

## A Jewish Perspective

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OUR TOPIC POSES two key questions. First, what are the pitfalls of writing from within our own religious tradition? Second, what are the advantages? In thinking about the Jewish tradition, my mind conjures up and fixes upon a quotation from Sheriff Wyatt Earp, upholder of law and order in Dodge City, Kansas, and later in Tombstone, Arizona: "The law," he said, "is a funny thing." Similarly, being Jewish and writing from within a Jewish tradition is a funny thing.

Jews have no hierarchical structure. We don't really belong to an organized religion. Individual congregations affiliate with different movements—the Reform movement, the Conservative movement, the Orthodox movement, and the Reconstructionists. Ties are loose, nonbinding. Each congregation is a body, a community unto itself. The rabbi's authority in each congregation is simply the power to persuade. When our rabbi in Salt Lake City was asked by a member of the First Presidency: "How far does your authority extend?" the rabbi responded, "Never beyond the kitchen of my own home—and usually not even there."

Other than monotheism, there is no binding doctrine, no binding catechism that unites Jews. The individual is in communion with God as he or she perceives Him or Her. There have been no excommunications of dissenters, of agnostics, or of atheists for at least three or four centuries. Moreover, there is a spectrum of answers to the question: Who is a Jew? A fierce debate rages, not only in Israel

but in this country. It concerns such matters as the mother's religion, ritual observance, and the conversion practice—all of which suggest slightly different answers to that complex question.

And that complex question leads us to a larger, more profound issue. For many Jews, both in Israel and here, Judaism is more than a religion. It is an ethnicity, a cultural, historical, and ethical identity. Judaism, then, is more than the synagogue. It is a commitment to ethical beliefs and codes, a responsibility (*tikkun olam*) to repair the world, to pursue goodly behavior, to leave the world a better place, to help the weak, to support the poor. Such behaviors are performed not from a desire for heavenly reward or because of fear of punishment. Such, in my mind, is Judaism—a call beyond the self, a call to activism—not only to Jews but to all of mankind and womankind.

In that context, I would like to focus on two questions: How has my Jewish identity affected my sense of history? And how have my experiences and my research, in turn, echoed and fed back to shape my identity? To answer those questions, I ask that you go with me on a historical quest that is intensely personal. It is important and valuable because it reveals the interplay of the historian, the religious tradition, and the pursuit of history.

About half a century ago, I was born in New York City which has a critical mass of Jews. That means it is easy to be Jewish there. Public schools close for Jewish religious holidays. Organizations exist to foster the full range of Jewish belief and Jewish ideas. There are multiple synagogues, many cultural events, and, of course, a great many places to obtain Jewish food. You don't have to worry about being Jewish in New York. That perhaps explains the minimum of Jewish education I received as a child. I learned the bare essentials for bar mitzvah, the coming-of-age ceremony by which Jewish boys and girls at age thirteen assume the responsibilities of adulthood. The idea was that being and staying Jewish would take care of itself.

But then the unexpected happened. When I was fifteen, my family moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. It was the mid-1960s, and there was only one synagogue in the entire Phoenix area. I was the only Jew in my high school. Some hotels and restaurants did not serve Jews. Jews were not allowed to purchase homes in certain areas. The Phoenix Country Club had just ended its ban on Jewish members, but the famous Camelback Inn and other resorts were still closed to Jews. At Arizona State University, I found little relief; there were few Jews and no Jewish student organization.

What was once familiar, taken for granted, was now gone; and care packages from the East were poor means to foster a sense of Jewishness.

This isolation and discrimination forced me to understand myself as a Jew. It led me to nurture and cultivate my Jewish identity. I did it first as a hobby, then as a college major, and then as a profession. I accomplished this by studying American history. Understanding history became my means to rootedness and community. The subjects I research and write about are intensely personal and related to my life. In exploring these topics, I know myself as a person and as a Jew.

An overview of the topics I have researched and published on will show what I mean by the interaction of identity, history, and the Jewish tradition. My first subject was the Ku Klux Klan. Most people, when they hear these words, conjure up an image of Southern rednecks bent upon intimidating and harassing blacks. The 1960s were a formative period of time for me, and the Klan rode in the 1960s. This became a very personal experience because my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Schwerner, was the mother of one of the three civil rights workers killed in Mississippi in June 1964. The civil rights movement was salient, as was the Ku Klux Klan. I participated in civil rights demonstrations in New York City protesting discrimination. I was thus drawn to study the Klan. However, I chose to research, not the Klan of the 1960s but the Klan of the 1920s, first as an honors project at Arizona State University and later for my dissertation at the University of Wisconsin. I was interested in the Klan of the 1920s because it was the most powerful social movement of the right wing in our history. It was a national movement, which had its strongest branches, or klaverns, in Indianapolis, Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles. And, perhaps, most important, the Klan movement during this period was primarily anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish, not anti-black. It is estimated that perhaps 6 million men and women joined the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s.

For my dissertation, which became my first book,<sup>1</sup> I studied Colorado, where the Klan elected mayors throughout the state, a governor, the lower house of the state legislature, and both U.S. Senators. I found membership lists with 20,000 names for Denver

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<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

and the small towns of Colorado and did a statistical analysis. I wanted to know who these people were, their occupations, where they lived, their marital status, the size of their families. What I found was that these Kluxers, these Klansmen and Klanswomen, were not the fringe, not the poor, not the alienated, but middle-class men and women, thirty years and older, married with children in stable homes.

My interest was not simply academic. I learned a lot of things personally, knowledge that fortified my identity as a Jew. The first thing I did with my 20,000 names was hit the telephone books. I wanted to know if any of these people were still alive; I wanted to interview them. I wrote letters. Foolishly, I used my real name, Goldberg, a Jewish signal; but I thought this was an old movement. Anti-Semitism was surely dying in this country. This was the end of the twentieth century.

From the first thirty letters, I received not one response. I then switched tactics. I made my middle name my first name and my first name my last so I magically became Alan Roberts. I sent out thirty more letters, and guess what? The Klan boys wanted to talk. I now came face to face with what I would call the beast. What these Kluxers told me was painful and upsetting, but it was also strengthening. As one Kluxer said to me: "You can tell a Jew just by looking at 'im."

I inquired with unfeigned interest: "How can you do that? What are their characteristics?"

He said, "Well, you know, they wave their hands around a lot. Their eyes are shifty. Surely you have Jewish friends."

Another Klanner told me, "You can smell a Jew, because Jews have Jew-stuff that oozes out of their pores."

In 1980 I was offered a position at the University of Utah and came to Utah for the first time. I must tell you that my initial look at Utah stunned me. It looked like Scandinavia. Everybody was blond. It seemed as if I had zoomed back in time to the 1950s. There were glass milk bottles. All the women appeared to be pregnant. Dorothy, this sure wasn't New York. I felt absolutely out of place, worse than Arizona. My response was to start reading, first about the Mormon people, and then about the Jews in Utah. I located a book or two,<sup>2</sup> not very good. However, I was particularly struck by

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<sup>2</sup>Juanita Brooks, *History of the Jews of Utah and Idaho* (Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1973), and Leon Watters, *The Pioneer Jews of Utah*, Vol. 2 in

a little curiosity I found in a book on ghost towns in Utah. It seems that there had once been a Jewish settlement in Sanpete County. A photograph showed a gravestone inscribed in Hebrew in the middle of the Utah desert. My interest was aroused. I did some research and found one article.<sup>3</sup>

In 1911, two hundred Jewish families in Philadelphia and New York subscribed money to buy land in Utah to foster a back-to-the-soil movement. They named their settlement Clarion because it was to be a clarion call to the Jews in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago to leave the cities and restructure Jewish life. I looked at the land records and found names. I put advertisements in Yiddish newspapers and the *New York Review of Books*. I also looked through the telephone directories for the more unusual names—not like Goldberg and Goldstein but Binder, Okun, and Nilva.

I was able to track down fifty-three of the families who settled in Clarion in 1911. These fifty-three produced nine journals, ranging in size from fifteen to two hundred pages, and one survivor. What I uncovered in Clarion, Utah, was a moment of Jewish time informed by a mass of materials. I interviewed the sons and the daughters, who had maintained networks with one another. These people went on pilgrimages to Sanpete County to touch this moment in Jewish time. They had preserved the letters and notes. Being Jewish allowed me entrance. Being Jewish enabled me to understand the nuances of their lives. I was always struck by the fact that, when I interviewed these people, they brought in their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to listen. It was clear that they wanted their own families to hear this story—that it was a story worth hearing and teaching, again and again.

I also interviewed Mormon farmers in Sanpete County, and I was impressed. They remembered the colony. Several had painstakingly collected information about the colony. Generously they gave it to me. "Take it with you," they said. "Write a book about it. This is important." Still, I was jarred when I heard Sanpete County people use the word *Jew* as an adjective. "Those are the Jew farms, and those

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Studies in American Jewish History (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1952).

<sup>3</sup>Everett Cooley, "Clarion, Utah: Jewish Colony in Zion," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 30 (Spring 1968): 113-31.

are Jew fences, and those are Jew gravestones.” It conjured up images of Nazi Germany for me all over again.

Clarion, Utah, was one of about twenty Jewish agricultural colonies planted in the United States as part of this back-to-the-soil movement. Others were created in Canada, Argentina, and of course, Israel. In fact, in 1909, Degania was Israel’s first kibbutz, preceding by just two years the Jewish settlement in Clarion. The Jews in Clarion stayed on the land for five years, struggled against poor soil, no water, and weather disasters. While the colony officially died in 1916, some Jewish farmers stayed on for an additional fifteen years in Sanpete County because they believed they were changing the lives of a larger population of Jews. That they failed is their history. That they struggled, that they were greater than themselves, that they fought for the Jewish people is the legacy they leave to my community. I have great pride in knowing that their story is now incorporated in junior high school textbooks of Utah history.

Again, in my research, I was changed. I learned about Russian discrimination against Jews. I learned about Jewish left-wing movements and the migration to America. This was self-education and self-study. I take pride in the fact that I added a piece of the Jewish mosaic.

My third book related to my activism in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and in Students for a Democratic Society.<sup>4</sup> This study obviously continued my absorption in social movements—collective action by men and women to change America. Again I was intrigued by the Jewish angle to American activism. Jews participate disproportionately in social movements. It is estimated that Jews formed half of the American Communist Party membership in the 1930s and 1940s. The Free Speech movement at Berkeley, Students for a Democratic Society, and the National Organization for Women were disproportionately Jewish.

In this book I write of a Jewish socialization process, family conditioning that fosters a toleration of radicalism, a questioning of authority, an assertiveness in defense of rights. Even more personally, in my study of the Communist Party of New York in the 1930s and ’40s, I came across the Furriers Union, which was heavily dominated by Communists. When my father came back from World War

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<sup>4</sup>Robert A. Goldberg, *Grassroots Resistance: Social Movements in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: Waveland Press, 1996).

II, he had briefly belonged to this union. I immediately got on the phone: "Hey, Dad, did you ever hear of Max Green?"

"Sure, I knew Max Green. He was in the Furriers Union."

"Did you ever hear of Abe Silver?"

"I knew Abe—wait a minute," he said. "Who have you been talking to? Where'd you get those names?"

My father then told me something he'd never told me before. As a child in the 1930s, he had belonged to the Young Pioneers, a Communist youth group. This exchange informed a statement he had made constantly to me during the 1960s: "Whatever you do, whatever protests you are in, whatever organization you join, don't sign anything."

My most recent book is a biography of Barry Goldwater, a U.S. Senator from Arizona for thirty years and a presidential candidate in 1964.<sup>5</sup> Goldwater is credited with birthing the modern American conservative movement. As a youth, I was absolutely intrigued by Barry Goldwater. The first political book I read—at age eleven in 1960—was *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Shepherdsville, Ky.: Victor Publishing Co., 1960). At thirteen, I read Goldwater's other book, *Why Not Victory?* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1962). I knew Barry had the answers. In high school in New York, my brother and I were Goldwater's only supporters. In 1964, I took my mother to the voting booth, closed the curtain, and turned the lever for Goldwater. Barry and I have since split company politically. The Vietnam War drove me to the left and him further to the right, but that's another story.

I was eager to do a biography on Barry Goldwater, to revisit the site of my adolescent rebellion and to study the Jew who got closest to the office of the American presidency. Two jokes made the rounds in the Jewish community during the 1964 campaign, both in reference to Barry Goldwater's Jewish father and Christian mother. One went, "Well, we all knew that the first Jewish president would be an Episcopalian." And the second one, Barry Goldwater told. While preparing to tee up one day at a club that didn't admit Jews as members, the club president came running up and said, "Barry, you're half Jewish. You can't play golf here." To which Barry said, "Well, since I'm only half Jewish, let me play the first nine holes."

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<sup>5</sup>Robert A. Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

In the book, I explore Barry Goldwater's Jewish roots. I trace the story of his grandfather, Michael Goldwasser, from the *shtetl* in Poland to the Arizona outback and eventually to his home in San Francisco. Here was a man who held to his faith, attending services weekly on the Sabbath, sending his children to Hebrew school, being part of a Jewish merchant network out of California that reached to Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Idaho. He was a Zionist, a believer in a Jewish state in Israel. His son Baron was bar mitzvahed but became alienated, became assimilated, did not participate in Jewish organizational activities, and married outside the faith. Barry Goldwater's first memories are of Christmas, sitting in the lap of Santa, who interestingly enough was played by Aaron Goldberg, another Jew who lost his way. Barry's father never mentioned his Judaism, and Barry mused to me during one interview, "Here I am, a half-Jew, and I don't know a goddamn thing about it."

But Barry Goldwater's Judaism was not so easy to escape. At Virginia's Stanton Military Academy where he went to high school, he faced anti-Semitism. According to his yearbook, his nickname was "Goldberg," which surprised me. I interviewed his roommate who told me: "It was better than calling him 'Kike.'" Barry Goldwater told me, "I had to go back east to learn that Jews were somehow different." Rather than sensitizing Barry Goldwater and giving him greater awareness, he accepted the anti-Semitism in silence. He made no protest, and he ran from his identity. When he pledged Sigma Chi at the University of Arizona, he did not object when his closest friend, Harry Rosensweig, a Jew, was denied admission because Sigma Chi had a "no Jews" policy. As president of his country club, he maintained a strict exclusionist policy; and when the Jews of Phoenix were seeking to open restricted clubs, Barry Goldwater would not assist them. In fact, he held his press conference conceding defeat to Lyndon Johnson after the 1964 election at the most notorious restricted club, the Camelback Inn. Barry Goldwater never came to terms with his heritage. He never accepted it and never understood it. He always had a sense of ambivalence because his Jewishness made him feel different. It made him uncomfortable. He had a recognition, which I feel that all Jews in this country know, feel, and fear—that in this golden land of freedom and opportunity, we are not at home. As a minority, we face hostility. Jews feel a need—as I would argue every minority does—to accommodate, to



adjust, and to assimilate. This makes us more Jewish at home and in our community than we are outside.

In conclusion, I hope that this roundabout excursion has shed light on the questions of history thinking and history-writing, and their interconnections with ethnic and religious identities. Who I am shapes what I study, the questions I ask, and my interpretation. Still, my interpretations are bound by my personal and professional integrity. I have been privileged. I have never been restricted nor intimidated by community authority or censors. My hope is that my work is free from denial, excuse, or mindless glorification. If not, my exploration of the past would short-circuit my larger goals. To explore the past is to understand my self, my community, and my people.