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“True Israelites of America”: The Story of the Jews of Iowa

MICHAEL J. BELL

OLYMPIAN VIEWS OF HISTORY are out of fashion. If nothing else, the complexity of life makes them suspect. What appears from above to be clear evidence of cause and effect, pattern and pathway, quickly deteriorates into chaotic and even random actions when viewed head on. Hence, historians shy away from epic narratives, knowing too well that they will be undone by the local and the particular. Nonetheless, this essay proposes to tell an epic story. Its subject is the history of the Jews of Iowa from the state's territorial beginnings to the present day. In particular, it will attempt to describe the one hundred and sixty years of Iowa Jewish life as it exists in the histories of more than twenty communities from across the state and the lives of the twenty to thirty thousand Jewish women, men, and children who lived all or part of their lives in Iowa. Clearly, it cannot tell all of these stories completely. Thus, the trends it will examine, the lives it will describe, and the conclusions it will draw must all be understood to be interpretations.

Nonetheless, this broad sweep is the heart of the justification for its writing. Until recently, the recording of Jewish-American

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history has been an urban affair. Most American Jews live in the large metropolitan centers of the United States, and the natural tendency of Jewish historians, most of whom came from those communities, has been to treat those urban populations as if they fully defined the American Jewish experience.¹ Moreover, focusing on those large populations made good methodological sense. Traditionally, historians of ethnicity have been interested in cultural difference. They have measured the heroic not by how a group has assimilated itself into American life but rather by how it has resisted the heat of the melting pot. Thus, they have relied on the existence of groups of sufficient size to maintain some form of self-segregation from the mainstream population. Those urban communities, then, offered the "best" examples of that segregation process. Finally, the too often virulent record of oppression and destruction of Jews during the Diaspora has made it virtually impossible for Jews or Gentiles to conceive that any Jewish community might willingly seek full membership in the larger cultural and political community. In fact, so ingrained is this belief that historians almost do

1. Among the many examples describing urban Jewish life throughout the United States are Frank J. Adler, *Roots in a Moving Stream: The Centennial History of Congregation B'nai Jehudah of Kansas City, 1870-1970* (Kansas City, 1972); Stephen Birmingham, *"Our Crowd": The Great Jewish Families of New York* (New York, 1967); Judith Engelmann, *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present* (Bloomington, IN, 1984); Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience* (University, AL, 1974); Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, 1978); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York, 1976); Frank Rosenthal, *The Jews of Des Moines: The First Century* (Des Moines, 1957); Joseph P. Schultz, ed., *Mid-America's Promise: A Profile of Kansas City Jewry* (Kansas City, MO, and Waltham, MA, 1982); William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations* (Albany, NY, 1982); and Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (San Marino, CA, 1970). Marc Lee Raphael has been arguing for twenty years against the urban, East Coast bias in American Jewish history. See his "American Jewish Local Histories: Deficiencies and Possibilities," *CCAR Journal* 20 (1973), 59-68; *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community: Columbus, Ohio, 1840-1975* (Columbus, 1979); and, more recently, "Beyond New York," in *The Jews of the American West*, ed. Moses Rischin and John Livingston (Detroit, 1991), 52-65. See also Lee Shai Weissbach, "The Jewish Communities of the United States on the Eve of Mass Migration: Some Comments on Geography and Bibliography," *American Jewish History* 78 (1988), 79-108.

not know how to write a Jewish history that does not treat Jewish integration as an impossibility.²

It is precisely those assumptions, however, that I will challenge in this essay. I will argue that even though the Jewish community in Iowa has never been large enough in any place at any time to effectively self-segregate itself, there has existed an active, Iowa Jewish life whose principal strength derives from its integration with the mainstream cultures of the state. Consequently, the history of Iowa's Jewish community is best told as a story of involvement rather than of siege. I will begin by examining the experience of the first generation of Iowa's Jews, and then, in succession, will explore the efforts of those Jews to develop community life, the forms such community life took as the number of Jews migrating to the state increased, the consolidation of Iowa's Jewish life during the age of mass immigration to the United States, and, finally, the continuation of Iowa Jewish culture from that point to the present day.

THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF IOWA begins almost at the moment that the story of Iowa begins. The first recorded Jewish settler in Iowa was a French Jew named Alexander Levi, who arrived in Dubuque on August 1, 1833. One of Dubuque's most successful early settlers, he became the territory's first naturalized citizen in 1837. His life and career are emblematic of several features of the early Iowa Jewish experience: on arrival he was isolated, urban, and entrepreneurial.³

Most early Iowa Jewish communities can trace their founding to a single individual who was the only Jew for several years. By 1846 there were sixteen permanent Jewish residents in the state, and well into the 1850s the rest of the identifiable Jews, a number never larger than one hundred, were almost all

2. See, in particular, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Jewish Presence: Essays on Identity and History* (New York, 1977); Marshall Sklare, ed., *Understanding American Jewry* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1982); and idem, *Observing America's Jews* (Hanover, NH, 1993), especially the introduction and chap. 3.

3. For more complete descriptions of Levi's life and career, see Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1904), 158, 160, 167-70, 176-79; and Oscar Fleishaker, "The Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community on the Banks of the Mississippi River" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1957), 8-11, 44, 47-48.

peddlers who traveled throughout Iowa but lived mainly in Illinois and Missouri. Thus, Levi, as one of the few Jews in the state for many years, lived under a greater scrutiny than his fellow immigrants. Whatever success he might achieve, he was known first as a Jew. Although there is little evidence of overt anti-Semitic activities in early Iowa, even at the height of Know Nothing politics in the 1850s, being Jewish made him a particularly visible representative of his community.

An example of such visibility occurred only two years after Levi arrived in Dubuque. Another Jew opened a business, mingled freely with the non-Jewish community, converted, and eventually married into one of the town's finer families. When the man was arrested for defrauding his creditors, Levi, who had not been involved with the man since his conversion, was visited by two ministers who complained about "tricky Jews." Levi replied that when the gentleman was a Jew the community had considered him "a credit to his people and a benefit to organized society. But the minute he joined you, . . . he was compelled to please a society, a church and a woman whom he did not understand and who could be contented with anything but his Jewishness."⁴

Levi's isolation was intensified by his urban setting. Throughout western Europe, Jews had been excluded historically from owning land, and thus the vast majority of them were urban dwellers whose skills and talents were adapted best for urban situations. In this, Levi's choice of Dubuque was typical of the early Jewish settlers of Iowa: whereas most immigrants to Iowa came to farm, Levi came because cities were forming and city life was what he knew best. By 1860 the permanent Jewish population of the state had risen to probably a little over five hundred, most of whom lived in Burlington, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, and Keokuk, with the rest located in thirty other communities in which known Jewish grocery, dry goods, or clothing stores operated.⁵

4. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 169-70.

5. *Ibid.*, 199-208.

Levi's third emblematic characteristic was his focus on business. Those early Jews who came to Iowa were among the first generation of American entrepreneurs. Like most newcomers, Levi came to Iowa seeking success. Had Dubuque not prospered or had he not been able to make a go of it, then he would have moved on to try his luck somewhere else. For the young Jewish businessman, a small store in the right community offered the opportunity for a Jewish immigrant to link himself to the rising prosperity of nineteenth-century America and to develop a sense (however limited) of individual power and independence. Thus, over three-fourths of the Jewish-owned stores spread across Iowa by 1860 had been started by peddlers who witnessed the emergence of new communities and established themselves in areas they had once served. After building customer awareness and raising capital, these merchants were then able to expand their enterprises into full-service department stores when that mode of product distribution emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many prospered far better than they could have imagined. The nineteenth-century settlement of Iowa parallels the emergence of America's culture of consumption, and thus families such as the Davidsons of Sioux City and the Younkens of Des Moines benefited as much from this cultural change as did the Macys, the Gimbels, and the Magnins in Denver, New York, and San Francisco.⁶

Despite their cultural differences, many Jewish settlers integrated themselves into the political and social structure of their various communities. The career of Moses Bloom is perhaps the most exemplary. In 1857 Bloom settled in Iowa City, where he opened a clothing store. He prospered, married, raised a family, and became a valued member of the community. By the 1870s he was deeply involved in the political life of Iowa City, securing election as alderman and mayor. Eventually, his party nom-

6. For a history of these activities, see Leon A. Harris, *Merchant Princes: An Intimate History of Jewish Families Who Built Great Department Stores* (New York, 1979); and Jacob R. Marcus, *Unites States Jewry, 1776-1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit, 1989-1993), 3:248-52. For an analysis of the role of consumption in the development of American Jewish culture, see Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York, 1990).

inated him for lieutenant governor in 1892, though he declined to run.⁷

Like Levi's success in the 1840s, Bloom's at the end of the century is a reminder of how untraditional the lives of Iowa's earliest Jewish settlers were. Unlike the Jews of the East Coast or the large cities, theirs was an intensely individual experience. Although they seldom sought to separate themselves from their Jewishness and actively worked to attract other community members to Iowa, they were more willing to strike out on their own and gamble that their Jewishness could survive apart from the shelter of the group. It helped that for most of their contemporaries Jewishness was as much a matter of nationality as it was of theology. Still, though unescapable, Jewishness on the frontier was not necessarily a hindrance. Territorial Iowans valued initiative over background, and the very act of coming to Iowa defined Iowa's earliest Jews as immediately different from their coreligionists. Of course, we have no record of those who failed to prosper and moved on or returned to the safety of settled communities. But the willingness of men such as Levi and Bloom to strike out on their own, establish their individuality, and trust in themselves laid the ideological ground rules for what would become the Iowa Jewish identity.⁸

EVEN AS THEY PROSPERED as individuals, most of the early Jewish settlers were Orthodox Jews who depended on the presence of coreligionists for the most basic features of religious existence. To minimize the need for compromises, they attempted to attract other Jews to Iowa and to develop appropriate institutional structures as quickly as possible. Not surprisingly, success came first to the more populated river towns along the Mississippi. In Davenport a group of young men founded the Young Men's Hebrew Literary Association in 1856, the first

7. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 176.

8. For examples of similar isolation and similar responses, see Harriet Rochlin and Fred Rochlin, *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* (Boston, 1984), 51-81, 141-67; and Leonard Dinnerstein, "From Desert Oasis to the Desert Caucasus: The Jews of Tucson," in Rochlin and Livingston, eds., *Jews of the American West*, 139-63.

known Jewish organization in the state. The Davenport community also established the first formally incorporated congregation in Iowa in 1861 and called the state's first rabbi.⁹ The real push to create Jewish community life in Iowa, however, came during and immediately after the Civil War.

The most successful early efforts were in Keokuk. In the mid-nineteenth century, Keokuk was exactly the type of urban commercial center that was so appealing to opportunistic Jewish immigrants. At its peak Keokuk's antebellum Jewish community of more than one hundred families was larger than Chicago's. Almost every problem, tension, conflict, and concession associated with small-town Jewish community life in Iowa can be found in its history. That history is a blueprint of the choices faced by every Iowa community large enough to attract a sizable Jewish population but not large enough to satisfy the sometimes contradictory needs of its members.¹⁰

Keokuk's first move toward establishing community was the creation of a benevolent society. The Benevolent Children of Jerusalem was founded in 1855 to "purchase ground for a burying place, to assist the sick and needy and arrange a meeting place for religious purposes."¹¹ The order of intentions is as meaningful as the impulses they represent. Establishing a synagogue required a commitment and a confidence in the long-term survival of the community that few early Jewish settlements could muster. Death, however, was another matter. Any Jew, regardless of the nature of their commitment, could understand the desire to bury Jewish dead in Jewish ground. Moreover, everyone, Jew or Gentile, knew death as a commonplace of nineteenth-century life. Thus, in nearly every Jewish community across Iowa, a Jewish cemetery was the first order of business. The Keokuk Hebrew Cemetery was no exception. It grounded the Jews to the city and permitted them to deal with a much too frequent reality.

9. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 219-20; Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 23, 53, 91-95.

10. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 189-90; Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 163-79.

11. Quoted in Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 168.

The founding of the cemetery association was followed quickly by the founding of the Ladies Benevolent Society. Its existence points up the classic division of responsibility that was repeated across Iowa and continues in some places today. The founding officers of the cemetery association and later of the minyan and synagogue were all men; the leaders of the benevolent society were presumably their wives.¹² In one sense, this is not surprising. This first minyan was Orthodox; Orthodox Judaism excludes women from leadership roles in religious life, and, despite the injunction that all Jews are responsible to be charitable, charity in nineteenth-century America was woman's work. Still, this relegation of charity work to women marks a first step toward an Americanized Jewish culture. In the established eastern synagogue-based communities, the administration of official charity remained the responsibility of the rabbi and the synagogue board. Women might carry out the tasks once they were defined, but the leading men of the congregation decided what was to be done. In Keokuk, few men had the time to involve themselves in the management of charity, and those few who were prosperous enough in 1855 to play the role of philanthropist were too preoccupied with their own businesses to pay attention. With no synagogue to stand between the women and their labors, and no men to define their enterprise, women gained a control that they would not easily surrender. In nearly every Jewish community in Iowa, charity remained a woman's responsibility well into the twentieth century, and then only ceased to be an exclusive women's domain in those communities where professionally managed federated charities arose or the funds raised became so large that the men usurped responsibility for their collection and management. Even in those communities, power was surrendered only reluctantly, and still today four of the five Jewish Federations in the state are managed by women.¹³

12. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 168-69, 277.

13. For a general description of the activities of Jewish women's philanthropy, see Marcus, *U.S. Jewry*, 3:465-74. In discussing the Federation movement at the beginning of this century, Marcus asserts that "Women were denied positions of leadership unless they were wealthy; then they were welcomed

If cemeteries and charities were relatively easy to found and manage, synagogues were not. Jewish law required at least ten men—a *minyan*—for most formal religious activity. The Keokuk minyan met first for the Passover of 1855 and then again for High Holy Days services. By November the community had founded B'nai Israel Congregation. Meeting first in a private home without a Torah, the group later rented rooms in downtown Keokuk and began to hold regular weekly services. By 1858, however, the community had disbanded in a dispute over whether to use the *Minhag Ashkenaz*, the form of service developed by German Jews, or the *Minhag Polin* favored by Hasidic Jews from Russia and Poland.¹⁴

The religious differences between the two groups were magnified by their differences in status and wealth. The city's German Jews had migrated first, opened businesses first, rose in social status faster, and integrated into the community more quickly than the eastern Europeans. Some Russian and Polish Jews had immigrated to the United States at the same time as the earliest German settlers, but most arrived after 1845. Moreover, they came from terribly impoverished areas and occupied the bottom of the economic ladder. The Germans were a classic upwardly mobile, easily threatened bourgeoisie; the Russians and Poles an equally classic struggling working class, resentful of the airs and the slights of those who thought themselves better.

The dispute was further magnified by contesting attitudes toward Americanization. For both groups, America represented emancipation. For the German Ashkenaz, American liberty meant that they were free to distinguish their identity from their religion and to develop the same national feeling as any other immigrant might. For many eastern European Jews, embracing American life was a form of surrender. To divorce Jewish identity from public life and to adopt the outward display of an American persona meant to cease to be a Jew. Their refusal to compromise on the form of service, then, reflected the conflict

on boards" (488), suggesting that the Iowa experience then and now was markedly different than in other states and communities.

14. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 168-70.

between those whose upward mobility would be threatened by the old-world, foreign, "vulgar" display and those for whom the absence of that display represented the disappearance of identity.

Powerful evidence of these divisions can be found in a letter written by a Mr. Green to the *American Israelite* in February 1869, ironically just before the Keokuk Jewish community began its successful push to institutionalize its communal impulses.

The Jews here may be divided into three classes. To the first and the worst belong those who are very indifferent, who care only about making money, seeking pleasure and little else besides. Then we have those who think religion consists in the observance of ceremonies. To obsolete forms they cling with a tenacity worthy of a better cause. . . . Attempt to do away with some forms mostly practiced in the land of the Muscovites and of noble Poland, and you make raging lions out of vegetating animals. . . . It is to use the very words of one of their representative men "like putting pepper into their eyes." . . . Fortunately we have another class who are for reforms, at least they think they are so. . . . According to their ideas progress consists in abolishing old and adopting new forms. That done, and they believe they have reached the very pinnacle of progress.

Green went on to criticize the "prejudice existing between those coming from different countries. Those from Russia, Poland, Bohemia, East or West Prussia think themselves wronged by the 'Ashkenaz,' and *vice versa*. . . . It is a contemptible sight to see a Jew keep aloof from Jews as much as possible."¹⁵ Even granting the excesses of nineteenth-century rhetorical style and Green's petulant tone, his criticisms tellingly exemplify the elements that threatened small-town community life. Here in a nutshell are the insurmountable religious differences, the contrasted values of those seeking to make a living and those who could afford to contemplate higher things, the dream of peoplehood brought short by attitude, income, and national origin. Here, most of all, are the factions, the feelings, the rages,

15. *American Israelite*, 5 March 1869, quoted in Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 171.

and hurts that must be managed at best, papered over at worst, if social life is to be possible.

Despite these differences, the Jewish community persisted in its efforts to institutionalize Jewish life in Keokuk. The congregation had been reactivated in 1863 with the German Orthodox *Minhag* as the accepted worship service. Joshua Falk Cohen, one of the more famous American rabbis of the period, became the first rabbi. During the next few years the revived congregation met in several different rented spaces, changing location about as often as it changed rabbis. In 1869 the congregation restructured itself a third time by replacing the German Orthodox service with *Minhag America*, developed in Cincinnati at the Hebrew Reform College under the direction of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. This move drew no organized resistance, reflecting a further Americanization of B'nai Israel, which now boasted sixty-two members. Buoyed by the growing population, B'nai Israel moved to build a new synagogue, the first in Iowa, which it eventually completed in 1877.¹⁶

In a final irony, just at the moment that the Keokuk Jewish community seemed to achieve its greatest success, the town's economic fortunes ebbed, undermining the prosperity that had made it appealing to Jewish residents. In 1869, anticipating the westward movement of economic power in Iowa, two of the Younker brothers (then the most powerful family in Keokuk) had moved to Des Moines to set up a new business there. With Keokuk's economy faltering, its Jewish population began a steady decline, reaching fifty by the turn of the century and just five in the 1950s.¹⁷ In the end, despite the best efforts of many of its Jewish citizens to create and maintain Jewish community life, the Jews of Keokuk could not best the external forces that brought them to the town. They had come to prosper, and they stayed and worked through their difficulties because they did prosper, but when that prosperity disappeared, so too did much of the incentive to remain together.

16. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 169-72.

17. *Ibid.*, 167, 175-76.

Keokuk displays the essential Iowa small-town Jewish community dilemma. With sufficient prospects to attract a Jewish population, the city never grew to the point where that population could do more than minimally satisfy the basic needs of its members. The compromises that produced the promise of a Jewish burial, the possibility of a sympathetic Jewish helping hand in times of need, and the ability to worship with other Jews were worth making, but they did not satisfy. In Keokuk, Jews found liberty, and that liberty freed them to put individual needs ahead of their need for community.

THE MIGRATION of the Younker brothers to Des Moines marked both an end and a beginning in Iowa Jewish history. To that point, no single Jewish community was able to rise above any other in prestige and power. In the 1880s, however, Jewish religious and social life diversified markedly. Many Jews continued to function much as the original settlers had: as single families in small towns. In the larger towns and cities—Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Fort Dodge, Iowa City, Marshalltown, Mason City, Oskaloosa, and Ottumwa—the Jewish populations grew large enough to begin to follow the path charted by Keokuk. Finally, the emerging urban centers such as Des Moines, Sioux City, and Davenport/Rock Island were able to support a variety of religious and community institutions.¹⁸

This trend toward institutional diversity would be accelerated by demographic changes in Iowa's Jewish population. The events in Russia after 1880, particularly the pogroms of the 1880s and 1890s, initiated a mass migration that at its peak at the turn of the century threatened to overwhelm the existing Jewish communities of the United States. Admittedly, the number of immigrants arriving in Iowa was far smaller than those coming to New York, Philadelphia, or Boston, but their effects

18. The nationwide Jewish survey in 1878 listed more than forty communities in Iowa with an estimated Jewish population of 1,200. Davenport and Des Moines are listed as having more than two hundred people, Burlington and Keokuk more than one hundred. Almost all the others had fewer than twenty, most far less. For details on individual community populations, see Jacob R. Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (Lanham, MD, and New York, 1990), 70-73.

were just as significant. The existing Jewish population of Iowa was largely integrated into the American experience before it arrived in the territory or the state. In fact, many Iowa Jews of the 1880s were second-generation Americans. The new immigrants stood out from their neighbors. Consequently, the resident Jewish population faced a Jewishness that was both foreign and frightening. Their response was to attempt to coerce these "new" Jews to become Americans and Iowans as rapidly as possible. Of course, the new immigrants were not pawns. They had come to the United States fleeing persecution, and they were not about to have their Jewish lives manipulated by those who had come before. Moreover, their numbers gave them an unexpected power. As long as the Jewish population of the state was small, Jewish life was dictated by compromise and consensus. With the arrival of large numbers of immigrants, the Jews already here not only had to take into account the expectations of their Gentile neighbors, they also had to answer to other Jews about the quality of the Jewish life they had made. These forces were particularly evident in Des Moines.¹⁹

Predictably, Des Moines became a magnet for this second wave of immigration. The capital of the state and its largest and most prosperous community, it had experienced a steady rise in population throughout the mid-nineteenth century. By 1869, its Jewish population was large enough for two distinct groups

19. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 235–36, 257–58; Rosenthal, *Jews of Des Moines*, 25–26, 52–53. For general historical and cultural descriptions of this immigration, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955); Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of the Eastern European Jews* (New York, 1989); Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York, 1978); and Pamela Susan Nadell, "The Journey to America: The Jews of Eastern Europe in Transition" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1982). Also of interest are Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Jews in America, 1880–1930* (New York, 1979); and Milton Meltzer, *Taking Root: Jewish Immigrants in America* (New York, 1976). For an early description of the immigration, see Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910* (New York, 1914). For comparative data on two distinct ethnic experiences, see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880–1915* (New York, 1977); or idem, "Jobs, Ghettos, and the Urban Economy, 1880–1935," *American Jewish History* 71 (1981), 218–38.

to meet and celebrate Rosh Hashanah. On the east side of the city, a group of predominantly Russian Jews formed Congregation B'nai Israel. On the west side, nine prominent businessmen—all German Jews—established a minyan, then formed the Emanuel Burial Association, and finally, in 1873, chartered Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. At first, "the constitution was in German, the services were orthodox and [t]here was no music except as was furnished by the children's chorus." But by 1874, the organization had "dropped all pretense to orthodoxy," and in a "public avowal of its radicalism" became "the first Jewish congregation in Iowa to embrace reform."²⁰

B'nai Jeshurun prospered, in part as a result of divisions in the Orthodox community. Religious quarrels are common in Jewish communities. In Des Moines, unlike in Keokuk, something more than complaining could be done. In 1881 a number of the members of B'nai Israel, deeming their fellow members "too radical," withdrew and formed their own congregation, Beth El Jacob. B'nai Israel and Beth El Jacob further divided in 1901 when a group withdrew because the synagogue's services, which were conducted entirely in Hebrew, "could not hope to keep the coming generation within its fold." Constituted as Congregation Tifereth Israel, by 1907 it enrolled 115 pupils in its Sabbath School, conducted a Hebrew School with an average attendance of fifty, and had the largest membership in the city. Its sudden success came partly because it occupied the middle ground between the firmly Orthodox congregations of B'nai Israel and Beth El Jacob and the Reform B'nai Jeshurun. Acknowledged as the first Conservative Jewish synagogue in Iowa, Tifereth Israel's willingness to conduct services "according to the orthodox ritual, with the one innovation that the men and women worship together," seemed to many best suited to balance the requirements of Jewish law against the realities of American life.²¹

In contrast to Des Moines, population growth drove Sioux City along a different path. In Des Moines, the divisions among

20. Annette Mann, "A History of the Jews of Des Moines," *The Reform Advocate*, 5 May 1908, 9.

21. *Ibid.*, 25–27.

the Orthodox prevented them from developing a power base to challenge the wealthier, though numerically smaller, Reform congregation. In Sioux City, however, the Orthodox were able to sidestep their religious differences and dominate the city's social, cultural, and religious life. Small but decidedly prosperous, Sioux City's central role in meat production, grain marketing, and northwest Missouri River development made it eminently attractive to immigration. By 1857, when Godfrey Hattenbach, the town's first Jewish citizen, arrived, the newly incorporated town of 150 was in the midst of a real estate boom.²²

As elsewhere in Iowa, the first institution the Jewish community in Sioux City established was the Jewish Cemetery Association in 1869. It was the Jews' only incorporated religious activity in the city until 1884, when the Hebrew (later Jewish) Ladies' Aid Society was founded. The society organized a Sabbath school and a reading group, and also "cooperated with the men in organizing religious services during the great holidays," the first of which was held in 1886, when "all the Jews of Sioux City joined in the orthodox celebration."²³

In the same decade the advance guard of Orthodox immigration arrived. By 1894, there were enough Orthodox to form Congregation Adath Jeshurun. By 1912, it had grown to seventy-five members, serving approximately three hundred people. In 1907 two more Orthodox congregations, Anshe Kapull and Tifereth Israel, were founded. The former had forty members in 1912, serving approximately two hundred individuals, most of whom had come from the same district in Russia. The latter, with fifty members, served a similar population; it had been formed to serve those Orthodox who had moved to the west side of the city and needed a place of worship within walking distance. The last Orthodox congregation, Beth Abraham, was

22. Lee J. Levinger, "The Jews of Sioux City: Their Progress and Prospects," *The Reform Advocate*, 12 December 1912, 5; Bernard Shuman, *A History of the Sioux City Jewish Community, 1869-1969* (Sioux City, 1969), 9-10.

23. Levinger, "Jews of Sioux City," 4.

formed in 1910 as a strictly Hasidic organization and had sixty-five members and a base population of three hundred.²⁴

The German Reform impulses present in Sioux City's early Jewish community and behind the original cemetery and aid societies did not formally organize until 1899, with the creation of Mt. Sinai Congregation. The Reform community had continued to meet regularly for high holiday services since 1886, but apparently had not felt the need to incorporate until the rapidly expanding Orthodox presence challenged its social preeminence. Then, drawing on the wealthiest members of the Jewish community, in particular the Davidson families, it moved quickly. Thirty-one members gathered in a hired hall for weekly services led by a permanent rabbi, and a temple was completed in time for the high holidays of 1901. Mt. Sinai promoted a radical Reform program designed not only to distinguish it from its Orthodox neighbors but also to signify its assimilation to more traditional forms of American religious behavior. Indeed, some of its choices seem willfully intent on giving offense to the Orthodox community: patterning itself on the radical Chicago Sinai of the left-wing Emil G. Hirsch, it eliminated the Torah entirely from services, held services on Sunday only, had open seating, and introduced instrumental music and choral singing. By 1912, it had retreated from some of these extremes, having acquired a Torah and instituted a Friday night service, but it still continued to hold its main service and school on Sunday.²⁵

The overwhelming numbers of the Orthodox Jewish community in Sioux City led to a curious apportionment of charitable work. In Des Moines the unity of the Reform B'nai Jeshurun enabled it to dominate the delivery of charity to the community, but in Sioux City, Orthodoxy set the tone for social work. Thus its central charitable organization was United Hebrew Charities, formed in 1890 by ten men in order "that they as Russian Jews

24. *Ibid.*, 13.

25. Shuman, *Sioux City Jewish Community*, 19; Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 289. For a description of Hirsch's career and influence, see David E. Hirsch, *Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch: The Reform Advocate* (Northbrook, IL, 1968). For a description of a similar "Protestantization" of American Judaism, see Lance J. Sussman, "Isaac Leiser and the Protestantization of American Judaism," *American Jewish Archives* 38 (1986), 5-6.

might aid their brother immigrants." Not surprisingly, given that four-fifths of the community was Orthodox (1,200 out of 1,500 Jewish residents in 1912), the bulk of Jewish philanthropic work fell to United Hebrew Charities. And, given the clash of Orthodox and Reform programs, the division of labor was also predictable. The Orthodox men did all the investigations, the two organizations shared the costs, and the women of each "contrive to do personal work by meeting and helping the recipients in a more intimate manner."²⁶

In Davenport/Rock Island, growth produced still a third version of organized diversity. By the turn of the century, Davenport/Rock Island had attracted a Jewish population in excess of one thousand. That size was deceptive, however. Together, Davenport and Rock Island represented a substantial Jewish community; apart, neither side of the river was ever strong enough either to achieve independence from the other or to establish a pattern of dominance. Although this pattern differed from that in Des Moines and Sioux City, much of the story is familiar.

Prior to 1860, on both sides of the river, there were small but active Jewish business communities built largely by peddlers who had eventually opened stores and integrated into their respective communities. By 1857, there were "enough Israelites . . . in both places for three times minyan," noted one observer, "but I am at a loss to state why nothing has yet been done. The young men have indeed tried to start a congregation, but the married men keeping aloof, induced us to take the step we did in starting a literary society [The Young Mens' Hebrew Literary Association] of young men only."²⁷

The first congregation established in Davenport/Rock Island was B'nai Israel of Davenport. At its first meeting in December 1861, the fourteen charter members agreed to use the Orthodox service, to purchase additional cemetery land, and to engage a Hebrew teacher. By the 1860s, local newspapers reported regularly on the annual Jewish holidays, with the *Davenport Gazette*

26. Levinger, "Jews of Sioux City," 15.

27. B. Eisenman, *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, 12 January 1857 as quoted in Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 23.

noting that during the Passover celebration in September 1865, "Quite a number of the Israelite merchants had their doors closed, others had not. We suppose the latter, nearly all in the clothing line, have more regard for breeches of cloth than breeches of doctrinal observances. Rather a hard observance that, for devoted merchants in Fair Week."²⁸

The first evidence of community strain in Davenport/Rock Island emerged in 1875. Until that year, the Jews of Rock Island had participated in B'nai Israel, but although they were expected to pay full dues, they did not receive full voting membership in the congregation. Consequently, several former members of the congregation along with others from Rock Island (twenty-five in all) organized Sons of Israel as a Reform congregation and engaged a rabbi. Although the Rock Island Reform congregation was soon reabsorbed into Davenport's B'nai Israel, the differences between the German and eastern European communities guaranteed that the two sides of the river would remain antagonistic until the 1940s.²⁹

The best evidence of the strains of diversity, however, are internal to the history of B'nai Israel itself. In fact, its fifty-year history of transition from traditional to Reform is the most contentious of any synagogue in the state. In 1868 the congregation adopted a new set of articles of incorporation in which it declared its intention to promote the principles and doctrines of the Jewish religion "according to the belief, ancient usages and honored customs of Israelite all over the world." By 1874, however, the war to overthrow those "ancient usages and honored customs" had begun in earnest. The congregation adopted the *Minhag America* and hired the Reverend Isaac Fall as rabbi. Rabbi Fall set forth the new program. "We must," he said, "set aside all dead forms and ceremonies, avoid superstition and hollow traditions, to be able to understand the real spirit of Judaism and religion, especially the Israelites in America must love their adopted country and must educate [their] children to be true Israelites of America." Still, a minority of conserva-

28. *Davenport Gazette*, 22 September 1865, as quoted in Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 97.

29. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 100-105, 118, 122, 224.

tives in the congregation managed to keep the reformers at bay until 1879, when all of the officers resigned, opening the way for the congregation to vote to join with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and "to inaugurate all such changes as is deemed preferable by the reform leaders."³⁰

After several years of debate, culminating in the dedication of Temple Emanuel in 1886 as the congregation's new home, leadership became the new focus of controversy. Although Rabbi Fall had spoken on behalf of reform in 1874, he was ambivalent on the issue. Repeatedly over the next fifteen years members of the congregation attacked him as too conservative. They finally replaced him in 1890. Rather than end controversy, Fall's replacement, Samuel Freuder, magnified it. He was fired in July, and two months later he publicly announced his conversion to Christianity. The conservatives in his old congregation seized on his revelation to once again attack those pushing for reform. The result was "the most disorderly [synagogue meeting] in the history of the Davenport Jewry." In hopes of avoiding another debacle, a committee was formed to discuss how "to further the cause of Judaism" at Temple Emanuel. No doubt in reaction, the committee's report was relatively conservative, recommending only the adoption of English instead of German for prayers and sermons, but even this was too much under the circumstances, and German remained the language of the congregation until the beginning of the twentieth century.³¹

While all the hoopla was occurring in Temple Emanuel, the Orthodox on the other side of the river were going about their business without fuss, furor, or much contact with their Reform brethren. Congregation Shomre Shaboth (later Beth Israel) was founded in Rock Island in 1887, but traditional services were held long before that. Older natives remembered attending minyans in private homes or walking across the bridge to Davenport. Orthodox services were held there as early as 1874, and

30. Temple Emanuel Minutes, 13 March 1868, quoted in Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 110; *Davenport Gazette*, 15 September 1874, quoted *ibid.*, 99; Temple Emanuel Minutes, 30 March 1879, quoted *ibid.*, 114.

31. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 282; Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 113-15.

after Congregation B'nai Emes was founded in 1894, one elderly Rock Island woman recalled her family crossing the ice of the Mississippi to attend services there. Services were held first in private homes and then in rented spaces until 1909, when the congregation was able to purchase a house for a synagogue. By 1920, the organization claimed forty-six members.³²

Because Rock Island struggled to maintain its orthodoxy, most of the immigrants arriving after 1880 settled there in what Glazer described as a Jewish ghetto that was "matchless among the smaller Jewish communities in America." As a result, its community grew to twice Davenport's size and was immensely more traditional in all its aspects. One neighborhood even had both kosher meat and milk—until residents realized that the amount of milk sold exceeded the production capacity of the neighborhood cows.³³

Eventually the Rock Island community grew large enough to support two synagogues. Having established itself securely, building its own synagogue in 1902, the Rock Island congregation inevitably split between its German and eastern European factions. The latter organized its synagogue as B'nai Jacob, which was strong enough by 1913 to purchase its own building. The split may have also reflected emerging class distinctions between those who had established themselves and the newly arrived. Thus divided, however, the community proceeded to go calmly about its business. In 1920 both congregations began using the same rabbi, who conducted an Ashkenazic service in the morning and a Hasidic service in the afternoon.³⁴

The foundation of the Tri-Cities Jewish Center in 1935 finally enabled the Davenport/Rock Island community over time to sort out its divisions on the neutral ground of the community center. The center also allowed them to play out their version of what would become the central compromise of the Iowa Jewish congregational experience. In the three largest communities, where choice replaced compromise, the threat was

32. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 118-19.

33. Glazer, *Jews of Iowa*, 285; Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 122.

34. Fleishaker, "Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community," 123, 125.

that the freedom to express religious difference would weaken and potentially destroy the nascent Jewish community. In each case, however, a different group came to the forefront, and accordingly a dominant mode of communal culture developed. In Des Moines and Sioux City, the result of organized diversity was distinctive religious communities marked by a single ambience (Reform in the former and Orthodox in the latter). In Davenport/Rock Island, where no group was able to develop dominance, the consequence was a history in which squabbling and splitting became the rule and disunity the norm.

Despite the ability of these three communities to satisfy the desires of their members for diversity, congregational variety remained anomalous in Iowa Jewish history. Few other communities achieved the population size or the business clout present in Des Moines, Sioux City, or Davenport/Rock Island, and none was able to sustain more than one congregation. Accordingly, those three represented the particular economics of potential growth. At once models of the possible and experiments in the probable, they served as bellwethers of what might happen in Marshalltown or Centerville or Mason City if prosperity spread and population grew. Ironically, then, the religious life of the rest of the Jewish Iowa was far less diverse. At home in the small towns of Iowa, most Jewish congregations followed a slowly evolving path from Orthodox to Conservative. Of the twenty-six congregations formed in Iowa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, only four—in Des Moines, Sioux City, Davenport, and Cedar Rapids—were formally affiliated with the Reform movement and three—in Des Moines, Sioux City, and Iowa City—with the Conservative United Synagogue of America. The remaining nineteen were Orthodox in intent if not in absolute practice. Of course, the complexity of dietary law, Sabbath practice, and synagogue ritual made pure Orthodoxy difficult to maintain. Nonetheless, these congregations strove to preserve traditional practices and only adapted themselves deliberately and cautiously to the changes brought about in Jewish life by its Americanization.

NEW SOURCES OF IMMIGRATION shortly after the turn of the century added a new element of diversity to Iowa's Jewish

population, which grew from about five thousand in 1900 to ten thousand by 1910, and sixteen thousand in 1918. Of course, Iowa was not the destination of first choice for many of those who ended up in the state. Almost all of the Jewish immigrants to America from eastern Europe starting in the 1880s chose to remain in the East. As their numbers increased, many settled Jews feared the consequences of such concentrations of new immigrants. To relieve those fears, three East Coast institutions—the Galveston Project, the Jewish Agricultural Societies of New York and Chicago, and the Industrial Removal Office—sought to settle Jews in other parts of the country, including Iowa.

In 1907 Jacob Schiff, one of the great Jewish philanthropists of the time, formulated a plan to encourage Jews to migrate to the port city of Galveston, Texas, and go from there to the American Midwest and West. During the eight years of the program, some ten to twelve thousand Jews went to Galveston, and many of those came to Iowa. An example of one who followed this pathway was Joseph Braverman, who first went to Davenport and then settled in Iowa City, where he became the founder of both the Agudas Achim Synagogue and the Talmud Torah. Other immigrants worked with agents in Cedar Rapids, Davenport, or Des Moines who would help them settle into a community and find work. Still others migrated as a community, such as the one that settled in Sioux City and formed the Anshe Kapull congregation.³⁵

The second method of settlement in Iowa was the work of the Jewish Agricultural Societies of New York and Chicago. These societies based their work on the belief that the essence of nationhood sprung from the identification of a people with their land. They believed that a community's identity came from its attachment to place, from its ability to locate itself in the physical world, and from the visceral awareness that grew from

35. Levinger, "Jews of Sioux City," 13; Shuman, *Sioux City Jewish Community*, 9–10. For a detailed history of the project, see Bernard Marinbach, *Galveston: Ellis Island of the West* (Albany, NY, 1983). See also Joseph, *Jewish Immigration*, 174–78; Ronald Sanders, *Shores of Refuge: A Hundred Years of Jewish Emigration* (New York, 1969), 235–49; Zora Szajkowski, *Jewish Mass Settlement in the United States* (New York, 1966), 12–13; and Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety: The Story of Jewish Migration since 1800* (Philadelphia, 1948), 127–29.

owning and working the earth. And they argued that, as a historically landless people, Jews could not hope to understand love of country or be willing to defend a homeland without restoring this attachment for themselves. Ignoring the romanticism of these arguments, the agricultural societies were able to settle more than seventy-five thousand Jews on farms throughout the United States and Canada, including nearly one thousand in Iowa. Most of those who came were settled on individual farms throughout the state without regard for whether there were other Jewish families nearby. A few original farm families still survive in the state, especially around Sioux City, but most Iowa Jewish farm families did not survive the Great Depression.³⁶

The third settlement mechanism was the Industrial Removal Office (IRO). Originally an arm of the Jewish Agricultural Society, the IRO soon became an independent agency when it became apparent that the number of Jews seeking industrial work far exceeded those interested in farming. The IRO's task was to find work for New York City's Jewish unemployed, and, in the process, to make a small effort to relieve the overcrowded slums by sending immigrants to cities and towns across the United States. An extensive network of agents around the country worked with the IRO's New York office to match individuals to available jobs in their areas.³⁷

The IRO settled roughly twelve hundred Jews in Iowa between 1905 and 1916. Working primarily with agents in four major cities—Davenport, Des Moines, Sioux City, and Cedar Rapids—the agency sent families and individuals to Anamosa,

36. For the story of the Jewish Agricultural movement, see Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910* (Detroit, 1981); and Herman J. Levine and Benjamin Miller, *The American Jewish Farmer in Changing Times* (New York, 1966). For references to individual colonies, see "Agricultural Colonies in the United States," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1968). For a recent study of Jewish agrarianism, see Robert A. Goldberg, "Zion in Utah: The Clarion Colony and Jewish Agrarianism," in Rischin and Livingston, eds., *Jews of the American West*, 69-91.

37. For the history of the Industrial Removal movement, see Szajkowski, *Jewish Mass Settlement*, 15-17; "Industrial Removal Office," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1963); and "Industrial Removal," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1968).

Boone, Burlington, Cedar Rapids, Centerville, Chariton, Charles City, Clinton, Council Bluffs, Cresco, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Emmetsburg, Fort Dodge, Gladbrook, Iowa City, Keokuk, Lyons, McGregor, Manning, Marshalltown, Mason City, Muscatine, Oelwein, Osage, Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, Pella, Perry, Sioux City, Waterloo, and Woodward. When the worker arrived at his new home, the agent helped the immigrant find a place to stay and got him started on the job. In return, these individuals were expected to work for their new employer until they were settled and able to take care of themselves. At that time, they were free to do as they wished; they could continue in their present job or seek a new one.³⁸

Like any great scheme, the IRO resettlement was not always simple. Many came expecting Iowa to be like New York, and many who received the new immigrants expected them to be more thankful than they were. Occasionally an immigrant would arrive only to find the promised job filled and the possible replacement not to his liking. Sometimes the worker and the employer were poorly matched. At times, the agents felt overburdened by the work and frustrated by all that went into helping the immigrants adjust. Sometimes the discussions turned bitter, and then letters and telegrams flew back and forth between Iowa and New York.³⁹ Nonetheless, for many of the new immigrants, resettlement represented a fresh start.

TO SETTLED JEWS, however, the new immigrants, regardless of how they arrived in Iowa, represented a perceived threat to the way of life they had created for themselves. Nineteenth-century Gentile-Jewish relations in Iowa were generally polite and largely untouched by virulent anti-Semitism, partly because

38. Iowa statistics are drawn from the Iowa correspondence files of the IRO (box 172) located at the American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts. For a description of the work in Des Moines, see Mann, "Jews of Des Moines," 32.

39. For two perspectives on the IRO, see Peter Romanofsky, "'... To Rid Ourselves of the Burden...': Jewish Charities and the Origins of the Industrial Removal Office, 1890-1901," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 64 (1975), 331-43; and John Livingston, "The IRO, The Galveston Project, and the Denver Jewish Community," *American Jewish History* 68 (1979), 434-58.

there were not enough Jews to matter, and those who were in the state were often so integrated into the power structure that attacking them was difficult. In addition, the compromises made by those already in the state offered limited protection. Most had been willing to hide their Jewish identity beneath an American veneer. Unfortunately, as much as the older Jewish residents might hope to disappear from view, there was no guarantee that they would be allowed to do so. Jews throughout the state were prevented from joining certain social clubs and fraternal organizations. From the beginning, there were Christian attempts to missionize to the Jews, and, as Alexander Levi learned, there were always those who confused individual behavior with group characteristics. Anti-Semitism was a commonplace of American life well up into the 1950s, and expressing one's hates was an accepted American freedom.⁴⁰ Still, Iowa had remained relatively free from openly hostile, aggressive activity against Americanized Jews. But many settled Jews feared that if too many eastern European Jews came to Iowa in too short a time, then there would be no way to make them American fast enough to prevent them from becoming every Gentile's standard of Iowa Jewish life.

Ida Jacobs expressed the fears of Iowa's settled Jews and proposed a solution.

The Jewish immigrant coming to this Land of Promise finds it often a Land of Disappointment and Disillusionment on account of his lack of adjustment to his surroundings. The Melting Pot of America will prove the crucible from which will arise the hope of the world, and the salvation of the individual, if its constituents will prove to have an affinity for each other based on understanding and broad sympathy; if not, it will merely prove to be the "Varnish Pot." . . . The newly arrived Jewish immigrant has few

40. For an excellent overview of anti-Semitism in the United States, see Leonard Dinnerstein, *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York, 1987); the best bibliography on the subject remains Robert Singerman, *Antisemitic Propaganda: An Annotated Bibliography and Research Guide* (New York, 1982). Edna Ferber was one who had bitter memories of anti-Semitism in Iowa. She describes one such incident from her childhood years in Ottumwa in the 1890s in her autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure* (New York, 1939), 41.

points of contact with his brother citizens of other faiths and with American culture. . . . He works side by side with his brother citizens of other lands, but the very conditions under which they work and the lack of a common language—the only means of a possible mutual understanding—are more likely to breed suspicion, jealousy, and hatred, than to foster a spirit of friendliness. He may have them for his neighbors, but what community of interests have they to draw them together? . . . The adult immigrant surely needs an institution that shall interpret for him American ideals—the meaning of America's past, her hopes for the future; an institution whose duty it is to prepare the material for the "Melting Pot"; an intermediary whose wisdom will be applied to adjusting properly the immigrant to his environment.⁴¹

The existing system of charity organizations did much to assist new immigrants, but it was simply not able to deal systematically with the kind of problems that worried Jacobs. It was designed to provide traditional charity, to care for the sick, to help the indigent, to support worthy causes; but these problems were minor compared to the new immigrants' need to adapt to an unfamiliar country. Moreover, all of the older charities were associated with individual synagogues, and they reinforced the exclusiveness that threatened those already here. What was required, therefore, as Jacobs suggested, was an alternative institutional structure that could reach out across religious lines and give the Jewish communities, old and new, a common ground on which to meet.

The most complete example of such an alternative developed in Des Moines in the period from 1900 to 1924. In those years, the city's Jewish community succeeded in transforming its traditional charities into an extraordinary network of institutions designed for the delivery of social services. In the process

41. Ida Jacobs, "The Jews of Des Moines: Their Progress and Prospects," *The Reform Advocate*, 14 December 1912, 11. Three-quarters history and one-quarter salesmanship, Jacobs's history, like Mann's four years earlier or Levinger's in the same issue, was designed both to promote the qualities of Jewish life in Iowa to those elsewhere who might consider settling in the state and to demonstrate the forward, progressive, "reform" agenda practiced by the Jews of the state. Consequently, her history is at once interesting, factual, and ideological.

it established a model for creating unity out of the chaos of Jewish community life at the turn of the century. The success was due in part to a happy accident. In 1905 Temple B'nai Jeshurun hired Rabbi Eugene Mannheimer away from Mt. Sinai Temple in Sioux City.

Mannheimer was certainly not the only rabbi in the state to feel the need to effect some sort of organizational change in the delivery of charity. But he was fully committed—by philosophy, by inclination, by talent, and by instinct—to changing the shape of American Judaism by changing the way Jews cared for each other. He was driven by more than merely the desire to aid; he supported Reform Judaism's commitment to social justice, as stated in its Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between rich and poor," it said, "we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society." Mannheimer, a thoroughgoing Reform Jew in outlook, made that mission his life's work.⁴²

The problem facing existing Jewish charity, in Mannheimer's view, was that it was not right for the age. "Ours is an age of science," he told his congregation in one of his first sermons, "and science demands more than mere giving. It demands the full and complete linkage of the Jewish community into the emerging web of modern social science." For Mannheimer, the traditional linkage between revelation, Mosaic Law, and charity had been broken. "The essence of Judaism," he continued, "was not in unity of ritual, not in a unified vision of god, not in dogma, not in hierarchy, not in race, not in national tie, [and] not in persecution. . . . We have rejected the law and placed ourselves under the banner of the prophets because the law has lost its meaning. . . . In its place we have substituted the

42. *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* 45 (1935), 200. For a description of the development of this concept of mission, see Allon Gal, *The Changing Concept of 'Mission' in American Reform Judaism*, Annual Lecture at the American Jewish Archives, Jerusalem, 1990 (Cincinnati, 1991); and Walter Jacob, ed., *The Changing World of Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect* (Pittsburgh, 1985), 94-120.

recognitions that all life is religion, and religion is life and that life and duty are not separate things."⁴³

Des Moines' road to "spiritual this-worldliness" began with Mannheimer's establishment of the Jewish Settlement in 1906. Since his arrival, he had agitated for the establishment of some scientific settlement work, but he "stood practically alone" in his belief that such an institution was needed. In part, the general reluctance seems to have been financial. The Roadside Settlement under the direction of Flora Dunlap was well established, and many who were already subscribers to that organization were unwilling to take on a second burden. Finally, Mannheimer convinced the Jewish community to attempt an experiment for a year under the "inspiration and guidance" of Dunlap, who was "in deepest sympathy with the plans of the committee." Dunlap's participation was no doubt in part secured by the assurance that "not one Jewish supporter of Roadside . . . withdrew his aid, although all the Jewish subscribers . . . were giving support to the Jewish Settlement."⁴⁴

Annette Mann was hired to manage this branch of Roadside. Quickly she realized that the arrangement was inappropriate. Roadside Settlement was some distance from the Jewish district and separated from it by a railroad yard. She persuaded Rabbi Mannheimer to abandon the idea of shared space, and with help from Dunlap, they convinced the Des Moines Board of Education to allow the Jewish Settlement to use rooms at the Bremer School, which was located in the Jewish district and had the largest enrollment of Jewish children in the city.⁴⁵

Having found a site, the next problem was to convince the neighborhood to accept the settlement. After extensive home visits, Mannheimer and Mann discovered that the community was most interested in learning to read and write English: "Each one felt that a grasp of the language would be the 'Open

43. Rabbi Eugene Mannheimer, Sermon, September 1905, 4. Mannheimer's sermons and diaries, as yet uncatalogued, are located at the American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio.

44. Jacobs, "Jews of Des Moines," 11.

45. *Ibid.*, 12.

Sesame' to the country's opportunities." Accordingly, the initial effort of the settlement was a night school for Jewish immigrants staffed with Jewish teachers who understood Yiddish. The first night school in Des Moines, and possibly in Iowa, the settlement's school opened on October 6, 1907, with 114 students registered the first night. "Some of these were men long past their prime, men well versed in Talmudic lore, but, as we learned later, too far advanced in life to master the intricacies of rudimentary English." But in all, 91 students, aged 15 to 60, from Russia, Sweden, Romania, Lithuania, France, Germany, Italy, and Austria, completed the first term, and demand was so high that a second language class was opened in December. Mann also organized several social clubs and classes in embroidery, sewing, darning, and millinery. Although a story hour was "literally besieged by youngsters," Mann reported some initial difficulty convincing parents of the usefulness of social activities for children. Nonetheless, "club spirit" soon prevailed and membership remained high throughout the year.⁴⁶

In succeeding years the Settlement House proved even more successful. In the second year the Board of Education took over the direction of the night school and soon developed similar classes at other sites across the city. The settlement itself expanded its work with children. It opened a mother's club, which met weekly to discuss topics such as child rearing, school, and hygiene; and in July thirty-five mothers and children "chosen from the most congested district" spent a week at the Ledges, a summer camp near Boone. Fifty-three boys enrolled in a gymnasium program to play basketball during the winter, and during the second summer, a playground (the first in Des Moines) was established two blocks away from the Bremer School.⁴⁷

By 1911, the expansion of Settlement House activities justified a move into its own quarters. At this new site near the Jewish district, the settlement added a whole range of new activities intended to transform the immigrants into Americans. It established a debating club, a patriotic club, a class in civil

46. Mann, "Jews of Des Moines," 34.

47. *Ibid.*, 35.

government, a dramatic club, and Sunday evening concerts. It also opened a department of the city library and of the Penny Savings Bank, and, most tellingly, baths which "proved a blessing in the summer to the little folks who lack these conveniences at home." To celebrate its move and the completion of a playground at the new site, a picnic was held at Union Park "to which all were driven in automobiles," no doubt as a powerful reminder of the future that awaited those who took to Americanization wholeheartedly. "If the settlement will be able to provide these children with the opportunity of enjoying many summers in this manner," the director concluded, "they will help greatly in developing wholesome, clean-minded members of society, who will have little opportunity to develop pessimism or cynicism."⁴⁸

At the same time as he was setting social work practice on a scientific footing, Rabbi Mannheimer was also restructuring the collection and distribution of charitable funds. He appreciated the good work the three sister organizations of Des Moines had done; but centralization was the hallmark of his philosophy, and he intended to bring it to bear on all aspects of philanthropy. He was not the first to suggest such a move for Des Moines. Consolidation of the Ladies Benevolent Society, the Hebrew Ladies' Aid, and the Hebrew Ladies' Relief had been discussed for ten years, but congregational and religious rivalries made it unfeasible. Within two years of Mannheimer's arrival, however, the unfeasible became a reality. In 1909 the Jewish Federated Charities of Des Moines was organized on "the principles of social management." Governed by a board of thirteen members—four representatives (three women and one man) from each organization plus Rabbi Mannheimer—the Federated Charities elected a president and established a Committee of Investigation and Relief (one woman from each synagogue charity) to carry out the distribution of funds for support of widows, orphans, the sick, and the jobless.⁴⁹

48. Jacobs, "Jews of Des Moines," 7.

49. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

By 1913, in his continuing efforts to unify Jewish philanthropy, Mannheimer brought the Federated Jewish Charities, the Settlement House, the Free Loan Society, and in 1914 the Talmud Torah together to form United Jewish Philanthropies to serve "the social, educational and spiritual welfare of the entire Jewish community." In a similar vein on another front, the Jewish Settlement House brought all of its activities back under one roof after years of dispersion. The Jewish Community Center, which opened in 1924, housed two Jewish libraries, a branch of the public library, an auditorium, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, a music school, and a free religious school. The goals of all of this consolidation, as articulated by Ida Jacobs, spoke volumes about the intentions of those in charge of administering charity "on scientific principles." The goals were "to make the people, for whose welfare they have voluntarily made themselves responsible, self-respecting, self-reliant; to help them to help themselves; to make them independent as quickly as possible; to preserve the integrity of the home; to make the world a better and happier place for those who have unusual burdens to bear, or who are perhaps less equipped to bear those that usually fall to man."⁵⁰

Whether or not Mannheimer and Jacobs had succeeded in those goals, they had, by the 1920s, successfully created unity out of the diversity that marked Jewish institutional life in the wake of the waves of new immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mannheimer's "spiritual this-worldliness" had worked. Fraternity apart from religion had led to equality, and philanthropy apart from theology had led to respect. At the settlement houses and in the organizations, clubs, sports teams, and theater groups they sponsored, the Jews of Des Moines had found ways around the problem of religion and past the question of class. At the settlement house, they had been taught individual dignity, good citizenship, social responsibility, and social justice, and those American values had transformed a divided group of people into a functioning ethnic community.

50. *Ibid.*, 8.

Religious disagreements between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews did not evaporate, of course. Congregations across the state continued to divide and subdivide, and when they could no longer divide, they competed to see who could build the biggest, grandest synagogue in the nicest neighborhood. But democracy and pluralism shifted irrevocably the ground on which their battles took place. For the Jews of Europe, religion was the anchor of their lives, providing both the defining character and the normative pattern of daily life. But in the United States, religion was only one of several constituent elements of identity, leaving twentieth-century Jews free to fashion multiple selves. They might be Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, but they were also Iowans and Masons and social workers and Drake and University of Iowa football fans, and this opportunity to fit persona to situation permitted struggles for power to be shifted to less contentious ground.

But civility did not mean drift. For many Iowa Jews, the development of mediated selves in the years between the wars represented a questionable search for legitimation. Such critics argued that in its move from European ghetto to American independence, Iowa Jewish life slipped effortlessly into a Jewish version of American civil religion in which the quality of life was measured as much by social harmony as by religiosity. They argued further that this rationalization of Jewish community life created a new class of power brokers—Federation directors, fund raisers, social service professionals—and paved the way for a loss of Jewish authenticity. Such arguments, however, neglect both the continuities of religious life and the strategic advantage gained by adaptation to American cultural structures. A large proportion of Jews in Iowa, as elsewhere, continued to attend synagogue, and although the replacement of synagogue attendance by philanthropy may have led some to cut back their religious practice, it also allowed many to think of themselves as caring and giving Jews who otherwise might have ceased to think of themselves as Jews at all. Thus, the price paid in the loss of traditional spirituality was recouped in the continuation of traditional community.⁵¹

51. See Marcus, *U.S. Jewry*, 3:739–840.

FRAGILE OR NOT, the Iowa Jewish community was fully formed by 1924. In the 1920s the period of free migration was ended by a series of Immigration Acts which, by favoring northern European, Anglo-Saxon immigrants, reduced the total number of immigrants by 1929 to 150,000 per year and eliminated the source of the pressures that had driven the Jewish community. In general, following the pattern throughout the United States in the decades between the wars, the Jewish population of Iowa expanded at a steady rate, though more slowly than that of similar ethnic communities. On the whole, Iowa Jewish families had fewer children, and the statewide Jewish population, which peaked in the mid-thirties at around eighteen thousand, had already begun to decline by World War II.⁵² Thus, Jewish life in Iowa would henceforth have to learn to work with the human resources it had and not with what it hoped to get.

Those Jewish demographics affected the social order in a second way. Increasingly, the Jewish population shifted within the state, as those who remained in Iowa migrated to Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City, and Davenport, seeking increased opportunity; and those who could find no opportunity left Iowa entirely. There had always been some redistribution and outmigration (especially among those unwilling to compromise Sabbath regulations for work), but now it began to affect even Iowa's most stable and self-sustaining communities.

The state's Jewish communities used the relative quiet of the period between the wars to develop local lives and histories. For Paul Berman in Rock Island, ordinary life in the twenties was made up of ordinary things: school, growing up, work, Hebrew School, and the occasional good story.

We lived in a neighborhood that was strictly, mostly all Jewish. As a matter of fact all the stores, all up and down the street, were Jewish. . . . There was one man there, named Tom Camel, had a store there; I was in there one day buying something, and one man said to another one: "I just made five dollars." "How did

52. Marcus, *To Count a People*, 70, indicates that the official Jewish population was only 14,089 in 1937.

you make five dollars?" And he said: "He bet me there was an Irishman on Ninth Street."

. . . We all lived in a clan. We had our own baseball teams, our own football teams. We had no equipment. We're lucky if we had a football. . . . We either played the black kids or else we played the team from St. Joseph's School over there. . . . There were a couple of Jewish players made the high school football team. . . . They played John Marshall High School from Chicago, which was strictly all Jewish at the time. And Rock Island just had a so-so team, and they came and thought they didn't have a prayer. And John Marshall couldn't do anything, and towards the end of the game, one of the guys from John Marshall said to another player, another Jewish one, 'I'll take care of him by myself—I'm Jewish.' And this Nate Lerman was playing line, and he says, 'Who are you gonna take by yourself?' They [John Marshall] were calling all their signals in Jewish [Yiddish] and they [Rock Island] were able to pick 'em up and they didn't know it, and that's why they were getting beat!⁵³

For Helene Barricks growing up in Emmetsburg, the circumstances of life were vastly different, but her family too manufactured a Jewish life and some good stories.

My family had to create its own way. Friday night was always family night. And my family was very musical. . . . We always had music night, Friday night. And of course the Sabbath lights were lit. And the holiday is a home holiday anyway so it wasn't difficult. And so we always observed the Sabbath in that way.

. . . But that didn't interfere with our sharing the non-Jewish holidays. And so we did. I have some wonderful memories. We used to go out caroling. . . . One year, it was a custom in school that you had a Christmas tree. And we always decorated it, and then someone got to take it home. One Christmas my older brother came home with the enormous, tall Christmas tree. My mother was just really chagrined and my grandmother said there's nothing wrong with that. So she helped him put it up and she had us all sitting around the dining room table making decorations and stringing popcorn and stringing cranberries; and

53. Paul Berman, interview by Kara Bakken, Rock Island, IL, 10 March 1991, Iowa Jewish Heritage Project, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa.

we have a holiday that comes about the same time called Hanukkah. And my grandmother tied the candle holders that we used for those lights to the tree and we lit our Hanukkah lights on that tree.

If they assimilated to Iowa's culture, she also described the lengths to which Jews from small towns would go to preserve Jewish community.

[Emmetsburg] was small. It was very small then. One time, there was a community twenty-six miles north of us and there was one Jewish family there and there was a community twenty-six miles east of us and there was a Jewish family there. There was a community twenty-six miles south of us and there was a Jewish family there and we would rotate and every Sunday we would—when the weather would permit, because the roads were mud roads in those days—we would either go up to Estherville and all of us gather there or we'd all go to Algona and gather there, or we'd all go to Pocahontas and gather there. And so we did have some social life with Jewish people.⁵⁴

Everything was not perfect, though. For every memory of a friend who baked "lard-free pies" so that their Jewish friends could eat at community suppers, there were painful memories. And where the pains were mild, there was still a lingering ache. Rabbi Jules Harlow remembers growing up in Sioux City in almost idyllic terms. "I think I speak for most of my contemporaries. It was terrific. . . . We never felt disenfranchised as Jews." And yet, "it was clear that there were certain clubs in high school that we wouldn't get in to. . . . The lines were drawn and that was it. But we didn't mope about it, or it wasn't a festering sore."⁵⁵ Louise Noun expressed the same double consciousness.

When I was growing up Des Moines was considered more liberal than other communities because Jews were not barred from the

54. Helene Barricks, interview by Hanna Griff, Des Moines, Iowa, 29 April 1991, Iowa Jewish Heritage Project, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa.

55. Jules Harlow, interview by Hanna Griff, New York City, 18 March 1991, Iowa Jewish Heritage Project, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa.

Junior League or the Des Moines Club. This was in contrast to Minneapolis where Jews were not even allowed to join the Automobile Association. Yet anti-Semitism, although much of it was covert, was pervasive. We tended to discount discrimination such as exclusion from two of the three country clubs in the city and from high school fraternities and sororities, partly, I think, because we were not willing to face further ostracism by complaining, and partly because we honestly believed that with time anti-Semitism would diminish. We had many gentile friends whom we considered tolerant and liberal people. If clubs they belonged to excluded us, it certainly was not their fault. We assumed that they had just inherited a bad situation that they would rectify when they had the opportunity to do so. Years later the bitter truth came to the surface when the Wakonda Club members in 1961 reaffirmed the club's policy of excluding Jews as members. . . . Fortunately today many of the barriers which Jews formerly faced in Des Moines have disappeared but I am fully aware of a continuing need to combat anti-Semitism along with all other forms of discrimination.⁵⁶

Others, however, were compelled to recognize the need at the time. In 1923, at the height of the Ku Klux Klan's political power, the Des Moines B'nai B'rith Organization successfully opposed the appointment of a prominent Klansman or Klan sympathizer as the postmaster of the city. In that same year, Helene Barricks's father took his own stand against the Klan in Emmetsburg.

There was this very active group of Klansmen in town. . . . I remember one night, one late afternoon, a friend of my father's came to the house to tell my father that the Klan was going to go ride that night and that we should not be alarmed because they were not going to stop at our house. They were on their way down to the Catholic Church . . . to demonstrate down there. My father was so enraged when he heard this that he—I can still see him pushing this man out of the house—saying, "Don't ever, don't ever come back here again. If you will ride against the Catholic people, the day will come when you will forget we are friends, and you will ride against us." . . . That night, I get goose

56. Louise Noun, *Journey to Autonomy: A Memoir* (Ames, 1990), 16.

pimples when I think of it, and I can still hear the thundering down the street in front of us the horses and hooded men.⁵⁷

IF THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE WARS was one of quiet consolidation, completing the transition from an immigrant Jewish culture to an Iowa Jewish culture, the years since World War II have been a time of great flux. Iowa's Jewish communities participated fully in the baby boom, and, like every other full participant, they had to deal with the consequences. The baby boom brought almost as many new Jewish Iowans as had the pogroms at the end of the nineteenth century, and, for a time, these children more than compensated for the numbers of adults who were leaving the state.⁵⁸ Accordingly, these children created, albeit unwittingly, two illusions. On the one hand, their sheer numbers seemed to represent the conditions for long-term growth. Large numbers of children would eventually translate into large numbers of adults who would produce their own large numbers of children, and hence, the individual communities would have to plan to accommodate not only the new arrivals but also the future increases that seemed inevitable. On the other hand, their sheer presence made it virtually impossible to expend energy in any other direction. Babies, young children, and young adults, in turn, force a community to focus on immediate needs.

Added to these internal pressures were the ever-present realities of the Holocaust and the founding of the state of Israel. Both, in different ways, gave renewed meaning to Jewish life and, like the internal pressures, focused community attention on immediate needs. For Iowa's Jews, the Holocaust was a terrible reminder of how fragile their culture was. No one expected that they would suffer a similar fate at the hands of their fellow Americans. Rather, they were reminded that the preservation of Judaism was solely a Jewish responsibility, and their response was to build whatever was needed to guarantee that preservation. If the children need gymnasiums and Talmud Torah teach-

57. Barricks interview, 7.

58. Marcus, *To Count a People*, 71.

ers and Bar and Bat Mitzvah classes and anything else that will help them grow to be Jewish, then those things will be provided. If a more aggressive synagogue presence reminds non-Jews that Jews are in Iowa to stay, then synagogues will be built. If removing caroling and Christmas trees from schools forces non-Jews to remember that Iowa is made up of different kinds of communities, then they will be ended.

Likewise, Israel was a reminder that vigilance here could only be maintained by a refuge there. For those who went through the war and remembered the prewar years, such a choice was more contentious. Although today the American Jewish community seems solidly behind Israel, in the first phase of the debate after the war, the Zionist question was not so easily discussed. There were Reform Jews and Orthodox Jews, each for different reasons, who opposed the formation of a nation-state. Reform Jews, in particular, saw Israel as a resurgence of the very nationalist argument that Reform had been founded to oppose. Rabbi Mannheimer admitted in his memoirs that he was initially uneasy with the idea of a nation-state. He was, he wrote, "an American who had no desire to become anything else."⁵⁹ As the horrors of the Holocaust became known, however, he quickly gave way. Support for Israel became a fundamental feature of the Iowa and American Jewish experience—so much so that the vast majority of funds raised well into the 1960s by Iowa Jewish communities through the United Jewish Appeals found their way not into Iowa projects but into support for the state of Israel.

Still, although these internal and external features shaped the Iowa Jewish community of the 1950s through to the present day, the most notable characteristic of the history of Iowa's Jewish community during the period was its success in integrating itself into the Iowa and American experience. Many Jewish families remained working class. But in general after the war,

59. Eugene Mannheimer, *Diaries*, 5 vols., 1945–1948, 1:6, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. For the uneasy relationship between the Reform movement and Zionism, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 55–58; and idem, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism: Early Efforts at Ideological Rapprochement," *Studies in Zionism* 5 (1983), 51–63.

the Iowa Jewish community was comfortably middle class with raised expectations and wider options. The traditional Jewish emphasis on education, coupled with the end of quota policies at most colleges and universities, meant that a large majority of Iowa's Jewish children not only attended college and professional school, but did so at institutions outside the state. Few of those children returned, however. For them, Iowa was no longer the land of opportunity it had been for their parents and grandparents. Moreover, the very concentrated postwar efforts to imbue them with a Jewish identity had made many desire a more concentrated Jewish experience than existed in Iowa. In a final irony, most were still as urban as their grandparents, and Iowa was too rural for their taste.

Prosperity made their parents and grandparents just as free. When it came time to retire, many had the income to make choices, and most chose to go elsewhere; they headed south and west for warmer climates. Like many of their Gentile neighbors who left Iowa's small towns, though, they left with nostalgia for their state. Perhaps the most interesting example of this nostalgia is found in the annual Sioux City reunions held in southern California and chronicled in a community newsletter, the *Sioux City Californian*. For several years in the mid-1980s, former city residents got together for annual picnics and reminisced about "the old days in Iowa." In celebration of the Sioux City Jewish community's centennial, more than a hundred returned, though as the director of the community Jewish Federation noted ruefully, "They came and told everyone what a wonderful time they had and how good it was to be back in Sioux City. But then they all got back on the plane and left."⁶⁰

Thus, despite the seeming potential for growth implied by the baby boom and the renewed commitment to culture and identity, the Jewish community of Iowa began a precipitous decline. In the early 1950s the total Jewish population of the state reached its prewar high of about eighteen thousand. By the late 1960s, it had lost a quarter of that number, and by the 1980s it had fallen to less than ten thousand. Now, there are probably no more than six thousand, with the strongest commu-

60. Doris Rosenthal, personal communication with author, 13 February 1990.

nities in Des Moines and Iowa City/Cedar Rapids, followed by Sioux City and the Quad-Cities.⁶¹ Everywhere else—in Council Bluffs, Dubuque, Fort Madison, Marshalltown, Mason City, Oskaloosa, Ottumwa, and Waterloo—Jewish life is either a memory or fast becoming one. Still, those who remain do so by choice. They are not kept here because they cannot go elsewhere. Rather, they remain in Iowa for the same reasons the first Jews came. They are here because they want to be, because the life and the culture of Iowa nurtures and sustains them in their work, their play, and their Judaism.

THE STORY OF THE JEWS OF IOWA thus comes full circle. Begun by a few peddlers struggling to make a life for themselves in a strange land, it ends with their descendants strangers no more. Economically, socially, and culturally, the Jews of Iowa prospered by their time in the state. Peddlers became grocers, opened provision stores, and started apparel stores. Their children expanded them into markets, wholesale distributors, and department stores. And their grandchildren built supermarket chains, retail chains, and banks or became doctors, lawyers, or teachers. Segregated into ghettos and excluded from power in Europe, the Jews of Iowa put themselves at the center of social life in small towns across Iowa and became a people who could be elected everything from school board member to mayor to congressman to governor. A threatened minority, denied liberty and security in the old world, Iowa's Jews responded to America's gift of freedom with hospitals, art museums, zoos, libraries, and parks. Their prosperity, security, and liberty derive in large measure from their assimilation to the midwestern American culture that encircled them. From their first days in the state, Jewish Iowans adapted their religion, their customs, and themselves to the Iowa way. In every city, town, and neighborhood where they lived, they surrendered their language, transformed their faith, and adapted their customs to the rhythms of the daily life that surrounded them. Again and again, when offered the choice to keep the public identity they

61. Marcus, *U.S. Jewry*, 3:748.

brought with them from Europe, Iowa's Jews chose to change themselves to be more like their neighbors and to adopt the values of American life.

For Iowa's Jewish community that adaptation has been a powerful cultural strategy for survival. In fact, it is clear that Jewish survival in Iowa was a series of negotiations, each a response to the cultural conditions of a particular epoch. For the first generation, participation was a way past the problem of nationhood. Americans are used to thinking of nationhood as a blessing. For the Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationhood was trauma. The Jews of Europe were a nation not because they had an ancient culture, not because their traditions and customs made them a people but because that claim allowed their neighbors to exclude them from the communities in which they lived; nationhood for the Jews of Europe was a weapon used by their neighbors to assault them for their religious difference. Becoming American, therefore, provided a mechanism by which the first generation of Iowa Jews could escape the accusation of divided loyalty. They embraced Iowa and America because both gave them a place to be at the price of a national identity they did not want.

For succeeding generations, the benefits of becoming Iowan were equally appealing. In the twentieth century, acculturation offered Iowa Jews a way to choose to continue to be Jewish. The differences between the Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe who came to the United States and Iowa between 1880 and 1920 and those non-Jews who were here or who came at the same time were real, material, and potentially threatening. American ground may have been free, but American culture did not have to be. Those who came, Gentile and Jew, brought with them all the prejudices and hates of Europe, and assimilation was nothing less than an attempt to guarantee that those transplanted antagonisms did not take root. When the Jews of Des Moines, Sioux City, or Davenport created their settlement houses, federated charities, and community centers, they were creating possibilities. They were giving themselves and their neighbors the opportunity to get past memories and beyond history. In effect, the settlement house, the federation, the community center was an act of faith. In them, the Jews of Iowa agreed that

it was better to become more like their neighbors than it was to stay like themselves. Through them, they made a claim on their neighbors to follow the same principle. Because of them, they found a place in their lives for the democracy and pluralism that make American life possible.

Of course, democracy and pluralism wrought their own changes. Traditional Judaism had been singular. It was a religious identity, a matter of transcendental authority, of sacred things and symbols, and of a moral community bound together by observance. Americanization multiplied the number and kind of Jewish identities, and that expansion in its turn transformed the structure of Jewish life. In America in general, but in Iowa in particular, Jews learned that there was more than one way to be Jewish. Perhaps more importantly, they learned that any decision to be made was personal. Slowly at first, but inevitably and inexorably the conditions of community membership shifted from external to internal and from inherent to discretionary. In a sense, then, the story of the Jews of Iowa is one in which the possibility of choice replaced the necessities of tradition: in Iowa not only might Jews choose whether or not to remain Jewish, they were able to choose the kind and quality of Jewish life they would have. For some, that life would center on the transcendental reality of the sacred. For others, the value of their Jewish life would be found in giving and caring. For still others, the core of Jewish life would become Israel and the hope it represented. And for a few, their Jewishness would be no different than any other American ancestry. This decentering of tradition, however, should not be confused with the loss of tradition. Many would argue that a Judaism without the sacred at its core was no Judaism at all, and thus would construct the integration of Jews into Iowa life as a story of loss and decay. However, observance is not all that matters. I would argue that survival too is a virtue. And without the freedom to find their own Jewishness, far fewer Iowa Jews would have survived the transition to American life with their Judaism intact.⁶²

62. See Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), especially 1-62, 158-201.

Given the present diminished size of the Iowa Jewish community, it may seem that all that is left to its history is nostalgia. Fortunately, that is not the case. The Jewish community of Iowa may never again be as large as it has been. It may never again be in as many places as it has been. But the strength of the community is in neither size nor geography. In the end, the virtues of Iowa Jewish life became its defects. Jews came to Iowa because they might prosper and be safe, and in the main they did both. By succeeding, they no longer needed the refuge that Iowa offered. They had come here thinking themselves in exile; their children, their grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, whether they have stayed or left, know they have a home.

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