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Website Review

Jewish Atlantic World. <http://cdm.reed.edu/cdm4/jewishatlanticworld/>. Created and maintained by the Reed Digital Collections. Reviewed March 2015.

Between 1492 and 1776, Europeans roamed the Atlantic unceasingly. As they sailed by ship in and out of settlements new and old in pursuit of gold and glory, they rapidly expanded and enriched colonial empires and global knowledge. Particularly eager to take to the sea were Jews, many of whom had been rendered homeless by the Spanish expulsion or transformed into crypto-Jews, wary of the Inquisition. Theirs was a time and place that seemed ripe with spiritual and religious meaning. The Safed Kabbalists had revolutionized mystical knowledge and Shabtai Zvi had stirred messianic expectation. These Jews now found themselves in a new world that many—fueled by mystical excitement—understood as laden with messianic import. Today it may seem odd to hear of Jews in places like Curaçao and Jamaica, but in the eighteenth century these were larger and more established Jewish communities than those in Newport, Charleston, Savannah, Philadelphia, and even New York. Arguably up until the 1820s, Jews in the South were Atlantic more than they were British or American, as ties of travel and correspondence, business, and family traversed communities bonded together by the often dark realities of the Atlantic trade.

Even as most studies of American Jewish history begin after 1880, this history reaching back to the beginnings of European contact is receiving renewed scholarly attention. The Jewish Atlantic World database, created by Laura A. Leibman and a team at Reed College, seeks to make this story better known and

its sources more easily accessible. In so doing, it also expands the digital possibilities for American Jewish studies.

In the field of the digital humanities, the emphasis has predominantly been on words, especially those that are difficult to transcribe or translate. Impressive efforts have been undertaken in Jewish studies to put online textual materials related to one site like the Cairo Geniza or the writings of great men such as Isaac Leeser, Isaac Mayer Wise, and Mordecai Kaplan. In contrast, the Jewish Atlantic World database attends to multiple places and to physical, nontextual sources of knowledge, fruitfully benefiting from the methodological insights of two recent scholarly turns, the transnational and the material.

Home page, <http://cdm.reed.edu/cdm4/jewishatlanticworld/>.

The database emerged from research for Leibman's recent book, *Messianism, Mysticism, and Secrecy: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life* (London, 2013), and includes domestic and religious architecture, schoolhouses, funerary art, household items, documents and texts, and images. These can be browsed or searched, and each entry includes a photograph that the user can zoom into, along with basic classificatory data and, for some objects, background information. The bulk of the materials lie in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, although they range from the six-

teenth century to the present and span the Americas and western Europe. Leibman's method catches a wider array of historical actors in her net than do most digital humanities projects—or scholarly monographs, for that matter—including materials used by women, slaves, and non-Jews in a range of locations. This approach helpfully illuminates alternative experiences and provides fodder for exploring important comparisons and broader contexts.

Many of the materials—for instance, synagogue interiors and exteriors—are effectively utilized in Leibman's rich monograph, which includes but does not emphasize Charleston and Savannah. Returning to her materials with an eye toward the regional could bring new insights into the aesthetics and necessities of southern Jewish life within its Atlantic context. For instance, the examples of kitchen implements—ranging from china used in Curaçao to cooking vessels owned by working women in Lowell, Massachusetts—could help us understand what might have been available for use in the everyday lives of southern Jewish women.

Of special note to readers of this journal are the photographs of eighty-five gravestones from Charleston's Coming Street Cemetery before 1902 and fifty-nine gravestones from Savannah's Mordecai Sheftall Cemetery before 1881, which can be used for information on the individuals interred but also to understand changing styles and values. A savvy scholar might compare these with gravestones elsewhere to consider continuities and ruptures in southern Jewish approaches to mourning, death, and the after-life. The funerary art is the heart of the collection, but the ritual baths are also wonderful and could fuel further comparative scholarship. For instance, there are pictures from multiple angles of both the exterior and the interior of the Nidhe Israel Mikveh, built in Bridgetown, Barbados, in the 1650s, which vividly show the presence of Jewish women and the perpetuation of traditional Jewish practice in the Caribbean. This leads one to wonder: Where, when, and how were *mikvaot* built in southern communities? What did they mean to local Jews? And how did they differ from those built elsewhere in the Atlantic world and the American continent?

"Exterior of the Nidhe Israel Mikveh (ca. 1650s) in Bridgetown, Barbados,"
<http://cdm.reed.edu/cdm4/jewishatlanticworld/>.

Apart from the possibilities they raise for new research, the visual materials displayed in this database seem especially well suited for teaching. Leibman and her team prepare for both possibilities, including PDFs of potential assignments on the site along with other resources to aid in using its objects. Also included is an accessibly written blog produced between February 2010 and October 2012, which covers a variety of topics ranging from Purim to family portraits to naming practices.

These supplementary materials are helpful because the objects are largely left to speak for themselves, likely leaving nonspecialists and those who have not read Leibman's book uncertain about how to interpret them. Not all materials are given equal attention or explication, and there is not always a clear rationale for inclusion. Some organizational idiosyncrasies also appear. For instance, there are many different categories to browse, but they cannot be combined to enable, for instance, a view of gravestones organized chronologically. The database can feel a bit haphazard, truly a dip into one scholar's evidence bag. Despite its limits, the Jewish Atlantic World database is an admirable effort and certainly worth browsing for pleasure, research, and/or teaching. In some ways, Leibman has deprived us all of a

great pleasure—she went to the Caribbean so we don't have to—but she has also done a great service, pushing the boundaries of the digital humanities and American Jewish history in ways that will hopefully continue to reverberate in both fields. Leibman reminds us of—and allows us to see for ourselves—the power of the material and the significance of early Jewish adventurers throughout the Americas.

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