



# SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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## “BAGELS & BARBEQUE” EXHIBIT TELLS THE STORY OF JEWISH LIFE IN TENNESSEE

By Harriet Stern

From closets and basements, attics and storage boxes, archives and living rooms, artifacts arrived at the Memphis Pink Palace Museum. Every item has a story to tell, a recollection of ancestors of blessed memory, of joy and sorrow, tragedy and triumph.

A trunk, a spinning wheel, a chair were baggage of immigrants on a ship. Bilingual prayer books—French-English, Polish-Hebrew, German-Hebrew—tell of their origins. Items from Scharff grocery, Uhnke the Tailor, Mammoth Livery Boarding, and Seessel's (a Model T delivery truck) reveal livelihoods. Fancy dresses, food grinders, an antique baby crib, a picnic cloth—all tell of patterns of life in Memphis. The darkest of memories are revealed in death camp photographs, a soldier's helmet and Yellow Fever death rolls. Voices and visions from the past surround them.

“Bagels & Barbeque,” an historical view of Jewish life in Tennessee, which opened in Nashville in 2007 as a three-year traveling exhibit, is now on display in Memphis at the Pink Palace Museum. The exhibit will be open through April 11, 2010.

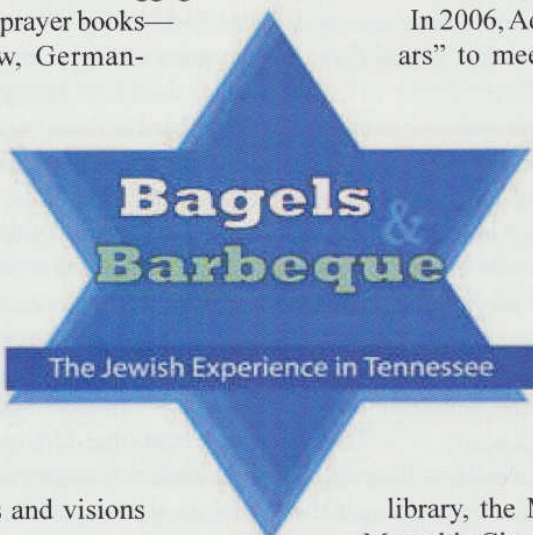
When Nashville was designated to host the 2007 Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America and their overseas partners, the question was asked: “Are there really Jews there?” Hearing that, the four

Tennessee Federation executives knew they needed to showcase the history of Tennessee Jewry. With the grant-writing assistance of Nashville archivist Annette Levy, the Federations succeeded in obtaining a state funding grant for the creation of the exhibit under the direction of Candace Adelson at the Tennessee State Museum.

In 2006, Adelson chose nine regional “Scholars” to meet in Nashville, gather materials

from their areas, and help plan and name the exhibit. Margie Kerstine, Temple Israel Archivist, and Judy Ringel, author of *Children of Israel: The Story of Temple Israel*, were selected as the West Tennessee Scholars. They assembled photographs, documents, and artifacts from the Temple Israel archives, the Center for Southern Folklore, the University of Memphis library, the Memphis Public Library, and the Memphis City Archives.

Collage and narrative wall panels form the core of the exhibit. These panels focus on the similarities and differences between the Jewish communities of Knoxville, Nashville, Chattanooga, and Memphis. They are placed in chronological order under topic areas: Early Settlers, Civil War, Reconstruction, Yellow Fever, A Wave of Immigrants, Holocaust and World War II, Post War Period, and finally, the “Bagels & Barbeque” up to



Please see **BAGELS**, page 2

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986  
c/o MJCC 6650 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138



# President's Message . . .



Harry Jaffe

Eli Evans wrote the following in *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*:

"I am not certain what it means to be both a Jew and a Southerner, to have inherited the Jewish longing for a homeland while being raised with the Southerner's sense of home."

Yet, Jews played and continue to play a vital and active role in Southern culture, politics, and economics. In fact, many scholars of American Jewish history have argued that before 1850, the heart of American Jewish culture was in the South. The earliest Sephardic immigrants came to Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina. The German Jews of the 1840s left crowded and grimy New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and St. Louis to try their luck as small-time merchants and peddlers in the Deep South. In the 1880s, they were followed by the Jews from Eastern Europe.

These Dixie Jews blended well into the dominant Protestant culture and communities but, in many ways, still remained apart. The upcoming exhibit at the Pink Palace—"Bagels & BBQ: The Jewish Experience in Tennessee"—will highlight that notion: the impulse toward and anxiety over assimilation; the Old Testament link to the African-American community and their church; and the odd relationship with white fundamentalists, many of whom held a reverential fascination with the Children of Israel as well as the Promised Land.

Thanks so much for everyone's interest in and promotion of the Society as we begin our 24th year in 2010.

Best, *Harry*

## 125 YEARS AGO -- March 7, 1867

The Hebrews of Memphis rank among the most enlightened and enterprising citizens of the United States. In all the relations of life they are eminently prosperous. As a business people none are more strictly just; as neighbors they are sociable and kind-hearted, and as donors of assistance to the wretched and needy they are among the most liberal, giving with unsparing hand and with a willingness of disposition that sheds a luster about their bountiful generosity.

--- from the *Commercial Appeal*

## Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & the Mid-South 2009-2010

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NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Marcia Levy

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the present. More emphasis has been placed on earlier rather than later history.

Added to these background panels are showcases and museum displays featuring a collection of rare artifacts owned by individuals, families, and institutions in Memphis. Some of these artifacts are on temporary loan; others have been donated to the Pink Palace. The museum is planning a future expansion which would include permanent exhibition space devoted to Memphis Jewish life.

Local items were collected under the leadership of Harry Samuels and Sumner Levine, who recruited congregational chairpersons: Iris Harkavy and Bluma Finkelstein (Anshei Sphard); Lyda Parker and Evelyn Makowsky (Baron Hirsch); Gil Halpern (Beth Sholom); Harry Jaffe (Chabad); Susan Stein (Or Chadash); Carole Plesofsky (Temple Israel); and Izzy Katz (Young Israel).

Many members of the Jewish community have volunteered to work at the exhibit. They include Nancy Ballin, Patsy Baroff, Goldie Burson, Joan Dermon, Nancy Engelberg, BeJay Gronauer, Phyllis Groskind, Phyllis Kaplan, Estaline and Melvin Katz, Margie Kerstine, Cathy Kessler, Joyce Lazarov, Phyllis and Sumner Levine, Esther Lubin, Linnie Mirvis, Lyda Parker, Carole Plesofsky, Viki Poole, Kay Rosenberg, Nora Rothschild, Friderica Saharovici, Diana Sater, Mildred Schwartz, Alvin Salomon, Harriet Stern, Debbie Weinstein, and Jocelyn Wurzburg. ☆



## The Civil War:

# Why Would a 'Nice Jewish Boy' Join the Confederate Army?

By Marcia Levy

When examining the early history of the Jews in the South, some questions inevitably arise: What motivated Jews to enlist in the Confederate army? Why, with a long history of persecution including enslavement in Egypt, were southern Jews ready to fight for a cause that believed in the perpetuation of slavery?

Most Jews came to America to seek the freedoms which were not granted to them in their native countries. At the time of the Civil War, there were approximately 150,000 Jews living in America. Of these, the majority lived in the North and supported the Union; however, about 25,000 lived in the South and were supporters of the Confederacy. One explanation for this loyalty to the Confederacy may be found in the words of the eminent Jewish historian Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, who wrote that the southern Jew was a "regional type ... He could not escape his environment; the pattern he followed was the pattern of a host of Southerners."

By the 1860s, many southern Jews had achieved a degree of financial security—some were themselves slaveholders. In addition, they benefited from the fact that, in the Old South, prejudice which might have been directed toward Jews was focused primarily on blacks. Like other members of their white communities, the southern Jews did not want to jeopardize their socio-economic position; thus they supported secession and were willing to contribute both men and money to the war effort.

A. E. Frankland, a prominent Jew who lived in Memphis during the Civil War, recorded the participation of a number of Memphis Jews in the Confederate army in his *Fragments of History*. The following excerpt is taken from this document, dated 1889-1890.

"At the outbreak of the civil war each section furnished as many Jews, according to ratio of population, as did any other class, of course. As was quite natural, they sided with the section that was their birthplace and their home. They volunteered as cheerful and served as patriotically as any other citizen, and were always to be found at the front. Many of them, alas, too many, gave up their lives in the struggle.

"Memphis, Tennessee, was not behind in her quota; nearly all her young men volunteered and went. There

was no chance for substitutes in that section. We write section understandingly, for the imaginary lines of Messrs. Mason and Dixon had not then been obliterated.

"A novel and affecting incident occurred at the Temple Children of Israel during the Sabbath service. The following named enlisted volunteers, all uniformed in Confederate gray, marched into the building. Standing round the scrolls of the law, they recited the blessing, in chorus: Major Abraham S. Levy, Captain Maurice A. Freeman, Lieutenant Isaac Strauss, Corporal M. A. Kuhn, Privates Lou Leubrie, Samuel Jackson, Harry Cohen, Julius Nathan, Emil Gross, Harry Jeessel, and several others. After which they received the ancient priestly benediction from the minister and returned to the camps of their several commands. It was their last assemblage together, and was a sad realistic scene that will never be forgotten by those that witnessed same."

Frankland refers to the Civil War as a "Fratricidal War," in which "brother met brother face to face on the battlefield." As an example, he mentions two members of his own family: "Judah Frankland, for many years a resident of Nashville, Tennessee, a journalist by profession and city editor for a long time of the Nashville Gazette, at the commencement of the war went out with General Zollicoffer. Solomon Frankland, of New York, enlisted in an Eastern regiment and went to the front under General N. P. Banks. At the surrender of Port Hudson they met face to face, the 'Gray' surrendering to the 'Blue' ... Both died after the peace from the effects of wounds received on the fields of battle."

Maintaining traditional Jewish observances under wartime conditions was extremely difficult, but a number of southern Jewish soldiers rose to the occasion. Reverend Maxmilian J. Michelbacher, the rabbi of Congregation Beth Ahaba in Richmond, wrote a special Jewish prayer for the Confederate soldiers. According to Jonathan D. Sarna in his book *American Judaism*, "Two brothers named Levy who fought for the Confederacy reputedly 'observed their religion faithfully ... never even eating forbidden food.'" Sarna also points out that "... Jewish soldiers strove to observe Judaism's major annual holidays, notably Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the fall, as well as Passover in the spring ... General Robert

Please see CIVIL WAR, page 6



## Family Treasures Highlighted in Bagels & Barbeque Exhibit

**L**'Dor V'Dor—From Generation to Generation—family treasures are handed down from grandparents to parents to children. Some things fall by the wayside. Homes are sold, children move away, grandchildren aren't interested in "old stuff." Clothing sealed in a box in a hot attic may fall into shreds years later when the box is opened. Documents or books stored in a damp basement may succumb to mildew. An inexpensive china platter might be given away, despite the fact that Bubbie served brisket on it for hundreds of family Shabbat dinners. Who could know that something seemingly worthless in its time would be a valued piece of history a hundred years later?



*Captain Ben Schaffer's World War II uniform jacket, cap, and pistol holster*

the first wave of Allied troops in Germany as the Third Reich fell. In May of 1945, two days after the liberation of Mauthausen concentration camp, Schaeffer's company entered the camp. Schaeffer made a photographic record of what he encountered. It bears testimony to the horrors that the inmates endured. The originals are now at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Sondra recalls some details of her father's army career: "My parents were already married and I was a young child. At that time, men with children were not being drafted, but Daddy volunteered because he wanted to serve. He didn't go in as a Captain but he was promoted because of his education. I remember that he was first stationed in Abilene, Texas, and we lived in a duplex located off the base. I also remember that there was a horse next door."

An additional item in the exhibit is a candelabrum that belonged to Sondra's grandmother, Dora Schaffer, who was the first president of the Memphis Chapter of Hadassah. This candleholder, which is silver plate on brass, was used at Shabbat dinners. It has been polished so often over the years that the silver is starting to wear off. The family decided not to have it resilvered, and it is still a handsome ritual object.

Sondra's in-laws, Barney and Janice Lazarus, rescued another "Bagels & Barbeque" treasure from a box in

Fortunately, some family treasures do survive, and such is the case with items in the "Bagels & Barbeque" exhibit. When Pink Palace personnel went to the home of Sondra Schaffer Lazarus, they found a real treasure trove and spent several hours deciding which items to display.

Carefully folded away in Sondra's attic was the World War II army uniform of her father, Dr. Ben Schaffer, who served as a Captain in the U.S. Dental Corps from 1942-1946. His uniform jacket, cap, and pistol holster now are prominently featured in a showcase at the museum, and this display has attracted perhaps the greatest amount of attention of the entire exhibit.

Captain Schaffer was sent to Europe in 1944 and was among



*Candleholder which belonged to Dora Schaffer, the first president of Memphis Hadassah*



a closet at Temple Israel. "My mother-in-law often helped in the kitchen as a volunteer at Temple," says Sondra. "One day she saw some parts of what appeared to be a brass oil-burning light in a closet. When she asked about it, she was told she could have it, so she gathered up the pieces and took it home. My father-in-law had it repaired and wired for electricity and it hangs now in my home." Although there was speculation that this item might have been used as a Ner Tamid in the original Temple Israel, it is actually a "Shabbos lamp" also called a "Judenstern." These six-pointed star-shaped hanging lamps were used in homes to provide light throughout the Sabbath. They were usually attached to a ratchet so they could be pulled down, filled with oil, and lit before the lighting of the Shabbat candles.



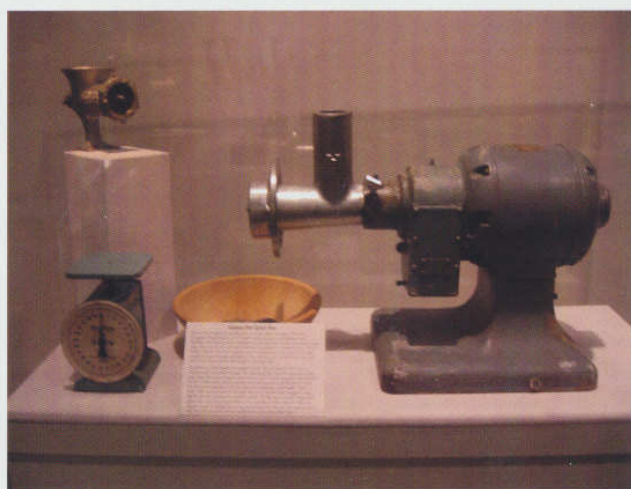
*Six-pointed Star-shaped Brass Shabbos Lamp  
From Home of Sondra Schaffer Lazarus*

If there is a lesson to be learned from the "Bagels & Barbeque" exhibit it is this: Take good care of your treasures. Because there are plans for a permanent exhibit of Jewish artifacts at the Pink Palace, more items eventually will be sought by the museum. Meanwhile, teach your children and grandchildren to appreciate the value of family heirlooms, whether historical or purely sentimental. If you have old photographs, documents, or artifacts that you wish to give to the Jewish Historical Society archives, contact Margie Kerstine, the archivist at Temple Israel. ☆



*Trunk, Germany, 19<sup>th</sup> century, on loan from Adrienne Rosenberg  
At the age of 15, Gerson Rothschild emigrated from Merchingen, Germany. This trunk held everything he owned. He came to America by himself but soon was joined by his brother David. Together they built a successful dry goods business.*

Although the largest item in size in the exhibit is the Model T delivery truck from Seessel's, of equal interest is the next largest, an elegant walnut baby crib (not pictured here), donated to the museum by Carol (Inky) Aronoff. The crib was made in 1875 for Inky's grandfather, Arthur Jacobs, who was the first doctor in Memphis to specialize in pediatrics. "It was in my attic," says Inky, "and I don't remember how it came to be there. I know that I slept in it as a baby, and I have a picture of my grandfather leaning down looking at me in the crib." The crib has an arched wooden canopy frame and the sides are embellished with elaborate cut-out scrollwork.



*Gefilte fish, a dish that originated in Eastern European Jewish kitchens, is traditionally served on the Sabbath and holidays. The kind of fish used varies by what is locally available. In the northern U.S. white fish or carp are the fish of choice, but in the South it is buffalo fish. At one time, home cooks processed the fish. Every kosher kitchen had a wooden bowl and hand chopper for making gefilte fish and chopped chicken liver. Later, the hand chopper was replaced with a hand-cranked meat grinder. By the 1950s, many Jewish women were buying jarred gefilte fish to avoid the time and mess, but its flavor was not as good as home made. That's when Billy James, owner of the Fish Market on North Main, bought a large electric grinder. Though not Jewish himself, he had many Jewish friends and customers who encouraged him to start grinding buffalo fish. In 1966, the market moved to Broad Avenue as the Buffalo Fish Market. For many years it was the only source in Memphis for freshly ground buffalo fish.*



E. Lee, himself a committed Christian, pledged in 1864 to do all in his power 'to facilitate the observance of the duties of their religion by the Israelites in the army,' and to allow them 'every indulgence consistent with safety and discipline.'"

The situation in the North was somewhat different. In 1861 the military chaplaincy law was passed. This law stipulated that a regimental chaplain be a "regular ordained minister of some Christian denomination," in effect, depriving Jewish soldiers in the Union army of having their spiritual needs addressed and making the Jewish faith appear to be illegitimate. When two elected chaplains were rejected on account of this discriminatory law, a national debate involving both Christians and Jews ensued. Sarna writes that "Although many supported a change in the law, one evangelical paper complained that if the law were changed, 'one might despise and reject the Savior of men ... and yet be a fit minister of religion.' It warned that 'Mormon debauchees, Chinese priests, and Indian conjurors' would stand next in line for government recognition—a tacit admission that the central issue under debate concerned the religious rights of non-Christians. To further the Jewish cause, one of the rejected chaplains, the Reverend Arnold Fischel, came to Washington ... to lobby on behalf of a change in the chaplaincy law, and President Lincoln promised him support. After substantial wrangling, a revised bill that construed 'some Christian denomination' in the original legislation to read 'some religious denomination' became law on July 17, 1862. This represented a major political victory for the Jewish community and remains a landmark in the legal recognition of America's non-Christian faiths."

The archives of the American Jewish Historical Society contain fascinating accounts of soldiers' seders on the front during the Civil War—where questions of slavery and freedom inevitably took on an additional meaning. One such account was published in 1862 in the *Jewish Messenger*. J. A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment wrote of a seder celebrated by Union soldiers in Fayette, West Virginia. Joel and 20 other Jewish soldiers were granted leave to observe Passover. A soldier home on leave in Cincinnati shipped matzot and hagaddot to his colleagues. Joel wrote: "We . . . sen[t] parties to forage in the country [for Passover food] while a party stayed to build a log hut for the services. . . We obtained two kegs of cider, a lamb, several chickens and some eggs. Horseradish or parsley we could not obtain,

but in lieu we found a weed whose bitterness, I apprehend, exceeded anything our forefathers 'enjoyed....' "We had the lamb, but did not know what part was to represent it at the table; but Yankee ingenuity prevailed, and it was decided to cook the whole and put it on the table, then we could dine off it, and be sure we got the right part. The necessities for the charoses we could not obtain, so we got a brick which, rather hard to digest, reminded us, by looking at it, for what purpose it was intended. "We all had a large portion of the herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing; each [ate] his portion, when horrors! What a scene ensued . . . The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and . . . we drank up all the cider. Those that drank more freely became excited and one thought he was Moses, another Aaron, and one had the audacity to call himself a Pharaoh. The consequence was a skirmish, with nobody hurt, only Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh had to be carried to the camp, and there left in the arms of Morpheus."

On April 9, 1865, Confederate General-in-Chief Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House. The surrender coincided with preparations for the eight-day holiday of Passover. According to Jonathan Sarna, "Throughout the North that Passover, Jews gave thanks for the redemption of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and for the restoration of peace to the inhabitants of the United States. The calendrical link between the anniversary of the biblical Exodus and the victory of the Union forces seemed to the faithful almost providential."

Five days after the surrender, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the next morning, synagogues were filled with grief-stricken worshippers, and mournful melodies replaced the customary Passover songs. It was important to Jews to be included in the memorials for Lincoln because of his friendship toward them. While Lincoln also was memorialized by rabbis in the South, their challenge was to somehow find meaning in the death and destruction, the burned and looted synagogues, and loss of self-government that southern Jews now faced.

During the post-Civil War decades, Jews in southern cities gathered together as a community to celebrate Confederate Memorial Day and special sections of some Jewish cemeteries were set aside for Confederate victims of the "Fratricidal War." While northern Jews put the war behind them, many southern Jews, like their Christian neighbors, continued to focus on the martyrdom of lost sons and to insist that the cause for which so many had fought and died was right. ☆



# Many Memphis Jews Achieved Economic Success In the Period Following the Civil War

Once the Civil war had ended, Memphis Jews, like all southerners, gradually began to rebuild their lives and resume their regular activities. The war had not been as disruptive in Memphis as it had been in some other southern cities, and the economic situations of most of its Jewish citizens improved fairly quickly.

According to Selma Lewis in *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt*, "The end of the war found Jewish Memphians engaged in many types of businesses; they were barbers, bankers, race track operators, retailers. Twenty clothing stores were owned by Jews. They were prominent in the cotton brokerage business. Solomon Levin operated a cotton gin. Jews were engaged in liquor, livestock, crockery, and glassware concerns; some were auctioneers and wholesalers. A. E. Frankland was in the real estate business. Jacob J. Peres, having been dismissed as a rabbi by Congregation B'nai Israel for keeping his business open on the Sabbath, was engaged in foreign trade and selling cotton to his native Holland. J. D. Blumenthal and Gensburger Brothers were involved in the manufacture of trunks. Arthur Seessel sold dry goods and was a jobber of shoes; his brother Henry was a butcher who also brokered livestock and kept a kosher meat counter. Menken Brothers and Lowenstein's had become major department stores. Joseph Goodman was in the jewelry business; H. Foltz operated a hotel, City House.

"While all businessmen in Memphis were bound by Sunday closing laws, Jewish businessmen encountered a particular problem because those who wished to observe religious practices could not do business on Saturday either. Sunday closing laws, called 'Blue Laws,' had been in force in Tennessee since 1803, only seven years after Tennessee became a state. When six people were arrested in 1862 for keeping their stores open on Sunday,

only one was Jewish. Among those who had to pay a five-dollar fine for staying open on Sunday were Jewish businessmen Louis Just, Abe Brum, M. Levy, D. Asher, and D. Zweifel. M. R. Isaacs was fined ten dollars in 1863 for 'not caring particularly for the Christian Sabbath.'"

Although a considerable number of Jews were merchants, salesmen, clerks, or bookkeepers in the immediate post-Civil War period, a few were bank officers and several held important positions in Memphis life insurance companies. A small number had entered the professions of medicine and law. Notable were Dr. R. L. Laski, who had come to Memphis about the time Union forces occupied the city in 1862. Dr. Laski was a Union supporter and was not a member of any local medical organization; nevertheless, he later was honored by the Hebrew Relief Association of Memphis for his dedicated service during the yellow fever epidemic.

In 1869, Leopold Lehman became the first Jewish lawyer listed in the City Directory. Lehman was born in Alsace of wealthy parents and, in addition to being an authority on the law, he was also an authority on the French philosopher and writer Montesquieu. Lehman's brother Irving was his law partner.

In general, the reaction of Memphis Jews to the Union victory was similar to that of the rest of the population. Some were bitter because of the losses and economic hardships they had suffered, while others made necessary adjustments to meet the challenges of the Reconstruction Era. Unfortunately, a greater challenge lay ahead—the Yellow Fever epidemics of the 1870s were yet to come, and they would prove to be even more detrimental than the Civil War to the growth of the city. ☆

## Welcome to Our New Members! (as of February 13, 2010)

Evelyn Goler  
Susan & Abe Plough  
Dr. Marian C. Levy  
Molly & Jason Wexler  
Mindy & Harry Diamant  
Aileen Burson  
Elaine & Michael Fox

Leigh A. Hendry  
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Barry Pelts  
Sherwin Yaffe, M.D.  
Jack Cohen  
Reva & Steve Ziskind  
Cheri & Marc Rubenstein  
Cathy & Richard Kessler

Robert Gordon  
Susan Adler Thorp  
Diane & Paul Mendelson  
Sarah & Naftali Thomas  
Roslyn Karesh  
Anne Reef  
Freda Brode & David Weinstein



## Coming Attraction: Film Docudrama *West of Hester Street* JHS Meeting and Program - April 18, 2:00 pm, MJCC



Faced with poverty and death, millions of Eastern European Jews poured into America in the early 1900s. They crowded into ghettos along the Eastern seaboard. Jewish leaders grew concerned that the U.S. government would soon close its doors to these new immigrants. They devised a plan to bring thousands of immigrants through the port of Galveston, Texas to settle them throughout America's heartland. This plan became known as the "Galveston Movement." There were even some unexpected results.

"I told them I was a blacksmith," said one greenhorn. "So who knew from a blacksmith? I had to say something. So I became a peddler. Peddler. . .shmeddler. . .if it earned me an honest living, I'd do it." With great warmth and humor, *WEST OF HESTER STREET* interweaves the dramatized events of the Galveston Movement with the story of a young Jewish peddler who journeys from Russia to Texas. The late Sam Jaffe narrates the immigrant's heart-warming story.

What people have said about *WEST OF HESTER STREET*:

"One of the best films I've seen... A film that should be seen by all."

— Dr. Eric Goldman, ERGO Media

"Marvelous...It is a masterpiece..."

— Bernard Wax, Director, American Jewish Historical Society

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