

Address/Sermon *Erev Shabbat* Service
Dr. Gary P. Zola
Congregation Or Chadash
Tucson, Arizona
October 24, 2014
א' חשוון תשע"ה

PROFILES IN AMERICAN JEWISH COURAGE

Comedian Milton Berle used to tell a memorable story. On one particular occasion, he was doing a series of performances, and he agreed to make an appearance at a local senior citizen center. Upon his arrival, he began shaking hands with the residents in the main lobby. As he approached an elderly sullen woman sitting off to the side, he extended his hand to her and said: "Hello ma'am, you know who I am, don't you?"

Immediately, the woman's countenance brightened and she happily responded: "Now don't you worry young man! You just go right over to that woman behind the desk. If you don't know who you are, just ask her; she'll be more than happy to remind you!"

* * * * *

This yarn serves as a humorous reminder that, more often than not, our fame and renown may not be as manifest as we might like to assume. In speaking of the American Jewish experience, do we really know who we are?

* * * * *

This evening, let us take this opportunity to speak to a *metaphoric* "lady behind the desk," who will be happy to remind us who we are as Americans and as Jews. The lady behind the desk is named "Clio" who, according to Greek mythology, is the muse of history.

* * * * *

Even a cursory assessment of the resources and wealth of the Tucson Jewish community today – indeed of the entire Jewish community of Arizona – would leave our pioneering forbears dumbstruck. Not only would those pioneers not recognize the terrain or towns they once called home, but they most assuredly would be dazed – actually overwhelmed by the array of emoluments that constitute today's Jewish communal infrastructure: schools,

communal organizations, recreational facilities, synagogues, rabbis, cantors, educators – the urban cities of Tucson boast a beautiful bouquet of Jewish flowers that the first Jews to settle in this part of the country – the Zeckendorfs, the Steinfelds, the Jacobs, the Mansfields, the Goldbergs, Drachmans (to name but a few) – could have hardly imagined. After all, most of Arizona’s first Jewish settlers journeyed to this vast desert wilderness in search of a promising livelihood - not a kosher lifestyle. As one scholar of this region has put it – “[Jews who ventured to Arizona in the last decades of the 19th century] “risked not only life and limb, but their religious identity as well . . .”¹

Yet even if the dream of financial success enticed Jews to this part of the world, we must not forget that Jewish life followed. Here (as was the case in so many Jewish communities), human death spawned Jewish communal life. The Jew’s age-old desire to rest eternally in Jewish sacred ground inevitably resulted in the establishment of a cemetery. Once this transpired, it was a small step to the creation of benevolent societies that helped fellow Jews through trying times - and ultimately worship services where קריש could be recited. “Religious occasions requiring Hebrew prayers fell, in a rabbi’s absence, upon the shoulders of a learned layman.”² Tucson’s Samuel Drachman (1837-1911) was such a man.

Drachman, a central European immigrant turned Confederate soldier during the Civil War, arrived in Tucson in 1867 by way of Charleston, South Carolina. He was a merchandiser, a government contractor, and a civil servant. By 1890, the local newspaper would describe him as “one of [Tucson’s] most popular and respected citizens.” Just prior to his death in 1911, he helped organize Tucson’s first synagogue, Emanu-el.

It just so happens that history has recorded precisely where Samuel Drachman was 120 years ago on this very day—October 25, 1894. Drachman had traveled up to Phoenix to officiate at a wedding of a young Jewish couple. His remarks were carried in the local paper, and they merit repetition: “The eyes of the world are now upon you,” Drachman told the young couple, “that you may

¹Floyd S. Fierman, “The Goldberg Brothers: Arizona Pioneers,” *American Jewish Archives* 18, no. 1 (1966): 3.

² Floyd S. Fierman, “The Drachmans of Arizona,” *American Jewish Archives* 16, no. 2 (1964): 136.

live and act as becomes a son and a daughter in Israel.”³

* * * * *

Today, 120 years later, we find ourselves blessed by countless Jewish accouterments. Yet Samuel Drachman’s charge to that young couple remains as relevant today as it was when he uttered those words, again to quote Drachman, at the “hymeneal altar.”

* * * * *

On this Sabbath eve, let us pause to consider the courage and fortitude that our American Jewish forebears possessed — the remarkable strength they needed to create a Jewish congregation and a Jewish community *ex nihilo* – out of nothingness.

As we contemplate this intrepidity, we will briefly meet *three* little-known American Jews — prototypical examples of American Jewish courage. Although these three profiles do not come from the annals of Congregation Or Chadash, they offer us a rationale for appreciating the charge Sam Drachman gave to that young couple 120 years ago today.

* * * * *

Our first profile in American Jewish courage is a woman named Penina Moïse who was born in 1797 and died in 1880. Moïse was connected by blood and through the marriage of siblings to the most prominent Jewish families of nineteenth century Charleston.

Penina was a tireless devotee of literature and learning. She was a competent poet whose contemplative verses focused on the ideals of American Judaism: the priceless gift of freedom, the sublime beauty of nature, the precious value of life, and the unique heritage that each Jew who walks this earth potentially represents.

Moïse’s best known literary legacy was the hymnal she composed for her congregation: K.K. Beth Elohim of Charleston. Those who still remember the old *Union Hymnal* may remember the fruit of Ms. Moïse’s pen, for some of her moving hymns were still being sung in Reform synagogues through the mid-20th century.

³Abraham S. Chanin, “Arizona’s Jewish Pioneers,” Nearprint file on Arizona Jewish history, located in The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Yet Penina Moïse’s legacy of courage derives not so much from her poetry as it does from another, lesser known aspect of her biography — a characteristic which makes Ms. Moïse emblematic of the American Jewish experience in total. Penina Moïse was a woman who, by any standard of measure, endured a life of challenge and hardship. And she overcame life’s obstacles in a spirit of courage and faithfulness.

Her father died when she was but twelve years old, compelling her to leave school and begin to work in order to support the large and financially destitute family that was left behind. The depth of her financial impoverishment was such that it was never to be surmounted. As a single woman — she never married — Moïse had no alternative but to support herself, her invalid brother (Isaac), and, in time, her aged mother who — toward the end of her life — was stricken with paralysis.

This single woman faced additional hardships. Her eyesight began to fail her as she approached her mid-forties and, by the time she turned fifty, she was completely blind. Her beloved sister and co-proprietor of the school house they operated, Rachel Moïse, fell ill and died. In short, here was a life filled with exceptional levels of suffering, crushing disappointments, and painful losses.

Still, throughout it all, Moïse continued to write sublime verses, rhymes and prose — literary treasures for the ages — even as she eked out her daily livelihood through her work as a loving and beloved school teacher.

And when she was laid to rest, she was remembered and eulogized by her peers and contemporaries *not* as a woman who suffered and agonized but, amazingly, the historical obituaries describe her as a woman with a spirited personality, always exuding a contented and hopeful disposition. Three decades of sightlessness never blinded her vision of life’s pleasures and the world’s beauty. She radiated a joie d’vivre — even in the face of life’s hardships.

And in her elderly years, young Jewish parents in Charleston would actually bring their newborn children and set them down in her lap in the hope that physical contact with this extraordinary woman would imbue and bequeath a hopeful outlook on life to their newborn infant.

Penina Moïse is a profile in the spiritual courage of American Jewry. She exemplifies one important facet of this congregation’s founding mission.

* * * * *

Rabbi Maximilian Heller (1860-1929) was a member of Hebrew Union College's class of 1884, the school's second ordination class. After spending two years as an assistant rabbi in Chicago, Heller assumed the pulpit of Temple Sinai in New Orleans in 1887, and here he remained until his death in 1929.

Heller's career as a committed Reformer, a dedicated minister, and a learned scholar takes a rather unique and unexpected turn when, at the turn of the 20th century, he declared himself to be a Zionist — a supporter of Theodor Herzl's vision for the future of the Jewish people.

Heller's "conversion" to Zionism was all the more remarkable in light of the fact that his beloved teacher and mentor, Isaac M. Wise, spoke out in bitter opposition to Herzl's Zionist program. In 1897, just a few years prior to his death, Wise criticized the whole notion of political Zionism when he spoke to his rabbinic disciples at a meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In this famous speech, the aging and venerable Wise referred to Herzl's followers by calling them "fantastic dupes of a thoughtless Utopia which is to us a *fata morgana*, a momentary inebriation of morbid minds, a prostitution of Israel's holy cause to a madman's dance of unsound politicians." Almost all of the rabbis who studied with Wise and who looked to him as their mentor remembered their sainted teacher's admonition.

Not long after Wise's death in 1900, Heller informed his rabbinic colleagues that he had joined the Federation of American Zionists in order to support Herzl's cause. By 1907, Heller had become a vice-president of both the Federation of American Zionists and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Customarily the vice-president of the Conference succeeded the president. However, on account of Heller's Zionist sympathies, a coalition of opponents plotted to break precedent and select a CCAR president other than Heller. To make matters even more complicated, one of the wealthiest and most influential members of his congregation, Isidore Newman, fell mortally ill just prior to the CCAR convention. With the Zionist controversy brewing, he needed to be at the convention in order to lobby for the presidency and to defend himself against the onslaught of those who wished to deny him succession. Some of his friends urged him to leave the bedside of his dying congregant and come to New York to lobby for the post.

Heller refused to leave the bedside of a dying congregant and the family

that depended on him. “I am too great a lover of fairness and freedom of speech to do that sort of cringing,” Heller wrote his supporters in New York. “Should I be defeated, I shall owe no one a grudge; I shall continue to work with and for the conference. *The cause cannot help it if the men are weak . . .*”

It does not always happen so, but in this instance probity actually trumped politics for Heller did become the CCAR’s president. Yet by placing loyalty, understanding, and love of Jewish life above personal gain or preference, Heller personifies a courageous profile that typifies a second aspect of this congregation’s founding aspirations.

* * * * *

This evening we have time to consider but one final profile: Rabbi Perry Nussbaum (1908-1987). Nussbaum was ordained by HUC in 1933. He was *not* an irenic spiritual leader and his prickly and blunt personality made him a wandering rabbi. During the first twenty-five years of his rabbinate, he served congregations in Melbourne, Australia, Amarillo, Texas, Pueblo, Colorado, Wichita, Kansas, Trenton, New Jersey, Long Beach, New York, and Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

After twenty-five years of peregrinations, Nussbaum found himself in Jackson, Mississippi, where he expected to spend the last half of his rabbinate sipping “mint juleps.” Ironically, however, Nussbaum’s arrival in peaceful Jackson was ill-timed. He came to town in the fall of 1954 -- four months after the day that most southerners had dubbed “Black Monday” — May 17, 1954 — the day that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional.

The Court's decision was a watershed event for the nation and, as the rabbi in Jackson was the leading spokesman for Mississippi's Jewry during this explosive period, Nussbaum became a human lightning rod in one of the state's stormiest periods. How did this northern transplant fare in the South during this volatile period in American history?

Nussbaum spent the last half of a forty-year rabbinate embroiled in a multi-fronted struggle over civil rights. On the one hand, he publicly excoriated Mississippi’s racism and those who were prepared to live with the status quo ante — some of whom were his own fearful congregants who worried that their rabbi’s crusading activities would endanger their livelihoods, their synagogue,

and their community. On the other hand, he resented and openly criticized northern Jewish activists who, as short-visit warriors for freedom, criticized, condescended, and belittled southern Jewry for eschewing a high-profile role in the local civil rights struggle.

He traveled hundreds of miles to visit young civil rights activists — the “Freedom Riders” — who had been incarcerated in Mississippi’s Parchman State penitentiary during the early 1960s. It was Nussbaum who insisted that Jackson’s ministerial association admitted black clergy to its ranks and, to the chagrin of many temple members, it was Nussbaum who insisted that the now-integrated ministerial association be permitted to hold its meetings inside the temple’s new building.

Always under fire from one side or another, Nussbaum repeatedly urged his congregants to listen to Judaism’s prophetic admonitions. He felt compelled to oppose bigotry, racialism, and segregation which he believed were morally wrong and, according to the U.S. Supreme Court, illegal. “You cannot resign from Judaism,” he told them.

Yet his crusading came at a heavy cost. On September 18, 1967, Ku Klux Klan member planted a bomb that destroyed a significant portion of Jackson’s newly dedicated house of worship. Two months later, on November 22, the rabbi’s home was bombed. Many non-Jews in Jackson reached out to the beleaguered temple and its rabbi, but many congregants never forgave Nussbaum. They told him he brought the calamity on them and on himself.

Nussbaum never sought nor did he receive much recognition for his labors, and he did not always accept this fate with equanimity. However, words he wrote during this period testify to the sincerity of his religious convictions. Defending his actions in the pages of a rabbinic journal that was read by thousands of colleagues, Nussbaum predicted that . . .

History will testify, and [the personal papers I donate to the American Jewish Archives] will reveal after [I] have gone to the *yeshivah shel maleh* [the academy in heaven] . . . at no time did [this rabbi] fail to rise to the challenges of these years, within and without the congregation . . .⁴

⁴“And Then There Was One In the Capital City of Mississippi,” *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* (October 1, 1963): 15-19.

Through his commitment to the “principles of righteousness and brotherhood” Rabbi Nussbaum constitutes a courageous profile of תקון עולם – the values of social justice that the founders of this congregation were determined to emulate.

* * * * *

Friends, on this Shabbat – פְּרַשַׁת נֹחַ – we are revisiting the familiar story of Noah and the ark. As we well know, Noah was told to take a male and female of every species onto the ark and live with them (לְהַחֲיוֹת אִתָּךְ). According to one fascinating midrash, not only was the ark filled with living creatures, but the spirits of generations past also accompanied Noah, his family, and the animals on that famous vessel:

אֶפְיָלוּ רוּחֹת נִבְנָסִים עִם נֹחַ אֶל הַתִּיבָה

Even spirits entered the ark with Noah . . .⁵

This midrash reminds us that, like Noah, every generation of Jews sails into uncharted waters. We do not know with certainty where and when we shall land on terra firma. Yet we know that if we carry the great and courageous spirit of our forbears along with us – and if we make these passions our own – לְהַחֲיוֹת אִתָּךְ – if we live with them, then history promises us that we will successfully endure whatever it is that may be awaiting us in the inscrutable future that lies ahead.

* * * * *

It was the brilliant German philosopher, Goethe, who – in his epic work Faust proclaimed: “WHAT YOU HAVE INHERITED FROM YOUR FOREBEARS, YOU MUST EARN FOR YOURSELF BEFORE YOU CAN REALLY CALL IT YOUR OWN.”⁶

Friends, Sam Drachman of Tucson spoke the truth to that young couple 120 years ago: “The eyes of the world are now upon you, that you may live and act as becomes a son and a daughter in Israel.”⁷

Let us carry the spirits of those who preceded in our hearts – never

⁵Genesis Rabbah, XXXI:13.

⁶From Goethe’s *Faust* (Part I, Scene I - “Night”). In German it reads: *Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.*”

⁷See quotation citation, *supra*.

failing to appreciate the efforts of those who have given us such a munificent American Jewish inheritance. If we resolve to enrich American Jewish life today then one day *our* posterity will look back as we did this evening and say with respectful admiration: our forebears not only studied history, but they had the courage and the vision to make history!⁸

* * * * *

And it is likely that no one captured the essence of this exhortation more aptly or elegantly than the first prime minister of the State of Israel, David Ben Gurion, with whose words we conclude: “We Jews must never, never live in the past, but the past must always live within us.”⁹

וכן יהי רצונו

⁸It is Otto von Bismarck who is often credited with having said: “The main thing is to make history, not to write it.”

⁹Cf. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, *A Treasury of The Art of Living* (Hollywood, California: Wilshire Book Company, 1963), p. 246.