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COVER PICTURE: Max and Trude Heller announcing Max's candidacy for mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, 1971. Heller's life and career are documented in the article by Andrew Harrison Baker in this issue. (Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Furman University.)

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PERMISSION STATEMENT

"Did You Ever Hear of Judah Benjamin?" Fictional Representations of the Jewish Confederate

by

Michael Hoberman*

Why have so many people written about Judah Benjamin's smile? Eli Evans, Benjamin's preeminent biographer, paints a vivid picture of it in *The Jewish Confederate*. "His ample cheeks," Evans writes, "almost cherubic in their plumpness, seemed to tug the corners of his mouth upward into a permanent half-smile, giving him the aura of a man at peace with himself and content in his life's work."[1] Every writer who has ever attempted to tell Benjamin's story not only mentions the smile but, like Evans, assigns great meaning to it. Naturally novelists go to town. Even the ones whose fictional retellings purport to stick close to the historical evidence feature the smile prominently in their characterizations. In Dara Horn's words it remains a "perpetual mysterious smile" that newspaper articles made famous.[2] In his recent biography of Benjamin for the Yale Jewish Lives series, James Traub quotes Varina Davis on the subject of Benjamin's "courtesy in argument," which, as the Confederate first lady put it, didn't preclude him from "smilingly" vanquishing his opponents in debates.[3] Harry Turtledove, a best-selling writer of speculative "alternative history," goes one further. His book *Guns of the South* tells the story of what would have happened if time-traveling Afrikaners had visited the Confederacy in its hour of need and gifted its leaders with enough AK-47s to win the Civil War. That book indicates that Benjamin's smile "claimed that he knew more about matters of state than any other three people living."[4]

* The author may be contacted at mhoberman@fitchburgstate.edu.

Like the man, the smile is both a tell-all and a consistent lacuna, a gesture that can and does signify whatever we want or need it to signify and then some. That is a great deal of symbolic pressure for so many writers to be placing upon a single person's facial expression—after all, does not *every* human being have a distinct smile? Evidently, Benjamin's case is a special one. He is the embodiment—or, more specifically, the envisagement—of so many Jewish American dialectics: confidence and anxiety, principle and weakness, certitude and doubt. As Eli Evans reminds us, Benjamin served as "the prototype of the contradictions in the Jew, the Southerner and stranger in the Confederate story." He was "the Jew at the eye of the storm that was the Civil War."[5] Who would fail to find a way to smile under all that pressure and expectation? Benjamin's "mysterious" facial expression is an invitation of sorts, a vacancy that doubles as a powerful signifier of whatever contemporaries and authors want it to mean. Is he pleased with himself? Eager to please others? Is he proud of who he is and who people think he is? Is he ashamed? Does he approve of the political cause for which he stands, or does he harbor misgivings about it? Is he sure that he will succeed, or is he afraid he will fail? Fiction writers who have portrayed Judah Benjamin have conferred an outsized, symbolically burdened significance upon him.

Exploring fictional characterizations of Judah Benjamin, especially as twentieth- and early twenty-first-century novelists formulated them, allows us to track changing attitudes towards the legacy of Jewish slaveholders in the antebellum South. Representations of this one man have varied greatly through the decades, but they have retained one stable quality. Whether they approve or disapprove of, or are simply intrigued by his example, the fiction writers who have featured him in their novels assign meaning to his acts *because* he was a Jew who happened as well to be a southerner of signal importance.

Naturally, fictional views of Benjamin have shifted in accordance with shifting mores toward race in America. In the years leading up to the Civil War centennial, a pervasive reconciliatory spirit (among whites, at any rate) allowed and even encouraged southerners to cling to the Lost Cause mentality. Fiction writers could claim Benjamin as a well-intentioned person who believed in the justness of the Confederacy's fight and was therefore ennobled through his service to that belief. Post–1960s versions of Benjamin have been more troubled by his wholehearted

Adolph Rinck, Judah P. Benjamin, *1853.*
(Courtesy of The Louisiana Supreme Court Portrait Collection.)

participation not only in the waging of a war to retain slavery as an institution but by his own slaveholding. What has not changed, however, is the *reason* that fiction writers care about him in the first place. Despite the fact that he never embraced his Jewishness in any certifiable way, novelists care about him because he was understood by all around him to be a Jew. In accordance with my interest in how people remember and represent the phenomenon of Jewish slaveholding, this essay classifies depictions of Benjamin through the years in order to think more deeply about how American Jews have engaged the subject of race.

For a man who, as the historians tell us, went so far out of his way to eliminate as many written traces as possible of his career, Benjamin has garnered oceans of ink at the hands of imaginative writers. Yet remember what the man wanted to happen or at least said he wanted to happen. In Pierce Butler's 1906 biography of Benjamin, we read of an interview that Francis Lawley, an aspiring British journalist and biographer, conducted with the former Confederate statesman in 1883, in which Benjamin asserted: "Even if I had health, and desired ever so much to help you in your work, I have no materials available for the purpose. I have never kept a diary, or retained a copy of a letter written by me. No letters addressed to me by others will be found among my papers when I die."[6] As Lawley explained—and this really tells us a great deal of what we need to know—Benjamin was worried lest "the passions and prejudices of writers" would yield a version of himself that would be out of keeping with the true story, or at least the story he would have wanted to have been told. I cannot help at this juncture but be reminded of a more recent subject of Jewish American biographical controversy, namely Philip Roth (more on him later). Where Roth sought, as we now know, to influence and guide the story of his triumphs without allowing insight into their sordid accompaniments, we see that Benjamin—a much different man—rather than seeking to shepherd the written record of his legacy, took steps toward eliminating it altogether by destroying his private papers.

The results, like the men, share little in common except for one thing: they remind us that living people remember dead people the way they want and need to remember them. Neither an absence of evidence nor a superabundance of it offers any impediment to the fashioning of stories that are not only compelling, but that fulfill our determination to derive meaning from the past in the present and unravel the mysteries that attend

the acquisition of power by unlikely candidates. Cultural fixations exert a shaping influence over fictional characterizations that can, at times, equal the effects of what the characters in question said or did in their lifetimes. Fictional portrayals of noteworthy public figures afford insight into the contradictory meanings and expectations that a citizenry attaches to its most colorful, or at least most controversial, characters.

As we consider Benjamin's posthumous fictional legacy, we note the parallels between it and that of Benjamin Disraeli, the converted Jew who served as Great Britain's prime minister through the 1870s. As biographer Adam Kirsch points out, Disraeli's period as the most powerful figure in Britain coincided with the publication in 1876 of two important novels—George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Anthony Trollope's *The Prime Minister*—both of which featured prominent treatment of Jews and Judaism. These novels offered diametrically opposing answers to the question that had motivated their authors: "Can a Jew be an Englishman?" Neither of these novels were *about* Disraeli, but both "testified," as Kirsch writes, "to the imaginative climate" that existed around him owing to the fact of his Jewish origins.[7] Fictional depictions of Jewish characters provided an outlet for a wider societal investigation of the parameters and limits of English identity in the Victorian era.

Within the North American context, fictional representations of Benjamin, like fictional representations of other "early American Jews" (I am using quotation marks because people's ideas of what *early* means as it relates to Jewish history in North America seem to differ), bear the strain of overuse. With so few Jews and even fewer Jews who left written records of their innermost thoughts and experiences, we rely heavily on the handful of stories that can be assembled out of the archive. Sunday school children who want to know what it meant to be a Jew in the era of the American Revolution are handed books about the noble Haym Solomon. Rebecca Gratz's story provides our graceful guide to the lives of Jewish women in the early republic. When the stories we can tell on the basis of archival sources are too fragmentary or not compelling enough for popular retelling, we invent: Gene Wilder, for example, as Avram Belinski in *The Frisco Kid*. How else would we know how Jews experienced the Gold Rush? That is how the game is played. Readers who are interested in how Jews experienced the Civil War—surely one of the most written-about and fictionalized episodes in American history—encounter

multiple depictions of Judah Benjamin, even though thousands of other Jews served in the Union and Confederate armies and 150,000 Jews who were not named Judah Benjamin called America home in 1860. Over a dozen novels published since the 1940s have featured Benjamin as a character of interest, if not as a protagonist. The earliest novel I have identified, Oscar Leonard's *Americans All: Grandfather Tells Benny How Jews Helped in the Discovery and Building of America,* was published in 1941. Dara Horn's *All Other Nights*, in which the Confederate statesman does not figure as a protagonist but plays an absolutely pivotal role, was published in 2009.

The moral quandaries that the racial question imposes on us compound the complexities of Benjamin's fictional legacy. As a slave owner and ardent Confederate, the man who came to be known as "The Brains of the Confederacy" throws a giant wrench into the already difficult process of thinking through Jewish racial identity in the United States. During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, as David Weinfeld notes, southern Jews in particular tended to celebrate Benjamin's legacy. Their "celebration of the Lost Cause symbolized" their "loyalty to the white South" and their willingness to embrace a form of commemoration that was tantamount to "a civil religion."[8]

In contrast, during the contemporary era, many Jewish Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line have formed the habit of assuming that their Jewishness precludes their participation in and furtherance of white supremacy. The vaunted alliance that Jews and Blacks formed in the civil rights era was built around just such an assumption. In words that come close to summarizing the experience of an entire generation of middle-class American Jews, historian Marc Dollinger, the author of *Black Power/Jewish Politics*, recalls his days as a child attending Sunday school in suburban southern California in the 1970s. "We learned," Dollinger writes, "how so many Jews risked their lives to protest segregation and, how, in the shadow of the Holocaust, each of us needed to do our part to ensure that no one faced persecution again."[9] Perhaps because so many of us think of ourselves as the victims of historical oppression, we adopt what Amy Cohen, in a recent *Tablet* article, refers to as "a typical Yankee perspective" whose heritage consists of "abolitionism, the Underground Railroad, [and] the Harlem Renaissance" to the exclusion of "slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and voter suppression." In Cohen's case, the realization that she had a Confederate great-great grandfather acted as a point of

curiosity and not much else—it was what she "could use to trip people up in games of Two Truths and a Lie."[10]

Benjamin gives the lie to the two truths. He is the Jew who should be a liberator who happens instead to be an oppressor. Or, as a more tempered variation on that theme, perhaps, he is the Jew who is trying to be a mite less oppressive than everyone else around him. He is the Jew who should be looking out for the welfare of his fellow Jews but, instead, is scheming to achieve personal success. Or, if we prefer to cast him in a more positive variation on that second theme, perhaps he is the Jew whose pursuit of personal success is meant to put his fellow Jews in a better light. He is the Jew who ought to be an independent thinker but, instead, acts the part of a blindly loyal acolyte who will go to any extreme to prove his patriotism, albeit to a nation that was formed by a treasonous act. Of course, he might actually be the Jew whose loyalty to that cause is so great and selfless that he will do whatever he can to save it from destroying itself. Whoever he is, he is never the person who, as Dara Horn writes, he "had been born to be."[11] Benjamin defied expectations at every turn. In a part of the world where Jews typically attained prominence through mercantile activity, he became a planter and a statesman. He left no evidence that he cared what his fellow Jews felt about his actions and accomplishments.

The smile keeps us guessing, and the stories that fiction writers have been inspired to tell about the man behind the gesture provide insightful lessons about who Jews-who-are-not-who-they-are-born-to-be are supposed to be. Oddly enough, these fictional renderings show that even Jews who are not born to be whoever it is that Jews are not supposed to be end up being those identical things. That is another way of saying that these Jews, or at least this particular Jew, no matter what he did or what we think he did, could not avoid being thought of as a Jew.

In surveying the range of fictional treatments of Judah P. Benjamin, I have identified three dominant motifs, each of which takes shape in keeping with the thematic pairings I have just delineated, and each of which derives its salience from one stable, or seemingly stable factor: the subject's Jewishness and all of its implied meanings within the framing context of American history.

The Jewish moralist or antimoralist offers the most dominant order of motifs. This motif allows fiction writers to explore the greatest dilemma,

or mystery, of all: how could a man who was so obviously the target of cultural and religious prejudice declare and enact his loyalty to a cause whose primary purpose was the enforced subjugation of millions of fellow human beings? Or, as Traub puts it, how could Benjamin have squandered the "charm, brilliance, [and] tact" with which he had been gifted in "the defense of slavery"?[12] The second motif I have coined is that of the Jewish maverick, or high achiever. Fiction writers who explore this motif want to know whether this reputedly brilliant jurist, legislator, and statesman was in it for himself—was his motivation purely mercenary in nature?—or whether he was, in fact, bent on gaining personal success and recognition because he wanted to prove to his detractors that Jews could be high achievers. The loyal Jew motif comprises a third approach. In a post–Napoleonic world, where Jews sought recognition as full-fledged citizens of nation-states, what would they have to do and to what lengths might they have to travel in order to prove their civic devotion? Fictional authors have interpreted Benjamin's loyalty, first to the state he represented in the Senate and eventually to the Confederacy, in a variety of ways. Was his loyalty a sign of personal virtue or, at the opposite extreme, indicative of a personal deficiency? Either way, the question of loyalty returns us to the North Star that guides all Benjamin depictions: to most of the people around him, possibly to himself, but most certainly to those of us who experience him as a historical personage, he was born to be a Jew in America whose truest loyalties remain a subject of speculation.

The (A)moralist: Slave-Holding Abolitionist or Would-Be "First Jewish President of a Major Country"?

No fictional portrayal of Judah Benjamin is as extreme in its eagerness to declare the Confederate statesman entirely exempt from moral condemnation as that of Oscar Leonard in his 1941 book, *Americans All: Grandfather Tells Benny How Jews Helped in the Discovery and Building of America*. Leonard's depiction, which was brought to my attention through Adam Mendelsohn's research on Jewish American renderings of the Civil War, offers a story whose fabrication brings to mind the story of Moses killing the slave-beater in Exodus. It is difficult to resist the temptation to quote it in full, as Mendelsohn did in a footnote accompanying his article. The story not only represents Benjamin as an unusually "humane" slaveholder but as someone whose insistence upon decent treatment of chattel

Oscar Leonard,
Americans All, 1941.
(*AbeBooks.com.)*

originates in his strong sense of Jewish identity. While riding a wagon through his plantation, the fictionalized Benjamin witnesses his hired overseer administering lashes to one of his slaves. Benjamin speaks the sort of judgment we might expect to issue from the mouth of a biblical prophet:

> Suddenly he stopped talking and jumped [from] the carriage. He ran toward the sound of a cruel, angry voice and the swift lashing of a whip. The fury in Benjamin's voice was controlled as he spoke in low, steady tones. "Who gave you the right to beat a helpless slave?" Before him stood his overseer, a whip now limply at his side, and a frightened and trembling Negro. The man stammered hesitantly. "But he sassed me." "You know my wishes in these matters. Complaints are to be brought before me. I will not tolerate whippings on my plantation. Is that clear?" The overseer muttered: "I worked on plantations before, for gentlemen . . . " Benjamin's face was severe as he cut in. "I know. You never worked for a Jew before."[13]

To quote Mendelsohn, pure inventions like Leonard's render "historical accuracy" itself a "lost cause."[14] I will resist the temptation to list all of the ways in which this depiction of Benjamin strays from the demonstrable, substantiated truth of who he was and what we know about him. Instead, and in order to follow a more thematically salient method of dismissing the passage's total and fascinating fabrications, I point to the three central components of its efforts to establish Benjamin's bona fides as a moral being. First, Leonard invests Benjamin with *physical*, as well as intellectual authority by describing Benjamin's agility in hopping out of his carriage (was it moving as he did so?), the steadiness of his voice, and the "severity" of his face. (This last point also offers an interesting counterpoint to the famous smile.) Second, the novelist establishes the confidence the plantation owner invests in his power as he asserts dominance over the overseer—he is the opposite of a cowering Jew. Finally, and most significantly, the quotation establishes a basis for all of these aspects of Benjamin's actions in the notion that it is his strong sense of Jewish identity that impels him to forbid cruelty toward enslaved people. Again, the lack of hard evidence for any of these aspects of Leonard's depiction is beside the point. What matters is that the author is bent on establishing an idea of what Jewish racial justice meant, or ought to have meant, in antebellum America.

Howard Denson follows in Leonard's footsteps in believing in the "progressive" nature of Benjamin's views on race. His recent self-published and quite fanciful murder mystery series goes so far as to join Benjamin to a Black partner and amanuensis. Denson offers an egalitarian-minded and *Huckleberry Finn*–like characterization of the U.S. senator and Confederate statesman-to-be. In *The Case of the Anniversary Libation*, Benjamin's efforts as an innovative amateur detective inspire him to free the enslaved, Louisiana-born Horatio T. Burdette and arrange for his education in the North.[15] Judah Benjamin, the racial moralist, also makes a significant appearance in *Gettysburg*, the 2003 what-if novel by the arch-conservative former legislator, historian, and sometime novelist Newt Gingrich (along with coauthor William Forstchen). In Gingrich and Fortschen's depiction, Benjamin plays the part of a go-between who arranges for Robert E. Lee to have dinner with an abolitionist Baltimore rabbi—presumably based on David Einhorn—who convinces the Confederate general that a South that wishes to be victorious must seize the moral

high ground from Lincoln and issue its own Emancipation Proclamation. Here again, we see that a fictionalized Benjamin, *because* he is a Jew, does his part to achieve a just result, racially speaking.[16]

A somewhat less strident version of Benjamin as a racial justice moralist features prominently in *Beloved,* a 1956 novel about the Jewish statesman by Viña Delmar (née Alvina Louise Croter). Delmar depicts him as a sympatico character, a man most motivated in life by love for his disloyal wife and devotion to the Confederacy. Delmar highlights Benjamin's 1842 defense, before the Louisiana Supreme Court, of an insurance company that transported enslaved people along the southeastern coast. In order to win the case and spare his clients the cost of paying for a party of slaves who had rebelled and jumped ship in the British colony of Nassau where slavery had already been outlawed, Benjamin highlighted the humanity of the Black people who could not help but liberate themselves when they got the chance to do so. To win the day he argued that the carriers whose interests he represented could not be held responsible for the actions of their freedom-seeking human cargo.

Viña Delmar,
Beloved, *1965.*
(Courtesy of Michael Hoberman.)

While Delmar fails to approach Leonard's level of fabrication in her representation of this episode in Benjamin's legal career, her selection of it from among the many cases that her protagonist argued in the course of his pre–Civil War legal career suggests her interest in establishing a claim for Benjamin's status as a moral being who wished to redress the barbarities of slavery. His most recent biographer also focuses attention on Benjamin's alleged "ambivalence" on the racial question. Traub's study actually begins with this same 1842 episode and, elsewhere, wonders whether Benjamin's encounters with resourceful and intelligent free Blacks in New Orleans may have troubled his outwardly facing devotion to upholding racial hierarchies.[17]

Elsewhere in *Beloved*, Viña Delmar's Benjamin airs his views on the subject of emancipation when a hostile and Jew-baiting member of the Davis cabinet grills him. LeRoy Walker, who served as the first Confederate secretary of war, asks him to declare his sentiments on slavery, and Benjamin speaks in favor of the institution's preservation not so much on the grounds of Black inferiority but of expediency and southern pride. He simply dislikes the idea of caving in to arrogant Yankee demands. As he puts it to Walker, "If the South had said, 'Let us free them all,' I would have replied, 'Splendid, let us do it.'"[18] Delmar would have her readers believe that Benjamin was, at worst, indifferent to the prospect of freeing slaves and, at best, in favor of it on the grounds that, as he puts it, it is "unfair to withhold learning from them and then judge them as lesser people because they have no learning." Benjamin's 1865 proposal to free Blacks willing to fight for the Confederacy must certainly have been a factor in Delmar's inclusion of the conflict between her hero and Walker as a central episode in her novel. That she elevates this conflict to such a high level of prominence is indicative of her eagerness to draw a moral distinction between the Jewish Confederate and his gentile counterparts.

Depictions like those of Leonard, Denson, and Delmar linked Benjamin's purported decency on the racial question to his Jewishness. But fiction writers' fixation with the question of his moral character and the influence that his identity and status as a Jew might have had over his stance on the slavery issue does not end there. After all, if Benjamin failed to live up to twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers' expectations that, as a Jew, he had a moral obligation to stand up for other oppressed peoples, he would be no less interesting as a fictional character. While I

have not yet found a fictional rendering that portrays him as a ruthless oppressor of Blacks, a version of Benjamin who is notably untroubled by his role in the continued enforcement of slavery and racial hierarchy can be found in Robert Skimin's "alternative history" novel *Gray Victory* (1988). In this plot-driven thriller, Benjamin comes across as the same inscrutable figure that he tends to be in the historical biographies, but one matter is made plain: his Jewish identity not only does not predispose him to feel or act upon any sympathy for Black people, but rather may influence him to act in opposition to such an expectation. Skimin's "what-if" takes shape around a Confederate victory in the war (which he concludes during fall 1863) and an imagined postwar trial of J. E. B. Stuart, Lee's chief of cavalry, who was actually killed in combat. Stuart is put on trial for the failure of the southern army, notwithstanding its ultimate triumph in the war, to prevail at Gettysburg. A major subplot within this action- and famous personality-filled novel is the attempt on the part of a group of desperate abolitionists, including both Blacks and whites, and John Brown's son Salmon, to foment a rebellion against the rebellion and overthrow the Confederate government.

Skimin's novel portrays Benjamin as a predatory, amoral figure whose apparent indifference to Black suffering is compounded not only by his transparent ambition, but also by his disturbing eagerness to exploit women. As the novel's abolitionist plot thickens, Verita, a light-skinned Black woman posing as the agent of a Confederacy-friendly French government, is assigned the task of seducing Benjamin in order to assess his knowledge of the coming Black rebellion. She is particularly bent on finding out whether he is aware that several prominent Jews have been contributing to the clandestine attack on the Confederacy. The novel's hypersexualized Benjamin seems only to care about taking Verita to bed in the short term and achieving the ultimate political triumph in the long term. In his state of arousal, he tells Verita, before explaining how he plans to pursue his goal: "I want to be the first Jewish president of a major country." "Do you think you have a chance?" she asks him in the course of one of their several precoital tête-à-têtes. After all, as she puts it, "doesn't the South resent Jews almost as much as Negroes?"[19]

Skimin's libidinous Benjamin is as far a cry from Leonard's mercy-dispensing, lawgiving Benjamin as can be imagined. In this prelude to one of the several sex scenes in which we learn just how evil and slimy of

Robert Skimin, Gray Victory, *1988. (Amazon.com.)*

a Jew he is, Benjamin cannot hold back on telling his lover (and eventual assassin) how he plans to gain that power. "His eyes bore into hers, radiating his natural confidence," Skimin writes, before directly employing his character as the mouthpiece for a history lesson. "I've been attorney general, secretary of War, and secretary of State in this government," Benjamin says, "and at times during the war, I was called the Brains of the Confederacy. Certainly, these are logical qualifications." Naturally, Verita wants to know more about the timing of Benjamin's planned rise to the presidency. "I must be patient," he tells her, before explaining that he expects Jefferson Davis to be reelected and then succeeded by Robert E. Lee. "Then it will be my turn."[20] It is difficult not to imagine the rising sound

of demonic and dastardly laughter accompanying this announcement on Benjamin's part.

What Skimin does not account for in this depiction is any sense of why this character who never declares or demonstrates his Jewishness would harbor any ambition to be the "first Jewish" anything. The closest Benjamin ever comes to making *any* pronouncement on Judaism is when he tells Verita that, notwithstanding his evident failure to take a moral stance on the slavery issue, he recognizes that "it's in the Jewish nature" to side with the oppressed. Apparently, and in keeping with a common antisemitic trope, it can also be in "the Jewish nature" to ignore such tendencies in pursuit of personal aggrandizement. Ultimately within the framework of the morality motif, Benjamin's Jewishness can only bear one of two possible aspects. It can, in the imagination of Leonard, Denson, or Delmar, be an extension of his Moses-like rectitude and sympathetic underdog character. In opposition, Skimin's Benjamin is no less of a vehicle for exploring the question of Jewish morality. In his wholehearted abandonment of any attachment to the moral compass that is supposed to be something he was "born" to cherish and honor, this "evil" Benjamin is still, fundamentally, a Jew, albeit of the "hypocritical" or "morally wayward" variety.

The Benjamin-as-moralist motif encompasses a range of possibilities, each of which hinges on some connection between Benjamin's Jewish origins and his attitude toward race. From Oscar Leonard's filiopietistic (and delusional) version of a physically courageous and justice-seeking Jewish humanitarian to Robert Skimin's patently antisemitic assumption that Benjamin's deranged indifference to the victimization of women and Blacks was a direct function of his Jewishness, one factor remains unchanged: his feelings about the oppression of Black people are dictated by his symbolically fraught positioning as a southern Jew. In historical terms, not much evolution occurs. Leonard's *Uncle Benny* bears the earmarks of a left-leaning, solidarity-based critique of Jim Crow injustice, even as it was also a product of the Holocaust era, a time when American Jews, by and large, felt extraordinary pressure to conform to mainstream Americanism. Leaving aside its racier aspects, Skimin's version of Benjamin, despite its 1988 vintage, could just as easily have emerged in the 1920s or 1930s, when ascendant antisemites had the upper hand and images of exploitative Jews in fiction were commonplace.

The Maverick: Agent of White Supremacy and a Weak Jew Besides

Whether or not Judah Benjamin deserves recognition as the most highly placed Jewish government official in American history is a matter of perspective and parameters. Does the Confederacy count as part of America? Does it matter if your face appears on paper currency if the country that issued that currency no longer exists? Does Henry Kissinger's three-and-a-half-year service as secretary of state under Nixon and Ford surpass Benjamin's four years of cabinet service under Jefferson Davis? Should we take Madeleine Albright, who may have only discovered her Jewish heritage late in life, into account? How long will Antony Blinken hang in there? Be these comparisons as they may, Benjamin's access to

Confederate currency featuring the likeness of Judah P. Benjamin, 1862. (Wikimedia Commons.)

power and ability to wield it taunts us with visions of individual Jewish achievement within the wider context of a gentile-dominated, secular state. It reminds us that whatever the state of Jewish collectivity might have been in the antebellum years, a Jew could and did attain high status on the merits of his intellect and ambition.

Philip Roth presents this use of Benjamin in his acclaimed 2004 novel *The Plot Against America.* In episode two of HBO's recent production of the novel, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (John Turturro) drawls out a brief overview of Benjamin's career. He was, as Bengelsdorf puts it, the "Jewish lawyer who served [Jefferson] Davis as attorney general, as secretary of

war, and as secretary of state."[21] Bengelsdorf, a Lindbergh apologist and the son of a German-born South Carolina Jewish peddler and veteran of the Confederate army, tries his best to convince the Levin family that Jewish boys like their eldest son Sandy will be accepted as real Americans if they first become real Confederates. While careful to point out that "the cause for which the South went to war was neither legal nor moral," Bengelsdorf does not tell Benjamin's story only because it represents a high-water mark of Jewish political achievement in America. Why Bengelsdorf chooses to share Benjamin's story with the Levins and not, say, Haym Solomon's has everything to do with *what Benjamin did* in order to prove his American bona fides and gain access to the corridors of governmental power. That his visage remains the only Jewish one ever to have made it onto paper currency (during his lifetime, no less) is by no means insignificant. Benjamin went to great lengths to arrive at that result.

Bengelsdorf gets one thing wrong about Benjamin, and Roth is the witting or unwitting source of the error—the HBO production takes the

Philip Roth,
The Plot Against America,
2004. (Amazon.com.)

John Turturro as Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf in HBO's production of The Plot Against America, *2020. (IMDB.)*

rabbi's words directly from the pages of the novel. He refers to Benjamin as "one of South Carolina's two senators" when, in fact, despite his having spent his childhood in Charleston, he represented Louisiana in the Senate.[22] Factual errors in novels—and especially in works of alternate historical fiction like *The Plot Against America*—need not give us enormous pause. As such novels go, *The Plot* is rather staid and even "realistic" in its scope. After all, instead of relying on time-traveling AK-47–wielding Afrikaners or seductive French-speaking female assassins to make its counterfactual point, it deploys the more plausible and familiar power of xenophobic populism in American politics as its central speculative device. Bengelsdorf's mistaken reference to Benjamin representing South Carolina rather than Louisiana gains importance because it is indicative of a larger pattern in fictional depictions of the Jewish Confederate statesman: the facts are of less consequence than the meanings that people attach to them. Why *should not* the quintessential Jewish Confederate have represented the state that was at once the most Confederate (the first to secede) and the most Jewish (Charleston hosted the nation's largest Jewish

population when Benjamin grew up there in the early 1820s)? Changeable facts are less important than stable and meaning-laden subtexts. The subtext that attaches to Roth's erring reference to Benjamin having represented South Carolina is that ambitious Jews who accrue political power in America can only do so at a cost. In the contemporary Jewish American imagination, a South Carolinian, Confederate Jew represents a character type extraordinaire—the Jew who is so hungry for personal power that he sells his Jewishness for a mess of potage and worships at the temple of white supremacy.

It is no coincidence that Benjamin's brief mention by Bengelsdorf occurs on the heels of one of the Roth novel's only overt invocations of the race issue. Sandy Levin has just returned to Newark from a summer spent living with a Christian family (the Mawhinneys) on a Kentucky tobacco farm as a participant in the Lindbergh administration's "Just Folks" de-Jewification program. Bengelsdorf's visit to the Levin household follows a dialogue sequence in which Philip plies his older brother with questions about what it was like to live with a family of southern gentiles. After Sandy describes to him how the Black farmhands who work for the Mawhinneys eat chitterlings, Philip wants to know whether Sandy ate them. The question evokes an alarmed and defensive response from this newly minted southern apologist: "Do I look like a Negro?"[23] The older brother understands and accepts the only terms upon which a Jew might hope to survive a fascist takeover in a society whose defining principle is a fixed racial hierarchy. Bengelsdorf, who evidently internalized this lesson early in life, is also eager to learn how Sandy's indoctrination has proceeded. The rabbi is thrilled to hear how thoroughly regionalized the boy has become in the course of a single summer—little Philip notices that both Bengelsdorf and Sandy Levin pronounce Kentucky's first three letters as "K-i-n." He then regales the family with the tale of Benjamin, the man who, according to the mythology, would certainly have perfected the art of being a southern Jew if only the Lost Cause had not been lost. Bengelsdorf has ventured a similar gamble in attaching his personal fortunes to Lindbergh's "America First" presidency, which views Hitler as a man of peace.

Strangely, Roth's representation of Benjamin as a sellout echoes the approach taken by "the queen of family-saga writers," Belva Plain (née Belva Offenberg), in her 1984 novel *Crescent City*, which Eli Evans

described in his *New York Times* review as a Jewish version of *Gone with the Wind*. Benjamin is fairly tangential to the action of Plain's novel. He exemplifies wrong-headedness, twisted ambition, and betrayal whenever the story's primary Jewish characters require a foil for their slightly less compromised behavior. One character, the reality-based Edwin Israel Kursheedt, who actually served in the Confederate army, judges Benjamin harshly on the basis of the statesman's failure to live up to expectations around his Jewish identity. "It's an old story," says the devoutly raised Kursheedt, scion of the minister of New York's pioneer congregation. "When Jews rise to great prominence there comes a temptation to take the easy social path and forget one's heritage."[24] He then singles out New Orleans's two most famous nineteenth-century Jewish Judahs—Touro and Benjamin—for censure. Elsewhere in Plain's novel, when a less sympathetic (and non-Jewish) character refers disparagingly to Benjamin, then the secretary of war, as the cause of the Confederate defeat at Roanoke

Belva Plain, Crescent City, *1984. (Goodreads.)*

Island in 1862, his would-be Jewish defender, Miriam Raphael, one of the novel's protagonists, echoes Kursheedt's earlier condemnation in her private thoughts: Benjamin was "a Jew, but not much of one."[25] Where Roth singles out the Confederate statesman for his reprehensible views on race, Plain—whose primary concern in *Crescent City* seems to have been to produce a southern romance with Jewish overtones—writes him off as a poor excuse for a Jew whose eagerness to rise through the ranks of American and southern society precluded any loyalty to the religion and culture of his birth.

Perhaps in the spirit of American Jews' midcentury rise into middle-class respectability, the two Benjamin-depicting novels that hew most closely to the "Jew as maverick" motif fix their attention on a similar question: can a Jew like Benjamin who achieves high status in American politics do so without relinquishing his legitimacy as a member of the Jewish community? Especially in the aftermath of World War II and the civil rights era, authors like Philip Roth and Belva Plain would have been all the more likely to wonder. Roth, in particular, whose ties to the Jewish community were, at every stage in his career, complicated by his own status as a maverick, pursued this question primarily through his depiction of Lionel Bengelsdorf, the rabbi who brings Benjamin's career to the attention of the fictional Roth family of Holocaust-era Newark. The Bengelsdorf/Benjamin depictions in *The Plot Against America*, a self-styled by-product of the George W. Bush era, are particularly salient since Roth never made a secret of his opposition to Republican regimes: his 1971 novel, *Our Gang*, is a sendup of the Nixon administration, which, of course, prominently featured Henry Kissinger. While Roth resisted the assumption that he bore any responsibility to the Jewish community, he devoted his career to exploring the lives and compromises of Jewish men in America.

Loyal Citizen: The Devoted Lover or the Spurned Victim?

Benjamin's story also offers an opportunity for novelists to explore the meaning of Jewish loyalty in America. Was the zealousness with which Benjamin served his Louisiana constituents a testament to the high regard he felt for their interests and well-being? In his fulfillment of three cabinet posts in the Jefferson Davis administration—each of which resulted in large measures of anti-Jewish ire being directed not only at him

but at the man who entrusted him with so much power—was he trying his best to demonstrate the depth of his loyalty to the rebel cause? Does he earn admiration for such "selfless" service in the name of a political and military effort, or, on the contrary, ought we view him as an abased creature whose eagerness to please people who, at bottom, felt a boundless contempt for him?

The figure of the lover, whether his advances are reciprocated or spurned by the object of desire, epitomizes the loyalist. Featuring Benjamin in the role of the spurned lover, Viña Delmar and Dara Horn assign an almost selfless quality to the Confederate statesman's loyalty. In Delmar's case, the role of lover actually supersedes that of political figure. The novelist's choice of title is indicative. While *Beloved* invests considerable energy in narrating the most significant events in Benjamin's legal and political career, its center of gravity throughout remains the lifelong "love story" that, at least as Delmar describes it, tantalized and tormented him through the several decades of his long-distance marriage to Louisiana-born Natalie St. Martin. Not one for depicting or even hinting in the direction of salaciousness, Delmar avoids painting Benjamin's spouse as the "nymphomaniac" that others have called her. Instead, she gives us a picture of the object of Benjamin's attraction and loyalty to a flighty, easily distracted, and breathtakingly superficial female who is unwilling to remain in one place as her husband goes about proving his worthiness as a public figure. For his part, Delmar's Benjamin resists all temptations to pursue relationships with other women, including the ever-available "quadroons" with whom his friend John Slidell continually tempts him, in Natalie's absence. Delmar evinces even less interest in portraying her subject as the homosexual that some historians claim Benjamin to have been.[26]

When Delmar depicts her hero visiting the pro-Confederate minister Maximilian Michelbacher of Richmond's Beth Ahabah congregation during spring 1863, she represents a conversation between the two men that reifies Benjamin's loyalty to his fellow Jews and to his non-Jewish spouse as the key feature of his personality. While the secretary of state owns that in having married outside of his faith others will *view* him as having betrayed Judaism, he refuses to relinquish his deepest attachments to it. "I have never ceased to think of [my religion] with love and reverence," he tells the religious leader who wonders how such a thing can be true for a

man who, in marrying a Catholic, had essentially excommunicated himself. "How long has your marriage endured," the minister asks. Benjamin's response allows that the thirty years of wedlock with Natalie have not produced "undiluted bliss," but it doubles down on the question of his steadfastness and devotion.[27] He has, he tells Michelbacher, always loved Natalie, always remained faithful to her, and never regretted marrying her. His love for those who would reject him—his people, his matrimonial partner, and his country—know no bounds. Clearly, Benjamin is not the "beloved" figure who inspired Delmar's book title, but the victim of the multiple objects of his unrequited affection. All the same, we should admire him for his willingness to love at all costs.

Dara Horn's Benjamin is hardly as gallant and heroic as Delmar's, but, as her attention to his "love affair" with America attests, she, too, views him as a study in extreme loyalty. Instead of dwelling on his sad marriage to Natalie, Horn fixes attention on Benjamin's childhood and youth as a point of origin for his eagerness to demonstrate loyalty. His devotion was "tortured and tormented":

> Like all the rest of the country's immigrant suitors, Judah Benjamin would do anything to win his country's love. He tried to attract her, to make up for his lack of conventional beauty with his brilliance, his wits, and his charms. He tried to impress her, becoming an attorney who had mastered the very laws that made her who she was.[28]

Regardless of whether or how we perceive him as a Jew, Horn's Benjamin is a profoundly human figure whose "ambition" is of a perfectly understandable and even admirable nature and whose indifference to injustice (and concomitant acquiescence to white supremacy) is entirely beside the point.

It all goes back to a single moment that Horn's imagination conjures as she depicts the secretary of state having a wistful conversation near the end of the war with Jacob Rappaport, the New York-born Jewish spy who has secured a place in the Confederate White House in order to keep tabs on an alleged Lincoln assassination plot. As Benjamin prepares to evacuate the Confederate White House in Richmond and make his escape to England, he tells Rappaport about a time when he and his beloved sister Penina were swimming off the abandoned docks in Charleston Harbor and she saved him from certain drowning by dragging him out of the water in the middle of a powerful thunderstorm. Judah's greatest fear was

Dara Horn,
All Other Nights, *2009.*
(Amazon.)

discovery by his parents, so in an attempt to shield her little brother from punishment, Penina announced to their father that Judah had rescued her from the roiling waters.[29] This, in turn, inspired Judah's father Philip to believe that his son possessed the maturity necessary to leave home and attend Yale at the tender age of fourteen. The possible implications from this story are myriad—that all Judah ever wanted was to be loved by his father, that his entire life was based on a fraudulent story, that he viewed himself right up until the end of his Confederate career, at any rate, as an inadequate and inauthentic being. From a young age, he had boxed himself into a corner and taught himself that the only way in which he might earn other people's love would be to maintain his composure, keep smiling, and forge ahead no matter the cost to his personal dignity or reputation. If there is a romantic element to be found in such a story and such a fate, it is of a singularly sad variety. We are meant to admire Delmar's Benjamin and pity Horn's Benjamin.

Love, whether of the doomed or the blessed variety, is a timeless interest in literary fiction, and, in this regard, neither Delmar's nor Horn's version of Benjamin appears to be any more the product of its particular era than it is of a novelistic consciousness that seeks to investigate the emotional states of the characters in whom it invests its deepest meanings. That being said, insofar as Delmar's Benjamin appears in other ways to exhibit a Lost Cause mentality that may result from its 1956 vintage, we ought not be surprised that the singularly unrequited nature of his love ennobles him. For her part, Dara Horn, who does not assign sentimental value to the Confederacy in her postmillennial Civil War novel, fails to deliver an admirable Benjamin but, instead, offers us an intriguing, if pitiable, version of him. In both instances, nonetheless, we encounter versions of the Jewish Confederate who engages our interest because of his acts of heedless devotion.

The Lost Cause as a Fictional Device

A lost cause demands doomed heroes like Judah Benjamin, and, if those heroes repeatedly prove to be based upon imaginative constructs, we ought not be surprised. Since the Confederacy was a fictional device unto itself, a political and military experiment in storytelling to fit a particular need, its production of a heroic pantheon had, by necessity, to rely upon the conjuring of fanciful figures. Since its demise, as so many of us have become especially aware in the last few years, its partisans shaped the very landscape of the South with their statues and memorial parks. The fictional legacy of the Confederacy has been an industry unto itself, from the earliest coinage of the phrase "Lost Cause" by Edward A. Pollard in 1866, to its popular culture apotheosis in *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind,* down to the present-day Sons of Confederate Veterans and the adherents of the "Heritage, not hate" campaign.

Its Jewish component, whose presence vexes common formulas and motifs, makes Judah Benjamin's fictionalization as a Lost Cause icon noteworthy. Jewish Americans, like those who would commemorate the South's rebellion in the Civil War, want to tell inspiring stories and elevate worthy heroes. The "ghosts in gray" who populate the romances of the South demonstrate all sorts of heroic properties, from battle-hardened stoicism to dashing courage to romantic devotion to a doomed spirit of chivalry. Notwithstanding the tradition that, for decades, conferred a

mantle of dignified "decency" upon Robert E. Lee, among other Confederate heroes, no one expects them to be symbols of humanitarian justice.[30] No one assigns them the role of upholding a minority faith in a land in which Christianity reigns. No one imagines them to be proud representatives of a foreign-born tribe. Judah Benjamin's fate as a fictional character related him to both sets of standards. To make his story meaningful to both of its two constituencies simultaneously is a tall order that cannot help but put an unwieldy imaginative strain on its tellers, especially in the present day. A Judah Benjamin who meets our contemporary criteria for Jewish heroism would be an unconvincing Confederate. A Benjamin who deserved consideration as a Confederate hero would be a *shanda*.

NOTES

The genesis of this article was a talk I gave at the 2021 (online) conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. Portions of the essay were previously published as "The Counterlife of Judah P. Benjamin," *Tablet*, August 20, 2020, accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/judah-benjamin.

[1] Eli N. Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin: The Jewish Confederate* (New York, 1988), 97.

[2] Horn's rendering of Benjamin's smile actually borrows from the poet Stephen Vincent Benet's 1928 epic poem, *John Brown's Body*, in which the Confederate statesman appears as the "dapper Jew" wearing a "perpetual smile." Dara Horn, *All Other Nights* (New York, 2009), 301.

[3] Quoted in James Traub, *Judah Benjamin* (New Haven, 2021), 33.

[4] Harry Turtledove, *The Guns of the South: A Novel of the Civil War* (New York, 1992), 243.

[5] Evans, *Judah P. Benjamin*, 38.

[6] Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin* (Philadelphia, 1906), 8.

[7] Adam Kirsch, *Benjamin Disraeli* (New York, 2008), xv, ix.

[8] David Weinfeld, "Two Commemorations: Richmond Jews and the Lost Cause During the Civil Rights Era," *Southern Jewish History* 23 (2020): 80.

[9] Marc Dollinger, *Black Power/Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA, 2018), x-xi.

[10] Amy Cohen, "Uncovering my Confederate Roots," *Tablet Magazine,* July 27, 2021, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/uncovering-confederate-roots.

[11] Horn, *All Other Nights*, 23.

[12] Traub, *Judah Benjamin*, 6.

[13] Oscar Leonard, *Americans All: Grandfather Tells Benny How Jews Helped in the Discovery and Building of America* (New York, 1945), 114-130.

[14] Adam Mendelsohn, "'A Struggle Which Ended So Beneficently': A Century of Jewish Historical Writing About the American Civil War," *American Jewish History* 92 (December 2004), 454.

[15] Howard Denson, *The Case of the Anniversary Libation, a Judah P. Benjamin–Horatio T. Burdette Mystery* (n.p., 2015), accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Case_of_the_Anniversary_Libation/vDP2jgEACAAJ?hl=en.

[16] Newt Gingrich and William Forstchen, *Gettysburg: A Novel of the Civil War* (New York, 2003).

[17] Traub, *Judah Benjamin*, 1–2.

[18] Viña Delmar, *Beloved* (New York, 1956), 206.

[19] Robert Skimin, *Gray Victory* (New York, 1988), 154.

[20] Ibid.

[21] David Simon and Ed Burns, "Part 4," *The Plot Against America* (HBO miniseries, 2020).

[22] Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York, 2004), 104. Later editions of the novel corrected the error, although the makers of the HBO series took the information from the original, flawed version.

[23] Ibid., 99.

[24] Belva Plain, *Crescent City* (New York, 1984), 111–12.

[25] Ibid., 352.

[26] See Daniel Brook, "The Forgotten Confederate Jew," *Tablet Magazine*, July 17, 2012, accessed February 13, 2022, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/the-forgotten-confederate-jew.

[27] Delmar, *Beloved*, 300.

[28] Horn, *All Other Nights*, 250.

[29] Ibid, 303.

[30] See, for instance, Adam Serwer, "The Myth of the Kindly General Lee," *Atlantic*, June 5, 2017.