

# THE JEWS AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

*The relationship of Jews in our country to slavery before the Civil War. While some owned slaves, others joined the anti-slavery group*

By Morris U. Schappes

THERE is no better test, actual and symbolic, of the attitude of Jews to slavery in our country than the experience in the colony of Georgia. Two groups of Jews had arrived in Georgia in the very first year of the existence of the colony, 1733. By the end of the year, when there was a general allocation of land to the colonists, the Jews also were assigned their plots of land.

Now there were two peculiarities in the Charter governing the colony as drafted by the Trustees in London. The first was that there was to be no outright ownership of land or private property in land; instead each colonist was to be assigned a plot of land for his use for seven years, at the end of which period there would be a reallocation of the land. The second was that the use of slaves was prohibited. The reason for the ban on slavery is clearly stated in the title of the law enforcing it: "An act for rendering the Province of Georgia more defensible by prohibiting the importation of black slaves or negroes into the same."<sup>1</sup>

The colony of Georgia, however, did not prosper. After five years the colonists concluded they knew the reasons why they were not prospering, and drew up a petition to the Trustees, setting forth "the Two following chief Causes of these our *present* Misfortunes and this *deplorable* State of the Colony," especially when it was compared with the flourishing Carolinas. First the Georgians wanted to institute private property in land in order to attract more settlers and provide an incentive for the colonists to "making further Improvements" on their land, since their children would then be able to inherit it.

Secondly, the petition asks for the right to import Negro slaves, "with proper Limitations," to overcome the labor shortage, increase production and thus be enabled to pay off the debt they are incurring by their import of English goods.<sup>2</sup>

Now 117 freeholders signed this petition to introduce pri-

<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Jones, Jr., *History of Savannah, Ga.*, Syracuse, 1890, p. 66; see also Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875*, New York, rev. ed., 1952, p. 24. Unless otherwise stated, the main facts and the texts of the documents in this article will be found in that volume, pages 37-38, 99-102, 118-121, 134, 293-301, 312-315, 332-333, 573-574, 593, 596-597, 599, 612, 643-644, 648-649, 656.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Tailfer, etc., "A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia, in America, . . ." Charleston, S. C., 1741, reprinted in Peter Force, *Tracts and other Papers . . . of North America*, Washington, D. C., 1836, vol. 1, p. 40-42.

vate property in land and slavery into Georgia. Did Jews in Georgia sign the petition?

## *Petition to Introduce Slavery*

I have put this question to scores of classes in the past few years. Sometimes a majority and always a minority of the students said no, the Jews did not sign it; moreover, it was argued, Jews would not, could not sign it. Why would pious, God-fearing Christians sign it and not Jews? Well, students explained, and these were liberal-minded, progressive students, the religion of Judaism forbade slavery, and according to the Bible, Jews had to free slaves, and there was the Jewish tradition of opposition to slavery, and Jews themselves had been slaves in Egypt, and always spoke of it at Passover, so how could Jews petition to introduce slavery? Christians—yes; Jews—no. . . .

Fortunately, we do not have to guess whether the Jews did, could or would sign such a petition. First, the record clearly states that the Jews did not sign. Those who thought they did not are triumphant; even some of those who believed the Jews did sign give expression to a sense of relief that they did not. Good for the Jews. . . .

But the record also clearly states why the Jews did not sign: "The *Jews* applied for Liberty to sign with us; but we did not think it proper to join them in any of our Measures."

The result of the petition is simple to relate. When the Trustees refused to grant it, most of the Georgia colonists, including all but three Jewish families, moved up the coast from Savannah to Charleston. Thus pressured, the Trustees yielded, and the original colonists, including many Jews, returned to Savannah, introduced private ownership of land and slaves, and prospered. By 1762, Mordecai Sheftall owned 1,000 acres of land and nine slaves. In 1763, Isaac Lyons and a couple of non-Jewish partners imported eight slaves. In 1768, James Lucena began to import slaves and by 1771 he had 20. In 1780, Abigail Minis owned a plantation of over 1,000 acres and 17 slaves.<sup>3</sup> And so it went.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, Philadelphia, 1953, vol. 2, p. 344, 322, 324, 358.

If the Jews reacted exactly like the Christians to the same given situation in Georgia, it was not because they were any the less pious, God-fearing or "moral" than their Christian fellow-colonists. It was not the Old Testament or the New Testament, the "teachings" of Jesus or Moses, that determined the morality of Jew or Christian with regard to the enslavement of human beings. It was the relations of production, and of Jews and non-Jews to the need for labor that basically decided their attitudes to slavery, not abstract religious principles of the brotherhood of man, or religious rituals, or a history of one's own group's enslavement or suffering in the distant past.

Tradition? What was the living tradition in the immediate past of the Jews (or Christians), of which Jews (or Christians) might reasonably be expected to be conscious in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Speaking of the trade in the Middle Ages in both white and Negro slaves, Israel Abrahams points out "the connexion of the Jews with this hideous traffic," and declares: "The real blot on the social morality of the middle ages lies in the attitude both of the Church and Synagogue towards slavery. . . . Neither Jew nor Christian looked with equanimity on the enslavement of members of his own religious sect, but neither raised any protest against the sin which slavery commits against the rights of man."<sup>4</sup>

### *Among the Slave Traders*

When emerging European capitalism seized upon the slave trade and expanded it tremendously, Jews were among the active promoters of the gruesome traffic. The Dutch West India Company, in which wealthy Jews from Holland were active from the beginning, regarded the slave trade as one of its main aims. In Brazil in the seventeenth century, and in the West Indies and Guianas of South America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sizable Jewish populations developed the sugar trade on the basis of plantation economies and slave labor—in the same territories as non-Jewish plantation and slave owners.

This, for Jew and Christian coming from Europe or South America, was the living tradition. Could a Passover ritual offset it and be decisive? Any nationalistic or chauvinistic theories or feelings about the alleged ethical superiority of the Jews obviously have no basis in reality when examined in this light.

Not that a living militant tradition cannot activate a conscience and thus affect human conduct on basic issues. The example of the Quakers indicates that it can. Emerging in the seventeenth century as a dissenting religious sect to which only bold spirits affiliated, the Quakers first in England and then in the American colonies became outstanding in the movement first against the slave trade and then against slavery as a whole. While one would exaggerate to assume that the Quakers were "as a body, throughout their history a solid phalanx aligned against human

enslavement," Dr. Herbert Aptheker reached this conclusion: "The radical philosophy, persecution and minority character of the original Quaker movement led it to take, as a group, an advanced position in the struggle, first, against the slave-trade within its own Society and then in the outside world; secondly, against slavery itself within its own Society (though here most gradually); and finally, against the existence of slavery anywhere."<sup>5</sup>

Thus "by the end of the Revolutionary War no accepted Quaker held slaves in any state north of the Mason and Dixon line" and by 1800 "the institution of Negro slavery had practically ceased to exist among accepted Quakers." As a dissenting part of the middle class, the Quaker movement had taken the general middle class principle of equality to mean that all men are brothers and "friends." But, unlike the vast majority of the middle class, the new, active religious ideology of the Quaker movement led it to seek to enforce the ideal of brotherhood upon its own members, first by education and remonstrance, then by discipline.

The contrast between the Quaker tradition and the absence of it among the Jews is most vivid in a state like Rhode Island. After 1715, when the British ruling class allowed colonial merchants to get directly into the African slave trade, Newport quickly became the main center of that barbarous traffic. The Rhode Island Quakers in 1717 and 1727 denounced this trade. By 1773, they had not only long since stopped Quaker participation in the slave-trade but were expelling Quaker slaveowners and by June there were no more such in the Society of Friends.

### *Some Slave Transactions*

Jews in Newport, however, got into the slave trade at the latest by 1754, when the Rivera family entered it. In 1762 Isaac Elizer and Samuel Moses sent a ship out to the African coast and handed their Captain John Peck a set of instructions as to what to do with his human cargo as matter of fact as if they were dealing with inanimate merchandise. Most involved in the slave trade, however, was the powerful shipper, Aaron Lopez, who got into the trade in 1764 and sent out one vessel each year to Africa in the 1760s, but in the 1770s, as the traffic expanded, he sent out three ships a year, each bringing 80 to 100 slaves to Jamaica.<sup>6</sup> Of course by that time 100 to 150 ships a year were sailing from Newport to Africa in quest of slaves and the proportion of Jewish participation was small.

Jews in Newport were by no means the only Jews to take part in the slave-trade. Those in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah were also involved.

Jewish merchants who offered slaves for sale did so with as clear and callous a conscience as did non-Jewish mer-

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 25 (1940), p. 331, 362.

<sup>6</sup> Marcus, work cited, vol. 1, p. 126, 141. In contrast, Morris A. Gutstein, then rabbi of the Newport synagogue, wrote in 1936, "We have met with no instances where the Jews of Newport traded in black slaves" (*The Story of the Jews of Newport*, New York, p. 164-165).

<sup>4</sup> Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, 1896, rev. ed., London, 1932, p. 114, 112, 113.

chants. On March 29, 1752, at the First Seder of Passover, Abraham Pereira Mendes undoubtedly was reminded in the Hagadah that the Jews had been slaves in Egypt and all that, but there is no trace of this tradition in his advertisement in *The New York Gazette*, May 4, 1752, of "a Parcel of Likely young Negroes, Pimento, Old Copper, Coffee, etc. . . ." Similarly did the Jewish silversmith Joseph Pinto announce his merchandise in *The New York Mercury*, October 30, 1758 as ". . . Silver Watches, chased Silver Milk Pots, Stone Rings: Also a healthy and likely Negro Boy. . . ."

### "Kindness" to Slaves

Judging by their conduct, Negroes enjoyed slaving for Jewish families no more than they did for non-Jewish. Now since very few Jews were plantation owners needing field hands, most slaves owned by Jews were used for domestic service or for work in merchants' shops. In this "patriarchal" slavery, house slaves are much less harshly treated in some ways than field hands, being used for convenience rather than profit. But "patriarchal" slavery is slavery still, and Ernestine L. Rose gave a definitive retort to the slaveowners' defensive wail that they were kind to their slaves. This noble and eloquent abolitionist, daughter of a Polish rabbi, in 1853 told an audience celebrating West Indian Negro emancipation:

"Ay, even if slaveholders treated their slaves with the utmost kindness and charity; if I were told they kept them sitting on a sofa all day, and fed them with the best of the land, it is none the less slavery—(applause); for what does slavery mean? To work hard, to fare ill, to suffer hardship, that is not slavery; for many of us white men and women have to work hard, have to fare ill, have to suffer hardship, and yet we are not slaves. Slavery is, not to belong to yourself—to be robbed of yourself. . . ."

The deep human desire to belong to themselves led as many Negro slaves as could do so to run away from "patriarchal" as well as other forms of slavery—and they ran away from Jewish as well as non-Jewish masters too. And Jewish masters did what others did: they offered rewards for their escaped slaves, warned and threatened all and sundry against "harbouring" these runaways or helping them get aboard a ship, and cried out righteously that their slaves had "robbed" them. Thus did Judah Hays about his runaway slave, "a Negro Wench, named Sarah, aged about 30 years," who had robbed him of "upwards of fifty pounds" in clothing, and for whose return he offered 40 shillings reward in *The New-York Gazette*, February 11, 1750/51, and for four weeks thereafter, apparently in vain. And so did the famous silversmith, Myer Myers, offering 20 shillings for the return of "a Negro Wench, named Daphne . . . tall and likely, not very black," in *The New-York Mercury*, May 4 and 11, 1767.

<sup>7</sup> Schappes, "Ernestine L. Rose: Her Address on the Anniversary of West Indian Emancipation," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 34 (1949), p. 350.

One significant aspect of slavery, especially towards the end of the eighteenth century, when the equalitarian ideals of the American revolution were being felt, was the number of masters who freed their own slaves, either during the lifetime of the masters or at least in their wills. Tens of thousands of Negroes achieved freedom that way, some of them of course from Jewish masters too.

While there are more wills by Jews and non-Jews transmitting slaves to heirs than freeing them, those that manumit (free) slaves are of special interest. The oldest so far uncovered goes back to 1692 and concerns Cresie, a Negro man slave of Arthur (Asser?) Levy, who died without leaving a written will. Nevertheless, when five witnesses swore they had often heard Levy say he wanted Cresie to be free after Levy's wife and he died, the Mayor's Court of New York, responsive to the oral will of Levy, set Cresie free.<sup>8</sup>

In the eighteenth century, manumissions are more numerous. In 1748, Daniel and Esther Gomez liberated a slave during their own lifetime, rather a rare deed. In 1770 brother Benjamin Gomez declared in his will that "my Mustee [octoroon] wench, Katty, is to be free from the yoke of Slavery, as a reward of her fidelity." Katty obtained her reward when he died, August 8, 1772.<sup>9</sup> Also in New York, the powerful merchant Jacob Franks, who had imported a dozen slaves between 1717 and 1743,<sup>10</sup> set one slave, Cato, free in 1761.

In Charleston, Philip Hart freed his "Negro Woman Flora" in his will, and in 1800 Jacob Cohen wrote a will giving "Tom his freedom for ever immediately after my death." When laws in Southern states made manumission illegal, Rachel D'Azevedo in 1843 bequeathed four female slaves "and their issue and increase" to her daughter, and declared that on her daughter's death they were to work for themselves "as if they were entirely free."<sup>11</sup>

One of the most interesting of manumission documents comes from Virginia. For various reasons, Jews settled late in that state, but by 1788 there were 10 Jewish householders in Richmond. All except Isaac Mordecai, who was too poor to own one, had at least one slave, and the firm of Cohen and Isaacs had three. Later the partnership broke up and in 1799 Isaiah Isaacs freed his slave Lucy. Four years later, he drew up his will in which, after disposing of other matters, he turns to the matter of his five slaves. "Being of opinion," he writes, "that all men are by nature equally free and being possessed of some of those beings who are unfortunate doomed to slavery," Isaacs sets forth the following schedule for the liberation of his slaves: Rachel is to be freed January 1, 1816, James, 1820, Polly,

<sup>8</sup> Samuel McKee, Jr., *Labor in Colonial New York, 1664-1776*, New York, 1935, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone*, New York, 1952, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus, work cited, vol. 1, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Reznikoff, *The Jews of Charleston*, Philadelphia, 1950, p. 77.

Know all Men by these presents, That I Jacob Levy Junr:  
do, by these presents, for good and valuable considerations, fully and absolutely Manumit, make Free, and set at Liberty, four slave, named Samuel Sykes Edwin Jackson, Elizabeth Jackson and James Jackson hereby willing and declaring that the said Samuel Sykes Edwin Jackson, Elizabeth Jackson and James Jackson shall and may, at all times hereafter, exercise, hold, and enjoy, all and singular the liberties, rights, privileges, and immunities of free men & woman fully to all intents and purposes, as if they had been born free.—And I do hereby, for myself my in Executors, Administrators, and Assigns, absolutely relinquish and release all my right, title, and property whatsoever, in and to the said Samuel Edwin Elizabeth & James as my slave.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, have hereunto set hand and seal, the 6th day of March in one thousand eight hundred and seventeen

SEALD AND DELIVERED IN THE PRESENCE OF  
J. Morley  
City of New York, ss.

On the sixth day of March 1817  
Jacob Levy Junr  
appeared before me, and acknowledged that he executed the above instrument, as his voluntary act and deed, for the uses and purposes therein mentioned. I allow it to be recorded.

Jacob Bradtiff

**Freedom document of four slaves freed by Jacob Levy, of New York, in 1817.**

1822, Henry, 1830, William, 1834. Should Rachel or Polly have children before they are freed, such children are to be slaves until the age of 31, when they shall be freed. None of his slaves is to be sold and each is to be given \$20 in clothing on the day of liberation. In 1806, the year he died, Isaacs made certain improvements in this will: Polly's date of liberation is advanced from 1822 to 1818; the *grand-children* that Polly and Rachel may have shall be free from birth; and Clement Washington, Rachel's youngest son, is to go free on—January 1, 1836.

### Work with Anti-Slavery Societies

Late in the eighteenth century, when the anti-slavery societies began to be formed, Jews of progressive views began to work in them. The oldest of these was formed by the Quakers in Philadelphia in 1775, was inactive during the Revolution, and resumed its work in 1787, with Benjamin Franklin as president. The first Jew to join the Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage was the partially disabled Revolutionary War veteran, Solomon Bush. (See Schappes, *JEWISH LIFE*, March 1954, p. 24.) Bush was a member until he died in 1794.

Manumissions by Jews of their slaves recorded in the manuscript records of the Society show that in 1784 Israel Jacobs and Philip Moses Russell each liberated a slave, and Raphael De Cordova freed one in 1820. Other Philadelphia Jews who took some part in the work of the Society, appearing as witnesses when others manumitted slaves, include Samson Levy and Daniel Levy in 1787, Benjamin Nones in 1792 and 1795, Joseph Levy in 1796, Sol Marache in 1797.<sup>12</sup>

The second such group to be formed was in New York in 1785, the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting such of them as Have Been or May Be Liberated. The first Jew to be elected to membership was Moses Judah in 1799; the Jeffersonian democrat Mordecai Myers was elected in 1803. Judah, moreover, was on the Executive Committee for more than two years, a leader in one of the strong anti-slavery organizations of its time. Incidentally, the manuscript minutes of this society indicate five or six cases in which the society had to defend Negroes against masters whom we know to have been Jewish.

It is from the militant radicalism of a Bush, a Judah and a Mordecai Myers that there stems the American Jewish progressive tradition of opposition to slavery. These lower middle class Jews fashioned the tradition not out of religious ritual but out of the living contact with the social system of which they were a part. It was the organized work of a Myers and a Judah that stimulated the manumission of slaves, on printed forms now in the records of the society, by merchants like Haym M. Salomon, son of Haym Salomon, who freed one slave in 1812, or Jacob Levy, Jr., who freed six in 1817, or Ephraim Hart, who freed one in 1818. More important, it was such work that helped the society and its supporters press the New York state legislature to pass a law that on July 4, 1827 freed 10,000 slaves born in New York.

### Ernestine Rose Fights Slavery

The outlawing of the slave-trade in 1808 and the abolition of slavery in the northern states in the next two decades led to a lull in organized anti-slavery work exactly at the time when slavery in the South was getting a new lease on life because of the increase of cotton production made desirable by the use of the cotton gin. When the anti-slavery movement revived in the 1840's and 1850's, an Ernestine L. Rose was outstanding as a leader. Hoodlums drown out her voice at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York on May 7, 1850,<sup>13</sup> but she will not be silenced.

At that time the middle class leadership of the Jewish organizations supported, condoned or tried to be indifferent to the issue of slavery. The most widely known Jew of the period was Mordecai Manuel Noah, Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall, who on February 20, 1848 assured the readers of the *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger* that the Bible sanctioned slavery and that Negroes were cowards. In 1850, while Mrs. Rose faced hoodlums in support of the Wilmot Proviso to keep slavery out of the ter-

<sup>12</sup> Manuscript, Hist. Soc. of Penna.: List of Members, 1789-1819; Manumission Book A, 1780-1793, p. 86, 87; Book G, 1819-1853, p. 56-57; Book A, p. 13-14, 132; Book B, 1788-1795, p. 239-240, 267-268; Book B, p. 92; Book D, 1795-1801, p. 77-78, 252.

<sup>13</sup> W. P. and F. J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879*, Boston and New York, 1894, vol. 3, p. 297.

ritory taken from Mexico, Noah campaigned against that Proviso, and helped defeat it.

When the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed, *The Asmonean*, English-Jewish weekly in New York, wrote on January 10, 1851 that laws must be obeyed, and that moreover the Bible endorsed "the principle of reclaiming the absconded slave." Yet in the new town of Chicago, a young Jew, Michael Greenbaum, not knowing or not caring about this so-called Biblical tradition, helped rescue a fugitive slave from the clutches of a federal marshal in 1853, and helped to forge a new tradition.

In 1853, when the Thirteenth Annual Report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was presented to its convention, it contained a section evaluating the relation of American religious institutions to slavery and found it on the whole shockingly bad. About the Jews these devoted, militant and self-sacrificing abolitionists express acute disappointment: "The objects of so much mean prejudice and unrighteous oppression as the Jews have been for ages, surely they, it would seem, more than any

other denomination, ought to be the enemies of CASTE, and the friends of UNIVERSAL FREEDOM." This judgment is inescapable. The Mrs. Rose who was already a beloved figure among the abolitionists was separated from organized Jewish life. Few and faint in 1853 were the Jewish voices in the anti-slavery movement. But new forces were to emerge from within the Jewish people, in the South and West and North, around the birth of the anti-slavery Republican party, with John Brown in Kansas, riding the ever-rising anti-slavery tide, which even the slaveholder's insurrection in 1861 could not stop. A new tradition was to be forged for American Jews.

*Note:* in my article in April, I stated that Henry Steele Commager might well have included Nones's letter of 1800 in his *The American Mind*. This is an error. The work I had in mind was Professor Commager's *Living Ideas in America*, since *The American Mind* deals only with the period after 1880.—M. U. S.

## Testifying at Ben Gold's Trial

By Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois

*On April 2 the witch-hunt claimed another victim—Ben Gold, fur union president, convicted on the charge of having committed perjury in signing the Taft-Hartley non-Communist oath. The conviction will of course be appealed. Below is a statement by the distinguished Negro scholar and leader, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois on his testimony at the trial.—Eds.*

I HAVE not only long heard of Ben Gold and the Fur Workers but while I was under attack for speaking for peace his unions and 13 other national unions whose cooperation he secured gave a dinner and contributed to my defense. I was therefore only too glad to help when he came under fire in the federal courts because it was alleged that he had not really resigned from the Communist Party under the specifications of the Taft-Hartley law. I therefore promised that I should be glad to testify as to his character and reputation during the trial.

I was called to the witness chair about 10:15 on Tuesday, March 30, and for the first time in my life took oath as a witness. The jury was present, half of them being colored, with one colored woman.

I testified that I had known of Ben Gold and the Furriers Union for about 25 years, that I had talked about him and heard about him from various persons. I especially named the late Mayor LaGuardia, and Dr. [Edward] Lindeman of the School of Social Work, Lillian Wald and Mary Ovington, social workers, and later, Dr. John Kingsbury.

I added that my chief informants were persons whom I do not remember and perhaps whose names I never knew, who were workers and union members and especially colored men who were gratified that the Furriers

Union had dropped all discrimination and was admitting them as members.

I testified that from all these sources I was told that Ben Gold was a man of honesty and integrity, representing the best type of union leader.

The prosecution then took over. A tall man arose with folded arms and looking at the wall said, "Dr. Du Bois, did you know that in (naming a certain date) Ben Gold attended the Lenin Academy in Moscow?" I answered, "No." He then asked me, "Do you know that in (naming another date) Ben Gold was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party?" I answered "No." He repeated this question, naming two or three other dates, and I continued to answer, "No" to each one. Then he started to ask apparently about another date, but stopped and said no, to strike that out. Meantime he had consulted with the colleague who went out and then came back in ten or 15 minutes and whispered to him. I imagine that they were seeking further information about me, but apparently did not get it.

The attorney for the prosecution then said that he had no more questions. Nearly all other witnesses had been asked the question as to their present or former membership in the Communist Party. He did not ask any question about this but simply indicated that he was through. Marcantonio then arose and asked, "Did you know that Ben Gold was a member of the Communist Party?" I answered, "Yes." The judge then dismissed me as a witness.

Leon Strauss and I then went over and saw the Japanese cherry blossoms which were just bursting in bloom and we also went into the Jefferson Memorial and read what Jefferson had said about freedom of thought.