

# Jewish Ideas Weekly

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FRIDAY, MARCH 22

## Rejoice When Your Enemy Falters?

By Shlomo M. Brody

One of the better-known customs at the Passover seder is to spill out drops of wine while praising God for inflicting upon the Egyptians the miraculous Ten Plagues. The conventional explanation printed in most Haggadahs, whatever their religious orientation, is that each drop represents a symbolic tear for those who suffered at the time of the Exodus, including the Egyptians. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “We may be uplifted from an event because it represents the triumph of justice, while at the same time identifying with the suffering of the victims.” This interpretation, which originated in the 13th century, is frequently cited along with a talmudic passage in which God berates the celestial angels for wanting to sing *Hallel* (hymns of praise) while his creatures, the Egyptians, perish in the sea (*Megilla* 10b). According to some sources, this is the reason why the Bible does not call Passover “a time of joy” and why Jews do not recite a full celebratory *Hallel* service after the first day of the festival (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahane*). As the verse in Proverbs states, “When your enemy falters do not rejoice and when he stumbles do not feel glee, lest God notice and disapprove and avert His anger from him.” (24:17-18)

Yet the earliest accounts of the custom of spilling wine drops record a diametrically opposite interpretation: “Spill the blood of our enemies while keeping the plagues away from us!” (*Maharil*) Moreover, the same book of Proverbs also declares, “When evildoers are destroyed, there is joy.” (11:10) This verse was cited by the talmudic sages to explain why the Jewish people burst into song after seeing the Egyptians drown, even

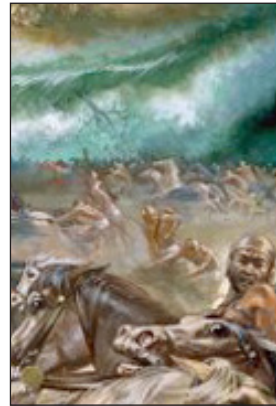
as God refrained from such jubilation (*Sanhedrin* 39b). Other texts go further and assert that the angels were prevented from singing only until the Egyptians had finished dying (*Torah Temimah* Exodus 14:20) or until the Jewish people had finished their own song. One version of the story even states that God’s concern was in fact for the Israelites who had not yet fully emerged from the waters. (*Torah Shleimah* Exodus 14:20) Full *Hallel*, according to this strain of thought, is not recited for technical reasons entirely unrelated to Egyptian suffering (*Arakhin* 10b). The most forceful challenge to the universalistic interpretation of the verse in Proverbs, however, comes from the talmudic depiction of the way in which Mordechai kicked Haman while using him as a ladder to climb onto his parade horse. Haman challenged this triumphalism by citing, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls.” But Mordechai responded, “That applies only to Jews; but with regard to your people, the Torah states, ‘And you shall tread on their high places.’” (*Megilla* 16a)

While one might argue that these sources reflect conflicting beliefs about this sensitive question, many commentators have tried to harmonize the varying sentiments. A few took the second part of the maxim in Proverbs 24 as evidence that any display of joy is unwise, since it looks like an act of hubris and will draw Divine attention to one’s own misdeeds. Yet several commentators allow people, in specific circumstances, to celebrate the downfall of others, permitting them to express normal human satisfaction at the downfall of evil adversaries. Some restrict the “do not rejoice” adage to personal rivalries, in which private grudges may in-

spire one think of a mere opponent as an evil being, as opposed to national antagonisms, in which the evildoer’s malevolence is more clear-cut. Many assert that those directly afflicted by the evil may celebrate with relief, while others should refrain from feeling such satisfaction because rejoicing over the suffering of others leads to moral callousness.

A different approach emerges in the writings of Rabbi Jonah of Gerona, the 13th-century Spanish scholar. He believed that the acceptability of an individual’s celebration depended on the nature of his or her intent. If one’s merriment focused on the downfall of another human being, it would be morally problematic. If one celebrated the removal of evil from the world and the manifestation of Divine justice, however, it would be a laudable act of sanctifying the name of God. We celebrate the downfall of evildoing, not evildoers. This sentiment recalls the exhortation of Beruria, who told her husband, beset by irritating antagonists, to pray for the end of sin through their repentance, not the demise of the sinners (*Brachot* 10a).

The “do not rejoice” adage is cited, verbatim, in *Ethics of Our Fathers* (*Pirkei Avot* 4:19). The author of the adage, Shmuel Hakatan, simply quotes the verse without adding any additional insights, making this the only time in the entire work that a sage quotes the Bible with no further comment. Shmuel Katan was a man of great piety (*Sotah* 48b), who apparently embodied the devoutness necessary to live up to this maxim. According to Rabbi Abraham Kook, it was precisely because of this virtue that he was chosen by Rabban Gamliel II to compose



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the Birkat Ha-Minim, the late addition to the Amidah that prays for the downfall of sectarians in late antiquity (*Brakhot* 28b). Only someone with such virtue, Kook believed, could exercise proper sensitivity in composing a prayer that appeals for the downfall of others.

While this prayer has undergone many historical variations, in its current form it beseeches, “May all wickedness perish in an instant. May all your people’s enemies swiftly be cut down.” The text, to my mind, com-

bines both idealism and realism. Above all, we desire the end of wickedness, and our wish is that this could be achieved entirely through the repentance of the wicked. But if this does not happen, it would be best for evildoers to be uprooted from the earth, so that we can celebrate a world cleansed of the vices they represent.

This is not a risk-free position. Celebrating the death of evildoers while maintaining proper intent is difficult to achieve, leaving the door open for a self-righteousness that

can weaken moral discretion and even lead to fundamentalism. While staying as far from that door as we can, we should remain aware that Passover teaches the importance of drowning evil. We affirm the Divine image in all human beings and hope they will use that potential for good. Yet we also remember that justice is necessary to bring redemption to the world and that this goal, alas, sometimes requires ten deadly plagues.

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

## As a Driven Leaf

By Phil Cohen

I grew up in a home where there wasn’t much in the way of Jewish religious practice, and I made it through Hebrew school at two Conservative synagogues without learning very much about Judaism. Arriving at college with only a rudimentary understanding of my own religion, I left it in the same condition. After graduating, however, I spent several months in Israel. Like so many others in the 1970s, I was lured from the Western Wall to a nearby *baal teshuvah* yeshiva and spent several weeks in an environment that was both inspiring and disturbing. What I learned whetted my appetite for more, but I was troubled by my new teachers’ absolute sense of certainty about all things Jewish, involving both practice and belief.

Returning from Israel after that experience to Carlisle, Pennsylvania and Dickinson College, where I had just received my B.A., I spent a summer in the basement of the college library, reading as much as I could about the Jews and Judaism. I was searching, without success, for the secret to the self-assurance that permeated the yeshiva, the feeling that all the answers were known and that the people there had them. One day, the Jewish studies professor at Dickinson, the late Ned Rosenbaum, placed in my hands a book I had not yet heard of, Milton Steinberg’s *As a Driven Leaf*. He said I might find it to be of interest, and I did.

A Conservative rabbi moonlighting as a novelist, Steinberg took the sketchy talmudic account of the life of a notorious heretic, Elisha ben Abuyah, and transformed it into a full-blown tale of a man’s life-long and ultimately unsuccessful struggle to reconcile faith and reason. Steinberg depicts ben Abuyah’s travels through the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds and his encounters with

the best and worst of both of them in ways that reflect the spiritual challenges of not only the second century C.E., in which the novel is set, but later ages as well. Most of all, the novel echoes the spiritual dilemmas of mid-20th-century Jews like Steinberg himself.

The fact that this novel remains in print almost 75 years after its initial publication is evidence that it spoke not only to Steinberg’s generation but to several subsequent generations as well—for one certainly cannot attribute the book’s longevity to its literary merits. Its dialogue is stilted, and many of its characters—especially the females among them—are quite flat. The philosophical dialogues that take place in the novel are sometimes rather tendentious, and—a real problem in a historical novel—Steinberg doesn’t get the background facts right all the time. Incredibly, he places the siege of Masada after the Bar Kochba revolt, around 135 C.E., when it actually occurred decades earlier, at the end of the first revolt against Rome.

None of this has stopped me from reading this novel five times, or stood in the way of its continued popularity. What, then, is the source of this flawed book’s unusual success?

I believe that it is the manner in which Steinberg depicts ben Abuyah’s quest, which affects both the heart and the mind. Steinberg’s prose, although less than stellar, enables one to empathize deeply with a character seeking philosophical and moral certainty and makes it possible for the reader to share in ben Abuyah’s disappointment as the years go by and such certainty eludes him. Finally, the conclusion of the novel at least points the way to a solution to the fundamental problem that pervades the book.

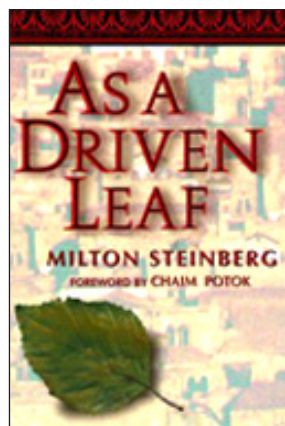
Ben Abuyah fails, in the end, to arrive at his

goal of a complete philosophical system for two reasons, one theoretical and one moral. Borrowing the framework of his story directly from the Talmud, Steinberg has ben Abuyah, as an old man, riding a white horse when he encounters his former student, Rabbi Meir. Meir walks alongside his teacher and master, questioning him about his life’s work and receiving answers that go beyond anything contained in the original talmudic story. Ben Abuyah has learned, he tells Meir, that “all truth ultimately rests on some act of faith: geometry on axioms, the sciences on the assumptions of the objective existence and orderliness of the

world’s nature. In every realm one must lay down postulates or he shall have nothing at all.” He goes on to explain to Meir that a good society requires justice and mercy, for which reason alone does not provide an adequate basis. Faith, by which ben Abuyah means the Torah, is also indispensable. “Faith and reason,” says ben Abuyah, “are not antagonists. On the contrary, salvation is through the commingling of the two, the former to estab-

lish first premises, the latter to purify them of confusion and to draw the fullness of their implications. It is not certainty which one acquires so, only plausibility, but that is the best we can hope for.”

For modern Jews this is an important truth. In an age of skepticism, the assertion that the mind requires some form of faith, some unprovable postulates, as its bedrock can help one wrestle with the question of loyalty to one’s religion. At the same time, ben Abuyah’s discovery is an invitation to openness and rationality. Yes, postulates are required, but so is thinking—about how to explicate the postulates and the content that follows from these postulates. The “what fol-



lows” is a product of the autonomous mind. It cannot reach the level of certainty, but only, as ben Abuyah says, of plausibility.

I suspect that this presentation of the modern problem and its solution is what keeps *As a Driven Leaf* alive. It is impossible to guess how

many young men and women caught up in spiritual quandaries have derived their intellectual bearings from this book, but I am sure that there have been large numbers of them.

For me and countless others, ben Abuyah’s story, as told by Milton Steinberg, has been a

small revelation. It has taught us that finding one’s place in the Jewish world is a process, one that grants us a great deal of intellectual freedom but reminds us, at the same time, that that freedom cannot be total: it must be rooted in something given.

FRIDAY, MARCH 29

## The Outliers

By Allan Arkush

At first glance, Alanna Cooper’s *Bukharan Jews* (Indiana University Press) looks like a conventional ethnographic account of one of those exotic Jewish communities about which most of us know very little. The Bukharans are, to be sure, a little more high-profile than some other such groups, thanks to their well-known and centrally located quarter in Jerusalem. But one of the many surprising facts one learns from this new book is that this neighborhood did not derive its name from its inhabitants. It’s the other way around—sort of. The organization that founded the Bukharan Quarter in 1891 bore the name “The Society of Lovers of Zion to Build Houses for the People of Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Their Outskirts.” The subsequent streamlining of this group’s name eventually led to the shorthand designation of the indigenous Jews from all of these Central Asian locales as “Bukharans.”

Cooper tells us a lot about the history, religious characteristics, and folkways of these people. Her primary intention in this book is not, however, to describe them so much as it is to utilize them to consider what her subtitle refers to as “the dynamics of global Judaism.” The Bukharans, Cooper asserts, “illustrate just how variable Judaism can be, and how different Jews can be from one another.” Their very existence lead one to ask: “Is there a single Judaism and Jewish People? And if so, how might these entities be defined in the light of the great diversity of Jewish forms that developed across the far reaches of the Diaspora?”

Yet the Bukharans, on Cooper’s account, are not so different from other Jews that there ever seems to have been any real question about their membership in the same people. Indeed, despite their long isolation and their uniqueness, no one in the Jewish world cast doubt, when they were rediscovered, on the authenticity of their ancestry.

Yosef Maman, the young traveler from Safed who came upon the Bukharans at the end of the 18th century, wanted not to convert them but only to correct their ways, to teach them to live more like other Jews.

It is the various manifestations of this urge over the past two centuries, as well as the Bukharans’ reactions to it, that most concern Cooper. She first encountered it in 1991, when she taught Bukharan immigrant youngsters in an Ashkenazi school in New York. There she witnessed what she calls efforts on the part of the establishment “to strip Bukharan Jews of features it characterizes as misguided or not authentically Jewish.” What she saw, she later learned, was not an isolated phenomenon but one of many “similar efforts undertaken over the course of two hundred years of history.”

One of the highlights of Cooper’s absorbing narrative of this ongoing give-and-take is a controversy over ritual slaughtering that took place back in Samarkand, perhaps at Passover time, in 1904. The problem began with Shlomo Lev Eliezerov, a Chabad rabbi from Hebron who served for a while as a fundraiser, emissary, and ritual slaughterer in the city. He eventually broke loose from the authority of his supervisor, the Sephardic chief rabbi of Palestine, and upheld stringent and unfamiliar Ashkenazi standards of kashrut. Even after Eliezerov returned to Palestine, his disciples among the local slaughterers continued to follow in his footsteps—and thereby to create, according to Shlomo Tagger, the rabbi of Tashkent, “great distress” in the community, in part because “the poor are lacking meat and there is none for the sick.”

Tagger wrote these words in a 1904 letter to Eliezerov’s superior, Palestine’s Sephardic chief rabbi, who was standing behind the policy that had been introduced by his former emissary. Tagger urged the chief rabbi “not to get involved in this matter.” Whether

his letter had any effect is unknown, for “the archival record trails off here.”

This rather obscure controversy “might be characterized as an encounter between center and periphery, and between local and global Judaism.” But matters aren’t quite that simple, Cooper reminds us. For one thing, Tagger himself had just one foot in the Diaspora. The other was in Palestine, where he grew up; it was Palestine’s Sephardic chief rabbi to whom Tagger deferred, albeit from a distance.

In the book’s final chapters, we find Cooper on the scene, or rather, the scenes, in Central Asia, New York, and Israel, to witness and describe the transformation of Bukharan Jewry from a mostly territorially based community to a widely scattered one. It is also a group whose members are in many instances losing their distinct identity.

One of the Bukharan Jews whom Cooper meets in Israel, a woman identified only as Rahel, was born to Bukharan parents and immigrated to Israel in 1948. She is intensely interested in all things Bukharan Jewish; but her daughter, Ilana, married to a man of Moroccan origin, doesn’t share her concerns at all. “Sure,” says Ilana, “the traditions are very nice . . . and my roots are important . . . but I am different than they are. I am a *sabarit* [native-born Israeli].”

Ilana is something of an outlier in this book, however. Overall, the story of the Bukharan Jews is one not of their disappearance into a melting pot but of their persistence as a marginal group, over a long period of time, in “continual negotiation and contestation about what is legitimately Jewish and what is not.” This history only fortifies Cooper’s conviction, expressed on the book’s final page, that Judaism “is a single religion, and the Jewish people are a single people.”





## The Mad Zionist

By Ran Baratz

Imagine an English officer who enjoyed walking around as naked as on the day he was born, happily munched away on raw onions, wrote blistering reports on his colleagues, defied his superiors, ran roughshod over his subordinates, ridiculed authority and rules, and was careless in his manners and impatient with mediocrity.

Now imagine that this was the first Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army.

That almost happened. If Orde Wingate had survived the battles of Burma in World War II, his dream of standing at the head of a Jewish army, which was also the dream of the leaders of the Yishuv in the Land of Israel, would likely have come to fruition. Moshe Yegar's new book, *Orde Wingate: His Life and Zionism* (Bialik), attempts to explain the link between Wingate and Zionism by telling the story of his short life.

Needless to say, it was not Wingate's strange habits that made him a likely candidate for the first chief of staff of the Jewish state. Those habits were forgiven on account of his military genius. Wingate's military career was filled with victories; there were no failures in it. He succeeded thanks to his unique military creativity, his absolute understanding of the utilization of force, and his exceptional ability to command, defeating large forces with small ones that were often assembled from the threshing-floor and the wine cellar. He did this in a limited way in Palestine, more broadly in battles in Ethiopia, and on a still larger scale in the fighting in Burma, where he built the famous force of "Chindits."

At a time when the Allied Forces were being hit hard on all fronts, Wingate's accomplishments stood out in ways that brought him to the attention of Roosevelt and Churchill; the latter even gave him free rein to contact him. War is a true time of testing, when mediocre commanders are distinguished from the good ones and the good ones from the excellent. Wingate belonged to the last category; and despite all his strangeness and his eventual mental crisis (caused by malaria, apparently), he had a meteoric rise on the ladder of command and in the level of forces assigned to him.

Wingate was "the real deal." Bernard Ferguson, an officer who served under him in two battles in Burma, put it this way:

His standard was perfection, nothing less. . . . No other officer was capable of dreaming a dream, making a plan, assembling the necessary force, training it, inspiring it and leading it. There are those who excel in planning, or in training or in leadership. Here was a man who excelled in all three, and whose vision at the drawing board was equal to his genius on the battlefield.

Wingate's rather sudden and mysterious death, as a result of the crash of his plane in the third week of his second battle in Burma, cut short a career that would have become more glorious in the course of the war and aided the Zionist cause when the war was over. Like every outstanding man in a hierarchical order, Wingate had no shortage of enemies in the British army; but on account of his abilities, he became famous worldwide during and after World War II. As Moshe Yegar writes, "It is doubtful that any other soldier who held the rank of a mere major general experienced such a deluge of publicity of all sorts and generated such wide interest."

Wingate was in Palestine for only two-and-a-half years altogether, but in this short time he put his stamp on the Yishuv's concept of active defense by means of his establishment of "Special Night Forces." He developed a military doctrine and imparted self-confidence to a generation of Israeli commanders; he also provided a personal example as a commander who was always out in front of his men and continued to remain in charge in battle even when he was wounded and still under fire. He helped, to the best of his abilities, with the British, and sought to convince them, on the basis of British imperial interests, of the necessity of building a Jewish force in the Land of Israel. He joined the Zionist and pro-Zionist leadership circles and made contributions to them that were far beyond what was permissible for a British officer.

To a large extent, Wingate gave the leaders of the Zionist movement a lesson in Zionism and political realism. More than once he rebuked them for their timidity (both in their "self-restraint" and in their diplomacy vis-à-vis the British) and their lack of comprehension of the greatness of the historical

hour. David Hacohen reports what Wingate said to him in their first meeting in 1936:

You should know, I am a Zionist with my whole heart. I feel myself indebted to you. I have spent a great deal of time reading the Bible, the eternal Book of Books, the glorious creation of the people of Israel, an eternal testimony to its life in this country. . . . It is my privilege to assist you in fighting your wars, and to that I will devote the better part of my life. . . . Everyone who raises a hand against you or your enterprise of reviving your land has to be fought against. If the neighboring nation intends to rise against you, on account of envy, ignorance, or twisted ideas . . . and for "political reasons" it also finds supporters among my people, I will fight with you against the one and the other.

In Palestine, Wingate quickly became close to Chaim Weizmann and Moshe

Shertok (Sharett), the heads of the Haganah, and many other notables among the leadership of the Yishuv. When his views are taken into consideration, there is nothing surprising about this. For instance, in a letter he wrote to his uncle, he expressed an aspiration for the creation of a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan through the removal of "the corrupt Abdullah," belittled the military capacity of the

Arab states, and sharply denounced those British who admired the Arabs and opposed the Jews. In one speech to his soldiers he said, "God will help us to kill all the enemies of the Jews, for the enemies of the Jews are the enemies of all mankind." With respect to the holiness of Jerusalem to the Arabs he said that "the entire Muslim claim to the Dome of the Rock is based on a story that is considered today, at least, to be as baseless as the 'Arabian Nights' by everyone except the most fanatic Muslims." And there is much more in the same vein. Many Jews testify that one heard from Wingate Zionism of the sort that their Zionist leadership didn't dare to put into words.

It is no wonder, therefore, that many of the British recoiled from him, and they quickly removed him from service in Palestine. Indeed, not just the British, but also some leading Zionists regarded him as too intense



a Zionist. Yet Wingate the realist knew what he was talking about, for he analyzed historical events better than they did. He foresaw the Second World War and understood that Chamberlain was bringing it nearer through his efforts to appease Hitler. Moreover, he understood that the Jews would pay a price for this attitude. In relation to this matter he criticized the conciliatory stance of the Zionist leadership toward the British. This, for example, is what he said to Dov Yosef of the Jewish Agency at the end of 1938:

If I were Dr. Weizmann, I would make it my goal to enter somehow into the office of Mr. Chamberlain . . . and I would say to him: "You have just destroyed Czechoslovakia, and how it seems that you are planning to deal with the Jews in the same way. . . . We will oppose with force every attempt to deny us our rights and we will fight you to the end." . . . Then I would turn around and leave the room. . . . I know my fellow countrymen. If he [Chamberlain] would not call out to Dr. Weizmann to return before he left the room, he would certainly bring him back to London before he would get very far on his trip back to Palestine.

But this wasn't the attitude taken by Weizmann and others. Similar disputes arose between Wingate and the Zionist leaders with regard to the creation of Jewish units to fight on the Western front. There was a personal dimension to this debate. When the British promised to set up a Jewish force (a promise that was broken), Ben-Gurion and Weizmann did not insist on having Wingate lead it, and thus did not keep faith with the greatest supporter of Zionism and the only military man who could have used this opportunity to build a proper Jewish army.

The question of what turned Wingate into such a Zionist is the focus of Moshe Yegar's book and is supposed to distinguish it from other treatments of his career. But the answer is not so mysterious. His arrival in the Land of Israel was for Wingate a "perfect storm." Assistance for persecuted and weak Jews followed from his moral beliefs; he was a great devotee of the Bible and the Land of Israel; corresponding religious beliefs stirred his heart; his physical and intellectual way of life sank deep roots in the land; and, of course, the struggle that took place in Palestine fit his military genius like a glove.

It is the book's good fortune that the author does not restrict himself to the Zionist con-

nection and tells Wingate's life story, including the battles in Ethiopia and Burma, intentionally leaving out the military aspects (but the reader will in any case understand that he has a military genius before him). In addition, Yegar surveys and judges the critique of Wingate by the "new historians" as well as the connection of the Wingate family to the country through his memorialization throughout Israel. An interesting point, which requires an investigation that is absent from the book, is the great resemblance between the views of Wingate and those of Jabotinsky and other Revisionists, which was—in military as well as diplomatic matters—greater than their resemblance to the views of the leaders of the Zionist establishment.

Wingate's story inspires and educates the reader from a number of points of view. He was an exceptional man with a special interest in Israel. His aggressiveness, creativity, realism, leadership, command, the hate that was directed against him on account of his eccentric genius, his contempt for mediocrity and, of course, the Zionism that burned with him generate great historical and practical interest and give the reader much food for thought.

THURSDAY, APRIL 4

## The Jewish Civil War

By Diana Cole

Rife with tales of brother pitted against brother, North and South, the American Civil War always carried for me the resonance of a biblical narrative of family strife. How could it not when, during the Civil Rights era of my childhood, that undercurrent played out daily in my own household, as I endlessly argued with my Virginia-born father who, despite having come "North" to Baltimore to escape anti-Semitism, somehow never shed the racist beliefs with which he grew up.

Still, it wasn't until I visited the recently opened exhibition, "Passages Through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War" that I realized the extent to which Jewish brothers (and families), North and South, also faced off against each other. The exhibition—on display at the American Jewish Historical Society and Yeshiva University Museum in New York until August 11—sheds light on a generally lesser-known but highly complex

and ultimately formative era of American Jewish history.

To set the scene for its depiction of the way the conflict played out in America at large and more specifically among American Jews, the exhibition begins with a map marking the growth of America's Jewish population, both in numbers (from 15,000 in 1840 to more

than 150,000 in 1860, mostly as the result of an influx of immigrants from Central Europe) and in the diverse locales across the country in which Jewish peddlers, shopkeepers, tailors, glaziers, cigar-makers and farmers settled. These included major cities, small towns, and rural areas in the North, South, and West, in states and territories that were both slave and free. This geography lesson is important because the location in which individual Jews lived—and the pro- or anti-slavery sentiments of their neighbors—typically determined their stance, whether for the Union or

for the Confederacy.

In short, the divisions among American Jews of the Civil War era generally mirrored those of America as a whole, with Jewish brothers of different loyalties, Union and rebel, battling each other throughout the conflagration, with several of their individual stories related in photos and letters. But,



given our contemporary sensibility, and despite the historical context of the era, it remains impossible not to ask: How *could* Jews who read the story of the Exodus of Jewish slaves from Egypt each year at Passover personally own slaves, or actively support that position? So it is to the credit of exhibition curator Ken Yellis that "Passages Through the Fire" does not shy away from perplexing questions

about Southern Jewish slaveholding Confederate statesmen like Judah P. Benjamin, whom Jefferson Davis appointed as his Secretary of State. (Nor was Benjamin the only

Jewish slaveholder in the South; among the slaveholders were the earlier generations of the Cone sisters of Baltimore, who contributed their extraordinary art collection to the Baltimore Museum of Art. And the exhibition tells the stories of additional Jewish rebel soldiers and sympathizers through portraits, photos, letters, memoirs, and war mementoes.)

The exhibition also includes numerous sermons, speeches, and letters demonstrating that this question was widely debated in Jewish communities throughout the country. The first volley was delivered by Morris Raphall, a celebrated New York rabbi who, in an infamous 1861 speech, stated that “slaveholding is no sin” and was “expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments.” Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore, among others, hotly rebutted Raphall’s expression of what Southern sympathizers interpreted as a scriptural endorsement of slavery. Other Jewish abolitionist voices represented here include New York feminist Ernestine Rose and Austrian immigrant August Bondi, who joined John Brown’s abolitionist fighters in Kansas in 1855 and during the Civil War itself served as a sergeant in the Kansas Calvary. (As for Raphall, he did sup-

port the Union when war broke out; and his son, who fought for the North, lost an arm in the battle of Gettysburg.)

But whichever side they fought for, Jews had to contend with anti-Semitism. The assaults on Jewish character were rampant, with one editorial asking, “How could you expect a Jew quartermaster to be honest?” Most infamously, in December, 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant issued his General Orders No. 11, which expelled all Jews from the large military district he commanded—a decree that was rescinded the following month in the wake of numerous protests by officials and citizens, both Jewish and non-Jewish, some of whose telegrams and letters are on display. Thus, a non-Jewish Union officer wrote of his colleague, Lieutenant Joseph G. Rosengarten, “I have come from being prejudiced against him to liking him very much.”

Letters like these bolster the argument that by making Jews more visible, the Civil War ultimately encouraged more tolerance and acceptance. The examples of civic commitment to the war by many Jewish institutions and organizations—such as opening the doors of New York’s Jews’ Hospital (later Mount Sinai Hospital) to ailing and wounded soldiers and sailors of every religion—further

bridged gaps between Gentiles and Jews.

Nor can the impact of President Lincoln’s personal and public support of religious liberty be underestimated. In addition to playing a key role in helping reverse Grant’s General Orders Number 11, Lincoln also helped undo restrictions that had allowed only Christian ministers to serve as military chaplains. Under his influence, the law was rewritten so that Jewish chaplains could be appointed. The exhibition displays the official 1862 commission of Rabbi Jacob Frankel as the first Jewish chaplain in the Union army.

Through these instances, among others, Lincoln earned the deep affection of the Union’s Jews, so much so that he became known as “Father Abraham” and, after his assassination, many congregations publicly recited the mourner’s kaddish for him. In 1865 Philadelphia rabbi Sabato Morais, reflecting the sense of loss felt by so many American Jews, composed a Hebrew acrostic poem about Lincoln as well as a longer “Address on the Death of Abraham Lincoln.” Both documents are on display in the exhibit.

As American Jews, they fought, and as American Jews they grieved. “Passages Through the Fire” tells the story of an American—and a Jewish—epoch.