

The Beauty of a Southern Jewish Heritage

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The front desk clerk at my Montgomery, Alabama hotel cheerfully told me, “I have a river-view room for you.” Night had fallen; but the next morning, when I opened the blinds, there it was: The Alabama River makes an exquisite horseshoe in downtown Montgomery. It’s surrounded by lush woods and is fronted by an historic railway station. A beautiful sight to behold!

Only hours later, though, the loveliness of the scene became more complicated. I was among fifty Reform rabbis participating in “Truth, Justice and Reconciliation: A Central Conference of American Rabbis Pre High Holy Day Seminar.” As soon as the program began, I learned of the critical role that gorgeous river played when Montgomery grew and prospered as the center of a robust domestic slave trade. That river was the conduit, bringing enslaved human beings north from Mobile Bay into the interior, where families were cruelly separated, small children ripped from their parents’ arms and spouses forever separated, enriching white Alabama slave traders.

We entered The Legacy Museum, a powerful testament to the horrors that white supremacy has wrought on African Americans for 400 years. In the museum’s first exhibit, only feet from the door, I was hit hard by a declaration I should’ve always known to be true: Many of the same families who were enriched by the slave trade continue to be prosperous citizens of Montgomery today. Their wealth, inherited down the generations, cannot be separated from the enslaved human beings their ancestors oppressed to earn their generous living.

Why, you might ask, was I so bothered by these particular words, among all the museum’s horrors?

I have long proclaimed, “In my family, the ‘old country’ is the Mississippi Delta.” All of my grandparents and four of my great-grandparents were born in the American South. I treasure my great-great grandparents’ Shlenker family Bible from Trinity, Louisiana. When Reform Judaism’s detractors assert the libel—that the children of Orthodox Jews become Conservative; their children, Reform; and their children leave Judaism altogether—I take out my great-great grandfather Gotlieb Lemle’s *Minhag America* for Yom Kippur, a prayer book written by

American Reform founder Isaac Mayer Wise. If that's not enough, I produce my paternal great-grandfather Gus Loewenberg's *Union Prayer Book*—alongside three more in direct succession, which my mother, her mother, and her grandmother, Rose Lemle Masur, each received at her Confirmation, each name embossed in gold on the cover. When I was 18, my beloved paternal grandmother gave me her mother's *Hours of Devotion: A Book of Prayers and Meditations for the Use of the Daughters of Israel*, which her mother had given to her when she was 18. My great-grandmother, Clara Simon Loewenberg, was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi in 1871, but that prayer book was published in 1868, so I presume that it belonged to her mother before her.

I was raised in the warm embrace of this family, with a strong Jewish identity and a confidence about the place of Jews in America.

As I got older, I became aware that my mother's family had known financial security for more generations than we know. And my paternal grandmother told of her father's tremendous success, reversed in a financial crisis in the early 20th Century.

I seriously doubt that any of my ancestors were slave traders. Most who immigrated before the Civil War came to this country only shortly before it. I learned that two of my great-great-grandfathers had fought in the Civil War only because I asked, not because my grandparents boasted of Confederate glory or yearned for its return. Still, that Montgomery exhibit got to me.

As I continued through the museum, I saw stark reminders that slavery didn't end in much more than name with the Civil War. Sharecropping, convict leasing, and racial terror lynching kept Black southerners in shackles, albeit of a different kind, until World War II, with Jim Crow persisting until the mid-1960s. During that period, all of my ancestors lived in the South. Again, I have no reason to believe that any were outwardly racist. Instead, I heard stories of kindnesses to Black customers and domestic employees. I never heard my grandparents use racist epithets. At the same time, I was never told any stories that led me to believe that any of my family were engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, for example. We Jews know, though, that bystanders have enabled the greatest evil perpetrated against us. Before the Civil Rights era, and often during it, southern Jews were bystanders at best.

After the museum, our group went to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, better known as "the lynching memorial," which I described on Rosh

Hashanah morning. There, along with examining monuments of lynching in Arkansas, I found memorials indicting every county where my family lived during that period: Adams County, Mississippi. Attala County, Mississippi. Catahoula Parish, Louisiana. Harris County, Texas. Orleans Parish, Louisiana. Ouachita Parish, Louisiana. My ancestors' Black neighbors were terrorized by lynching in each place that they lived.

The organizers of our rabbinical group provided the words to "Strange Fruit," a poem written and set to music by Abel Meeropol and popularized by Billie Holiday:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the popular trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

The Alabama River in downtown Montgomery is indeed beautiful, and I continue to treasure my southern Jewish roots. I particularly honor the memories of my grandparents, who were consistently present, positive influences throughout my childhood and beyond it.

Still, on this *Shabbat Shuvah*, this Sabbath of Repentance, I cannot help but ask what repentance is required of the grandson, great-grandson, and great-great-grandson of bystanders who prospered while their Black neighbors bled?

T'shuvah, ut'filah, utz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zeirah, "Repentance, prayer, and charity," we learn, "temper judgment's severe degree." I now regard my own commitment to racial justice—in Little Rock and throughout our nation—as an act of *t'shuvah*, of repentance. I will do what my ancestors did not, and perhaps could not, given their insecurity as Jews in what was still a new land for

them. During *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur afternoon, I will pray that God forgive them their sins, even if those sins were mostly of silence. And I will continue to direct *tzedakah* to redress racial inequality that persists to this day, with a thought toward returning some of the prosperity they enjoyed between the end of the Civil War and World War II.

And yes, I will continue to celebrate the beauty of my southern Jewish heritage, bringing me to where I am today. I hope you will join me.

Amen.