For Such A Time As This: The Impact of Christian Missionaries on the Birth of Reform Judaism in Charleston, South Carolina, 1824-1846

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FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS:
THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES ON THE BIRTH OF REFORM
JUDAISM IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, 1824-1846

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Ashley Lauren Goldberg
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Accepted by:
Dr. Paul Christopher Anderson, Committee Chair
Dr. Rod Andrew, Jr
Dr. H. Roger Grant
ABSTRACT

The first generation of Americans born after the Revolution found themselves in uncharted territory, defining what it meant to be an American in a country that did not yet know itself. The impact was far reaching, as old institutions struggled to adapt to changing mores. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the city of Charleston, South Carolina was home to the largest Jewish population in America; it too found itself in the midst of the struggle between the old ways and the new. How should Judaism adopt or adapt to the customs of a new country, one dominated by a Protestant majority? Should it at all? This thesis will examine the impact of democracy and Christian influence on Charleston’s Jewish community. Most scholarship has focused on the events of the birth of Reform Judaism, noting the importance of new freedoms to Jewish acculturation. But no scholarship has sufficiently examined the motivation behind Reform Judaism. For Such a Time as This analyzes the impact that Christian doctrine played on the specific alteration to Jewish doctrine and how proposed reforms were received not only by the Jewish community in Charleston, but also in America.
DEDICATION

To David M. Rogers, who taught me to seek the Truth… no matter what the cost.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great debt to a great many people. This degree has taken me far longer to achieve than originally expected, and at many times seemed far out of reach. I would like to begin by thanking my advisor, Dr. Paul Christopher Anderson, who was not only my advisor as a graduate student, but as an undergraduate as well. Without his advice, help and guidance, completing this thesis would have been impossible. I would also like to express my gratitude to Drs. Grant and Andrew for their input and assistance with my thesis. These three men have been my professors throughout my undergraduate and graduate careers at Clemson University and I am grateful for their commitment to the study of history. They have passed on their love of history to their students, and I am lucky to have had the opportunity to sit under their teaching in the classroom and through this process. Though not part of the History Department, I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Julie McGaha for reminding me to continue to work on my thesis and not give up.

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INTRODUCTION

THE EXPERIMENT AT WORK

During the colonial period of American history, deference and paternalism defined social relationships. The notion that people were better than other people was accepted virtually without question. The American Revolution turned on its head the idea that wealth and one’s position at birth ought to determine one’s worth. As Gordon S. Wood explains in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, the most extraordinary aspect of the Revolution was its impact on society. Relationships were forever changed—no longer would a small ruling elite dominate the lives of ordinary citizens.¹

People once thought to be undeserving of an opinion, be it public or private, because they were dull and common, were now given the opportunity to express their thoughts; political candidates began to pander to earn their votes. According to Wood, “Equality was in fact the most radical and most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution.” Though America’s elite could not

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be compared to the wealthy in Europe, equality took down the power structure that had existed in the colonies, no matter how tenuous it was.²

A leveling spirit touching the lives of white males thoroughly bent on the pursuit of happiness; it spread throughout the country so convincingly that even the “Founding Fathers” were shocked at the changes they saw in only a generation’s time. A divide emerged: one between those who fought in and for the Revolution, and those who grew up in light of the freedoms and ideas that came out of the Revolution. The older generation had one image in mind of a republic in which merit—“equality of opportunity”—guided national life, but the first generation of Americans created something with a quite different tone: a nation in which political and social dynamics stressed a powerful democratic ethic.³

America at the turn of the nineteenth century was a nation in its infancy. Not even two decades old, the experiment in democracy was forcing old traditions and notions of authority to change. No one was quite sure of the direction the country would take—except that things would be different. The first generation began to frown at elitism in every form. A distinctly American culture emerged, one that could be considered more “vulgar” in nature.


Formality began to disappear. As the chasm began to shrink, more members of society fit into what was called the “middling class.” 4 The first generation even began to create a kind of American lexicon, a common idiom to meet the needs of the democratic nation and to help a growing immigrant population find its place. 5 The first generation set the trajectory for the nation itself. As historian Joyce Appleby notes, “in the years after the Revolution men and women abandoned formality, easing the entry of newcomers into civic life by honoring intrinsic qualities over extrinsic qualities.” 6

Women also began to define their place and their role in their new country. They also gained more freedom and equality as a result of the Revolution. 7 They, too, had a duty and role to play in the success of the country. Women would raise the sons of the Republic, endowing them with pride in their country and raising them to be future and active participants in civic life. Though women could not play a role in the political realm, they still had to help

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in the success of America. They found their place in the home and at church, keeping the country on a moral and upright Christian path.8

Minority groups, at least those thought of as “white,” also sought a place in this culture even as they were caught up in the fluidity of its development. Fitting in mattered not just as a point of acceptance but as a point of participation. In Charleston, South Carolina, several groups felt the pull of assimilation early on. Charles Town, as it was known prior to the Revolution, is an interesting case because even before the Revolution, the city’s acceptance of different religions (except Roman Catholics) caused groups to grow attached to its freedoms, more specifically the city and its people. Minority cultures “softened the edges” of their own identities so that they would be in keeping with the dominant Protestant culture. Historian Arthur Henry Hirsh, described how in just a matter of decades the French Huguenots of Charleston lost their cultural distinctiveness in the city’s tolerant atmosphere.9 More recent scholarship notes how acceptance into the city’s culture allowed for intermarriage between Huguenots and English colonists, which quickly led to

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Huguenots melting into their surrounding culture.\textsuperscript{10} As new generations gained more acceptance into its surrounding culture, the ties that bound the formerly persecuted community together abroad, loosened and eventually disappeared in Charles Town.

The Jewish residents of Charleston had a similar history, though the emphasis seems to be one of acculturation rather than assimilation. Acculturation meaning a borrowing of the dominant culture, rather than assimilation, which means the merging of the minority culture with the majority culture. Jews from across Europe made their way to Charleston after escaping the Inquisition and other forms of persecution in Europe. They found a place where though they were different, they were not threatened. Though they were different, they were not isolated. Years of integration in city affairs and friendships that crossed religious boarders punctured holes in their protective armor of distrust and isolation. They intermarried with the Gentile community, formed business relationships, and within decades only their last names separated them from the dominant Protestant English culture.

In the early nineteenth century, the Jewish community in Charleston faced the same challenges that the rest of the country faced. They too were caught in a battle between the old and the new. The first generation of Charleston Jews born

\textsuperscript{10} Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, \textit{From New Babylon to Eden: The Huguenots and Their Migration to Colonial South Carolina} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), p. 162.
into American society grew up to cherish equality, and found themselves at odds with their religious tradition that was replete with rules and patriarchy—systems that were supposed to die with the founding of the new nation. Their religion put them at odds with the emerging democratic ethics of their country and they were left with a predicament. How could they keep their faith and be Americans, too?

The pages that follow will trace the history of Charleston’s Reform movement. The dynamic within the Jewish community was to hold on to tradition and religion; the pull from without—the emerging American community—told them to change their identity and become full-fledged Americans. That dynamic created an intense rift between the Orthodox, the heirs of pre-Revolutionary Jewish traditionalism, and a younger generation pulled not just by the forces of political and social change, but by religious ones as well. The younger generation made a choice: to rebuild the faith to coincide with American liberty, but in so doing, to compete with the growing threat they perceived to Judaism that developed as a result of the Second Great Awakening.
CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING: JEWISH COLONIAL LIFE AND THE IMPACT OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Jews have been discriminated against throughout most of their history; the eighteenth century was no exception. During the 16th and 17th centuries, even in fairly tolerant cities, like Amsterdam and London, the rights of Jews continued to be restricted and prejudice was a daily experience. In cities like London, the Jewish community found some semblance of tolerance compared to other parts of the world. Because of this, many Jews who faced torture or forms of discrimination in other countries flocked to London. But the Jewish refugees coming there had few possessions and virtually no money, as they were forced out of Portugal and Spain. Though London’s Jewish community tried to care for its religious brethren, the numbers were too great and London’s Gentile population refused to care for the Jewish poor, creating a tremendous burden on London’s established Jewish population.11

As a way for London’s Jews to care for their poor, they paid the way for the refugees to come to a new colony in North America, Georgia.12 The Georgia


12 Hagy, This Happy Land, p. 9.
colony was first started with the idea of helping England’s debtor population. James Oglethorpe, one of the colony’s founders, originally petitioned the English Parliament with the suggestion that the colony be created to help those struggling with unemployment.\(^{13}\) Upon the arrival of a ship containing only Jewish settlers, some in the colony requested that they be denied entry. However, the colony’s charter only exclude one group of people—Roman Catholics, as mistrust and resentment still lingered as a result of the Protestant Reformation. There was also fear that Roman Catholics would undermine the authority of the British Royal government by aligning themselves with Papal authority, thereby threatening the success of the colonies. Oglethorpe allowed the Jewish immigrants to stay, and they helped to increase the success of Savannah.\(^{14}\) With merchant connections across the globe, London’s Jews correctly thought that their poor brethren would be able to expand trade opportunities, eventually being able to provide for themselves and increase trade networks throughout the New World.

Therefore, Jews who headed to the New World did so largely for financial reasons. Though appreciative of the religious freedom and equality they


received, their goal was to build and maintain wealth through trade and commerce. Jews in the New World were able to take advantage of their familial connections across the globe, allowing them to finally benefit from the dispersal of their people across Europe.\textsuperscript{15}

The biggest port cities that attracted Jewish settlement were Newport, New York, Savannah, Philadelphia, and Charleston.\textsuperscript{16} Jews who settled in the North faced more persecution than those who settled in the South. Because the Northern colonies were founded on religious principles and were havens for persecuted Protestants, they were not forgiving of heathens and dissenters, specifically Jews and Roman Catholics. The establishment of the Southern colonies, however, was based on the creation of wealth through the expansion of trade. The Carolina colony, was proprietary, as historian Walter Edgar notes, “While proprietors were interested in promoting the expansion of the empire, it is also quite evident that they were interested in making money.” Therefore, the more people who could settle there and begin trade, the more beneficial it would be for England. That environment was conducive to the settlement of those colonies, as people looking for the chance to make money immigrated there. Edgar goes on to say, “It is no wonder that the Lord’s Proprietors, most of whom


\textsuperscript{16} Faber, \textit{A Time for Planting}, p. 29.
were experienced in colonial affairs, expected not only that the colony would pay for whatever administrative costs would arise, but that it would provide them with a handsome return.”¹⁷

Charles Town, as it was originally named, was one such city in the Carolina colony that existed to increase trade and England’s wealth. Founded by eight Lords Proprietors, but settled under the ideals of one of them, Anthony Ashley Cooper and his secretary, John Locke, Carolina allowed settlers to enter regardless of their religious affiliations, though Roman Catholics still faced persecution. Jews who began to settle there in 1695 boasted of the religious tolerance they enjoyed, even gaining full civil rights in 1697. Simon Valentine was the first Jewish settler to gain civil rights under British rule in the colonies:

"GREEETING, KNOW Yee that Simon Valentine Mercht: an alien of ye Jewish Nation borne out of ye Crown of England hath Taken his oath of Allegiance to our Sovereigne Lord William ye Third over England Scott- land France and Ireland King &c Defender of ye faith and hath done every other thing wch by an act of assembly made att Charles Town in ye ninth Yeare of ye Reigne of our Sovereign Lord King Willm, &c, Anno Dom: One Thousand Six hundred ninety Six and Seven entituled an Act to make alien free of this pte of the Province and for granting Liberty of Conscience to all Protestants as one is required to do And is fully and effectually to all Intents Constructions and Purposes Qualified and Capacitated to have use and Enjoy all the rights Priviledges Powers and Immunities Given or Intended to bee given to any Alien then In habitant of South Carolina by the aforesd Act to Certifie wch I have hereunto Sett my hand and Caused the Publick Scale to be affixed at Charles Town the Twenty Sixth day of May Anno Dom. one

Thousd six hundred ninety and seaven. JOSEPH BLAKE [Lord and Proprietor].”18

Charles Town was founded in 1670, and from its inception allowed for religious diversity.19 Though Charles Town was not meant to be a refuge for religious dissenters, it did become a refuge for Jews. While tolerance did not extend to office holding, Jews were not harassed, nor were they persecuted.20 Jews were a people displaced by religious fervor and prejudice, and their ancestors’ troubles were not lost on this newer generation of Jews who were still feeling the effects of the Inquisition and lingering persecution throughout Europe and even in the Americas.

Initially, only a small number of Jews settled in Charles Town, but as the eighteenth century progressed more and more made it their home. Most Jews who originally settled in Savannah, Georgia left in 1741 when they feared that the Spanish might take over after Oglethorpe failed to capture St. Augustine.21 Those displaced overwhelmingly chose Charles Town, not only because of its proximity to Savannah, but also because of the religious liberty Charles Town’s


19 Edgar, South Carolina, p. 43.

20 Hagy, This Happy Land, p. 29.

21 Hagy, This Happy Land, p. 9.
Jews enjoyed. Almost all Jews chose to be involved with trade and merchant opportunities; only a small number endeavored in agricultural interests.

Charles Town offered Jews a chance to interact with their Gentile neighbors and be a part of society in a way that was previously impossible. Being able to participate fully in their city and in the lives of those around them began to impact them personally and religiously. Their unaltered faith was increasingly exposed to new ideas, and their lack of isolation from Christians taught them different religious practices that did not go unnoticed amongst the Jewish population. Over the course of many decades, traditions and religious beliefs slowly began to take a back seat to new experiences and complete inclusion in their community.

Formal organization could not occur for the Jewish community in Charles Town until 1749. Jewish historian, Barnett Elzas, believed that once the Jewish community from Savannah came to Charles Town, there were finally enough Jews to gather together to worship. Before this, its Jewish population was transient because of trade interests, so formal meetings rarely occurred, as they did not have the required prayer quorum of ten or more men (minyan).

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23 Elzas, The Jews of South Carolina, p. 33.
Once it formally organized, it spared no time in creating offices for their new congregation, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), or Holy Congregation House of God. KKBE was of the Sephardic tradition, which meant they came from the Iberian Peninsula. At this time, Charles Town’s Jewish residents could trace their ancestry from the Inquisition, as their relatives were forced to flee Spain. The members of KKBE mostly extended from Bevis Marks, a Sephardic synagogue in London, which was formed in the 1500s when Sephardic Jews emigrated from Spain to escape the fast spreading Inquisition, which had recently invaded Portugal. Because of KKBE’s close ties with Bevis Marks, members modeled their governing body after their “mother” synagogue. Since members of KKBE were familiar with the organizational structure of Bevis Marks, it made it easier to implement congregational rules that followed the same format, which in turn made it easier for the Jewish population to obey them. Their elected officials were known as the adjunta, and they were known for their strict adherence to the congregation’s procedures and rules—there was no room for change or dissention. Amongst the adjunta’s various roles, they were also in charge of selecting the parnass, who would serve as a de facto rabbi.24

A paramount concern was that Jews had a graveyard to properly care for their dead. Judaism had strict regulations for the treatment and burial of the

dead, so even before the community built a synagogue, they had to purchase a plot of land to serve as a cemetery. This did not occur until 1764, which was quite late since the earliest Jewish settler in Charles Town can be traced to 1695. The fact that the congregation did not purchase land until fifteen years after its founding was due to lack of funds. Before the existence of KKBE, Jewish settlers purchased private graveyards that belonged to families, but did not fall under the ownership or guardianship of the synagogue. One such cemetery was owned by Isaac Da Costa on Coming Street, which was later purchased by KKBE and became the main burial ground for the congregation.25

The founders and initial adjunta, Isaac da Costa, Moses Cohen, Joseph Tobias, Philip Hart, and Michael Lazarus, took seriously their role in enforcing Jewish law and custom. Violations would result in a monetary fine, and if the infraction was heinous enough, they could be excommunicated from the congregation, including being banned from burial in the congregation’s graveyard. The body was entirely Orthodox in its services and traditions, and practiced Judaism just as their fathers and their fathers before them practiced it.

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They met for morning prayers, observed the Sabbath, and kept kosher, as prescribed by the Torah. There was no deviation from religious traditions.

Charleston’s Jewish population expanded throughout the eighteenth century because of immigration to the city, one estimate put the total number of Jewish residents at 400 by 1791. More and more of the Jewish immigrants were coming from Eastern Europe and were of Ashkenazi descent. Their mode of worship was slightly different from the Sephardic tradition. One main difference, and a cause of much controversy, was the language in which the service was conducted. As KKBE was founded under the Sephardic tradition, the service was conducted in three languages: Hebrew, Ladino, and Spanish (Ladino is a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish). For the Ashkenazim this was troublesome, as they knew little or no Spanish or Ladino. There were also differences in congregational practices. Ashkenazi Jews began to feel that Sephardic Jews were more lenient on some matters, causing disagreements between members and the adjunta.

Solomon Breibart, KKBE’s official historian, believed that the Sephardic Jews parted ways with KKBE after the Ashkenazi population claimed that the

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26 Torah refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Sephardic Jews did not follow appropriate procedure in the synagogue. There are no extant records explaining why the split occurred, only general indications that differences in ritual and burial practices left some members angry. Breibart explained that the division lasted approximately nine years and the Sephardim reunited with the Ashkenazim between 1792-1793.\textsuperscript{28} This temporary split was the first for Congregation Beth Elohim, but it would not be its last. While disagreement centered on custom and practice, later the division would be generational: between the young and the old, between the children of the American Revolution and those who actually fought in the Revolution. Still, tensions remained. As the Ashkenazi population increased, so did the disputes between the members of KKBE. The ruling elite continued to be Sephardic, and was unwilling to try and accommodate its Ashkenazi brethren until the Early American period when Ashkenazi Jews dominated the adjuncta. Although the adjuncta now was mostly Ashkenazi, the congregation was still considered Sephardic, but the adjuncta ensured the rules and procedures were strictly enforced.

From its inception, Charles Town was known for its charitable giving and benevolence organizations. The city’s location as a port city allowed for a large indigent population and outbreaks of devastating illness and disease. These conditions taught the people early on how to care for one another in times of

\textsuperscript{28} Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, pp. 115, 189.
need or disaster.29 As early as 1710, the city provided schooling for its residents, but to the exclusion of Roman Catholics. In 1712, the city created an almshouse, and in 1734, St. Phillips Episcopal Church opened a workhouse for the mounting poor and sick population.30 Dozens of societies and organizations emerged, some religious in nature, such as the South Carolina Society that was run by French Huguenots, and there were secular societies, such as the Fellowship Society that was founded by artisans to help Charles Town’s mentally ill.31 But no organization was as loved as the Orphan House. It opened its doors in 1792, and each year on its anniversary (which was celebrated as October 1794), the city shut down and everyone was expected to join in the celebration of the charity’s good works, including the city’s Jewish population, demonstrating the city’s acceptance of the Jewish community.32

For all of their differences, Askenazim and Sephardic Jews believed that acts of loving-kindness were vital. The men of KKBE participated in the city’s


31 Bellows, Benevolence, pp. 16-17.

32 Bellows, Benevolence, pp. 121, 123.
many benevolent organizations.\textsuperscript{33} The most common groups for them to join were organizations that helped the sick and aged, as well as the local orphan house. But as their tenure continued in those groups, they realized the importance of making sure that Jewish residents, in particular, were assisted. In 1784, the men of KKBE founded the Hebrew Benevolent Society. Its purpose was to help Charleston’s needy Jewish population, fulfilling their duty to care for one another. It was the first organization of its kind in America.

After the displacements caused by the American Revolution, some of Charleston’s Jewish population suffered financial hardship. As an auxiliary to KKBE, the Benevolent Society sought to assist impoverished Jews throughout Charleston, preventing them from becoming a public burden.\textsuperscript{34} Their motto, “Charity Delivers From Death,” reveals some of their initial activities.\textsuperscript{35} In 1843, one man wrote, “The Israelites of Charleston deeming that the obligation of being charitable and benevolent comes from a high and sacred Source, determined to establish a society to relieve sorrow, to succour distress, to pour

\textsuperscript{33} Reznikoff and Engleman, \textit{The Jews of Charleston}, p. 94.


\textsuperscript{35} Tobias, \textit{The Hebrew Benevolent Society}, p. 4.
the balm of sympathy into the wounded heart, to give to the poor, and to clothe and feed the hungry and naked.”36

Many of the same men who were members of the Hebrew Benevolent Society were also active in the life of Charleston’s other benevolent associations, including the secular Orphan Society. But, seeing the need to protect Jewish orphans from Christian proselytes, they opened their own orphanage, The Hebrew Orphan Society. The Jewish community was concerned that Jewish children raised and taught by Christians would grow up to become Christians, abandoning their heritage and faith. It also points to a concern that would only grow more pronounced in the decades to come, the proselytizing of Jewish children. Before the Hebrew Orphan Society existed, Jewish orphans were mainly taken care of by Christians at the Orphan Society. Jewish children were forced to learn about Christianity and the deity of Jesus, and they had to go to church on Sundays.37 (Even as adults, the men who were members secular benevolent groups in Charleston were subject to conversion by their friends.) Seeing this pattern and fearful it would turn Jewish children into Christians, the


37 Bellows, Benevolence, pp. 132-133.
congregation of KKBE felt they knew the importance of founding Jewish centered organizations.38

These early institutions demonstrate the necessity for Jews to participate in acts of loving-kindness toward their fellow Jews, as well as their Christian neighbors who might also need assistance. These organizations showed Christians that Jews were engaged in the community and were also seeking what was best for their city and its residents. They did not want to be viewed as another entity in the city, but rather as active Charlestonians who were equally vested in the city’s welfare. There was growing concern among the Jewish population that although they participated in various city organizations and charities, they would always be seen as separate from the rest of the population because of their religious customs. Yet, there was a degree of self-imposed separation by the Jewish community because of its need to have their own orphan house. Though they wanted to be seen as the same as their neighbors, they did require that some organizations be specifically Jewish in order to ensure the preservation of their faith. This separation would become an issue for future generations of Charleston’s Jewish population who became divided over needing to fit-in to their country yet having the desire to hold on to their faith.

The decade from 1790 to 1800 was also a time of rapid growth in Charleston’s Jewish community. Membership increased by one hundred

38 Reznikoff and Engleman, The Jews of Charleston, p. 96.
persons, bringing the city’s Jewish population from 400 to 500 persons.\textsuperscript{39} Charleston, in fact, was home to the largest Jewish population in America. Its small rented meeting space could no longer hold the congregation. As membership grew, it became clear that a larger synagogue was necessary—perhaps a permanent home. KKBE rented space from the estate of Jacob Tobias, a deceased member of the congregation, whose father was Joseph Tobias, one of KKBE’s founders. Tobias owned a considerable amount of real estate and Beth Elohim purchased space from his estate, as well as three parcels of land along Hasell Street.\textsuperscript{40} Though the congregation would have land to build a new synagogue, it would not include space for a cemetery, forcing the members of KKBE to continue to use the land they purchased decades early on Coming Street as their official cemetery.

The members of KKBE gave generously to the building campaign and raised the majority of the funds needed to build the synagogue. Other congregations were also generous. Shearith Israel in New York City and Bevis Marks in London contributed to KKBE’s building fund, demonstrating the unity of the Jewish community at the time.\textsuperscript{41} In 1792 the construction of the new synagogue was underway and was completed just two years later. From the


\textsuperscript{40} Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{41} Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, p. 117.
exterior the structure looked like a church; there was nothing to identify it as a synagogue. They chose to construct an innocuous building that would coincide with the rest of the surrounding religious architecture. However, on the interior the synagogue was unmistakably Sephardic in design. It featured a central bema where the hazan\textsuperscript{42} conducted services. A balcony screened by lattice—so that men worshiping would not be distracted—sat the congregation’s women. Though women could not participate, their presence was expected. The new building was much like the Jews who worshipped there: outwardly they could not be identified as Jewish, but inside they were unmistakably so.

\textsuperscript{42} Hazan refers to a lay Jewish leader, similar to a parnass, without formal rabbinical training.
The American Revolution had a tremendous effect on America’s Jewish communities, particularly in Charleston. At the war’s end, many Jews successfully took advantage of business opportunities throughout the city. Their adherence to Jewish customs waned as their businesses expanded. The post-war era encouraged this form of leniency and Jews began to relax customs that interfered with their daily lives.43 Sunday Laws, for instance, had required

businesses to close in observance of the Christian Sabbath. This initially had a detrimental effect on Jewish business because they observed the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, and also closed their businesses then. Indeed, KKBE’s constitutions called for severe penalties if the Sabbath were broken, leaving Charleston’s Jews in a difficult position. Many of the younger Jews, however, did not follow the temple law. They opened their businesses on Saturday along with their Christian neighbors believing that they could still be Jewish without strictly adhering to the Sabbath law. They found the synagogue to be constraining and felt that the “rules” were not what was important. It was their belief that mattered, not their attendance at Sabbath services.

On the surface this was a congregational dispute. But in reality it was also an identity conflict. Being an “American” was of the utmost importance for the younger generation of Jews in Charleston. This eventually led to an “Americanization” of Judaism, which would later split the congregation in Charleston, and congregations across the country. The Jewish community’s active participation in the Revolution and their allegiance to America made them feel that they could follow their new home’s customs, even if it defied their religion. They saw their bravery in the war as an initiation into American

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44 Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p. 39.
culture.\textsuperscript{45} For the first generation after the Revolution, they felt divided between tradition and the emerging American culture. Their parents experienced the initial pull of change and acceptance, but the next generation felt an overwhelming desire to conform even more to the society around them.

The internal conflict among Jews in Charleston might have been colored by external tensions, though probably not severely aggravated by them. Jews who fought in the Revolution believed that they had proven themselves to be loyal by bravely serving and sacrificing along with other supporters of the cause. But in many places this loyalty was implicitly and explicitly questioned after the Revolution; Jews still faced prejudice, and were denied the same rights as Christians in several of the new states, most notably in Maryland. Maryland required that all elected officials be professing Christians, therefore, Maryland’s law forbade the election of its Jewish residents. Charleston’s Jewish population, however, enjoyed full citizenship early on. Solomon Briebart did not overstate the case when he noted the general equality of Charleston’s Jewish population. “By 1800, the members of Beth Elohim had established a synagogue, three cemeteries and a charitable organization. They lived in an environment free of the political, economic and religious restrictions of the Old World.” He continued, “They had fought alongside their Christian neighbors in wars, shared

\textsuperscript{45} Sarna, “The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews,” pp. 151-152.
with them the physical hazards of fires and hurricanes and participated with them in social and cultural activities.”

After George Washington became president, KKBE wrote to him swearing congregational allegiance to America. Its purpose was to make clear that those Jews were Americans through-and-through, and not merely Hebrews.

Various, extensive and invaluable are the benefits which your fellow-[c]itizens gave derived from the glorious revolution which, under Providence, you have been the principal instrument in effecting. To them it has secured the natural and inalienable rights of human nature— all the requisite privileges and immunities of freedom, and has placed within their reach peace, plenty, and the other blessings of good government. To the equal participation and enjoyment of all these, it has raised us from the state of political degradation and grievous oppression to which partial, narrow, and illiberal policy and intolerant bigotry has reduced us in almost every other part of the world. Peculiar and extraordinary reason have we, therefore, to be attached to the free and generous Constitution of our respective States, and to be indebted to you, whose heroic deeds contributed so much to their preservation and establishment. In a degree commensurate to its wise and enlarged plan, does the general government attract our regard, framed on principles consentaneous to those of the Constitution of the different States, and calculated by its energy to embrace and harmonize their various interests, combine their scattered powers, cement their union, and prolong their duration.

Washington responded with mild gratitude and assured the members that their religion was in no danger. Jewish historian Jonathan Sarna notes, “Jews

46 Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, p. 117.

realized that they could only win equality in popular eyes by demonstrating that being Jewish in no way conflicted with being American. They had to prove that non-Christians could still be loyal and devoted citizens.” Though Washington assured them of their freedom and that their faith would be protected, many state laws continued to deny Jews the right to vote, and threatened to impose discriminatory practices on their Jewish citizenry because they were continually considered outsiders. Jews’ refusal to take an allegiance to Jesus put them at odds with state governments, and that threatened their right to vote and hold office. Sarna notes how state laws could drastically contradict the U.S. Constitution by continuing to deny Jews their rights, “Theoretically, a Jew could be President of the United States, but ineligible to hold even the lowest office in Maryland.”

Jewish tradition and religious practice was hierarchical in nature. There were leaders who upheld the rules and who were viewed as superior to the rest of the Jewish community. Those traditions did not coincide with the ideals of American liberty where the notion of equality was developing. Because of centuries of persecution and discrimination, Jews created an insular culture that provided support for one another, but also placed heavy importance on following strict rules that governed the synagogue and nearly every aspect of their daily life. In the eighteenth century it was clear that although Charleston’s

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Christian community accepted its Jewish neighbors, the Jewish community was unsure how to react to that acceptance. There was fear that the horrible persecution they felt in Europe might extend across the Atlantic, or that the persecution many were still facing in other parts of America might find its way to Charleston. Even for those Jews who promoted laxities within the synagogue, there were some punishments that the adjunta could exact that would send chills up the spine of any member. The most severe punishment: excommunication. Though not frequently used, the threat was usually terrifying enough to elicit an apology and a life change. But as the nineteenth century began and progressed, and the adjunta’s pull on young people decreased, those threats increasingly rang hollow.

Judaism placed a premium on the preservation of culture and strong community. Being Jewish was not only about following the rules set forth by God in the Torah, but also by following rules created by men, the rabbinic code set forth in the Talmud.49 Judaism was not only a religion, but it was a race of people with a distinct heritage.50 In the Old Testament they were referred to as

49 Talmud refers to the rabbinic teachings that are meant to explain the Hebrew Bible.

50 The Jewish people were often seen as a separate entity, either as the Hebrew people, the Israelites, or the Jewish race. These terms continued throughout the nineteenth century, not only by members of the Jewish community, but by the Gentile community as well. In using the term race, I am adopting the language of the time. Modern scholars continue to debate the terms, see for example, Joseph B. Gittler, he defines Jews in America as an ethnic minority group. Joseph
the Hebrew people, a people set apart. As the new generation of American Jews emerged, they questioned the notion of a Jewish nation and instead replaced it with the idea of a Jewish faith and membership in the American nation. The synagogue’s elite strictly monitored all aspects of life and punished anyone who broke synagogue law, including other members of the adjunta. Although Jewish congregations changed the name of their rules and regulations to “constitutions” after the American Revolution, American liberty was not represented in its pages. Their rules of decorum remained firm, but to the younger Jewish community, the rules of the synagogue were seen as overly harsh and incompatible with the new Republic.

As a result of the Revolution Jews became more and more engulfed in the new Republican culture. Their loyalty was to America first, their faith second. Congregational authority saw the difficulty of maintaining control over its members and believed the best way to maintain control was to assert even more power over the community and more stringently enforce the temple’s constitution. But the attempt to control and keep the synagogue as the center for


53 Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p.144.
Jewish life backfired and created a new generation of Jews who were more concerned with their businesses and social concerns than their local congregation. They did not let the adjunta control them; many decided not to become members of the synagogue at all. Just a decade before this would have been unheard of, but in the wake of the Revolution it was becoming a more common occurrence. By refusing to join the congregation, they were free do as they pleased and without fear of reprisal.

The idea of a Jewish elite and rabbinical authority did not sit well with younger Jews who were raised in the burgeoning Republic. To them rabbinic authority was inconsistent with Republican values, and the notion of a ruling elite smacked of hubris in an age of equality. In the eighteenth century the colonists were under the control of the British Crown. They were seen as royal subjects and their loyalty was to the monarchy. For Jewish colonists, the idea of being subject to authority, whether a king or a religious elite, was not an issue or a source of discontent. Being subject to authority was normal, being the custom of the time. But in light of the Revolution and the years of the Early Republic the notion of authoritarian rule was looked down on.

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Though the synagogue tried to control the lives of Jews, it had no real authority to do so.\textsuperscript{56} The only authority was the power that the congregation allowed the adjunta to exert over them. As the need for a close-knit community dissolved, so did the hold that the adjunta had on the younger members of the congregation. Congregations across the country wrestled with issues of how to make Judaism fit into the framework of the Republic.\textsuperscript{57} Aspects of Judaism were in direct conflict with democracy and the notions of liberty and individuality. The congregation and its bylaws were created to keep Jews in community with one another — it was the only way they could survive in Europe as they dealt with persecution. Now in the face of individual freedoms the entire structure of the synagogue community would have to be overhauled, a challenge that much of the older ruling elite did not want to face.

One of the biggest causes of debate amongst Jews was intermarriage with Christians. According to the congregation’s constitution members who chose to marry Gentiles were excommunicated. They were forced to give up burial rights in the congregation’s cemetery and found themselves rejected by those closest to them, including their relatives. Jewish acceptance in all aspects of Charleston’s society made it easy for them to integrate and develop deep relationships outside


\textsuperscript{57} Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, p. 42.
of the synagogue. Such connections drove business deals, benevolence, cooperation in government activities, and frequently resulted in marriage between Jews and Gentiles. Nearly 29% of Jews nationally in the Early Republican period married outside their faith, compared to only 10-15% during the Colonial period.\textsuperscript{58} Once married to a Gentile, the synagogue community turned its back on them, essentially forcing them to become closer to Christians, with some even converting.

Congregations throughout America faced additional challenges as more of its members became acculturated into society. Some religious laws were completely abandoned, even by those who strictly practiced other aspects of Judaism. Jewish custom required its practitioners to keep Kosher and for its women to use the mikveh bath for ritual cleaning (after a woman’s menstrual period). It was the synagogues responsibility to hire the shohot (the ritual slaughterer or kosher butcher) and he was paid out of the congregational funds. Therefore, the community was monitored by the temple’s officials to ensure members kept the Torah Laws. By the late 1700s, these two practices—keeping kosher and the use of the mikveh bath, appear to have been abandoned by many, if not most of, the Jewish community. Upon visiting a synagogue in Philadelphia

\textsuperscript{58} Sarna, American Judaism, pp. 27, 44.
in 1844, a rabbi commented that not one female made use of the bath in 49 years.\textsuperscript{59}

The new generation of Jewish Americans was transforming what it meant to be Jewish. To them it would not be tradition and custom or even “law” that would define their faith. They would not allow the Jewish community to determine if they were Jewish, but would define their faith on their own terms. Many outward expressions of Judaism began to be forsaken by American Jews who saw them as practices that would continue to cause them to be seen as the “other.” To them many outward Jewish customs that alienated them from the majority population; younger Jews could justify abandoning those customs while still claiming to be Jewish. Customs and rabbinic practices were just another tradition that separated them from American culture. This became a familiar reason to relinquish religious practices—one could still be Jewish without participating in certain customs, traditions, and observances.

Young Americans generally began to rebel against the notion of staying close to home. This generation moved far away from home, leaving behind their families and the authority of their fathers. According to historian Joyce Appleby, “Where their [new generation] fathers and grandfathers had participated in the Revolution that created the nation, these men personalized the concept of independence, giving it a social and psychological resonance. The political

\textsuperscript{59} Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, p. 51.
independence that endowed most white men with the privileges of citizenship merged imperceptibly in popular sentiments with the right for each to blaze his own trail.”60 Because of this movement away from family and religious influence, another historian Scott E. Casper, points out the tremendous importance that biography played in the formation of character among young men during this time period. Biographers praised individualism, but took great care to influence their young readers to acts of morality and good works even throughout their quest for independence.61 Because these young men were no longer at home under the influence of their parents and religious leaders, it was imperative that they received these moral lessons in some way, biography helped to impart those lessons now that they were out of reach of their family and religious institutions.

Synagogue leaders faced this same challenge as many of Charleston’s Jews began to live wherever they wanted, which included living far from the nearest synagogue community. The ruling group could not enforce rules and regulations from a great distance, nor could it charge fines or membership dues to those who lived far away. Moving away from the synagogue community was another way of asserting freedom in America. In the Old World a Jewish family would never consider moving to a town or area without a synagogue or

60 Appleby, Inheriting the Revolution, p. 173.

established Jewish community, but in America it was a fairly common occurrence. This further demonstrated that the Jewish community, which was once so crucial to the survival of Judaism across centuries of persecution, was no longer necessary. Historian Eli Faber wrote, “While mobility and unrestricted settlement interfered with efforts to reconstitute the traditional European Jewish community in the English colonies, it was the complete lack of need for such a community that undermined it.”

The decades after the American Revolution were a time of great change and transition. What it meant to be an American was still being decided and formed as a new system of government was tested. Initially, the wealthy elite tried to maintain control by creating qualifications for voting that denied average white males the right to participate. The elite still believed that their wealth and education made them the only ideal candidates for public office. Money and education gave these individuals the proper perspective to look out for the best interest of the country. Yet over time the American Revolution drastically changed the notion of citizenship and the ability for men to participate in the government. Individuals who were once denied the privilege to vote or participate in politics were empowered to elect representatives, debate their opinions, and even run for elected office, and in doing so they changed the

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62 Faber, A Time for Planting, p. 82.

political landscape in America. By 1830 or so, the democratic impulse symbolized by Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson forever changed the political landscape. The common man had come to define what it meant to be an American. The post-revolutionary generations were not necessarily wealthy or well educated, but they were idealists who believed they had a chance to make something of themselves and that this new form of government would provide that chance. There was a clash between the older citizens who fought in the war and sacrificed for the new country and the young generation who was benefitting from that sacrifice.

The American Revolution’s impact on the nation’s Jewish population was just as pronounced. From their first arrival until the late eighteenth century, Jewish life carried on much the way it did for Jews in Amsterdam and England. They devoted their lives to studying the Old Testament and Talmud and to following Jewish laws and customs. Their faith was not altered; the way they practiced did not change. But the American Revolution changed the fate of American Judaism. A once static religion saw modifications that were almost unavoidable in the new Republic. While the older ruling elite in the synagogue fought those changes, the younger generation of Jews in Charleston welcomed the notion of equality and democracy and chose to transform their Jewish faith.

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64 Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution*, p. 29.
As the nation was formed and its citizenry developed an identity, the Jewish communities’ problems and clashes mirrored the disputes between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians. Members of the old guard were not willing to change and defer to the younger, and in their minds, less qualified, just as the old adjunta was not willing to hear from the younger members of the Jewish community. Young Jews thus tried to learn what it meant to be an American, but also, more specifically, an American Jew.

The American Revolution was the greatest single influence on the transformation of American Judaism. Through the course of the Revolution and in the decades following, Jews in America experienced unparalleled freedom in their practice of Judaism—both in the way they practiced their faith, and how society enabled them to practice it. As the nineteenth century began, the younger Jews in Charleston were especially focused on the freedom of the new Republic. Where they saw contradictions in their faith and American society, they chose the latter. They did not accept the full authority of their religious leaders. Society also allowed them to express religious freedoms. They were guaranteed their rights, and because of this they chose to be more lax in their practice of their faith. Freedom to go into any profession of their choice, being allowed to live wherever they liked, the ability to speak out against their religious leaders, and not being persecuted by the government gave them the
opportunity to have a life outside of Judaism that was inclusive of the world around them. They were becoming fully integrated into society.\textsuperscript{65}

As the 1820s approached, the religious community in Charleston was experiencing incredible change. The synagogue was dividing and there was little hope in sight of reconciliation. Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews continued to argue over the way in which the service was conducted. By the nineteenth century, KKBE was overwhelmingly filled with Jews from Eastern Europe, which continued to cause a rift. The younger generation in the synagogue became more works and business oriented, causing them to take part in acts of loving-kindness, but declining membership in the synagogue. America was wreaking havoc on Judaism, and two camps emerged: those in favor of reforms, and those who clung to Orthodoxy.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REFORMED SOCIETY OF ISRAELITES

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the congregation of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim remained tight-knit. It was still the only Jewish congregation in Charleston (as enforced by the temple’s constitution), and it afforded little freedom to its members. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Eastern European immigrants began to dominate the membership at KKBE, but the congregation’s rules and liturgy remained Sephardic. Synagogues throughout the country saw a decline in membership and population, but KKBE became the only congregation to expand in the first two decades of the 1800s. Charleston’s economy was strong after the American Revolution—making it an ideal home for recent immigrants. The city’s notoriety for tolerance also greatly contributed to the growth of the congregation. By 1820, Charleston continued to have the largest Jewish population in America. It became the center of Jewish culture, much like Amsterdam had been in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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During the first decades of the nineteenth century issues emerged regarding the mode of worship at Beth Elohim. Out of tradition dating back to the congregation’s founding, the constitution for the synagogue demanded that services be held in the Minhag-Sephardic ritual, which left the overwhelming majority of congregants unable to understand what was taking place. The services were conducted in only Hebrew, Ladino, and Spanish—English was strictly prohibited. For Jews born in America this rule effectively kept them from worshipping. There was little if any education in Hebrew in Charleston or any other American city. Also, the “new” immigrants were Ashkenazim, mostly from Germany. Though many of them were trained in Hebrew, cultural distinctions and dialects greatly hindered their understanding of the liturgy. They, like American-born Jews, did not know Ladino or Spanish. Inability to comprehend the worship service created a division between the older members of the congregation and the younger American born Jews and recent émigrés. Though there appeared to be a degree of homogeneity, it was only because those who did not understand memorized the services, creating the illusion of uniformity and comprehension. That homogeneity was also forced—all of Charleston’s Jews were required to worship together—because the outsiders, so to speak, were not permitted to create a new synagogue.67

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67 Constitution of KKBE, 1820, Rule VIII.
The Jewish residents of Charleston were widely accepted and incorporated into the city. The men were members of fraternal organizations and their wives joined Christian women in charity work. It was also common for Jews and Christians to marry, but this also meant that one of the spouses would cede their faith. Typically, the Jewish spouse discontinued practicing and allowed the Christian spouse to raise the children in a Christian home. But Jews rarely converted to Christianity; they just stopped practicing Judaism. Although conversion to Christianity was rare, when it did happen it was because KKBE’s constitution required anyone who married outside the faith to be excommunicated. They, therefore, forfeited their right to be buried in Beth Elohim’s cemetery. Those who chose to marry outside of Judaism were shunned from the Jewish community. Although Charleston’s Jewish residents got along with the Christian residents, there was a feeling of betrayal when Jews gave up their faith for Christian spouses.

It was also common for the younger generation, who were most often born in America, to be less active in the synagogue. In previous generations, when Jews were in Europe, there was no choice but to remain with their

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70 Constitution of KKBE, 1820, Rule XXIV.
They were persecuted and forced to live apart from everyone else. That established tight bonds centered on their faith and created a unity that would not have existed had they been accepted in their homelands. Because of Jewish acceptance in Charleston, the younger generation did not have that bond with their fellow Jews. Such a dynamic did not mean that they necessarily favored Christian friends or business partners; it just meant that they could have Christian friends and business partners. The language barriers that existed in the synagogue and acceptance by the community of Charleston as a whole led younger Jews to be less active in the synagogue. Some never attended Sabbath services, even being absent on High Holy Days.\(^7\)

Jewish acceptance into society offered the chance for acculturation, and more opportunities for acculturation led to further acceptance. Some historians, including Jacob R. Marcus, argue that Charleston’s Jewish population did not acculturate at all, that they actually set a course for the destruction of their faith. He asserts that it occurs when a culture or a religion is retained while at the same time being accepted in society. Marcus insists that this is not what happened in Charleston. Because Jews were intermarrying and giving up their faith, or discontinued the practice of it, Marcus argues what occurred in Charleston was

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\(^7\) High Holy Days refers to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover.
not in fact acculturation at all, but rather the Jews “surrendering” their heritage. However, he goes too far by asserting that the younger generation of Jews simply “surrendered” their faith. Through their participation in benevolence organizations, business relationships, friendships, and daily interactions, the Jews of Charleston were accepted, and therefore began to borrow the customs of the majority of Charleston’s society—they were not surrendering, they were simply trying to figure out how their culture and religion fit into their community of acceptance. Acculturation created an intense rift between the older and younger congregants.

The older members, many of whom were foreign-born and veterans of the American Revolution, had first-hand knowledge of the struggles that Jews went through and the high cost of the freedoms that they now all enjoyed. They fought for Jews to be able to freely practice their faith, a point of particular tension because to the older generation, the younger generation seemed so eager to leave their religion to marry goyim (non-Jews). American-born Jews knew nothing of the Inquisition and pogroms that their ancestors escaped in Europe. This tension between generations encouraged many young Jews to drift from their religious obligations and instead take part only in their Jewish civic

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responsibilities. They would be active in the Hebrew Orphan Society, for instance, but would often neglect to buy a seat on the High Holy Days.⁷³

Though acculturation was dangerous to Judaism, a bigger dynamic soon threatened American Jews. Beginning in the early 1790s, the Second Great Awakening swept across America and led to revivals and a renewed sense of missionary zeal. The goal of these missionaries was not to convert peoples from distant lands, but to convert their neighbors, including their Jewish ones. In fact, societies were created with the explicit purpose of converting Jews. In Charleston, assimilation only compounded the missionary threat.⁷⁴ The lack-luster observance of Judaism by its younger members and the lack of Jewish instruction made them easy targets for missionaries. Or so it seemed to many fearful at the time.

Perhaps the biggest perceived threat was in the form of a man named Joseph Samuel Christian Frederick Frey. He was by far the most famous missionary to the Jews because he was once Jewish; he had converted to

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Christianity at the age of 27. He helped start the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews and then, seven years later, was forced to leave London because he was accused of seducing a recent convert. Coming to New York in 1816, Frey quickly drew attention to his cause, which led to the formation of America’s first societies focused on converting Jews, the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews (ASMCJ). Jonathan Sarna explains the reaction of American Jews: “American Jews understandably took fright. They feared for their survival. Being small in number (about 3,000), they could ill afford to lose adherents to the majority faith.” He posits that some of the fear that the Jews felt stemmed from past experiences of religious persecution, namely the Spanish Inquisition.75

Frey traveled along the eastern seaboard raising money for his efforts and started auxiliaries across the country. Because he was once Jewish his speeches were highly regarded. His knowledge and insights regarding Jews were indispensible to the cause of converting them.76 Frey’s escapades were regularly retold in The Charleston Times; he even visited Charleston in 1823 as a

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representative for the ASMCJ.\textsuperscript{77} These auxiliaries existed to raise money to help support the efforts of converting Jews. The overall goal was conversion, but most of the people in the offshoots of the ASMCJ had never before even seen a Jewish person. As Lorman Ratner noted, “in most cases the only information members had about the Jews, aside from Biblical references, came from the monthly publication of the American Jews Society [ASMCJ], ‘Israel’s Advocate.’”\textsuperscript{78}

For a time their missionary activity dissipated, but in the 1830s, as more and more Christians hoped for the Second Coming of Jesus, the ASMCJ redoubled its efforts. Also, more Jewish immigrants came to America in the 1830s. The Jewish population was no longer stagnant and many Christians believed that the increasing number of Jews was the perfect opportunity to renew efforts to convert them. Ratner continued, “Thus, for the first time, the number of potential converts already in America was significant.” This time there were additional societies not associated with the ASMCJ who desired to

\textsuperscript{77} Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby}, pp. 115-116.

convert the Jewish people. Nationally, the Episcopal Church and the Baptist Church launched their own efforts to reach them.\textsuperscript{79}

The Jewish response to these missionaries was frankly incredible. Jonathan Sarna explains, “The symbolic importance of the missionary battle explains the magnitude of the Jewish response.” Numerous publications started because of the Christian threat, including The Occident and American Jewish Advocate (The Occident), which became one of the most important periodicals for Jewish Americans. The monthly magazine’s motto was, “To learn and to teach, to observe and to do.” Jews from across the country read the Philadelphia-based publication and articles regarding Jewish reactions to missionary pressure frequently graced its pages. Started by Isaac Leeser in 1843, The Occident came out just months after the ASMCJ produced The Jewish Chronicle.\textsuperscript{80}

The Occident proved useful in its efforts to equip Jews with ways to counter the Christian threat. Frequently featuring articles that pointed to inconsistencies in Christianity and their New Testament documents, The Occident taught Jews throughout the country about Christian claims and how to counter them. But Christian missionaries saw weaknesses in the Jewish community and their lack of communication between synagogues and organizations. Christians

\textsuperscript{79} Ratner, “Conversion of the Jews and Pre-Civil War Reform,” pp.49-51, quotation from p. 49.

capitalized on the disorganization of American Judaism, but that tactic would not work forever. With the success of The Occident, independent Jewish communities had a resource that kept them informed about what was going on in congregations across the country.\footnote{Sarna, “The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth Century Christian Missions,” pp. 48-49.}

The fear of Christian missionaries was not temporal, but lasted for decades. From the time Frey came to America in 1816 until the Civil War, Jews continually felt threatened by missionaries. Even sending Jewish children to traditional school was seen as endangering their religious life. In December 1843, Isaac Leeser warned Jewish parents in The Occident that by sending their children to schools taught by Christians they were opening the door to conversion. “We cannot shut our eyes to the dangerous tendency of placing Jewish children under the exclusive care of Gentile teachers,” Leeser wrote. Jews feared the influence that their children’s teachers had over them and what they were being taught. To the parents, their children’s young minds were easily manipulated and could fall victim to their teachers. Explained Leeser, “We are in great error if we suppose that Christian teachers do not endeavor to influence actively the sentiments of their Jewish pupil. There are some, at least, who take especial pains to warp the mind and to implant the peculiar tenets of Christianity
Leeser believed that the best way to combat this fear was to better educate Jewish youth and start early on, gradually introducing them to the Jewish faith. He, together with other Jews, saw a weakness in Jewish education that left children as easy targets for Christians.

In reality, pressure from missionaries actually led Jews who had lapsed in their faith to a renewed vigor in their religion—but in a new form. On November 21, 1824, a group of Jewish men met to discuss how they could salvage their ancient faith, and how they could bring renewed life into what seemed like a dying religion. How could they keep young Jewish men in the synagogue? How could Judaism “combat” Christian missionaries and save Jewish youth from conversion? How could Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim make their services more in tune with American principles? What could be done so that everyone who attended Sabbath and holiday services understood what was being said? These big questions required a response from the leadership of KKBE, the adjunta.

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The group who tried to work for these changes consisted of thirty-eight men, and soon they petitioned the adjunta. Their petition clearly outlined their desired changes and the purpose behind them. In December a final group of forty-seven men came together and signed the petition with the hope of creating meaningful change: “We wish not to overthow, but to rebuild; we wish not to destroy, but to reform and revise the evils complained of; we wish not to abandon the institutions of Moses, but to understand and observe them; in fine, we wish to worship God, not as slaves of bigotry and priestcraft, but as the enlightened descendants of the chosen race [italics in original].”

Reformers did not want to harm Judaism but to understand it. Their hope was to return the religion to its “true” form, believing that their proposals would save their faith. It is unlikely that the adjunta even read the petition, but the petitioners’ purpose was clear. The adjunta, citing the rules of KKBE’s 1820 Constitution, would not grant its meeting to discuss change. According to the constitution, these men had no authority to request a meeting to discuss their petition. Those who submitted the petition did not give up. They met again to discuss their next step, and after careful consideration, forty-two of them agreed to meet regularly to discuss their ideas aimed at saving their Jewish faith by

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advocating change. They called themselves the Reformed Society of Israelites (RSI), and they adopted a constitution of their own. The RSI’s main purpose was to sustain Judaism rather than watch it dissolve in the pressures of the new nation. Their intent was not to defect from Beth Elohim but to enact “alterations and improvements in the present mode of Worship as would tend to perpetuate pure Judaism [italics mine].”\textsuperscript{86} They believed the Jewish faith did not focus around rules and regulations, but rather worship and attention to benevolence as specifically called for in the Tanakh.\textsuperscript{87}

It is important to note that the members of the RSI represented a much different demographic than the leadership at KKBE. These men were born in America; they were, on the whole, significantly younger than the adjunta. While the adjunta was wealthy, the petitioners were of a more meager economic standing.\textsuperscript{88} Other than age and social status it should be stressed that the majority of the petitioners were lapsed members; three were excommunicated because they married outside the faith.\textsuperscript{89} Rule XXIV in the Constitution of 1820 states, “Any person or persons being married contrary to the Mosaical Law, or renouncing his or their religion, shall themselves and their issue, never be

\textsuperscript{86} Elzas, \textit{The Reformed Society of Israelites}, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{87} Tanakh refers to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

\textsuperscript{88} Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby of Charleston}, p. 120. Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, p. 57.

\textsuperscript{89} Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby of Charleston}, p. 119. Hagy, \textit{This Happy Land}, p. 132.
recognized members of the Congregation; and should such person or persons
die, they call not be buried within the walls of the Beth-Hiam.”

Much of the RSI’s petition, and then its later constitution, was a reflection of the young men’s situations. They had personal stakes in the success of their propositions. As men who could attest from their own experiences, their faith was experiencing “a gradual decay.” They found KKBE restrictive. And because they were children of the Revolution, they believed its practices, rules and structure were in opposition to the emerging culture of America. Though the adjunta changed the name of KKBE’s bylaws to its “constitution,” the revision did not mean KKBE was in line with republican and emerging democratic ideals. It was the petitioners who were swept up in American zeal, trying to make their faith adjust to the new society in which they lived.

The RSI’s greatest concern was making the religious services intelligible for all who attended. As more of the members of KKBE were American born and the older population was passing away, fewer members understood their form of worship. The constitution required that the service be conducted in the Minhag-Sephardic tradition, which meant that Hebrew, Ladino, and Spanish were the only languages permitted during the service. At this time, the majority of

90 Constitution of KKBE, 1820, Rule XXIV.
91 Elzas, The Reformed Society of Israelites, p. 44.
92 Constitution of KKBE, 1820, Rule I.
members at KKBE were from Eastern Europe, they were not Sephardic, and the ritual was quite different than what they knew. Those born in America had an even greater disadvantage, as there were not any qualified Hebrew instructors in Charleston. America did not welcome its first rabbi until 1840. Before 1840 congregations had hazans (hasans) who were knowledgeable lay leaders but without formal training. RSI’s reform idea was distinctly American because of the situation that most congregations across the country, including Charleston, were facing. They needed a way to worship that would include both the Sephardic and the Ashkenazim.

As the RSI noted in the original petition, many members did not know Hebrew and therefore have been unable “to become enlightened in the principles of Judaism.” That ignorance created half-hearted adherents who did not know “the beauty of religion” and the knowledge of the God they worship. They wanted “the Hasan, or reader, to repeat in English such part of the Hebrew prayers as may be deemed necessary, it is confidently believed that the congregation generally would be more forcibly impressed with the necessity of Divine worship.”93 They also sought to shorten the service by removing “superfluous parts.” The service could last for five hours, and that even at that

length worshipers were still pressed for time to do all that tradition required.\textsuperscript{94} The RSI believed that by keeping only the core content, the hazan could go slowly, reading in both Hebrew and English, and teach the congregation. The RSI especially wanted to eliminate rabbinical doctrines, mainly the Talmud. They saw them as works of man, not of God, and therefore not to be included with the Laws of Moses, the Torah. At this time, rabbinical law was as important as the Tanakh.\textsuperscript{95} This point would later cause enormous controversy, as the Reformed Society of Israelites suggested the removal of a great portion of Judaism’s religious tradition. The removal of some rabbinical doctrine meant questioning thousands of years of Jewish belief and tradition, but to the Reformers, it was deemed necessary in the wake of missionary fervor and religious backsliding.

The RSI’s last major request was to include a sermon in the service as a way to educate and instruct.

According to the present mode or reading the Parasa, it affords to the hearer neither instruction nor \textit{entertainment}, unless he be competent to read as well as comprehend the Hebrew language. But if, \textit{like all other ministers}, our reader would make a chapter or verse the subject of an English discourse once a week, at the expiration of the year the people would, at all events, know something of that religion which at present they so little regard [italics mine].\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} Hagy, \textit{This Happy Land}, p. 130.

\textsuperscript{95} Elzas, \textit{The Reformed Society of Israelites}, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{96} Elzas, \textit{The Reformed Society of Israelites}, p. 50.
The Reformers truly believed that these modifications to the liturgy at Beth Elohim would serve to re-engage those who defected or abandoned Judaism. Their hope was that through these changes younger Jews would finally see how important and exceptional their religion was, and they would become devoted and active worshipers. The members of the RSI were uniquely qualified to make such claims, as they fell into the group of Jews who were disengaged in the practice of their faith.

Initially the Reformed Society of Israelites was quite successful. Even more Jews from KKBE joined their ranks. They met monthly for the purpose of discussing their proposed modifications. Though initially there was not a society president, Isaac Harby took on that role and addressed the group at its anniversary celebration. Harby was excited by their growth and still eager to see change at KKBE, and again he described the desired changes he and the other members sought.

[We] call upon the good and the wise and the pious, out of this society, to aid us in our virtuous exertions—to open the door to reason—to welcome, with the welcome of brethren, those who desire to add dignity to their religion. This can only be done by the union of candour and patience and fortitude. Once done, we ask no more... This is the course of things which every politic, every moderate man must prefer to the most successful schism.

Our desire is to yield everything to the feelings of the truly pious Israelite; to take away everything that might excite the disgust of the well-informed Israelite. To throw way rabbinical interpolations; to avoid useless repetitions; to read or chaunt with solemnity; to recite such portions of the Pentateuch and the prophets... in the original Hebrew, but to follow such selections with a translation in English, and a lecture or discourse upon the
law, explanatory in its meaning, edifying the young, gratifying the old, and instructive to every age and class of society [italics mine].

And again he was clear that their purpose was not to divide the congregation; the hope was for revision that would lead to reconciliation.

Hoped for change seemed to stem from issues strictly related to Judaism. To the average person at the time, it looked like these ideas were solely to correct the defects of the Jewish faith and to increase understanding in order to win back wayward brethren. While on the surface that might appear to be the case, these modifications were created not by an internal push for renewal because of a powerful external force: America’s Christian influence. Not merely just observing how Christians conducted their services, but also by their doctrines. Observing the tactics and effects of the Second Great Awakening around them, they saw how sermons increased understanding, and how using a vernacular language that everyone understood led to “proper” worship—for instance, English in Christian services rather than using Greek texts or solely relying on Latin. These changes reflected the Christian society in which they lived, even if

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it was not the emulation of Christianity that they hoped for but rather a new way to demonstrate the uniqueness of Judaism.100

The proposed reforms were oddly defensive and even ironic. As a result of the Second Great Awakening, Christian missionary societies sprang up with the intent of converting Jews. The motive behind most of the missionary groups was millennial—to bring on the second coming of Christ.101 Jews in Charleston felt besieged by missionary advances because they were not equipped to deal with them, especially in regards to the Jewish youth. Though Charleston had the largest Jewish population in America through the 1820s, many if not most Jews did not have any formal education in Judaism, hence the petition for English services. The fear was that without sound knowledge of Judaism and a pride for their faith, children especially would be perfect targets for missionaries. In their petition to the adjunta at KKBE, the Society wrote, “It is not every one who has the means, and many have not the times, to aquire a knowledge of the Hebrew language, and consequently to become enlightened in the principles of Judaism; what then is the course pursued in all religious societies for the purpose of


disseminating the peculiar tenets of their faith among the poor and uninformed? [italics mine]”

In fact, it was because Jewish members of society were so integrated into Charleston’s culture they were much easier targets than Jews elsewhere. Across the country Jews typically were accepted by their communities, but in many of the larger cities such as New York and Philadelphia, because Jews tended to live together, there was still a palpable degree of separation.

However, a lack of dependence upon one another in Charleston, which grew stronger the longer they were in America, as well as their acceptance within Charleston society, created a sense of unprecedented freedom that led many to abandon their ancient practices and readily compromise their religion in the name of republicanism and “progress.” They still wanted to be Jewish, otherwise they would not have petitioned the adjunta, but their new circumstances shaped their ideas and attitudes about Jewish practice. These Reformers considered themselves to be Americans who happened to be Jewish. One of their goals was to distinguish Judaism as a religion rather than treating Jewish identity as a race. They wanted to make sure Christian America knew

102 Elzas, Reformed Society of Israelites, p. 45.

103 Reznikoff and Engleman, The Jews of Charleston, p. 79.

their allegiance was to their country, not to their religion.\footnote{Hagy, \textit{This Happy Land}, p. 144.} Jews along with Roman Catholics were forced to prove where their allegiance stood— that neither their faith nor a religious leader thousands of miles away could stir them from supporting their new country, and ultimately what some hoped would become their stronger faith—American democracy. There was a fear among the dominant Protestant population that minority religious groups, such as Jews, and especially Catholics, would turn their allegiance to another, thereby undermining the democratic system.\footnote{Stephen A. Brighton, “Degrees of Alienation: The Material Evidence of the Irish and Irish American Experience, 1850-1910,” \textit{Historical Archeology}, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2008): p. 134, accessed on July 9, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25617533.} Gary Phillip Zola points out that Charleston’s Jewish population was so acutely aware of these aspersions, that when Jews in Charleston were accused of voting misconduct, “eighty-four of the city’s Israelites signed a public proclamation denying the charge.”\footnote{Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby}, p. 117.}

Christians in general, and the missionary societies specifically, had an enormous number of Bibles to give away, while few Jews owned any form of scripture. This was even true of Isaac Harby, who did not own a copy of the Talmud, but did own a Christian Bible.\footnote{Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby}, pp. 11-12.} Many of these Bibles were given to Jews in an attempt to convert them and eventually they found their way into
Jewish schools when they could not afford copies of their own religious texts. The lack of Jewish texts made Jewish adults, and especially their children, ill-equipped to discuss and properly defend their faith, leaving Jewish parents fearful of sending their children to schools run by Christians. Jewish parents were afraid that their children would be coerced into Christianity. The Reformed Society of Israelites suggested change to the liturgy to combat missionaries, and in so doing they removed doctrine that could further the Christian mission.

Judaism’s biblical law, frequently called the Law of Moses, and Rabbinical Law, in the Talmud, were viewed as equally important and strictly adhered to. The strongest of the Rabbinical Laws was known as the Maimonidean Creed. It consisted of thirteen beliefs based on the Old Testament, but the Reformed Society of Israelites made alterations. The doctrines they removed most closely related to Christianity; the thirteen beliefs were turned into ten under the rule of the RSI. They removed the idea of a coming of a Messiah, the return of the Jews to Palestine/Jerusalem, and the resurrection of the dead.

The Maimonidean Creed stated that a Messiah would come to rescue and save the Jewish people. Christians claimed that he already came, and his name was Jesus. To counter this Christian claim, and in a way discredit Christianity, Reformers reinterpreted the Creed by saying that there was no actual person coming to save the Jewish people. There was no Messiah. Their claim was that the Jewish people, as a whole, were the Messiah. This took away the need for a
person to save the Jewish people from tyranny even as it removed the possibility of the deity of Jesus. What better way to fight off Christian missionaries than to disprove the basis of their religion? Since American Jews were no longer in danger or in need of rescue, the doctrine of a savior was no longer relevant. Reform Jews now maintained that the term “Messiah” referred not to a person at all, but rather to a time of peace. The Reform position then came to mean that there would eventually be a Messianic time of peace for all. The belief morphed from the personal Messiah to a universal age of enlightenment.109

The Second Great Awakening was driven largely by the millennial impulse: that the second coming was at hand. The majority of Christians attempting to convert Jews were doing so to hasten Christ’s return.110 If Jews denied the existence of an actual savior then they could more easily disprove Christ’s second coming because he never “came” in the first place. If the messiah was not actually an individual, then Christianity at its core would be entirely false. Jesus, therefore, could not possibly be the savior and Jews would no longer have to prove that their Messiah would be coming. It discredited Christianity and solved the problem of waiting on the much-anticipated Jewish savior. The Reform claim took weight away from many of the arguments that missionaries

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110 Ratner, “Conversion of the Jews,” p. 44.
presented and therefore would insure that no Jews “fell for” their tricks to convert them.

The second part of the Maimonidean Creed that reformers revised was the bodily resurrection. Debate on this issue was not new. Anyone familiar with ancient Judaism is aware of the quarrels over this issue. It is clear, though, that at this point in time the issue was not merely over the clarity of Old Testament texts, but over ways to differentiate themselves from Christians. Christians talked about the reality of bodily resurrection; their proof was that Jesus rose from the dead. The Reformers, therefore, declared that a physical resurrection from the dead was impossible.

Another long held belief was that the Jewish people would reinhabit the nation of Israel; the Jews would be restored to Palestine and Zion would be their home. Christian missionaries believed that they could hasten the return of Jesus by helping the Jews return to Palestine. If Jews could not be converted to Christianity, then Christians could at least help send them to Palestine. Many Christians felt it was their duty to hurry along God’s plan and help usher in the millennium. The Reformed Society of Israelites denied that they needed to “go back” to Palestine. With the freedoms they had in America, reformers declared their physical return to Palestine unnecessary.

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In a speech given to the Reformed Society of Israelites in November of 1825, Isaac Harby had this to say about Jewish settlement in America:

Where is he that does not feel a glow of honest exultation, when he hears himself called an American? What that does not offer praise and thanksgiving to Providence, for the contrast of what man is in these United States, and what he is under almost every other government? we are willing to repose in the belief, that America truly is the land of promise spoken of in our ancient Scriptures; that it is the region to which the children of Israel, if they are wise, will hasten to come. Not to some stony desert, or marshy land, or inhospitable clime, do we invite them. But, be the promised land what it may; whether new Jerusalem mean old Judea, renovated and blessed by the munificence of heaven; or whether with Chrysostom, we take it to signify the city of God, happiness hereafter; yet we are contended, while we remain on earth in this temporal state, to live in America; to share the blessing of liberty; to partake of, and to add to her political happiness, her power, and her glory.112

Just as their rationale to exclude the coming of a messiah— that neither a first coming (for Jews) or a second one (for Christians) was necessary— Reformers saw America as their true home, one in which they faced little persecution. They had no need to return Palestine in order to have peace because peace was afforded to them in America. Declaring America as a Jewish homeland deprived missionaries of a way to win over the Jews to their “side” and disappointed their hope of ushering in the millennium. European and American Christians saw their work to convert Jews as a means to an end, and Jewish communities across the country knew this. Reformers did not just want

to streamline their religious services and add a sermon to impress and emulate their Christian friends; they wanted to reform their religion because of the perceived threat from Christians. It was not only about understanding their faith, but protecting it as well.

Some historians have suggested that the reforms and the especially the deletion of rabbinical practice during services occurred purely because of the Reformers’ disapproval of rabbinical authority. It is true that they wanted to remove “superfluous” portions during services, which were the “man made” portions (the rabbinical law). But they did not remove all of them. They were particular about which beliefs they eliminated. Had their impulse been driven simply by dismissal of rabbinical authority, the entire Maimonidean Creed would have been thrown out. When the Creed was reintroduced with the Reformer’s modifications it was still in essence the Maimonidean Creed, just with ten points instead of thirteen. The issues of Reform Judaism were not merely about an American-tinged liberty or a younger generation’s freedom from rabbinic authority. They founders of the RSI were emerging into issues of religious liberty and freedom from Christians who were trying to impose their faith on Jewish communities across the country. The Reform movement was not merely influenced at a distance by their Christian neighbors. Their fear of losing their religion, of Jews being converted to Christians, inspired their doctrinal reforms.
On the whole, Christian success was extremely low. Few Jews converted to Christianity because of the work of missionaries.\textsuperscript{113} Christian missionary efforts frequently made headlines and their accomplishments (Jews who converted to Christianity) were published in periodicals begun specifically to reach Jewish audiences. But there is little evidence that any of Charleston’s Jewish population was actually converted through missionary activity. Yet Basil Manly, pastor of Charleston’s First Baptist Church, did claim that after one of his revival speeches in 1828 a Jewish man approached him about becoming a Christian.\textsuperscript{114} When conversion took place, it was generally because of marriage. Still, the threat was no less real, and the pressure from missionaries was felt by all Jews, who initiated reforms, pioneered Jewish education to fight the specific threat of missionaries, and started periodicals of their own in part to challenge Christian claims.\textsuperscript{115}

The Reformers in Charleston began to face additional problems of their own, putting the future of Reform Judaism at risk. The number of members in the Reformed Society of Israelites began to dwindle as the 1820s drew to a close. The economic problems that struck the city in the 1820s forced many the

\textsuperscript{113} Ratner, “Conversion of the Jews,” p. 43.

\textsuperscript{114} A. James Fuller, \textit{Chaplain to the Confederacy: Basil Manly and Baptist Life in the Old South} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), p. 70.

\textsuperscript{115} Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, p. 49.
Society’s members to move north. Isaac Harby, who was known as the voice of the Society, left for New York in 1828 to pursue literary interests. It was a hard blow to the RSI, one that they never fully recovered from, as they were never able to find an adequate replacement. The RSI had also divided many families and as economic hardship tightened its grip on the people of Charleston, many families reunited. Death was also a factor, nine of the original members died before the middle of the 1830s.\footnote{Zola, Isaac Harby, pp. 147-149.} By 1833 the Reformed Society of Israelites folded. The members rejoined KKBE and paid fines for their insubordination. As Barnett Elzas pointed out, “The society failed, but its very failure was success, for it sowed the seeds of progress, which germinated very soon thereafter, this time successfully.”\footnote{Elzas, The Reformed Society, p. 28.} As the 1830s progressed, KKBE became more liberal minded, as the older generation was passing away, the younger members were able to advocate for change. The congregation came out with its new Constitution in 1837, with a cursory glance might appear to be just as strict as KKBE’s former Constitution of 1820, but on closer review, it reveals some changes.\footnote{Hagy, This Happy Land, p. 237.} Article XI allowed for teaching in English. Article XV permitted leaders to meet to discuss petitions submitted by a third of subscribing members to alter the Constitution or service of the synagogue if laws were considered to
be “detrimental.” There was, however, some backlash, most notably Article XII prohibited the creation of any societies, “which has been adopted, or shall be adopted, innovations in our sacred religion, alterations in the form of worship, as practiced herefore, or changes in the Mosaical or Rabbinical Laws.” It did go on to say that they can rejoin KKBE, but they had to pay a fine before doing so.119

The “Great Fire of 1838” destroyed much of Charleston, including KKBE’s building on Hasell Street. The building could not be salvaged, forcing the congregation to rebuild. With the new construction came a second wave of reforms in Charleston. The new ideas proposed in the late 1830s and early 1840s brought about even more innovation. As nearly three years of construction drew to a close, a new controversy emerged as another reform was suggested by members of the congregation as well as the hazan, Gustavus Poznanski. He was originally hired by the congregation because he was known to espouse Orthodox ideas. But soon after he was hired, he began to support Reform concepts and created a rift throughout KKBE.

Some members of KKBE proposed the purchase of an organ to be used during worship ceremonies. Many of those members were formally of the RSI, which allowed the use of instruments during their services when they were

officially separated from KKBE.\footnote{120}{Hagy, \textit{This Happy Land}, p. 154.} Rabbinic tradition did not allow for instrumentation. The Babylonian Talmud, Beitza 36b, stated that music could not be performed on the Sabbath, “Nor clap the hands, nor slap the thighs, nor dance; it is a preventative measure lest he might repair musical instruments.” The ultimate goal was to prevent work being done on the Sabbath, and not actually the prohibition of playing musical instruments. According to the synagogue’s 1837 Constitution, Article XV, services were to be conducted in accordance with “strict adherence to Sephardic ritual,” and prohibited the introduction of further reforms.\footnote{121}{Constitution of KKBE, 1837, Article XV.} That strict ritual did not include the use of an organ or any other instruments. All that was permitted during a service was the use of the human voice. “Further reforms” were a direct reference at the RSI, whose members were now a part of KKBE. While KKBE allowed for a couple of changes in its 1837 Constitution, they refused to permit the many changes that the RSI suggested and tried to enact when they separated from KKBE.

In order to address the issue, a special meeting was called by the adjunta. All members of the congregation were invited to discuss the proposal of the organ. Hazan Poznanski was also asked to speak, which was highly unusual right before a vote. Because he was the congregation’s hazan for life, highly trusted by the congregation, his opinion was vital in determining how members

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\textbf{120} Hagy, \textit{This Happy Land}, p. 154.
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\textbf{121} Constitution of KKBE, 1837, Article XV.
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ought to vote. Many members came to the meeting unsure of how they would vote, but they were persuaded by Poznanski’s arguments that there were Jewish authorities that said the playing of musical instruments was permissible during a worship service.¹²² Those who were in favor of the organ also promised to use donations to pay for the organ instead of spending congregational funds. That too led many to be persuaded that the organ would be an acceptable addition to the synagogue.

Abraham Moïse a former leader of the Reformed Society of Israelites, publicly introduced the vote as a motion instead of as a constitutional amendment; the latter required seventy-five percent of the vote, while the former required only a simple majority. KKBE voted with forty-six in favor of the organ, and forty opposed. The Reformers were victorious and they purchased the organ for the synagogue.

The vote for the organ created a schism that could not be repaired. Those opposed to its use during services withdrew from Beth Elohim and formed their own synagogue, Shearith Israel. It strictly adhered to traditional practices, and opposed reforms. But tensions continued to exist between the two congregations, and in 1845 they went to court to determine who would have control of the Hasell Street building. Judge David Lewis Wardlaw ruled in favor of the Reform congregation of KKBE, but in 1846, the members of Shearith Israel

¹²² Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p. 242.
appealed the decision. KKBE was once again victorious. Judge Andrew Pickens Butler affirmed the decision of Judge Wardlaw for several reasons, including the fact that those who formed Shearith Israel voluntarily left Beth Elohim, which in the court’s mind denied them the right to the building. Judge Butler also upheld the verdict in the name of progress and democratic ideals. In response to the argument that the constitution from 1837 forbade any reforms, he replied:

Neither is it practical to frame laws in such a way as to make them, by their arbitrary and controlling influence, preserve, in perpetuity, the primitive identity of social and religious institutions.

The granite promontory in the deep may stand firm and unchanged amidst the waves and storms that beat upon it, but human institutions cannot withstand the agitations of free, active and progressive opinion. Whilst laws are stationary, things are progressive.  

He later went on to discuss the changes the synagogue had already made to its practice in regards to formal traditions that were previously held by the congregation of KKBE:

As practiced and observed in Charleston in 1784, and for many years afterwards, exercises in Spanish were connected with it. They have long been discontinued: long before the commencement of this controversy. Religious rituals merely, not involving always essential principles of faith, will be modified to some extent by the influence of the political institutions of the countries in which they are practiced.  

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123 Barnett A. Elzas, The Organ in the Synagogue: An Interesting Chapter in the History of Reform Judaism in America, Charleston, South Caroline: ?, p. 3.

124 Elzas, The Organ in the Synagogue, p. 4.
Judge Butler ruled that the culture, in part, ought to determine how religion was to be practiced, a sentiment that reformers had long been arguing. Butler clearly pointed to the notion that change in religion was a result of America’s political culture. The national system of government was changing how people were practicing their faith and influencing the direction of Judaism. Republican ideals fostered change and Jewish inclusion in society, which only created more deviations from historic Judaism. In another section of the ruling, Judge Butler argued that the changes in Judaism over the last millennia would make modern Judaism unrecognizable to ancient Jews. He went further to say:

I suppose it might be admitted that in its origin such a ritual was practiced without the aid of instrumental accompaniment, but to suppose that the exact kind of music that was to be used in all former time had been fixed and agreed upon by the Jewish worshippers who obtained this charter would be to attribute to them an impracticable undertaking. That such music was not used is certain: but that it might not in the progress of human events be adopted would be an attempt to anticipate the decision of posterity on matters that must be affected by the progress of art and the general tone of society, and which could not be controlled by arbitrary limitation.\(^\text{125}\)

So the decision was handed down and Shearith Israel was forced to look for a new home. The acrimonious split was felt across the country as congregations began to reform their own congregations, or in many cases, hold fast to Orthodoxy. By 1903, however, as Barnett Abraham Elzas wrote, “even conservative congregations now have the organ in their places of worship”—a

\(^{125}\) Elzas, *The Organ in the Synagogue*, p. 6.
point seeming to demonstrate the processes of “progress” and change in American Judaism.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{126} Elzas, The Organ in the Synagogue, p. 8.
CHAPTER THREE

ISAAC LEESER AND THE OCCIDENT: THE ORHODOX JEWISH
RESPONSE TO THE REFORMED SOCIETY OF ISRAELITES

The battle over the organ in the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue entangled its members for five years. From the time the organ was first suggested in 1841, until the appeals court made its final ruling in 1846, the Jewish population of Charleston found itself in a debate over something more precious than a musical instrument—it was over the veracity of the Talmudic teachings, what Jews had been practicing for thousands of years. The Orthodox reaction to the proposition of the organ and Reform Judaism generally, as well as how the once local debate over reforms hit the national stage as *The Occident* went to the presses. The battle was no longer being waged inside the walls of KKBE as Orthodox Jews across the country submitted their opinions to *The Occident*.

American society played a tremendous role on the suggested reforms, specifically in regard to Christian missionaries and how they created anxiety among America’s Jewish population. The reforms were not efforts to emulate Christianity, though Christianity inspired some changes. The purpose behind Reform Judaism was to affirm the distinctiveness of Judaism to America’s Christian population. Although some of the adjustments made by the Reformers were borrowed from Christianity, their goal was not to copy it.
Both groups, Reformed and Orthodox, faced the same troubles and the same missionaries, but they responded to these threats in opposite ways. Both claimed the same reasons for their reactions, yet their solutions were completely different. It is clear that each group believed that its position would save the faith, but only the Reformers felt that there were deficiencies in the traditional practice of Judaism, which required their religion to change.

When Charleston’s Reformers initially decided to separate from Beth Elohim, it did not cause an uproar to America’s Jewish community. At the time it was just a small group of men (many of whom were no longer members of the congregation) who decided to leave to form their own congregation. This act violated KKBE’s Constitution of 1820, which stated that another synagogue could not be erected and those who chose to abandon KKBE would lose their right to be buried in the temple’s cemetery. But when the battle over the organ reached the national stage, the debate in Charleston over the idea of a reformed Judaism began to invite the opinions from Jews across the country.

This could not have happened before the founding of The Occident and American Jewish Advocate (The Occident). Launched by Isaac Leeser in 1843, the publication reached Jewish communities across America, providing news and commentary about the happenings in domestic Jewish society. At first the publication was an outlet for America’s Jewish population to connect across the

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127 Constitution of KKBE, 1820, Rule VIII.
country and to create a tighter community, but as the divide over reforms continued to plague the Jewish community, *The Occident* became a vehicle to espouse opinions on the topic of Reform Judaism. Though the magazine was for all American Jews, Leeser was a proponent of Orthodoxy. The pages of *The Occident* were filled with editorials dismissing Reformers as heretics and ignorant of the truths of the Tanakh. All Jews were welcomed to contribute to the magazine, getting their thoughts printed, but in the magazine’s history, few supporters of reforms were published. Reformers who appeared in print merely wrote the history of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim and of the success of its students from their Hebrew Sunday School, and others who proposed reforms from across the country who were published, frequently responded to Leeser’s arguments.

Isaac Leeser was one of the most influential Jewish leaders of the antebellum period.\(^{128}\) Though not formally trained as a rabbi, he served as Philadelphia’s hazan from the early 1840s until his death in 1868.\(^ {129}\) He was a staunch proponent of Orthodox Judaism, though as Maxine S. Seller noted, he


was never a fanatic. Although Orthodox, he did not believe in holding fast to the notion that Jews in America should be isolated nor should they hold on to traditions from their former countries. Being a German immigrant himself, he saw the importance of gaining an American identity as soon as possible. This desire to integrate immigrants into American culture often created a dilemma within his Jewish faith. But, unlike Jews who supported Reform Judaism, where a conflict existed between the Talmud and American culture, Leeser chose the historic Jewish teachings. He did not see a conflict between being a strict adherent to Judaism and being an American the way that Reformers did. He believed in civic conformity, but religious distinctiveness. Leeser strove for equal protection of the Jewish people, specifically against Christian missionaries. Along with the Reformed Society of Israelites, he felt the pressure from missionaries, but he saw the US Constitution as his way of protecting Judaism. To him, altering Talmudic teachings as a defense to missionaries was unacceptable and irrational.

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In the pages of *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, Leeser and others outlined the arguments against Reform Judaism. Cowing to Christian pressures and losing sight of the beauty of the religious liberty that Jews in America enjoyed fueled his essays and dialogues between contributors to *The Occident*. While he favored complete integration with American ideals—especially liberty—Leeser refuted the notion that the only way of doing so was to give up traditional Judaism.

The timing of the founding of *The Occident* coincided with the introduction of Christian magazines aimed at converting Jews, such as the *Jewish Chronicle*. Every issue of *The Occident* featured multiple articles pertaining to the defense of Judaism against missionaries. Many traditionalists saw the issue of reforms as an issue of sufficiency and truth: sufficiency in that Judaism, as it had been practiced for thousands of years, satisfied its adherents and truth in that God’s word and Jewish traditions passed on for centuries were the only ways in which to properly practice the faith. To them, Reformers were not just asking for minor revisions but rather major overhauls, turning their religion of God’s chosen people into a religion that was deficient and unacceptable. There was no room for alterations, especially as a means to fit into society. Reformers held the notion that society and the nation that surrounded them should impact religious practice—that if society held certain beliefs, it was necessary to remove parts of Judaism that conflicted with those beliefs. Max Lilienthal, a German reform
advocate, came to America in 1845 and explained that altering doctrine and practice were not only acceptable, yet necessary, “How many prayers are there unbecoming the country we live in,” he said, “unfit for our mode of thinking, totally antagonistic to the changed views and feeling! Reform tries to find a remedy for all these abuses and to make the house of the Lord a house of true prayer and devotion.”

By the early 1840s, even Orthodox Jews, including Isaac Leeser, accepted the use of English in religious services. But the resurgence of Reform ideas in the 1840s went far beyond that; they were aimed at the heart of Judaism, what had made it so different from other faiths. The debate centered on the removal of Jewish doctrine. Reform was no longer seen as a series of small disagreements over organs or the celebration of multiple holiday nights; it was about the truth of the ancient faith, really, what made Judaism, Judaism. The controversy began to hit too close to home as Jews throughout America joined the debate. Orthodox Jews claimed that Reformers were compromising their beliefs, adjusting them based on Christianity and American democracy. Judaism had prevailed for much longer than either. Though those reform ideas had been in the air since the Reformed Society of Israelites, they were not developed fully until the early

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1840s. Now they incorporated all of America’s Jews. What was once discussed locally in Charleston was being debated across the country. And those arguments spilled onto the pages of *The Occident*.

In its first issue, *The Occident* set out to make clear its purpose and its religious position. Its inaugural issue discussed the re-launching of the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews (ASMCJ), acknowledging that the timing involved in the founding of *The Occident* was no accident. Isaac Leeser conceded that his periodical was going to be used as a weapon against missionaries who targeted Jews. American Jews saw the revitalization of the ASMCJ and its publication, the *Jewish Chronicle* (originally called *Israel’s Advocate*), as a direct attack on them, and they wanted to show missionary Christians that they were prepared to stand their ground. Leeser’s opening remarks to *The Occident*:

> In our case, this is hardly necessary, since the name of "Jewish Advocate" amply shadows forth what we mean to devote our pages to the spread of whatever can advance the cause of our religion, and of promoting the true interest of that people which has made this religion its profession ever since the days of the great lawgiver, through whom it was handed down to the nation descended from the stock of Abraham… This then is our object; we wish to be useful in a department where attainment of success is very difficult and where failure would carry with it no disgrace, any farther than having been too bold in undertaking that for which our forces were insufficient. But we trust, that we shall be kindly supported by many valuable contributors and

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correspondents, who, it is to be hoped, will offer their assistance as soon as they see that we are fairly embarked in our laborious undertaking... We shall endeavor to give every month one sermon by one of the modern Jewish preachers on some topic of general interest... We shall not object to controversial articles, if written temperately and candidly; but on no account can our pages become the vehicle for violent denunciation or unfounded aspersions... We do not mean that articles intended for us should be written tamely, without life or spirit; far from it; we like zeal; but it must be tempered with discretion; and in carrying on a controversy, when such a warfare is necessary, a prudent deference to the opinion of an adversary, a cautious avoiding of harsh epithets, and above all, a manly candor, will much more readily insure the victory, or at least the respect of opponents, than hasty expressions, crude denunciation, and vehement philippics, though the provocation be ever so great.¹³⁷

Though the writer of the two-part series, “The American Society for the Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, and its Organ, the Jewish Chronicle,” which appeared in its first and second issues of The Occident is unknown, it is clear that he opposed Reform Judaism and blamed it for the re-emergence of Christian missionary activity. Claiming that the Reformer’s conduct was due to the neglect of their faith, not because of their love of it, the author argued that Reformers’ discontent gave missionary societies the opportunity to capitalize on disunity; discontent could also be seen and heard as unbelief, making Jews

¹³⁷ Isaac Leeser, “Introductory Remarks.”
particularly susceptible to missionaries.\textsuperscript{138} Were it not for reform activity, in short, missionaries would have no one to convert.

In a later issue, Leeser published a letter directed at the Reverend Gustuvus Poznanski, the former hazan at Beth Elohim. Poznanski ushered in many reforms during his short tenure, which was supposed to be his position for life, but he resigned after much controversy over reforms.\textsuperscript{139} Leeser proclaimed his disdain of Poznanski and practically accused him of defrauding KKBE by hiding his reform tendencies. Claiming that he would never have suggested Poznanski to KKBE had he been aware of his reforming tendencies, he charged Poznanski with the disunity that ensued and the split in the synagogue. “[Y]ou acted without duly weighing the fearful responsibility which you assumed in siding with those who formerly did not value you very highly,” Leeser wrote, “and discarding your old friends, when you gave your advice that music should be introduced on the Sabbath, against the opinion of millions of Israelites, the


\textsuperscript{139} It was common before formally trained rabbis came to America to give a hazan the title of Reverend. It gave an official title to the office holder, but also demonstrates the impact of Christian America on the synagogue as a whole, using a Christian title to a Jewish leader.
voice of centuries, the doctrines of the wisest and best of men.”¹⁴⁰ Leeser, like the members of KKBE who opposed the introduction of the organ, saw reform activity as betrayal of trust, and he personalized it in attacking Poznanski.

Leeser also included in his letter an excerpt from the *Charleston Observer*. A Presbyterian minister, B[asil] Gildersleeve, wrote a short piece expressing confusion about the removal of three of Judaism’s most basic beliefs. He attended the dedication of the new synagogue in 1841 and found the beliefs professed by Poznanski to be opposed to what the Old Testament taught; namely, the restoration of Israel, the resurrection of the dead, the coming of the messiah. He also expressed concern for Poznanski’s belief that the Jews would not in fact re-inhabit Israel, but that their home in Charleston was their new Israel.

We received the impression that neither he, nor these attached to his peculiar views on this point, believed in the personal coming of the Messiah. He seemed to us to take the same liberty in interpreting the prophecies of the Old Testament touching Messiah, that he had previously done touching the return of the Jews. It struck us that he regarded both not in a literal, but in an emblematical point of view — and that free institutions — a cessation of hostilities — and the general prevalence of peace and good-will among men, constituted the only Messiah which he anticipated.¹⁴¹


Jews who held fast to their ancient faith saw reforms as a distortion and they took those changes personally. It is important to note that those espousing Orthodox beliefs were aware of the ties that Reformers were making to Christianity — removing tenants of the Jewish faith that coincided with Christian beliefs. Leeser wrote, “I really do not understand how the ideas of Christians that he has come [the Messiah], can affect our creed so as to require the alteration of its words which you have either introduced or countenanced.” Leeser also wrote, “In brief, I cannot understand how not believing in the accomplishment of any thing can be a matter of belief, or creed. The wording of your profession of faith is apparently merely antagonizing to Christianity.”\(^\text{142}\) He argued that the removal of parts of the Maimonidean Creed did not take away the impetus for missionaries to convert Jews but merely added to their cause.

Orthodox Jews saw ignorance of the scriptures as one of the main causes of reform in Judaism. Not having a clear understanding of their faith and what the Old Testament taught was the actual issue, they believed that proper education might alleviate some of the issues and conflicts within Judaism. Isaac Leeser sought to solve the problem of reform with education, believing that was the key to ending reforms. No longer would education take a back seat in their faith; the Orthodox were going to transform the Jewish educational system

(nearly non-existent at the time) and create a new generation of Jews who believed the scriptures because they understood the scriptures.

Wrote Leeser, “We allude to the great ignorance which prevails among us with respect to the tenets of our religion, and the language in which the Bible was communicated to our forefathers. There is, we acknowledge, an ardent devotion among most of us to the name of Israel; but unfortunately there is little else to designate the character which this feeling should establish.” He added, “The indifference, therefore, which we witness, is in many cases the legitimate result of an ignorance of the duties and doctrines which Jews ought to perform and believe in; and the apostasy of a few by intermarriages with the Gentiles, or the adoption of the belief of the stranger, must be charged to the same cause, that when they sinned they knew not what they should do that they might live, and were perhaps unconscious of the enormity of their transgressions.”

Even in the late 1830s much attention was given to the fact that there was little if any Jewish religious training for the youth. The opening of Jewish Sunday Schools in American synagogues was a result of the need for instruction of Jewish youth, but such schools had few materials and the instructors, who were women, hardly knew Hebrew themselves. Since the latter part of the eighteenth century, Jewish education in America was weak at best. Leeser

attributed some of the reforms and what he called “transgressions” to the lack of biblical training available in America. Placing some of the blame for reforms on himself and the older Jewish community, he wanted to resolve this issue, considering it as something that could easily be accomplished. “For if ignorance is the disease which afflicts us,” he wrote, “if want of a knowledge on religious matters is a reproach to us from the Gentiles, it is evidently acting only in conformity with common sense to do all we can to scatter this ignorance, and to prove to the world at large that we too are fully alive to the necessity of a religious education.”

But as the Reform movement advanced, Leeser was far less gracious toward the Reformers. Though he still believed their reforms to be the work of ignorance, he was not nearly as charitable. In January 1844, he wrote that those proposing reforms wanted to transform a system that they did not even understand. His change in attitude was probably due to the growing strength of the Reform movement and its reach across the states. Instead of it being restricted to one synagogue in Charleston, Reform Judaism was on the move. Nearly every large city was feeling its effects. Seeing reforms as more dangerous and as a threat, Leeser, along with all the other proponents of Orthodoxy, treated those proposing reforms as enemies instead of as religious brethren.

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144 Isaac Leeser, “Public Religious Education.”
Leeser also claimed that Reform Jews were worldly and their chief concern was money and not their faith. Not wanting to lose business, many Jews decided to stay open on Saturdays despite it being the Jewish Sabbath, wanting not to lose two days of business, since they were forced to close on Sunday. He blamed love of money as part of the reason that Jews compromised their faith.

“It is, therefore, inconceivable how so many of our people can permit themselves to be so engrossed by matters of mere business as to neglect to so great a degree as they do their spiritual welfare.” Working on the Sabbath was a heinous violation in the eyes of Orthodox Jews, while those supporting reforms or those who no longer attended any synagogue saw it as perfectly acceptable, especially if they were expected to compete in business. Orthodox Jews believed that Reform Jews were risking their souls. Leeser described their behavior as “disgraceful” and complained that it was no wonder that Americans believed Jews to be “miser.” He called for Jews to give up some of their personal desires for the sake of their faith and their position before God.  

Reminding his fellow Jews that there was more to this world than money and possessions, he called for the unity of their faith and the desire to rebuild what had been torn down by reforms. “There is a world to live for, holier, purer than earthly life; that there is a pursuit sweeter, truer than the acquisition of

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wealth; and that all who so feel may unite their energies of soul, and combine the influences of their respective stations to aid in the good cause which is now suffering from the slothfulness of its servants, and the active energy of its enemies.” He believed that the Jews in Charleston and in other large cities were more concerned with their relationships with their Gentile neighbors than with their Jewish brethren— their apathy towards their faith was appalling. 146 Another observer noted, “Instead of offering a thanksgiving to the God of Israel for having riven our chains, we are entirely absorbed in worldly pursuits, and think we have nothing more to pray for.” 147

Leeser, however, did oppose “Blue Laws,” which required all businesses to close on Sundays. His objection did not come from a financial standpoint, though, but from the perspective that it was a violation of the US Constitution. He wrote in an issue of The Occident, “There are in the words of the Declaration of Rights no earthly supports for the opinion that Christianity is the law of the


land.” He understood the frustration of many of America’s Jews, but he did not see money as a reason to abandon their Sabbath.

Orthodox Jews were conscious of how the split in Judaism was received by Christians. They believed that the disunity that emerged was detrimental to the health of Judaism and also its appearance to Gentiles. Orthodox believers pleaded with their reforming brothers to consider what they were doing. Noting that minor changes to Judaism may have been warranted, Leeser objected to the current state of reforms. He even confessed that the initial reforms that were “home-grown” may have been necessary, but he clearly believed that “new” reforms were inappropriate in their attempt to fix Judaism.

We (the lovers of ancient usages) are not enemies to improvements, but desire that nothing should be done hastily, or contrary to law: we are for amelioration of our condition by education, by enlightening the public mind, by making our blessed faith better understood and more lovely to all its adherents. We therefore ask all of you who are the professed friends of improvement, to progress, to reform, or by whatever other term your endeavours are characterized, to reflect, that all the recent agitation sprung out of a state of laxity of morals and religion, brought about by a long-continued war against and its consequent confusion; that it was first attempted by those who professed that something must be done to bring the backsliders and lukewarm back to the pale of religion, and that in the outset but some few local changes were thought requisite.


Still attempting to save Judaism from its current state, Leeser continued to request that the Reformers stop their current work and rejoin the Orthodox, or ancient practitioners, and discuss appropriate changes. He understood the initial call for reform in the 1820s and 1830s by the congregation in Charleston, but believing strongly that the spread of Charleston’s ideas regarding doctrine hurt Judaism. Orthodox Jews believed the “new” attempts at reform were not intended to transform the faith, but destroy it. The proposed changes were not mere alterations to the length of the service or in what language it was conducted, but rather the removal of doctrine that had accompanied the faith for millennia.150

Henry Goldsmith, a contributor to The Occident, described the disunity in Judaism as a result of acceptance and civility. He blamed the freedom that Jews had in America as the source of reforms: “We are forced to avow that our religion (at least the observance of it) has suffered ill proportion to the civil privileges which we have acquired.” He claimed that oppression strengthens one’s faith and forces community. “The more we are oppressed the more closely do we cling to each other; the more our enemies endeavour to annihilate us as a nation, the more do we exert ourselves to uphold our religion to prove the

futility of their unholy attempts.” Goldsmith also described how mistaken
American Jews had been in using their new freedom; instead of taking
advantage of it to delve more deeply into their faith and learn more about it,
their goal became transforming it and making it “respectable” by hewing reform
more closely to Christianity. In so doing, they were not actually practicing
Judaism at all. Like Leeser, Goldsmith saw education as the main tool to
strengthen the faith and combat reform. If all of America’s Jews were better
educated, there would be no debate about ancient Jewish beliefs. As a result of
proper training in the scriptures, the teachings and traditions of pure and ancient
Judaism would be clearly understood by all Jews.

Both the Orthodox and the Reformers, in fact, wanted to appear
“respectable” in the eyes of American Christians. But they emphasized different
paths to respectability. While Reformers attempted to modify Judaism to fit an
American context, the Orthodox insisted that tradition, not modification, was
more likely to produce respect among American Christians making it less likely
that Christians would pursue conversion. In September 1844, for instance,
Leeser used the Sabbath as an example of true piety. If more Jews would observe
it faithfully, the most pious among American Christians would honor them for
doing so, in part because pious American Christians were concerned with
Sabbath-breaking among their own. Leeser argued, “The observance of the

151 Henry Goldsmith, “Innovation, Its Tendency, and Preventative.”
Sabbath, that weekly sacrifice of our time to the divine will, is neglected to such an extent that honourable Christians speak of it as a shame, as a disgrace to us.”

In that same article Leeser further discussed education. Still convinced that the Reformers did not understand Judaism, he continued to call his fellow Jews to do a better job of educating their youth. Leeser complained of the “necessity for teachers” especially; more and better teachers might alone eliminate the great disturbance and trouble that Jews faced from their coreligionists. Though Jewish Sunday Schools were popular and their goals were the same, many Orthodox did not view them as an adequate source of education because they lacked resources and well-trained teachers. Indeed the education of young Jews was written about in nearly every issue; The Occident almost always contained updates about how well various Hebrew Sunday Schools were doing.

Leeser was not the only one concerned about Jewish education, but as the editor of The Occident, he had more opportunities to express his views. Both the Orthodox and Reform groups stressed education; in fact, for both groups good schooling was necessary to ward off missionaries. “What then constitutes the


difference between Jews and Gentiles? Nothing but their education, and perhaps the idea of the unity of God inherent to a greater degree in those of the seed of Abraham than in the descendants of other families,” Leeser observed. The Orthodox, however, wanted Jewish men to take up the task of teaching—a difficult task for men who did not receive a proper education themselves, but necessary for the strength of Judaism.

This was no doubt because the overwhelming majority of teachers in the Sunday Schools were women. Their presence as teachers no doubt reflected the influence of American culture. The idea of Republican Motherhood stressed that American women, as the caretakers of the virtue so important to a republic, were the educators of the country’s youth, especially boys and young men who would grow into the obligations of citizenship.154 Broadly speaking, the duties of the Republican Mother were confined to the domestic sphere, but religious education straddled boundaries of public and private.155 The presence of women in Jewish Sunday schools shows that an American influence was modifying Jewish custom. It was Jewish tradition for females not to be educated outside of the home. Their education involved rituals of cleanliness and domestic life, both for themselves and the food they prepared for their families. It was an American


reform, which allowed women to teach outside of the home and to be permitted

to have a role in a synagogue. Such was the necessity of education that even

Leeser, while he preferred male teachers to female ones, allowed that girls as

well as boys needed strong teaching in Jewish tradition. “Our youth, both male

and female,” he wrote, “should receive a thorough training from parents and

teachers, in all the dogmas and duties which belong to Israel.”156

In fact, this issue pointed to a curious tactical course that Leeser adopted

in his articles supporting Orthodoxy. He wanted to use some of the means of

reforms, including the emulation of Christian practice, to benefit the ends of

Orthodox tradition. “Our Christian neighbors,” he said, “have shown us an

excellent example in their endeavours to let the benefits of religious education

reach every hamlet and every house in the country.”157 In a later article he

praised sermons—a reform first suggested by the Reformed Society of Israelites

in 1824, and one of the few reforms that most congregations approved of—and

how influential they could be in educating the Jewish community. The Occident


156 Isaac Leeser, “The Demands of our Times,” The Occident and American Jewish


157 Isaac Leeser, “The Demands of Our Times,” The Occident and American Jewish

Advocate, Vol. II, No. 9, December, 1844, accessed November 13, 2007,


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often published them. Claimed Leeser, “Sermons are perhaps the best vehicle for information which religious subjects admit of.”

Leeser also promoted educating the youth in English as well as in Hebrew. He believed that learning about Judaism in both languages was useful in understanding the faith, “By learning their religion from persons speaking English, they will ultimately, when grown-up, be accessible to the voice of the public teacher, and thus become gradually confirmed in their duties and faith, as soon as the number of congregations will be sufficient,” he wrote, “and what is next, [they] will obtain duly qualified ministers, who will be required to expound the law and watch over the progress of religious education.”

In the end, however, Leeser’s approval of certain reforms spoke to his Orthodox views. He accepted the use of English in Jewish education as long as it helped promote the doctrines of traditional Judaism; he still opposed false or distorted doctrine. Ever trying to unite America’s Jews, Leeser tried to be open to some reforms—but as it turned out, he acknowledged the usefulness of some of the old suggested reforms only to decry the “new.” Orthodox Jews were willing to discuss reforms as they pertained to practice, but would not entertain ideas that attempted threatened doctrine. As reform ideas spread across the

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country and the reformation of doctrine became more evident, Leeser could not
defend or excuse “improvements.”
Perhaps no group was more greatly affected by Reform Judaism and American Protestantism than Jewish women. The women of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim and eventually Jewish women across the country saw their role in the synagogue change over the course of decades—turning their once silent position within in the synagogue walls to a vital voice in the Jewish community. Jewish women began to conform to the image of American female piety while attempting to maintain their place in Judaism. The vastly different roles caused some women to accept, even revel in the new freedoms that Reform Judaism and American views of women offered. Others clung more fiercely to their religion’s teachings. Their battle mimicked the debate between the Orthodox and the Reform, though the topics of debate were different, at its heart it was part of the same debate. How much should a Jewish woman’s role change simply because she found herself in America, and what role should she play in the debate over Reform Judaism?

The Orthodox response to Reform Judaism played out in the pages of The Occident, but the role of women in the synagogue was also part of those debates. While the Jewish men in America argued over a women’s proper place, the
women took action and chose sides. They were not immune to the controversies over Jewish doctrine—a controversy that drove families apart and divided homes, which was supposed to be the female sanctuary. As one student from Shearith Israel (the new Orthodox synagogue that formed in Charleston after the split over the organ) put it, “Women have caused all revolutions,” what was their role in the revolution of American Judaism?160

The women at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim were greatly impacted by the changes first proposed by the Reformed Society of Israelites. The Society’s reforms went beyond changing the liturgy; the RSI also proposed altering the role of women in the synagogue. These ideas, which initially led to minor changes for Jewish women, set the stage for women to take a more active role in the synagogue—roles similar to those occupied by their Christian counterparts. In the antebellum period Christian women’s roles were clearly defined as “domestic,” for example educating children, but domesticity allowed public works of benevolence. Jewish women’s domestic roles were similar, but all their work was done behind closed doors. This led many Christian women to view Judaism in a poor light because they felt that Judaism treated their women shabbily.

It is important to recall that Jews immigrating to America tried to build communities as soon as they were able. Because a prayer quorum was required in order to worship, most Jews immigrated to areas that already had an active Jewish community, perhaps large enough to have a synagogue, or at least enough males to allow worship. As Jewish communities were formed throughout the eighteenth century they tried to keep traditions and laws, especially food laws as they pertained to proper ritual slaughter, which would allow them to keep kosher (the synagogue paid the butcher from temple funds). Such customs also required women to continue the use of the mikveh bath. The mikveh bath, as with diet, was extremely important. Just as keeping kosher was important for food purity, the mikveh bath important for personal cleanliness.

Following the American Revolution the inclusion fought for and won by Jews had the ironic effect of making Jewish customs and rituals stand out even more. To many—Jews as well as Gentiles—they seemed archaic and incongruent with republican ideals. After the war, as the early republic began to take shape, Jews of Charleston started to become more lax in their adherence to some of their more outward displays of Judaism. Increasingly they worked on their Sabbath (Saturday) since they were forced to close on Sunday. It was practical and it allowed them to meet their business responsibilities. They also worried less about keeping kosher and using the butcher approved by the synagogue. The person in the household responsible for obtaining kosher meat
was the wife. It was one of her only duties in regard to the practice of Judaism because traditional practice did not include women.

The Jewish women of Charleston were frequently close friends with their Christian neighbors and participated in the same benevolent societies. Like their husbands and brothers, Jewish women felt pressure to do away with certain customs. Some of the most important traditions became so infrequently practiced that when a European rabbi visited America, he was appalled that the women almost never made use of the mikveh bath. Keeping the home kosher, using the mikveh bath for cleansing, and insure that the children were raised in the precepts of the law were the wife’s chief responsibilities. Though KKBE’s constitutions portray strict adherence to biblical law, many domestic rituals and traditions were ignored.

At the same time women did not have a place in traditional Judaism. They were not allowed to participate in the services, being forced to sit in balconies blocked with lattice to keep them hidden from the men. Moreover they did not count in the prayer quorum and there was no ceremony to welcome baby girls into the faith or the opportunity for them to receive instruction in Hebrew. Every morning when the men were through praying, they thanked God they were not born women. The women were not treated as equals in the faith, and
there was little they could do participate in it. Thus, for different reasons, women were increasingly on the outside. 161

When the forty-seven men from Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim petitioned the adjuncta to institute change in the liturgy and their mode of worship, they also desired to change the place of women in Judaism. Though the majority of the petition pertained to specific traditions that were already in existence, the RSI did try and implement new practices that had significance for females. The Reformers wanted to institute a naming ceremony, for instance, for infant girls that would take place eight days after their birth, a practice that would coincide with male circumcision. It was the RSI’s way of formally including the women, showing women that from the time of their birth they would be included and that there was a place for women in Judaism. The RSI also proposed that the wife be allowed to speak in a wedding ceremony.162 And during services, they desired a mixed choir. It is also supposed that the RSI attempted to create family seating instead of seating strictly by gender.163

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163 Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, p. 81.
Just as the men in Charleston actively participated in benevolent organizations, local women did the same. In 1813 they formed the Ladies Benevolent Society, the first society of its kind in America.\textsuperscript{164} Its goal was to help women and children in need by providing nursing care, money and goods. Each member of the organization paid annual dues and sought donations from the city-at-large. The Society also asked local churches to take up a general offering that would benefit the organization. The congregation of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim was also asked to do so, and KKBE raised $250 for the Ladies Benevolent Society. However, it is to be noted that KKBE required the collection to be taken during the week and not during the service. The coming in contact with money on the Sabbath violated the Sabbath, and KKBE did not allow a speaker from the Society to come, as the speaker would be giving their discourse in English, which at the time was a violation of the Jewish ritual.\textsuperscript{165} Because it was a non-denominational society, it is extremely likely that women from KKBE were members of the Ladies Benevolent Society, which explains the inclusion of KKBE as fundraisers. Few records for the Society exist, and there are no membership lists from its inception period. If early records for the Society did exist, it is highly probable they were destroyed in the fire of 1838.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{164}{Bellows, Benevolence, p. 40.}
\footnotetext{165}{Hagy, This Happy Land, p. 43.}
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Still, it is clear that the women of KKBE were accepted by their Christian neighbors. Religion did not exclude Jewish women from participating in public charitable organizations. But constant contact had a greater impact on Jewish women than they probably ever imagined. For Christian women domesticity allowed them a place in church and their participation in efforts to alleviate poverty and care for the orphaned was expected. Because Christian men were involved in the rough and tumble of politics and the competitive world business, their “purity” was tainted. But precisely because religion promoted the virtue that women were responsible for nurturing, Christian women were involved in their churches, in fact, they were the majority of attendees on Sundays. For these reasons Christian women were considered more pious than their husbands.166

Jewish women did not have a way to participate in Jewish benevolent societies. Judaism left women in the balconies while men started charitable organizations. Their religion did not allow women to be included in public displays of Judaism, which would include acts of benevolence. The practice of leaving women removed from worship, and further excluding them from benevolent activities considered the “women’s sphere,” made little sense to their Christian neighbors. Living in a highly Christianized society forced Jewish

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women to defend their faith to their friends, who did not understand why the women were, in a way, tossed aside.167

This was one of the first ways by which Jewish women learned that they needed to be able to defend their faith—and also be able to stand up to missionaries. Through these interactions they realized that their friends did not “like” Judaism because it seemed to marginalize women. Christian women were not promoting gender equality to Jewish women. However, they did believe that Jewish women should be allowed to take part in charity work outside the home and be allowed to worship alongside the men, just as Christian women could do.

At the same time there were elements within Judaism that in theory could be expanded to allow for reform. Charitable work, for instance, was in keeping with a significant tenant of the faith, loving kindness. Jacob R. Marcus noted that Jewish men permitted the women into the world of “charity” because in America charity was seen as an acceptable, even advantageous, role for women. Thus, service organizations were crucial in developing women’s roles in American Judaism. Women were able to publically practice acts of loving-kindness and they were no longer bound to Judaism’s traditional female responsibilities—a sort of “soft” breaking of the boundaries in Judaism since the men were no longer the only ones doing charitable work in the public sphere. Women were

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no longer constrained to the domestic sphere. Jacob R. Marcus explained that Jewish men permitted the women into the world of “charity” because in America charity was seen as an acceptable, even advantageous, role for women.\footnote{Marcus, \textit{The American Jewish Woman}, p. 47.}

A similar sort of soft breaking occurred in education. The RSI desired to create a school to educate Jewish youth, both male and female, but was not able to accomplish this in its short existence.\footnote{Elzas, \textit{The Jews of South Carolina}, p. 32. Zola, \textit{Isaac Harby of Charleston}, p. 88. Elzas, \textit{The Reformed Society of Israelites}, p. 22.} But the idea of doing more to educate Jewish youth was not unique to the RSI. Throughout the nation Jews were struggling to solve the educational issue; as Isaac Leeser’s example shows, even the Orthodox thought of education as a serious problem. One solution, however, came from an unusual source. In 1838, Rebecca Gratz opened the first Hebrew Sunday School in Philadelphia. The purpose of the school was to educate Philadelphia’s youth in Hebrew, in Jewish customs, and in the richness of Jewish history. The most significant reason for the school’s creation was to challenge Christian missionaries who targeted Jewish children.\footnote{Ashton, \textit{Rebecca Gratz}, pp. 144-147. Goldman, \textit{Beyond the Synagogue Gallery}, p. 62.} Interestingly, Rebecca Gratz was strictly Orthodox and opposed all of the reforms proposed in Charleston, she was an unintentional innovator. She expanded the role of women, although such a suggestion would have offended her sensibility. Her

\footnote{168 Marcus, \textit{The American Jewish Woman}, p. 47.}
goal was not to be revolutionary, not to challenge gender roles, nor to transform her faith or her role in it. As with Leeser, she desired to see Jewish children stave off missionaries and learn to love their traditional religion. Gratz simply desired to educate Jewish youth in traditional doctrine so that they would grow up to perpetuate the faith she loved.

There is no doubt, however, that Gratz was influenced by her Christian friends and the growing Sunday school movement. The women of KKBE were in communication with her and two months later they petitioned the adjunta to start their own Hebrew Sunday School. It is notable that women started and supported the school, though the leaders of the movement denied it as a “reform” — aided softly no doubt by the knowledge that Gratz was no reformer.

Sally Lopez directed the Charleston school. She also was opposed to the Reform movement, even though one of her biggest helpers, Penina Moïse, was an advocate of reforms. Moïse’s brothers, in fact, were members of the original group of defectors from KKBE.

Moïse was a published writer and also a collaborator on the first ever prayer book for Reform Judaism. She wrote more than half of the hymns. She was also featured in Godey’s Lady Book and frequently wrote poetry for newspapers in Charleston. Moïse already broke the mold with her writing

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because she did not use a pseudonym, a common practice for female authors.\footnote{Jay B. Hubbell, \textit{The South in American Literature: 1607-1900}, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1954), p. 605, as cited in Breibart, \textit{Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History}, p. 41.} At the time, women authors were expected to only comment on issues of domesticity and to write novels that strengthened the role of a woman in the home, since men and other women were fearful that the wrong type of literature would easily sway women’s minds.\footnote{Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, p. 166.} But Penina Moïse not only wrote into \textit{Godey’s Lady Book}, she also submitted her work to various news outlets across the country, commenting on national Jewish affairs. As a women that was certainly not her place, but she did so without fear, choosing to submit those writings with her own name rather than using someone else’s. Despite their disagreements regarding reforms, Moïse and Gratz had much in common. Both remained single until their deaths because their only suitors were Gentiles; both were eager to educate their youth in response to Christian missionaries; both were committed to keeping Judaism alive in a Christian culture; and both were devoted to their faith. They each saw how acculturation created apathetic Jews. They wanted to strengthen their faith and not watch it disappear as America’s Jewish population dissappeared into American society.

Both women were involved with the same organizations, and yet they saw their work in different lights. Penina Moïse believed that reforms would
keep Judaism from dying out in a Christian society that seemed continually driven to convert Jews. She believed she was saving Judaism by reforming it to fit in with an American context of independence and democracy. Gratz was opposed because she believed the ancient faith would be killed by reforms. Once reforms took place, people would no longer be practicing Judaism. Changes or reforms would suggest problems inherent in the faith, which for Gratz was an invitation to the Christian missionary cause. Though Gratz and Moïse could not have disagreed more on the necessity of reforms, both women felt that their work would keep the faith alive.

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The Hebrew Sunday School at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim was approved in 1838, but did not begin until early 1839. Like many Jewish institutions at the time, it was short on funds. Temples nationally had limited access to copies of the Old Testament. So in order for the women to instruct the children they made use of the abundant copies of the Christian Bibles that were available as a result of the Second Great Awakening. In the early years of the school there did not appear to be much discord among educators at KKBE’s Hebrew school. These women had different opinions regarding their roles and the future of Judaism, but they did not allow that to interfere with their desire to instruct the youth of

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174 Ashton, Rebecca Gratz, p. 121, 123.

175 Ashton, Rebecca Gratz, pp. 152-153.
KKBE. Though the Reformed Society of Israelites was disbanded by this point, it was no secret that the members left the synagogue for many years and were rejoining after the failure of the RSI. It is also likely that many women were caught between their religious traditions and their family, since many families became divided over the issues of reform. Should they side with historic Judaism or with their family members, or perhaps abandon their family and tradition and support the Reformers? As women, where should their loyalty stand and ought they have a say in the matter at all? It made a difficult situation that much more complex. Still, it was only when further conflict occurred in the 1840’s over further reforms at KKBE that the Orthodox community in Charleston began to make their views of women’s roles known, once again sparking debate between the Reform and Orthodox Jews in Charleston, and eventually the country as a whole.

Shortly after the petition to start a Hebrew Sunday School was circulated, the “Great Fire” of 1838 swept through Charleston, destroying much of the city, including Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim. The controversy over the installation of an organ caused great turmoil in the congregation. But amidst these problems, both sides came together to consecrate the new KKBE building in 1841. Penina Moïse, a proponent of reforms, wrote a special hymn for the occasion, one of the only Jewish hymns at that time, more interestingly, composed by a woman.

Behold, O! Mighty Architect,
What love for Thee, has wrought;
This Fane arising from the wrecked,
Beauty from ashes brought.
Oh! when we glance with finite eye,
From Stars to Ocean’s shells,
A Temple each, where Deity,
Magnificent dwells...\textsuperscript{176}

She also penned the inscription gracing the front of the synagogue:

Enter not lightly then the house of prayer,
Nor hymn with lip of guile the praise of God;
Balm will be found for meek contrition there
For contumacy, an impeding rod.\textsuperscript{177}

The division over the organ, as noted earlier, was more than just a squabble over instrumentation. It brought the entire issue of Reform Judaism to the forefront, a topic that many members of KKBE had hoped to put to rest when the former members of the RSI returned to the synagogue. The organ was seen as a kind of slippery slope that would inevitably lead to other reforms, which in turn would continue to deviate more and more from Jewish Orthodoxy. In fact, that was the dynamic that ultimately lead to the creation of a new Orthodox synagogue in Charleston: Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim remained for the Reform Jews, while the Orthodox established Shearith Israel.

The women of Beth Elohim were not immune to the controversy. They also had to make decisions about whether to stay with KKBE or to join the new

\textsuperscript{176} Charleston Courier, August 28, 1840 as cited in Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, pp. 43-44. Penina Moïse, Secular and Religious Works of Penina Moïse, with A Brief Sketch of Her Life (Charleston: Nicholas G. Duffy, 1911), p. 269.

\textsuperscript{177} Moïse, Secular and Religious Works, p. 276.
synagogue of Shearith Israel. Beth Elohim’s Hebrew Sunday School became a casualty of the division of the two synagogues. The new director of KKBE’s Sunday school, now The Society for the Instruction of Jewish Youth, was Penina Moïse, a major supporter of reforms and “advancements” in the faith. Sally Lopez, who had been the conservative director of KKBE’s Sunday School, chose to follow her family and join Shearith Israel.178 There the school was called The Society for the Instruction of Jewish Doctrine, a name making it clear that Shearith Israel meant to teach “true” doctrines and not compromise on traditions. Each year at the annual examination the school’s director delivered an address about the students and what they learned; the examination closed with the students presenting their own original work. Members of the congregation would then write Isaac Leeser, founder of The Occident, to inform him of the wonderful ceremony. Whoever wrote to Leeser each year—it typically changed—also typically remarked on Shearith Israel’s parting from KKBE.

The review of the ceremony from June of 1845 was especially harsh on KKBE, particularly the role of women and exalted Shearith Israel for holding fast to tradition:

The nature and objects of the institution are clearly set forth in its name [The Society for the Instruction of Jewish Doctrine]. It has been founded but one year, when those who avowed orthodox

178 Breibart, Explorations in Charleston’s Jewish History, p. 82.
principles, and were opposed to the innovations established in the congregation “Beth Elohim,” withdrew from that body and established this society; and it dates its origin from that circumstance, as well as from the benignant power of woman’s influence. Women have caused all revolutions. The Peloponnesian war was produced by Aspasia; Helen caused the famous Trojan war; and we have here in this city the daughters of Israel waging an interminable war against immorality and irreligion, by imbuing the tender minds of our youth with a knowledge of our ancient faith and a practice of its divine precepts. We begin to feel and recognise the true social position of woman; and the existence of this institution has so beautifully developed her latent resources, her zeal and perseverance, that with a heart gushing with grateful emotions (as a parent of one of the pupils), we exclaim, “Powerful and beautiful is thy influence, O woman!” To stand forth as the champion of religion and morality, is her appropriate sphere. No aim or object can be more noble or more worthy of an enlightened Jewish female, than that which seeks to advance the character of Israel by inculcating those lessons of wisdom and piety, which, like charity, extend beyond the grave into the boundless realms of eternity. [italics mine]179

The role of women at both synagogues was in fact more or less identical, but the author of the letter did not see it that way. Because the women at KKBE promoted reforms, their instruction was tainted and therefore inadequate. It was fruit from a poisonous tree. Regardless of what was taught at Beth Elohim, it would never be pure Judaism. “Women have caused all revolutions,” the author wrote, but at the same time denied that women’s roles changed. According to this viewpoint, the women of Shearith Israel were the champions of the faith, using their gifts and knowledge to halt the rebellion that is Reform Judaism and

179 “Examination of the Pupils of ‘The Society for the Instruction of Jewish Doctrine,’ June 1845.
put down the revolution that caused the unpleasant split between the two synagogues, the women of Shearith Israel are truly pious for staying in their sphere and not becoming involved in the politics of the divide.

Also revealing is how the author saw the role of women in Judaism generally. Either deliberately or unintentionally, they did not comprehend how much the role of women had changed in Judaism. This allowed the author to condemn the women at KKBE while ignoring that the role of women in their own synagogue was drastically different than it would have been decades prior. Charity and piety were originally models and roles for Christian women and only recently extended as models of Jewish womanhood. But Shearith Israel’s women did not see those new roles as “revolutionary.”

One can gather from the review that its author was not very old, as they had children in the school. And the author seemed to be unfamiliar with the traditional roles of womanhood just prior to their own ascent into adulthood. The author exclaimed the virtues of female piety, for instance, when less than ten years earlier Jewish men ended morning prayers by thanking God that He did not make them women. Women were not considered worthy of worshipping God and therefore were forced behind lattice blocked balconies. It was actually the American lifestyle and the influence of Christian neighbors that made her role as an educator “traditional” rather than her Jewish heritage.
One month earlier, in May 1845, a woman from KKBE had written to *The Occident* to boast of the congregation’s annual ceremony for its Sunday School. The tenor of their letter was far gentler. The author, identified only as M.M.S., remarked on the division between the congregations but did not wish to discuss the topic further. “Unfortunately,” she wrote, “the storm which burst over the heads of our local family of Israel, and threatened in its relentless fury to immolate the highly esteemed changes effected in our worship, did not leave this noble institution entirely unscathed; its numerical strength was diminished, and the sphere of usefulness contracted by resignations. It is not our purpose to pursue this theme, or trace out the causes which led to this untoward event.”

Students in the Sunday schools were not ignorant about what was taking place. At the 1847 ceremony for Shearith Israel, one student reflected on his education and what it meant to follow his ancient faith:

> It teaches him, secondly, that there is a great, invisible, almighty, and omnipotent God—a perfect unity—who created this world and all that is therein by his wisdom, to whom alone we owe adoration, and who requires no mediator between him and mankind [Jesus]. He is the only God to whom we have to look up for salvation. It teaches him, finally, that our ancestors, through their transgressions, have been scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth; but at a certain time, known to God only, he will send us a Messiah or Anointed from the seed of David, by whose agency we shall be reassembled from the four quarters of the globe, and

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restored to our country, where we shall serve God as in former times, and when the Lord shall be acknowledged as a unity by all the nations of the earth.  

The student clearly understood the controversy over eliminating doctrine from the Maimonidean Creed. He was specific and intentional about espousing the truth of the coming person of the Messiah as well as the restoration of the Jews to Israel. Those were two doctrines that Reformers had taken out of the Maimonidean Creed. He was also trained to identify Christian teachings and asserted that there should be no mediator between God and man.

To that might be counter-pointed the remarks of Nathaniel Levin, a prominent Charleston Jew and a member at Beth Elohim, who in 1842 addressed The Society for the Instruction of Jewish Youth, the congregation’s Sunday School. His remarks, a sermon of sorts on the piety and majesty of women, readily acknowledged the affect of American society on the change in Jewish perceptions of women.

In this enlightened age and country she deservedly ranks among the highest. On an equality with man in this happy land; she shows herself worthy of her station by emulating him in every good enterprise in which she can properly embark, and by taking a prominent, though modest part, in his moral reformation and intellectual improvement. Indeed, so accustomed has the American

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citizen become to the cooperation of woman, in undertakings which affect the community in its social aspect; that he seldom ventures far in his labours, whether they be of a moral, religious, or charitable character, without first obtaining her sanction, or at least her advice.

He continued, “The Jewish female, enjoying all the blessings and privileges that emanate from a free and republican government, does not wait to be led into schemes of benevolence; she does not merely accompany man in the promulgation of useful principles, or the performance of popular charities. Like an angel of light she points the way herself, and is often among the foremost in missions of mercy.” In all, his remarks not only praised women for their leadership and participation in the renewal of the faith, but they acknowledged that traditional Judaism had not treated women well. It is worth noting, in fact, that his address was not all that different in tone and rhetoric from the emphasis of the time on virtuous ladyhood, so popular at picnics and other, secular public occasions. “Delicate in her constitution, mild and beneficent in her disposition, warm in her affections, and lovely in all her actions,” Levin said, “she has ever been (where her worth was properly appreciated) the guardian and the ornament of the social compact.”¹⁸²

It took years for the men of Shearith Israel to praise their women teachers and value their piety. Yet the men of Beth Elohim had been doing so for some time. After all, Reformers were the ones who tried to give women a place in the synagogue from the time of their birth, adding the naming ceremony for female babies. These men saw the way in which Christian society honored their women, and they followed their lead.

American Judaism, as a whole, could not help but be influenced by Christianity. The way that Christians worshiped and the role Christian women played in their faith impacted Judaism. Some of the influence on Jews was from American culture allowing the idea of female virtue began to creep into the Jewish belief system. Moreover, men began to allow women into their religious practice. Though the women at Shearith Israel and KKBE disagreed on their roles and purposes in the synagogue, they both agreed that it was their duty to educate the next generation. And that was a reform, whether it was called so or not.
CONCLUSION

TRANSFORMING JUDAISM

In the twenty-first century, few Orthodox synagogues exist in America. The number of Orthodox Jews in America is small, roughly 10% of the Jewish population at large; the majority of Jews in America today identify themselves as Reform or “just Jewish,” or, as it’s becoming more common, “other.”\(^{183}\) It might not be too much to argue that the movement that began fewer than fifty men in Charleston has become the way most Jews identify themselves.

Jews living in Charleston saw the height of the city’s Jewish population and cultural influence begin to wane after the collapse of Charleston’s economy during the 1820s. When Charleston’s economy suffered in the 1820s, many of its Jewish residents fled to the north for a chance to recover their economic losses. Jewish immigrants came in droves to other port cities like New York, and the once thriving and vibrant Jewish community of Charleston became depressed. Once the leader of the Reform movement, the city’s role in it was practically over as Jewish communities in cities such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia took the lead.

During the Civil War, Charleston’s Jews sided with their state. Though they saw themselves as Americans, they also saw themselves as Southerners. They did not see the irony of their support of slavery, as they too were slaves in Egypt. The Confederacy’s Secretary of State and then War, Judah P. Benjamin, was Jewish. Both synagogues in Charleston suffered great damage as a result of the war, and items that were sent to Columbia to be kept safe during the war were largely destroyed when General William T. Sherman marched through the city in 1865. The two synagogues were forced to join together for a period after the war, much to their chagrin, due to the sharp decline of the Jewish population in the city.\(^{184}\) In the years following, Charleston’s Jewish population struggled to rebuild; although it eventually gained ground, it did not see the same growth as other major cities across the country.

Yet Charleston’s decline as a center of Reformed Judaism, paradoxically, only spoke to the explosive growth of Reform ideas. Partly that was because what happened in Charleston, broadly speaking, began to happen elsewhere as Judaism sought new cultural centers in America. And even as these dynamics were at work in America, Reform ideas grew elsewhere. Even as American Jews introduced reforms based on the pressures of American culture and Christian missionary zeal, German Jews were also transforming what it meant to be Jewish. German reforms were not impacted by Christian missionaries as was the

case in America, but they too, especially in liturgical reforms, began to change the practices of Judaism. So when German immigrants made their way to America, the Reform movement grew rapidly. Between 1840 and 1860, 150,000 Jewish immigrants came to America, most of them from Germany.\footnote{Sarna, \textit{American Judaism}, p. 63.} Those German immigrants were amenable to change and they joined the cause for Reform Judaism in America. The Jewish community in America would never be united again.

What began in a petition in the Congregation of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina in the nineteenth century, in response to Christian missionaries and the ethic of American democracy, has continued to reverberate. In the twentieth century even more division occurred, as the Conservative movement emerged and split from the Orthodox. The Conservative movement then faced a split of its own when the Reconstructionist movement began. Though separated from Conservative synagogues, it most resembles Reform Judaism. It is now the fastest growing sect of Judaism in the country. The contagion of liberty that historian Bernard Bailyn once perceived in the dynamics of the American Revolution can also be traced in American
Judaism: the reform ideas first proposed in Charleston have not stopped spreading.\textsuperscript{186}

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