

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Exhibit Reviews

The Legacy of the Hebrew Orphans' Home: Educating the Jewish South Since 1876. At the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, August 14 through December 26, 2017. Curated by Catherine Lewis.

A walk through *The Legacy of the Hebrew Orphans' Home: Educating the Jewish South Since 1876* at the Breman Museum provides an engaging glimpse of southern Jewish philanthropy through the past century and a half and the oldest nonprofit in the state of Georgia. Viewers are invited to witness the connective threads tethering late-nineteenth-century waves of Jewish immigration to contemporary efforts to support Jewish education nationwide. The exhibit provides an informative and compelling lens on the historical foundations that produced the Jewish Educational Loan Fund (JELF), which has provided nearly twelve million dollars in low-interest loans to more than four thousand students since 1961.

The exhibit proceeds chronologically, the entrance showcasing architectural elements of the original Hebrew Orphan's Home, which opened its doors in 1889 at 748 Washington Street, then the center of Jewish Atlanta. From its opening until 1930, the home provided a proverbial "home away from home" for destitute Jewish children in the five-state southeastern B'nai B'rith district. The exhibit makes artful use of photographs and other material culture from the extensive holdings of the Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History. Several enlarged images of the Home's children—"inmates" as they were called in the nineteenth and early twentieth century—help transport visitors one hundred years into the past. Early photographs supply striking depictions of life at the home: well-dressed orphans stand at the entrance of Loew's Grand Theater downtown for a matinee or cluster on the home stairs around superintendent Ralph A. Sonn. Less formal images capture

children roller skating or playing on the home's grounds, or a group of boys enjoying a summer getaway at Camp Fendig on St. Simons Island off the Georgia coast. These children are hardly the orphans of Charles Dickens lore; they appear as normal, healthy, and above all beloved children. And indeed, these images convey the uniqueness of southern Jewish orphan care, exemplary compared to the non-Jewish orphan homes of the South and to the Jewish orphan homes of the North. The Southeast's smaller Jewish population—with relatively few immigrant settlers compared to northern urban centers—translated to a smaller orphan home. The Atlanta home's leaders invested greater attention to orphans' cultural and social uplift in a region tightly scripted by the rules of the racial color line.

Although elements of the institution's early history resonate throughout, the majority of exhibit space is devoted to documenting the more recent history and widespread impact of JELF. Curator Catherine Lewis has a doctorate in American studies and holds a faculty appointment at Kennesaw State University. She is well trained in the art of visual and material storytelling within museum spaces, having curated and managed more than forty exhibitions, and her curatorial vision is

(Courtesy of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)

persuasive and moving. She places the individuals affected by JELF and its institutional precursors at the exhibit's center, with two video installations/stations providing testimony of people who received financial support from the institution over its more than fifty-five-year educational loan history. Individual "JELFies" share their stories in moving detail of economic hardship and family tragedy, describing how JELF loans enabled them to fulfill their educational dreams. The exhibit is accessible, inviting, and comfortable, with ample room to sit and view the videos, or to rest between viewing the still materials. As the visitor navigates the space, the voices of JELF's beneficiaries follow, offering an audible reminder of the way benevolent legacies resonate in our present.

Museum exhibits are by necessity spatially and temporally limited; they provide visitors a fleeting glimpse of often-complex subject matter, and visitors will see and read only as much as their time and interest allow. The curator therefore faces a difficult decision to determine which materials go on display and which remain in the less-accessible archive. Inevitably, complexity and nuance must be sacrificed to space and time limitations given the multiple ways in which different people approach the lessons of the past. To address the limitations of space and

(Courtesy of the Breman Museum, Atlanta.)

the overabundance of relevant archival materials (the Cuba Family Archives at the Breman Museum holds over seventy boxes of materials related to JELF's history), two scrapbooks containing documents and images from the orphans' home are available for viewers to peruse. I appreciated this opportunity to investigate the institution's "deep history" but realized these materials might not receive the same attention as the two video stations. The scrapbooks contain letters documenting the more complex ups and downs of orphan home management, contributing nuance to the more than 150-year story of philanthropic transformation that eventually led to JELF. And yet the exhibit as a whole suggests a narrative of relatively seamless institutional transition from residential orphan home to foster care, to generalized social services, to its current form as JELF. What this smooth and conflict-free story misses are the often-heated debates that accompanied many of these transformations. For example, the home's early leaders were often at odds over the optimal ways to educate the children of poor and unacculturated coreligionists. Some argued that orphans should learn to make a living through "manual trades," while others clung stubbornly to the idea that all Jewish children, especially the children of the poor, should pursue their intellectual ambitions to the limit. Given the institution's eventual incarnation as the Jewish Educational Loan Fund, it is easy to forget this episode of conflict over the very core values many take for granted today.

Also modulated in the exhibit are the grim realities that brought the Orphans' Home into existence in the first place: the crushing poverty, illness, and death that forced destitute Jewish families to relinquish their children to benevolent caretakers and the social and cultural distance between impoverished families and their benefactors that often led to conflict and resentment. These were the urgent realities of the past, and they resurface today as the nation confronts polarizing debates over immigration and refugee policies. As we peer back in time to reflect on the fascinating institutional roots of JELF, may the nuance and complexity of the southern Jewish struggle for acceptance afford us deeper insight into our contemporary considerations of education and value, of social justice and belonging in its fullest sense.

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Kehillah: A History of Jewish Life in Greater Orlando. Kehillah Jewish History Project. Accompanying catalog: *Kehillah: A History of Jewish Life in Greater Orlando* (2017). At the Orange County Regional History Center, Orlando, Florida, November 12, 2017, through February 20, 2018. Curated by Marcia Jo Zerivitz.

In 1963, after searching for an East Coast outpost for his entertainment empire, Walt Disney put his finger on a map of central Florida, near the edge of a little-known city named Orlando. For Orlando, Disney's choice turned acres of swampland into the first of a series of theme parks, assuring the provincial city's survival—and prosperity. And, as this exhibit illustrates, it also assured the survival and prosperity of central Florida's Jewish community, which has since drawn a steady stream of in-migration. In 1971, when Disney World opened, there were four thousand Jews in central Florida; today, there are an estimated thirty thousand. As the legend at the exhibit's entrance puts it, "To tell a history of Orlando's Jewish community is to tell the history of Orlando itself."

Kehillah: A History of Jewish Life in Greater Orlando grew directly out of plans to celebrate the centennial of Congregation Ohev Shalom, the first synagogue founded in central Florida, and the exhibit is dedicated to the Conservative congregation in honor of this milestone. This anniversary led to a broadened undertaking, which eventually involved a task force of sixty-five community volunteers. It also benefited greatly from the involvement of guest curator Marcia Jo Zerivitz, a former Orlando Jewish community leader who established and directed the Jewish Museum of Florida (Miami Beach) and who collected many of the photographs included in the exhibition.

Spread out over 277 linear feet in the downtown Orange County Regional History Center, the compact exhibition includes 450 photos, 75 objects, and 65,000 words in captions. The designers suggest a three-hour visit, but half that is sufficient for a self-guided tour. The organization is a blend of thematic and chronological sections, sometimes overlapping, devoted to "Roots," "Branches," "Seeds of Change," "Growth," "Care-takers," and "Blossoms." Most of the exhibit is composed of photos and commentary panels, but there are also cases displaying documents; free-

standing clothing, artifacts, and architectural models; a small, salvaged, stained-glass window from an early Ohev Shalom building; and an 1855 Czech Torah saved from the Nazis. Necessity became the parent of innovation when a budget freeze for the host center required a 30 percent cut in space for *Kehillah*. Center officials suggested they pivot to technology, displaying the material on touch screens. There are also light boxes with narrated slide shows. One screen runs a loop of local personality Sam Behr's over-the-top TV commercials for Allied Discount Tires.

As the exhibit's "Roots" section explains—and all the exhibit section titles exemplify—what makes Orlando's Jewish settlement distinctive is that its genesis was essentially agricultural rather than commercial. The yearning of Orlando's pioneering Jews to work their own land was not thwarted in America as it had been in Europe. A few itinerant wanderers, peddlers, and adventurers passed through central Florida during the nineteenth century, with just a handful settling permanently. Most notable among the permanent Jewish settlers was Dr. Philip Phillips, a Columbia University-trained physician who morphed into a citrus land baron and, ultimately, into a major philanthropist. While his foundation, which remains active, is gun shy about his Jewish identity, old timers say Phillips spoke Yiddish and shared holidays with other Jewish grove owners, although he never affiliated with a synagogue.

But the story of Jewish settlement begins in earnest between 1912 and 1918 with the arrival of a handful of farm-minded families from Pittsburgh. They bought citrus groves and, with the help of extended family members, they thrived. They expanded from growing oranges and grapefruit to fruit and juice packing, processing, and distribution. Some raised cattle, in part to provide dairy products and kosher meat. In 1915, using a Torah they brought from Pittsburgh, they began holding services and weddings in their orange groves. In *Kehillah*, this unfolding Jewish growth is told largely through the lives of these first Jewish families and their descendants who are still active and prominent in the community.

Agriculture drew retailers, the next significant wave of settlement, from the 1930s to the early 1960s. By then, 200 Jewish merchants operated 340 stores in and around downtown Orlando. But for two decades beginning in the 1960s, several developments threatened the economic

lifeblood of the Jewish community. The growth of suburban shopping malls largely decimated the downtown retail scene. Only two of the original Jewish-owned businesses survived, including—anomalously, given the area’s high temperatures—a fur and cold storage store. Then, in the 1980s, four killer freezes essentially wiped out central Florida’s citrus-growing industry. By then, however, Disney-generated prosperity had transformed the Jewish community’s economy, leaving it sufficiently robust and diversified to survive. The theme parks—Universal Studios Florida and SeaWorld, which joined Disney—have had an incalculable effect. Directly or indirectly, the larger hospitality industry has stimulated and accelerated development in defense (what became Martin Marietta arrived in 1958); aerospace (Cape Canaveral is less than an hour away); biomedical research and higher education (the gargantuan University of Central Florida and Rollins College, both of which have had Jewish presidents); and, most recently, computer gaming and simulation (both relying on animation). As the *Kehillah* catalog notes, “More than 150 technology companies are now based in what was once a sleepy farming and citrus area.” All of these industries have drawn Jews to the area, many with high-paying jobs and—along with the professions and businesses that serve them—have helped keep the children and grandchildren of earlier Jewish arrivals in the area after attending college.

In other ways, Orlando fits the historic pattern of Diaspora Judaism. As one might expect, the exhibition tracks the development of the traditional institutional benchmarks of many mid-sized Jewish communities: multiple congregations, some established through splits, others through geographic expansion; a weekly newspaper; a senior residential high-rise; and a vibrant Hillel at the University of Central Florida. Most prominent is a campus housing a Jewish Community Center (with a second on the other side of town), Federation offices, a day school, and the Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center.

As others have for millennia in the Diaspora, central Florida’s Jewish community has depended on the philanthropy of those who have achieved great economic success and who have become community patrons and benefactors. There has been so much philanthropy that the exhibit’s curators set a relatively high standard for inclusion: only those who have made one-time gifts of at least one million dollars to the

ABOVE: *Entrance to Kehillah: A History of Jewish Life in Greater Orlando.*

(Photo by Sarah M. Brown.) BELOW: *A photo from the exhibit of*

Aaron Fechter with his creation, the Rock-a-fire Explosion.

(Photo by Seth Christie, used with permission of Marcia Jo Zerivitz.)

Jewish or the Greater Orlando community or the State of Florida are pictured in that category.

Kehillah, both serious and celebratory, is not without a sense of humor. One quirky, whimsical example is a life-sized, animatronic gorilla sitting at a keyboard, a Rock-afire-Explosion creation of Aaron Fechter, who is also credited in the exhibit with inventing Whac-A-Mole. Fechter gets the same amount of space in the exhibit as Marshall Warren Nirenberg, who shared the 1968 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine.

Central Florida replicates familiar patterns of Jewish life in the American South, although settlement in Orlando came a century or more later than many of the historic Jewish centers like Charleston and Savannah. Orlando also has not suffered the same decline and disappearance as so many small-to-midsized inland Jewish communities across the region.

As a postbellum community, central Florida's Jews did not have to face the wrenching challenges and legacy of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. The tumultuous civil rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s receives a gloss in *Kehillah*, but with little introspection into the tension in many southern Jewish communities during the period between those wanting to fit in (and keep customers) and those who wanted to speak the truth clearly and unambiguously about the intrinsic evil of segregation and white supremacy. Those Orlando Jewish activists, who are justly celebrated in *Kehillah*, were moderates rather than prophetic insurgents who risked jail or personal safety. They involved themselves in the civil rights movement by working through established community channels, forums, and in court—and were always civil.

Kehillah introduces numerous memorable activities and individuals. A page in the accompanying catalog is devoted to Jewish doctors who responded in the aftermath of the 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse night club, tirelessly treating shooting victims. Even fiery former U.S. Representative Alan Grayson is represented with a photo and favorable caption. For a decade, from 2006 to 2016, Grayson was the central Florida Jewish political figure who was best known locally and nationally, although some in the Jewish community found him too brash and impetuous to offer their support.

Kehillah is a celebratory exhibit. Unmentioned is that the Federation is perennially cash-strapped and experiences high turnover at the execu-

tive level; that the day school has had to dramatically retrench; and that some congregations are hanging on by a thread. Critics have argued that the exhibit devotes too much of the limelight to Congregation Ohev Shalom and its members, which is probably understandable since its centennial was the inspiration and impetus for *Kehillah*. Although there is no handout fact sheet or brochure, laminated glossaries are provided for those unfamiliar with Yiddish and Hebrew words and Judaism. The large-format catalogue includes all the images and objects, many shown in color, along with the entire exhibit text.

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