

Jews for Slavery - Jews against Slavery

By Jerry Klinger

The American Civil War was a crucible of values, power, change and American amalgamation. The War resolved the American ideals first expressed in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

For the Jew it was a watershed in the struggle for equality in America that tested the very foundation of the American experiment.

Every spring, the Passover holiday is observed. Jews gather with family and friends to retell the Biblical story of how God freed the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. The gathering is called a Seder, a retelling of the story in an order. Rabbi Gamliel said almost two thousand years ago, that whoever does not explain three symbols during the Seder has not fulfilled the requirements. The symbols are Pesach - the sacrificial lamb, Matzah- unleavened bread, a simple mixture of flour and water, and Maror or bitter herbs, to remind everyone of the bitterness of slavery.

Slavery in the Americas began with the conquest of the New World. The Spanish and Portuguese quickly learned that the conquered indigenous American Indian population could not be easily remade into slave labor. The Indians did not endure under the European taskmasters and European disease. In simple terms, many escaped, weakened and died. A cheap labor supply was needed to work the European colonial enterprises. A benign slave system existed through much of the coastal African societies that European traders came into contact with. Opportunity bred greed and soon African and Arab trading enterprises began to supply black human beings as merchandise to the seemingly insatiable demands of the New World colonists. Slavery became very profitable for both the slaver in Africa supplying "merchandise" and the colonists buying the human merchandise. Over the course of three hundred years, until the early 19th century, millions of black Africans were forcibly "exported" as slaves to the Americas.

Slaving as an industry was controlled and dominated by the British, French, Dutch and Portuguese. The Spanish were barred, by the 1494 treaty of Tordesillas, from direct slaving from Africa. African labor was introduced to the English American colonies in 1619 as a time defined indentured servitude. A Dutch trading vessel first brought 20 blacks to Virginia. One of the black indentured servants, Anthony Johnson, probably of mixed parentage, eventually purchased his own freedom. He became a prosperous Virginia landholder in time. He too purchased the labor of black indentured servants. Johnson became embroiled in a legal dispute, Johnson vs. Parker, 1653, Northampton, Va., which helped set the precedent for lifelong indentured servitude. One of his black indentured servants, John Casor, swindled him out of his legal indentured labor time with the help of a white farmer named Parker. Johnson took Parker to court and won the precedent of lifetime labor and service from John Casor. Ironically and horribly tragic, it was the lawsuit of one black man against another that helped lead to institutionalized slavery in Virginia. . Massachusetts was the first North American English colony to legalize slavery in 1641.

Slavery was not very economic in the American colonies until the late 18th century; it was even believed that the practice might die out. Moral issues were raised and argued over the viability of slavery but that was to change. Eli Whitney, a Yale University graduate from Westboro, Massachusetts, invented the cotton gin in 1793. Cotton farming which did well in the Southern English Colonies suddenly became king as the new invention made cotton very profitable. The demand for black slaves exploded in the Southern American colonies. Cheap labor was more valuable than the land upon which cotton was grown upon. At the time of the American Revolution, slavery was legal in all the Colonies. Within the span of the next seven decades the slave labor system and the institution of slavery split the States into slave and non-slave economies.

What was the Jewish connection to slave trading? Between 1492 and 1865, Jews were relatively few in the Americas. Small groups of Marranos (Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had outwardly converted to Christianity but secretly remained Jewish), moved to the New World to escape the Inquisition and find a relative degree of religious freedom. Some moved to the early colonies engaging in agricultural and commercial endeavors. Those involved in agriculture employed slave labor, as did the much larger Christian communities. Some Marranos participated as captains of slave ships but the numbers were small. The Inquisition was very vigilant about keeping Jews, whether hidden or visible, from living or working within the reaches of the Church. In the English colonies by the time of the American Revolution there were about 1300 Jews. A few Jewish merchants, such as Aaron Lopez, of Newport, Rhode Island, participated in a handful of slave trading enterprises. Of the more than 10,000 estimated British slave-trading voyages, Jewish involvement was never significant. A limited number of British, Dutch and American Jews did participate as slave factors and investors.

By 1860, like their Christian neighbors and where the legal and economic system permitted, Jews participated in the slave business. Seven percent of white Southerners, about 389,000 people, which included Jews, owned slaves. Given that the Jewish population of the South was estimated at 15,000, the impact of Jews on the slave system was small.

The Revolutionary War was fought by the Confederation of Sovereign States who banded together in a loose governmental structure to battle a common enemy, the British. The Articles of Confederation, the governing document, soon proved not workable for the developing newly independent States to provide for the common defense and welfare. A new document had to be created to which the States ceded certain powers to the central government, but retained the balance of rights and powers to themselves – that document became the Federal Constitution.

Differences between regions and States were compromised and left undefined in the new document. A series of amendments were soon added, known as the Bill of Rights. Inherent in the document was an understanding and respect for the rights of property; slaves were property. The famed or infamous Dredd Scott decision of 1857 U.S. Supreme Court upheld that very point. What remained unresolved was the central issue of States' Rights and the very concept of the compact - was it voluntary or irrevocable? Were Americans citizens of the United States and in turn residents of their respective States or were Americans citizens of their Sovereign States living under the limited protection of the U.S. government? For the Jew the question was further convoluted - are they Jewish Americans or are they Jewish citizens of their respective States?

Napoleonic Europe had been stimulated by the American political experiment. The taste of freedom led to many bloody and failed uprisings from France to Poland to Russia to Italy. For the Jew, whether from Hungary, Germany or Prussia, the answer was the same – no matter how much they tried to be accepted as citizens of their countries - they were always Jews. Many reached the simple conclusion that they could never be free in Europe but in America they could.

In America Jews quickly experienced a new freedom. They strove to be integrated as citizens and be recognized as citizens of the State they lived in. Immigrants who went to live in New York who adopted the values, culture and ideals of New York were quickly seen as New Yorkers. Immigrants who went to live in Virginia adopted the values, culture and ideals of Virginians were quickly seen as Virginians. Americans were defined by what State they came from.

During the Civil War soldiers fought, died and were buried according to the States they came from. It was not until after the war that the U.S. Army recognized units not by State but as purely American. Jews measured their new position in America in comparison to Europe and became ardent supporters of their States and the new freedoms accorded to them. It was a historic Jewish response to the anti-Semitic stereotype that Jews were not loyal citizens of their country and could not be trusted. Jews, in face of the moral dilemma of slavery, rallied loyally to their State and region.

Slavery was an issue that eventually divided all Americans – Christian and Jew, North and South. For Jews, slavery was an issue that was faced and resolved sometimes on a personal basis. Aaron Levy, the founder of Aaronsburg, Pennsylvania, purchased Rachael, a black slave, in the 1780's and brought her to Philadelphia. He freed her. He educated her and he married her. She sleeps eternally in the Mikve Israel cemetery not far from the remains of Hayim Solomon, the financier of the American Revolution. Moses Elias Levy, a Florida sugar planter and investor, published, in 1828, "A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery." His work was not well received in the South. His son, himself a slave-holding planter, identifying himself with his State (Florida), became estranged from his father. He changed his name to Yulee and converted to Christianity.

David Yulee was the first American of Jewish heritage to be elected to the United States Senate in 1845. The first professing Jew to be elected to the United States Senate was Judah P. Benjamin, a slaveholder and planter from Louisiana, in 1852. Benjamin's was to play a major role during the Civil War as Secretary of War and later Secretary of State of the Confederacy. His likeness was used on the Confederate two-dollar bill: the only Jew ever to be recognized in such a manner until the establishment of the modern State of Israel. The first successful anti-slavery prosecution was won by a Jewish attorney in New York, Philip J. Joachimson.

August, (Anshel) Bondi was born in Vienna, Austria July 21, 1833. He was the son of Jews who wanted him to have both a religious and a secular education. Caught up as a participant in the failed liberal revolution of 1848, the Bondi family fled to New Orleans and settled in St. Louis, Missouri. Young Bondi encountered, first hand, the horrors of slavery and was deeply disgusted. In 1855 a New York Tribune editorial urged freedom-loving Americans to "hurry out to Kansas to help save the state from the curse of slavery." Bondi responded immediately. He moved to Kansas and along with two other Jews, Theodore Weiner from Poland and Jacob Benjamin from

Bohemia established a trading post in Ossa-watomie. Their abolitionist sentiments very soon brought pro-slavery terrorists upon them. Their cabin was burned, their livestock stolen. Their trading post was destroyed in the presence of Federal troops who did nothing. The three courageous Jews joined a rabid local abolitionist, to defend their rights as citizens and to help rid the horror of slavery from Kansas. The Jews joined the Kansas Regulars under the leadership of John Brown.

In a famous battle between the Regulars and the pro-slavery forces at Black Jack Creek, with the bullets whistling viciously above their heads, 23 year old Bondi turned to his 57 year old friend Weiner and asked in Yiddish – "Nu, was meinen Sie jetzt?" (Well, what do you think of this now?) He answered, 'Was soll ich meinen? Sof odem moves' (What should I think? Man's life ends in death). Kansas joined the union as a Free State. Bondi married Henrietta Einstein of Louisville, Kentucky in 1860. Their home became a way station for the Underground Railroad smuggling slaves to the North and freedom. The Civil War began in 1861, Bondi enlisted in the Union army encouraged by the words of his mother. He later wrote in his autobiography "as a Jew I am obliged to protect institutions that guarantee freedom for all faiths." August Bondi died in 1907, a respected judge and member of his Kansas community.

The Jewish population of the North was considerably larger than that of the South. Jews fought and were visibly represented on both sides of the war. Two thousand Jews fought for the South and nine thousand Jews fought for the North. Seven Jews were to win the highest decoration for bravery the Union could offer during the ensuing war, the Congressional Medal of Honor. Jews rose to the rank of general in the Union army. Frederick Kneffler rose from a private to be the first Jewish Major General in an American army. The Confederate States listed at least 23 Jewish officers. The first surgeon general was David de Leon of the Confederacy. Captain Lewis Meyers-Harby of the Confederate Navy was highly distinguished in the defense of Galveston, Texas.

Jew faced Jew in the war- as American brother faced brother. Prussian born Major Adolph Proskauer of Mobile led the 12th Alabama at Gettysburg. Captain Park wrote to Proskauer's widow "I can see him now, in mental view, as he nobly carried himself at Gettysburg, standing coolly and calmly, with cigar in his mouth, at the head of the 12th Alabama, amid a perfect rain of bullets, shot and shell. He was the personification of intrepid gallantry, of imperturbable courage." Lieutenant Abraham Cohn of the 6th New Hampshire Volunteers was born in the East Prussian town of Guttentag in 1832. He fought in eleven major battles and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor when, almost single handedly, he rallied a broken Union line to stand and fight in the face of certain disaster- saving the regiment.

Decades after the war ended a rising chorus of nativist anti-Semitism rose, partially in response to the flooding immigration of eastern European Jewry. The contributions of American Jewry in the Civil War were forgotten and drowned out by charges that Jews did not fight for their country. The Hebrew Union Veterans Organization was founded March 15, 1896. The organization was the forerunner of the Jewish War Veterans of America.

Rabbinic leadership fell on both sides of slavery and the war as did Christian leadership. Rabbis wrote treatises arguing both for and against slavery. Rabbi Illowy, Lloyd Street Synagogue,

The issue might have rested quietly and been ignored except for a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) worker who visited the Virginia camp of the 65th Regiment of the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry – Cameron's Dragoons, a few months later. He was horrified to discover that a Jew, Michael Allen of Philadelphia, was the regimentally elected Chaplain. With the support of the YMCA, he began a public campaign for Allen's dismissal. Assistant Adjutant General of the Army George D., Ruggles issued a written warning that Allen would be discharged without pay or allowance. Humiliated, Allen resigned. Allen had been the freely elected regimental chaplain without malice or knowledge of the Volunteer bill's prohibitions. A very large proportion of the 1200 men who made up Cameron's Dragoons were Jews. The commanding officer was Colonel Max Friedman.

Col. Friedman had no intention of letting the issue go. He soon looked for an ordained rabbi to replace Allen. Rev. Arnold Fischel of Shearith Israel Synagogue, N.Y. was chosen. A remarkable correspondence about the chaplaincy issue began between Secretary of War Cameron, for whom the regiment was named, and Rabbi Fischel. After five months the correspondence was leaked to the press. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise up until that time had been the lone protesting public voice - "Jews pay taxes, serve in the military forces, die in battle if such be their destiny: why then should rabbis who might apply for military commission be discriminated against?"

Northern Judaism, which until that time had only rudimentary organizational structures, now had a focus – a common cause – Jewish American rights. Jewish periodicals picked up the call and soon the call was being echoed in the non Jewish press. The Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch wrote - "so soon as it becomes a settled point that a native born American is disqualified, by his peculiar religious belief, from filling any position under government, we need not boast no longer of our vaunted liberty, freedom and equality." Petitions of protest flooded Congress but it was access to President Lincoln that was needed. Moses Grinnel, a major financial supporter of the Republican Party, wrote to Lincoln requesting he meet with Rabbi Fischel. December 11, 1861, Lincoln met with Rabbi Fishcel.

Two days later Lincoln wrote to the Rabbi:

My dear Sir: I find there are several particulars in which the present law in regard to Chaplains is supposed to be deficient, all which I now design presenting to the appropriate Committee in Congress. I shall try to have a new law broad enough to cover what is desired by you in behalf of the Israelites.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln.

Lincoln was true to his word. Almost a year after Congressman Vallandigham first protested the Chaplaincy issue, the law was modified. Jews could be Chaplains.

The victory of Jewish rights was soon to fade into near meaninglessness. A far more serious threat to the very right of Jews to live in America emerged in the North.

GENERAL ORDERS No. 11
HDQRS. 13TH A. C., DEPT. OF THE TENN.
Holly Springs, Mississippi
December 17, 1862.

The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order.

Post commanders will see that all of this class of people be furnished passes and required to leave, and any one returning after such notification will be arrested and held in confinement until an opportunity occurs of sending them out as prisoners, unless furnished with permit from headquarters.

No passes will be given these people to visit headquarters for the purpose of making personal application for trade permits.

By order of Major General U. S. Grant:

General Ulysses S. Grant's broad order of December 17, 1862, expelled all Jews potentially from Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi with 24 hours notice. Grant, frustrated by contraband trafficking to the Confederacy, focused on the one visible, easily identified general class of people in his military sphere of control. It is very likely that a small number of Jews were involved in smuggling but then Grant chose to focus on the Jews and not on the much larger Christian community engaged in the same illegal trade of supplies to aide the South. Grant's sweeping order appealed to underlying common anti-Semitism, deeming Jews as guilty without trial or accusation. Jews were guilty by being Jews. Never in American history had a single class of people been judged guilty for the possible acts of a few.

The Southern reasons for fighting the invading oppression of the Northerner were being confirmed. Southerners said the war was not to free the black man and restore the Union but was for power and dominance of one region over another; the Jew would be the sacrificial lamb.

Jews throughout the Union were alarmed. Telegrams flew from Kentucky to Maine. Under the able protest leadership of Cesar Kaskel who conferred with the Rabbis and leaders of Cincinnati on his way to Washington the alarm spread to the non Jewish press. Telegrams and letters sent to Washington met with no response. Order number 11 prohibited contacting General Grant to appeal the order. There was only one appeal to the tyrannical military order of expulsion – appeal to President Lincoln directly.

In Washington, Kaskel met with Adolphus S. Solomons of the Executive Committee of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites. They secured the assistance of Congressman Gurley

from Ohio, a friend of Rabbi Wise, to gain an audience with President Lincoln. On January 3, 1863, two days after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves that were still within the Confederacy, Kaskel met Lincoln. The President had known nothing of General Order 11 and was shocked by the implication. Lincoln issued instructions to the General in Chief of the Army Henry W. Halleck. The next day a letter was sent to General Grant.

War Department

Washington, January 4, 1863.

Major-General Grant

Holly Springs, Miss.:

A paper purporting to be General Orders, No. 11, issued. By you December 17, has been presented here. By its terms it expels all Jews from your department. If such an order has been issued, it will be immediately revoked.

H.W. Halleck

General in Chief

General Grant rescinded his order three days later. Was Grant anti-Semitic? Most likely Grant reflected the common prejudices of his era and acted without forethought or real malice.

In 1868, U.S. Grant was elected President of the United States. He never expressed or engaged in any anti-Semitic act for the rest of his life. He never apologized for General Order Number 11. Grant's administration was extraordinary in that Grant appointed more Jews to more governmental positions than any previous President. He nominated a Jew to be Secretary of the Treasury. He ordered the American State department to help the Jews in Rumania when they were savagely attacked in anti-Semitic rioting. Grant was the first President to attend a Jewish religious service when he officiated at the dedication of Washington, D.C.'s conservative Adas Israel synagogue.

1868 saw the passage of the 14th amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Federal law would be dominant over State law. North Carolina, the last State to require a belief in Christianity to hold elected office, officially changed its laws in 1868. Jews in the Civil War era had undergone a radical transformation in America. They were now truly Americans, equal with Christians in opportunity and freedom. Jewish organizations began to stand up and represent Jewish interests on a national basis. Prejudices remained but no longer would federal, state or local law prohibit Jews from the promise of America.