

By
Dawn's Early Light

JEWISH CONTRIBUTIONS TO
AMERICAN CULTURE FROM THE NATION'S
FOUNDING TO THE CIVIL WAR

*Essays by Thirteen Contributing
Scholars & Interpretative Notes Published on
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SUBVERSIVE JEWS AND AMERICAN CULTURE:
NOTES ON THE LEONARD MILBERG COLLECTION OF
EARLY AMERICAN JUDAICA

JONATHAN D. SARNA

LEONARD MILBERG's collection of early American Judaica highlights American Jewish contributions to culture of every sort: prose, poetry, drama, music, art, science, medicine, journalism, publishing, pedagogy, religion, and more. The collection encourages a shift away from the all-too-prevalent focus upon the "image of the Jew"—meaning the study of the Jew as object—and underscores the agency of Jews, their role as creators and shapers of the nascent national culture.¹

Considering that as late as 1840 Jews formed less than one-tenth of one percent of the national population—about 15,000 in all—and that they would not reach even one percent of the population before the end of the century, the extent of Jews' cultural creativity in the antebellum period seems astonishing. The quantity of the material, however, is no indicator of its quality. As the pioneering American Jewish historian Jacob Rader Marcus observed years ago in writing about the early national period, "Jews ... do not stand out as belletrists, as poets, historians, great journalists, technologists, inventors, scientists." Instead, he described them as being "culturally aware and productive."²

Moving beyond Marcus, it seems to me that the point at which Jews did affect early American culture is where they cast themselves as critics, subversives, and dissenters. As non-Christians, Jews at that time in the United States, however white and wealthy they may have been, were by their very existence cultural outsiders and religious non-conformists. If, following the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to be culturally subversive means to challenge and undermine "a conventional idea, form, genre, etc., especially by using or presenting it in a new or

1. Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature from Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974); Louise Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth-Century America's Perception of the Jew* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Heather S. Nathans, "Jews On and Off the Stage in the Early American Republic," *Early American Studies* 2 (2004): 310–42.

2. Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1989–93), 1: 493.

unorthodox way,”³ then Jews of that time were disproportionately subversive. Indeed, some of the most important works in the Milberg collection reflect precisely that kind of oppositional stance.

The best-known Jews of the era dissented from the mainstream in their persons, by being Jews, and in their writings, by setting themselves apart from those with whom they disagreed, but still observed strict limits. People like the journalist-politician-playwrights Mordecai Noah (1785–1851) and Isaac Harby (1788–1828), and the journalist-religious-and-communal-leaders Isaac Leeser (1806–1868) and Isaac M. Wise (1819–1900)—all of them well-represented in *By Dawn's Early Light*—were careful not to shock or outrage non-Jewish readers unduly, for fear of being marginalized.⁴ Noah, for example, was known for never failing “to resent the least aggression on the character of his people.” Nevertheless, he defended a Charleston “blue law,” forbidding the sale and exposure for sale of goods on Sunday, as “a mere local or police regulation, which should be carried into effect by all religious denominations.” “Respect to the laws of the land we live in,” he reminded his fellow Jews, “is the first duty of good citizens of all denominations.”⁵ Isaac Leeser similarly reassured Christians in his early work, *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights* (1841), that “we wish not to interfere with you, we wish not ... to unsettle your hopes and convictions,” even as he understood that in presenting Jewish “claims” he was distancing himself from many of his neighbors. Later, in discussing the messiah in one of his discourses, he expressed a willingness “to attack, to a certain extent, the opinions of the majority of the people among whom we live,” but did so only after a prolonged apologetics and with the utmost of caution.⁶

Instead of focusing on these better-known interlocutors, here I want to focus on culturally creative Jews of this era who dissented more openly from the main-

3. “subversive, adj. and n.” OED Online. June 2015. Oxford University Press, [http://www.oed.com/resources.library.brandeis.edu/view/Entry/193260?redirectedFrom=subversive](http://www.oed.com/resources/library.brandeis.edu/view/Entry/193260?redirectedFrom=subversive) (accessed September 2, 2015).

4. For standard biographies, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981); Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1994); Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1995); and Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1992).

5. Daniel Peixotto, as quoted in Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew* (as in note 4), 122; Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 279–81.

6. Isaac Leeser, *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights* (Philadelphia: C. Sherman & Co, 1841), 15; Isaac Leeser, *Discourses on the Jewish Religion* (Philadelphia: Sherman & Co, 1867), 270; Sussman, *Isaac Leeser* (as in note 4), 86–87.

stream—and in a few cases paid a price. These “subversive Jews” never became household names, even in American Jewish historical circles, and some, until rescued by this exhibition, have been almost totally forgotten. Their bold challenges to the norms of their time nevertheless pushed boundaries. Freedoms that we enjoy today are in some part due to their audacity and courage.

One of the most subversive early American Jews was a man named Samuel Benjamin Helbert Judah (1799?–1876).⁷ Son of the prominent New York Jewish merchant, Benjamin Judah, who was bankrupted in the War of 1812, Samuel, as a young man, aspired to a literary career. The theatre, controversial as it was in many Evangelical circles, served as a point of entry for him. During the early nineteenth century, as American theatre democratized, many aspiring writers challenged the cultural hegemony of the elite and took on the daunting challenge of redefining American identity by writing for the theatre.⁸ Besides Judah, Jewish playwrights of the time (all of them featured in this exhibit) include Mordecai Noah, Isaac Harby, Jonas B. Phillips, Samuel Yates Levy, and Herman M. Moos. Judah wrote several plays, including *The Mountain Torrent* (1820), which, he reported, was greeted “with universal applause.” He also authored *Odofried, the Outcast: A Dramatic Poem* (1822), which drew upon Milton and old German legends, but included lines (“I was born an outcast”) that take on additional layers of meaning when one recalls that the author, as a Jew, was himself an outsider.⁹ Odofried’s soliloquy echoed the complaint of many a Jew facing persecution in a Christian world:

No crime hath ever stained my soul, and of blood
This hand is innocent; yet still hath the
Eternal followed my footsteps ever,
With a blighting, deadly, and unsated curse,
From morn to morn—night to night—day to day—
Forever—ever—ever—ever.¹⁰

7. On Judah, see “Samuel Benjamin Helbert Judah,” *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936); *Biography in Context* (online, accessed August 28, 2015); Sol Liptzin, “Samuel Benjamin Helbert Judah,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit, Mich.: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007); Marcus, *United States Jewry* (as in note 2), 1: 460–62; and Charles P. Daly, *The Settlement of the Jews in North America*, ed. Max J. Kohler (New York: Philip Cowen, 1893), 139–45.

8. See Gary A. Richardson, “Plays and Playwrights: 1800–1865,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, eds. Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1: 272–75; Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

9. Samuel B. H. Judah, *Odofried, the Outcast: A Dramatic Poem* (New York: 1822), 18.

10. *Ibid.*, 24.

Odofried was too faulty and grim to win success. The aged John Adams, who had the poem read to him, pronounced it “horrible.” He softened the blow by assuring Judah that it nevertheless contained “marks of genius and talents, which in so young a man, if hereafter carefully cultivated and applied to more proper subjects, may produce something agreeable and useful.” Thomas Jefferson begged off reading the work altogether.¹¹ Most critics were no more encouraging. *The Port Folio*, in Philadelphia, characterized the poem’s author as “entirely deficient in all the essentials of his art,” and, revealingly, confused Judah with the better-known Jewish writer of that time, Mordecai Noah.¹²

It was, however, Judah’s pseudonymous work, *Gotham and the Gothamites: A Medley* (1823; Item 9.3, see Fig. 51) that definitively marked him as a subversive writer. Described in the nineteenth century as “almost without a parallel in the history of defamatory literature,” the volume followed the form of Gulian C. Verplanck’s gentle political satire, *The Bucktail Bards*, but its language was far more inflammatory and vituperative. Its attacks upon the misdeeds and hypocrisies of over one hundred easily identifiable members of New York’s elite—“public officials, politicians, merchant of the highest integrity, eminent lawyers, editors, clergymen, booksellers and publishers, literary men, professors in colleges, actors, theatrical managers, prominent military men, scholars and artists”—were in many cases personal and offensive.¹³

For example, *Gotham and the Gothamites* described Judah’s nemesis, Mordecai M. Noah, thinly disguised as “N**h” in the book (“descended of Mordecai of old who hanged Haman”) as a “poor, luckless wight ... doomed from out thy brainless head to spin forth libels on grammar and learning.” He revealed that N**h had been seen with an unnamed “goddess” on Duane [“D***e”] Street, home of an infamous tavern. The “goddess,” having been made “tipsy with bad gin,” according to Judah, “mistook N**h for a wise man,” for “she saw double—that is gave him credit for twice the sense he possesses.”¹⁴

In the case of a minor author named George Houston [“H*****n”], known for attacking Christianity and supporting freethought, *Gotham and the Gotham-*

11. John Adams to Samuel B. H. Judah (June 25, 1822), online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7649>; Thomas Jefferson to Samuel B. H. Judah (June 27, 1822), online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-2909>; Marcus, *United States Jewry* (as in note 2), 1: 461.

12. *Port Folio* 13 (1822): 226.

13. Daly, *Settlement of Jews in North America* (as in note 7), 140, 142.

14. Samuel B. H. Judah, *Gotham and the Gothamites: A Medley* (New York: 1823), xii–xiii, xxxix.

ites reminded readers of the “daring infidel’s” imprisonment in England (“the Newgate halter hath scarcely left his neck”) and piously opined that “he who mocks, however faulty, the faith he hath quitted, should be held a second Cain, hated and despised.” Rhyming couplets that simultaneously entertained and appalled readers, betraying Judah’s venom and the modesty of his poetic gifts, lashed out at Houston directly:

Thou has a heart that honor never braced,
A head of stone, where sense doth run to waste....
So great a knave art thou, so perfect true,
The world hath not a rogue to rival you.¹⁵

Gotham and the Gothamites coupled these subversive attacks on individuals with broader and more commonplace sallies against the general state of public morality in the “proud city” of New York. Judah portrayed Gotham’s “merchant nobles” as “weak and willing slaves to gold and wild and boundless luxury.” He railed against prostitution, “the serpent Lust unblushing doth his vot’ries call.” He sighed over what he saw as a widespread decline in female modesty (“at one time, a full dress was such as to cover the fair wearer from almost the closest inspection, scarce showing the chin or ankle [*sic*]—now, a full dress is no dress at all.”) He critiqued missionaries (“Reforming saints, look that your own heart be true, Ere you Christianize the Indian, or convert the Jew”), as well as ministers, doctors, and scholars. Finally, spent of his anger, he admitted, “I am emptied of all hatred now ... my task is done.”¹⁶

Actually, his task was not done at all, for William L. Stone, the editor of the *Commercial Advertiser* and one of those skewered in the book (“a Stone by name, and a Stone by nature ... particularly his brains, which are rather of a *stony* substance”),¹⁷ identified Judah as the author of *Gotham and the Gothamites*, and had him and his publisher indicted for libel by the New York Grand Jury. District Attorney Hugh Maxwell charged that Judah “seemed to be actuated by a general malice against all classes of individuals, with a view of filling his pockets, and gratifying his perverse and malicious disposition. The private concerns of individuals,” he complained to the court, “have been spread before the public, and wanton attacks made upon the most distinguished and respectable citizens.” Found guilty, Judah was fined a whopping \$400 plus costs (about \$8,000 in

15. *Ibid.*, 75–76; on Houston, see Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Freethinker, the Jews, and the Missionaries: George Houston and the Mystery of *Israel Vindicated*,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 101–14.

16. Judah, *Gotham and the Gothamites* (as in note 14), 7, 59, 68, 91–92.

17. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

today's money).¹⁸ When unable to pay, he spent thirty-three days languishing in prison until pardoned by the governor out of concern for his health.¹⁹

Jacob Rader Marcus theorized that Judah was "embittered by lack of recognition as a dramatist, resentful of the success of others, totally unable to gauge his own work, deficient of good common sense, pathetically starved for attention, frustrated, conceited, and determined that people would yet pay heed to him."²⁰ Be this as it may, his work can be understood as that of a badly behaved, rebellious adolescent: it laid bare some of the hypocrisies of its time, and cut some of New York City's most prominent cultural figures down to size. Though it bespoke Judah's status as an outsider, it is significant that antisemitism seems to have played no public role in his prosecution; surviving newspaper accounts failed to mention his religion at all. Jews did, nevertheless, pay special attention to the case, for Judah and his family were prominent members of Congregation Shearith Israel. Isaac Gomez, Jr., scion of one of the oldest and most distinguished Sephardic Jewish families in New York City (Stephen Birmingham once memorably dubbed them "the grandees"),²¹ went so far as to produce a memorandum of the trial which he preserved among his papers. His goal in doing so, he wrote, was to "to guard my children from permitting themselves from evilspeaking or evildoing as the consequences are serious."²²

Gomez was himself a contributor to early American culture, but his outward public stance was completely the opposite of Judah's. His *Selections of a Father for the Use of His Children, In Prose and Verse* (1820), an anthology "calculated to promote a taste for reading and to improve the mind in useful learning," was the very model of propriety and, unlike Judah's *Odofried*, was highly praised by John Adams ("deserve[s] a place in every family, there is not an impure or mean thought in the whole Book.")²³ Where Judah, like many young native-born

18. Calculation based on inflation made at <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>; for other (higher) values, based on purchasing power, see <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppowerus/>.

19. *National Advocate* (New York), September 9, 1823; *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* [hereafter *PAJHS*] 27 (1920): 315-16; Daly, *Settlement of Jews in North America* (as in note 7), 143-45.

20. Marcus, *United States Jewry* (as in note 2), 1: 461.

21. Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandees: The Story of America's Sephardic Elite* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

22. *PAJHS* 27 (1920): 314-16.

23. Isaac Gomez, Jr., *Selections of a Father for the Use of His Children, In Prose and Verse* (New York: 1820), vi; John Adams to Isaac Gomez, April 10, 1820, Letter books, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7348> (accessed August 28, 2015); William Van Lennep, "John Adams to a Young Playwright: An Unpublished Letter to Samuel Judah," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 1 (Winter 1947): 117-18.

writers of that time, pursued the goal of creating a new American literature, Gomez championed the classics. "As a young country," he righteously declared in his preface, "we must not flatter ourselves with excelling in all the departments of literature; and, therefore, we must establish a true taste upon a firm foundation, we must select from the most approved authors, and thus gradually lead to perfection of our own."²⁴

In private, however, Gomez was much more critical—at least of the religious world that surrounded him. His unpublished manuscript, "God is One and His Name One: Quotations from Scripture etc. to Prove God to be One and the Truth of the Jewish Faith," lovingly handwritten for the benefit of his only son, Moses Emanuel (1804–1878),²⁵ was explicitly designed to buttress the views of a small Jewish minority seeking to maintain its distinctive religious identity amid a sea of Protestants eager to convert them. Inwardly and within the protective bosom of his own family, Gomez revealed his true feelings about the merits of his neighbors' beliefs. His purpose, he disclosed in his preface, was nothing less than "to shew, and to know that we are the chosen people of God ... as well as that God is one without addition or subtraction ... that there never was nor never will be but One God." This was, of course, an utterly subversive idea in the face of overwhelming Christian trinitarianism, and Gomez, whose ancestors had been crypto-Jews in Portugal, explicitly warned his son to keep the critique to himself: not "to be a religious disputant" and not to share the volume with anyone else, "never part with it, either by lending or otherwise." At the same time, the whole point of producing the handwritten book was to arm his son with the necessary texts and arguments for "when it becomes necessary for you to defend your religion." Gomez made clear that he "put no credence" in the New Testament, which he described as replete with "many alterations, false quotations and misrepresentations." Nor did he respect Christianity as a whole, having determined that it "has grown out of Heathenism." His conclusion, after more than 460 pages of proof-texts, was certainly not surprising for a Jew whose ancestors had been persecuted by the Holy Inquisition, but was

24. Gomez, *Selections of a Father* (as in note 23), preface. Mordecai Noah made the same point in his published approbation for the volume: "While every encouragement is due to the native productions of our country, we should be ever prepared to treasure the wisdom of those great and good men who have laboured for the prosperity of mankind, and there is as much talent required in selecting from the best works of antiquity as may be necessary to produce an original work of mankind" (p. iii).

25. Isaac and his wife, Abigail Lopez (daughter of Aaron Lopez), had six daughters in addition to his son. An earlier son, also named Moses, died in infancy. See Malcolm H. Stern, *First American Jewish Families* (Baltimore, Md.: Ottenheimer, 1991), 85.

nevertheless utterly countercultural in the 1820s world of New York City. Gomez firmly insisted that Judaism was right and Christianity wrong. "The idea of there being more Gods than One, either three in one or three distinct characters....," he whispered to his son, "is inconsistent with reason or common sense."²⁶

The Milberg collection contains several published volumes (decidedly not by "grandees") that likewise aimed to subvert missionary efforts directed against Jews. The 1816 arrival in New York of Joseph Samuel Christian Frederick Frey (1771–1850), a celebrated Jewish convert to Christianity and a founder of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, stimulated the publication of these anti-missionary tracts.²⁷ Frey, in December 1816, founded the American Society for Evangelizing the Jews (reorganized and chartered in 1820 as the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews), which during the early years of the Second Great Awakening garnered widespread support for its effort to convert Jews as "a signal for the conversion of the great body of the Gentiles." A "Who's Who" of New Yorkers served as officers of Frey's organization. Elias Boudinot, former president of the Continental Congress, stood at the helm. Below him sat many, obviously honorific, vice presidents, including John Quincy Adams, Ashbel Green (the president of Princeton), Philip Milledoler (the president of Rutgers), William Wirt Phillips (pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New York), and Stephen Van Rensselaer (patron, congressman, and founder of what became Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute). Rounding out the list of officers was the treasurer, Peter Jay, son of diplomat John Jay.²⁸

To publicly oppose men of such celebrity and standing was both daunting and frightening. This probably explains why the first known American rebuttal to Frey was a hasty reprint of Jacob Nikelsburger's carefully worded *Koul Jacob in Defence of the Jewish Religion: Containing the Arguments of the Rev. C. F. Frey One of the Committee of the London Society for the Conversion of the Jews and Answers Thereto* (New York, 1816; Item 6.4), first published in England in 1814.

26. Isaac Gomez, Jr., *God Is One and His Name One, Quotations from Scripture Etc. to Prove God to be One and The Truth of the Jewish Faith* (n.d., ca.1820), preface, 363, 456, 461; a copy of this manuscript is found in collection SC-4120, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

27. On Frey, see George Harvey Genzmer, "Joseph Samuel Christian Frederick Frey," *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1928–36), 7: 28–29; and George L. Berlin, "Joseph S. C. Frey, the Jews, and Early Nineteenth Century Millenarianism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Spring 1981): 43–54.

28. Philip Milledoler in *Religious Intelligencer* 1 (January 25, 1817), 555; Jonathan D. Sarna, "The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions," *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 35–51.

Nikelsburger, who had migrated to England from Germany, made clear that he wished “to avoid religious controversy” and was “not against any religion whatsoever; being firmly persuaded that there are good men of all religions.” Rather than question the truth of Christianity, as Gomez did, he simply offered a point by point refutation to Frey’s arguments, contending that they were “altogether weak and without foundation.” Indeed, Frey’s Christological readings of biblical prophecies, according to Nikelsburger, were “completely erroneous,” “contradictory,” and “incompatible with all reason and common sense.” Where Frey asserted that the Jews were in error, Nikelsburger responded that “the errors are on your side,” and mischievously called upon the missionary to “return and seek the *true* explanation of the prophets ... that you may be saved without *sacrifice*.”²⁹

Solomon Henry Jackson’s *The Jew; Being a Defence of Judaism Against all Adversaries, and Particularly Against the Insidious Attacks of Israel’s Advocate* (1823–25) was a much bolder response to Frey and his organization (Item 6.5, Fig. 52). The first Jewish periodical ever published in the United States, this anti-missionary monthly was occasioned by the appearance of the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews’ monthly entitled *Israel’s Advocate; or, The Restoration of the Jews Contemplated and Urged* (1823–27). As so often before in Jewish history, a Christian cultural challenge called forth a Jewish cultural response. Jackson (d. 1847), unlike Nikelsburger whose work he knew, refused to be constrained in his attacks on missionaries. Perhaps because as a young man he had himself abandoned Judaism and married the daughter of a Presbyterian minister,³⁰ or perhaps because, when starving, he had promised a missionary that he would accept baptism and then repented,³¹ he expressed impatience with the Jews of “trembling heart,” who saw “danger” in his effort to defend Judaism. “Caution is now fear,” he admonished these moderates, “and instead of being a virtue is in truth a weakness.” To his mind, the danger posed by the majority culture outweighed

29. Jacob Nikelsburger, *Koul Jacob in Defence of the Jewish Religion: Containing the Arguments of the Rev. C. F. Frey, One of the Committee of the London Society for the Conversion of the Jews and Answers Thereto* (Liverpool, 1814), 10, 97, 125. For a broader discussion of the “obvious linkages between Anglo-Jewish and American Jewish cultural life from the late eighteenth through the first half of the nineteenth century,” see David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 269–73 (quote on p. 272).

30. Marcus, *United States Jewry* (as in note 2), I: 194, wonders whether Jackson’s preoccupations reflected “an unending effort to expiate guilt.” Jackson himself mentions his abandonment and return to Judaism in his “conclusion” of *The Jew* (1825), II: 480–81.

31. Solomon Solis Cohen quoted this theory in the name of his Mother, see *Jewish Exponent* 85 (October 25, 1929): 5.

the claims of civility: "In the present enlightened age," he thundered, "not to defend Judaism would be considered a tacit acknowledgment that it was indefensible, or at least that we thought so.... Calumnies must be repelled."³²

Since *Israel's Advocate* attacked Judaism, *The Jew* attacked Christianity. It critiqued issues of *Israel's Advocate*, and charged its editors with "misquotations, misapplications and perversions of the holy scripture."³³ It published for the first time the letters "on the evidences of Christianity" penned by Benjamin Dias Fernandes in London and, until then, only clandestinely circulated, in manuscript form, among a select group of English-speaking Jews (see Item 13.18).³⁴ It characterized the New Testament as "a work of errors" and described Jesus as a "strange god." It attacked Christianity as "idolatry," and looked forward triumphantly to the day "that all the world will become of the Jewish persuasion, and be of their religion which is the only true religion."³⁵ It refused even to spell out the word "Christ," spelling Christianity ".....ianity." Never before in America had a Jewish publication so brazenly and subversively taken aim at the faith and culture of the majority Christian population.

In 1829, four years after *The Jew* had ceased to appear, Solomon Jackson remained deeply proud of his oppositional anti-Christian stance, behavior he engaged in, so he said, in the face of overwhelming odds:

I stood singly arrayed in the cause of Judaism, and as it turned out, at my own expense, against the combined talents of all the ———ian clergy of this city, and the enormous fund of "The American Society for Ameliorating the condition of the Jews," fearful odds against a single individual of but small talents, and puny means, yet with the help of God, to whom be the glory, the cause being the cause of his people, was crowned with complete victory, and the enemy and oppressor has ceased, at least the persecution has ceased from that quarter.³⁶

In fact, Jackson was completely wrong. The American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews continued to exist and missions to the Jews only grew in number and significance as the century wore on.³⁷ What is nevertheless

32. *The Jew; Being a Defence of Judaism Against all Adversaries, and Particularly Against the Insidious Attacks of Israel's Advocate*, 2 vols. (1823–1825), 1: vi–vii.

33. *Ibid.*, 1: 69.

34. *Ibid.*, 1: 82, 112, 130, 152, 193, 209; Benjamin Dias Fernandes, *A Series of Letters on the Evidences of Christianity* (Philadelphia: 1853/54); Marcus, *United States Jewry* (as in note 2), 1: 300, 358.

35. *The Jew*, 1: 54, 77, 158; cf. 153, 306.

36. Solomon H. Jackson, "Address to Joseph Dreyfous, A. N. Phillips, and Montgomery Moses, Esqrs (1829)" reprinted in Solomon Solis Cohen, "A Unique Jewish Document of a Century Ago," *Jewish Exponent* 85 (October 25, 1929): 8.

37. Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

THE JEW;

BEING A DEFENCE OF JUDAISM AGAINST ALL ADVERSARIES,
AND PARTICULARLY AGAINST THE
INSIDIOUS ATTACKS OF
ISRAEL'S ADVOCATE.

עַל לַעֲשׂוֹת לַיהוָה הַמְרוֹת תִּהְיוּ
וְאֶעֱנֶה הַרְפוּי דַבָּר כִּי כִסְפוּתוֹ בְּרַבֵּךְ

"It is vain to work for the Lord; they make void thy Law,
And I will answer the blasphemers of the word, for I depend on thy words."
Psalms cix.

Vol. I.

March, 5583.

No. 1.

The Advocate being three numbers before me, and being confined to one sheet to answer them; I must, without prefatory remarks, proceed to their examination.

In the consideration of "The importance of converting the Jews," the writer* reminds his readers† of the claims they (the Jews) have on their benevolent exertions. He then enumerates: 1st, "The obligations we are under to them;" 2nd, the injuries we have formerly done them; 3d, the very awful apprehensions we are compelled to entertain concerning them, while they remain unconverted; 4th, the visible and glorious display of divine power and mercy, in their conversion; 5th, the aspect this great event will have on the salvation of the world at large. The two last, I cannot at present notice at all; and the first three but lightly; weightier matter precluding them from the consideration they perhaps merit.

In regard to the 1st, on the obligations they are under to the Jews, he says, that all their blessings came to them through the instrumentality of Jews. "The first propa-

* A. S. M. C. L. and body, are considered the writer.

† No. II.

Fig. 52. *The Jew; Being a Defence of Judaism against All Adversaries, and Particularly against the Insidious Attacks of Israel's Advocate*, edited by Solomon Henry Jackson, New York, 1823-1825 (see Item 6.5). Collection of Princeton University Library, Leonard L. Milberg Collection of Jewish American Writers.

significant about Jackson's self-appraisal is his sense of standing as one against many, "singly arrayed in the cause of Judaism." That cultural stance—what Isaiah Berlin called "against the current"³⁸—characterized numerous antebellum Jews whose works are highlighted in *Dawn's Early Light*.

Uriah Phillips Levy (1792–1862), who as a Jew faced extraordinary prejudice during his naval career and insisted upon fighting back, was very much, in his own eyes, a lonely hero of this sort (see Fig. 11).³⁹ Born in Philadelphia, a second cousin to Mordecai Noah, he ran away to sea at the age of ten, joined the U.S. Navy at the age of twenty to fight in the War of 1812, was captured by the British, received an independent naval command at thirty, and became a captain, the highest naval grade (equivalent to commodore), in 1844. Honor meant a great deal to him. "My parents were Israelites..." he explained to a court of inquiry in 1857. "I was forced to encounter a large share of the prejudice and hostility by which, for so many ages, the Jew has been pursued."⁴⁰ He also was resented as an interloper for rising through the ranks from the position of sailing master rather than entering the navy as a midshipman, as most officers did. On both grounds, many in the navy considered him a subversive threat to tradition and order, and attempted to oust him. Insulted and kicked in 1816 by a fellow officer, Lt. William Potter, who called him "a damned Jew," Levy faced him down in a duel. When Potter refused to settle the quarrel amicably and took aim, Levy shot him dead.⁴¹ Subsequently, he was court-martialed on six different occasions between 1816 and 1842, in part, as Mordecai Noah privately admitted to Navy Secretary George Bancroft in 1846, because he was "rough and uneducated [and] no favorite with many of the officers," and in part, as Noah also apprehended, because of "religious prejudices operating to his disadvantage."⁴²

38. Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

39. Standard works on Levy include Abram Kanof, "Uriah Phillips Levy: The Story of a Pugnacious Commodore," *PAJHS* 39 (September 1949): 1–66; Donovan Fitzpatrick and Saul Saphire, *Navy Maverick: Uriah Phillips Levy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963); Melvin I. Urofsky, *The Levy Family and Monticello, 1834–1923* (Monticello: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2001); Marc Leepson, *Saving Monticello: The Levy Family's Epic Quest to Rescue the House that Jefferson Built* (New York: Free Press, 2001); and Ira Dye, "Levy, Uriah Phillips," *American National Biography Online*, Feb. 2000, <http://www.anb.org/articles/04/04-00627.html> (accessed Sept. 4, 2015).

40. Jacob R. Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 1: 84.

41. Urofsky, *Levy Family and Monticello*, 51–52; Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 58 (both as in note 39).

42. Noah to George Bancroft (June 2, 1846), *Massachusetts Historical Society*, as quoted in Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew* (as in note 4), 121; cf. Bancroft's testimony on Levy's behalf, Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews* (as in note 40), 1: 103.

When Levy was unceremoniously cashiered out of the navy, in 1855, at the age of sixty-three, he hired excellent lawyers, fought back (“My case,” he claimed, “is the case of every Israelite in the Union”), and, in 1858, won reinstatement.⁴³

Over the course of his career, Levy made a fortune in real estate, thanks to his timely purchases of property in Greenwich Village. By 1855, he was one of the two richest Jews in the city, reputedly worth some \$12.5 million in today’s money. This allowed him to devote funds to the two causes that became closest to his heart: the campaign against corporal punishment (flogging) in the navy, and the campaign to honor Thomas Jefferson, whom he considered “an inspiration to millions of Americans,” particularly since he “did much to mould our Republic in a form in which a man’s religion does not make him ineligible for political or governmental life.”⁴⁴

Levy fancied himself “Father of the [1850] law for the abolition of the barbarous practice of corporal punishment in the Navy of the United States,”⁴⁵ which is an exaggeration, but his public advocacy for the cause, as well as the personal example he set by substituting humiliating punishments for painful ones on board his own ship, made an impact. It also furthered his unpopularity among naval officers, who overwhelmingly deemed the cat-o’-nine-tails an essential means of enforcing military discipline.⁴⁶

As for Levy’s campaign to honor Thomas Jefferson, it resulted in three cultural monuments that survive to this day. In 1832, six years following Jefferson’s death, he commissioned the noted French sculptor Pierre-Jean David d’Angers to create a bronze statue in Jefferson’s memory. He personally oversaw the making of the 7.5-foot statue, today celebrated by art historians for breaking with neoclassicism and focusing upon “the practical application and dissemination of enlightenment principles within the public sphere of political action.”⁴⁷ He then paid to have it transported across the ocean, and presented it to Congress,

43. Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews* (as in note 40), 1: 76–77, 115.

44. Urofsky, *Levy Family and Monticello*, 45, 54; Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 59–60 (both as in note 39).

45. The statement is found in his will, see *PAJHS* 39 (September 1949): 63. The record does not reveal whether he similarly opposed corporal punishment for the “Negro Slaves” he owned in Virginia; *ibid.*, 61.

46. Harold Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy, 1798–1862* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1967), 170–207, esp. 181, 185.

47. Cynthia R. Field *et al.*, *Paris on the Potomac: The French Influence on the Architecture and Art of Washington, D.C.* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), 62; Thomas P. Somma, “‘Lost in America’: David D’Angers’s Bronze Statue of Thomas Jefferson, 1832–1833,” *American Pantheon: Sculptural and Artistic Decoration of the United States Capital*, eds. Donald R. Kennon and Thomas P. Somma (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), 90–110.

in 1834, as a gift to “my fellow citizens of the United States.” The statue stands today in the Capitol Rotunda, and is remembered as the first full-length portrait statue placed in the U.S. Capitol building and the only one donated by a private citizen. That same year, Levy presented the painted plaster model of the statue to “the people of New York”; today it adorns the Council Chamber in City Hall.⁴⁸ Finally, also in 1834, he purchased Monticello, Jefferson’s by then pillaged and dilapidated Virginia estate, which he proceeded to protect and preserve, believing as he did that “the homes of great men should be protected and preserved as monuments to their glory.” Monticello remained in the Levy family, maintained by Uriah’s nephew Jefferson Monroe Levy until it was sold to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923.⁴⁹

Uriah Phillips Levy, like the others whom we have so far considered here, belonged to a synagogue and participated in Jewish life. *Dawn’s Early Light*, however, also embraces Jews who separated themselves from the Jewish community. Such Jews, on both sides of the Atlantic, sometimes proved to be the most subversive Jews of all. One case, considered a “great sensation” in its time, concerned a promising young British-born Jewish chemist in New York with the unusual name of Charles Cleomenes Coleman Cohen (1807–1834). Well educated as a Jew in England and a onetime student of the pioneering British scientist Michael Faraday, Cohen abandoned his Jewish faith while still in England and, in New York, publicly identified as an atheist. “I can attach no idea to the word God,” he proclaimed in the radical *Free Enquirer*, “and cannot consequently believe in him.” The very day those irreverent words appeared in print, Saturday, February 16, 1834, an explosion in his laboratory blew Cohen to bits. This naturally sparked headlines—some viewed his death as Divine punishment—and in the shadow of Abner Kneeland’s arrest and conviction for blasphemy in Boston,⁵⁰ also stimulated a lively debate concerning whether Cohen, had he lived, would likewise have been hauled into court for his subversive writings. Fascinatingly, a newspaper sympathetic to Cohen noted that there were in the United States some half a dozen other Jews—“most intelligent men ... well-educated in the Jewish faith”—who had become “professed and fearless Atheists.” Mordecai

48. For the statues, see <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/other-statues/thomas-jefferson-statue>; http://www.nyc.gov/html/artcom/html/tours/visit_guide_collections.shtml; and Urofsky, *Levy Family and Monticello*, 60–65; Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 60–65 (both as in note 39).

49. Urofsky, *Levy Family and Monticello*, 65–204, esp. 68; Leepson, *Saving Monticello*, 65–256 (both as in note 39).

50. See Leonard W. Levy, ed., *Blasphemy in Massachusetts: Freedom of Conscience and the Abner Kneeland Case, A Documentary Record* (New York: De Capo Press, 1973).

Noah's advice, reflecting the fear of subversives that characterized his later life, was "let them be silent."⁵¹

Ernestine Rose (1810–1892), the best known Jewish atheist and women's rights leader of her day, would soon spurn that advice (see Fig. 26). Born in Poland, where her father was a rabbi, she refused a marriage arranged by her father, and after stints in France and Holland, moved to England in 1830, where she fell under the spell of the socialist reformer, Robert Owen, and married a fellow Owenite in a civil ceremony. Arriving in New York in 1836 accompanied by her husband, she quickly won success on the speaking circuit and became a celebrated women's rights and human rights advocate as well as a proponent of radical freethought. She described herself as "but a daughter of poor, crushed Poland, and the down-trodden and persecuted people called the Jews, 'a child of Israel,'" when she pleaded for the "equal rights of her sex," in 1852, in an address to the Third National Woman's Rights Convention (see Item 3.18, Fig. 61). A year later, addressing her "sisters" at a debate between supporters of the Bible and infidels, she created an uproar when she asked "do you wish to be free? Then you must trample the Bible, the church, and the priests under your feet." To her mind, freedom for slaves, women, and Jews were intertwined: "I go for emancipation of all kinds," she explained, "white and black, man and woman.... I go for the recognition of human rights, without distinction of sect, party, sex or color." Her motto, which she recommended to social reformers everywhere, was "Agitate! Agitate!"⁵²

Ernestine Rose was both conscious and proud of her subversive stance. "I know but too well what it is to go against the long-cherished and time-honored prejudices and superstitions," she admitted in an 1853 speech. "It is no pleasant task to go against the current, but there is a sense of duty that balances all unpleasantness."⁵³ Perhaps because she was so unorthodox in advocating full equality for women, opposing slavery, and defending atheism, the Jewish community of her day completely ignored her. Not one mention of her name has so far turned up in any pre-Civil War Jewish newspaper. Years later, in 1890, when her name was brought to the attention of the editor of the *American Israelite*,

51. Key primary sources are reprinted in Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 187–94.

52. On Rose, see Carol A. Kolmerten, *The American Life of Ernestine I. Rose* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999); and Yuri Suhl, *Ernestine Rose: Women's Rights Pioneer* (New York: Biblio, 1990; 2nd ed.). Her speeches and letters are collected in Paula Doress-Worters, ed., *Mistress of Herself: Speeches and Letters of Ernestine L. Rose Early Women's Rights Leader* (New York: Feminist Press, 2008); quotes (in order) are from pp. 121, 144, 150, 152, 259.

53. Doress-Worters, ed., *Mistress of Herself* (as in note 52), 137.

he confessed with some surprise that “we never heard of Mrs. Rose before.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Rose continued to identify herself with the Jewish people, and during the Civil War she vigorously and repeatedly defended them against attacks by Horace Seaver, editor of the freethought weekly, *The Boston Investigator*.⁵⁵

Ernestine Rose was far from being a “typical” American Jew of her time. Samuel B. H. Judah, Isaac Gomez, Solomon Henry Jackson, Uriah P. Levy, and the other subversive Jews who, we have seen, violated the cultural conventions of their day were far from typical either. All alike pushed the bounds of propriety—speaking out against hypocrisy, prejudice, and against the social and religious norms of their time. Even if ignored or persecuted by those around them, we know, in retrospect, that these men and women broadened and enlivened American culture. Some paid a heavy price for doing so.

The bulk of Jews in antebellum America, even if they differed from the mainstream in matters of religion, were, of course, far from subversive. They kept their heads down and their mouths shut. Seeking to win their neighbors’ respect, they strove mightily to behave well. But they too paid a price. Their names go unrecorded in the annals of American Jewish culture and they left nothing for Leonard Milberg to collect. The moral, proclaimed by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich with respect to women, is no less true with respect to Jews: the well-behaved ones seldom made history.⁵⁶

54. *American Israelite*, December 4, 1890, 8. Although Rabbi Isaac M. Wise was titular editor of the paper, his son, Leo was the *de facto* editor at this time. In later issues, he revealed how much he had learned about Rose, largely from *History of Woman Suffrage*; see *American Israelite*, December 11, 1890, 1, and October 20, 1892, 5.

55. Doress-Worters, ed., *Mistress of Herself* (as in note 52), 311–33.

56. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

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