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'our sentiments of sympathy for the late unwarranted, cruel, and barbarous massacre':

The American Jewish Response to the Damascus Affair

Matthew B. Darroch

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

History

May 2015

Dedication

To Jolynne and My Parents

Acknowledgments

Despite only my name being credited as the author, this thesis was anything but a solo effort. No one could take on a project of this magnitude without the help of others. First and foremost, I want to thank Jolynne for always being there for me, celebrating with me when things went good and lifting my spirits when things went bad. She was always understanding when I had to put my studies ahead of our relationship—and for that I am forever grateful. Through it all, Dr. Brannon offered invaluable insight that put my thesis in the right direction, made my arguments more assertive, and helped me organize a coherent narrative. I could always rely on her calming presence whenever a deadline was fast-approaching or when I was panicking about the oral examination. Even if we were separated by hundreds of miles, my parents were only just a phone call away. I am grateful for their moral support and their steadfast confidence in me, even if I did not think so highly of myself. I must give thanks to Xavier Macy and the rest of my cohort in the graduate department. Without his comic relief punctuating this stress-filled existence that is graduate school, I do not think I would have had the willpower to make it through the program. Lastly, I want to thank my dog, Caroline, who laid patiently by my side as I typed away at my computer for hours on end. Her cute, affectionate company would cure the most stultifying writers block. Thank you for being my muse. After I graduate, I promise to take you out on more walks.

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Abstract

By looking at four American Jewish meetings that were convened in the United States, this thesis seeks to understand why they would care about a handful of Jews in a faraway land (Damascus). In so doing, it militates against Jacob R. Marcus' argument (which dominates the historiography) that holds that American Jews felt a special connection to Damascene Jews by virtue of their shared religion. Instead, this thesis argues the American Jewish attempt to rescue the Damascene Jews was informed by prevailing intellectual currents in Western society. A product of the culture of sensibility and Romanticism, American Jews had a heightened sense of sympathy for the well-being of others and an aversion to pain. They believed humans were given certain inviolable rights, including: 1.) The right to a fair trial; 2.) The right to live free of torture; 3.) The right to practice religion without the threat of persecution. They saw the Damascus Affair as an atrocity that flew in the face of universal human rights.

Moreover, American Jews believed that the United States was an exponent of republican virtue that set a model to be followed by the rest of the world. They felt America was ordained with a divine duty to protect human rights abroad. According to American Jews, if the United States truly embodied the rights enshrined in the Constitution, it would take meaningful action to end the sufferings of the Damascene Jews. The American Jewry had a special affinity to American exceptionalism because it dovetailed with Jewish particularism. If the American Jews were a chosen people, tasked with spreading the word of God, America was a chosen nation, tasked with spreading representative government. American Jews were not an insular community, cut off from

society. They were a perceptive people that bought into ideas that were pervasive in America and Western society, co-opting them to suit their own interest.

Introduction

On February 5th 1840, Father Thomas, a chaplain of the French capuchin monastery at Damascus, mysteriously disappeared.¹ The details are still a bit fuzzy, but he was probably on his way to post a notice on the door of a synagogue regarding a charitable auction that would benefit a poor European family.² Somewhere along the way something happened to Father Thomas and he was never seen again. Christians in Damascus grew suspicious and eventually clung to the false belief that he was abducted by a cabal of Jews that were bent on resurrecting an ancient sacrificial tradition, victimizing Father Thomas as part of a ritual murder that was carried out in observance of Passover, wherein Christian blood was a key ingredient in the baking of matzo.³ After harvesting his blood, it was alleged that the Jews eviscerated his body, leaving only a few bone fragments behind. A testament to the widespread perception of their guilt in Damascus, even after the Jews were exonerated, Father Thomas' tombstone would later read:

Here lie the bones of
Father Thomas of Sardinia
Apostolic Capuchin Missionary
Assassinated by the Jews
The 5th of February of the year 1840⁴

In an effort to bring the accused murderers to justice, the ensuing investigation combed the Jewish quarter looking for any implicating evidence. Dozens were apprehended and held in prison on suspicion to commit murder. By dint of persistent torture a wrongful

¹ The city of Damascus was located in Syria. Jewish population estimates in the area range from three thousand to twenty thousand. For more information, see: Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 32.

² Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 20.

³ Passover is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the exodus (lead by Moses) from slavery in Egypt to their freedom in Israel. Matzo is unleavened bread that is traditionally eaten on Passover.

⁴ "Father Thomas," *Times* (London), May 9, 1840, 6, quoted in Ronald Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 69.

confession was elicited that incriminated seven prominent Jews. They were summarily arrested and locked up in dungeons.

Of course, the whole thing was a farce. The allegations were completely unfounded and based on circumstantial evidence. Underlying the case brought against the Jews of Damascus was a hateful myth that has been foisted upon the Jewish community since time immemorial. Cropping up sporadically for over a thousand years, the myth gained such currency in the medieval ages that it became a common pretext to justify anti-Semitic outbursts. The blood-libel, as historians have termed it, is defined as a malicious superstition propagated by Christians and Muslims alike, which holds that Jewish people were compelled by secret messages in the Torah to commit ritualistic murder in order to collect the blood of unsuspecting Christians. Their blood would then serve an integral part in a depraved ceremony to celebrate a Jewish holiday.⁵

The genesis of the blood-libel can be traced back to ancient Greece. The Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus Epiphanes, desecrated the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (167 BC) by dedicating it in honor of the Greek god, Zeus. In the ensuing months Epiphanes issued a decree that outlawed Judaism, claiming to have uncovered a little-known Jewish custom that encouraged human sacrifice. It supposedly commanded Jews, “to catch a Greek foreigner, and fatten him thus every year, and then lead him to a certain wood, and kill him, and sacrifice with their accustomed solemnities... and take an oath... that they would ever be at enmity with the Greeks.”⁶ Although this was one of the

⁵ Joshua Trachtenburg, *The Devil and The Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 124-127

⁶ Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus, The Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian*, trans. William Whiston (Belfast: Sims and M'intyre, 1841), 810.

first incidences of an alleged ritual murder perpetrated by Jews, it would hardly be the last.

It was not until the medieval ages, that accusations of ritual-murder were reprised anew. By the twelfth century a rumor circulated that Jews were stealing Christian children away from their parents and nailing them to a crucifix as a kind of perverse reenactment to mock the death Christ.⁷ The advent of blood as a theme in ritual murders came in 1247, when after suffering through days of torture, a French Jew confessed to crucifying a child on Easter and using the boy's blood as communion to celebrate the holiday.⁸ Since it was an extreme stretch to believe that Jewish people celebrated Easter, it was eventually phased-out and replaced with Passover. By the fourteenth century the bloodlust that had been imputed to the Jewish community had rounded into form. All told, there were 150 documented cases of ritual murder during the medieval ages.⁹ By the time the Damascus Affair rolled around, the myth of the blood-libel had firmly latched onto the mind of the non-Jew, prodding their suspicion of the Jewish community. Small wonder then how the Jews of Damascus could be so ruthlessly mistreated and arrested under trumped up charges.

Both American and European Jews reacted publically to the Damascus Affair, trying to do everything in their power to help their persecuted brethren. In Europe, two men (Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Cremieux) were sent to the Middle East on a mission to somehow get through to the Governor-General of Damascus and convince him to relent. In the United States, Jews in major American cities rushed to organize a

⁷ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 131.

⁸ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 132

⁹ Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 125.

response to the Damascus Affair that spoke to both American and Jewish values. This thesis will use four of the six meetings that were held in the United States (New York, Richmond, Charleston, and Philadelphia) to shed light on the American Jewish response to the Damascus affair. All of these meetings were summoned by prominent members of the Jewish community and each shared the same agenda: 1.) To convince the United States government to take meaningful action against persecution in Damascus, 2.) To prevail upon American Jews (and Christians) that the plight of the Jews of Damascus demanded a response, 3.) To coordinate with other Jewish communities in the United States to furnish aid to the Damascene Jewry. Each meeting assigned a committee to craft a set of resolutions that laid bare their grievances.

The language imbued in their rhetoric along with the arguments they put forth to address the cruelties of the Damascus Affair is a chief concern of this thesis. In so doing, it attempts to understand why the Jews of the United States reacted the way they did by singling out the ideas that they absorbed. It is true that American Jews considered the Damascene Jews to be their brethren based on their shared religion. This is where a significant portion of their sympathy came from. But that is not the full story. Influenced by the culture of sensibility and Romanticism by extension, American Jews were outraged that the human rights (the right to a fair trial, to practice religion without the threat of persecution, and to live free from torture) of the Damascene Jews were being trampled on by the pasha. American Jews co-opted themes of American exceptionalism, believing that the United States had a special, if not divine duty to protect the rights of humankind abroad. The Damascus Affair was a watershed event in American Jewish history in that it evinced a nuanced understanding of the prevailing intellectual currents in

the United States, which gives the lie to the misconception that their community is and has always been insular and cut off from society. They bought wholesale into the trappings of American culture and embodied the essence of what it meant to be an American.

Geopolitically, the years leading up to the Damascus Affair were a highly volatile period in the Middle East. Mehemet Ali caused a stir among the international community when he rose up against the Ottoman Empire in 1831. Ali, the viceroy of Egypt under the auspices of the Sultan, mounted an offensive with his mind set on conquering Syria, a massive territory which encompassed the modern borders of Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and some parts of Turkey. The Sultan sent a formidable force to meet Ali head-on, but suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Egyptian army.¹⁰ It was nothing short of an unmitigated disaster, sending convulsions throughout Europe and rattling the balance of power which had effectively stabilized the region and put paid to any self-aggrandizing designs among the great powers (Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia) since the promulgation of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

At this point, the Ottoman Empire had been in a state of decay for some time. In anticipation of its collapse, the great powers in Europe all jockeyed for position to secure their military and economic interests. In what was a tangled web of statesmanship and power politics, each nation had some sort of vested interest in the Ottoman Empire. Russia had interests in acquiring the rights to the Dardanelle Straits and Britain wanted to safeguard its trade routes into India. While France backed Mehemet Ali, because they

¹⁰ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 19

thought that the Egyptian viceroy had the wherewithal to eventually usurp the Sultan.¹¹ The great powers, understanding the gravity of the situation, issued a joint ultimatum in August of 1840: The Egyptians were to relinquish their claims on Syria and vacate the territory or Europe was prepared to wage war against Ali.

As the survival of the Ottoman Empire hung in the balance, the Damascus Affair burst onto the scene.¹² After Father Thomas went missing, the French consul in Damascus, Count de Ratti-Menton, dispatched a search party to canvas the Jewish Quarter, informing the local police that they were to chase any leads that might come their way. Ratti-Menton headed the investigation in accordance with the Franco-Turkish treaty of 1740, which stipulated that French diplomats were to shoulder the responsibility of protecting the Roman Catholic clergy in the Ottoman Empire.¹³ As the search party raided house after house it appeared as though they were going to come away empty handed—that is, until the notice that Father Thomas had intended to post on the Synagogue was found in the possession of a Jewish barber named Solomon Halek. This broke the case wide open. Ratti-Menton took him into custody and gave him over to the governor-general of Damascus, Sherif Pasha, who had a reputation of eliciting confessions out of the most recalcitrant criminals. Pasha's favorite method of interrogation involved torture by way of the *falaga*, which was a whip that was made out of thick hippopotamus hide.¹⁴ He was nothing if not brutally effective. By the time Pasha

¹¹ Morris U. Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 201.

¹² A similar incident erupted on the island of Rhodes (off the coast of Turkey) at about the same time, but it was overshadowed by the Damascus Affair. In the interest of time and space it will not be discussed in this thesis.

¹³ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 18.

¹⁴ Florence, *Blood-Libel*, 29.

was through with the barber, he had given up the names of seven prominent Jews supposedly involved in the murder, including three rabbis.

A couple of weeks passed before Ratti-Menton got the breakthrough he was waiting for. The barber disclosed that he had worked in tandem with six other Jews to get rid of Father Thomas' body. They did so by cutting him up into pieces and smashing his bones. According to his testimony, they disposed of what was left of the body in a nearby ditch in the Jewish Quarter. The French investigation scoured the Jewish quarter to recover Father Thomas's remains and came across some bone fragments as well as a clothe-like material that seemed to resemble the cap and tonsure that a monk would wear. The bone fragments were subsequently appraised by five physicians who reached a unanimous decision: The bones were human and they were most certainly Father Thomas'. To be sure, one examiner did determine that the bones were probably animal, but he was considered an outlier and his opinion was dropped.¹⁵ Once it came to light that the investigation had found the alleged bone fragments, many Jews repaired to their homes, shut themselves away, and went into hiding. Shouts for the execution of the accused Jews rang out from the Christian quarter as the potential for mob violence grew to dangerous levels.¹⁶

Insofar as the investigation thought they had clear-cut evidence linking the seven Jews to the murder, they had not as of yet established a motive. According to Ratti-Menton's reports, the myth of the blood-libel was invoked when the barber, being held

¹⁵ Florence, *Blood-Libel*, 74.

¹⁶ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 17-25.

captive in a dungeon and subjected to repeated torture, went into detail about the way in which Father Thomas was killed:

He [the barber] had pulled his [Father Thomas'] head up by the beard in order to facilitate the flow of blood into the copper basin... Harari's servant had returned to the house and was put to work with the barber on cutting Father Thomas up. They then smashed the skull and pounded the bones to pieces on the marble stone of the courtyard.¹⁷

This was the first time that the blood-libel had figured into the case. The testimony implies that Father Thomas' murder was a meticulously planned operation. In order for it to be carried out efficiently, everyone was assigned a specific responsibility. One person kept watch. Another situated Father Thomas' head in a position that was most conducive to harvesting his blood. Another helped to drain the blood into a copper basin, pouring it into white bottles for convenient storage. While interrogating one of the Jewish detainees, Ratti-Menton grilled him with questions regarding the blood-libel: "What did you do with the blood? And who took it?" The response he got was a devastating blow to the Jewish plea of innocence: "As I did not say till the end, I do not know who took the blood; there was a large white bottle on the edge of the platform... which was to be filled with the blood."¹⁸ Needless to say, this did not bode well for the Jews of Damascus. As the trial was set to begin, the entire Jewish quarter was reeling. They had to do something to stem the tide.

When Europe was first apprised of the Damascus Affair, it took some time for outrage to spread throughout the continent. This was largely because Western Europe was not attuned to the goings-on in Damascus—no European journalists were stationed in the Middle East. Information was hard to come by and on the off chance that anything

¹⁷ Ratti Menton to Soult (29 February, no. 16) *Ministere des Relations Exterieures Archives: Affaires Etrangeres, Turquie: Affaires Diverses*, quoted in Frankel, *Damascus Affair*, 24.

¹⁸ Achille Laurent, *Relation Historique*, 151-152, quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 28.

trickled in, it was either incomplete or erroneous. Christian Europeans were the sole source for insider information in Damascus with a direct line of communication to Western Europe, and their general consensus was that the Jews were guilty bloodlusts. Even when an article was disseminated to the public on the Damascus Affair, newspapers all over Europe appropriated the information and published reprints of it. Thus, the initial reaction in Europe assumed that the Jews of Damascus had in fact conspired to kill Father Thomas.¹⁹

Seven weeks went by since the day Father Thomas went missing before the Damascene Jews were able to send a letter out to Europe appealing for help. The letter was received by the Rothschild family, who were prominent Jewish bankers in Vienna, Naples, and London.²⁰ The family was active members in the Jewish community, tremendously wealthy, and intimately acquainted with European statesmen.²¹ The Jewish image in Europe was in shambles. Rabbis across Europe began to speak out to repair the damage done by the Damascus Affair with little to no effect. It was not until Adolphe Cremieux the French vice-president of the Central Consistory, and Moses Montefiore, President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, took it upon themselves to condemn the newspapers for accusing the Jews of ritual murder. As the Rothschild's were funding Cremieux's campaign to absolve the Jews, they suggested that France send an independent delegation to Alexandria to strike at the heart of the problem. Cremieux accepted and invited Montefiore along to join him on his mission. Once in Alexandria, they both read petitions in front of Mehemet Ali that urged the Egyptian viceroy to

¹⁹ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 74.

²⁰ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 80.

²¹ Florence, *Blood-Libel*, 166.

release the Jewish prisoners.²² But these men were not the only ones who felt a deep sympathy that moved them into action. Soon the American Jewry would also take up the cause.

After outlining the historiographical landscape of the Damascus Affair and American Jews in the Early Republic, chapter two deals with the question as to why American Jews chose to respond to the Damascus Affair and attempt to rescue their religious brethren. It argues that they did so because they felt that sympathy for the misfortune of others was a core human value. This belief, as will be shown, was inaugurated by the culture of sensibility in the seventeenth century and kept alive by Romantic period that followed. Everybody was granted certain rights that they were entitled to enjoy just by virtue of being human—the two most important being the right to a fair trial and the right of the freedom of religion, both of which were overtly violated in Damascus. Emotion was considered the linchpin of humankind. In fact, the ability to feel compassion or empathy in the face of someone else's plight was what defined the human experience. Once it was perceived that a person or people were inflicted with some type of pain (in the case of the Damascus Jews it was torture), society, at least in theory, would assemble to intervene on their behalf. The value of sympathy and aversion to pain was a mark of civility that distinguished Western society from the rest of the world. Although their shared religion undoubtedly influenced the American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair, these intellectual trappings of the culture of sensibility and Romanticism were the overriding factors that determined the way in which American Jews reacted to the Damascus Affair.

²² Florence, *Blood-Libel*, 179.

Chapter three looks at why American Jews believed that their country had a duty to come to the aid of the Damascene Jews. American Jewish rhetoric is littered with allusions to American exceptionalism, portraying the United States as a consummate example of the benign effects of democracy, blessed with a Constitution that enshrined human rights. American Jews saw the United States on a divine mission, ordained by God to instill freedom and enforce the inviolability of human rights around the world. Their privileged position in the United States, free from the threat of persecution, gave them a guilt complex which in no small way influenced their decision to support the Damascene Jews. American exceptionalism, it will be argued, appealed to American Jews because it dovetailed nicely with Jewish particularism. If the American Jews were the chosen people, tasked with spreading the word of God, the United States was a chosen nation, tasked with spreading representative government. American Jews treaded the line between acculturation and preservation of Jewish tradition with terrific care. Their response to the Damascus Affair is a direct reflection of this. They bought into American values and used them to their own advantage to look out for their own kind.

Chapter One: The Damascus Affair and the Historiography of Judaism in the Early Republic

The following is organized into three separate but inter-related sections that work in tandem to chart the historiographical landscape on the Damascus Affair and how the crisis figured into the broader scope of American Jewish history. The first section touches on the extant literature of the Damascus Affair from both European and American perspectives, taking pains to explain why scholarly attention on the latter has been largely neglected and ignored. The next section covers American Jewish history from the time they first stepped on American soil to the onset of the Damascus Affair in an effort to place the crisis within historical context. I make the case that the American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair should be seen through a cultural lens (which would undoubtedly bring it more academic attention) reflecting their ability to tread the line between acculturation and preservation of Jewish tradition. The last section outlines the historiography on the culture of sensibility and its carryover into the Romantic period. It goes a long way in laying the ground work for my argument in chapter two, which holds that certain ideas were absorbed by the American Jew which in turn caused them to sympathize with their brethren in Damascus, take umbrage upon discovering they were being subject to torture and denied their universal human rights, and seek redress from the United States government to intervene on their behalf.

The Damascus Affair

A clearly demarcated line runs through the historiography on the Damascus Affair and its effects on the European Jewry, dividing it into two opposing camps: classical celebratory scholarship and modern revisionist scholarship. Concerning the former, Heinrich Graetz briefly touches on the topic in *The History of Jews* (1895), his

comprehensive six volume work. He interprets the Damascus Affair as an epochal clash between ancient prejudices harbored by the East and progressive ideals touted by the West. The Damascus Affair was a crisis that pitted good against evil, civilization against barbarism. Thanks to the benevolence of Cremieux and Montefiore, Europe took up the Jewish cause and unleashed a collective barrage of condemnation on the Pasha for trampling over religious toleration and presiding over persecution. The West, with its high-minded values and almost unanimous support for the Damascene Jews, triumphed over the East.

After the Damascus Affair ended, European Jews came together as brethren and united in an effort to promote the prosperity and preservation of their people. The impetus for this show of solidarity, according to Graetz, was to repair the image of their disgraced religion and to prevent persecution from ever flaring up again. The Damascus Affair paved the way for a kind of brotherhood to emerge as European Jews came to identify as a collective body. From now on, when/if an emergency were to occur they would be able to defuse it much easier and quicker. After the European monarchies were toppled in 1848, European Jews were integrated into society on an unprecedented scale. They mounted reform movements, earned positions in governmental office, and were granted an equality of rights: “After the Jews had been emancipated in Western Europe... they labored unceasingly at their own improvement, and could soon point out distinguished co-religionists in the highest ranks in every position.”²³ The Damascus Affair, according to Graetz, put an end to the blood-libel myth once and for all, as the nineteenth century came to represent a period of increased religious toleration.

²³ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Press of the Jewish Publication Society, 1895), 704.

The more recent work that has been published has taken Graetz to task for his rosy view of the Damascus Affair and its consequences. The focal point of Jonathan Frankel's analysis in *The Damascus Affair* (1997) is European politics and press as they pertain to the Damascus Affair. Frankel suggests that in terms of modern Jewish history, the Damascus Affair was "a major milestone rather than a cross-roads or turning point in the development of Jewish politics during the nineteenth century."²⁴ It was not so much that Jews had never before mounted campaigns for equal rights—they had, often even. It was just that they were episodic in nature and fizzled out as quickly as they began. Their effort to court public opinion during the Damascus Affair was larger and longer than ever before.

Moreover, Frankel's overarching argument holds that the Damascus Affair did not give rise to an era of increased religious toleration. Anti-Semitic prejudices remained a hallmark of the nineteenth century and beyond. In fact, the constitutional governments that replaced some of the monarchies in Western Europe after 1848 might have even made things worse for the Jewish community. Without state censorship the Jews were more vulnerable to the scandal-mongering press. If anything, the Damascus Affair was a painful reminder that anti-Semitic sentiment remained alive and well. Frankel refutes Graetz's argument that the European powers were uniform in expressing their sympathy for the plight of the Damascene Jewry. Nor does he see the Damascus Affair as a battle between a progressive West against a backwards East, because as he observes, both regions were fraught with anti-Semitic prejudices. Therefore, the blame for the crisis should not, according to Frankel, fall squarely on the East: "On close examination, it

²⁴ Johnathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 432.

turns out that neither the Damascus nor the Rhodes Affair can be understood as primarily the product of the backward and Muslim East.”²⁵ As Frankel put it, the irony was that the European consular corps were the main instigators behind the plot to persecute the Damascene Jews. Frankel militates against the classical celebratory interpretation of the Damascus Affair as a pivotal point in Jewish history where European Jews gained a sense of brotherhood, were integrated into society, and ceased being a target of malicious prejudices. Instead, Frankel argues that European Jews were still stigmatized as “others” by the public and still had to keep a wall up so as to protect themselves from anti-Semitic outbursts.

The historiography on the American Jewish reaction to the Damascus Affair is much less polarized. This is largely due to the fact that it is almost nonexistent. Frankel gives some insight as to why there is little momentum in the field to study their reaction: The number of Jews in North America was negligible (in the United States there were merely 15,000 Jews) and they “had equal rights and hardly stood out in the medley of different denominations in sects, both old and new.”²⁶ The American Jews, according to this line of thought, did not and could not take meaningful action against the atrocities meted out to the Damascene Jews because: 1.) They were hamstrung by a meager population; 2.) They enjoyed an equality of rights unheard of anywhere else, which meant that they were not as attuned to the sufferings of Jews in far off lands. The only scholarship that has sufficiently covered or at least broached the Damascus Affair has been sweeping histories that either spans the entirety of European and American Jewish history or the history of anti-Semitism. Until Frankel’s authoritative book, there had been

²⁵ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 437.

²⁶ Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 9.

no academic work devoted specifically to fleshing-out the Damascus Affair as a noteworthy historical event with important implications.

The two most preeminent historians that have touched on the American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair are Hasia Diner and Jacob R. Marcus. In *The Jews of the United States* (2004), Diner dedicates little space to the Damascus Affair. She does, however, submit that it was an important event in the overall history of the American Jewry in that it marked the beginning of modern Jewish politics on an international scale. It was their first time carving out their own political agenda and it established a precedent that American Jews followed whenever another threat to their community flared up for the next eighty years.²⁷ In so doing, American Jews, through their organized meetings and newspapers, did their part to make it clear that the world had to reckon with a full-on brand of Jewish diplomacy. As for the United States, the crisis offered the nascent nation an opportunity to have its presence felt on a world stage. This was its chance to put its liberality and tolerance on full display. By taking a stance against the Damascus Affair, Diner argues, the United States was making a statement that it was as civilized and progressive as the European powers.

In *United States Jewry* (1993), Marcus sheds light on why the American Jews organized politically and made an effort to allay the hardship faced by their fellow Jews. They did so because they felt that all Jews were kin and they feared that if they stood idle while the blood-libel myth ran roughshod in the Middle-East, it might one day rear its

²⁷ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 174.

ugly head on American soil.²⁸ Even though American Jewish communities did not hold meetings until the tail end of the Damascus Affair (by this time the Jewish prisoners were about to be freed in Damascus), Marcus asserts that it still left an indelible imprint on the American Jewry. American Jews united under a common cause and put forth a concerted effort to furnish aide to their Jewish brethren in faraway lands. This had the effect of “further[ing] their self-esteem and their identification with World Jewry.”²⁹ The American Jewry felt connected to communities outside the confines of their nation simply by virtue of their shared religion. Thus, there came into being a nominal Jewish nation that spanned the entire world.

Conversely, the sense of community among American Jews within the United States was amplified as they rallied together and opened up lines of communication in heretofore self-contained pockets of Jews along the east coast. Since the Christian majority and the government of the United States went to great lengths to voice their outrage at the cruelties of the Damascus Affair, American Jews started to think that maybe this was the breakthrough they needed to finally be accepted as full-fledged members of society. Probably even more important, at least in the eyes of Marcus, Jews felt like their meetings were effective—even though they undoubtedly were not—which gave American Jews their first taste of political power. The Damascus Affair helped sketch the contours of an American Jewish body—one that would last into our day and make Jews an increasingly confident and assertive American minority. Marcus cites the attempts by Isaac Leeser to form a national organization that would represent all

²⁸ Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 657-660.

²⁹ Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 660.

American Jews as evidence of the emergence of an American Jewish community. Marcus concludes that “by working together in a crisis, the Damascus brutalities had taught Jewry here to think of itself as an American national unit.”³⁰ The Damascus Affair, according to Marcus, helped the Jewry in the United States find themselves and figure out where they fit in America and the broader Jewish nation.

Historiography: Jews in America

The history of the American Jews first became a topic of academic investigation when the American Jewish Historical Society was established in 1892. This organization drummed up support for the collection and preservation of source material that would open a window into the past and help piece together a respectable history of the American Jews.³¹ It cued an eager interest in the Jewish community and how they figured into the broader themes of American history. What is their legacy? What did they contribute to American society? What kinds of challenges did they face? How did they fit in? These were the questions that early historians began to address and modern historians still grapple with to this day.

Historiography pertaining to the American Jews has been delineated into three distinct sections: the Sephardic period (1654-1820), the German period (1820-1880), and an Eastern European period (1880). Officially coined as the “wave theory,” historians since the turn of the twentieth century have pointed to American Jewish immigration patterns to define huge chunks of their history. The Spanish Jews correspond to the Sephardic period, German Jews to the German period, and Russian Jews to the Eastern

³⁰ Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 661.

³¹ Joshua Bloch, “American Jewish Historiography (A Survey of Some of the Literature on the History of the Jews of America),” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45, no. 4 (April 1955):434.

European period. It should be noted that these sections of American Jewish history are not cut-and-dry. They are used to bookend periods in time wherein certain nationalities of Jews were predominantly coming to America, but were not the only Jews doing so.

Intermingled with criminals on a boat destined for the New World, a number of Jews were expelled from Portugal and shipped to Brazil in 1548. This became a regular occurrence, repeated indefinitely every two years. So regular in fact, that there started to develop a self-sustaining Jewish community on the Brazilian coast, in a town called Recife. The town grew gradually and eventually inflated to 6,000 people, as a steady stream of Jews trickled in from Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Spain, Portugal, and Germany. In 1630 the Dutch seized control of Brazil, and held on for a few decades until the Portuguese wrested it back in 1654. Hard on the heels of victory, the Portuguese commanding officer issued an order: the Jews of Recife were to be displaced. Where they went next was up to them, but one thing was sure—they were no longer welcome in Brazil. Many Jews found refuge in the West Indies, but a small minority emigrated to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam.³² By 1654, the first Jews had stepped foot on North American soil.

Some historians have casted doubt on the veracity on this origins story of Jewish Americans. In 1981, Egon and Frieda Wolf wrote an article that pointed out that the primary source that historians have relied on to recount the series of events that led to Jews arriving in America is more than a little vague. Written by Saul Levi Morteira, a Rabbi of a Sephardic congregation in Amsterdam who died in 1660, the document

³² Oscar Reiss, *The Jews in Colonial America* (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 7-8.

outlines the dispersal of Jews from Recife in 1654. There exist seven copies with varying degrees of differences between them. Three conflicting versions suggest that the Jews were dropped off by a French ship in either Florida, Africa, or New Amsterdam.³³

Although recent historiography has acknowledged the dubious quality of Morteira's account (usually by way of a footnote), historians have continued to tell the origins story of the American Jews as they always have. Since there is only one primary source on the matter, there is no foolproof way to winnow fact from fiction. The only thing that historians can do is accept that some details will always remain unsettled and potentially erroneous.

Early historiography on the Sephardic period has tended to lionize the character of the Jewish immigrant and harp on how they impacted the trajectory of America. Until the cultural turn arose in the 1980's, there was little to no mention of the intermingling between Jewish and American culture. The first wave of Spanish Jews was portrayed as people who were largely merchants and were relatively well off before they arrived in America. The pull for most of these Sephardic Jews was to find a safe asylum away from persecution. America beckoned with economic promise and personal liberty. These first American Jews tended to gravitate to big cities on the East coast (Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, Newport, and Savannah) where it was convenient to ply their trade as merchants with easy access to the ocean. In *A History of the Jews in the United States* (1935), Lee J. Levinger argues that American Jews had direct and indirect influences on American society. The former revolved around their ability to forge trade between colonies and facilitate the importation of international goods and human cargo (i.e. slave

³³ Egon and Freida Wolff "The Problem of the First Jewish Settlers in New Amsterdam, 1654," *Studia Rosenthalia* 15, no.2 (August: 1981): 169.

trade). The latter being how Jewish principles insinuated themselves into the minds of Puritans and Deists. Many New Englanders had Old Testament names and enacted laws that were steeped in Judaism. In Levinger's own words: "Not only were their civil and criminal laws based on Jewish statutes but their political constitution as well."³⁴ Judaism, according to Levinger, helped build the very foundation of American society.

Other authors whose books contributed to the early historiography focus on the (often times exaggerated) accomplishments of the colonial American Jew and their exploits during the Revolutionary War. In *Jews in American History* (1945), Philip Foner tries to give American Jews the credit he thinks they deserve for having played "a part in the building of American democracy, participating in this country's struggles for freedom, sharing in its victories and contributing to its growth."³⁵ In an effort to counteract the marginalization of American Jewish history, these early historians did everything they could to prop up its importance by looking at how American Jews left their mark on American history—and historians grasped at straws to do so. For example, in a similar vein to Levinger, Peter Wiernik's *History of the Jews in America* (1912) maintained that "the spirit of the Old Testament" was invoked and offered inspiration for the rebellion against England. Sermons all over America, according to Wiernik, "infer[ed] that the same providence of God which has rescued the Israelites from Egyptian bondage would free the colonies."³⁶ As far as these early historians were

³⁴ Lee J. Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States* (Cincinnati: Department of Synagogue and School Extension of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1930), 105.

³⁵ Philip Foner, *Jews in American History 1654-1865* (NA: International Publishers Co., 1945), 7.

³⁶ Peter Wiernik, *History of the Jews in America: From the Period of Discovery of the New World to the Present Time* (New York: Hermon Press, 1912), 82.

concerned, American Jews figured highly into American history, providing the impetus for the Revolution and taking up arms to fight for freedom.

Modern scholarship, however, has refrained from putting the colonial Jews and their accomplishments on a pedestal. Instead, no doubt in response to the cultural turn, books like Eli Faber's *A Time for Planting* (1992), have centered on how colonial American Jews treaded the fine line between assimilation and holding on to Jewish tradition. As Faber suggests, colonial Jews were the first of their kind to do so. American Jews intermarried with Christians at a rate that was unprecedented in Europe. In an effort to fit in, traditional religious law receded to the private lives of American Jews. They conducted business with non-Jews which brought many to places where no Jewish community existed. They wore clothes that made them blend in with the public. Colonial Jewish architecture started to take on uniquely American styles. To be sure, the political realm remained off-limits for American Jews (except in New York) who were barred from voting or running for office. Most had no political footprint whatsoever. The onset of the American Revolution, however, changed all of this. For the first time, colonial Jews expressed their latent political beliefs by taking up the cause for freedom.³⁷

Reflecting this recent historiographical trend of focusing less on how Jews influenced America and more on how America influenced the Jews, Johnathan Sarna sheds light on the various ways in which the Revolution induced changes in the American Jewish community. Sarna maintains that "Jews realized that they could win equality in popular eyes by demonstrating that being Jewish in no way conflicted with being

³⁷ Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654-1820* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 92-105.

American.”³⁸ After the Revolution, according to Sarna, two priorities figured highest among the Jewish community: the need to conform and gain acceptance as Americans. He observes that the petitions drafted by the Jewish community were couched in what he calls a “language of freedom.” This meant that the petitions usually appealed to the sentiments of liberty and freedom that provided the intellectual framework for rebellion against Britain and the installment a Republican government thereafter. Moreover, Jewish administrations that ran local synagogues began to adopt democratic principles. Instead of coercing Jews to be members of the congregation, there was a new emphasis on persuasion and voluntary attendance. They drafted constitutions that democratized authority in the synagogue and the more voices in the congregations started to hold sway. Inter-marriage was less frowned upon and violations of Sabbath did not necessarily incur a penalty.

The early historiography on the second wave of Jewish immigrants is hampered by the same flaws as the historiography on the Sephardic period. It tends to lionize the German Jewish character, champion their accomplishments, and ignore any signs of acculturation they underwent in America. German Jews, as the early historiography indicates, arrived in America with a completely different set of circumstances than their predecessors. Germany was ravaged from the Napoleonic wars and was, as a result, in dire economic straits. German Jews chafed under medieval laws that were founded on prejudice. Germany, as Levinger puts it, was “backward in government and industry, militaristic and brutal in politics, and particularly severe against Jews.”³⁹ Jews left

³⁸Johnathan D. Sarna, “The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 1 (September 1981): 5.

³⁹ Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States*, 177.

Germany in hopes of securing a life in America free from persecution. Most were poor and became itinerant peddlers, hawking their goods to farmers in the rural countryside. According to Levinger, by dint of strong work ethic and perseverance—which were incidentally part of the German Jewish character—they were able to overcome their poverty. Unlike the Spanish Jews they did not settle in major cities. They ventured further out west, establishing a Jewish presence in places like Cincinnati.⁴⁰

Representative of modern scholarship, Hasia Diner's *A Time for Gathering* (1992) argues that the second wave of immigration (the German period) is a gross oversimplification. Heretofore, the historiography casted German Jewish immigrants as: “a homogenous group sharing their Germanness, their affluence, their Reform Judaism, and their striving for acceptance in America.”⁴¹ But Diner makes it clear that this was not necessarily the case. Most of the immigrants during this period were not actually German, but were descendants of Poland, Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, Alsace, and Russia. Although she does acknowledge that many German Jews immigrated to America because of persecution and the fact that they were prohibited from working and marrying, she attributes the majority of the European Jewry migration to industrialization. German Jewish traders and artisans moved to large European cities looking for work, whereas only poorer German Jews immigrated to America. This meant that America was not the premium destination for German immigrants, as the most prosperous stayed in Europe.⁴² Diner debunks the myth that America attracted immigrants by virtue of its freedom and

⁴⁰ Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States*, 175-177.

⁴¹ Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 1.

⁴² Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration*, 43.

opportunity, when in actuality if they could have afforded it, many would have stayed in Germany and taken new jobs brought about by industrialization.

In a similar vein to Levinger, Diner portrayed the German immigrants who came to America as a ragtag group of peddlers. However, she does not attribute their ultimate success in America to high integrity and a strong work ethic. Instead, Diner argues that familial networks of credit allowed Jewish peddlers to start their business and eventually turn a profit. Peddling was so prevalent, according to Diner, that it united Jews and became something of a linchpin within the American Jewish community. In short order, a culture of peddling began to emerge wherein male relatives shared vital information about routes and lent a hand whenever a fellow Jew was down and out. Although Diner agrees with Levinger that they were poorer than their Sephardic predecessors, she provides a more sophisticated analysis by showing that the reason behind German Jewish success in America was because of their ability to rely on familial connections to get ahead.⁴³

Diner highlights how Jews adapted to American life by examining the Jewish Reform movement which first occurred in 1824 in Charleston South Carolina and carried on gradually throughout the nineteenth century. She argues that the reform movement was an effort to fit in with the public and as a result many Jewish traditions were superseded by assimilation. Although, according to Diner, Jewish Orthodoxy was not completely wiped out by the advent of Reform. Diner militates against earlier historians like Wiernik who argued that “Reform Judaism [led] into complete assimilation,” whose

⁴³ Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration*, 73-80.

devotees “emphasize its progressive side and neglect the eternal and historical sides.”⁴⁴ New seating arrangements were such that men and women were no longer secluded from each other. More American Jews stopped observing the Sabbath Day in favor of attending to business pursuits. Women within the congregation were entrusted with more power and they attended service in much greater numbers than their European counterparts. On the other hand, Jews went to great lengths to preserve the circumcision of infant sons, kosher slaughtering, and the key role of matzo in the celebration of Passover. In comparison to their Sephardic predecessors, Jews immigrating during the German period intermarried much less because the American Jewish population was larger.⁴⁵

By the time the Damascus Affair rolled around in 1840, the American Jews, according to Diner, were integrated into the United States. Most states had nullified religious and property rights to vote, and in so doing granted the American Jewish community legitimate political clout. Jewish merchants in particular participated in politics because they had a vested interest in protecting their sources of income as well as that of their communities. American Jews were active in local politics because, as Diner suggests, “it might have been a way to secure business contracts.” Their overriding goal in their political pursuits was to make sure that their people had an equality of rights in American society and abroad—the latter of which was one of the highest priorities on the American Jewish agenda. Over the course of the nineteenth century American Jews appealed to the United States government to furnish aid to their suffering brethren in

⁴⁴ Wiernik, *History of the Jews in America*, 166.

⁴⁵ Diner, *A Time for Gathering*, 123-133.

Palestine, Romania, and Russia. Considering all of this, Diner comes to the succinct but telling conclusion that “Jews participated in American life as Americans. They participated in American life as Jews.”⁴⁶ Their ability to pull off being two things at once is what allowed American Jews to blend in to American society without losing their roots.

Although it has never been placed in this historiographical context, the American Jewish reaction to the Damascus Affair is a consummate example of their ability to simultaneously juggle two different identities: 1.) One of the acculturated American; 2.) Another of the traditional Jew. On the one hand, their reaction provides ample evidence that the American Jewish community absorbed pervasive American intellectual currents that were tinged by the culture of sensibility, Romanticism, and American exceptionalism. On the other hand, they invoked these ideas in such a way that suited their own purposes in an effort to convince the American public and the United States government that the persecution of their brethren demanded a response that took meaningful action against the pasha and delivered the Damascene Jews from their plight. The American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair should, therefore, be seen as an important episode within the cultural confluence between American society and Judaism.

Historiography: The Culture of Sensibility

The eighteenth century marked the emergence of new kind of mindset that championed the importance of emotions and the role they played in the embodiment of traits like sociability, virtuosity, and morality. As the culture of sensibility suffused

⁴⁶ Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880*, 168.

through Europe and the United States, it gave rise to an archetypal personality referred to as the “man of feeling,” which made it desirable, or at least normal, for men to wear their emotions on their sleeves. Teary eyes, quivering lips, blushing cheeks, and a fluttering heart were common tropes in popular sentimental novels where male and female characters exuded excessive affection.⁴⁷ Sharing the human experience, people were seen to be members of a broad earthly community that was connected through a network of mutual emotion. Whenever hardship befell a fellow-feeler or they were forced to endure pain and suffering, an outpouring of sympathy was supposed to well up, rallying everyone together to offer collective assistance and relief.

Sympathy tethered tender hearts together, putting everyone on the same emotional wavelength. This ability to feel for others made people better able to place themselves in someone else’s shoes. More importantly, it was considered a sign of civility. As the culture of sensibility rounded into form, there followed a gradual shift away from the aggressiveness that typified the Medieval Ages, as dueling, public executions, bull baiting, and cock fighting fell out of favor. They were seen as cruelties that had no place in civil society.⁴⁸ Inter-human connection and the ability to identify with those on lower rungs of the social ladder allowed for the treatment of others to become appreciably less violent.⁴⁹ Controversy started to swirl around the issue of slavery. Physical punishment as a public spectacle was slowly being phased out of society. People who showed compassion for other sentient beings (animals included) were a foil to cruel forces that inflicted pain. A binary worldview began to take shape that saw the West as civil and the

⁴⁷ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1986), 3-5.

⁴⁸ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 143-150.

⁴⁹ Pieter Spierenburg, *The Broken Spell: A Cultural and Anthropological History of Preindustrial Europe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 220.

East as barbarous. In its heyday, the culture of sensibility was a prevailing intellectual current, but by the end of the French Revolution, its relevance began to wane. Its legacy had far reaching implications. The culture of sensibility (and its interaction with the forces of capitalism) had a heavy influence on the emergence of sentimental literature, conceptions on what it meant to be civil, and the value of humanitarianism and the devaluation of pain. Since the culture of sensibility affected many facets of society, it has been studied by academics of varying disciplines, including: sociologists, literary theorists, and historians. Therefore, this historiography is necessarily interdisciplinary in nature and scope.

One of the salient outgrowths of the culture of sensibility was a new literary genre called sentimentalism, which coincided with the advent of the novel in the 18th century. The historiography on sentimental literature got off to a rocky start in the first half of the twentieth century. This can be attributed to a distinct lack of interest on the part of literary critics, who had a dim view of the literature of sensibility and did not think it was worthy of scholarly attention. Arthur Sherbo reflects this negative attitude by casting sentimentalism as “a debased literary drama,” that is excessively mawkish and “exaggerates and distorts human emotions; and it is conceived in terms of a view of life which is absolutely inconsistent with reality.”⁵⁰ It was not until 1956 that the eighteenth century became known as the “Age of Sensibility,” coined by Northrup Frye who argued that the old ‘pre-Romantic’ label that used to be attached to the eighteenth century was an ahistorical projection onto a time where people had no idea of what the Romantic period was nor of its close imminence. Rather than getting bogged down in semantics, Frye

⁵⁰ Arthur Sherbo, *English Sentimental Drama* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), vii.

makes it clear that he “does not care about terminology, only about appreciation of an interesting period of English literature.”⁵¹ In sketching the contours of the “Age of Sensibility,” Frye sounded a clarion call for other literary critics and historians to take it more seriously and to try to get a better understanding of the imprint it left on the history of literature. Not until the 1980’s, however, did sentimentalism get the credit it deserved. The impetus behind the reprisal of sentimental literature as a topic of analysis lay in two types of literary theories that cropped up in the 1980’s and 1990’s: cultural materialism and new historicism.⁵²

Janet Todd’s *Sensibility: an Introduction* (1986) surveys the output of sentimental literature in the eighteenth century through the lens of new historicism. She refrains from judging the genre on a basis of merit and quality, but instead reads between the lines of their stories to ferret out a didactic feature to the literature of sensibility: “A sentimental work moralizes more than it analyzes... It is a kind of pedagogy of seeing and of the physical reaction that this seeing should produce.”⁵³ Todd is an exponent of the new historicism approach because she probes the text of fiction, trying to find linkages with historical phenomena. By treating sentimentalism with this literary theory, Todd is able to convey how it intended to instill certain values. Sentimental literature, according to Todd, taught the reader how to react feelingly when confronted with someone who was in the throes of suffering. The ability and willingness to show sympathy was a mark of civility and morality. Only by adopting a new historicist approach were literary theorists able to bring these fundamental aspects of the culture of sensibility to the fore.

⁵¹ Northrup Frye, “Toward Defining an Age of Sensibility,” *English Literary History* 23, no. 2 (June 1956): 144.

⁵² Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996),

⁵³ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, 4.

Informed by the conceptual framework of cultural materialism, the thrust of Markman Ellis' argument in *The Politics of Sensibility* (1996) looks at how sentimental literature served as an advocacy platform and was freighted with hot-button issues within the political and economic discourse of the eighteenth century. On the subject of slavery, Ellis concludes that: "Sentimentalism wants to believe that all humanity is equally capable of feeling and that this equality of feeling is not determined or prejudiced by appearance or skin colour."⁵⁴ He points out that although sentimentalism raised awareness to the abject cruelty of slavery it stopped short of advocating for abolition. Thus, the literature of sensibility helped to shape the "moral conscience" of the abolition movement that gained traction in the 1790's. By identifying the anti-slavery politics that tinged sentimentalism, Ellis assumes a cultural materialist approach, which props up the importance of the espousal of ideology in fictional texts.

Another example of the cultural materialist theory at play in Ellis' book is his attempt to show how the sentimental novel offered a mouthpiece for authors to chime in on economic debates. Ellis spotlights Henry Brooke's *The Fool of Quality* (1765), who politicizes his work by promoting the building of canals in Ireland to provide for better international transportation that would facilitate the forging of commercial transactions between greater distances. The canals would circulate "goods and good feeling... by establishing a ramifying network of commercial encounters, augmenting relations of trust and association, polishing social relations and refining manners."⁵⁵ Ellis pinpoints what he calls the "trope of circulation," which grappled with fledgling capitalist principles. It centered on the idea that the circulation of money, rather than its production, that

⁵⁴ Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, 86.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, 153.

bolstered the coffers of a nation. What Ellis is attempting to do is demonstrate the engagement of sentimental literature with prevailing flashpoints of economic and political contention, reflecting the cultural materialism that is the cornerstone of his argument.

Before discussing how the culture of sensibility has been studied from other angles, it should be noted that since its revival in the 1980's, literary historians have yet to agree upon solid definitions for three terms that were used extensively by contemporaries of the eighteenth century: 'sentiment,' 'sensibility,' and 'sentimentality.' G.J. Barker-Benfield takes the stance that they were all cognates and the meaning of each term bleeds into the next. They all essentially connote the same thing: touting feeling over intellect and passion over reason.⁵⁶ Janet Todd, on the other hand, submits that each term, while sometimes used interchangeably, had subtly different meanings. According to Todd, 'sentiment' is a moral opinion on what is right or wrong in society. 'Sensibility' is defined by the ability and willingness to express sympathy in the face of suffering. The term 'sentimentality' was used to deride the culture of sensibility in the 1770's when it first came under attack by critics who were put off by its tear-drenched emotionalism.⁵⁷ In this way, Todd and other historians who have followed in her footsteps have put forth a more detailed analysis of the vocabulary associated with the culture of sensibility. Barker-Benfield is mistaken when in his notes section he comments that: "Because this is a truism [the supposition that all three terms are cognates] one may find it everywhere in

⁵⁶ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xvii.

⁵⁷ Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction*, 6-8.

literary history.” Suffice it to say, the fluid meaning of each term have given academics trouble and continue to polarize the historiography.

Civility and all of its associated trappings underwent a major overhaul during the eighteenth century, at about the same time that the culture of sensibility was at its zenith. Norbert Elias is considered a member of a select pantheon of seminal sociologists of the twentieth century. His foundational book, *The Civilizing Process*, was published in 1939 but did not garner wide acclaim until the 1970’s when it was reprinted and translated into English. His work finally caught on because he was the first to take an interdisciplinary approach that combined principles of history and sociology. More importantly, he offered an answer to a problem that had been vexing the field of sociology for many years: What is social order and does it, in fact, exist? Threads of Freudian influence can be seen in Elias’ argument in that the codes of behavior that society imposed during the civilizing process (cultivating the super-ego) restrained natural instincts and impulses (curbing the id). He inaugurated a new theoretical approach in sociology called figurational, which propounds the idea that humans are interconnected and the sum total of each individual pursuing their own interests engenders a social order that is both unforeseen and unintentional. Humans are the agents of change but they do so unwittingly without knowing the long-term implications.⁵⁸

Drawing on an array of treatises on manners, Norbert Elias pinpoints the emergence of what he calls the “civilized man” by charting the civilizing process (which he compartmentalized into three phases: *courtois*, *civilité*, and *civilisation*) that slowly spread in Western society from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. The

⁵⁸ Robert Van Krieken, *Norbert Elias* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 50-55.

concept of *Civilité* was first introduced by Erasmus of Rotterdam, when he published *On Civility of Children* in 1530. The focal point of the treatise was on body propriety and restraint. Erasmus outlined a set of polite norms for all walks of life to follow. The treatise was circulated far and wide, making waves on the European continent. A new genre of etiquette books arose after other authors began to publish in a similar vein. Over the course of many years, a set of behavior habits began to take shape that mankind was expected to obey. People began to be more socially aware, observant, and attuned to their surroundings. Everyone acted a certain way in order to fit in and avoid the stigma of being a social outcast. Elias notes that in the era of *civilité*: “People [began to] mold themselves and others more deliberately than in the Middle Ages.”⁵⁹ There existed social coercion that pressured everyone into exhibiting what was classified as “good behavior.” Table manners were refined and the human body was turned into a repulsive vector of shame that needed to be repressed. Sexuality was swept under the rug and what ever happened behind closed doors was to stay there. Everyone was supposed to keep a lid on their pent-up urges and impulses. The violence that typified the Middle Ages was dialed back. The ravages of war were delimited with rules and prohibitions.

A product of the cultural turn that gained currency in the 1970’s and the new cultural history that became popular in the 1980’s, Karen Halttunen argues, in “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” (1995) that by the eighteenth century the “civilizing process” had assigned a mark of civility to those who were averse to the sight of pain and expressed sympathy for the plight of others.

⁵⁹ Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, vol. 1, *The Civilizing Process* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 79.

Operating under this conceptual framework, Halttunen examines Gothic literature of the eighteenth century to determine how it was affected by the culture of sensibility.

Halttunen begins her article by tracing the origins of the culture of sensibility back to the Latitudinarians, an English religious movement that garnered an extensive following after the Restoration in 1660. Latitudinarians believed that everyone was inherently moral and that everyone was born with a natural inclination to behave in ways that exuded kindness and generosity.⁶⁰ She argues that the philosophical musings of the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (which bore a striking resemblance to the principles preached by the Latitudinarian divines) were not widely accessible and never trickled down to the masses. This is why, as Halttunen suggests, the roots of the culture of sensibility lay in the principles of the Latitudinarians. Here, she is engaging with a historiography that is fraught with competing interpretations. In 1934, R. S. Crane published an article that maintained that the Earl of Shaftesbury only had an impact in elite intellectual circles. In so doing, he reoriented the origins of the culture of sensibility much earlier to the Latitudinarians who, according to Crane, were better able to reach the general population as they instilled their beliefs into the throngs of people that constituted their congregations.⁶¹ In 1977, Crane was taken to task by Donald Greene who argued that Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson were the leading proponents of innate benevolence. Greene asserts that the Latitudinarians were only minor players in the Anglican Church, which was, instead, dominated by the Augustinian doctrine of free will.⁶² But by the

⁶⁰ Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 304.

⁶¹ R.S. Crane, "Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *Journal of English Literary History* 1, no. 3 (December 1934): 207.

⁶² Donald Greene, "Latitudinarianism and Sensibility: The Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling' Reconsidered," *Modern Philology* 49, no. 2 (November 1977): 181.

1980's onward, probably because of the influx of cultural historians who prioritized the common majority over the elite minority, the pendulum has swung back to Crane's side of the historiographical discourse.

Halttunen follows the thread of the culture of sensibility that was woven into Gothic fiction and humanitarian reform literature. Just as pain as a public spectacle was on the decline, representations of pain as a literary trope were on the rise. The Gothic fiction that became prevalent in the eighteenth century was known for its dark plotlines that centered on torture, sexual violation, and murder. These types of books were marked by the coexistence of two diametrically different feelings (pleasure and suffering) that took the reader on an emotional thrill ride that many found titillating. Instances of sexual flagellation cropped up time and again, implying that violence was linked with sex. Voyeurism was an underlying theme that: 1.) Allowed for the reader to get a flush of masochistic excitement from watching or envisioning something that was scandalously taboo; 2.) Portrayed literary characters that would secretly peep into scenes that were tinged with violence and sexuality.

Humanitarian reform literature was created to convince the public that pain was cruel. Brutal depictions of evildoers causing suffering drove home the fact that pain was antithetical to civil society. Victims of pain became an unfeeling shell of themselves and viewers of pain had their appetite for cruelty whetted. The irony of the humanitarian reform literature is that in an effort to vilify pain, it reflected many of the themes that typified Gothic literature. It was no coincidence that just as the civilizing process was starting to take hold and violence was being stamped out of society, a new literature emerged that was obsessed with pain and its relationship with sexuality. Pain was stowed

away in the private life, where sexually charged scenes of flagellation, torture, and whipping proliferated.

Another aspect that looms large in the historiography of the culture of sensibility is its interaction with capitalism. From 1750 to 1850, a humanitarian reform movement was afoot that marched across Western Europe, England, and North America. In an article (published in two parts) entitled “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility” (1985) Thomas Haskell links this upswing of humanitarianism to the rise of capitalism. Historians had long since known that the charitable policies that were enacted by the bourgeoisie (the ones who spearheaded the humanitarian reform movement) were not done so out of the kindness of their heart. Instead, the bourgeoisie had an ulterior motive that served as the primary impetus for humanitarian reform: social control. Max Weber and Michael Foucault posited that capitalism facilitated hyper-competitiveness and a headlong lust for material interest. Humanitarianism simply could not exist in this ruthless economic arena. In fact, in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he ties the advent of the prison system to the Industrial Revolution, arguing that the latter necessitated discipline in order to maximize production. According to Foucault, to enforce discipline, criminals were imprisoned and brutally punished.⁶³ Haskell was militating against the likes of Foucault and Weber when he argued that “Whatever influence the rise of capitalism may have had generally on ideas and values through the medium of class interest, it had a more telling influence on the origins of humanitarianism through

⁶³ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 298-306.

changes the market wrought in *perception* or *cognitive style*.”⁶⁴ According to Haskell, the advent of capitalism provided the necessary conditions under which humanitarian sentiment could insinuate itself into the ethos of humankind, stretching the reach of moral responsibility and amplifying the sympathy felt for the hardship of strangers.

The capitalist market, according to Haskell, did not give rise to an acquisitive society, wherein everyone fell over each other in a mad rush to make money and become rich. The capitalist market actually taught two valuable lessons: 1.) The importance of promise keeping; 2.) Delayed gratification and an acute awareness to the long term consequences of actions. Haskell maintains that the linchpin of the economy were the contracts that bound transactions. The eighteenth century saw an expansion in contract law and a sharp uptick in the amount and type of contracts. At the most basic level, a contract entailed a formal promise where both parties were obliged to fulfill their end of the bargain. Often times these contracts were forged between people who did not know each other, had no familial connection, and were separated by vast distances. They necessitated trust and good faith. These contracts, Haskell maintains, extended everyone’s causal involvement. The capitalist market connected the world in ways that had never before been possible, providing the necessary infrastructure or pathways for sympathy to travel from one person to another. Haskell notes that it was no wonder that humanitarianism proliferated at the same time that promise keeping was being championed as a “supreme moral and legal imperative.”⁶⁵ People were also more attuned to how their choices affected the future. Even though the capitalist market was

⁶⁴ Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility, Part One” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 342.

⁶⁵ Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility, Part Two” 542.

characterized by constant change, its changes were predictable. People were able to shed parochialism, reflect on the future, and identify with disparate peoples. The major upshot of capitalism and the shifts in perceptions it wrought, was that the issue of slavery came under intense humanitarian criticism. This was in direct response to David Brion Davis' *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, who argued that slavery was ended because capitalism dictated that it was cheaper and more efficient to exploit wage labor.

In a similar vein to Haskell, in *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (1996) G.J. Barker-Benfield explores the intersection between the culture of sensibility and capitalism. Whereas Haskell looks at how humanitarianism grew in tandem with capitalism, Barker-Benfield details how consumerism in the eighteenth century produced the psychology of sensibility. Barker-Benfield determines how male and female roles (as opposed to Haskell who only focuses on men) were delineated by the civilizing process. Therefore, Barker-Benfield fits into the historiography as a gender historian, a field that is an offshoot of women's studies, which was introduced in the 1970's. Barker-Benfield is part of the relatively recent development of Gender history as a legitimate category of analysis until the 1980's. He is much more concerned with constructions of sex than Haskell and includes both males and females in the purview of his study.⁶⁶

The eighteenth century saw the relegation of females to the domestic sphere where they were expected to attend to the tasks of a housewife. According to Barker-Benfield, since they were confined to the home, women had more time to spare to learn

⁶⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, "AHR Forum: A History of 'Gender,'" *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 5): 1347.

how to read and write. As a result, many bought novels as a means to escape their rather mundane and unfulfilling lives. This surge in female literacy coincided with the commercialization of publishing, making it easier to supply books on a large scale. Noticing that they were sitting on a potential gold mine, novelists started to craft their books in such a way that would appeal to their predominately female audiences. Barker-Benfield concludes that: “The major truth that the correspondence between the rise of sentimental fiction and the laws of the marketplace expressed was that the themes of the fiction answered the interests of the female readers.”⁶⁷ An entire genre of literature was created to pander to the female condition. The literature of sensibility came to reflect the perceived tendency of women to be at the whims of their emotions.

Expanding on Elias’ explanation of the civilization process, Barker-Benfield argues that the major impetus for the reformation of male manners revolved around the emergence of consumer capitalism. Men threw off the yolk of their feudal lords, became tradesmen and skilled workers, and began meeting in alehouses. It was in these public places where transactions were made and business was exchanged that a male identity began to take shape that was defined by money. According to Barker-Benfield, alehouses “provided a stage for self-fashioning, as interpersonal transactions between its customers were multiplied and extended over time.”⁶⁸ Men demonstrated their civility by wearing expensive outfits, buying an expensive education, and traveling in an expensive carriage. This newfound interest in materialism replaced the “farmer warrior” as the archetypal personality that everyone strived to exude.

⁶⁷ Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 168.

⁶⁸ Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 84.

Much of the recent work on gender looks at the interplay between gender, class, and race, emphasizing the fact that they should be studied alongside one another. Kathleen Brown's *Foul Bodies* (2009) looks at the history of cleanliness as it relates to the human body, obviously influenced by post-modernism as indicated by her interest in the making of the modern body. Putting another spin on Elias' outline of the civilizing process, she argues that "Civility expressed in the body began to supplant courtesy—the code of conduct based on the performance of deference to superiors."⁶⁹ The degree of cleanliness came to reflect one's social station in life. Poorer classes who could not afford to keep up with standards of cleanliness were seen as barbarous. On the other hand, elites had access to bathes, washed their hands and face on a daily basis, wore clean linen, and made sure to have good breathe and clean teeth. This attentiveness to cleanliness set the elite class apart from the commoners and cemented their civility, morality, and gentility. Because of the importance of appearing clean, women bore the brunt of the labor to wash clothes and bedding, keep tidy and neat houses, and protect children from disease and administer care whenever they got sick. The filth that African slaves toiled in on the plantation, according to Brown, represented their immoral exploitation. To make their lives more bearable, it was incumbent upon their owners to insert habits of cleanliness. There still remained a pervasive prejudice that cleanliness was restricted to southern white gentility.

The historiography of the culture of sensibility was broached in the 1950's but did not start in earnest until the 1980's when the cultural turn was in full swing. New historicism, cultural materialism, and gender and cultural history breathed new life into

⁶⁹ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 10.

the moribund topic. Historians, literary scholars, and sociologists have all contributed to a better understanding of the impact of the culture of sensibility in the eighteenth century. However, there still remain considerable gaps in the historiography. There is a pathetic dearth of books that take an American perspective on the culture of sensibility. Although it is true that North America was in the hands of the British and the American novel did not come into its own until the nineteenth century, Americans were doubtlessly absorbing British culture and reading the popular sentimental literature. Even though American authors were few and far between, American newspapers abounded. How did the culture of sensibility affect accounts of suffering in American newspaper articles? How did it affect American newspapers' portrayal of the Revolutionary War? These are just a few suggestions for further study on the culture of sensibility that still plays second fiddle to the Romantic era that succeeded it.

Moreover, historians of the next generation need to ditch the misconception that many of the trappings of the culture of sensibility died off after the Romantic era arose from the ashes of the French Revolution. They have lived on and continue to live on well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, today there are many humanitarian non-profit organizations that mount campaigns (using rhetoric tinged by the culture of sensibility) to raise awareness to global issues in hopes of saving lives and alleviating human suffering.⁷⁰ The culture of sensibility and Romanticism were not separate historical phenomena, there was much overlap. Michael Ferber had it right when he

⁷⁰ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 195.

wrote that: “Romanticism was an episode within the larger movement of Sensibility.”⁷¹ Although sentimental literature fell out of style, the core concepts of the culture of sensibility did not suddenly disappear after the onset of Romanticism. The sooner this is acknowledged by scholars, the sooner the culture of sensibility will get the attention it deserves.

The two chapters that follow will both conform and flout the historiographical trends listed above. Regarding the latter, the Damascus Affair will be propped up as a watershed event in American Jewish history, despite the lack of studies from the American perspective. Borrowing from Eli Faber’s and Hasia Diner’s cultural approach to American Jewish history, the Damascus Affair will be refracted through a cultural/intellectual lens, putting an entirely new spin on the crisis. The extent of American Jewish assimilation is reflected in their rhetoric, invoking ideas that were pervasive in American society. But at the same time, they used these ideas as a means to an end, so as to drum up support for their campaign to rescue their religious brethren overseas. Heretofore seen as the genesis of an American Jewish political agenda, their response to Damascus Affair also represents a vexing cultural conundrum: To what degree could they buy into American society without being perceived as sell-outs to Jewish tradition? In their effort to fit in, they were faced with juggling two different identities—one of being American, the other of being Jewish. In this cultural sense, the Damascus Affair was a coming of age for their community, as they struggled to define themselves as Americans, Jews, or American Jews. Lastly, the culture of sensibility will be treated as an intellectual current that did not only influence white Christian men and

⁷¹ Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

women in Western society. It had a considerable effect on the Jews of America and largely determined their reaction to the Damascus Affair.

Chapter 2: The Culture of Sensibility and the American Jewish Response to the Damascus Affair

“I have the honor to relate briefly to Your Honors consideration,” wrote Jasper Chasseaud, “some details of a most Barbarous secret, for a long time suspected in the Jewish nation.”⁷² Reporting on the Damascus Affair, Chasseaud, the American consular at Beirut, was utterly convinced that the Damascene Jews were guilty as charged. According to him, the incident finally confirmed a dark secret that had been kept under wraps within the Jewish community for many years: “serving themselves of Christian blood in their unleavened bread at Easter, a Secret which in these 1840 Years must have made many unfortunate events.”⁷³ This was the first information that the United States received regarding the Damascus Affair. Although far from a utopia of unbridled religious freedom, American Jews enjoyed an equality of rights that far surpassed those in Europe. But even in the United States, the blood-libel myth had invaded the minds of many, prodding their suspicions of the Jewish community. Judging by this initial reaction, it is hard to imagine that the American government and its citizens (comprised primarily of Christians) were sympathetic to the Jewish cause—but they were. The obvious question, then, is why? What common ground did these disparate groups share that caused them to voice their concerns and couch their rhetoric in similar terms?

This chapter tries to answer this question and in so doing points to the emergence of the culture of sensibility and Romanticism that influenced Western society, bringing about a paradigm shift in the way people viewed the world. Both American Jews and

⁷² Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 924.

⁷³ Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 924.

Christians saw the Damascus Affair through the lens of the culture of sensibility and reacted out of a concern for the well-being of others. This chapter argues that their sympathetic responses stemmed from a heightened sense of cosmopolitan humanitarianism that was a direct outgrowth of the culture of sensibility. Religious persecution and torture were barbarities associated with a bygone era, and it was the duty of the civilized world to rally together to nip them in the bud. The goal of this chapter is to enrich our understanding of early American Jewish history and further revise the misconception that American Jews were comprised of insular communities that were detached from society. They were, in actuality, aware of the prevailing intellectual trends (i.e. the Enlightenment, the culture of sensibility, and Romanticism) and integrated them in the rhetoric they used to seek the redress of the Damascene Jews. The American Jewry were an informed and perceptive people that knew how to craft a compelling argument that grabbed the attention of their government. Their attempt at steering the foreign policy of the United States is a testament to how engaged they were in the cultural milieu in which they lived.

The intellectual origins of the culture of sensibility can be traced back to the Latitudinarians, an English religious movement that came to prominence after the Restoration in 1660. If Puritan principles propped up the idea that everyone was born a sinner and humans were a fallen creature, Latitudinarianism was the direct opposite. Their divines preached that morality was bestowed on everyone and that it was innate to human nature. People were predisposed to make morally correct decisions because they

craved the gratification that was generated from being good, kind, and loving.⁷⁴ The soul was wellspring of sympathy that made everyone attuned the sufferings of others. Latitudinarian divines harped on the importance of Charity, or the projection of goodwill onto all human beings and a concomitant desire to relieve the sufferings of the afflicted. There existed basic human rights that were considered inviolable. They were protected by a deep and abiding sense of universal benevolence.⁷⁵ Although the historiography has been contested, most historians agree that the roots of the culture of sensibility lay in the principles of Latitudinarianism.

The 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was an important figure in helping the culture of sensibility gain currency among the ranks of the elite classes in Europe. He was read by the highly educated strata of English society. Poets, novelists, philosophers, and essayists absorbed his teachings and incorporated them into their own. His work was not widely accessible and never trickled down to the masses, and for this reason, he usually takes a back seat to the Latitudinarians. He propounded the idea that the order of nature was both beautiful and harmonious, operating under a set of laws that were ordained by God. Nature was sublime and its aesthetic appeal was direct proof of God's existence.⁷⁶ Humans, according to Shaftesbury, were not inclined to sin. Rather, every soul shined bright with virtue and everyone had an impulse to treat others with kindness. He pointed to the existence of what he called the "moral sense," which was a type of instinctual

⁷⁴ Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 304.

⁷⁵ R.S. Crane, "Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *Journal of English Literary History* 1, no. 3 (December 1934): 208.

⁷⁶ Basil Willey, *The English Moralists* (London: Chatto & Windus LTD, 1964), 220.

intuition that helped people distinguish between good and bad.⁷⁷ It needed to be incubated through years of education in the fine arts, which meant that the majority would always have a stunted “moral sense.” As his line of thinking went, emotion trumped reason and all humans were to have a hand in ensuring the happiness of mankind. Sympathy was an outgrowth of the “moral sense,” without which orderly society would turn into a chaotic maelstrom of competing interests.

Unlike the Latitudinarians, John Locke posited that people were not inherently good or evil. Without any other outside influences or experiences, human nature was suspended in limbo between the two extremes. Locke believed that every thought in a given mind was filtered through the five senses. The mind was a “white paper” that over the course of time was imbued by various thoughts stimulated by hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, or smelling. The most important sense, the one that informed our ideas the most, was sight.⁷⁸ The moral philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment built off of Locke’s ideas, especially the emphasis he placed on sight, and applied them to their understanding of sympathy. The most obvious strain of Lockean influence can be found in Adam Smith’s expositions. Probing the inner-workings of human emotion, he concludes that the mainspring of sympathy was sight: “The sight of a smiling countenance, in the same manner, elevates even the pensive into that gay and airy mood, which disposes him to sympathize with, and share the joy which it expresses.”⁷⁹ Francis Hutcheson believed that when someone witnessed the pain of another, the natural inclination was to help rescue them: “When we see or know the pain, distress, or misery

⁷⁷ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105.

⁷⁸ Willey, *The English Moralists*, 203.

⁷⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: MDCCXCVII, 1797), 31.

of any kind which another suffers... we feel a strong sense of pity, and a great proneness to relieve.”⁸⁰ Sight, according to David Hume, stimulated pity, and by extension, sympathy: “pity depends, in a great measure, on the contiguity, and even sight of the object.”⁸¹ As more and more philosophers chimed in on the discourse, sympathy became entrenched as the core of the culture of sensibility.

Torture was anathema to the culture of sensibility and was considered a cruelty of the highest order. Writing in 1763, Cesar Beccaria defined it as such: “The torture of a criminal during the course of his trial is a cruelty consecrated by custom in most nations.”⁸² At the most basic level, torture was cruel because it dealt pain, often times for an extended duration. It was better to let the legal system punish the accused rather than some overly harsh and inhumane torture technique. Even worse, if the victim was tortured before their case was heard in court, there was always an underlying possibility that they were innocent of the charged crime: “for, in the eye of the law every man is innocent whose crime has not been proved.”⁸³ Torture was brutally effective at coaxing confessions, but it had one glaring drawback. False incriminations were frequently uttered as a ploy to end their suffering if it became particularly unbearable. Within the framework of the culture of sensibility, torture was increasingly seen as a cruel injustice that violated human rights, specifically the right to a fair and impartial trial. Reliance on litigation to come to a proper verdict, rather than torture, became one of the hallmarks of civil society.

⁸⁰ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: A. Millar, 1755), 19. Accessed, October 2, 2014, <https://archive.org/stream/systemmoralphilo01hutc#page/18/mode/2up>

⁸¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: MDCCXXXIX, 1739), 370.

⁸² Cesare Beccaria, *An Essay on Crimes and Punishment* (Edinburgh: James Donaldson, 1788), 63.

⁸³ Beccaria, *An Essay on Crimes and Punishment*, 64.

The intersection between cosmopolitanism and capitalism in the eighteenth century made the world seem smaller than ever before, providing the conditions under which the humanitarianism of the culture of sensibility could thrive and extend its reach. One of the upshots of the Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism encouraged people to expand the horizons of their worldview. Everyone, no matter what race they were or nation they belonged to, shared the same common denominator: the human condition. Wanderlust was extolled. Travel facilitated the exchange of ideas and culture, thereby enhancing the world.⁸⁴ This sense of inter-human connection engendered an ability to identify with people in far-flung places. Thomas Paine seizes on cosmopolitan ideology in *Common Sense*: “all Europeans meeting in America, or any other quarter of the globe, are COUNTRYMEN.” The nations of Europe, he continued: “when compared with the whole, stand in the same places on the larger scale, which the divisions of street, town, and county do on the smaller ones; distinctions too limited for continental minds.”⁸⁵ At about the same time that cosmopolitanism was catching on, capitalism emerged and brought about an expansion in contract law. The amount and type of contracts proliferated and people who either had no familial relation or were separated by vast distances became legally linked. The capitalist market made the world smaller by creating the necessary infrastructure or pathways for sympathy to move from one person to another.⁸⁶ The forces of cosmopolitanism and capitalism abridged the space between the United States and Damascus, allowing American Jews and Christians to be touched by the abject misery of the Damascene Jews.

⁸⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 223.

⁸⁵ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (NA: Infomotions, Inc., 2001), 11.

⁸⁶ Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility, Part One” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 342.

Rising from the ashes of the French Revolution, an intellectual movement called Romanticism inaugurated a new set of attitudes and beliefs that rejected the rationality touted by Enlightenment thinkers. Nature was not orderly and harmonious, it was wild and sublime. Priority was placed on individualism and the imagination was allowed to run wild and free.⁸⁷ Rousseau put so much stock into the human capacity to imagine that he believed that it actually made people more apt to feel sympathy for the suffering of others: “no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him outside himself.”⁸⁸ However, the culture of sensibility did not just fade into oblivion after the onset of Romanticism. Emotion still trumped reason and pain remained a cruelty. The poems of William Wordsworth—who was the literary poster child of the Romantic era—were dripping with sentimentalism:

Love, now an universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, man to earth,
--It is the hour of feeling⁸⁹

The trappings of the culture of sensibility have lived on and continue to live on well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, today there are many humanitarian non-profit organizations that mount campaigns (using rhetoric tinged by the culture of sensibility) to raise awareness to the world’s problems in hopes of saving lives and alleviating human suffering.⁹⁰ The culture of sensibility and Romanticism were not separate historical phenomena, there was much overlap. To be sure, the “man of feeling,” as delineated by sentimental literature, was criticized for being excessively mawkish. The

⁸⁷ Michael Ferber, *Romanticism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv, 1-11.

⁸⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: C. Tinling & Co. Ltd., 1950), 184.

⁸⁹ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: J. & A. Arch etc., 1798), 97.

⁹⁰ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 195.

English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose life coincided with that of Wordsworth's, spewed venom on the short-lived literary genre: "Sensibility is not Benevolence. Nay, by making us tremblingly alive to trifling misfortunes, it frequently prevents it, and induces effeminate and cowardly selfishness."⁹¹ Although sentimental literature fell out of style, the key features of the culture of sensibility did not suddenly disappear before the Damascus Affair burst onto the scene in 1840. Even though Romanticism was in full-force by this time, carryover from the culture of sensibility (an aversion to pain and value of sympathy) informed the reaction of American Jews and Christians.

In response to the Damascus Affair, there occurred six meetings from August to September of 1840 around the United States that were conducted by leading Jewish figures (one additional meeting was held by Christians) in areas where there was a both sizable and active Jewish community. Since most Jews were concentrated in the cities on the eastern coast of the United States, it was only natural that the meetings be held in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Cincinnati, Savannah, and Richmond. Each meeting followed the same basic blueprint: At first a keynote speaker held forth, followed by an open discussion, which was then capped off with a document enshrining a set of resolutions that outlined their various grievances and how they were to furnish aid to their Jewish brethren in Damascus. An appointed committee would then submit a letter to the President of the United States, Martin Van Buren, imploring him to demand the release of the Jewish prisoners. To be sure, every Jewish meeting that is covered in this chapter happened after the U.S. government had already taken a stance against the Damascus Affair. But this does not take away from how profoundly telling they are. The

⁹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Essays on His Own Times: Forming a Second Series of a Friend* (London: William Pickering, 1850), 151.

meetings show that the American Jewry were uniform in their sympathy towards the Damascene Jews. Although it is true, as historians like Jacob R. Marcus have noted, that the American Jewish reaction to the Damascus Affair evinced a broad Jewish identity that transcended national borders; this was not the main source of their sympathy. They sympathized with the Jews of Damascus because of the cruelties that they were forced to endure. American Jews believed in a type of cosmopolitan humanitarianism that afforded everyone certain natural rights (freedom of religion and right to a fair and impartial trial) that were being overtly violated by the Pasha. Their response—rife with affection, empathy, and compassion—can be attributed to the culture of sensibility. Jewish communities in America were not detached from society. They assimilated intellectual trends, such as the culture of sensibility, and wove them into the rhetoric they used to seek the redress of the Damascene Jews.

In surveying each of the six recorded meetings, one overarching theme emerges: American Jews were outraged at the ways in which the Damascene Jews were treated. Time and again, the speakers at these meetings would use words like “sufferings,” “cruelties,” “terrors,” and “atrocities” to describe the hardships that the Jews faced in Damascus. They saw the persecution of the Damascene Jews as an anachronism that was carried over from a bygone age. The “exquisite barbarities” and “ignorant bigotry” that was rampant in Damascus, made the East look like an especially backward land. They characterized the lead investigators of the Damascus Affair as “merciless and savage persecutors,” because of the injustices done to their Jewish brethren.⁹² The fact that

⁹² Persecution of the Jews in the East, Containing the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia, on Thursday Evening, the 28th of Ab, 5600, Corresponding with the 27th of August, 1840,

persecution was afoot on the fringes of civil society was extremely alarming. At a time when religious toleration was the sine qua non of civility, the blatant disregard for personal liberty was a throwback to the way things had been during the Medieval Ages.

Isaac Leeser, one of the speakers at the Philadelphia meeting, took umbrage over the Damascene Jews' denial of their natural rights. Acknowledging the outpouring of sympathy in Europe, mainly by way of Austria and England, he made a point to give thanks to their efforts. The European nations that took it upon themselves to aid in the relief of the Damascene Jews might inspire the Jewish community of Philadelphia to do the same—or so he hoped: “Perhaps in this city, men will step forward to vindicate the rights of man outraged in the persons of the Jews of Damascus.”⁹³ In sounding a clarion call to his fellow Philadelphian Jews to denounce the cruelties that were meted out to the Damascene Jews, he makes reference to universal human rights and laments the fact that they were being trampled on by the East. Leeser asserted that the freedom to practice religion without disturbance was a natural right, all denominations included. If the American Jewry stood idle while the Damascene Jews struggled under the scourge of persecution, they “would deem themselves traitors to brotherly love and the rights of outraged humanity.”⁹⁴ In other words, the Jewish community in America had a duty to deliver the Damascus Jews from their plight not necessarily because they shared the same religion, but because they shared the same species. All humans were afforded certain privileges (religious freedom being one of them) that were inviolable. This sense of

quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 938.

⁹³Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 935.

⁹⁴Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 938.

cosmopolitan humanitarianism was undoubtedly a consequence of the culture of sensibility.

Echoing Leeser, J.C. Levy, the chairman of the Charleston meeting, condemned the human rights violations associated with the Damascus Affair, which he maintained, threatened all of mankind. Looking toward the future, Levy gave a grim prediction if the Damascus Affair was allowed to run its course. Something needed to be done to thwart the evildoers that were committing “horrors” on the Damascene Jews, “for what affected Hebrews today, in such countries, might be equally fatal at another time.”⁹⁵ If Jews and Christians balked at taking action against the Damascus Affair there would be grave consequences that would affect their lives later down the line. Levy feared that if they stood idle while the blood-libel myth ran wild in the East, it might one day rear its ugly head on American soil. He was calling for a concerted effort from all religious denominations in order to lay waste to persecution and keep it from stretching its tendrils into Western society.

Another to speak on behalf of religious toleration was Abraham Moise, who did so at length during the Charleston meeting. He believed that the reason the Damascus Affair flared up was because of the lack of religious freedom in the East. Looking back at the Puritans’ journey from Europe to North America and the expulsion of the Huguenots from France, these major historical events occurred, according to Moise, because of religious toleration, or the lack thereof. Seen in this light, the Damascus Affair was a

⁹⁵ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, Held at the City Hall, on the 28th August, 1840, in Relation to the Persecution of the Jews in the East. Also, the Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, Convened at the Hall of the Hebrew Orphan Society, on the Following Evening (August 29 1840), in Reference to the Same Subject, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 945.

direct affront to American Constitutional principles. Wondering aloud, Moise asks the rhetorical question: “Was it [the Damascus Affair] not a vital stab to the great human privilege, which secured to all mankind forever, the right to worship God, according to the dictates of conscience?”⁹⁶ Again, American Jews considered freedom of religion a natural human right, which was being infringed upon by the East. The fact that the Constitution enshrined religious toleration as a right extended to all American citizens was reason enough to sympathize with their Jewish brethren in Damascus and help relieve their sufferings. This meant projecting their American values onto a number of hapless Jews in Damascus.

Another theme that can be gleaned from American Jewish meetings revolves around the way in which they saw the world separated in two halves: the East and the West. As they conceived it, the West was a bastion of liberty and freedom while the East was a wasteland of moral turpitude and oppression. Harking back to the Medieval Ages, Abraham Hart, a speaker at the Philadelphia meeting, explained that the blood libel accusations had been imputed to the Jewish community as far back as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, wherein “Jews were accused in Europe of crimes equally as atrocious as that now brought against the Jews of Damascus.”⁹⁷ The benighted prejudices of the Medieval Ages, it was feared, were creeping back into the ostensibly enlightened age in which they lived. Hart speculated that the unfounded crimes that the Damascene Jews were accused of were based on “*similar motives*, a desire to possess their estates,

⁹⁶ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 948.

⁹⁷ Persecution of the Jews in the East, Containing the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia, on Thursday Evening, the 28th of Ab, 5600, Corresponding with the 27th of August, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 934.

and a hatred to their *religion from bigotry*.”⁹⁸ He was frustrated that in the nineteenth century, an era that trumpeted personal liberty, persecution could be allowed to wreak havoc on the outskirts of the civilized world. He believed that the Damascene Jews were trapped in a barbarous land that still stubbornly clung to ancient prejudices. Their gross abuse at the hands of the East needed to be dealt with, lest it spread to the rest of the world.

J.N. Cardozo, a speaker who held the floor during the Charleston meeting also reinforced the idea that the East was a backward land, where bigotry was allowed to run rough shod over human rights. American Jews, according to Cardozo, needed to express their sympathy “for the barbarous cruelties” that had been exacted on the Damascene Jews.⁹⁹ If the civilized nations were to rally together they might generate a wave of indignation that would crash down on the Pasha, forcing him show mercy to the Jews of Damascus. The United States, according to Cardozo, was filled with “communities which will respond to the calls of suffering humanity, that have the moral courage to denounce such barbarous practices.”¹⁰⁰ Not only should American Jews speak out against the cruelties of the Damascus Affair for the sake of human rights—it was morally correct for them to do so. Remarking on the Christian meeting that was held in Charleston a few days prior, Cardozo again links morality to the outpouring of sympathy for the Damascene Jews: “that the clergy of almost every denomination appeared... presenting the most beautiful moral spectacles, to lend their countenance and sanction to the objects

⁹⁸ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 934.

⁹⁹ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 946.

¹⁰⁰ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 946.

of the meeting.”¹⁰¹ By supporting the Damascene Jews, they were making a morally correct decision that was steeped in their cosmopolitan humanitarianism beliefs and united them with other Americans.

Another overarching theme that crops up in the American Jewish rhetoric is their disgust at the excessive use of torture to elicit confessions. In fact, much of the outrage displayed by the American Jews can be attributed to their revulsion at the tortures that the Damascene Jews were forced to suffer. In the preamble of the Philadelphia meeting it was remarked that the American Jewry had a duty to come to the aide of the Damascene Jews in the name of disgraced humanity. But what specifically about the treatment of the Damascene Jews provoked their sympathy? The Jews of Philadelphia pointed to torture: “were they [the American Jews] to withhold their expression of sympathy for their suffering brethren, who writhe under unmerited tortures, and languish in loathsome dungeons.”¹⁰² Torture was supposed to be thing of the past, its demise brought on by the culture of sensibility. The aggressive violence of the Medieval Ages had given way to the more gentle treatment of others. Civil society propped up the importance of the legal system and renounced torture as an acceptable means by which to elicit confessions. The usage of torture in Damascus undoubtedly reified the American Jewish perception of the East as a barbarous land.

Later on in the Philadelphia meeting the subject of torture was broached from a different angle. What got under Abraham Hart’s skin was not just that his Jewish brethren were allegedly being tortured, but that the lead investigator of the case was a Frenchman

¹⁰¹ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 947.

¹⁰² The Proceedings of the Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 947.

who presided over the use of torture. Hart found it especially reprehensible “that in these enlightened times, a man who represents the French nation in the East, should be found guilty of having the innocent Jews subjected to the torture, and that too without any evidence.”¹⁰³ The fact that Ratti-Menton, a Frenchman who was a product of civil society, was perpetrating this persecution without any evidence was hard to swallow. The West was supposed to be an enlightened land far superior to the East. That one of its own members was permitting the use of torture made Hart question how civil, in fact, Western society was. It also made for a powerful rhetorical device for American Jews, who simultaneously shared the American hostility towards the French and expressed their disdain for the anti-Semitic prejudices of the Europeans and Syrians.

In a similar vein to Hart, Aaron Moise, a speaker in the Philadelphia meeting, began to have serious doubts about the degree to which Europe was a progressive land. He was despaired that the reputation of Judaism was being aspersed and tarnished by a hateful myth that had no semblance of truth to it. How could, he declaimed, his Jewish brethren be so grossly victimized by persecution and torture “in this boasted era of enlightenment and civilization, in the very eye of civilized Europe!”¹⁰⁴ Again, the American Jewish rhetoric linked civility to the West and barbarity to the East. Reading between the lines, Moise implies that the West might not be as enlightened as it let on. He had a point. Although the Damascus Affair flared up in the East, it did so disconcertingly close to the civilized world, while the investigation was headed by a

¹⁰³ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 934-935.

¹⁰⁴ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 947.

Frenchman (Ratti-Menton). According to Moise, it was up to the West to prove how civilized they were by supporting the Jewish cause.

That the Damascene Jews were denied the right to a fair and impartial trial was a particularly sore spot in the American Jewish rhetoric. The group of Jews that were suspected of murdering the capuchin monk were apprehended and locked away in dungeons where they were tortured without due process. The preamble of the Philadelphia meeting outlined its grievances over the abuse of the Damascene Jews. After railing against the tortures that they were subjected to, the American Jews hoped that they would at least “have impartial justice administered to them upon the present and any future occasion.”¹⁰⁵ One of the results of the culture of sensibility, and Romanticism by extension, was a reliance on the legal system to punish the guilty and absolve the innocent. This emphasis on jurisprudence to uncover the truth became part and parcel of the civilized world. The East’s disregard for the legal system is what defined it as a barbarous land. That the Damascene Jews were assumed guilty before having their case heard in court was a direct violation of natural human rights.

Concern over the use of torture and the absence of due process were also two of the main flashpoints of discontent expressed to the President of the United States. Although the complete proceedings of the New York meeting do not survive, the letter that the committee sent to the Martin Van Buren does. Pulling at the President’s heart strings, the New York Jewry tried to rouse the President’s humanitarian and moral sensibilities. Could his conscience bear it as he stood by while the Damascene Jews were

¹⁰⁵ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 938.

brutally tortured and denied a fair and impartial trial? They urged the President to speak out against the persecution of the Damascene Jewry for the sake of humanity and justice: “use every possible effort to induce the Pasha of Egypt to manifest more liberal treatment towards his Jewish Subjects not only from the dictates of humanity but from the obvious policy of justice.”¹⁰⁶ This was an attempt to steer the United States foreign policy. That they invoked a humanitarian appeal (foregrounded by the usage of torture and denial of a fair trial) in their letter to the President, speaks to what type of subjects they thought would resonate with the government. They knew that the government and by extension the American public held the same cosmopolitan humanitarian beliefs as they did. So in order to convince the President that the time was now to put an end to the sufferings of the Damascene Jews, they couched their language in words that were tinged by the culture of sensibility.

The American Jews were not the only religion in the United States that responded to the Damascus Affair. American Christians joined the fray when they held a meeting in Charleston, expressing their sympathy to the Damascene Jews and coordinating a joint effort to ameliorate their sufferings. A couple of days before the American Jewish meeting was slated to begin in Charleston, Henry Ducachet wrote a letter to Hyman Gratz (the chairman of the American Jewish meeting to be held in Charleston a few days later) to make it known that he was disappointed that Christians were not invited to the meeting. Ducachet claims that he has his finger on the pulse of the American Christian community and is sure that they are eager to offer assistance to the Jews of Damascus. He tells Gratz that he will solicit his congregation for donations on behalf of the Jews. As the

¹⁰⁶ I. B. Kursheedt and Theodore J. Seixas to Martin Van Buren, New York, August 24, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 930-931.

letter draws to a close, Ducachet explains why he felt the Christian community was snubbed by Gratz: “It is not, sir, the cause of the *Jews* only you are about to espouse: it is the cause of humanity.”¹⁰⁷ Ducachet latched on to the Jewish cause because he saw their plight as a threat to humanity, not necessarily one marginalized religion. What this suggests is that the cosmopolitan humanitarianism, affected both Christian and Jewish religions in America. Judging by their rhetoric alone, Christians were just as concerned about human rights as their Jewish counterparts.

A few days later, Christian Americans from various denominations met at the Charleston City Hall (this meeting, incidentally, was open to the public) and drafted a set of resolutions that were subsequently sent to President Martin Van Buren. The purpose of the meeting was to express their disapproval at the “bigotry and intolerance” that was “totally repugnant to the humanity and civilization of the age.”¹⁰⁸ They shared the same worldview as American Jews, in that they pitted a barbarous East against a civil West. They saw the West as a beacon of liberality that should be used to shine through the dark cloud of prejudice that had settled over the city of Damascus: “It becomes the solemn duty of all nations blessed with the enjoyment of Civil and Religious Liberty, to raise their voices against such cruelty.”¹⁰⁹ The rhetoric espoused in American Jewish and Christian meetings mirror each other. Their responses to the Damascus Affair stemmed from their outrage at the trampling of fundamental human rights, providing further evidence that the culture of sensibility was absorbed by Christians and Jews alike. The

¹⁰⁷ Henry W. Ducachet to Hyman Gratz, Philadelphia, August 21, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 941.

¹⁰⁸ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, Held at the City Hall, on the 28th August, 1840, in Relation to the Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 942.

¹⁰⁹ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 942.

American Jews were not out of touch with prevailing intellectual trends—quite the contrary. Otherwise, they would not have couched their rhetoric in almost identical terms that the American Christians did. They were at least as affected by the culture of sensibility as the Christian majority. At some level, American Jews embraced universal human rights because of their history as victims of persecution, mistreatment and outright prejudice. Through their rhetoric, American Jews were broadcasting the need for the Jewish community to be finally accepted in society as equals.

Echoing their Jewish counterparts, Christian Americans were disgusted at the usage of torture to elicit confessions from the Damascene Jews. They saw torture as a violation of human rights that flew in the face of everything that the West and more specifically, civil society, stood for: “The use of torture is abhorrent to the humanizing principles of the nineteenth century.”¹¹⁰ The Damascene Jews deserved a fair trial, but they were shamefully “divested of the guardianship of the Law.”¹¹¹ Christian Americans had no connection of any kind to the Damascene Jews. They did not share the same religion, race, or nation. However, they felt that the Damascus Affair threatened the natural rights of mankind. They felt sympathy because they could look past their superficial differences and identify with the plight of a small insignificant number of Jews in Damascus. They all shared the human experience and to ensure that the world kept spinning, everyone needed to safeguard the happiness of mankind.

A few newspapers published articles that called for the Christian American community to make a concerted effort to bring the Damascus Jews to safety. One article

¹¹⁰ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 942.

¹¹¹ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 942.

in particular, published by the *Morning Herald*, proclaimed that “we as Christians, and members of a civilized community, ought to hold meetings... to subscribe liberal sums of money” and take measures to relieve the sufferings of the Damascus Jews.¹¹² They were to do so, according to the article, in the name of “reason, humanity, and common consistency.”¹¹³ Aside from showing that cosmopolitan humanitarianism was a pervasive belief among Christian Americans, the article explains why they should care about the misfortune of the Damascus Jews. Christians were deeply indebted to the Jews because they gave them their religion—the best human gift to receive: “They gave us our religions, our code of morals, and the foundation for all our laws for human government.”¹¹⁴ Put plainly, Christian Americans needed to furnish aid to the Damascene Jews because they owed the existence of Christianity to their Jewish counterparts.

In a similar vein, another newspaper article, published in the *Sun*, decried the persecution imposed upon the Damascene Jews and outlined a list of reasons, most of which have already been touched on in this chapter, why Christian American should feel a sympathetic twinge in their hearts. It was true, the author pointed out, that ancient Jews crucified their “Lord of life,” and it was probably safe to assume that the Jewish community from then on has been condemned to hell for their sins. But the Jews had suffered enough. They had paid the penalty for their sin and toiled under the weight of persecution for too long. It was high time that the Jews get to enjoy religious freedom—after all, considering the cruelties that they have had to deal with for centuries, they deserved it. Although the Jews took the brunt of the blame for the crucifying of Jesus, “to

¹¹² “The Persecutions of the Jews of Damascus,” *Morning Herald*, September 2, 1840.

¹¹³ “The Persecutions of the Jews of Damascus,” *Morning Herald*, September 2, 1840.

¹¹⁴ “The Persecutions of the Jews of Damascus,” *Morning Herald*, September 2, 1840.

the eye of humanity, it would seem that their descendents have been made to suffer abundantly for the sin of their ancestors.”¹¹⁵ If anyone surveyed the history of America, the author was sure they would be struck by the “benign effects of civil and religious liberty on the human character.” Its religious toleration is what made the United States an exceptional nation. The author was astonished that “in any part of the world not utterly uncivilized, so much ignorance, bigotry, and savage cruelty could be found existent in this age of... universal light and intelligence.” Again, the feeling of shock that persecution could crop up in the nineteenth century was shared by both Christian and Jewish Americans alike.

In keeping with the similarities between the American Jewish and Christian rhetoric, the United States government issued a response to the Damascus Affair that was tinged by the culture of sensibility. Although its initial reaction to the Damascus Affair was less than sympathetic, once it received more accurate and complete information, they eventually came around to take up the Jewish cause. At the behest of the President, John Forsyth (Secretary of State) wrote letters to the American consuls in Alexandria and Turkey, urging both to do everything in their power to pressure the Pasha into releasing the Jewish prisoners. Opposing the “atrocious cruelties” meted out on the Damascene Jews, the government held out hope that “justice and humanity be extended to those persecuted people.”¹¹⁶ The government, Forsyth wrote, was sadly surprised that “in this advanced age, such unnatural practices should be ascribed to any portion of the religious world, and such barbarous measures be resorted to, in order to compel the confession of

¹¹⁵ “Bigotry and its Effects,” *Sun*, August 11, 1840.

¹¹⁶ John Forsyth to John Gliddon, Washington, August 14, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 928.

imputed guilt.”¹¹⁷ Reflecting the rhetoric of Jewish and Christian Americans, the government associated torture with barbarity. That the blood-libel myth was revived in the nineteenth century was a cause for concern, considering that the era was boasted for its leaps in human improvement.

Adopting the same worldview as American Jews and Christians, the government saw the East as backward and the West as a civil. In John Forsyth’s letters to the American consuls, he casts the East as a barbarous land: “As the scenes of these barbarities are in the Mahomedan dominions, and as such inhuman practices are not of infrequent occurrences in the East.”¹¹⁸ Forsyth reminded the consuls that the United States took pride in upholding the “institutions, political and civil, place upon the same footing, the Worshippers of God, of every faith and from, acknowledging no distinction between the Mahomedan, the Jews, and the Christian.”¹¹⁹ Since the United States touted the importance of religious freedom within the confines of its own country, it felt an obligation to do the same for other persecuted peoples in faraway lands. The government saw the Damascus Affair as an opportunity to show the world how civilized the nascent nation had become. By taking a public stance against the Damascus Affair and projecting their American values (specifically religious toleration and due process, which were enshrined in the Constitution), the United States were reinforcing the fact that they deserved to be considered a model member of the civilized world. This is most evident in the way Forsythe begins his letter to the American consul in Alexandria: “In common

¹¹⁷ John Forsyth to John Gliddon, Washington, August 14, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 928.

¹¹⁸ John Forsyth to John Gliddon, Washington, August 14, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 928.

¹¹⁹ John Forsyth to David Porter, Washington, August 17, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 929.

with all civilized nations, the people of the United States have learned with horror, the atrocious crimes imputed to the Jews of Damascus.”¹²⁰ If the United States failed to chime in on the public discourse denouncing the cruelties of the Damascus Affair, they risked being perceived as less civilized than the European powers. Seen in this light, the Damascus Affair was an opportunity to showcase to the world, by extending a sympathetic hand to the Damascene Jews, that the United States was the epitome of civil society and an exponent of the West.

The American Jewish reaction to the Damascus Affair was patently influenced by the culture of sensibility, showing that they were keenly aware of intellectual currents that were afoot during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while at the same time, giving the lie to the misconception that they were a people apart. They seethed with outrage when they heard that the natural human rights (the right to a fair and impartial trial and freedom of religion) of the Damascene Jews were being violated. They described the pain, mistreatment, and outright persecution they were forced to endure as cruelties that were repugnant to the boasted age of progress of the nineteenth century. Their humanitarianism stemmed from the idea that mankind was attached to a web of emotion and whenever a fellow-feeler was facing hardship everyone would make a concerted effort to whisk them away to safety. It was believed that sympathy was the tie that bound society together. This belief, as has been shown, was planted into the minds of Western society by the culture of sensibility starting in the eighteenth century.

¹²⁰ John Forsyth to David Porter, Washington, August 17, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States*, 929.

American Jews were thankful that their natural rights were protected by the Constitution and felt that every human being, no matter what religion, should be able to enjoy them. However, the fact that they identified with the Damascene Jews based on their shared religion should not be dismissed. It was only natural for them to feel a special connection with their Jewish brethren. The American Jews considered themselves as part of a nominal Jewish nation that transcended national borders. This cannot be denied. But it was much more than shared religion that prompted their response to the Damascus Affair. Over and over again the speakers at the American Jewish meetings preached to their members that they had a duty to defend the rights of their Jewish brethren, not because they shared the same religion, but because they shared the same species. In this way, their cosmopolitan humanitarianism, an outgrowth of the culture of sensibility, overshadowed their religious connection with the Damascene Jews.

Chapter 3: American Exceptionalism in American Jewish Rhetoric

Although they may have been reluctant to admit it, some, if not most, American Jews harbored serious doubts about whether they could impact the outcome of the Damascus Affair. Their doubts were simply a matter of course. American Jews surely realized the harsh truth: expressions of sympathy could only go so far and do so much. Abraham Hart took note of this and when it was his turn to hold the floor at the Philadelphia meeting, he did his best to clear the air: “It has been asked by many what benefit can we in America bestow on our brethren who are suffering at such a distance from us?”¹²¹ He went on to say that their response would boost the spirits of the Damascene Jews, giving them the strength to persevere through their hardship, and would make their persecutors shudder in fear, since they considered all tyrants to be cowards. Although this part of the speech goes a long way toward validating the American Jewish meetings, his conclusion is the most telling: “let us hope... that the expressions of disgust and horror which have proceeded from every portion of the civilized world, and particularly the United States, the only land of entire freedom, will operate as it ought, speedily.”¹²² Here, Hart grapples with two concepts that are seemingly at variance with each another. On the one hand, he singles out the United States as greater than the rest of the civilized world, as if its abounding freedom put it on a higher level than Europe. On the other, he suggests that the United States had a duty to project American values onto the world, thereby safeguarding what it considered to be the universal rights of

¹²¹ Persecution of Jews in the East, containing the Proceedings of a Meeting Held at Mikveh Israel, Philadelphia, on Thursday Evening, the 28th of Ab, 5600, Corresponding with the 27th of August, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 935.

¹²² Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 935.

humankind. This co-existence of American exceptionalism and universalism is a theme that crops up time and again in American Jewish rhetoric during the Damascus Affair. But this was not their first appearance. These ideas were a time-honored tradition, embroidered in the tapestry of American history.

This chapter will shed light on how American Jews wove the thread of American exceptionalism—which revolves around the idea that the United States is an exponent of republican virtue, ordained by God as a model to be followed by the rest of the world—into their rhetoric during the Damascus Affair. American Jews believed that Providence smiled upon the United States, helping to form a country that embodied freedom, tolerance, and liberty on an unprecedented scale. Insofar as their rhetoric wore American exceptionalism like a badge of honor, American Jews also thought that their religion was exceptional. The six Jewish American meetings were published in newspapers around the country, many of which outlined the accomplishments Judaism racked up throughout its existence and the legacy it left behind (pointing to themselves as the originators of the Bible), served as a reminder to the American public that they were indebted to their Jewish counterparts. They could recompense by taking up the Jewish cause. More importantly, the American Jews co-opted the idea of American exceptionalism and used it to their own ends. They argued that if the United States wanted to live up to its reputation as a beacon of freedom, then it needed to protect the universal human rights of the Damascene Jews. American Jews knitted American exceptionalism with universalism: Since America had the privilege of enjoying rights that had a universal application, they were tasked with the duty of protecting the inviolability of human rights around the world, projecting their American values onto Ibrahim Pasha and the

Damascus region. In their letters to the Martin Van Buren, the President of the United States, American Jews invoked the theme of American exceptionalism in order to appeal to their government and convince it to pressure the Pasha into relenting. Similar to the last chapter, the thrust of this argument is to dispel the misconception that American Jews have always been an insular and isolated community, aloof to the cultural milieu within the United States. Instead, they actively engaged with the American public, and in so doing acquired a deep understanding of the prevailing intellectual currents and used them to their own advantage.

The preliminary contours of American exceptionalism were first sketched by English colonizers in the seventeenth century, who were struck by the sheer magnitude of empty land that was laced with bountiful resources. Its rawness and richness, they thought, set America apart from their European homeland. America seemed to brim with opportunity, a far cry from the over-crowded streets and countryside of England where land was a premium and jobs were a scarcity.¹²³ The prospect of shedding their past for a new beginning in America, gave many a new lease on life. Their future seemed brighter and aspirations more attainable in America. Not everyone, however, had such a rosy view of the New World. Many felt that its wild and untamed nature would rub off on its inhabitants, coaxing out their savage impulses and making everyone depraved and immoral. It did not matter if they showered it with compliments or smeared it with criticism, everyone believed that America was different—regardless of whether that meant that it was a cut above or below the rest. America was different.¹²⁴

¹²³ Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 47.

¹²⁴ Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America*, 4-7.

Much of the intellectual origins of American exceptionalism are rooted in Puritanism. It was first broached in a speech given by John Winthrop (1630) on board the *Arbella*, as it sailed to reach North America and thereupon establish the Massachusetts Bay colony. In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Winthrop coined one of the most famous phrases in American history: “For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us.”¹²⁵ The New England colonists were on a divine mission to set up a righteous settlement that God could look upon and admire from his almighty perch. They were the chosen ones who were destined to show the world the light. Their ultimate success would lend credence to the importance of hard-work, piety, and a strict adherence to the Bible. They were trying to change the course of history for the better. No longer would the world thrash about in a morass of sin and debauchery. Nations had the chance to put themselves on a path to heavenly redemption if only they followed the example set by the New Englanders.

American exceptionalism was made secular in Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776), when he declared that the goals of independence were tantamount to what all humans wanted, strived for, and deserved. In his own words: “The cause of America is in great measure, the cause of mankind.” America was exceptional because it took it upon itself to stand up in the name of freedom, liberality, and representative government. More importantly, Paine brought the marriage between American exceptionalism and universalism to the fore: “Many Circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of Mankind are affected.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” quoted in Matthew S. Holland, *Bonds of Affection: Civic Charity and the Making of America* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 274.

¹²⁶ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (NA: Infomotions, Inc., 2001), 2.

Britain's abuse of power and mistreatment of the colonies violated their universal human rights. Paine wished that "as men and christians, ye may always fully and uninterruptedly enjoy every civil and religious right, and be, in your turn, the means of securing it to others."¹²⁷ Paine advocated for independence not only to form an American nation that would be a bastion of human rights, but that would also eventually protect human rights around the world. A successful bid for independence, according to Paine, had far-reaching ramifications that could potentially "begin the world over again."¹²⁸ Paine effectively knitted together the ideas of American exceptionalism and universalism to put forth a compelling case to mount a revolution against the British.¹²⁹

When the Revolutionary War broke out, much of the American population believed that Providence was on their side and that divine prophecy would carry them to victory. That America was doing God's bidding was trumpeted by virtually all religious denominations in America. It is, in fact, what united them in a common cause. In a sermon given in 1776, John Witherspoon exhorted the American public "to put your trust in God, and hope for his assistance in the present important conflict. He is the Lord of hosts, great in might, and strong in battle."¹³⁰ He continued on, saying that he believed wholeheartedly that the American cause was one "of justice, of liberty, and of human nature," and for this reason Providence would favor them.¹³¹ Sermons that espoused this same basic principle were given all over the colonies on the eve of the Revolution. They

¹²⁷ Paine, *Common Sense*, 36.

¹²⁸ Paine, *Common Sense*, 32.

¹²⁹ Emily Garcia, "'The Cause of America is in great measure the cause of Mankind': American Universalism and Exceptionalism in the Early Republic," in *American Exceptionalisms: From Winthrop to Winfrey*, eds. Sylvia Soderlind and James Taylor Carson (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2011), 54-58.

¹³⁰ John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1776), 39.

¹³¹ Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men*, 40.

had the effect of providing solidarity, propping up confidence, justifying the war effort, and giving a higher sense of purpose.¹³² They took up arms to defend “certain unalienable rights” that were considered universal and were “endowed by their creator.” When Britain supposedly trampled on the rights of the American public, it was a direct affront to humankind, and by extension—God. America was exceptional because they had God’s blessing. This is why many Americans felt that they were fighting the good fight. The impetus for the independence movement was wrapped up in a combination of American exceptionalism and universalism.

By the time the nineteenth century rolled around, manifest destiny (the prevailing outlook that held that it was only a matter of time until the United States took over North America and realized its potential as a great world power) became an outgrowth of American exceptionalism. In 1839, John Louis O’Sullivan penned a piece in the *United States Democratic Review* that synthesized American exceptionalism, ran the gamut on all its major themes, and casted an optimistic gaze toward the future of the United States. With an air of righteousness and a bloated sense of self, the United States set off for the horizon on a quest to stretch the reach of the nation. And with the help of Providence, at least according to O’Sullivan, nothing could stop its expansion: “We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.”¹³³ God gave America a higher calling. It was destined to become a land of equal rights and religious devotion. The presence of the United States made the governments of the past seem retrograde and outmoded. They were

¹³² Thomas Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3-9.

¹³³ John Louis O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *United States Magazine & Democratic Review* 6, no. 11 (November 1839): 427.

anachronisms and democratic spirit would make them crumble and turn to dust:

“America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field.”¹³⁴

America was exceptional because of its values. Its values were universal and Americans embraced a duty to project them around the world.

This was the state of the intellectual atmosphere in the United States when the Jewish meetings on the Damascus Affair took place in 1840. American Jews believed that it was a privilege to be citizens of the United States because they got to enjoy some of the broadest individual and religious freedoms in the world. Their exceedingly privileged position is what, in part, prompted their sympathy for the Damascene Jews. The quality of their lives in America threw the plight of the Damascene Jews into stark relief. American Jews were outraged that the human rights of their brethren were being violated without compunction. Because they took to heart America’s exceptionalism, they felt the United States was obligated to take a stance against the persecution and make an effort to stop its continuance. So they co-opted ideas of American exceptionalism and universalism in order to induce the United States government to take action. They absorbed American intellectual trends and used them to their own ends. Both Jews and Christians in the United States wove themes of American exceptionalism and universalism into their rhetoric during the Damascus Affair, which further dispels the misconception that the Jewish community was cut off and disengaged from society.

¹³⁴ O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” 430.

One of the overarching themes that appears in each of the six Jewish American meetings (occurring from August to September of 1840) was the belief that there existed a set of fundamental rights that everyone, no matter which religion or nation they belonged to, was entitled to. They were inviolable and universal in scope, meaning that every human got to enjoy them simply by virtue of being just that—a human. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, these universal human rights included: 1.) The right to a fair and impartial trial; 2.) The right to live free of torture; 3.) The right to practice religion without the specter of persecution. By conducting meetings for the purpose of furnishing aid, the American Jews styled themselves as the “vindicators of the principles of universal toleration,” who assembled to voice their sympathy and “vindicate the principles of liberty and humanity.”¹³⁵ The American Jews were up in arms over the Damascus Affair because they perceived the Pasha as a tyrant who treated human rights with blatant disregard. Reeling over the hardship endured by the Damascene Jews, a flush of sympathy and a feeling of helplessness came over them as they envisioned their Jewish brethren suffering so far away. Desperate to lend a hand, the American Jews placed the burden upon themselves and their nation to rescue the Damascene Jews from their plight. But what made them think this way? Their persecution certainly tugged at the heart strings of American Jews, but why did they task themselves and their country with the duty to protect the livelihood of the Damascene Jews?

The answer relates to American exceptionalism. American Jews were convinced that the United States set itself apart from the rest of the world. They saw America in a

¹³⁵ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, Held at the City Hall, on the 28th August, 1840, in Relation to the Persecution of the Jews in the East. Also, the Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, Convened at the Hall of the Hebrew Orphan Society, on the Following Evening, in Reference to the Same Subject, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 946 -947.

different light than Europe. It was not so much that America was more civilized, they were just more progressive and liberally-minded, in the sense that freedom and tolerance had taken firmer root. After spewing venom on the transgressions of the Pasha, J.N. Cardozo (an American Jewish speaker at the Charleston meeting) hoped that Europe and America would uniformly express their sympathy for the Damascene Jews. Maybe then, Cardozo thought, the Pasha could “be made to feel the force of public sentiment in civilized Europe, and free, liberal, and tolerant America.”¹³⁶ The significance of this quote resides in its ability to open a window into the mind of the American Jew. Cardozo draws a distinction between Europe and America. He does not lump them together under the category of being civilized. Only Europe has that quality. Although Europe holds claim to the great powers of the world, it still did not enjoy the values that comprised the trappings of American society: freedom, tolerance, and liberality. Europe may have been civilized but they paled in comparison to the United States in terms of civil and religious rights. This is crucial to know in order to understand the worldview of the American Jew and the United States’ place within it.

The records of the American meetings are tinged with the incandescent pride American Jews had for the United States. Although their lives were not a perfect snapshot of religious toleration, they knew they had it a lot better than their brethren in the East, or even Europe. American Jews were grateful for “the liberal and enlightened views in relations to matters of faith, which has distinguished our government from its

¹³⁶ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 945-946.

very inception.”¹³⁷ They were thankful to be able to reap the benefits of living in the United States, relishing the expansive freedoms it afforded. But they were haunted by an undercurrent of guilt. Their civil and religious privileges made the cruelties endured by the Damascene Jews seem all the worse. Considering the equality of rights they enjoyed in America, how could they stand by while their brethren were ruthlessly oppressed in a land typified by prejudice and intolerance? To do so, would certainly be a mark of shame. So the American Jews in New York City implored their President to denounce the Pasha, which would in the process affirm the liberality of the United States: “we trust that the efforts of your Excellency... will serve to... impress more fully on the minds of the Citizens of the United States, the Kindness and liberality of that government under which they live.”¹³⁸ In other words, if the United States was, in fact, exceptional, this was their chance to prove it. The Damascus Affair provided a world stage. All the United States had to do was stand up for what it believed in: the inviolability of universal human rights. This is a prime example of American exceptionalism and universalism at play in American Jewish rhetoric.

In a similar vein, the American meeting in Charleston crafted a set of resolutions that were sent to the President, calling for the government of the United States to denounce the mistreatment of the Damascene Jews which would in turn reinforce the progressive values that the nation stood for. American Jews took great pride in being one of the first people in the United States to sound a clarion call against the struggles that the Damascene Jews faced. They held that “such expression[s], so worthy the American

¹³⁷ I.B. Kursheedt and Theodore J. Seixas to Martin Van Buren, New York, August 24, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 935.

¹³⁸ I.B. Kursheedt and Theodore J. Seixas to Martin Van Buren, 931.

character, illustrates the true nature of our institutions.”¹³⁹ By expressing their sympathy and exposing the cruelties of the Damascus Affair, the American Jews felt they were doing the United States a service. They were, in effect, cultivating its image as an exceptional nation and making a statement that American values had a universal application. By seeking the redress of their Jewish brethren and their human rights, they were putting America’s exceptionalism on full display. American Jews did not see themselves as a people apart. They comported themselves like any other ordinary American and did their best to fit in. Their only glaring distinction, which attached a sense of otherness to the American Jewish community, was their religious beliefs. They bought into the culture and strived to embody its values. Even though they represented a tiny fraction of the American public they felt confident enough to stand up and speak out against the Damascus Affair. In so doing, they became the mouthpiece of American exceptionalism.

American Jews also embraced the idea that God had chosen the United States to be the standard bearer of human progress. The preamble of the Philadelphia meeting stated that the American Jews lived in “a land where, under the blessing of Providence, equality of civil and religious rights so solemnly prevails.”¹⁴⁰ The belief that Providence spun the web of fate for America, as has been shown, dated as far back as the seventeenth century. Providence would look after the United States, helping it establish a new world order where democracy reigned supreme and tyranny was eliminated. If the American Jews hesitated to lend a hand to their brethren in Damascus “they would deem themselves

¹³⁹ J.C. Levy to Martin Van Beuren [sic], Charleston, September 1, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 949.

¹⁴⁰ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 938.

traitors to the rights of outraged humanity.”¹⁴¹ Since the threat of persecution did not loom over American Jews if they spoke out against the Damascus Affair, they felt obligated to do so. The civil and religious freedoms that made the United States exceptional granted the American Jews the opportunity to support the human rights of the Damascene Jews. They could not bear to squander this opportunity. For it would be a great injustice to humankind, not to mention a disservice to Judaism.

Taken aback by the participation and turnout at the American Jewish meetings, some of the speakers held forth on the pride they had not only for the nation they belonged to, but also for their religion. They delighted in the fact they were “members of a community which will come to the rescue of outraged human nature.”¹⁴² The American Jewish community had coalesced around a common cause and put together a concerted effort to stamp out Jewish persecution. And for this, American Jews patted themselves on the back. Along these same lines, an unknown member at the New York Meeting submitted that since Jews had contributed so much to the progress of mankind the world should pay it forward by coming to the aid of the Damascene Jews. The unknown speaker posed the question: “I ask, sir, have we not contributed to the arts and sciences, and whatever is good for the human race?”¹⁴³ He then went on to rattle off name after name of famous Jewish philosophers, scientists, musicians, lawyers, artists, and doctors who all had a hand in enriching Western society. The contributions of these pre-eminent Jews represented the cornerstone of civilization, which made it an utter disgrace that the

¹⁴¹ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 938.

¹⁴² The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 946.

¹⁴³ “Meeting of the Jews,” *Morning Herald*, August 21, 1840.

Damascene Jews were being denied their human rights. The world owed it to the Jews to rescue them from their sufferings if for nothing else than respect for all that the Jewish community had accomplished and given back to the West. They played up the idea of Jewish exceptionalism in order to grab the attention of the public and, in a way, guilt them into taking up the Jewish cause. In so doing, they iterated upon the larger theme of American exceptionalism and tweaked it to serve their own interests.

Isaac Leeser, a speaker at the Philadelphia meeting, made a case for the exceptionalism of Judaism by referencing the War of Greek Independence, which took the world by storm in 1821 when Greece sparked a rebellion to throw off the yokes of their brutal oppressor—the Ottoman Empire. It became a concern of global proportions for two key reasons: 1.) Europe considered Greece the originators of western civilization; 2.) It was seen as an epochal clash between Christianity and Islam.¹⁴⁴ By dint of persistence and European intervention, the Greeks won independence in 1832. Alluding to the overwhelming sympathy Europe had for the Greek bid for independence, Isaac Leeser argued: “Why should the cause of the Jews be less attended to than that of the Greeks?”¹⁴⁵ Even though the Greeks were credited for many of the trappings of civilization (poetry, architecture, painting, and sculpture) they still did not deserve “any greater claim upon the sympathy of the world than we have.”¹⁴⁶ The world was indebted to the Jews for a gift that brought far more to the table than anything the Greeks accomplished. According to Leeser, the Jews produced “the word of God, the holy and

¹⁴⁴ David Brewer, *Greece, the Hidden Centuries: The Turkish Rules from the Fall of Constantinople* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2011), 233-235.

¹⁴⁵ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 937.

¹⁴⁶ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 938.

precious Bible, the parent of pure belief, the foundation of true human happiness.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, the importance of the Damascus Affair trumped the War of Greek Independence. And if the latter garnered massive attention and induced the sympathy of Europe, the Jewish cause should do that and more. Again, the American public and the rest of the world owed it to the Damascene Jews to deliver them from their plight.

But for all the praise they heaped on themselves, it did not begin to compare to the admiration they had for the United States and its efforts to defuse the Damascus Affair. According to Abraham Moise, the crisis set the stage for a competition of benevolence between the United States and England. Who was going to be the first to bring pressure to bear on the Pasha and force an end to his oppressions? Moise was confident that the United States would win: “he rejoiced... to know that the land of Washington and Franklin, of Jefferson and Hancock, had not been outdone by the land of Newton and Shakespeare, of Milton and Dryden.”¹⁴⁸ The American Jews wanted the United States to shoulder its way into the vanguard of European nations that were facing down the Damascus Affair. There was not a nation more primed to be the defender of human rights than the United States. They had the broadest individual and religious freedoms. They had Providence intervening on their behalf. As far as the American Jews were concerned, the United States was ordained to ensure that human rights remained universal in scope.

¹⁴⁷ Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 938.

¹⁴⁸ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 947.

The Damascus Affair flew in the face of one of the key features that made the United States exceptional: the Constitution. Enshrined in the Constitution is the First Amendment, separating church from state and preserving the right to worship whatever religion with impunity. Religious tolerance was considered a central pillar of American society. It distinguished the United States as a free and liberal nation. The American Jewish community saw the Damascus Affair as an alarming encroachment on religious toleration—and by extension, the Constitution. This was certainly not lost on Abraham Moise, a speaker at the Charleston meeting: “was it not the great question so admirably settled in the noble link which kept us together as a people, the Constitution of the United States of America?”¹⁴⁹ The evil forces behind the Damascus Affair struck at the core principles of American society. Referring to the freedom of religion, Moise believed that the Damascus Affair was “a vital stab to that great human privilege.”¹⁵⁰ The United States had reason to back the Damascene Jews because their persecution ran contrary to the American values enshrined in the Constitution.

The American Jews knew that their infinitesimal numbers worked against them. If the American Jews remained alone in their outcry, their voices would only be a whisper in the wind. But if the Damascus Affair struck a chord with the Christian majority, the whole could be greater than the sum of its parts. If Christian and Jewish Americans united under the same cause, only then could they leave their mark on the Damascus Affair. Cardozo, a speaker at the Charleston meeting, maintained that the atrocities

¹⁴⁹ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 948.

¹⁵⁰ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 948.

wreaking havoc in the East “demand an expression of opinion co-extensive with the length and breadth of this republican land.”¹⁵¹ To confront the Damascus Affair, every American needed to be galvanized. They needed to shelve their differences and join forces in order to put forth a concerted effort to stamp out persecution. Sympathy for the Jewish cause, according to Cardozo, should be found in “every division of our common country, and each section of the American people, who respect and revere those principles of toleration and civil liberty.” If the public was truly convinced that America was exceptional, they would vouch for those American principles “that constitute the safeguards of personal rights.”¹⁵² American Jews saw the Damascus Affair as anathema to the United States and its citizenry because it antagonized everything it was sworn to uphold.

The American Jewish community issued a challenge to the Christian majority and they, for the most part, rose to the occasion and ramped up their support for the Damascene Jews. The rhetoric espoused by the Christian Americans closely resembled that of their Jewish counterparts. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Christian American rhetoric rigidly opposed the Damascus Affair, describing the atrocities associated with it as “totally repugnant to the humanity and civilization of the age.”¹⁵³ To Christian Americans, the persecution of the Damascene Jews was especially abhorrent

¹⁵¹ The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 945.

¹⁵² The Proceedings of a Meeting of the Israelites of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 945.

¹⁵³ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, Held at the City Hall, on the 28th August, 1840, in Relation to the Persecution of the Jews in the East, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 942.

because of the flagrant use of torture and denial of their universal human rights, specifically their right to a fair trial. The Damascus Affair, according to Christian American rhetoric, was perpetrated by the East, which was casted as equal parts barbaric and savage, and represented a throwback to a bygone era. On account of the expansive individual and religious freedom enjoyed in the United States, the Christian American meeting in Charleston determined that it was the nation's duty to "raise their voices against such cruelties, to remonstrate against their repetition, and to invoke the aid of public opinion everywhere for their suppression."¹⁵⁴ As far as their rhetoric was concerned, Christian and Jewish Americans were cut from the same cloth. They both saw their country as a beacon of liberty, awash in freedoms that were unprecedented in world history. Because of these privileges it was incumbent upon the American public to rally around those less fortunate and safeguard their human rights. The twinning of American exceptionalism and universalism insinuated itself into the Christian American rhetoric much in the same way that it did the American Jewish rhetoric.

Apart from their meeting in Charleston, Christian Americans urged the public to take up the Jewish cause by way of newspaper articles that were published and reprinted around the country. One in particular argued that the system of government unique to America was such that bigotry and prejudice would never see the light of day. Tolerance was the hallmark of democracy: "under our civil system the mind of each individual is freely permitted to acquire any amount of intellectual light," which in turn caused the

¹⁵⁴ Proceedings of a Public Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 942.

“general prevalence of reason over blind prejudice.”¹⁵⁵ According to the article, any flare up of persecution was “utterly inconsistent with our social professions and civil institutions,” which was why nothing of the same cruel magnitude as the Damascus Affair would ever be allowed to rear its ugly head on American soil.¹⁵⁶ Democracy was inherently more benevolent than all other forms of government and promoted a sense of equality and rationality that rubbed off on the American public, making them more disinclined to prejudice than anyone else.

Surveying all of American history the author was hard pressed to find anything that resembled the wickedness of the Damascus Affair. He chalked this up to the democratic nature of America’s government: “Let any person peruse the brief account of the horrible cruelties on the Jews at Damascus... and compare it any thing of the kind to be found in the history of this country.” Anyone who did so would be “struck at once with the benign effects of civil and religious liberty on the human character.”¹⁵⁷ As the article suggests, there is a lesson to be learned from the Damascus Affair. If nothing else, it should teach everyone to be thankful for their comfortable lives in America, especially when they consider “our condition with that of others, and see the superiority of our civil and social system; while we are enjoying the largest practical measure of rational freedom.”¹⁵⁸ American Jews and Christians shared an intense gratitude for the proliferation of civil and religious rights that were unheard of in Europe and the rest of the world. An intellectual current flowed through both Christian and Jewish communities

¹⁵⁵ “Bigotry and its Effects,” *Sun*, August 11, 1840.

¹⁵⁶ “Bigotry and its Effects,” *Sun*, August 11, 1840.

¹⁵⁷ “Bigotry and its Effects,” *Sun*, August 11, 1840.

¹⁵⁸ “Bigotry and its Effects,” *Sun*, August 11, 1840.

and saturated their minds with a belief that America was exceptional, and by virtue of its exceptionalism, it had a duty to uphold the universal rights of humankind.

American Jews also invoked the theme of American exceptionalism when they appealed to the President to bring pressure to bear on the Pasha. The Richmond meeting concluded with a letter that was crafted by a chosen committee and sent to the President thanking him for taking a strong stance against the Damascus Affair. They believed that his humanitarian response “assures us of his sympathy in whatever may hereafter be attempted or done toward... the ancient race of Israel, wherever dispersed.”¹⁵⁹ The American Jews took the President’s response to the Damascus Affair as a precedent that guaranteed a similar response whenever persecution threatened Jews scattered around the world. They now expected that the government would react the same in the future if another outburst of persecution flared up. It would do so, according to the Jewish community in Richmond, in the name of the “civil and religious privileges secured to us by the Constitution of this favored land.”¹⁶⁰ Every aspect of the American Jewish rhetoric, whether it was directed towards the government, the Christian majority, or their own people, was tinged by American exceptionalism and universalism.

The rhetoric of the United States government reflected the Jewish and Christian response to a notable degree. Of course, this would make sense, considering how pervasive the theme of American exceptionalism was in the country at this time. As has been mentioned earlier, the government of the United States put forth a response to the

¹⁵⁹ A.H Cohen, G. A. Myers, Samuel Marx, and Samuel H. Myers, Committee to Martin Van Buren, September 4, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 929.

¹⁶⁰ A.H Cohen, G. A. Myers, Samuel Marx, and Samuel H. Myers, Committee to Martin Van Buren, September 4, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 929.

Damascus Affair that took the Pasha to task for infringing on the human rights of the Damascene Jews. But before that response was formally issued, John Forsyth (the Secretary of State) sent letters to the American consulars in Turkey and Egypt on behalf of the President. The persecution that was wreaking havoc in Damascus was, according to Forsyth “a subject which appeals so strongly to the universal sentiments of justice and humanity.”¹⁶¹ Just as the American Jews and Christians had suggested in their rhetoric, the government had delineated a set of fundamental rights that had a universal application. The violation of human rights that most alarmed the government was the outright denial of religious freedom in Damascus. Writing to the American consular in Turkey, Forsyth points to religious toleration, and its prized priority in America, as the main impetus to take action against the Pasha: “The President is of the opinion that from no one can such generous endeavors proceed... whose institutions... place upon the same footing... every faith and form, acknowledging no distinction between the Mahomedan, the Jews, and the Christian.”¹⁶² The American consular in Turkey was advised to do everything in his power to curtail the mistreatment of the Damascene Jews. When addressing the Pasha, the consular was commanded to “refer to this distinctive characteristic [religious tolerance] of our government.”¹⁶³ The United States government championed religious freedom and put it on a pedestal. It refracted the world through the lens of American exceptionalism. Since America enjoyed an equality of rights that was

¹⁶¹ John Forsyth to David Porter, Washington, August 17, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 929.

¹⁶² John Forsyth to David Porter, Washington, August 17, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 929.

¹⁶³ John Forsyth to David Porter, Washington, August 17, 1840, quoted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 929.

unparalleled, the government felt a duty to intervene on behalf of peoples who were denied their human rights. In similar fashion to Jewish and Christian Americans, the government was convinced that it was ordained by God to spread the light of liberty across the world, rooting out all the prejudicial darkness that managed to creep in.

The reaction of the American Jews was informed most obviously by the theme of American exceptionalism. Although they did not live in a utopia of religious freedom, they recognized that their lives were privileged in relation to Europe and the rest of the world. They wholeheartedly bought in to the idea that the United States was an exponent of democracy and the epitome of freedom. American Jews made reference to Providence, claiming that they belonged to a nation comprised of chosen people who were to conduct themselves in God's image, thereby showing the world the path to heavenly redemption. To this end, they believed it was incumbent upon the United States to protect the universal rights of humankind. They appealed to the United States government to denounce Damascus Affair for two reasons: 1.) It offered the nation a world stage to display everything that it stood for; 2.) It presented the opportunity to affirm how seriously it took civil and religious freedom to its own citizenry. Besides the fact that the Damascene Jews were their religious brethren, American Jews seethed in outrage over the Damascus Affair because it flew in the face of the core principles enshrined in the Constitution, more specifically religious toleration. They even used the blueprint provided by the theme of American exceptionalism to make a case that the world was indebted to Judaism, on account of its contributions to Western civilization. They casted the legacy of Judaism as exceptional, pointing to themselves as the originators of the

Bible, in order to persuade and at some level guilt, the American public and the rest of the world into taking up their cause.

But the question still remains: Why did American Jews cling so tightly to the theme of American exceptionalism? I argue that American Jews wove American exceptionalism into their rhetoric (which incidentally was littered with so many allusions to American exceptionalism that Christian rhetoric paled in comparison) in response to the Damascus Affair. But why did the theme of American exceptionalism appeal so much to the Jewish community in the United States? The answer is that American exceptionalism dovetailed very nicely with core principles of Judaism. Proponents of American exceptionalism believed that Americans were the chosen people, ordained by God to be exponents of freedom and liberty in a world marred by prejudice and intolerance. They had a duty to spread democracy to every corner of the world. The Hebrew Bible held that Jews entered into a divine covenant. Jews were put on a divine mission to do God's bidding on earth. Following in Abraham's footsteps, they were to teach and spread the word of God to every corner of the world. There was a quality and a duty associated with being both an American and a Jew.¹⁶⁴ Americans were a people who respected civil and religious freedom and projected these values onto the world. Jews were a people whose purpose was to comport themselves in God's image and project monotheism onto the world. Themes of American exceptionalism meshed with Jewish particularism, such that American Jews had a natural affinity to embrace and invoke it in their response to the Damascus Affair.

¹⁶⁴ S. Leyla Gurkan, *The Jews as a Chosen People: Tradition and Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.

To be sure, the importance of the Damascus Affair as a world event is little to none. As quick as the Damascus Affair flared up it fizzled out even quicker, when almost out of the blue, the Pasha relented under the pressure brought to bear by Europe and the United States, absolving the Damascene Jews of all crimes they supposedly committed—this after many days of brutal torture, starvation in dank dungeons, and unnecessary deaths. But in terms of American Jewish history, the crisis was something of a watershed. It was the American Jews' first attempt at lobbying for their own political agenda and steering the foreign policy of the United States.¹⁶⁵ It was a coming-of-age for American Jews where they rallied around a common cause and appealed to their government as a full-fledged community to be reckoned with in the United States. The American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair was also the first event in their history that evinced a nuanced understanding of prevailing intellectual currents in America. This may be where the greatest importance of the Damascus Affair lies. It debunks the misconception that American Jews, from the inception of the United States, were a people apart and continue to be a people apart to this day. If nothing else, the American Jews were an informed people who were actively engaged with the cultural milieu that surrounded them. They, without uncertainty, embodied the essence of being American.

¹⁶⁵ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 174.

Conclusion

When Father Thomas went missing, a world already on edge as a result of Mehemet Ali's (the Egyptian viceroy) uprising and acquisitive designs in Syria, was sent through convulsions by the Damascus Affair. Each day the crisis continued, the closer the Middle-East resembled a pressure cooker. But on September 6th, almost exactly eight months to the day of the abduction, Ali issued an order commanding the pasha to release the Damascene Jews. This happy conclusion must have seemed like a long time coming for Montefiore and Cremieux, who went on a joint mission to the region and doggedly campaigned for the exoneration of the wrongly accused Jews. Despite all this, there remained a number of loose ends in the case. There was no retrial, nor did any proof emerge that implicated the true murder(s), only a half-hearted statement made by the Sultan (Suleiman II) that the charges leveled against the Jews were false.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, persecution of the Damascene Jews was stifled, owing to the efforts of Montefiore, Cremieux, and the great European powers. For their part, the American Jews had virtually no impact on the outcome of the Damascus Affair. This was because their response, and the one put forth by the United States government, came into play too late to make a difference. By the time they tried to furnish aid, the crisis was already on its last leg or had ended entirely. So why, when considering that it did not cause any changes it intended, study the American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair.

As evidenced by the surviving source material of their meetings, American Jews were heavily influenced by the culture of sensibility (specifically its emphasis on an aversion to pain and value of sympathy) which remained a key feature of the Romantic

¹⁶⁶ Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 362.

era. They were outraged that the Damascene Jews were forced to endure torture and persecution perpetrated by a backwards East whose prejudices were a throwback to a bygone era. American Jews believed that emotion was the tie that bound society together. If a fellow-feeler was in danger everyone would make a concerted effort to come to their rescue. Their perception that the human rights (freedom of religion and right to a fair trial) of the Damascene Jews were being violated was refracted through the lens of the culture of sensibility. Seen in this light, the American Jewish reaction to the Damascus Affair was only a matter of course. This was because they had so thoroughly absorbed and bought into ideas that had become part and parcel of American society and Western civilization by extension. Their rhetoric virtually mirrored that of the Christian majority and the United States government, which is a testament to just how prevalent the trappings of the culture of sensibility were.

The American Jews who spoke at the meetings made countless allusions to themes of American exceptionalism and universalism. Since they took it to heart that the United States was exceptional by virtue of its equality of rights and religious toleration, they believed that it was on a divine mission to protect the rights of humankind abroad. And with Providence on their side, America's duty to project its values around the world seemed all the more important. The main reason why American Jews clung to this idea was because it chimes with the core principles of Judaism. Many Jews styled themselves as the chosen people, who had a close relationship with God. As Abraham had done in the Old Testament, Jews were tasked to spread the word of God and encourage monotheism. Jewish particularism is to religion as American exceptionalism is to nation. Boiled down to their most basic level, they both essentially propound the same thing.

This could be why the theme of American exceptionalism is much more apparent in the American Jewish response to the Damascus Affair than their Christian counterparts.

By analyzing the intentions in the American Jewish response, I show that they were as attuned to prevailing intellectual trends as anyone else was in the United States. This revises the misconception that the American Jews were an insular community without any loyalty to the United States—a misconception that has persisted and continues to persist in the present day. In this way, the significance of the Damascus Affair is that it provides a consummate example of how American Jews nimbly treaded the line between full-on assimilation and preservation of Jewish tradition. They absorbed these prevailing intellectual currents in the United States, but used them to advocate for the help of their own kind. Even though the historiography has focused on how American Jews reconciled Jewish tradition with American culture, it has not considered how the Damascus Affair has figured into this phenomenon. Whenever they begin to do so, maybe it will stop being a topic of passing mention and will be one worthy of plumbing analysis.

Far from being self-centered or parochial, the American Jewish community had an especially cosmopolitan view of the world. Their humanitarian ideals extruded their cares far beyond their tight-knit communities in America. It is a fiction to suggest that they were only worried about getting ahead and looking out for themselves. They were concerned with the inviolability of human rights abroad. They thought that the United States existed to be a model of liberty and freedom, which if other countries followed they would be on the fast track to heavenly redemption. Their ardent conviction to these

ideas gave the American Jews a particularly expansive world view that was just as developed, if not more so, than their Christian counterparts.

A recent report issued by the Anti-Defamation League claims that in 2014 the world (including the United States) has seen a sharp uptick in anti-Semitism around the world, the United States included. These anti-Semitic outbursts, in the form of physical violence, racial epithets, and hateful demonstrations have coincided with Israel's military intensification in Gaza.¹⁶⁷ Amid all of this religious tension, this thesis serves as a reminder that from the inception of the United States, American Jews have bought into its values, assimilated its culture, and took pride in belonging to what they considered to be an exceptional nation. They have been, and always will be, part of the American fabric.

While it is true that the American Jewish community in the early Republic made up a tiny fraction of the population of the United States, this does not justify the scant attention they are given by historians. Despite their lack of size, by training a lens on their small community, the importance of their reaction to the Damascus Affair becomes readily apparent. It marked the beginning of modern Jewish politics on an international scale and it was the first time they carved out their own political agenda¹⁶⁸ It demonstrated how long they had come in assimilating the American culture and absorbing its ideas, but at the same time never losing sight of their Jewish roots. No doubt, there are significant road blocks in the way of studying early American Jewish history—the main one being limited sources. But by taking an intellectual/cultural

¹⁶⁷ Anti-Defamation League, "Violence and Vitriol: Anti-Semitism Around the World During Israel's Operation Protective Edge, July-August 2014," <https://cbsla.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/adl-report-on-anti-semitism-during-ope-july-aug-2014.pdf> (accessed November 6, 2014).

¹⁶⁸ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 174.

approach and studying their rhetoric it is possible to get a sense of how engaged the Jewish community was in American society. Early American Jewish history, along with the people and events that comprise it, warrant more than a sweeping study that is compartmentalized by three different waves of immigration. American Jews deserve a closer look. There are plenty more angles to take on the history of early American Jews, but there needs to be decidedly more effort and creativity on the part of historians. Only then will we be able to understand how far American Jews have come and how they got to where they are today. We owe it to ourselves as historians and to the American Jewish legacy to do our best to capture their voice and make their history come alive.

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