

Hollins University

## Hollins Digital Commons

---

Undergraduate Research Awards

Student Scholarship and Creative Works

---

2022

### **Jewish People and Relationships with Christians in the Antebellum US**

Elizabeth Klein

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards>



Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Jewish People and Relationships with Christians in the Antebellum US

In surveys of American history, the presence of Jewish people is usually not mentioned more than twice. The first time is with the late 19th-century's major wave of Jewish immigration, and the second is with the onset of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Although discussing the history of Jewish immigration and anti-semitism in the United States is important, these stories are not the only ones that comprise Jewish American history. Between 1820 and 1860, the Jewish population in America grew from between 2,650-5,000 to between 150,000-200,000, multiplying almost fifty times over a forty-year period to accommodate an influx of Jewish people from central Europe.<sup>1,2</sup> Little attention is paid to the Jewish population in America during the antebellum era, yet it is clear from these numbers that Jewish people were here, and their presence was only growing. What occupied their lives, thoughts, and writings during this time? What can we learn from their experiences in this era as both a significant religious minority and members of the largest population of Jewish people in America until that point? One element that was stressed in the writings of Jewish Americans during the antebellum era was their interactions with Christians. Jewish people throughout this period devoted significant space to writing about relationships with Christians, attempting not only to create those connections but to define the favorability of their terms, offering critiques when they were harmful to Jewish people and welcoming those that benefitted them. This is perhaps because, as Jewish historian Naomi W. Cohen writes in her book *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality*, faced with the resilience of the "Christian-state idea," Jewish people in the antebellum era "increasingly desired...popular acceptance of a broad interpretation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, "Total Jewish Population in the United States (1654-Present)," Jewish Virtual Library, American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43.

constitutional spirit—an affirmation of the immutable principle of Jewish equality.”<sup>3</sup> Looking at the thoughts of Jewish people on their relationships with Christians—as well as Christians’ perspectives on these interactions—it is clear that Jewish people looked for this affirmation in relationships with Christians, though they did not always find it. By analyzing debates between Jewish and Christian people over the validity of each’s religion, attempts by Jewish people to protect the future of Judaism in America from proselytization, and newspaper clippings that offer a glimpse into interactions between Richmond’s Jewish and Christian communities, this essay will argue that in using relationships with Christians as a means to foment respect for their faith, Jewish people made a space for themselves within a Christian majority and tested the notion of national Christian homogeneity in antebellum America.

As Jewish Americans and their Christian counterparts interacted throughout the antebellum US, there was a concerted attempt by Christians to question the former group’s religious beliefs, putting them into situations where they could provide information about their faith and argue for its validity. In some instances, Jewish people took an active role in explaining their religion, voluntarily participating in conversations with Christians that allowed them to demonstrate the validity of their faith. However, Jewish people were sometimes forced into debates with Christians, where the latter pitted Jewish beliefs against their own to support their conviction that Christianity was the only true faith. In both types of interactions, Jewish people acted as representatives of their religion, attempting to show to a Christian audience that their beliefs had merit and deserved recognition.

One instance of this type of interaction revealed the obstacles Jewish people faced in attempting to form relationships with Christians where a foundation of mutual respect was not

---

<sup>3</sup> Naomi W. Cohen, *Jews in Christian America*, 42.

granted to them. In chapter three of his 1905 book *The Plea and the Pioneers in Virginia: A History of the Rise and Early Progress of the Disciples of Christ in Virginia*, Frederick Arthur Hodge provided a transcription of an 1829 conversation between a Christian preacher named Mr. Campbell and a Jewish citizen of Virginia named Mr. Judah.<sup>4</sup> Although the identity of this Mr. Judah remained entirely unclear, Mr. Campbell refers to Alexander Campbell, a famed Irish-American Protestant minister and theologian whose interpretation of the Bible led to the development of the Church of Christ.<sup>5</sup> In Hodge's book, Judah is introduced as a rabbi who reached out to Campbell because he wanted to meet.<sup>6</sup> The two met in 1829 through a mutual friend and began a conversation about their respective religions.<sup>7</sup> Although it is unclear if Hodge's account is fictional or a truthful retelling of the two men's meeting, its publication and the conversation it depicted warrant analysis to determine how Jewish and Christian relations were viewed and discussed in antebellum America.

The actual conversation, which takes up the remainder of the chapter, began with Judah expressing his appreciation that Campbell never sought to preach anti-Jewish sentiments, and Campbell responded by acknowledging the debt he believed Christians owed to Jewish people for the development of their own religion.<sup>8</sup> He then asked Judah if he could pose to him some questions "for [his] own information;" to which Judah replied, "It would give me pleasure to answer them."<sup>9</sup> Campbell began by asking questions to better understand Judaism from his

---

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Arthur Hodge, *The Plea and the Pioneers in Virginia: A History of the Rise and Early Progress of the Disciples of Christ in Virginia, with Biographical Sketches of the Pioneer Preachers* (Richmond, Everett Waddey Company, 1905).

<sup>5</sup> Hayden Amos Sutton, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve Ohio; with Biographical Sketches of the Principal Agents in Their Religious Movement* (Cincinnati, Chase and Hall, 1875).

<sup>6</sup> Hodge, *The Plea and the Pioneers*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian perspective, inquiring about Jewish beliefs and traditions.<sup>10</sup> However, after a few such questions, Campbell said to Judah, “I wish, for my own information, to know by what arguments you reject Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>11</sup> To this, Judah answered, “As a matter of information, but not with a design to convert you, I will continue to answer your questions.”<sup>12</sup>

Campbell was, of course, not asking Judah to disprove Jesus’s role as the messiah as a purely informative matter. Although he may have been interested to hear the Jewish perception of Jesus as is interpreted by Jewish people in their beliefs, he was already not entering the conversation with a completely open mind because he was unwilling to being converted to accept the Jewish conception of Jesus. His aim in asking this question of Judah could certainly have been to learn; however, this possibility seems unlikely based on Campbell’s repeated prodding of Judah’s explanations of Jesus’s importance. The rest of the conversation is largely a debate, marking a departure from its beginning where Judah was given room to fully explain his beliefs with the shared purpose of educating Campbell about Judaism. In this debate, Campbell took an interrogatory tone with Judah, beginning with phrases such as “Was it not...” and “Have you not...” in linguistic attempts to trap Judah into agreement.<sup>13</sup> After one particularly contentious stream of debate, Judah said, “I do not expect you, Mr. Campbell, to agree with me on this subject, and you know I told you that I did not aim at proselytizing you to my faith.”<sup>14</sup> Judah’s decision to brush off Campbell’s repeated questioning to reiterate this statement suggested a level of frustration in the conversation that Campbell ultimately refused to address.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 59.

In this expression, Judah conveyed his desire to reestablish the original purpose of the conversation as informative. His repeated assurance that he did not seek to proselytize Campbell shows that by this point in the conversation, Judah felt that Campbell had strayed from his expressed desire to ask Judah questions for his “own information” and should stop attempting to find the fault in all his points. Campbell, however, ignored this and continued by saying, “True, you said so; but I hope you will indulge me a little farther, as I wish to know what you have to offer against our faith, and what reasons influence you in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah.”<sup>15</sup> The two continued the conversation with the same back-and-forth tone until they were unable to break down their convictions any further.<sup>16</sup> Judah told Campbell that he did not blame him for his “proselytizing zeal,” and they ended the conversation respectfully.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to imagine Judah’s motivations for seeking conversation with Campbell. What kind of discussion did he expect? Clearly, he was uncomfortable when the discussion turned into a debate, where he felt that Campbell was looking for holes in his beliefs through which he could reinforce his own. Judah seemed much more at ease in the beginning when he perceived Campbell’s questions as coming from a desire to learn about Jewish beliefs. It is likely that he viewed conversation with Campbell, already a well-known religious and public figure, as an opportunity to speak with someone he saw as a representative of Christianity to promote Christian tolerance of Judaism. Even if Judah entered the conversation with different purposes, perhaps seeking only to discuss the similarities in their interpretations of the Old Testament, this too would have been revelatory of his desire to make connections with Campbell directly because of the differences in the two’s religions. For Judah, engaging in this conversation with

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 60-62

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 62.

Campbell—providing him with information about his beliefs, answering his questions, and responding to his arguments—was a matter of arguing for the validity of Judaism. In this interaction, Judah seems to have sought a relationship with Campbell, one of the nation’s leading theologians, in order to assert to a powerful audience that like Christianity, Judaism was a logical and valid form of faith, and that its adherents deserved to be respected for their beliefs in the same way Christians in America were.

An article published a little over a decade after Judah and Campbell’s conversation took place depicted a similar story of a Jewish person being asked to prove the validity of their faith, providing an example of the type of relationship with Christians that Jewish people refused to suffer. This 1843 article that also depicted an interaction between a Christian preacher and a Jewish person was published in Isaac Leeser’s periodical *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*.<sup>18</sup> This periodical, whose publication in Philadelphia began that year and continued until 1869, was devoted to the dissemination of Jewish religion, culture, and theology and served as a prominent platform in combatting anti-semitism. Its editor, Isaac Leeser, was a Jewish scholar and publisher who fought for Jewish rights and recognition throughout the antebellum era until his death in 1868. In a notice Leeser himself wrote in the periodical’s third edition, he provided a follow-up on the periodical’s earlier depiction of a speech given by a Jewish Mr. Blumenthal before a Christian audience in Chambersburg.<sup>19</sup> In May of 1843, the *Occident* had published a short article stating that through the Christian Reverend Bokum of the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, Blumenthal “obtained the permission of

---

<sup>18</sup> Isaac Leeser, ed., “Mr. Blumenthal’s Speech at Chambersburg,” *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 3 (June 1843).

<sup>19</sup> Leeser, ed. “Mr. Blumenthal’s Speech.”

making an exposition of the tenets of Judaism before a crowded church in that town.”<sup>20</sup> In the following edition of the *Occident*, Leeser clarified this version of the events, saying that Blumenthal’s speech was given less than voluntarily.<sup>21</sup>

This clarification revealed that Bokum had not been honest in his portrayal of the events at Chambersburg and had forced Blumenthal into defending his faith before a Christian audience with no preparation. Leeser wrote in his article that the perception of events that Bokum gave him was that Blumenthal “sought the opportunity of defending his religion before a Christian audience.”<sup>22</sup> However, Leeser stated that a letter he received from Blumenthal contradicted this vision and showed that Blumenthal was pressured into delivering a speech he was ill-prepared to make.<sup>23</sup> Bokum had asked Blumenthal, whom Leeser noted was a merchant and held “no office in the Jewish church,” to speak at Chambersburg before a Protestant congregation.<sup>24</sup> Before Blumenthal could respond to this invitation, a newspaper reported that he would deliver this speech the very next day.<sup>25</sup> Upon arriving at the church, Blumenthal felt that “were he to refuse accepting the invitation any longer, it might be supposed that he had nothing to advance in defence of his faith.”<sup>26</sup> Faced with few options, Blumenthal delivered the speech, and Leeser wrote that he did so admirably, giving an hour-long talk that succeeded in “obtaining the approbation of the audience.”<sup>27</sup> Should Bokum have sought to “obtain some credit by the weakening of the argument of his Israelitish opponent,” Leeser wrote, “he was evidently

---

<sup>20</sup> Isaac Leeser, ed., “American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, Part 2,” *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 2 (May 1843).

<sup>21</sup> Leeser, ed., “Mr. Blumenthal’s Speech.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



disappointed.”<sup>28</sup> Leeser closed the article by congratulating Blumenthal for so expertly defending the Jewish faith.<sup>29</sup>

This article provides an example of an interaction between a Christian and a Jewish participant that was entirely involuntary for the Jewish party. In the same way that Judah in his discussion with Campbell was made to hold up his beliefs before the latter’s repeated questions, Blumenthal’s unwillingly delivered speech shows that it was difficult for Jewish people in the antebellum US to obtain validation from the nation’s religious majority unless they submitted themselves to constant scrutiny. As is demonstrated in Blumenthal’s predicament, they were expected to answer to Christians and be ready to do so at any time, lest their lack of participation be interpreted as an inability to defend themselves against the arguments of Christians seeking in Jewish people a way to reinforce their own beliefs. In his article, Leeser characterized this interaction between Bokum and Blumenthal as the exact wrong way to go about forming relationships with Jewish people. His admonishment of Bokum demonstrates his belief that if Christians and Jewish people were to coexist, then a respect for the beliefs of the latter group without a desire to disprove their faith was a foundational element of such relationships.

These examples of interactions between Christians and Jewish people in the antebellum US demonstrate a similar dynamic. Although the Jewish person’s participation is willing in one instance and unwilling in the other, both show a desire for Jewish people to interact with Christians in a way that would benefit their existence in antebellum America. Blumenthal had not yet decided whether he would accept Bokum’s offer to speak at the church in Chambersburg. However, the fact that he was considering this invitation shows that even if he had eventually decided that the drawbacks of this speech would outweigh the advantages, Blumenthal did see

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

the possibility of advantages in this situation. Like Judah's aim in forming an inroad with Campbell to help Christians see the merit of Jewish beliefs, Blumenthal could envision a speech that would make the Christian audience at Chambersburg respect his religious beliefs, forming a connection with this majority group that increased their tolerance for the adherents of Blumenthal's faith. According to Leeser, Blumenthal delivered that very speech.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, though, he was not able to make that decision for himself due to Bokum's desire to invalidate Judaism to bolster his own faith, just as Judah's attempts at forming a relationship with Campbell to argue for the legitimacy of his faith were derailed by Campbell's "proselytizing zeal."<sup>31</sup> In Judah's attempts to connect with Campbell to help him understand Judaism and Leeser's article criticizing Bokum's behavior towards Blumenthal, Jewish people defined the terms of the relationships they wanted to hold with Christians in the antebellum US. Their work in building these relationships shows a desire to engage with Christians in interactions that were underscored by tolerance and understanding. Above all, they sought the same natural, unconditional respect from Christians that they were afforded simply by being the foremost religion in the United States.

In other instances, Jewish people in the antebellum era critiqued relationships with Christians that already existed, doing so out of a concern for the longevity of Judaism in America. In their writings, they expressed a fear of proselytization within these interactions and its potential to harm future generations of Jewish Americans. One example of this can be found in a review written by Sarah Hall of the 1817 book *Harrington* by Maria Edgeworth.<sup>32</sup> Edgeworth, an Irish writer, published the book as a fictional autobiography in which the

---

<sup>30</sup> Leeser, ed., "Mr. Blumenthal in Chambersburg."

<sup>31</sup> Hodge, *The Plea and the Pioneers*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Hall, Review of *Harrington*, 1833, in *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*, ed. Marc Dollinger and Gary Philip Zola (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 89-90.

protagonist is “compelled to confront his anti-Jewish prejudices” when he meets a woman that he assumes is Jewish before finding out she is not.<sup>33</sup> In a review published in 1833, Sarah Hall, a Jewish writer from Philadelphia, spoke about the realities of intermarriage between Christians and Jewish people in America.<sup>34</sup> She took issue with the idea presented in Edgeworth’s book that a Jewish person could marry a Christian and retain their faith.<sup>35</sup> She contested Edgeworth’s assertion that Jewish Americans “frequently” married Christians without converting, writing, “A few such instances, it is true, have occurred; but in some case, one of the parties has wholly embraced the opposite creed; and in others they have evinced their total indifference to all religion.”<sup>36</sup> She wrote that had Jewish people historically embraced intermarriage with Christians, “their very name would have been discovered only in their history,” and argued that Jewish people “absolutely abstaining from intermarriages with any others than those of their own communion, is the principal means by which they are preserved in their separate state.”<sup>37</sup> In these statements, Hall acknowledged the importance of Jewish people preserving their beliefs and practices given their status as a religious minority. She continued by writing that she could not see how two people “attached to a creed essentially so different as those of the Jew and the Christian, could live together in...perfect harmony.”<sup>38</sup> In these comments, Hall asserted that although fact that Jewish and Christian people in America did sometimes marry, these marriages presented an obstacle for the religious beliefs of both parties and threatened the preservation of Jewish people living amongst a Christian majority.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hall, *Review of Harrington*, 89.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 90

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Unlike the other sources mentioned in this essay demonstrating the attempts of Jewish and Christian people to form relationships, Hall's review is more aptly characterized as an appeal for these groups to abstain from forming one specific type of relationship: marriage. However, in her argument, Hall defined how she believed Jewish and Christian relationships should look by describing how they should not. Although she stressed the differences between Jewish people and Christians that made their intermarriage an illogical and harmful interaction, she wrote, "In all the various intercourse of social life, we know of no uncharitable barriers between Jews and Christians in our happy community."<sup>39</sup> In Hall's opinion, there was no reason for Jewish and Christian people not to get along—except when those interactions led to marriage. When this occurred, Hall argued, Jewish people were always at risk of losing their faith due to their position as a religious minority, either through conversion to Christianity or indifference to Judaism. By citing intermarriage in her review as a type of relationship that should not exist between Jewish and Christian people, Hall offered her belief that beneficial interactions between the two groups consisted of Christian people respecting Jewish people, their beliefs, and the future of their religion enough to refrain from marrying them.

In another source from *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* that criticized the tutelage of Jewish children by Christian teachers, Isaac Leeser showed that Jewish Americans revised the terms of pre-established relationships with Christians when they felt it necessary to preserve their faith.<sup>40</sup> Leeser reflected Hall's anxieties over the future of Jewish people within a majority Christian nation, but he did not share her conviction that marriage was the only type of relationship with Christians that could jeopardize this future. In an 1843 article published in the

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Isaac Leeser, ed., "Jewish Children Under Gentile Teachers," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 9 (December 1843).

*Occident's* ninth issue entitled "Jewish Children Under Gentile Teachers," Leeser expressed his fear that Jewish children in America were at great risk of being proselytized to the Christian faith within their educations.<sup>41</sup> He argued that due to children's natural impressionability, a Jewish education at home was not sufficient in safeguarding Jewish children from conversion, as they were "dismissed from the domestic fireside to a public or private school which is essentially Christian."<sup>42</sup> In these schools, Leeser argued, Jewish children faced countless opportunities to be gradually indoctrinated to Christian beliefs, and this was a fact that the Christian community was "well aware of."<sup>43</sup> Leeser claimed that it was essential to assume that some Christian teachers did "endeavour to influence actively the sentiments of their Jewish pupils," and he lamented the "danger of leaving Jewish pupils under the charge of men or women who have the means and disposition to corrupt our children."<sup>44</sup> Far from sharing Hall's belief that there were no "uncharitable barriers" preventing harmonious relations between Jewish and Christian people, Leeser asserted that Jewish parents had good reason to worry over their children's education, writing, "Even in this country and England the rage for proselyte-making is as rife as ever, and means which a Jew would shrink from employing are resorted to effect the spread of Christianity."<sup>45</sup> Facing this danger, Leeser claimed that the remedy was making Jewish education more available to Jewish children outside of the home, expressing his desire to establish Jewish elementary schools everywhere possible. However, Leeser was aware that this would not work in many places throughout the country and offered an alternative: "Where this is impracticable," he wrote, "the parents watch closely over the progress of their children, and the course of conduct

---

<sup>41</sup> Leeser, ed., "Jewish Children Under Gentile Teachers."

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

pursued towards them by their Christian teachers...and, if possible, require that they be allowed to be absent when prayers are recited in which a mediator is invoked.”<sup>46</sup> Inviting Jewish parents to intensify their advocacy of their children’s education represented a way to reform a relationship that had already been established between Jewish and Christian people.

In his recommendation, Leeser proposed the normalization of interactions where Jewish parents held Christian teachers accountable for the education of their children, protecting them from early exposure to the proselytization that Jewish people faced in all aspects of society. Leeser’s article and its urgent tone show that there were likely few places outside the home and synagogue where Jewish people did not feel the influence of Christianity. Because this religion represented an overwhelming majority in America, Jewish people likely worried that conversion could come not only from specifically Christian institutions but from more subtly Christian ones, like children’s schools, as Leeser argued. His encouragement that Jewish parents take up the fight against proselytization by becoming directly involved in their children’s educations represented a dynamic shift from the attitudes of Jewish people mentioned earlier in this essay. Rather than oppose conversion with education like Judah or eloquence like Blumenthal, Leeser sought to fight it by telling parents to monitor Christian educators for attempts to proselytize Jewish children and calling them out. The relationship between Jewish parents and the Christian teachers of their children already existed, but Leeser’s suggestion that Jewish parents intensify their involvement by requiring more communication with these educators shows that for Jewish people in the antebellum era, forming and reforming relationships with Christians to ensure that they benefitted Jewish people was not only a matter of making life more comfortable but of preserving the future of Judaism in America.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

In their attempts to protect Jewish existence in America, both Hall in her review and Leeser in his article addressed types of relationships that already had a precedent in antebellum America to show how doing so could be beneficial for the future of Judaism in America. As Hall acknowledged, there was a history of Jewish people and Christians marrying before *Harrington's* publication in 1817, and Leeser was motivated to write based on his dissatisfaction with the traditional relationship between Jewish parents and Christian educators at that time. They wrote not to suggest the formation of new kinds of relationships with Christians but to critique the ones that already existed, redefining their terms to better suit their desire for their faith to be respected and left out of Christian attempts at proselytization. However, their approaches differed in their overall attitude towards the state of Jewish and Christian relationships. Hall's assertion that intermarriage was the only obstacle standing in the way of friendly Jewish and Christian relations is a sentiment Leeser most likely would have disputed vehemently. Her idea of a "happy community" contrasts with his assertion that the "rage for proselyte-making" was rampant in the US. Yet the fact that Leeser's advice in combatting this proselytization within children's education was parents' increased involvement in relationships with Christian teachers attests to the utility of relationships with Christians as a platform for Jewish people to effect change. Hall and Leeser's views on the state of relations between Jewish and Christian people wildly opposed one another, but they both offered a similar outcome: refining the terms of relationships with Christians to ensure religious tolerance for both current and future generations of Jewish Americans.

Jewish people were not the only active parties in their relationships with Christians: the latter group were often dedicated participants whose attempts to acknowledge Jewish people's minority status and make connections with them based on mutual tolerance illustrated Jewish

people's convictions that positive relationships with Christians could generate respect for Jewish beliefs. A series of articles published in the *Richmond Dispatch* offers a glimpse into the attempts of Richmond's Christian community to include and welcome the city's Jewish population. In a short notice from the issue published on February 14, 1852, the *Dispatch* advertised an oratorio depicting a story from the Hebrew Bible set to be performed in the spring for the benefit of the "Hebrew synagogue, on 11th st. under the pastoral charge of Rev. Mr. J. Michelbacher."<sup>47</sup> An issue published on May 10 of that same year offered clarifying information.<sup>48</sup> The oratorio, titled *The Oratorio of Absalom*, was set to be performed the following week at the First Presbyterian Church.<sup>49</sup> Elaborating on its charitable cause, the article finished by noting the synagogue's lack of funds and addressed its audience, saying, "We appeal to those who belong to the Christian community to assist their elder brothers, the Hebrews, who are of the same nation with the head of their church, and through whose inspired writings the world first obtained some idea of the only and Living God."<sup>50</sup> This appeal offers insight into the dynamics of the relationships that existed between the Jewish and Christian communities of Richmond.

The May 10 notice spoke directly to Richmond's Christian population, asking them to participate in this charitable effort for their city's Jewish community on the basis of brotherhood and the similarities between the two groups' religions. It is worth questioning how the organizers of the fundraiser made contact with Rabbi Michelbacher's synagogue. Whether the rabbi sought the help of someone in Richmond's Christian community or the someone in Richmond's Christian community found out about the synagogue's need, both options suggest that the

---

<sup>47</sup> "An Oratorio," *The Richmond Dispatch*, February 14, 1852.

<sup>48</sup> "The Oratorio of Absalom," *The Richmond Dispatch*, May 10, 1852.

<sup>49</sup> "The Oratorio of Absalom."

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



fundraiser was held out of friendship, willingly pursued by both parties. The article's text implies that this relationship was intentional in its respect for Richmond's Jewish community: it made a point to acknowledge that Judaism predates and is responsible for the development of Christianity, implying that Christians should have a vested interest in the wellbeing of Jewish people because they owe their own religion to Judaism.<sup>51</sup> By referring to Jewish people as the "elder brothers" of Christians, the article reinforced this debt of gratitude and avoided the patronizing connotations that can become associated with charity work.<sup>52</sup> And in their references to the shared god of both Jewish and Christian faith as well as the selection of the oratorio itself as a story from the Hebrew Bible, the article and event itself encouraged Jewish and Christian unity over the things they had in common.<sup>53</sup> Overall, in these notices, the *Dispatch* revealed the attempts of Richmond's Christian community to extend tolerance and respect to the Jewish community there, and the fact of Rabbi Michelbacher's participation in this relationship shows an acknowledgment that this type of relationship with Christians was worthwhile and beneficial to his congregation as well as his faith.

A later article from the *Dispatch* demonstrated a continued effort by Christians to maintain a favorable relationship with Richmond's Jewish presence through increasing their community's understanding of Jewish practices. In an article entitled "Jewish Passover" published on April 10 of 1855, the *Dispatch* commemorated the annual celebration of Passover, offering readers a background on the holiday and an excerpt of scripture mandating its observance.<sup>54</sup> The article also provided a brief description of how Jewish families observe the holiday, including information about cleansing the house, changing out the silverware, and

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "Jewish Passover," *The Richmond Dispatch*, April 10, 1855.

preparing unleavened bread ahead of time.<sup>55</sup> An interesting element of the article is its choice to refer to Passover's date using the Jewish calendar: the *Dispatch* wrote that Passover "commenced on Tuesday last, being the 15th day of Nissan, (or month of Abib,) and will terminate on this day."<sup>56</sup> *Nissan* and *Abib* are terms from the Babylonian and Hebrew calendars, respectively, that describe the same month. It appears that the paper was writing to a Christian audience considering the information it provided would, of course, have been well-known to Richmond's Jewish community. This fact also reinforces the idea that the piece's author collaborated with a member of this community, given its attention to detail in providing the Jewish date and overview of Passover traditions. The author's decision to communicate with the Jewish community in commemoration of this holiday demonstrated a reverence for Jewish customs and suggests that the *Dispatch*'s goal in publishing the article was to foment respect among its Christian readership for Richmond's Jewish community through education and understanding. Additionally, the continuation of this relationship years after the oratorio fundraiser shows that Jewish people in Richmond deemed this relationship beneficial to their existence and held a level of trust in Richmond's Christian community to respect their religious beliefs.

Though these articles may have been written with a Christian audience in mind, they are clearly the work of a collaboration between Jewish and Christian perspectives. Jewish people's continued approval of this relationship with Richmond's Christian community as documented by the *Dispatch* offers an opportunity to understand what Jewish people stood to gain from relationships with Christians. By asking the Christian audience to acknowledge the similarities between Judaism and their own faith and educate themselves on Jewish practices, the *Dispatch*

---

<sup>55</sup> "Jewish Passover."

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

articles legitimized Jewish people's rights to religious freedom and tolerance within the Richmond community. Jewish people living in Richmond reciprocated in these attempts to connect throughout their publication. This is emphasized by another article published in 1866 that detailed a Christian's experience at the reopening ceremony of a Portuguese synagogue under the charge of the same Rabbi Michelbacher for whose benefit the 1852 oratorio was performed.<sup>57</sup> That the antebellum-era relationships Christians and Jewish people formed in Richmond lasted for years after shows that Jewish people viewed these relationships as valuable for their existence within the Richmond community. In the city's Christian population, Jewish people found an ally they could trust to respect their faith.

Richmond was just one example of these relationships during the antebellum era. However, it provided an interesting case study for the importance of relationships with Christians for Jewish people. The *Dispatch's* chronicling of fourteen years of interactions between Richmond's Jewish and Christian communities showed that when Christians formed relationships with Jewish people where they held no motivation other than to learn about Judaism for the sake of fostering community, Jewish people's religious beliefs were validated and their existence within the community was respected and wanted. The continued participation of Jewish people in these interactions with Christians affirmed the idea that for at least some places in America, Hall's vision of a "happy community" was not too lofty a goal when Jewish people were able to participate in beneficial forms of relationships with Christians. This was not something that could be an immediate reality for all Jewish people and all communities within the United States. Jewish people still feared having their beliefs held up for Christian scrutiny as was the case for Judah and Blumenthal, and they still worried about their coreligionists being

---

<sup>57</sup> "Re-Opening of the Portuguese Synagogue," *The Richmond Dispatch*, March 29, 1866.

proselytized in marriages to Christians or under the tutelage of Christian educators. But the idea that interactions like those found between Jewish and Christian people in Richmond were possible was the reason Jewish people set out to form such relationships in the first place. The mutual respect between the Christian and Jewish communities of Richmond was evidence that these relationships could offer Jewish people a way to exist the way they wanted to in American society and ensure that same right for their progeny.

Ultimately, this was what every one of the Jewish people and communities discussed in this essay sought to accomplish. They wanted to protect their existence as a religious minority in the United States and safeguard the future of Judaism in this country by forming relationships that, above all else, prioritized their right to practice their religion free from invalidation or conversion. To advocate for this, these Jewish Americans focused on being active participants in their relationships with Christians and the discourse surrounding them. This was shown in their attempts to form relationships with Christians they believed advantageous and outline the kinds of relationships they would not suffer. It was shown in their work to refine the terms of existing relationships with Christians to protect the future of Judaism in America. And it was shown in their decisions to welcome relationships that afforded them tolerance through Christian people's efforts to learn about and validate Jewish beliefs. Although they knew that they were a long way from receiving the automatic tolerance Christian people were granted in the United States, in focusing on their interactions with Christians, Jewish people in the antebellum era attempted to build something that would last. In this action, they contested the idea of a Christian homogeneity within the US. Despite Christianity representing the country's religious majority, by interacting with Christians throughout the antebellum era in ways that would legitimize Jewish beliefs, Jewish people consistently fought the notion that America was comprised of a

consensus of Christian faith. In this struggle, they fought to define and realize their vision of religious tolerance in America. As the Jewish people and communities discussed in this essay showed, every time they took an active role in their interactions with Christians to determine on their terms how these relationships would work, Jewish Americans sought to realize this vision and force Christian America to reckon with their presence. They used these relationships with Christians—forming them, reevaluating them, and criticizing them as it fit their needs—to carve out a space for themselves in the United States that they hoped future generations of Jewish Americans would work to keep expanding.

## Bibliography

- American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. "Total Jewish Population in the United States (1654-Present)." Jewish Virtual Library, American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. <https://bit.ly/33wmTWd>.
- Cohen, Naomi W. *Jews in Christian America: The Pursuit of Religious Equality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Hall, Sarah. "Review of *Harrington*, A Fictional Account Describing Intermarriage, 1833." In *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*, edited Marc Dollinger and Gary Philip Zola. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014. [muse.jhu.edu/book/35937](http://muse.jhu.edu/book/35937).
- Hodge, Frederick A. *The Plea and the Pioneers in Virginia: A History of the Rise and Early Progress of the Disciples of Christ in Virginia, with Biographical Sketches of the Pioneer Preachers*. Richmond: Everett Waddey Company, 1905.
- Leeser, Isaac, ed. "American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, Part 2." *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 2 (May 1843). <http://www.theoccident.com/Occident/volume1/april1843/meliorate.html>
- Leeser, Isaac, ed. "Jewish Children Under Gentile Teachers." *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 9 (December 1843). <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/dec1843/children.html>.
- Leeser, Isaac, ed. "Mr. Blumenthal's Speech at Chambersburg." *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 1, no. 3 (June 1843). <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/june1843/blumenthal.html>.
- The Richmond Dispatch. "An Oratorio." February 14, 1852.
- The Richmond Dispatch. "Jewish Passover." April 10, 1855.

The Richmond Dispatch. "The Oratorio of Absalom." May 10, 1852.

The Richmond Dispatch. "Re-Opening of the Portuguese Synagogue." March 29, 1866.

Sutton, Hayden A. *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve Ohio; with*

*Biographical Sketches of the Principal Agents in Their Religious Movement.* Cincinnati:

Chase and Hall, 1875.