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Mordecai M. Noah*

On the Bicentennial of His Birth

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"THE WRITER OF THIS PARAGRAPH," wrote James Rees in 1845, "remembers Mr. Noah as a great literary and political lion . . . He told the best story, rounded the best sentence, and wrote the best play of all his contemporaries. He was the life and spirit and quotation of all circles. As editor, critic and author, he was looked up to as an oracle. He was, in short, the *idoneous homo* of that day. His wit was everywhere repeated, and his kind-heartedness — which, by the way, to this very hour has never forsaken him — was the theme of every tongue."¹

Rees was an intimate of Mordecai Noah's, and his characterization, written while Noah was still alive, must therefore be somewhat discounted. Still, his words bear close reading. For Rees realized, even in his adulation, that Noah's reputation rested chiefly on his style and personality. Samuel Lockwood put it well: "Noah was a man of talents rather than genius."² His talents, however, stood him in good stead and he exploited them to the hilt. Consequently, his name continues to elicit smiles of recognition two full centuries after his birth.

Mordecai Noah (1785-1851) belonged to that first generation of native-born Americans who grew up in the years following the Revolution. When he was young, he knew some of the Founding Fathers personally, but he had no memory of his country as being anything but politically independent. Like so many others of his day, he cherished the dream that America would one day also

¹ James Rees, *The Dramatic Authors of America* (Philadelphia, 1845), p. 110.

² Samuel Lockwood, "Major M.M. Noah," *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education*, 1 (1868), p. 670.

achieve full cultural independence. Politics and culture, central concerns of the young Republic, became his central concerns as well.

Noah's early literary contributions focus around these twin preoccupations. As a young man in his twenties, he first achieved repute in the field of political journalism. He wrote copy on behalf of Simon Snyder, Democratic-Republican candidate for governor of Pennsylvania in 1808. He authorized a pseudonymous pamphlet attacking New York Governor De Witt Clinton's bid for the presidency in 1812. And he published a noteworthy series of articles in the *Charleston City Gazette*, in 1813, that helped expose some attempted political chicanery on the part of South Carolina's governor, Joseph Alston.³

At the same time, Noah authored the first of his plays. He had long been a devotee of the theater ("I had an early hankering for the national drama," he later admitted, "a kind of juvenile patriotism."⁴), and he subsequently became an important critic. But "The Fortress of Sorrento," and "Paul and Alexis" were hardly great works. The former, Noah himself later remarked, he was "almost ashamed to own."⁵ The latter, he excused as being merely a favor written for a friend. The plays he wrote when he was older, all of them devoted to American themes, proved somewhat more enduring, and won Noah a place among the front ranks of early American dramatists. In one, "She would Be a Soldier, or the Plains of Chippewa," he introduced onto the stage a remarkably benevolent Indian, one brave enough to criticize the white man's encroachments, and educated enough to speak perfectly standard English. In another, "Marion, or the Hero of Lake George," he broached a subject ignored in most literary treatments of the American Revolution, the tragedy of conflicting allegiances that rent families asunder, pitting brothers against one another. Both plays, and other Noah plays too, enjoyed long and successful runs. Yet Noah himself realized, by the time he was middle-aged and no longer writing plays, that his were somewhat "amateur" productions, composed at odd mo-

3 Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1981), pp. 1-14.

4 Noah to William Dunlap (July 11, 1832), reprinted in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 6 (1897), p. 116.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

ments in the all-too-rare interstices between political caucuses and journalistic deadlines. Others, he thought, had done better.⁶

HIS TRAVELS

Noah's most significant contribution to American letters was his book of travels, published in 1819. The volume was conceived while Noah was serving as American consul to Tunis, a post he received in 1813. "I am taking notes for writing a Book . . .," he informed his friend David Bailie Warden in 1815, "I wish to add my poor mite to the store of American literature."⁷ By the time the book appeared, however, it had taken on an additional function. Soon after writing to Warden, Noah found himself recalled home for reasons — among them "the religion which you profess" — which he considered to be grossly unjust. In part, at least, he used his book, "as a work of explanation and defence."⁸ *Travels in England, France, Spain, and the Barbary States* is thus a mixture of travelogue and apologia. The first book of its kind by an American diplomat, it won considerable acclaim and went through at least two editions.

Noah's travelogue included all the standard motifs of the genre: injury on the road, a near robbery, and lusty moments of embarrassment. Noah rendered typical judgements on each of the countries he visited. England, he felt, should be considered a "permanent enemy," ever eager "to check our progress or mar our national prosperity." France, on the other hand, left not a single unfavorable impression: "no circumstance . . . served to lower the respect which is generally entertained towards this country and its inhabitants." As for Spain, he was very critical of its "indolence" and "prejudices." He urged the country to "tolerate all religions, [to] call back the Moors and Jews," and to free her South American colonies. These were all regular Jeffersonian sentiments and probably evoked no surprise from readers.⁹

What did distinguish Noah's volume from other contemporary works of its type was the attention devoted to Jewish affairs.

6 Ibid, p. 115; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 6-8, 12-13, 47-51.

7 Noah to David B. Warden (February 10, 1815), Warden Papers, Library of Congress.

8 Mordecai M. Noah, *Travels in England, France, Spain and the Barbary States* (New York, 1819), p. iv.

9 Ibid, pp. 58, 125, 241.

Right from page one, Noah expressed his desire to obtain "the most authentic information in relation to the situation, character, resources, and numerical force of the Jews in Barbary, part of whom had been banished from their colleges at Cardova, and parts were emigrants from Judea and Egypt."¹⁰ Later in the book he described with obvious care different sectors of the Jewish community — praising some, condemning others — but generally laying blame for any Jewish vices at the feet of the Islamic rulers. He pointed out that Jews hungered after money in North Africa because it purchased "protection and toleration." He suggested that emancipation and mild treatment might make Jews far more useful and beneficial citizens.¹¹

The apologetic part of Noah's book — the extended defense of his consulship in general and particularly his handling or mishandling of a secret mission aimed at freeing American prisoners in Algiers — holds, at first blush, substantially less interest. Noah had published much of the material in his *Correspondence and Documents Relative to the Attempt to Negotiate for the Release of the American Captives at Algiers* (1816), and his plea for his "unfortunate people, whose faith and constancy alone have been the cause of so much tyranny and oppression; who have given moral laws to the world, and who receive for reward opprobrium and insult," reeks of self-pity. What does make the defense significant is the simple fact that Noah undertook it at all, let alone in so spirited a fashion. As "a citizen of the United States, protected by the constitution in my religious as well as in my civil rights," he served notice that he would fight, fight publicly, and fight as a Jew, for religious equality.¹²

This Jewish self-assertiveness, expressed even more frequently in Noah's later writings, had lasting significance. The fact that a public figure like Mordecai Noah so openly declared himself a Jew, both by expressing his interest in other Jews and by defending himself against religious attacks, legitimated and encouraged similar acts of self-assertion by other Jews, and indeed other minority group members. Noah, of course, was not unique in assuming a forthright stance, nor was he the first American Jew to proudly defend his religion in print. He did, however, re-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 289, 307-314.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 376-381; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 31-32.

ceive far more publicity for his defenses of the faith than did any other American Jew of his time.

JOURNALISTIC ACTIVITY

Despite the success of his *Travels*, Noah wrote no other books. He compiled a volume of his newspaper columns (1820, rev. 1845), and he published an American edition of Moses Samuel's translation of the *Book of Jasher* (1840). But otherwise he confined himself to pamphlets, published lectures, and the forum he liked best: the press.¹³ During his long tenure on New York's newspaper row, Noah edited some of America's leading dailies: *The New York National Advocate*, *The Enquirer*, and *The Evening Star*. He also edited the *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, one of the first Sunday newspapers in America, and one designed to be a family newspaper, "received and approved in circles where no Sunday publication had penetrated before."¹⁴ Noah rarely concerned himself with two trends revolutionizing American journalism in his day: increasing speed and decreasing price. He left the scoops and the scandal to the *Sun* and the *Herald*; meanwhile, he concentrated on quality. "It is the business of a newspaper," he wrote, "to tell its readers of everything *new*, which transpires in the world, and more especially of that sort of *newness*, which carries with it utility and value . . . It is our business, as editors, to make known such occurrences as shall have an influence, and a beneficial influence too."¹⁵

Noah remains best known for his Jewish writings: his published lectures, pronouncements, and newspaper articles that aimed to improve both the image of Jews in the eyes of Gentiles, and the condition of Jews worldwide. As early as in his *Correspondence and Documents* (1816), echoing themes he had previously expressed in private letters to government officials, Noah trumpeted the loyalty and patriotism of American Jews:

The citizens of the United States, who profess the Hebrew

13 For a complete bibliography of Noah's writings, see Jacob Blanck, *Bibliography of American Literature* (New Haven, 1973), vol. 6, pp. 447-454; with the several corrections noted in Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, p. 215.

14 *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger* (March 28, 1852), p. 2.

15 *New York Enquirer for the Country* (November 17, 1827), p. 2; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 5-6, 35-38, 77-80, 97-99.

religion, have merited, by their exemplary conduct, the rights which they enjoy. They have been the constant, unwavering friends of the union; they took an active part in the war of the revolution, which secured, and ought to secure to them, an equality of privileges, in common with the rest of their fellow citizens. Forty years of freedom have strengthened and secured their attachment and devotion to a country, which had broken down the barriers of superstition, in proclaiming and perpetuating civil and religious liberty.¹⁶

Noah offered a more lengthy exposition on Jews — complete with learned footnotes — in his *Discourse Delivered at the Consecration of the [Second Mill Street] Synagogue of Congregation Shearith Israel* in 1818. In his oration, Noah cast himself in the role of a knowledgeable and experienced leader, enlightening and gently prodding his people — whom he addressed as “we” — all the while looking back over his shoulder to gauge the reaction of the outside world. He instructed his people as to their own history and condition, traced Jewish rights in every country, and concluded, patriotically, that “OUR COUNTRY [is] the bright example of universal tolerance, of liberality, true religion, and good faith.” America, he told his audience, was the Jewish people’s “chosen country” — at least until Jews could “recover their ancient rights and dominions, and take their rank among the governments of the earth.” In passing, Noah mentioned hatred of Jews, which he blamed on ignorance and jealousy. But he expressed more interest in Jewish survival and the future of the Jewish people. For Jewish survival, he credited a Divine miracle. The ultimate destiny of Jews — “restoration of the Jewish nation to their ancient rights and dominion” — he similarly left in God’s hands. Jews’ immediate future, however, he willingly accepted as his own personal concern.¹⁷

16 Mordecai M. Noah, *Correspondence and Documents Relative to the Attempt to Negotiate for the Release of the American Captives of Algiers; including remarks on our relations with that regency* (Washington City, 1816), p. 126.

17 Mordecai M. Noah, *Discourse Delivered at the Consecration of the Synagogue K.K. Shearith Israel in the city of New York on Friday, the 10th of Nisan, 5578, corresponding with the 17th of April, 1818* (New York, 1818); Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 54-55.

SETTLEMENT PROJECT

Noah manifested his concern for Jewry's future a few years later in his well-known Ararat plan, his effort to create a Jewish colony on Grand Island, New York. The history of this abortive endeavor has been detailed elsewhere.¹⁸ Of concern here are the two literary remains of the episode: Noah's brief "Proclamation to the Jews," and his far more comprehensive address delivered at Ararat's elaborate dedication, on September 15, 1825. In his proclamation, Noah, calling himself the "Judge of Israel," issued a series of decrees, apparently aimed largely at Jews in pre-modern countries; those, for example, whom he described in his *Travels*. Among other things, he called on Jews to remain loyal to the governments that protected them, to abolish polygamy, and to learn how to read and write before entering into marriage.¹⁹

His Ararat decrees went further. He reviewed the state of world Jewry, explained his colonization plan in detail, including its implications for Jewish restoration, and then justified his project in terms that he hoped both Jews and non-Jews would understand. In his Ararat address, as in so many of his other pronouncements on Jewish affairs, Noah sought to prove that he could be a good citizen as well as a good Jew, helping his people and his country at one and the same time.²⁰

Noah is remembered for two other widely-publicized addresses on matters relating to Jews: his *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel* (1837), and his *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* (1845). In both cases, Noah relied heavily on facts and theories developed by others; his contribution was to popularize and Judaize the two themes, setting them forth in a framework favorable to Jews, yet still familiar enough to be acceptable to non-Jews.

In the case of the Indians, Noah adduced the usual evidence "proving" their Jewish heritage: Indian traditions, similarities between Indian and Jewish rituals, and resemblances between He-

18 Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 61-75; for earlier studies see pp. 221-222.

19 The Proclamation is reprinted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron (eds.), *The Jews of the United States 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York, 1963), pp. 894-900.

20 "Address of Mordecai M. Noah . . . Delivered at the Laying of the Corner Stone of the city of Ararat," reprinted in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 21 (1913), pp. 230-252.

brew and Indian words. He added nothing fresh to a literature that went back at least as far as the sixteenth century. Far more interesting was Noah's effort to link the Jews and the Indians typologically: "Fifteen hundred years after the expulsion of the Canaanites by Joshua . . . the descendants of Joshua" — Noah meant the North American Indians — "a *second* time fall on the Canaanites on another continent, knowing them as such, and burn their temples and destroy their gigantic towers and cities."²¹ According to Noah, Jews were thus "the first people in the old world" — the ancestors of Christianity — and "the rightful inheritors of the new."²² On this basis, Jews could both claim legitimacy in the New World, and argue, as Noah did, that destiny would be theirs again: "the Jews . . . will stand forth; the richest, the most powerful [and] the most intelligent nation on the face of the globe."²³

HOPE FOR RESTORATION

In his "Restoration Address" Noah continued in this same vein. Although, of course, his subject had changed, he continued to insist that America and its Jews had a special role to play in the Divine scheme, and that ultimately, with America facilitating the process, Jews would reemerge triumphant. Restoration of Jews to the Holy Land was a commonly discussed theme in the 1840's, since many associated it with the predicted imminent approach of the millennium. But where others foresaw Jewish conversion before Restoration, Noah, perhaps taking his cue from some British restorationists, argued that Jews and Christians should "unite in efforts to promote the restoration of Jews in their *unconverted* state, relying on the fulfillment of the prophecies and the will of God for attaining the objects they have in view after that great event shall have arrived."²⁴ Delivering his address before a mixed audience that included Christian missionaries, Noah preached tolerance, and exuded patriotism ("If I am right . . . what a glorious privilege is reserved for the free people of the

21 Mordecai M. Noah, *Discourse on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel* (New York, 1837), p. 9.

22 "Address of Mordecai Noah," p. 249.

23 Noah, *Discourse on the Evidences*, p. 40.

24 Mordecai M. Noah, *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* (New York, 1845), p. 25.

United States: the only country that has given civil and religious rights to the Jews equal with all other sects; the only country which has not persecuted them, selected and pointedly distinguished in prophecy as *the* nation which, at the proper time, shall present to the Lord his chosen and trodden-down people, and pave the way for their restoration to Zion."²⁵) He knew that the only way he could garner support for the cause he considered so critical to the betterment of Jewish life was to insist that it would benefit every one: Jews would have their own state, Christians would bask in the rewards reserved for those who furthered millennial aims, and Americans generally would enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that theirs was the land described by Isaiah (18:1) as that land destined by God to play a crucial role in the whole restoration process.

Noah occasionally addressed his ideas to Jews alone. But though in these writings he may have been more parochial, he nevertheless urged American Jews to chart a more liberal course than that advocated by "defenders of the faith," who, like Rabbi Abraham Rice of Baltimore, condemned innovations of every sort. As an integrationist leader, Noah believed that Jews had to learn to accommodate themselves to the world at large.²⁶ He thus supported secular education. The "Hebrew College" that he once proposed was to be a place where children could obtain *both* "a classical education, and at the same time be properly instructed in the Hebrew Language."²⁷ He also put forward a number of ideas for religious reform: "I should . . . be gratified if we could introduce in our prayers, a portion of the language of the country in order that we may better comprehend the great responsibilities of our faith. We might also curtail many repetitions, and introduce some beneficial changes." (In the same breath, however, he warned that "there are great dangers in all innovations on an established religion."²⁸) Finally, he advocated a more tolerant view of Christianity insisting, in an address to Jews assembled at Shearith Israel on Thanksgiving Day, 1848, that "there is enough

25 Ibid, pp. 49-50; cf. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 152-157.

26 Jonathan D. Sarna "The Spectrum of Jewish Leadership in Ante-Bellum America," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 59-67.

27 Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 127-128.

28 Ibid, pp. 137-142; cf. Mordecai M. Noah, *Address Delivered at the Hebrew Synagogue in Crosby-Street, New York, on Thanksgiving Day, to Aid in the Erection of the Temple at Jerusalem* (Jamaica, 1849), p. 16.

in the character of Jesus to give him a rank among the highest practical moralists."²⁹ Proud as he was of being Jewish, Noah did not wish to see his fellow Jews cut themselves off from their non-Jewish neighbors. In his writings, as in his other activities, he sought to bring American Jews and American Christians closer together while still preserving Jewish identity firmly intact.

What then is the legacy of Mordecai Noah? Surely it does not rest solely on his writings, for though many can be read with interest today, none can honestly be said to have had any lasting impact on subsequent generations. The fact that a Jew in the early nineteenth century wrote for and was read by non-Jews is still significant; a mere handful of Jews anywhere in the world could make the same claim. Noah also wrote with a fine style and he left behind some beautifully crafted prose. But he was by no means an important thinker.

Instead, it appears that Noah's enduring importance derives from his courageous and in many ways pioneering effort to achieve success in two worlds at once. He taught Jews that America did not demand conversion as the price of achievement; a Jew could remain a Jew and still rise to significant heights. At the same time, he taught non-Jews that, as Rabbi Morris Raphall put it in his eulogy, those "professing the Jewish faith were as able, as faithful, as zealous in [America's] cause and service as any of her other children."³⁰ In short, he mediated between two worlds, explaining each to the other. He scarcely solved the dilemma of being an American Jew, but he experienced, embodied, and understood it — and then grappled with it honestly and openly.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Asmonean* (March 28, 1851), p. 181