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THE SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY 28TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
"A PEOPLE'S MEMORY IS HISTORY"

## Jewish Memphis: A Brief Historical Overview

By Harriet Stern

*Fifteen years ago, when the Southern Jewish Historical Society conference was held in Memphis, we explored ourselves as "lox and grits" Southern Jews. Today, as we once again host the SJHS Annual Conference, a more apt description might be "lox and latte." For our convention visitors as well as our Memphis membership we offer this brief historical overview of the Jewish presence in our fair city.*

Thoroughly modern Jewish Memphis has a strong communal life, with 80-90 per cent affiliation among the approximately 10,000 Jews. The city has four modern synagogues (Conservative, modern Orthodox, Reform and Sephardic), two smaller Orthodox congregations, two Jewish day schools, two pre-schools, a Yeshiva, a Jewish newspaper in existence for 78 years, a new Jewish magazine, a residence for senior adults, a nursing home for the aged, a Jewish Family Service, a Jewish Community Center, both a Jewish Student Union and a Judaic Studies program at the University of Memphis, plus many other social, fraternal, and service groups. Most Memphis Jews, though not all, live in relative proximity to these institutions located some 15 miles from the banks of the Mississippi where the early settlers congregated.



Front Street, c. 1895, looking north from the Government Building  
(Photo courtesy of Memphis/Shelby County Public Library)

Memphis had the familiar immigration pattern: German, mostly Reform Jews settled here in the mid-19th Century; mostly Orthodox Eastern European Jews migrated at the end of the century and into the 20th. Refugees from Hitler arrived in the 1930s, followed by survivors of the Holocaust. Russian refugees came to the community in the 1980s and '90s.

Many members of the local Jewish community have come from small towns in the region. Numbers of Jews who came to the South settled in small towns and founded businesses, kept Judaism alive in their homes and built vibrant Jewish institutions wherever possible. In recent years, the reduced economic life, a younger generation that did not want small town life, thus the loss of a critical mass needed for a real Jewish community brought even more of the

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JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986  
P.O. BOX 242154, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38124



## President's Message . . . .



Max Notowitz

Approximately sixty years ago the Jewish people, and especially the European Jews, suffered the most tragic experience that ever happened to World Jewry—the Shoah or Holocaust. The many Jews who were responsible for great educational endeavors, the writers, musicians, scientists, businessmen, tradesmen and artisans faced death from the hands of the Nazis and perished. It was only through the survival of a relative few that the world learned what actually happened during World War II. In fact, the Nazis were so sure that they would succeed with the annihilation of the Jewish people that when they broke ground to establish a Jewish museum in Prague, Czechoslovakia, they supposedly dedicated it as a “museum of a people who once was but is no more.” Of course, all this is history which we can look back on and cry and mourn for all the tragic losses as well as rejoice and be thankful for the survival of those who brought the history to us.

While some of the history through which we have lived has dealt with matters of life and death, other aspects have dealt with more subtle experiences such as the disappearance of Jewish youth through assimilation. It is when discrimination disappears and anti-semitism is no longer a factor in the progress of Jews in the fields of business or professions that Jewishness or Yiddishkeit weakens. It is then that we need to revive the history of the Jews and strengthen the ties that have kept us together for all these years.

The Jewish Historical Society makes us clearly aware of where we came from, how we got here and what we have done since we arrived. It takes knowledge, study and a sense of relationship to bring us up to date and make us aware that history does not just happen; it is created by people and transmitted by people. Those of us here in the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South can be proud of making our contribution of helping to create a bridge between some of the early Jewish immigrants and settlers in the vast areas of the southern part of the United States and the generations of today.

Therefore, we take great pride in welcoming the Southern Jewish Historical Society's 28th Annual Conference to Memphis to help bring top quality

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*\*Of Blessed Memory*

*Rosh Hashana Greetings  
to our  
Members and Friends*

*Best Wishes for  
a Year of  
Health, Happiness,  
and Peace*

historians and professionals who will share their knowledge with us. It is a privilege to have earned this honor, and we, the Memphis Jewish Historical Society, will exert every effort to help the co-chairmen of the conference, Sumner Levine and Jack Rosensweig, achieve the success for which they have worked so hard.

*Max*



small town Jews to Memphis. Loss of the Brownsvilles, the Blythevilles and the Clarksdales has been Memphis' gain.

Memphis was founded in 1819, when the Indian population was "removed" for white expansion and settlement. Ideally situated in the middle of the continent and set on bluffs above a broad sweep of the Mississippi River, Memphis came to dominate the regional riverboat cotton trade and today continues as a major distribution center.

If you were to arrive by riverboat yourself and debark at the cobblestone levee below Riverside Drive, you might walk up a block to Front Street. Leading Jewish cotton brokers on this "Cotton Row" have had successful companies beginning with that of Joseph Andrews, who arrived in 1840. Andrews is considered the founder of the Memphis Jewish community because he donated land for a cemetery when his brother died in 1847. This prompted the formation of the first Jewish communal institution, the Hebrew Benevolent Society, which took care of burials and of the cemetery, soon followed by the Ladies' Benevolent Society for charitable work.

If you were to proceed another block east to Main Street, you might imagine yourself passing the many shops of the early Jewish immigrants: D. Block's men's furnishings, Zellner's shoes, Jacob Block's hats, and the dry goods stores of Sam and David Schloss, Lehman and Co., plus four more dry goods establishments owned by four different Levys. Later merchants built specialty stores such as Phil A. Halle men's furnishings and larger department stores such as Lowenstein's, Lowenstine's, Bry's, Black and White (later renamed Shainberg's) and Goldsmith's (still in existence but no longer locally owned.)

The city's growing prosperity was interrupted by the Civil War. Some Jews were slaveholders and a few were slave traders. Because Jews who had settled in the South generally acculturated to Southern mores, the Jewish community favored secession. Rabbi Simon Tuska and leading Jewish merchants were outspoken advocates of the Confederacy. Loyalty to the South, more than defense of slavery, motivated them. After the Union captured and occupied Memphis in 1862, some changed sides.

***In 1862, after the Union army captured Memphis, General Ulysses S. Grant issued the only anti-Semitic order in American history.***

It was a great shock when, in December of 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant issued his General Order Number 11, the only anti-Semitic order in American history. Singling out Jews from all others for speculation and running contraband, Grant ordered the immediate expulsion of the Jewish population from Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky. Grant had his supporters, but Jewish leaders appealed to "Father Abraham" Lincoln, and he rescinded the order within a few days.

Once the war ended, the Jewish business community flourished with new roles in banking, insurance and cotton. There were, however, only three Jewish lawyers and one doctor because of a lack of acceptance of Jews in the professions.

In 1873 and 1878, yellow fever devastated the city. Many fled and many died. From a population of 2100 Jews before the Civil War, only 300 remained. The Hebrew Hospital

and Relief Association served the entire community during the Yellow Fever epidemic.

By the 1880s, the earliest German Jewish population moved a short distance eastward in the city. Newer Jewish arrivals for the next twenty years came from Eastern Europe, fleeing pogroms, army service and a desperate life. They joined Italian and Irish immigrants in the vacated area north and near the river, which became known as "the Pinch" for the pinched stomachs of the Irish fleeing famine. Primarily poor and working class, the East European Jews brought their socialism and Zionism to this twelve-block area which was the Memphis version of the Lower East Side of New York. Life in "the Pinch" remains vivid in nostalgia for its former residents now living elsewhere in the city as well as for local author Steve Stern, who reimagines it in his writings.

By 1912, the Jewish population had grown to 6000. The Jewish Neighborhood House, established in 1901 to serve the influx of immigrants, helped not only Jews but the entire "Pinch" population. When, by the Depression, no Jews remained in the neighborhood, Neighborhood House continued to serve the education and health needs of the subsequent African-American population. Today it exists as a scholarship fund. The Hebrew Benevolent Society, having reorganized after the Civil War to provide for postwar needs, in 1906 became the Federation of

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# *A Potpourri of Memories of Memphis . . .*

## **Hollace Ava Weiner, SJHS President**

Dear Fellow Convention Goers,

Welcome to Memphis, my favorite stop whenever I take a cross-country trip from my house in Fort Worth to points north and east. Whether I am driving from Texas to Cincinnati or from Texas to my hometown of Washington, D.C., Memphis is my mid-journey destination.

This crossroads of the South is not only a convenient stopover, but a city with culture, walkways, museums, parks, historic markers and dramatic views of Old Man River. It has synagogues that welcome travelers. It is a place to recharge my batteries—physically, psychically, aesthetically and spiritually.

My first time in Memphis, I drove straight to Graceland and waited six hours to gain entry to Elvisland. My next few visits, I realized that Memphis has much, much more. Beale Street, famous for music, has sights, sounds and souvenirs. There are fun fashion stores with hats and coats from past eras. Beale Street is also home to A. Schwab's, a store operated by a fourth-generation member-of-the-tribe.

Believe it or not, I keep roller blades in the trunk of the car. On mild, sunny afternoons, I have roller bladed through the historic park above the river, gotten my quotient of exercise, then locked myself in the car for another long stretch of road. I have even changed clothes at the Peabody Hotel, watched the ducks on parade, relaxed to piano music in the lobby, then ordered a delicious corned beef on rye. (Where else, just off the Interstate is that possible?)

Welcome each of you to Memphis and to the Southern Jewish Historical Society's annual conference. The Host Committee, chaired by Sumner Levine, has been working overtime to make sure that you, too, get acquainted with the city's amenities. Like me, many of you will return time and again to recharge the soul.

Kol Tov.

## **Minette Cooper, SJHS Secretary**

When I was probably eight years old in 1944 or 1945 and living in Vicksburg, Mississippi, my mother drove us up to Greenville, picked up her good friend Isabelle Kirschner and went on to Memphis for a concert by Vladimir Horowitz. Our friend Ike Myers was the impresario for that concert. He had persuaded the great Horowitz to perform in Memphis by moving out of his own apartment and turning it over to Mr. and Mrs. Horowitz. Ike had moved into the Hotel Peabody for the duration. The Peabody was where we were also housed, so we got to talk several times. During that concert, Horowitz played the Wedding March from Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream." Ike told us that Horowitz had done it to try and encourage Ike to get married. Of course, Ike never did, but it was a beautiful concert and the Wedding March still stands out in my memory!

## **Helen Wax, Charter Member of Memphis JHS**

Helen Wax could be called the "Matriarch" of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. Her husband, the late Rabbi James A. Wax, a founding member, played a pivotal role in organizing the society in 1986.

Mrs. Wax has attended SJHS conferences both as a delegate and a speaker. She was present at previous conferences in Atlanta, Hot Springs, Cincinnati, Montgomery, and Memphis. At the Cincinnati conference she was one of three women on the program who recounted their experiences during the civil rights struggle in the 1960s. The audience responded to Mrs. Wax's presentation with a standing ovation.

When asked to share her thoughts as she prepares to attend her sixth SJHS conference, Mrs. Wax replied, "It is reassuring to see the interest of those who have moved away to other parts of the

country but continue to support the SJHS because they have an interest in preserving the history of this region."

## **Rachel B. Heimovics, SJHS Past President**

"Lox and Grits: A Jewish Sense of Place in the South." That was the name the Southern Jewish Historical Society gave its conference in Memphis in 1985. It was to be my introduction to Memphis, to the society and to the Jewish South. I had moved from Chicago to Florida barely a year before. 'Up' there, I had been very involved in local Jewish history and was a founder and early president of the Chicago Jewish Historical Society. Also, as a member of the American Jewish Historical Society, I already knew many who were active in SJHS. Among them was Janice R. Blumberg, then president of the society.

Now that I was a displaced person, I decided to plunge into the waters of the Jewish South. I decided to attend the conference in Memphis. It was held at the Peabody—oh, those ducks! The conference officially began Friday evening with a Shabbat dinner. In those days, the local committees planned home hospitality for out-of-town participants. I was the guest of Harriet and Tom Stern. At Temple Israel that evening, Rabbi Harry Danziger delivered the sermon, "Finding a Home in the South." At Shabbat morning services at Baron Hirsch West, Rabbi Leonard Yormark spoke on "Grant's West Tennessee Edict." Later, Rabbi James A. Wax gave a historical perspective, "The Jewish Community in the Mid-South." So much was compressed in such a short time; when I left Memphis, my mind was awirl.

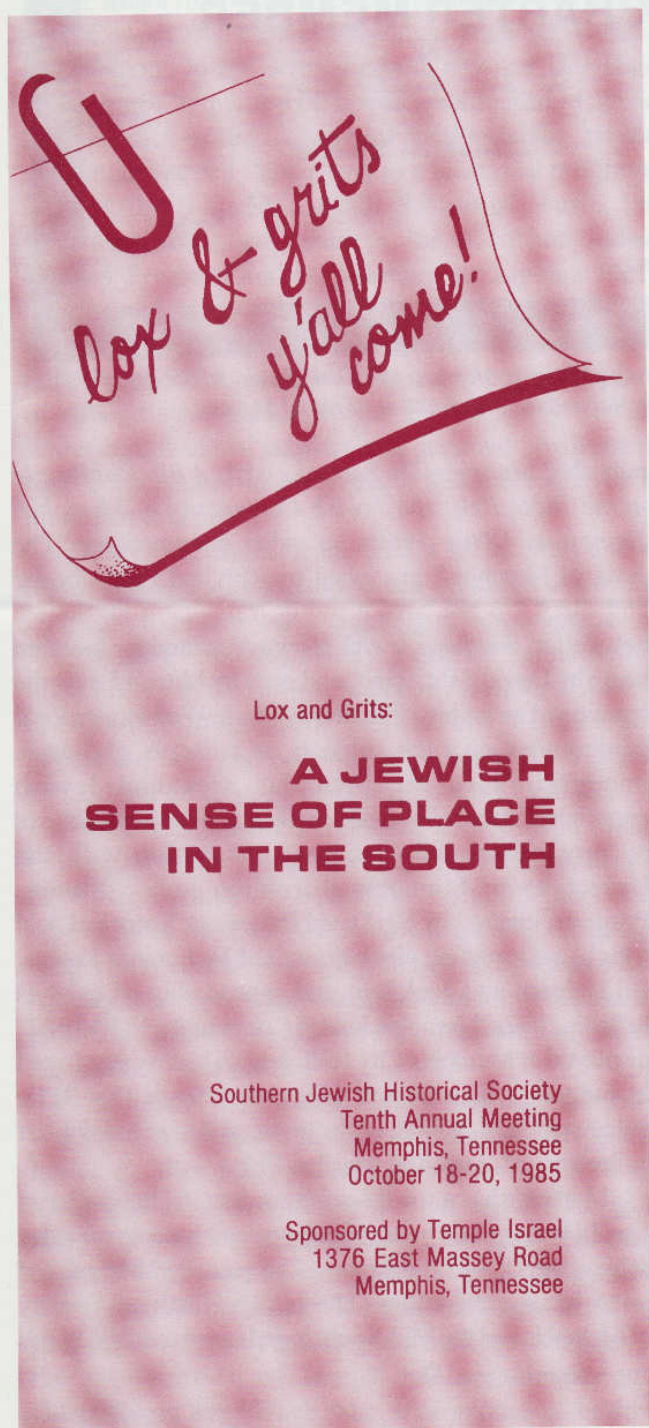
I returned to Memphis in 1995 for the society's first mid-year conference—"Southern Rabbis' Involvement in Black Civil Rights"—as an active participant, a seasoned veteran, a past president. And now that I plan to return in 2003, I look forward to visiting the place where Southern Jewish history began for me.



# Tenth Annual Conference of SJHS Held in Memphis Inspired Creation of Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South

By Leonid Saharovici

*In the beginning, there was a conference of SJHS. And an enthusiastic group of Memphis Jews saw that it was good. Thus begins the story of the creation of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South.*



In the fall of 1985 the leadership of the Southern Jewish Historical Society asked Harriet Stern and Judy Peiser to help organize their tenth annual meeting in Memphis and to serve as program and arrangements chairpersons. Both were well known and experienced active supporters for many years of Jewish causes. They worked hard and prepared a program that attracted a large number of the Memphis Jewish community. The title of the conference was "Lox and Grits: A Jewish Sense of Place in the South."

Temple Israel sponsored the conference and its members were very active in contributing to its success. For three days at the Peabody Hotel participants were offered a potpourri of exhibits, lectures, workshops, films, tours and music that revealed the high potential of local individuals and their interest in documenting the Jewish experience in Memphis. Abe Schwab\*, a family historian, invited the participants to visit his family store which has been on Beale Street for over a hundred years. He revealed photographs, documents and artifacts related to the store and his family beginnings in Memphis. Together with Anna Olswanger, editor of the Olswanger Journal, he offered advice on how to begin genealogical research and how to use available research data.

Rabbi James A. Wax\*, Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel, presented historical observations of many years of research and interviews with Jews who grew up in Memphis and shared their rural and urban experiences. Leonid Saharovici shared memories from the Holocaust and stressed the importance of preserving local Jewish history and promoting pride in our heritage. Panels of experts, including Dr. Henry Green of the University of Miami, Dr. Louis Schmier of Valdosta State College and Eli Evans, author of *The Provincials*, discussed the need for preserving regional Jewish history and traditions.

On the minds of many participants were the questions, "Where do we go from here?" and "What do we do to preserve Memphis history?" During a lunch break in an

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informal conversation, Rabbi James A. Wax, Harriet Stern, Judy Peiser and Leonid Saharovici discussed looking closer at the existing potential for organizing a local Jewish Historical Society in Memphis. A list was compiled of 27 people who were interested in Jewish history, and Harriet Stern invited them to her home to discuss the formation in Memphis of a Jewish Historical Society. The meeting took place on January 16, 1986, and in the minutes the following was written: "It was a consensus of the gathering that the society should be independent and not be set up as a chapter of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and that it is important that we have history promoted by our society that is objective, scholarly, and does not leave out any groups."

It was the feeling of this first gathering that more organizational and legal work had to be done before calling for a major program open to the general public. A committee composed of Marx Borod\*, Rabbi James A. Wax, Leonid Saharovici, Judy Peiser and Harriet Stern was designated to draw a charter and by-laws of the new society. Marx Borod was helpful in preparing the legal documents and later in fund raising. Rabbi Wax volunteered to write all his friends in the Memphis Jewish community an open letter asking them to join and support the new society.

On May 12, 1986, at the Memphis Jewish Community Center, more than a hundred people gathered to approve the formation of the new society and its by-laws and to receive certificates as charter members of the first Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South.

Looking back to its beginning, the society recognizes the role played by the Southern Jewish Historical Society in influencing its successful activities. In the first newsletter Harriet Stern, first president of the newly created society, acknowledged in her message to the membership the inspiration of the conference of the SJHS held in Memphis, and expressed her hope that "this fledgling organization ... can take wings and fly."

In its sixteen years of existence the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South has achieved remarkable successes which include: a written and



*Certificate given to Charter Members of Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South at its initial Meeting*

published history by Dr. Selma Lewis\*, *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt: the Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840s-1960s*; a video documentary "The Jews of Memphis" produced by Rob and Pam Cooper and aired on the area's public television station; a newsletter, *Southern Jewish Heritage*, edited for fourteen years by David Schneider\* and now by Marcia Levy; the creation of an archive initiated by Shirley Feibelman; local conferences on such subjects as patterns of Jewish immigration to the Memphis area and Jewish contributions to the legal and medical professions; lectures by prestigious scholars in collaboration with the University of Memphis Bornblum Judaic Studies Program, chaired by Dr. David Patterson; historical field trips to surrounding areas organized by Sumner Levine, Gil Halpern and Joel Felt; and sponsorship of exhibits including "The Memphis Jewish Community 1840-1987" displayed at Memphis City Hall, Jewish history illustrated in medals, illuminated Haggadot from the Belz, Saharovici and Weiser collections, and the Judaica art collection of Jack and Marilyn Belz.

Memphis has a small Jewish community but a vibrant one. In its over 160 years of existence, it has known great achievements which deserve to be recorded and passed on to future generations. The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South is dedicated to fulfilling this important mission. ☆

*\*Of Blessed Memory*



Jewish Charities, a family social work agency. These and other communal aid organizations ultimately evolved into those of today's Memphis Jewish Federation.

Memphis Jews continued to build their own community while contributing to the community as a whole. Major roadways have been named for Abe Plough, Sam Cooper and Avron Fogelman because of their contributions to the welfare of the city and individual philanthropy. Other Jewish names are attached to public facilities such as the Lichterman Nature Center and the Goldsmith Garden Center and to educational programs such as the Rudi M. Scheidt School of Music, the Fogelman School of Business, the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program and the Barbara K. Lipman Early Childhood School, all at the University of Memphis; the Margolin Hebrew Academy; Bornblum Solomon Schechter School; and the Fogelman Scholars program of college scholarships, to name only a few. Jewish leadership, financial support and personal involvement have been evident in every major cultural endeavor in music, art and theater.

Despite exclusions from certain social clubs and at higher echelons of particular careers through half of the 20th century, there was a high degree of acceptance of Jews in the overall community. Historian Selma Lewis, in her history of the Jews of Memphis, *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt*, asserts that the city's large black population bore the brunt of prejudice that otherwise would have fallen upon Jews and possibly Catholics.

While Memphis went through the same major events of the 20th century as other cities, it had its own unique Civil Rights history. Many Jews shared the racial perceptions of most white Southerners. Although tempered by considerable sympathy for desegregation and equality, fear of economic and anti-Semitic consequences, including violence, meant that the community in general maintained a low profile.

This did not deter Rabbi Arie Becker from marching with Dr. Martin Luther King in Birmingham, nor Rabbi James A. Wax from preaching fiery sermons to his congregation or from playing a visible role in civil rights efforts. During the 1968 strike of the local sanitation workers, Wax worked intensely with other clergy for a settlement and ultimately led their dramatic march to confront the mayor. The strike was finally settled through the intervention of Jewish business leader and philanthropist Abe Plough, who, anonymously at the time,

gave the city the funds it claimed it needed to raise the pay of the workers after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King at the Lorraine Motel.

This was a defining event in the history of Memphis, as in the country. Earlier in the 1960s, the city, with the leadership of Jewish businessmen, had peacefully desegregated movie theaters and integrated personnel in department stores. Jewish individuals helped with the peaceful integration of schools. The first integrated law firm in the South was formed in Memphis. Josie Burson, as head of the Democratic Party's Women's Division for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket, broke the local ice in 1960 by having an integrated reception, after which such political functions became routine.

No history of Memphis could be complete without the mention of its celebrated citizen Elvis Presley, whose Jewish connections are certainly less well known than his music. At one point in time, Elvis and his mother shared a Jewish-owned duplex with Rabbi Alfred and Jeanette Fruchter in "the Pinch." In return for serving as their "Shabbos goy," the Fruchters let Elvis use their telephone and phonograph. "The King" continued to feel close to the Jewish community, partly through his relationship with local radio personality George Klein. He bought jewelry at Levitch's and purchased clothes at Lansky's. He often wore a "chai" and had a Star of David engraved on his mother's gravestone. Some claim he had a Jewish grandmother.

Memphis Jewry became more varied with each wave of immigration—from the Germanic of the mid-19th century, to the East European in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the refugees fleeing Hitler and the survivors of the Holocaust to the most recent Russian emigres. Although the first arrivals, middle-class German Reform Jews, looked down upon the later East European arrivals because they had Orthodox practices and no middle-class status, they gave whatever assistance was needed to help them become Americanized. The Orthodox and Reform remained in separate worlds for many years, during which it was considered a daring act to mix or worship with Jews of a different persuasion. This gradually began to change in the 1950s as Jewish youth were brought together at the newly opened Jewish Community Center. Today Memphis Jewry has moved toward greater mutual respect and interrelationships while continuing to maintain the respect of the Memphis community as a whole. ★

*Harriet Stern is a Past President of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South.*



# The Southern Jewish Historical Society 28th Annual Conference

Friday, October 31 - Sunday, November 2      Park Vista Memphis Hotel

*featuring*



**Joan Nathan**

*Nationally acclaimed  
Cookbook Writer & TV Personality  
Saturday Lunch  
with Joan Nathan Recipes*



**Bill Ferris**

*Immediate Past Chairman,  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
speaking at Saturday Banquet on  
"Personal Reflections on the Southern Jewish  
Experience"*



**Ellen Frankel**

*CEO and Editor-in-Chief,  
Jewish Publication Society  
speaking at Sunday Lunch on  
"With a Southern Accent:  
The Contributions of Southern Jews  
to Jewish Publishing in America"*

Friday Evening Dinner at Temple Israel.....\$15.00 per attendee  
Saturday Lunch.....\$30.00 per attendee  
Saturday Cocktail Party and Banquet.....\$55.00 per attendee  
Sunday Lunch.....\$25.00 per attendee

Saturday Morning Programs.....(Free)  
Saturday Afternoon Programs.....(Free)  
Sunday Morning Program.....(Free)

*All meals are "Kosher Style"—To request  
vegetarian or strictly Kosher, please specify.*

*Please fill out the following and designate who will attend. Include names, address, phone # and e-mail with check payable to **Southern Jewish Historical Annual Meeting**. Send to: BERNARD J. GARFINKEL, 1039 Humphrey Oaks Cir., Memphis, TN 38120-2626. There are no charges for events where food is not served, but you must have identification badges which we will supply.*

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Any questions? Call Sumner Levine, 901-682-5935 or [physum@midssouth.rr.com](mailto:physum@midssouth.rr.com)



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