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# Louisville Jewish Hospital's "Tikkun Olam": A Case Example of Continuity for American Jewish Hospitals

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# Louisville Jewish Hospital's "Tikkun Olam": A Case Example of Continuity for

## American Jewish Hospitals

Hannah Thompson

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### Introduction

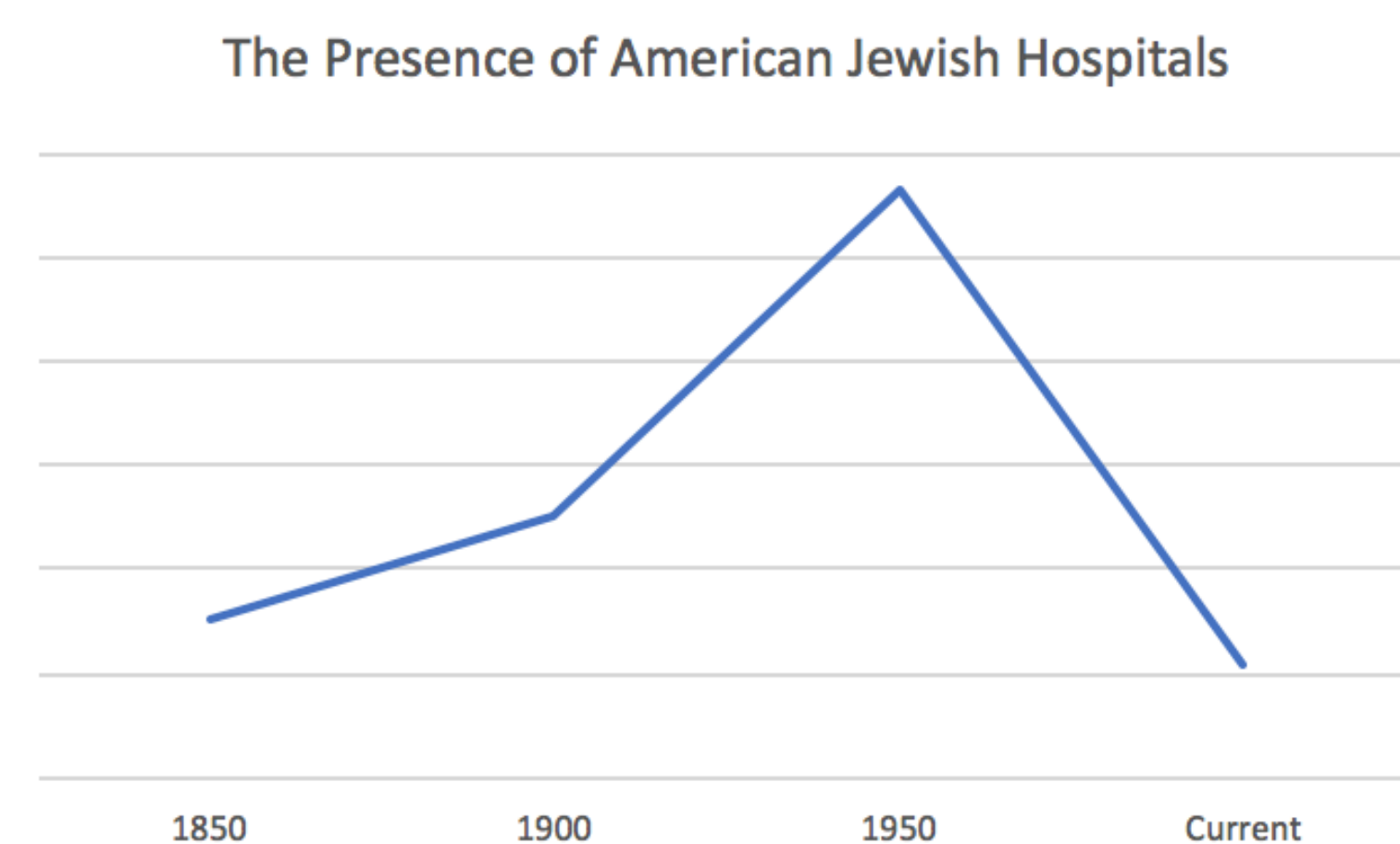
According to Mary Wagner, the author of *Jewish Hospitals Yesterday and Today*, Jewish Hospitals emerged in the mid-19th century in the U.S. for several reasons: the American Jewish community's need to combat anti-Semitism, to provide services for its large and then-growing immigrant population, and to establish a place for Jewish medical professionals to work, since anti-Semitism prevented them from being employed elsewhere. Although American Jews became increasingly more accepted as part of the broader American social and political milieu throughout the early 20th century, Jewish Hospitals persisted in cities across the U.S. until the 1970s. To date roughly 22 of the original 113 Jewish hospitals remain. Among them is Jewish hospital in Louisville, KY, first established in 1903 by a group of Jewish physicians and the Jewish community of Louisville. This study considers Louisville Jewish Hospital as an unusual case example of a Jewish hospital that continues to exist and preserve its Jewish heritage by using Jewish concepts such as *tikkun olam* to guide its principles of care, despite a shrinking local Jewish population.

### History

American Jewish Hospitals were built in three waves, each characterized by an influx of Jewish immigrants: during the 1850s, early 20th century, and after WWII. These hospitals were supported mainly by Jewish communities and used Jewish traditions to support efforts to heal. One Jewish concept, *tikkun olam* or "repairing the world," is central to the mission of American Jewish Hospitals.



At their peak of success, there were 113 American Jewish Hospitals, however, only 22 stand today. The fall of American Jewish Hospitals can be explained by economics, demographic changes, and a decline in anti-Semitism.



- 1.) Economics: American Jewish Hospitals faced the same economic burdens as non-Jewish hospitals did. The rise of health maintenance organizations, changes in Medicare and Medicaid, advances in medical technology, and the recession prompted many American Jewish Hospitals to merge with other hospitals or to sell their own hospital.
- 2.) Demographic Changes: There has been a decline in the Jewish population of the US since the 1950s. Many Jewish people have moved from urban Jewish neighborhoods, where Jewish hospitals often were established, to the suburbs.
- 3.) Decline in Anti-Semitism: American Jewish Hospitals were established as a response to anti-Semitism, however, the decline in anti-Semitism in the latter part of the 20th century lessened the need for Jewish hospitals. Jewish physicians and medical students are now socially accepted and it is illegal to discriminate based on religion.

### Methods

Although Louisville's Jewish Hospital has faced these hardships, it remains an American Jewish Hospital. To carefully investigate the way Jewish Hospital Louisville connects its Jewish values to its medical innovations, I conducted three original oral history interviews with leaders of Jewish Hospital to determine how Jewish Hospital had impacted the local community by making *tikkun olam* values explicit in their mission for social justice, advocacy, philanthropy, and medical advancement. The primary source interviews with Rabbi Dr. Nadia Siritsky, the Vice President of Mission at Jewish Hospital; Dr. Gerald Temes, former Chairman of the Jewish Hospital Board & Thoracic Surgeon; and Mr. Robert Waterman, the Chair of Jewish Hospital & St. Mary's Foundation and Lawyer; call attention to the ways Louisville Jewish Hospital adjusted to new pressures, while honoring its Jewish heritage, thus providing a useful case example for other U.S. Jewish hospitals.

### Oral History Results



Rabbi Dr. Nadia Siritsky, Vice President of Mission at Jewish Hospital

"I am honored by the incredible... people who work in healthcare, our doctors, nurses, aides, um, our environmental services workers, dietary food services. . . . There are so many people who you wouldn't even think are related to healthcare, like our accountants...and they are still so committed to the mission of healing and caring for the underserved...my role is to support them, provide some, um, moral, spiritual leadership, um, but really also to encourage them and to advocate for them."

"Slowly but surely I feel like a lot of the community has come around to learn to trust, and it's possible that they've come to trust Jewish Hospital because they already trusted me as somebody from the community, and I think that that probably helped a lot."

"I'm just really proud... because it shows how Jews have taken their own experiences of oppression and transformed it into lessons that they can use to help other people not be in the situation they were in. And so whether it's refugees and immigrants--because Jews arrived fleeing persecution from other lands as refugees and immigrants in America, and they needed medical care, and so that's why Jewish Hospital was formed, and that's why we continue to work with, um, the Kentucky Refugee Ministries, and why Jewish Family Career Service [sic] continues to provide care and partner with Catholic Charities in caring for refugees and immigrants."

"I think for me, the biggest issue--and--is, especially as a child of a Holocaust survivor who is aware of how anti-Semitism continues to be a big issue in the world today, um, my hope is that non-Jews, whether they work at Jewish Hospital or they receive care at Jewish Hospital, many of them may never have met a Jew in their life and may only know about Jews from stereotypes and prejudices that were repeated to them, that hopefully they experience, um, Jewish Hospital in a positive way, that they feel like Judaism is... a positive influence in the world, and... in many ways I hope and pray that I am helping Jewish Hospital be... a force that will prevent anti-Semitism."

### Conclusion

Although, Kentucky's Jewish population is shrinking and the Commonwealth faces economic challenges and a recent increase in anti-Semitism, Jewish hospital continues to exist and preserve its Jewish heritage by using Jewish concepts to guide its principles of care. The presence of Jewish Hospital is crucial for the Louisville community in more ways than one. Jewish Hospital has impacted our state, country, and world through its advancements in medical care, mission for social justice, and philanthropy. In light of recent anti-Semitic attacks, it is important for Jewish Hospital to remain a pillar of Jewish courage and strength.



Mr. Robert Waterman, Chair of Jewish Hospital & St. Mary's Foundation

"Well... I think it's important to keep it as a Jewish hospital. The history of Jewish Hospital... started when Jewish doctors were not allowed to practice in the hospitals here and it was hard for Jewish patients to, to get good care... It has been an important part of the Jewish community ever since and, and a sense of pride."

"While there are a lot of good hospitals in, in town... we provide things that none of the others do... the real innovative type medical care."

"If there's some things that we can do to increase their care or to provide the ability to provide that care... you know, I think that's sort of the essence of *tikkun olam*."

"Jewish Hospital in addition to providing, uh, care, one of its missions is wellness, is getting out in the community and teaching people how to... better eat, going into parts of town where they don't have education about diabetes..."



Dr. Gerald Temes, Former Chairman of the Jewish Hospital Board & Thoracic Surgeon

"Well, uh, of course Jewish hospital is Jewish because it was started in 1906 by a group of Jewish doctors. And it was started because... Jewish doctors could not practice in other hospitals, and it was the first hospital, for instance, to have African American doctors practicing there, uh, which is a tradition that's really important, and... when we did the merger, as I said, we worked out a list of Jewish values, and that was actually... enshrined within the documents."

"He (Yitzhak Rabin) said, 'I wanna tell you something,' he said, 'I was riding down the street, and I saw this sign that said Jewish Hospital,' he said, 'I was so proud it didn't say Mount Sinai, it didn't say Cedars of Lebanon, it spelled it out, Jewish Hospital, how proud you must be.' And that's, that's the way I always felt about Jewish Hospital."

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