish movement on local politicians and organizations. The campaign also demonstrated that, despite the lamentations of politicians and press, few endorsed opening the United States's borders. Even the *Birmingham News*, perhaps the loudest voice on this issue, argued that "most Americans" viewed saving the remaining Jews as "primarily an issue of elementary humanity and justice."<sup>72</sup> Birmingham's Zionists continued to lobby politicians and sponsor lectures after the European war ended in 1945, and many members of Temple Emanu-El supported these efforts.<sup>73</sup> Birmingham's Zionists in mid-1945, Abe Berkowitz foremost among them, helped the struggling Palestinian Jews' quest for independence by gathering all manner of aid, including a truck that "was loaded with tires and the tires' inner-tubes were stuffed with guns and pistols and shipped to New York to see that the 'cargo' would not be apprehended." The effort by these Zionists, such as Max and Tillie Kimerling, Dora Roth, James Permutt, and Alex Rittenbaum, whose "international adventure . . . put James Bond to shame," was eventually rewarded when the United Nations decided to recognize a permanent Jewish state in Palestine. In December 1947 the YMHA hosted a victory celebration to commemorate the event. Another celebration followed in May 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel.<sup>74</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Eastern European Jews like Abe Berkowitz and Ike Ableson remained the driving force behind Zionism in Birmingham, but Milton Grafman played a large role in the movement and in how the public came to perceive this crusade. In *The Provincials*,

*Rabbi Milton Grafman.*

*Grafman served Temple Emanu-El until 1975.*

*This picture was taken at or about the time he retired.*

*(Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.)*

Eli Evans describes Grafman as one of “the new breed of Reform rabbis, the men who had served in World War II and replaced the generation of rabbis who had been at their temples for four or five decades . . . all came to realize that identification with Israel was the only hope for the American Jewish community.”<sup>75</sup> Despite the large differences between Grafman and Newfield in both style and substance, Newfield’s reputation and public prominence proved extremely beneficial to Grafman as he established his own ministry. Part of Newfield’s legacy at Emanu-El, similar to many Reform rabbis throughout the United States, was to shape the gentile population’s perception that he spoke for the entire Jewish community. As Newfield’s successor, Grafman had an established platform on which to speak to a wider audience.

With only a brief interregnum between Newfield’s death in 1940 and Grafman’s appointment in 1941, Temple Emanu-El enjoyed eighty years of stable leadership. Under Grafman, Emanu-El attracted more members as families migrated from Beth-El, and these eastern European families brought with them their strong adherence to Zionism. Beth-El’s rabbi, Abraham Mesch, had been a constant and continuous advocate for a Jewish state in Palestine long before Grafman’s arrival, and as these families left Beth-El, they took Mesch’s influence with them. Grafman’s outspoken support for Israel, and his inability to “function in the mold of the classical ultra-Reform rabbi,” did not please the remaining anti-Zionists in Temple Emanu-El. In 1955 a number of prominent families, led by influential industrialist Milton Fies, left Emanu-El and began their own congregation, the Congregation of Reform Judaism. By 1959 the breakaway congregation had dissolved and the families returned to Emanu-El. Despite the brief schism, by the late 1950s, few anti-Zionists remained in Birmingham’s Jewish community. As Elovitz notes, after 1948, “Zionism, in the form of devotion to Israel, became part and parcel of the activities and philosophical underpinnings of virtually every Jewish organization in Birmingham.”<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, World War II was the crucible upon which Birmingham’s Jewish community turned. Not only had the Holocaust altered the outlook and worldview of Birmingham’s Jews, but the

movement of families from Beth-El to Emanu-El under Grafman had also eroded the barriers between Jews of central and eastern European descent. The returning veterans, the “congregation of tomorrow” as Grafman referred to them, spurred further conciliation within the Jewish community, and intermarriage between the two Jewish sub-groups became more common. The war also marked the seminal moment for Grafman. His service to the congregation during wartime and his tireless work producing the *Serviceman* as “a chaplain behind the lines” set the tone for his tenure as leader of Temple Emanu-El. His strong advocacy for the relief and rescue of persecuted European Jews and for the creation of a Jewish state established his stature and authority as not just a Jewish leader, but also as a community leader.

Beyond the impact Hitler’s policies and World War II exerted on Birmingham’s Jewry, black and white Christians perceived events and reacted through prisms of their very different positions, exhibiting vastly opposed agendas and historical consciousness. Jews and issues of Jewish import received open and mixed support as well as open hostility. For their part, Birmingham Jews continued to cooperate with each other and with groups in the broader society on certain issues and disagree over others. In so many ways, this essay describes the unification of Birmingham’s Jews who overcame generational and cultural divisions, but also the emergence of new conflicts that reached beyond Birmingham and the Jewish community into southern culture at large.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robert G. Corley, *Paying Civic Rent: The Jews of Emanu-El and the Birmingham Community* (Birmingham, 1982), 20–22; Mervyn Sterne interview conducted by Mark Elovitz, July 12, 1972, folder 781.4.2.2.7, Mark Elovitz Research Papers, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives (hereafter cited as BPL); Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience* (University, AL, 1974), 117–121, 227, n.4; “Mervyn Hayden Sterne: Biographical Note,” Mervyn Sterne Papers, BPL; for Ullman, see Margaret England Armbruster, *Samuel Ullman and “Youth”: The Life, The Legacy* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Temple Beth-El did have prominent public figures in the congregation. The merchant and philanthropist Louis Pizitz was foremost among them.

<sup>3</sup> Elovitz, *Century*, 90, 98.

<sup>4</sup> Mark K. Bauman, “The Transformation of Jewish Social Services in Atlanta, 1928–1948,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 53 (2001): 83–111.

<sup>5</sup> *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 21, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust: 1933–1945* (New York, 1986), 40–48.

<sup>7</sup> For an examination of the Alabama press and its reaction to Nazism, see Dan J. Puckett, “Hitler, Race, and Democracy in the Heart of Dixie: Alabamian Attitudes and Responses to the Issues of Nazi and Southern Racism, 1933–1946” (Ph.D. dissertation, Mississippi State University, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See “Socialist Leader to Lecture Here,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 15, 1933 ; “Birmingham Forum Sponsors Lectures,” *Birmingham Post*, October 20, 1933; “Forum Urges Nazi Protest on Senators,” *Birmingham News*, February 7, 1934; “Hitler Danger Warning Given,” *Birmingham Post*, November 12, 1934; “Speakers Given By Forum Here,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 31, 1935.

<sup>9</sup> The United Jewish Fund established a Refugee Committee to deal with European refugees and to coordinate such activity with the Resettlement Division of the National Coordinating Committee in New York. It is unclear just how many refugees the fund sponsored, but those who found their way to Birmingham were employed with various Jewish businesses in the city. At one point in late 1938, committee members suggested that, compared to other communities, Birmingham had not carried its weight in sponsoring refugees. At the Refugee Committee meeting in January 1939, the committee pledged to sponsor eighteen refugees for that year. “Meeting,” November 28, 1938; “Refugee Committee Meeting,” January 19, 1939, United Jewish Fund Papers, Birmingham Jewish Federation Archives (hereafter cited as BJF) (courtesy of Sol Kimerling).

<sup>10</sup> “Budget Committee,” November 24, 1936; “Meeting,” November 28, 1938; “Special Meeting with Dr. Kohs,” December 15, 1938; “Meeting of State Conference in Montgomery,” December 15, 1938, United Jewish Fund Papers, BPL. See also the first edition of the United Jewish Fund’s newsletter, *The United Appeal*, October 5, 1937, folder 781.3.6, BPL.

<sup>11</sup> “Special Emergency Meeting,” October 9, 1938, United Jewish Fund Papers, BJF.

<sup>12</sup> Hollace Ava Weiner, "The Mixers: The Role of Rabbis Deep in the Heart of Texas," in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K. Bauman (Tuscaloosa, 2006), 55–101; Mark K. Bauman and Arnold Shankman, "The Rabbi as Ethnic Broker: The Case of David Marx," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 2 (1983): 71–95; George R. Wilkes, "Rabbi David Marx and the Unity Club: Organized Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Liberalism, and Religious Diversity in Early Twentieth-Century Atlanta," *Southern Jewish History* 9 (2006), 35–68. Marx preceded Newfield as rabbi at Temple Emanu-El. He arrived at Emanu-El in 1894, but left for Atlanta the following year. See also Malcolm H. Stern, "The Role of the Rabbi in the South," in *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoﬀ and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, VA, 1979), 21–32.

<sup>13</sup> Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism: From Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY, 1975; reprint, Lincoln and London, 1995), 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Lowi, "Southern Jews: The Two Communities," in *Jews in the South*, ed. Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson (Baton Rouge, 1973), 276.

<sup>15</sup> Elovitz, *Century*, 135, 138–139, 230, n.19.

<sup>16</sup> Elovitz, *Century*, 133; Mervyn Sterne interview. A notorious mumbler, Sterne was unclear in his interview as to what he meant by "more discrimination."

<sup>17</sup> Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920–1945* (Baltimore and London, 1992), 183–184.

<sup>18</sup> William B. Bankhead to Cordell Hull, October 11, 1938, 817.1.1.1.20, Morris Newfield Papers, BPL. Shugerman also contacted U.S. Congressman Luther Patrick from Birmingham, and Sterne coordinated with Adolph Weil in Montgomery. "Special Emergency Meeting," October 9, 1938, United Jewish Fund Papers, BJJ. United States Representative John Sparkman also received encouragement to fight for an open Palestine. See Sam J. Israel to John Sparkman, October 7, 1938; John Sparkman to Sam J. Israel, October 20, 1938; Stephen S. Wise to John Sparkman, October 16, 1938; John Sparkman to Stephen S. Wise, October 20, 1938, box 18, fld."Jews," John Sparkman Papers, Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama (hereafter cited as HSC). For more information on Ike Abelson, see Karl B. Friedman to editor, *Southern Shofar*, September 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Cordell Hull to William B. Bankhead, October 15, 1938; William B. Bankhead to Morris Newfield, October 18, 1938; Morris Newfield to Solomon Goldman, October 14, 1938; Ewart H. Wyle to Franklin Roosevelt, n.d.; International Convention of the Disciples of Christ Resolution, n.d.; A.H. Reid (Birmingham Baptist Association) to Franklin Roosevelt, n.d.; George Lang to Franklin Roosevelt, October 18, 1938, 817.1.1.1.20, Newfield Papers, BPL; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 26, 1938.

<sup>20</sup> Adalien Feidelson Kahn interview conducted by author, January 5, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Cowett states that Newfield's Classical Reform Judaism "satisfied his congregants, mostly enterprising businessmen and professionals, who hoped to gain access to the wider avenues of social, political, and cultural power in Birmingham and simultaneously hold onto some Jewish traditions." Mark Cowett, "Morris Newfield, Alabama, and Blacks, 1895–

1940," in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s*, ed. Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin (Tuscaloosa and London, 1997), 42; Mark Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi: Morris Newfield and Alabama, 1895-1940* (University, AL, 1986), 153-154, 169.

<sup>22</sup> Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 168-169.

<sup>23</sup> "Special Emergency Meeting," October 9, 1938, United Jewish Fund Papers, BJF.

<sup>24</sup> Cyrus Arfa, *Reforming Reform Judaism: Zionism and the Reform Rabbinate, 1885-1948* (Tel Aviv, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> All of these individuals later served on the Executive Committee of the Birmingham chapter of the American Council for Judaism, which opposed Zionism.

<sup>26</sup> "Christians and Jews, Mobilize!" *Birmingham News*, August 3, 1939.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1998), ix, 232-233, 354-355.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn Feldman, *Politics, Society, and the Klan in Alabama, 1915-1949* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1999), 241.

<sup>29</sup> Engel admitted that he had not "suffered any inconvenience or harassment at the hands of the Klan," but chose to leave Birmingham nonetheless. Elovitz, *Century*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>31</sup> *Birmingham Age-Herald*, March 8, 1940. With the exception of the *Age-Herald's* editorial, no one in the press mentioned again the idea of racial separateness.

<sup>32</sup> "Morris Newfield," *Temple Emanu-El Yearbook: 1945-1946*, 15. The information came from Rabbi Myron Silverman's eulogy of Newfield. The yearbook can be found in "Jewish Synagogues Temple Emanu-El," BPL Subject Files.

<sup>33</sup> Morris Fisher, Ida Newman Fisher, Max Goldberg, and Fannie Newman Goldberg interviews conducted by Mark Elovitz, July 10, 1972, Elovitz Research Papers, folder 781.4.1.2.6, BPL.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Grafman to author, February 27, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Irving Beiman to Milton Grafman, n.d. (1943?), folder 1758.1.9, Milton Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>36</sup> Buddy Marlow to Milton Grafman, n.d., folder 1758.1.77, Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>37</sup> Arfa, *Reforming Reform Judaism*, 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Cowett cites Arfa's doctoral dissertation as his source. Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 168.

<sup>39</sup> It is unclear when Grafman became a Zionist. According to his son Stephen Grafman and daughter Ruth Fromstein, the rabbi most probably embraced Zionism early in his life, well before the Nazis came to power. Stephen Grafman to author, February 22, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen W. Grafman, "Out of the Pale: A Grafman Family History," 296-297 (unpublished manuscript in possession of author).

<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Beth-El, Temple Emanu-El had no Hebrew school, held regular Friday evening services, and observed only one day of Rosh Hashanah. Only in the 1940s, for

instance, did Rabbi Abraham Mesch of Beth-El begin adding English to the service rather than conducting it entirely in Hebrew, or offering Friday evening services.

<sup>42</sup> Elovitz was a former rabbi at Temple Beth-El. He goes on to say that in 1938, Beth-El's Board "was still divided on the question of the eligibility of women as members in their own right. It was not until 1944 that Temple Beth-El formally identified itself with the United Synagogue of America and the Conservative Movement." Elovitz, *Century*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> *Temple Emanu-El Yearbook*, 21–22, 46–48.

<sup>44</sup> *Serviceman*, August 1943, 1. The newsletters are in folder 1758, Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>45</sup> "Devoted Rabbi Gets News to Boys Overseas," *Birmingham Post*, August 1, 1944, folder 1758.1.133, Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>46</sup> See the letters from the various congregations in folder 1758.1.132, Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>47</sup> "Devoted Rabbi Gets News to Boys Overseas," *Birmingham Post*, August 1, 1944.

<sup>48</sup> See Puckett, "Hitler, Race, and Democracy in the Heart of Dixie," chapter five, "Alabama and the Holocaust," for an examination of how the Nazi mass killings were covered, portrayed, and interpreted by the press and the public in Alabama.

<sup>49</sup> Grafman wrote in the *Serviceman* that Birnbrey fled Germany in 1939, but Birnbrey indicated that it was in 1938. Birnbrey's father died from a severe beating a month after *Kristallnacht*. His mother died soon after. "Former Refugee Stationed in England," *Serviceman*, May 1944, folder 1758.1.2, Grafman Papers, BPL; Philip K. Jason and Iris Posner, eds., *Don't Wave Goodbye: The Children's Flight from Nazi Persecution to American Freedom* (Westport, CT, and London, 2004), 154–155; Myrna Katz Frommer and Harvey Frommer, *Growing Up Jewish in America: An Oral History* (Lincoln, NE, and London, 1995), 115–116.

<sup>50</sup> *Serviceman*, March–April 1945, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Malvin Mayer to "Mother & Sis," Germany, June 11, 1945, folder 1758.1.81, Grafman Papers, BPL.

<sup>52</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2004), 141.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Elovitz notes that Grafman became "significantly interested" in Zionism between 1945 and 1948, but Grafman's interest, not to mention his role in the movement, prior to 1945 was more significant than Elovitz suggests. Elovitz, *Century*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> See Stephen S. Wise to John Sparkman, October 27, 1942; Stephen S. Wise to John Sparkman, November 1, 1942; John Sparkman to Stephen S. Wise, November 2, 1942, box 18, folder "Jews," Sparkman Papers, HSC; also John H. Mayer to Lister Hill, March 2, 1943; Lister Hill to John H. Mayer, March 23, 1943, box 161, Lister Hill Papers, HSC.

<sup>55</sup> "Birmingham Rabbis Sign Paper Rebuking Zionism Opponents," *Birmingham News*, November 16, 1942; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, November 17, 1942.

<sup>56</sup> The Joint Resolution was approved finally on June 10, 1943. Alabama, *General Laws and Joint Resolutions of the Legislature of Alabama* (Birmingham, 1943), 136, n.144; see also "Resolution is Passed Asking for Creation of Jewish Homeland," *Birmingham News*, May 5,

1943; "Jews Organize Campaign Group," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, December 21, 1943, 7; "Black Paper," *Alabama: News Magazine of the Deep South* (January 21, 1944): 15.

<sup>57</sup> "Future of Jew is Talk Subject," May 15, 1943, 12; "Rabbi Discusses Needs of Peace," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, June 5, 1943; "Nazis Can Never Come Back, Says Zionist Leader Lewisohn," *Birmingham News*, May 21, 1943; "With Aid of Christian Nations Anti-Semitism May Go, Says Rabbi," *Birmingham News*, November 1, 1943.

<sup>58</sup> *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 19, 1943.

<sup>59</sup> *Birmingham News*, December 22, 1943; November 7, 1943.

<sup>60</sup> John Temple Graves, "This Morning," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, December 29, 1943.

<sup>61</sup> *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 12, 1944, and January 13, 1944.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen S. Wise to Cooper Green, February 4, 1944; Cooper Green to Stephen S. Wise, February 4, 1944; Form letter, February 7, 1944; Abe Berkowitz to Cooper Green, February 10, 1944; John Newsome to Cooper Green, February 14, 1944, 9.16, Cooper Green Papers, BPL; John Sparkman to Cooper Green, February 8, 1944, box 38, "House Legislation: Jews," Sparkman Papers, HSC; see also "Plan for Aid to Jews Endorsed," *Birmingham News*, January 11, 1944.

<sup>63</sup> Alfred E. Smith to Chauncey M. Sparks, May 20, 1944, box 9, Chauncey Sparks Personal Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History (hereafter cited as ADAH).

<sup>64</sup> David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York, 1984), 237; Chauncey Sparks to Alfred E. Smith, May 22, 1944, box 9, Sparks Personal Papers, ADAH; see also, "Sparks Endorses Rescue of Jews," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 21, 1944.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph P. Mudd to Chauncey Sparks, May 25, 1944; Chauncey Sparks to Joseph P. Mudd, May 26, 1944, box 9, Sparks Personal Papers, ADAH.

<sup>66</sup> *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 12, 1944.

<sup>67</sup> Augustus Brenners to Gessner T. McCorvey, May 12, 1945, Box 2, James A. Simpson Papers, ADAH.

<sup>68</sup> There were five refugee scholars at Talladega College, but only three during the war. Gabrielle Simon Edgecomb, *From Swastika to Jim Crow: Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges* (Malabar, FL, 1993), 58.

<sup>69</sup> This was a guest editorial from *The Cincinnati Independent*. While the content of the editorial did not originate with the *Birmingham World*, it circulated among Birmingham's black population. The *World* rarely published editorials that strayed too far from its own perspective. "The Die Is Cast," *Birmingham World*, January 10, 1941.

<sup>70</sup> "Uncover Bones of 700,000 Victims of German Murder," *Birmingham World*, January 5, 1945.

<sup>71</sup> "Nuremberg Verdicts," *Weekly Review*, October 19, 1946. There is no record of how Birmingham's Jews responded to such rhetoric by African Americans. Black newspapers were relatively unknown to the white community and usually only journalists and interested businessmen paid any attention to the black press.

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<sup>72</sup> *Birmingham News*, March 19, 1944.

<sup>73</sup> See Abe Berkowitz to Cooper Green, May 25, 1945, 9.17, Green Papers, BPL; Robert F. Wagner and Robert A. Taft to Lister Hill, May 18, 1945; Abe Berkowitz to Lister Hill, June 9, 1945; Lister Hill to Abe Berkowitz, June 12, 1945, box 623, fld.243, Hill Papers, HSC.

<sup>74</sup> Elovitz, *Century*, 142-145.

<sup>75</sup> Eli Evans, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York, 1973), 110.

<sup>76</sup> Elovitz, *Century*, 149, 157-158.