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Guided by Wisdom, Bert Bornblum Has Shared His Blessings With Others

By Jack Rosensweig

Memphis was truly blessed when Bert (Baruch Zvi) Bornblum emigrated from Poland in 1938. He was born in Warsaw, the eldest of four brothers. His early education was at the city's foremost yeshiva, The Tachkemoni. There he was inspired and motivated by a Polish teacher of history and literature, becoming an ardent reader. Because the family was of modest means, he had to drop out of school at thirteen years of age. He initially worked in a print shop and later apprenticed in designing and hand cutting from patterns in a shirt factory. It was a time of increasing anti-Semitism, the rise of socialism, and Zionist fervor. Bert was active in the Shomer Hatzair movement. The family was anxious to emigrate and join family in America. However, because of restrictive immigration quotas, only Bert, eighteen years old, and his brother David, sixteen, could leave. With visas to America, a boat ticket from Hamburg, and only \$10 in David's pocket, they headed to America with the expectation that the rest of the family would soon follow.



Bert Bornblum

When they arrived in Memphis, they were warmly received by their cousin, Oscar Makowsky, and his family and lived with them in the Pinch. Bert started learning English at the Neighborhood House and then continued on his own when he began working. His initial salary was \$3 a week, increasing to \$35 after three years. Bert and David tried desperately to obtain visas for the rest of the family, but to no avail. Their last communication indicated that their family was moved into the Warsaw Ghetto, where they presumably became victims of the Holocaust.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, both brothers—although not obligated, since they were not yet American citizens—patriotically enlisted in the U.S. Army. David served in the Pacific and Bert in England, France, and Germany. They served with distinction and while in the Army, became American citizens. After his discharge in 1945, Bert returned to Memphis, where he studied and passed the GED examinations. He then headed to Los Angeles,

Please see BORNBLUM, page 6

President's Message . . .



Dr. David Patterson

First, I would like to say, "Thank You." Many members of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South have graciously offered their help in the coming year. I hereby accept their offer. I am new at this job, and I have many past presidents to emulate. I owe my biggest debt of gratitude to the Society's immediate past president, Gilbert Halpern. Gil is a very tough act to follow, and I just hope I can do half as well as he and other past presidents have done.

We have another excellent program for the coming year, one that includes several world class scholars, filmmakers, and experts. In addition to providing such outstanding programming, among our goals for the coming year is to increase both membership and an awareness of what we are doing. With regard to the former, we shall look for more ways to offer more people more incentives to become members of the Memphis Jewish Historical Society. With regard to the latter, here are some thoughts.

Since every Jew is tied to every other Jew, our interest in the history of the Jewish people extends beyond Southern Jewry. Jewish history is about more than keeping a record of the past: beyond that, it is about offering a testimony for the future. Indeed, the Hebrew word translated as "history" is *toledot*, which means "generations." It is a cognate of *yeled*, the word for "child." This means that what we engage in is for the sake of our children, for the sake of an ongoing affirmation of Jewish presence, Jewish responsibility, and Jewish values. Thus we set out with a renewed sense of mission to better serve the Jewish community and all who are tied to our community and thus to declare, "*Am Yisrael Chai!*"

David Patterson

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NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Marcia Levy

Calendar of Events, 2008 - 2009

Sunday, October 26, 2:00 pm, at the Memphis Jewish Community Center (MJCC): *Orthodox Stance*, a film about Jewish boxer Dmitriy Salita, with a discussion by the filmmaker Jason Hutt

November, time TBA: a program, in conjunction with Hillel, on the 70th Anniversary of Kristallnacht

November, date and time TBA: we shall sponsor one of the authors for the Jewish Book Celebration

Thursday, January 29, 7:30 pm, at the U of M Rose Theatre: *The Monster Among Us*, a documentary film on antisemitism with filmmaker Allen Mondell

Sunday, February 22, 2:00 pm, at the MJCC: Elliot Chodoff, this year's David Bornblum/Lemsky Visiting Scholar in Israel Studies, will speak on "Israel: What the Future Holds"

Sunday, March 15, 2:00 pm, at the MJCC: Larry Weinberg, distinguished specialist on Israel, will speak on "Israel's Contributions to Humanity"

Sunday, May 10, at 2:00 pm, at the MJCC: Dr. Brenda Brasher of Tulane University will lecture on Southern Jewry (title TBA)

Orthodox Stance Tells of Israeli Boxer's Search for Meaning

On Sunday, October 26, 2:00 pm, at the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South will present a documentary film, *Orthodox Stance*, with a discussion by filmmaker Jason Hutt. Hutt grew up in Potomac, Maryland, where he excelled as a student and a soccer player. While attending Harvard University, he transitioned from athlete to artist, as his passion for sports was redirected from competition to storytelling.

For the last sixty years, the term "Jewish boxer" has been an oxymoron. But Dmitriy Salita, a twenty-four-year-old Russian immigrant is making history as a top professional boxer and a rigorously observant Jew. While providing an intimate, three-year-long look at the trials and tribulations faced by an up and coming professional boxer, *Orthodox Stance* is a portrait of seemingly incompatible cultures and characters working together to support Dmitriy's rare and remarkable devotion to both Orthodox Judaism and the pursuit of a professional boxing title.

The film travels with Dmitriy from his home in the Russian section of Brooklyn to a dilapidated Orthodox synagogue, from a Black and Hispanic amateur gym in the projects to boxing's biggest stages in Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Puerto Rico. Intimate verite scenes of Torah study, prayer, keeping kosher, and observing the Sabbath on the road are juxtaposed with training, weigh-ins, business negotiations, and locker room and fight footage. In so doing, the film reveals a first of its kind insider's view of professional boxing and a first of a kind professional boxer.

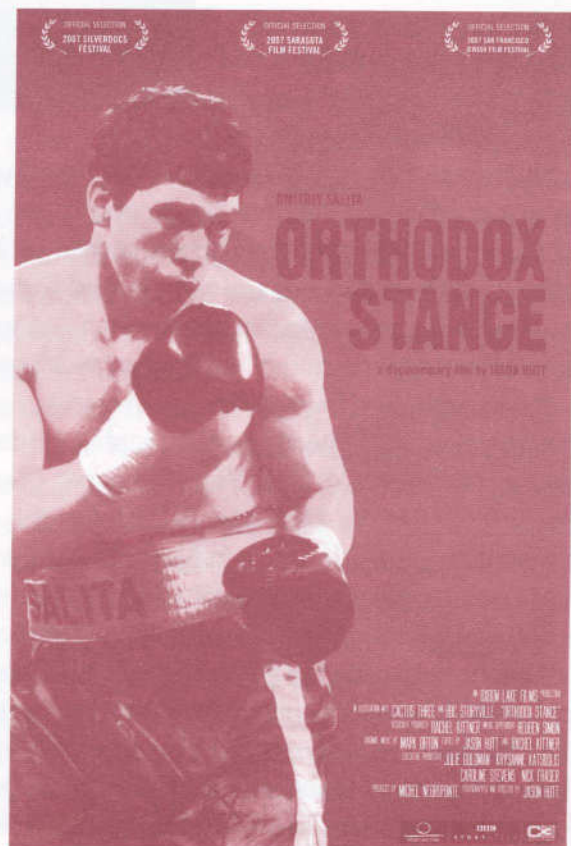
Along the way, we meet the many colorful characters that teach and guide Dmitriy, and the tension of balancing boxing and Judaism. Rabbi Zalman Liberov teaches Dmitriy how to be a good Jew and sees him as a model of religious conviction in a secular world. Bob Arum and his company Top Rank see a talented prospect with great marketing potential. And after ten years of educating Dmitriy about boxing and life, and a prominent career dedicated to amateurs, his eighty-year-old Black trainer Jimmy O' Pharrow has his last, best chance to produce a professional champion.

The film offers behind the scenes access to Dmitriy and his crew for three critical years, tracing his maturation in the gym, with the press, at fights, business meetings, and speaking engagements. At the same time, it explores important aspects of Dmitriy's identity and back-story—how Jimmy's boxing gym gave him sanctuary as a young immigrant, how Dmitriy found God through boxing, became observant after his mother died, and how she asked Jimmy to look after her son for her. Jimmy's age will force him to delegate responsibility to other trainers, and as Dmitriy matures, Jimmy teaches him to be his

own boss. Dmitriy will find additional trainers to learn from, leave Bob Arum for a New York based promoter in order to grow his fan base, and will guide the negotiations for a new long-term contract.

As he fights in New York in front of Russian immigrants, Hasidic Jews and hard-core boxing fans, Dmitriy's celebrity grows and he is ultimately invited to the White House for President Bush's Hanukkah party. Through his uncompromising devotion to boxing and Judaism and comfort and confidence with who he is, the film shows how Dmitriy is part of these very different worlds on his own terms, in ways that feel both true to him and new to us.

After four years and twenty-two professional fights, the film culminates with Dmitriy fighting for his first professional title in front of a rabid crowd of boxing fans and Orthodox Jews at Manhattan's Hammerstein Ballroom. The Hasidic Reggae singer Matisyahu sings Dmitriy to the ring and Dmitriy rewards the crowd with a knockout victory. As Dmitriy exits the ring, he has solidified his credentials as a professional boxer and a modern day Jewish sports hero. *Orthodox Stance* tells a universal story of a young man's search for meaning in life and will enable viewers to understand and appreciate boxing and boxers like never before. ✪



Memphis to Jerusalem: Hadassah Bridges the Generations ...

New Book Tells the Story of Memphis Hadassah

In 1912, a new national Zionist organization for women was formed. It was called Hadassah, and Henrietta Szold was the first president of the founding chapter. Just six years later, a Hadassah chapter was established in Memphis, with Mrs. Harry I. (Dora) Schaffer chosen to be its leader.

Now the history of Memphis Hadassah has been chronicled in a book, *Memphis to Jerusalem: Hadassah Bridges the Generations 1918-2008*, written by Perre Magness, author of seven previous books about Memphis history as well as a weekly history column which appeared for sixteen years in the *Commercial Appeal*. Organized by decades, the story of the Memphis chapter unfolds by means of carefully researched information and more than 425 photographs of leaders, events, and activities over the years.

The formation of the local Hadassah chapter in 1918 was inspired by the visit to Memphis of an ardent Zionist, Ben Avi, who encouraged a group of women to organize and support the Zionist cause. The core of the group was a sewing circle, started in 1916 and led by Mrs. Raphael Gold and Mrs. Robert Cohen. A meeting was called, resulting in a group of women with a new purpose: to support a homeland for the Jewish people and to enrich their own lives as Jews in America.

The organizational meeting of Memphis Hadassah was held at the home of Mrs. Sam Steinberg (Sarah), affectionately known as "Big Mama," as was the later organizational meeting, in 1925, of Memphis Junior Hadassah. The Steinberg family's involvement in Hadassah spanned several generations. Sarah's daughter, Fannie (Mrs. Perry Sewel), was the first president of Memphis Junior Hadassah, served as president of the Southern Region, and became the first national vice president of Hadassah from Memphis. Fannie's daughter-in-law, Dessie (Mrs. Lester Sewel), was active in Memphis Hadassah,

and Dessie's daughter, Patsy Sewel Gruenberg, served as president of her Hadassah chapter in Philadelphia.

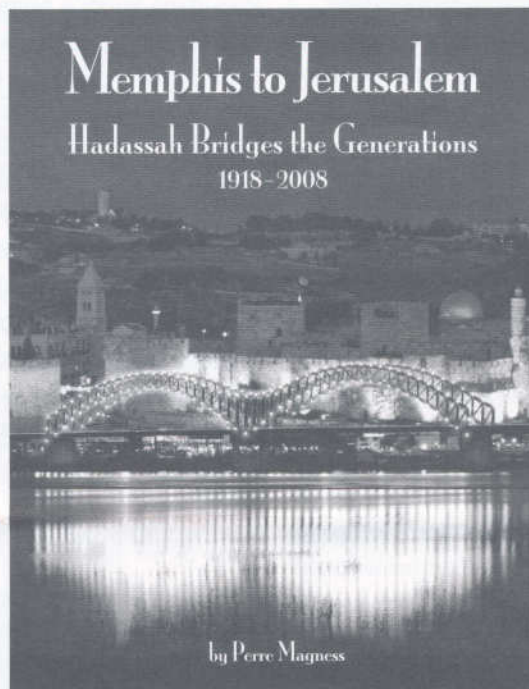
It was fitting, however, that the first Memphis Hadassah president was Mrs. Harry Schaffer—until the 1980s, women were always referred to by "Miss" or by "Mrs."

with their husband's names—because her original name was Hadassah Baruchman. It was only after coming to Memphis from Russia in the late 1800s, that she was known as Dora (Dashka). Her family strongly believed in Zionism and, as with Sarah Steinberg's family, serving the cause became a family tradition. Her sister Pearl Baruchman was one of the organizers of Young Judaea in Memphis and became a nurse in Palestine; her daughter Libbye was president of Memphis Junior Hadassah; another daughter, Freida Levy, was president of Hadassah in Birmingham.

The early dues of Memphis Hadassah were 25 cents and one of

the early projects was to sew clothes for the orphans of Palestine. In May, 1921, the National Hadassah newsletter reported that Memphis had contributed "\$200 to the Training School, \$63 to the Restoration Fund, \$100 to the Orphans Fund, \$2.59 for Palestine Supplies, sewed 88 garments and provided 60 ready made garments." In 1924 the Memphis Chapter sent "\$100 for the readoption of its orphan, and sent a shipment of linens, garments, and piece goods valued at \$134.05 with \$10 for freight charges." Hadassah members also organized a Cultural Club in the early days of the organization, to discuss current events and increase their understanding of Jewish issues.

In 1925, in order to attract younger women who would carry on Hadassah's work in the future, the Memphis Chapter of Junior Hadassah was established. This new group was organized with 35 charter members, but the membership soon increased to 110. Junior Hadassah's successful fund raising often centered around social



activities—for a party at the home of Mrs. Sam Karchmer the price of admission was sheets, pillowcases, or towels; a “brilliant dinner dance and cabaret” at the Elks Building raised money for the orphan asylum in Palestine; the proceeds of a scrip dance at Dreamland Gardens included \$48.14 for school lunches and \$25 for the Jewish National Fund.



Mrs. Harry I. Schaffer
Chapter president 1918-1922

The book describes another successful Junior Hadassah event as follows: “After Celia Fortas (later Mrs. Sam Sheft) became president of Junior Hadassah in 1929, the group put on a carnival...Food booths sold hot dogs, sandwiches, homemade cakes, Mexican chili, candied apples

ice cream cones, and drinks. Another booth sold Palestinian imports. There was a candy wheel, a merry-go-round from Goldsmith’s, fortune tellers, and a fishing pond with carnival favors.

Entertainment included side shows featuring the ‘Siamese Twins’ Helen and Lolly Moskovitz, (later Mrs. Herman Lubin) and Mrs. Avrome Dan. Ray Evans played



Hadassah members Bessie Klibanoff, Frances Lewis, Hilda Reisman, Mrs. Frank Perlman, and Molly Weisberg were featured in the play “Me and My Family,” performed in the ballroom of the Menorah Institute on March 12, 1933

the ‘Snake Woman.’ At 8:30 there was a vaudeville show. Ruby Kabakoff was a blues singer, Fritz Lawless and Rudy Willing were comedians, Melvin Rosen and Sara Jane Krakauer did an adagio dance, and Fannie Bauer did an imitation of Fannie Brice. The carnival raised \$1000.”

The women of the Memphis chapter of Hadassah have continued to draw upon outstanding dedication and creativity throughout their ninety-year history to raise money for projects in Israel, most notably for the Hadassah Medical Center. Along with information about every president of the chapter, *Memphis to Jerusalem: Hadassah Bridges the Generations*



Mrs. Perry Sewel
Junior Hadassah president
1925-1927

documents a succession of stellar events from luncheons and fashion shows to educational programs and major donor affairs. The book is significant not only as a way to preserve the history of Memphis Hadassah, but also as a part of the history of Jewish Memphis.

Freda Brode, a past president of the Memphis Chapter, served as editor of the book and chaired the Fruition Committee, which she describes as “One of the most time consuming and intense jobs that I have undertaken for Hadassah.” She then adds: “However, it has been a labor of love and a dream come true!” Other members of the committee were: associate editor Barbara Zitron, Harriet Beck, Bobbie and Herman Goldberger, Gloria Kahn, Linnie Mirvis, Friderica and Leonid Saharovici, Esther Shendelman, and ex officio members Eileen Posner, Emily Steinberg, and Brona Pinnolis.

Brode began interviewing former presidents in the early 1980s, but almost 25 years elapsed before there was a concerted effort to create a book. Perre Magness was selected to write the book because of her enthusiasm for the organization and her extensive knowledge of Memphis Jewish history. All writing and publishing costs were underwritten by a group of generous sponsors so that the total sales could go to the Memphis Chapter of Hadassah. ☆

To purchase a copy of the Hadassah book, contact Freda Brode, 683-5650; Madelyne Daneman, 754-1332; or Barbara Zitron, 682-3800.

with the expectation of continuing his education at UCLA. He was told his chances for admission would be greater if he first established California residency. With that intention, he worked as a manager in a men's clothing store. However, a business opportunity and the fact that David had stayed in Memphis lured him back to Memphis.

In 1948 he married Ethel Baer, from Turrell, Arkansas. They had two sons, Irwin and Donald, and two beautiful granddaughters, Stephanie and Samantha. In 1949 Bert and David opened their first store on Beale Street, selling both used and new merchandise. Two years later they opened a second store on Beale, selling only new clothing. A third store followed in 1967 and later another store on Main Street. Additional stores were opened and eventually there was a chain of eight "Bert's Men and Boys" clothing stores in Memphis and Nashville. They operated the stores until 1987, selling some stores to their managers.

Bert was the first to hire black salespersons in Memphis. He became a member of the NAACP and actively supported the Civil Rights Movement. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, he participated in the protest march. He was also very active in the Jewish community and held leadership positions in Yiddish groups, B'nai Brith, the Zionist Organization of America, and Israel Bonds. He became a board member of Baron Hirsch Synagogue and the Memphis Jewish Federation.

Despite his business activities, Bert continued his pursuit of learning. For seven years he participated in the Great Books Program at Rhodes College. Together with his close friend, Murray Spindel, he took courses in philosophy for almost twenty years at Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis). In 1997 he studied at the International Summer School at Cambridge, England.

Bert developed a close association with the University of Memphis and in 1986 he and David endowed the establishment of the Bornblum Judaic Studies Program at the University. Under the leadership of its internationally renowned director, Dr. David Patterson, who currently occupies the Bornblum Chair of Excellence, the program has flourished, attracting both Jewish and non-Jewish students, and has been actively involved in all aspects of education within the Memphis

Jewish community, including partnership with the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. This partnership has generated a remarkable series of stimulating and informative lectures and programs benefiting the entire community and the University of Memphis. In 1999 Bert and David extended their commitment to Jewish education by endowing the Bornblum Solomon Schechter School in Memphis. Additionally Bert has funded its Judaic Studies Principal and Special Studies Teacher and took the lead in funding and inspiring the school's campaign for expansion in 2007.

Bert extended his personal commitment to benefit the entire Memphis community, the city in which his success was achieved. His broad involvement in community-wide educational institutions is reflected in his active participation on the Board of Trustees of Southwest Community College and the University of Memphis and also by the establishment of the Bornblum Institute at LeMoyne-Owen College, which allows students to actively engage with accomplished professional leaders in almost every field of endeavor. In recognition of Bert's contributions to educational pursuits, he was awarded a Ph.D., *Honoris Causa* degree by LeMoyne-Owen College in 2006.

In 1991, Bert and David established the Bornblum Foundation as the ultimate charitable beneficiary of their estates. The Foundation serves as a vehicle to channel their individual contributions to the vast array of institutions which they support. Since 2003, the Bornblum Foundation has sponsored speakers at the annual meetings of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and has awarded grants for its continuing research of southern Jewry. Additionally, the Foundation supports community-wide needs in Memphis and in Israel.

In memory of his beloved brother David, who passed away in October, 2004, Bert established the David Bornblum Fund in the Department of Philosophy and in the Judaic Studies Program at the University of Memphis. Another living tribute was the creation of the David Bornblum Chair in Land of Israel Studies at the Kinneret College of the Sea of Galilee.

Bert Bornblum's remarkable life vividly reflects the maxim expressed in the Talmud, "If one is blessed with wisdom as well as riches, his wisdom will guide him to share the blessings with others." ☆

Make plans to attend the Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference

November 1-3, 2008, in Atlanta, Georgia

"Jews in a Changing South"

See registration form on back page

For more information, contact Sumner Levine, 682-5835

Irving Belz Made Memphis History By Winning National Spelling Bee in 1951

By Marcia Levy

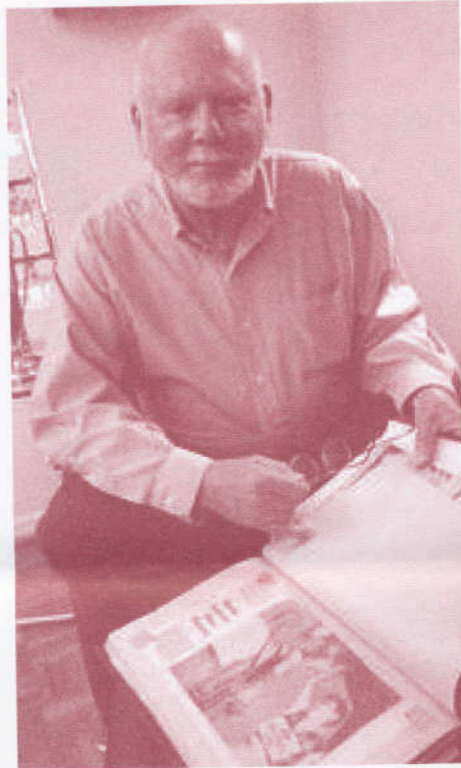
Fifty-seven years ago a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy, Irving Belz, made Memphis history. Irving, son of Rose and Jacob J. Belz, won the 1951 Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C. and became the Mid-South's first national champion speller. Representing Snowden Junior High School, he out-spelled fifty of the nation's best spellers and clinched the title with the words "cuisine" and "insouciant."

In an interview for the Memphis Press Scimitar, Irving credited his ability to spell the winning word to a session with his father the night before the bee. He said "insouciant" was on a list of practice words and he had misspelled it—his father made him go over the word until he could spell it correctly. He gave credit to his mother as well, for remembering to bring his shocking pink lucky shoelaces, which he had threaded into his blue suede shoes prior to winning the Shelby County and the Mid-South bees earlier in the year. Irving had forgotten about the laces and was quoted as saying, "Personally, you know, I don't believe in them. But you've got to humor mothers every once in a while."

Evidently Irving's infectious grin and self-effacing manner gained him a number of supporters from among his bee opponents, who rooted for him after they had missed and dropped out of the race. A few girls sitting near his father were even praying with their rosary beads for Irving to win. He had received good wishes from Senator Estes Kefauver the day before the bee as well as a congratulatory wire after his victory, along with a host of other telegrams from friends, relatives, teachers, and Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton. One message, stated: "New spring suit and accessories await your selection at Julius Lewis. We are proud to be part of your national triumph. Best Wishes. Signed Jack Lewis."

Irving was accompanied to Washington by his parents and younger brother, Saul. His prizes were a trophy, \$500 in cash, and a trip to New York City for the whole family. In addition to seeing *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway and taking in the usual tourist sights, he spent some time with the Brooklyn boy that he defeated in the final round of the six-hour 394-word competition for the spelling bee crown.

When Irving Belz, who now lives in Houston, reflects today on his spelling bee victory, he says that although winning was "a kick," he wasn't too fond of the aftermath. "I think it allowed me to indulge my natural tendency to be kind of lazy." He developed poor study habits that persisted through medical school at the University of Tennessee. Nevertheless, he became a psychiatrist and now works part time after retiring from a satisfying career at a community health center. The bee did force him to keep up his spelling skills "at least out of vanity," and he has always considered himself a good editor. "I can scan a page," he says, "And if something is wrong, it just pops up."



Irving Belz, now living in Houston, looks at Spelling Bee clippings in his scrapbook (Gannett News Service photo)

Spelling bees are thought to be a uniquely American phenomenon. The word "bee" used in this context is a language puzzle that has never been satisfactorily explained. Historically, the word has described a community social gathering at which friends and neighbors join together in a single activity, such as a quilting bee. Most early students of language assumed that it was the same word that referred to an insect, because of the obvious similarity between these human gatherings and the industrious social nature of a beehive. Later scholars, however, have rejected this explanation, suggesting that this "bee" is a completely different word, possibly from Middle English. In America, the term "spelling bee" first appeared in print in the mid-1800s. The concept probably was inspired by Noah Webster's "Blue-backed Spellers," the books that were an essential part of the curriculum of elementary school children for five generations.

The United States National Spelling Bee was started in 1925, with nine contestants, by the Louisville Courier-Journal, the newspaper in Louisville, Kentucky; the winner was Frank Neuhauser whose final word was "gladiolus." In 1941, Scripps took over the sponsorship of the program. There was no National Bee during the World War II years of 1943, 1944, and 1945, and co-champions were declared in 1950, 1957, and 1962. Of the 84 champions to date, there have been 43 girls and 40 boys. In recent years, spellers from the Bahamas, Canada, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and New Zealand have been included in the contest. ☆

Registration Form • Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference • Nov. 1-3, 2008

Full registration fee includes meals, sessions and programs, refreshment breaks, receptions, and transportation from hotel to all conference venues.

Name(s) _____

Address _____

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May we print your contact information in a registry of conference attendees? Y N

All meals are kosher, with vegetarian options available.

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Cancellation Policy: A full refund of registration fees, minus a \$25 processing fee, will be possible if cancellation is received in writing or by email (to egoldst@emory.edu) by September 15. Eighty percent refund will be possible if cancellation is received by October 1. After October 1, payment is not refundable.

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