

Jews in Church: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in Nineteenth-Century America

Shari Rabin

Yaschik/Arnold Jewish Studies Program, College of Charleston, 66 George St, Charleston, SC 29424, USA; rabinsl@cofc.edu

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Abstract: Studies of Jewish-Christian relations in the nineteenth century have largely centered on anti-Semitism, missionary endeavors, and processes of Protestantization. In this literature, Jews and Judaism are presented as radically separate from Christians and Christianity, which threaten them, either by reinforcing their difference or by diminishing it, whether as a deliberate project or as an unconscious outcome of pressure or attraction. And yet, Jews and Christians interacted with one another's religious traditions not only through literature and discussion, but also within worship spaces. This paper will focus on the practice of churchgoing by Jewish individuals, with some attention to Christian synagogue-going. Most Jews went to church because of curiosity, sociability, or experimentation. Within churches, they became familiar with their neighbors and with Christian beliefs but also further clarified and even strengthened their own understandings and identities. For Jews, as for other Americans, the relationship between identification and spatial presence, belief and knowledge, worship and entertainment, were complicated and religious boundaries often unclear. The forgotten practice of Jewish churchgoing sheds light on the intimacies and complexities of Jewish-Christian relations in American history.

Keywords: Jews; United States; Christianity; Nineteenth-Century; Jewish-Christian relations; Space

1. Introduction

In 1855 Benjamin Meyer of Newburyport, Massachusetts, wrote a letter to the Jewish newspaper *The Israelite*, which was headlined "An Experience." He had been living in isolated towns for ten years and had regularly gone to church, he reported, "partly to pass a few hours and partly to learn something more about the *man* whom many worship as God." He had become quite familiar with Christianity and still, he reported, "I am as far from believing that Jesus was God or a particle of God, as heaven is from earth." Meyer took from the experience that "Well may every Israelite rejoice, that he put not his trust in man, nor in the son of man, but in the Lord God of Israel ... the *one* immutable God" (Meyer 1855). Meyer and many other Jews in nineteenth-century America voluntarily attended Christian church services. Despite the concerns of rabbis and leaders, church could be an important space for sociability and for self-examination, helping ordinary Jews elaborate and even strengthen—rather than threaten—Jewish identity.

Scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations in America tends to focus on Christians and/or Christianity as threats to Jewish distinctiveness. On the one hand, Christian anti-Semitism and missionary endeavors explicitly target Jews for discrimination or conversion (Sarna 1981; Dinnerstein 1994; Mayo 1998; Ariel 2000; Mullen 2017). On the other hand, Jews became like their neighbors through assimilation and/or a process of "Protestantization," either organically or through deliberate planning (Sussman 1986; Hyman 1995). In the words of one edited volume on the topic:

Since Jews have always been a very small minority of the population, most interreligious encounters, and materials relating to them, find the Christian as the initiator and the Jew

the reactor or adapter ... Or, on another level, the behavior of the majority carries greater influence with the minority, particularly an accommodationist one, than the reverse (Cohen 1990).

Other scholars point to Jewish engagement with Christianity and Christians, but focus almost exclusively on elites. We learn, for instance of rabbinic polemics that reclaim Jesus as a Jewish figure, and of organizations like the National Council of Christians and Jews, created in the early twentieth century to encourage interreligious dialogue and solidarity (Kraut 1982; Prothero 2003; Schultz 2011; Dollinger 2000). Indeed, existing scholarship seems to have little room for Benjamin Meyer, an ordinary nineteenth-century Jew, fortified in his Judaism and active in its defense even as he sat comfortably in a church pew.¹

A more useful framework here is Catherine Albanese's insight that contact, encounter, and exchange are central to American religious history. She rejects narratives of a pure religious essence subject to "religious devolution," arguing instead that religious combination and addition are natural and inevitable, if not always amicable, processes that amount to a kind of practical religious choreography. Notably, she opens her essay on this topic with three snapshots from the life of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, two in which he interacts with curious Christians, and one in which he copes with the consequences of American congregationalism. In these examples, Albanese argues, "the encounter with the other becomes the invited or (mostly) uninvited gift that transforms the contacting parties—or the gift rebuffed, which still comes back to haunt" (Albanese 1997, p. 202).

The religious exchanges that Albanese describes took place in a train car, in Wise's home, and within a synagogue. But this kind of "religious mixing" involving Jews could also occur, even more directly, within a church. Historians of American religion have long centered their studies on churches and synagogues, and yet they have tended to assume a relatively straightforward relationship between the identity of the space and its occupants; a Baptist church is a Baptist space, and those who attend a Baptist church are interesting insofar as they are Baptists or at least potential Baptists (Jick 1976; Goldman 2001; Butler 1992). Spaces do define and structure behavior according to particular values and power dynamics, but as various theorists have shown, they are also permeable, and shaped by the agency of those who enter them. Even religious spaces are never as totalizing or coherent as they seem, playing host to a range of unauthorized activities and attitudes (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993; De Certeau 2011; Foucault and Miskowiec 1986).² Using this insight as its starting point, this article will show that Jews, especially, if not exclusively, young single men, enthusiastically engaged with Christianity, viewing churches as spaces not necessarily of contamination or transformation, but of interreligious encounter and theological reflection. If Christianity was, in Albanese's term, a gift offered up by American life, Jews took advantage of the option to consider it closely while simultaneously rejecting it.

2. Jews and Christians, Synagogues and Churches

In the middle of the nineteenth century a range of political and economic developments brought a mass migration of Jews to the United States, mostly from German-speaking lands. Legally, Jews were considered "free white persons," and they were thus granted the privileges of American citizenship. Unlike in the European places they came from, they were not officially identified as Jews, nor would they have access to religious institutions supported—and surveilled—by the state (Rabin 2017, p. 21). Indeed, over the first third of the nineteenth century the rejection of religious establishments announced in the first amendment gradually trickled down to the states, creating an environment of unprecedented religious voluntarism (Green 2010). This combination led to a new, more open relationship between Jews and Christians that extended into the many new worship spaces being created across an expanding continent.

¹ One exploration of how ordinary Jews perceived non-Jews, including Christians, is (Ribak 2012). For another example of members of a minority group engaging with, critiquing, and rejecting Christianity, see (Ronda 1977).

² On spiritualist séances as sites of critical investigation and interrogation, see (Walker 2013).

In search of economic opportunity and endowed with new political rights, Jewish migrants found themselves moving throughout a country that was “awash in a sea of [Christian] faith.” As Jon Butler and others have shown, Christian affiliation and activity increased over the course of the nineteenth century, unimpeded if not encouraged by disestablishment. The religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening and its Arminian theologies of salvation inspired evangelization—of Jews and others—but also fueled efforts to Christianize the American nation through other means. Enthusiastic Christians crafted a new “moral establishment,” which, most notably for Jews, instituted Christian oaths for officeholders and prohibited work on Sundays. Meanwhile, Christian fervor combined with westward expansion, resulting in the construction of around 50,000 new churches in the United States between 1780 and 1860. Every town featured churches—and their signature church bells—as a readily recognizable part of the local landscape. Although there was considerable diversity of architectural forms among churches in different regions and denominations, in all cases architects, ministers, and leaders intended them to strengthen believers and encourage people on a journey toward conversion (Butler 1992; Sehat 2011; Kilde 2002).

Working as peddlers, small-town merchants, and in other mobile occupations, Jews wound their way westward, often living far from their coreligionists. While most of their neighbors knew only of “the mythical Jew” of Christian polemics, they usually demonstrated curiosity about and even sympathy toward the newfound “Jew next-door” (Sarna 1986). Jews and Christians developed friendships and business relationships, joined the same masonic lodges, and much to the chagrin of their leaders, married one another. In the United States Jews need not convert to Christianity in order to marry a Christian, and in fact in some cases Christian partners, almost always wives, converted to Judaism (Rabin 2017, pp. 60–63; Rose 2001). There were, however, Jews who chose to convert to Christianity, whether in response to a convincing argument or from a sudden experience of transformation (Mullen 2017, pp. 48–49). There were several Protestant groups organized explicitly with this end in mind and those Jews who did convert were often celebrated, with some becoming high profile ministers. Rebecca Gratz noted of Joseph Wolfe, who was preaching to packed churches, that “the novelty of a Jew preaching the Gospel is irresistible” to Christians (Gratz 1929, p. 246).

Overall, however, the number of Jews who embraced Christianity remained very small, and when Jews gathered together in sufficient numbers, they founded their own religious congregations. While in 1840 there were only eighteen formal Jewish congregations in the United States, by 1877 there were no less than two hundred and seventy seven, increasingly housed in structures that they either bought or built. These structures added Judaism to the local religious firmament and made it visible to fellow Jews and to their neighbors (Jick 1976, p. 57). One indication of the importance of synagogues is a letter written soon after the Civil War, in which E. Ebenstadt of Shreveport lamented, “Every sect of religion has its place of worship, but we have ‘none.’”³ Many congregations rented quarters and hired nonrabbinic religious functionaries, but even when they had designated buildings and official rabbis, American Jewish congregations remained fragile undertakings, which not all Jews were eager to join and/or participate in. Congregations took note of resident non-members who still demanded congregational privileges and of travelling or small-town “strangers” who turned up at the high holidays. At the same time, many struggled to make a regular prayer quorum of ten adult Jewish men (Rabin 2017, pp. 44–49).

And yet, Jews regularly noted the presence of Christians at special events like consecrations, confirmation ceremonies, and High Holiday services (Abraham 1847; J.A. 1849; A.P. 1871). Christian travelers and journalists also entered synagogues, writing about them in diaries or for the public as sites of popular interest. In the late 1820s David P. Hillhouse described the synagogue in Charleston in his travel diaries, as well as the Connecticut legislature, a deaf and dumb asylum in Hartford, and the penitentiary in Auburn, N.Y.⁴ Walt Whitman attended services at Shearith Israel in New York City in the 1840s, and described his reaction: “The heart within us felt awed as in the presence of

³ E. Ebenstadt to unknown recipient, Shreveport, LA, 10 February 1866, Samuel Adler Papers, Folder 3, MS-423, AJA.

⁴ David P. Hillhouse Diary, Folder 75, Alexander and Hillhouse Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

memorials from an age that had passed away centuries ago” (Whitman 1950, pp. 31–32). This interreligious interest went both ways. Samuel Bernard Judah, en route to Vincennes, Indiana in 1827, noted churches as a sign of urban development. In describing Rochester, New York, for example, he took note of “3 new churches building and new houses in abundance ... there is a Roman Catholic Chapel and a Quaker meeting.” In Columbus, he visited the state house, the penitentiary, and then the local Presbyterian Church.⁵ This reciprocal curiosity extended into financial support and educational endeavors; laypeople regularly offered donations to support the construction of each other’s houses of worship and religious leaders preached in each other’s pulpits (H.E.S. 1868; Timothy 1871; Waldman 1872; O. 1872; Leaser 1849; Holzinger 1854; Lilienthal 1877). Judah Wechsler reported from Seymour, Indiana, in 1861, “It was a happy thought for me when the sweet sound of the bell of a Christian church invited the people to come and listen to a Jewish minister as he explains the living Word of God” (Wechsler 1861). On the other hand, from Leavenworth Kansas, the correspondent “Olive” complained that “some of our Jewish citizens giving large sums of money to the support of the Free Congregational Society,” while ignoring the needs of their synagogue (Olive 1876).

Until the modern era, the social and spatial divide between Jews and Christians had been relatively rigid if not impermeable. While individual Jews might choose to enter churches in order to do business, many rabbis saw churches as “houses of idolatry” which *halakhah*, Jewish law, forbids Jews from entering (Berkowitz 2012). In medieval and early modern Europe some rulers forced Jews to attend sermons in the hopes of leading to their conversion, sometimes, but not always, in churches (Chazan 1980; Teter 2003; Carlebach 2008; Vose 2011; Endelman 2015). Jewish and Christian leaders understood churches as spaces of Christian power and persuasion. It was only in the modern period that some European Reform rabbis began attending Christian worship, seeking inspiration as they sought to make Judaism compatible with modern citizenship (Liebermann 2011).

In the United States, more Jews found themselves inside church buildings more regularly. Some Jewish congregations purchased and refurbished former church buildings to build their synagogues; for instance, Congregation Achdut ve’Shalom in Fort Wayne, Indiana, spent \$1200 to remodel a German Methodist church (Jick 1976, pp. 140–43). A church need not be a space of Christian power alone, but a neutral real estate opportunity or event venue. In January 1864 Rachel Rosalie Philips entered a church in Washington, D.C. to see a celebrated mimic perform, and in December, 1871, Rabbi Elias Eppstein performed a Jewish wedding in a Methodist church in Rock Island, Illinois.⁶ Within local communities, boundaries between Jews and Christians were relatively porous; in an environment of religious voluntarism and communal development, this meant that they also supported and entered one another’s worship spaces.

3. The Social World of Church

Jews not only entered into spaces constructed as churches, they also went to church for worship services. Churches were usually segregated by race and class, but the conversionary hopes of American Christians meant that although there were few further barriers to entry. In frontier communities especially, unfamiliar attendees were neither surprising nor unexpected (Butler 1992; Maffly-Kipp 1994). Within churches there was a hierarchy of faith, including baptized members but also other participants, presumed to be at various stages on the journey toward conversion and salvation. So, for instance, seated in the pew might be the child of a committed Baptist, not yet confident of a personal conversion experience that would warrant baptism; a “friend of the Moravians,” curious but not yet—and maybe not ever—a full-fledged member of the community; or, it turned out, a self-confident Jew (Mullen 2017, p. 82).

Leader and editor Isaac Leaser argued that Jews attended church because they were living in “a state of isolation [that] is almost intolerable ... [T]hey therefore quietly fall into the customs of those

⁵ Diary, 5 November 1827. SC-14388. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (from here, AJA).

⁶ Rachel Rosalie Philips Diary, 18 January 1864, Box 1, Folder 2. MS-695. David M. Klein Collection. AJA; Diary, 3 December 1871. MS-220. Elias Eppstein Papers. AJA.

around them, in order to have some one to cling to" (Leeser 1858). Put less polemically, churchgoing was a means of participating in the local community. Haiman Spitz found in Maine, "They generally asked to what church you belonged; they would patronize church members" (Spitz 1955, p. 297). It is not clear whether he ever attended church, but others clearly did. One Jew, "Timothy" reported that in the small-town Midwest in the early 1850s, "I went to church almost every Sunday." There were other Jewish men in the area, but "I shunned them and they would not recognize me ... simply because none of us wished to be recognized as Jews." His neighbors unknowingly spoke to him about Jews "and in their ignorance told me such outlandish stories to them that I preferred to be incognito" (Timothy 1871). Jews could choose to go unrecognized within churches, although not all did.

Typical was Edward Rosewater, an immigrant from Bohemia who as a teenager in the late 1850s and 1860s attended church semi-regularly throughout the south and Midwest, including Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, and Episcopalian services as well as a Tennessee camp meeting. He also attended at least two other churches, "St. John's Church" and a "Mr. Days Church." Rosewater did not commit to one denomination but moved between them and he did not see his churchgoing as precluding Jewish worship. Some of his outings were in towns without Jewish communities like Stevenson, Alabama; Murfreesboro, Tennessee; and Omaha, Nebraska, but others were in larger cities that did have synagogues, like Nashville and Cleveland. Indeed, in Cincinnati Rosewater went to Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's synagogue on Tuesday, 2 November 1858, and five days later went to church with a friend, where he heard a lecture about the Sabbath.⁷

Church was not the only outlet for worship or sociability available to Rosewater. In addition to synagogue, he noted other activities, like card-playing, that might have taken up the time. His diary never explicitly discusses his reasoning for churchgoing, but we can glean some hints. The day in April that he went to an Episcopalian Church, he noted that it was raining, which might have made sitting in a dry church seem like a good way to spend the day. In communities that had some population of women, they were generally overrepresented in church attendance and it is clear that sometimes Rosewater went to church for the ladies. Unlike in most synagogues at the time, men and women could sit together during worship (Sarna 1987). In October of 1863 he planned to attend church in Omaha, but changed his mind when the woman he was accompanying was detained by work.⁸

On another occasion, he did accompany a local woman to the Methodist church, and reported that there was a "drunken soldier behind us swearing all [the] time ... [which] kept some people tittering." Indeed, Rosewater found that not everyone in church was motivated by pure and exclusive devotion. At a Baptist meeting in Nashville in 1860, he had heard a "Methodist making awfull [sic] screaming & yelling" about drunkards and hypocrisy. Sectarianism and misbehavior could both manifest in the church space, puncturing the assumed unity and sincerity of the space. While churches were mostly racially segregated, camp meetings were more integrated, and also fractious. In Stevenson, Alabama, in August 1859 Rosewater noted that he saw African Americans, whom, signaling his comfort within white society, he referred to as the "funniest looking [N-words] I ever did see."⁹

Jews went to church to socialize with fellow white people and because they often had little else to do, a result of Sunday laws of various kinds that were in force across the country, whether *de jure* or *de facto* (Borden 1984, p. 104; McCrossen 2001). Peddler Abraham Kohn lamented that in America "one must profane the holy Sabbath, observing Sunday instead." One Sunday in 1843 he reported in his diary: "at each house where I tried to sell my wares, I was told to go to church." Kohn followed this advice at least once, attending the meetinghouse in Phillipston, Massachusetts—likely a Congregationalist church (Goodman 1951, p. 108). Another Jew, "F.B." noted that "among the beautiful churches of the city," Keokuk, Iowa, he attended the Unitarian Church because it "It has for its pastor a courteous gentleman, Rev. O. Chute." There was a Jewish congregation in town—which

⁷ Diary, 19 September 1859; 7 February 1864; 10 June 1860; 16 June 1861; 10 April 1859; 22 August 1859. Box 4, Folders 1 to 4. MS-503. Rosewater Family Papers. AJA.

⁸ 18 October 1863, Folder 4, *Ibid.*

⁹ 7 February 1864, *Ibid.*; 10 June 1860, Folder 2, *Ibid.*; 22 August 1859, Folder 1, *Ibid.*

he noted, “had very impressive services”—but the aesthetics of the building and the personality of the pastor meant that he also “occasionally visited” the church (F.B. 1875). Whether this was for lectures or for worship services, he apparently saw it as no contradiction. In Leavenworth, Kansas, one Jew complained of his coreligionist that, “they can’t find time Saturday to go to Schule but they can go on Sunday to hear Mr. Sanborn preach” (Olive 1876). Indeed, it is impossible to prove but entirely conceivable that there were weeks in the nineteenth century when more Jews attended church than synagogue.

4. Churchgoing as Encounter

Jews were going to church, then, but apart from social interactions, what happened inside them? They likely witnessed Christian rituals like baptisms and communion, and they also heard—and possibly sang—hymns, which blurred the boundaries between religion and entertainment. Some Calvinist communities only sang biblical Psalms, many of which would have been familiar to Jews, although in the original Hebrew and with different melodies. Other hymns, focused on Christian theological topics, may have been pleasing aesthetically, as theatrical experiences in highbrow urban churches with organ and choirs, or as folksy sing-alongs in country congregations. The canon of hymns was relatively stable across denominational boundaries and over time, and so while I have found no concrete proof of Jews joining in communal Christian singing, it would not have been difficult for those who attended church repeatedly to do so (Brown 2004, pp. 190–242).

The real focus of church services, however, was preaching. Pulpits were elevated and centralized so that worshippers could hear the words of God, intended as a means of cultivating Christian faith and repentance. Sermons touched on a wide range of biblical and contemporary topics, sometimes encouraging unity and at other times joining in the lively sectarian battles of the day (Kilde 2002; Stout 1998). The critic of Jewish churchgoing in Leavenworth, Kansas, argued that Jews liked to attend the Free Congregational Society because the pastor “preaches a doctrine very easily digested by all, irrespective of creed or denomination” (Olive 1876). Whatever the content, sermons were, understandably, the most remarked-upon element of church services among Jews.

In some cases, it was patriotic sermonizing that initially brought them to church. Living in Stevenson, Alabama, at the start of the Civil War, Rosewater heard “Parson Bruce preach [a] farewell Sermon to [the] Volunteers” in a crowded church. This he deemed “very impressive,” reporting approvingly that the minister “admonish[ed] Mercy Sobriety Moderation Fortitude &C.”—none explicitly Christian values—and “Many cried.”¹⁰ Emma Mordecai went to Emanuel Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, a month after the Civil War ended, in order to “hear some excellent remarks by good Mr. Walker upon the present state of things & our duty under them.” Six days later, she went to synagogue, but found “very few there.” Her own cousins had stayed home to assist in dressing a relative’s wound.¹¹

While Jews might find unobjectionable morality or a unifying civic identity in sermons, more often than not, they felt distant from the ideas they heard and readily expressed sectarian objections and aesthetic judgments. Rosewater reported in his diary of one sermon that it was, “tolerably good[. There were] only few mistakes by [the] preacher about dates &c.” On another occasion, he “heard [a] Sermon about higher Law ... but it was not argued well[,] the Preacher not proving that such Law existed.”¹² Rosewater played both fact checker and critic. On one occasion, he wrote of a minister that he “preaches somewhat in style of [Edwin] Forrest or [Edward Loomis] Davenport [both famous actors] as Othello.” He continued, “[I] never saw [a] man with such awkward gestures nor heard such bellowing.” Likewise, Abraham Kohn compared the preacher he heard unfavorably with Isaac Loewe, the modern rabbi of Fürth, in Bavaria. His sermon, on the love of the Redeemer, he reported, “displayed false and cloudy ideas” (Goodman 1951, p. 107).

¹⁰ Diary, 24 March 1861. Box 4, Folder 3. MS-503. Rosewater Family Papers. AJA.

¹¹ Emma Mordecai Diary (Mss5:1 M8115:1) Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.

¹² 18 April 1859 and 7 February 1863. Box 4, Folders 1 and 4. MS-503. Rosewater Family Papers, AJA.

Jews sometimes encountered sermons that attacked Judaism directly. Solomon Moritz, traveling in Athens, Ohio, in 1857 attended a Presbyterian church, where the sermon “consisted in the main of reminiscences of early life in Ohio,” but also included “denunciations of drunkenness, gaming and kindred vices and ... flings at the Jews and the Catholics and the slaveholder, all of whom were excluded from any reasonable chance at redemption.” Moritz was more puzzled by the anti-Catholicism than the anti-Semitism, however, which became the subject of “an animated conversation by way of comment on the sermon” with a Universalist. As he listened to this man’s rant on the dangers of the “Romanists,” however, he determined him to be “slightly crazed and poorly informed” (Moritz 1857). Secret Jewish churchgoer “Timothy” reported that in the early 1850s he had been a regular churchgoer in the small-town Midwest. He reported of the sermons:

I was informed, that the Jews are cursed, damned, lost and rejected forever. I felt a sort of relief not to be recognized as a Jew, although my heart revolted against the superstition of men called to teach religion, the heartless and arrogant selfishness of public instructors.

Even when denying his Jewish identity and passing as a Christian, Timothy was registering dissatisfaction with Protestantism. When he wrote to the *Israelite* in 1871, he had returned to a public Jewish identity (Timothy 1871).

Sometimes civic identity and Jewish sectarianism converged in church. In Tallahassee, Florida, in 1864, Confederate soldier Nat Strauss attended Christian worship on several occasions. Once he heard a sermon on sanctification, commenting afterward, “I judge before [the preacher] was done he made it as clear as mud to everybody, except himself.”¹³ On another occasion Strauss gave a lengthy refutation of Christianity, citing the theological confusion of the Civil War as “a simple method to refute all the vagaries of those blatant Christians.” He was particularly troubled by Northern and Southern Christians’ equally vociferous claims to God’s favor, which led him to ask “Which is the right Jesus?” (Noll 2006).¹⁴ This line of questioning and critique was certainly not what that congregation’s minister had hoped to encourage. Strauss and other Jews, then, were not passive recipients of the Christian gospel, even as they sat within churches, surrounded by non-Jews.

The social conditions—harmony if not total invisibility—that brought Jews to church did not necessarily result in identification or agreement. Jews actively engaged the ideas they heard there, participating in a kind of lay polemics. Although historians have tended to downplay the significance of belief and theology in Jewish identity, American life encouraged Jews to engage with debates over religious ideas. Strauss’s letters were written to a Jewish friend, Adolph Proskauer, and in critiquing sermons, he was cutting his intellectual teeth and forming himself as a Jew. Some of the churchgoing Jews later joined Jewish congregations, while others never joined, finding Jewish affiliations elsewhere. Strauss and his correspondent, Proskauer, for instance, were both counted among the members of the B’nai B’rith Lodge in Mobile, Alabama, in 1870 (Loewi 1870). Whatever their fate, however, these young Jews, mostly men, were not apathetic victims nor straightforward Protestantizers. They were not so different from their coreligionists who were creating Jewish debate societies around the country in this same era (Wenger 2010). These Jews found religious expression and identity through the combat of ideas—including in church—as much as, if not moreso than through traditional observance and worship in synagogue.

5. Conclusions

Jewish leaders were well aware of the practice of Jewish churchgoing and spoke out against it. In 1852, Reverend M.N. Nathans of New Orleans warned the Jews of Galveston against churchgoing in his address at their burial ground consecration. While there were not enough of them to build a synagogue, he insisted,

You can pray at home, instead of inconsistently going with your families to church and chapel, to pray to a mediator, whom no instructed Israelite believes in, and listen to dogmas

¹³ Nat Strauss to Adolph Proskauer, April, 1864. Folder 2, MS-254. Proskauer Family Papers, AJA.

¹⁴ 3 July 1864, Ibid.

and doctrine to which you cannot subscribe and which conflict with those you were taught by learned instructors in early life (Nathans 1852).

He equated churchgoing with intermarriage and neglect of circumcision as threats that American life posed to traditional Judaism. In 1858, Isaac Leeser likewise wrote in *The Occident*: “We must warn our friends, especially those who live in the country where there are no Synagogues, against going to churches and prayer meetings.” He worried that such activities encouraged missionaries, and yet he admitted that he too occasionally heard a Christian sermon, writing, “We will not absolutely assert, that an occasional visit to a church is a sin; we have been ourself once in a while to various places of worship for particular reasons, all foreign to worship and instruction” (Leeser 1858). According to Rebecca Gratz, he attended once to “point out some misquotations” propagated by a converted Jew (Gratz 1929, p. 246). In practice, however, the exact boundaries of “worship and instruction” were unclear.

In 1855 Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise argued, “Here [in America] people stand far closer together ... people listen more attentively to their neighbors, [and] *visit other institutions with less prejudice*” (emphasis mine) (Wise and Shinedling 1972). The prevalence of Jewish churchgoing shows that in the United States Jews engaged with Christianity on their own terms, even within the belly of the beast of American Christianity, the local church. They found in these spaces sympathy and community, but also dissension and disagreement. We should not assume then, that in their congregations and individual lives Jews were only mimicking their neighbors in pursuit of acceptance and respectability or perpetually staving off the threat of missionaries or discrimination. American Jews have long created thoughtful, if eclectic, religious selves—participating in the choreography of American religions, in Catherine Albanese’s terms—within diverse secular and multireligious spaces (Albanese 1997, p. 225). This has been so because for Jews and for other Americans, the relationship between identification and spatial presence, belief and knowledge, worship and entertainment, is complicated, and religious boundaries blurry.

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