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Julius Lewis: A Philanthropist and a Gentleman

By Marcia Levy

For Julius Lewis philanthropy was never incidental; it was a way of life. A modest, soft-spoken man, always impeccably dressed, Julius did not seek public adulation for his good deeds, many of which were known only to a few members of his family. He exemplified the adage "Actions speak louder than words" and often followed Maimonides' principle that the highest degree of charity is helping those in need to help themselves.

Julius Lewis was born in Memphis in 1891, the youngest child of Moses Lewis and Jennie Alperin Lewis. The primary inspiration for his generosity and kindness came from his parents, who set a precedent for helping others which has been followed by their descendants even to this day.

Moses Lewis came to America in approximately 1880 from Bardichev, a shtetl in Russia. The family name originally was Tarshis, but like that of many immigrants, it was misunderstood by the authorities and thus recorded as Lewis.

Moses began his career as a peddler with a horse and buggy. He sold his goods in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where

he sometimes encountered signs that stated, "No Jews and No Dogs Allowed." His first enterprise in Memphis was a used clothing store near Main and Jackson; later he began to sell new dry goods which he purchased wholesale from B. Lowenstein. This new business prospered and subsequently was moved to the Randolph Building at Main and Beale.



Julius Lewis, circa 1915

Few social agencies existed in Moses's and Jennie's time, and they expressed gratitude for their own good fortune by helping those who were less fortunate, including other recent immigrants who came to live in Memphis. Above all, they believed in family taking care of family, and one of their great pleasures was delivering gelt to all the children in the family every year at Chanukah.

As he became more affluent, Moses was able to replace his horse and buggy with a car, and he hired a chauffeur to drive Jennie. On the first day that she was to ride in the car, the black chauffeur politely opened the rear door of the car for her. Jennie shook her head. No! She was not interested in riding in the back seat. She insisted on riding

Please see Lewis, Page 4

Dr. Lawrence Schiffman of New York University

President's Message



May Lynn Mansbach

Our ancestors knew that knowledge of the past is extremely valuable for the present and for the future.

Even as the Children of Israel prepared to cross the River Jordan into Canaan, Moses advised them not to forget their history.

"Remember the days of old, Consider the years of many generations; Ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, Thine elders, and they will tell thee." Deuteronomy 32:7

At one of the most crucial junctures in the history of the children of Israel, as they prepare to inherit the land of their destiny, Moses encourages the people to look to the lessons of the past. Moses does not wish to hamper the Israelites' journey. He wants the Children of Israel to move forward, to progress, to take on new tasks and challenges. He wants them to do as the Lord commanded Abraham, to go forth. But simultaneously, he advises them to know their origins, to study the achievements of the generations before them, and to benefit from the wisdom of their forebears.

The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South will help you fulfill the counsel of Moses. We will help you "remember the days of old" so that you might be better equipped to go forth and flourish in the place where you choose to live. Our oral history and Selma Lewis scholars projects will help you "ask your father." Our genealogy project will help you "consider the many generations." Our newsletter, our technology projects, our book and video, our exciting programs and speakers will "tell thee" the achievements of the Jewish people—our people—and of the rich Jewish history of our city and region.

George Santayana, philosopher and poet, famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Tellingly and chillingly, William L. Shirer used these words as the epigraph for his *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The message is clear. In order to say confidently "never again," we must be equipped with the knowledge that will help us to recognize the signs of impending catastrophe. Equally we must be equipped with the knowledge that will allow us to experience the joy of our heritage. Please let the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South help you remember, so that together we can move forward confidently.

As we grow, as we flourish, and even when we encounter the inevitable rough patch, let us celebrate our origins, let us connect ourselves to those who came before us, who laid much of the

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Book Review:

Sarna's Book Chronicles 350-Year History of American Judaism

By Joel Felt

AMERICAN JUDAISM by Jonathan D. Sarna
370pp. Yale University Press \$35.00

Anyone hearing a presentation by Jonathan Sarna is immediately captivated by his energy, his enthusiasm, and his rapid-fire gems of fact and meaning. A premier authority on Judaism in America, his writing reflects a knowledge of his subject both broad and deep. Even more impressive is his transparent commitment to honest and objective reporting. He presents the long and complex development of the American Judaic experience with even-handed attention to triumphs, warts, frictions, and difficulties;

his interpretations exhibit the sober integrity of a modern Thucydides.

His current work identifies three conflicting but essential themes and struggles of American Judaism: upholding the sacred traditions of the Jewish religion; adapting to the unprecedented freedoms and opportunities of life in a new land by changing Judaism; preserving the sense of Jewish peoplehood, culture, and communal unity.

From the arrival in New Amsterdam of twenty-three bedraggled Sephardi Jews in 1654, the symbiosis of Judaism and New World Liberalism has been in play. The anti-semitism of Peter Stuyvesant was reigned in and countered by the pro-Jewish leaders of the Dutch West Indies Company, which demanded only that Jews care for their own poor. An instructive and prescient beginning this was; a theme that would recur.

The infinitesimal Jewish Sephardi communities never grew to more than 6000 altogether until 1830, when

observance to conform to the requirements of modern life in the new land of freedom.

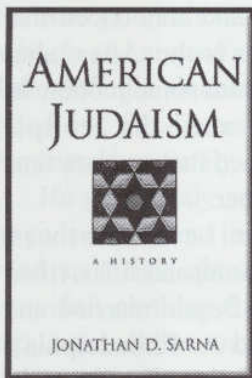
The massive influx of Eastern European Jews occurred from 1880 to 1930, swelling the Jewish population to more than four million. While Reform Judaism had provided one track for Jews to confront the frightening emancipation known as America, Conservative Judaism offered a less radical and more traditional approach to accommodating modernity in the Golden Medina. Tiny Reconstructionism had a serious influence on the struggle to maintain Jewish identity. Meanwhile, Judaism, like other religions, had to deal with the secular inclinations of growing segments of the population.

Slightly more Jews live in America than in Israel. The American Jewish community has struggled to affirm its faith, its traditions, its place in the American sun, its sense of peoplehood, and its unique culture in the face of serious obstacles. Virtually all the fears dogging American Jews today—assimilation, intermarriage, abandonment of Torah and ritual, disappearance of Judaism—were very much on the minds of Jews all through the 350 years of American Jewish history.

When asked recently whether he was Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, Jonathan Sarna reportedly replied, "All of the above." With his comprehensive knowledge of his field, he has concluded that Jewish renewal has occurred over and over for many centuries and is destined to triumph repeatedly despite internal strife, persecution, and neglect, on into the dark mists of the future.

Sarna concludes that like the American people who spawned, shaped, and conditioned the great American Republic, America's Jews sense the unique genius of what their turbulent history has wrought and will preserve its continuity against all odds.

With all the dissonance of the multiple tensions



in the front seat beside the chauffeur. Jennie's independent spirit had served her well when she lived in Russia. As the story goes, when the Cossacks came, she scrambled under the house and thus was able to escape.

Moses was a devout Orthodox Jew who was known as an authority on Jewish law at Baron Hirsch. When a group wanted to hold a dance at the shul on an evening immediately following the Yom Kippur closing service, it caused a controversy in the congregation. Moses was consulted and resolved the question by determining that once the service was over, Yom Kippur was over, so the dance could be held.

Moses and Jennie had four children, Bessie, Abe, Sam, and Julius. Julius attended school through the tenth grade, then took a business course, after which he went to work for his father. The dry goods business, however, did not appeal to him. He was interested in selling finer merchandise, so in about 1915, he started a men's haberdashery adjacent to Moses's store on Beale, where he specialized in Borsalino hats, silk shirts and underwear, and fine neckwear. Many of his early customers who could afford these luxuries were gamblers and bootleggers.

Jennie suffered from diabetes and was only in her late 50s when she predeceased her husband by about a year. Moses died in his early 70s in 1924, and Julius and his brother Sam inherited their father's business. One day

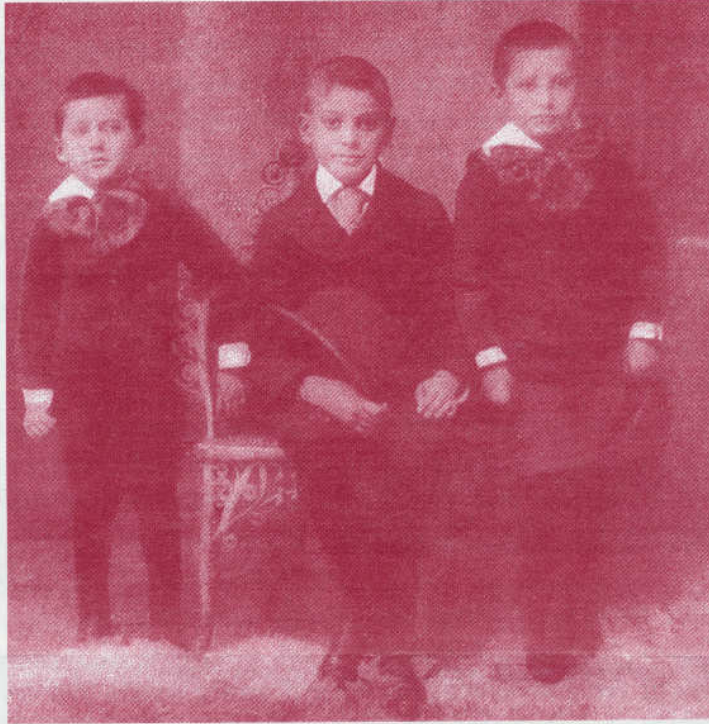
was an attorney in Washington.

On October 10, 1915, Julius married Lena Sarsar, and they went to Chicago on their honeymoon. They stayed at the Palmer House, and Julius bought a beautiful coat for his bride. Evidently Julius already had a reputation for following in his father's footsteps as a benevolent man who would respond to family members in need of

assistance, for much to the newlyweds' surprise, a cousin showed up at their hotel and announced that he was broke. After Julius gave him some money, he left, and the couple resumed their private time together.

The Lewis brothers, Abe, Sam, and Julius (their sister Bessie married and moved to Philadelphia), often acted together to perform good deeds—stories of their generosity abound. A woman affectionately referred to as "Aunt Ollie" (although she was not a relative), came to work in the store in 1915. Her parents had

died in the yellow fever epidemic, and she never married. When she grew too old to work, Julius made sure she was taken care of financially; in the 1950s she became one of the first residents of the Ave Maria Home. Meanwhile another store employee, an Irishman named Jim Cleary, developed tuberculosis. He could no longer work and had four sons to support. Every Sunday a pay envelope was delivered to his door until his death in 1952. When various family members fell upon hard times, Julius helped by providing housing or setting them up in businesses which he enabled them to eventually own by



The Lewis brothers: Julius, Abe, and Sam

and Sonia, out of Germany. Julius paid for their passage. Alexander Rolf moved in with Julius and Lena, and Sonia lived with another member of the family.

Over the years Julius became involved in a number of enterprises, some profitable and others charitable, as opportunities arose. He retained the store on Beale, setting up a cousin as manager. Through the dry goods business, he bid on work clothes for the penitentiary and penal farm. In 1937, when there was a major flood in the Mississippi Delta, the Red Cross needed single blankets for emergency shelters that had been set up in Memphis schools and at the Fairgrounds. None were available, so Julius bought doubles and cut them in half. He had a good eye for diamonds and sometimes obtained them for friends or family.

He generously supported numerous Jewish as well as civic causes and institutions. In the early 1940s, Julius read an article about Boys' Town and, as a project, provided clothing for the boys. A Baptist orphanage requested clothes and he took on that project as well. He belonged to Temple Israel, served as treasurer of Baron Hirsch, and was on the boards of St. Joseph Hospital and the Memphis Housing Authority, which honored his service by naming a street Julius Lewis Drive.

Meanwhile, Lena, an elegant and gracious woman, acquired a reputation for her own good works. She could walk into a sick room or a home of bereavement and take charge. When relatives died, she might buy a black dress for the widow or make a lace collar for the shroud. In one relative's home, Lena decided the curtains needed to be replaced, so she bought new ones and hung them. When she and Julius celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary, their picture appeared in the newspaper. Shortly thereafter, she received a letter with a plea for help from a destitute family in Mississippi who had just had a baby, and she sent them a complete layette, kept in touch, and continued to send gifts for a number of years. She knitted, crocheted, sewed, and trimmed cashmere sweaters to look like those in the latest fashion magazines. She could begin to make a dress in the morning, lay it

filled with friends and family who had dropped in for a visit and who sometimes stayed for lunch, dinner, or both. There was always room at the table and plenty of food, thanks to Mabel, who cooked for the Lewis family for many years. In 1950 the house on Melrose was sold and Lena and Julius moved to another home on Rose Road, where their hospitality continued.

Julius moved his store in 1933 to a building that had once housed the Majestic Theater at 145 S. Main. The building was owned by a member of the Snowden family, who recognized Julius as an up-and-coming merchant. In a gesture of good faith, Mr. Snowden offered him fixtures and six months free rent. At first the store carried both men's and women's clothing, but then switched to men's furnishings only. The business flourished, and in about 1941, women's clothes were again added. Later, keeping up the family tradition, Jack Lewis went into business with his father Julius, and in 1952, a new, upscale store bearing the name of its founder, "Julius Lewis," was opened at the corner of Union and McNeil.

In a city in which water fountains still were labeled "White" and "Colored," Julius Lewis was one of the earliest stores to offer charge accounts to African-American customers, one of the first to permit them to try on clothing in its dressing rooms, and the first to send an African-American woman to New York as a buyer in their children's department. At one point during the civil rights movement, a picket line was set up and people were urged to boycott the store, despite its liberal hiring policies. Concerned about the safety of their African-American employees, Jack Lewis called them together and told them to stay home until the picketing had ended, adding that they would receive full pay and not be required to make up the workdays. Then he escorted them out the back, away from the crowd.

Throughout his life, Julius Lewis cultivated a cadre of business and personal friends, and when his health began to fail, they, along with members of his family, made every effort to share with him the same kindness and concern that he had shown to others. After his wife

Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth Takes Pride in Its History

The following article, taken from a sermon by Rabbi Joel Finkelstein of Anshei Sphard-Beth El Emeth synagogue, is printed here with his permission. The Anshei Sphard congregation recently entered its hundreth year since receiving its charter in 1904.

When dealing with ancient history, there are often conflicting reports as to the exact events that transpired, and it is often difficult to determine what happened. There is even a school of new historians who say that in history we can never get back to the truth; we can only record different versions of history. This may be said of the history of Memphis congregations.

Before we engage in telling the history of Memphis's Orthodox congregations, we need to ask why this investigation is important. For us as a congregation, it is important to have a sense of who we are and where we have been. It is important to have a sense of history of the congregations from which we come in order to appreciate how long and how hard we have fought to stay alive and to appreciate what it means to continue. A congregation that knows its history has a stronger sense of self and of significance as an institution. We are not only part of a present reality but we are also part of a long chain of history.

We have at least two versions of the history of Orthodox congregations of Memphis. In the

purchased the old Temple building on Poplar in 1916. According to the Commercial Appeal, the group who bought the building simply "decided" to call themselves Beth El Emeth after the ante-bellum congregation.

To continue this narrative, Baron Hirsch was founded in 1862 by those who were unhappy with Beth El Emeth. They prayed in various unofficial locations until they

bought a church and renovated it in 1890. According to this story, Beth El Emeth was a new congregation which started about 1917 and lasted until its merger with Anshei Sphard in 1966. Anshei had been meeting in a store at Main and Beale from 1896 to 1904 and was chartered in 1904; therefore, Anshei would be older than Beth El Emeth,

The second version of history, one often told, is in histories written by Rabbi Mark Levin and Jurdon Messinger, the president of Beth El Emeth at the time of its merger with Anshei. According to this story, the Beth El Emeth of 1917 is the same congregation as the one which began to disband in 1881 in the aftermath of the yellow fever epidemic. The people who re-founded Beth El Emeth in 1917 included two people from the old Beth El Emeth. Rabbi Levin writes that although in 1884 Beth El Emeth merged back with the Temple, some people were unhappy there and

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Compliments of the Register's Office.

JAMES C. JONES, Register. JAMES A. MURRAY, Deputy Register.

SHELBY COUNTY REGULATION

TRUST DEED

FROM

Anshe Sphard

TO

Chas. B. Brooks and Chas. B. Brooks' Trustees

JUN 30 1904

913

8

See Book 18th C.R.

STATE OF TENNESSEE,

SHELBY COUNTY.

Filed for registration June 30, 1904

at 9:10 o'clock P.M., and noted in Note Book

No. 20 Page 8 and was recorded

July 11, 1904

in Record Book No. 3136 Page 298

Fee 1.75 Paid.

James B. Jones, Register.

By J. A. Murray

State of Tennessee }
County of Shelby }

Before me a notary public in and for the State and County aforesaid
personally appeared Skanarek with whom I am personally acquainted and
who upon oath acknowledged himself to be the president of Anshe Sphard the
within named bargainor, a corporation, and that he as such corporation president
being authorized so to do executed the foregoing instrument for the purpose therein
contained by signing the name of the corporation by himself as president. Witness
my hand and seal at office in Memphis, Tenn., this June 28th. 1904.

Israel H. Kies,
Notary Public.

[1899-p.364]

conclusion. By 1880, the directory says that services at Beth El Emeth are suspended, but it still has a listing. The Beth El Emeth cemetery is listed through 1886. Then in 1890 and again in 1892, despite reports to the contrary from other historians, there is a listing for Beth El Emeth at Cochrane Hall on Monroe St.

In the directories, no mention is made of Baron Hirsch until 1890. According to Sam Shankman, the Baron Hirsch Benevolent Society was founded in 1890, and shortly after that they had their first rabbis. But in 1893 and 1895, the only shul listed in the directory aside from the Reform congregation Children of Israel, now known as Temple Israel, is Tifereth Israel in Cochrane Hall.

Apparently, after the yellow fever epidemic some Jews met in Cochrane Hall. Sometimes they went by the name Beth El Emeth, sometimes Tifereth Israel. Sam Shankman says that Tifereth Israel, whose name today is all but forgotten, merged with Baron Hirsch. Tifereth Israel had its own cemetery from 1892 to 1895. In the meantime, the Polish Jews, or Galitzianers, founded Anshe Sphard as a small congregation in 1896. Two other Orthodox congregations also sprang up: Anshe Mischne, in 1900, and Anshe Galicia in 1912.

Is Beth El Emeth actually 142 years old or is it only

tremendous scholar and achieved a great deal. At the age of eighteen at the University of Leyden he published a book on Hebrew grammar and mastered twenty languages. When he took his first pulpit, the king of the Netherlands came to hear him. He was the first rabbi of congregation Children of Israel, then resigned and helped found Beth El Emeth. He served that congregation in various capacities, and went on to start his own law firm, publish a math text book, teach school, and become a highly esteemed civic leader serving as president of the Memphis city school board. All this was cut short when he was stricken with yellow fever and died in 1879 at the age of 49.

In 1863 Rabbi Joel Alexander of Brooklyn, New York, became the first official rabbi of Beth El Emeth, and in 1872, they hired another rabbi of great distinction, Rabbi Ferdinand Leopold Sarner, who was the first rabbi to be a chaplain in the U.S. Army. He was wounded in the battle of Gettysburg, and according to the story, his horse was killed under him. Rabbi Sarner later died in the yellow fever epidemic. Unfortunately the Jews of Memphis, like their neighbors, were associated with the Confederacy. Several owned slaves, and some young people fought in the Civil War.

Coming Soon to a Computer Near You!

The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South soon will have its own website. Ron Perel of Internet Solutions is generously providing complimentary web hosting for the site, and Gil Halpern and Larry Lipman are in the process of organizing it. This website will be filled with information about our organization, including news of forthcoming programs and events. Watch for it at www.jhsmem.org. Meanwhile, you can view the websites of the Southern Jewish Historical Society at www.jewishsouth.org and the American Jewish Historical Society at www.ajhs.org.

LEWIS, *continued from Page 5*

house. "What happened to the clock?" asked Julius, having spent years of sleeping through the night lulled by the sound of the chimes. Jack immediately restored the chimes.

Julius Lewis died in 1975. His life was a paradigm for a kinder, gentler era—a time when people went visiting on Sunday afternoons, family took care of family, and business was conducted on a handshake. He touched the lives of many who never knew that he was their benefactor and of others who remembered him not only as a philanthropist, but also as a gentleman. ☆

Many thanks to Jack Lewis, Aileen Lewis Sharpe, and Erma Lewis Cohen for providing information for this article.

Save the Date! Sunday, March 20, 2005 Guest Speaker: Richard Siegel

Richard Siegel has been on the forefront of Jewish creative renewal in America since the late 60's. Graduating from Brandeis University in 1969, he joined Havurat Shalom Community Seminary (aka the Boston Havurah) as a rabbinical student. His experiences as a member of this community, which blended intense Jewish study and prayer with American counterculture, provoked his idea to write a "Jewish Whole Earth Catalog." Starting as his Masters thesis, also at Brandeis, in Contemporary Jewish Studies, *The Jewish Catalog*, which he subsequently edited, was published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1973 and became an immediate phenomenon. *The Jewish Catalog* both reflected as well as shaped the Jewish counterculture that gave birth to contemporary Jewish renewal, with its emphasis on intimacy, empowerment, spirituality and creating communities of meaning.

Richard Siegel is the Executive Director of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, an organization dedicated to strengthening Jewish identity in America through the arts and humanities. Under his leadership, the NFJC has become the leading supporter of contemporary Jewish creativity, through such initiatives as the Jewish Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, the Fund for Jewish Documentary Filmmaking, and the sponsorship of festivals, conferences, programs and publications on a wide range of cultural issues.