

"But their God runs Mississippi..."

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"Jews have been and remain marginal to the South," writes Deborah Dash Moore:

Their marginality is intrinsic to their existence as southern Jews. African Americans have been and remain central to the South. It is impossible to imagine southern culture, politics, religion, economy, or in short, any aspect of southern life, without African Americans.

Moore's comparison of African American and Jewish American history is presented in her chapter, "**Separate Paths: Blacks and Jews in the Twentieth-Century South**," from the book *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*. Continuing our **Black History Month series**, some excerpts:

The history of Jews and Blacks in the South reveals enormous contrasts and few similarities. Differences include demographic and settlement patterns, occupational distribution, forms of culture, religion, and community life, even politics and the prejudice and discrimination endured by each group. Visible Jewish presence in the South is considered so atypical that when large numbers of Jews (that is, over 100,000) actually did settle in a southern city, as they did in Miami and Miami Beach after World War II, the entire area of South Florida was soon dismissed as no longer southern and jokingly referred to as a suburb of New York City... In the popular mind as well as in reality, the South would not be the South without Black Americans. Jews, by contrast, offer an interesting footnote to understanding the region, an opportunity to examine the possibilities and cost of religious and ethnic diversity in a society sharply divided along color lines...

Irrespective of where they settled (except, of course, for Miami), Jews usually worked in middleman minority occupations not considered typically southern: as peddlers, shopkeepers, merchants, manufacturers, and occasionally professionals (doctors, dentists, druggists). Main street was their domain. Initially Jews lived behind or above their stores; as they prospered they moved to white residential sections of town...

By contrast, African Americans worked at a wide range of occupations from sharecropper and farmer, to day laborer and industrial worker, to a handful of middle and upper class positions, including storekeepers, teachers, entrepreneurs, and professionals serving a segregated society... Unlike Jews, many of whom were self-employed, Blacks largely worked for others, usually whites, restricted by custom and prejudice to the least desirable jobs in each sector of the economy...

Probably the single most important communal institution was the Black church. Virtually all African Americans, seeking individual salvation and

collective spirituality, joined a church, which was usually either Baptist or Methodist. The church not only offered Sunday services and schooling, but it also sponsored social welfare, and civic and cultural activities... Synagogues assumed far less centrality in the Jewish community, though far greater percentages of Jews joined them in the South than in the North...

Usually accepted as white, and not summarily excluded from participation in civic affairs as were African Americans, Jews tried to maintain communal institutions focused upon internal Jewish needs, such as community centers, B'nai B'rith lodges, social welfare organizations, as well as women's clubs and Zionist groups, while supporting white community endeavors not connected with the church, such as cultural activities, better business and chamber of commerce groups, and philanthropic endeavors. Their success in this dual enterprise depended upon politics; during the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan after its reestablishment in 1915 in Georgia, Jews generally found themselves unwelcome in both political and civic endeavors. This chilly environment warmed substantially during World War II, and southern Jews faced the dawning of the postwar civil rights era feeling integrated into the white community. Observers in the 1960s discovered even among relatively small Jewish populations that two communities often coexisted, divided sharply by their "degree of Southernness."... Opposition to Zionism, and by extension Jewish nationalism and ethnicity, coincided with a high degree of "Southernness." Irrespective of ideology, however, southern Jews uncovered no antisemitism among their neighbors, although many feared that it might be "stirred up" by political change." Outsiders visiting their fellow Jews rarely understood such sentiments... Coming down to Mississippi to help with legal defense of those involved in the voter registration drive, Marvin Braiterman, a lawyer, decided to attend services at a local synagogue to escape the tensions of the week. "We know right from wrong, and the difference between our God and the segregationist God they talk about down here," his Jewish hosts told him. "But their God runs Mississippi, not ours. We have to work quietly, secretly. We have to play ball. Anti-Semitism is always right around the corner."...

World War II changed southern Jewish attitudes toward politics, but not enough to bring them into convergence with African Americans' increasing demands for equal civil rights and for an end to desegregation. Jews migrating to the South after the war carried their politics in their suitcases, but since 80 percent of these northern newcomers went down to Miami, they exerted little influence on the emerging civil rights movement. A handful of young rabbis joined forces with Christian clergy across the color line, but most feared to speak out lest they lose their positions...

The shift from protest to politics--especially the voter registration drives organized by SNCC in 1964 that drew large numbers of northern Jewish students to the South--exacerbated southern Jewish discomfort. The rabbi of Meridian, Mississippi, urged Michael Schwerner to leave, fearing that white anger at Schwerner might turn against local Jews.

Much more fascinating history follows, including the bitter conflict between the Black and Jewish communities surrounding the Leo Frank case.

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