

## **And so, it is with us.**

When my parents were married in 1977 some apparently joked that it was a “mixed marriage” because my mother is a Cincinnati Jew of German descent and my father is a Cincinnati Jew of Russian descent. This subtle salvo masquerading as humor always struck me as strange and counterintuitive. The dominant narrative of my reform Jewish education framed our people as united in a collective struggle to return to a literal and metaphoric homeland that was literally and metaphorically stripped from us by oppressors and conquerors. I was taught that in order to overcome these countless attempts at annihilation, we had to stick together—were often forced together—and it was through our unity, our shared desire to preserve our faith and traditions, that we persisted through episode after episode of persecution and slaughter. And so, to me, the notion that the Jews of Cincinnati could find themselves at odds with one another was truly baffling. Here they were, strangers in a strange land—one whose dominant majority yet again sought to diminish their dignity and opportunity—and still they allowed intracultural differences to sow division and discord. Even as I grew older and more aware of similar big-endian-little-endian divisions, I sought to understand the meaning behind this obscure yet familial dichotomy. And so, for my first budget contribution as a member of the Literary Club, I will share the history of and my

perspective on this division, whether we as a Jewish community, have moved past it, and what we as students of history can learn from it.

Jews have lived in this region since at least 1817 when the German-born watchmaker and silversmith, Joseph Jonas proclaimed himself “the first Jew in Cincinnati.” German Jews came to the Queen City generations earlier than their Eastern European counterparts. Seeking economic opportunity and religious freedom, the German Jews flourished in business, medicine, law, and politics. Despite blatant discrimination, they were able to successfully engrain themselves in public life, holding influential positions within Cincinnati’s civic infrastructure. Jewish surnames adorn local buildings and parks—no doubt descendants of the industrious and intellectual German elite who emigrated to the United States throughout the Nineteenth Century.

Perhaps most well-known and well-regarded among these early Cincinnati Jews was Isaac M. Wise, a man whose name has undoubtedly been spoken in this club for over a century with deserved reverence and praise, a man whose name adorns Plum Street Temple’s crowning Moravian architectural achievement. To list his accomplishments and accolades would require another paper altogether, but he is without a doubt one of the most important figures in American Jewish history,

having established institutions, publications, and movements that remain vibrant to this day. I have always felt personally connected to the man, not just in admiration of his legacy, but because we're distant blood relatives on my mother's side.

Isaac's brother had a daughter named Helen who married my Great Grandfather, Jacob Heldman. Protracted as it is, the Heldman family has always celebrated our connection to this legend of intellect and faith. The Heldman family, which can trace its lineage back several centuries, found success in the textile industry and have remained proud and faithful stewards of Cincinnati's cultural, educational, and religious institutions. My mother's family followed the pattern of Jewish flight from Bond Hill to Amberly Village. They attended Rockdale Temple—formerly K.K. Bene Israel, one of the oldest congregations in the United States—and were members of Losantiville, Cincinnati's first Jewish Country Club. The German Jews my mother's family typified did not reflect the parodic stereotypes often associated with the Jewish people. Again, even though they undoubtedly faced anti-Semitism, they enjoyed a kind of community prominence associated with assimilated outsiders. So assimilated were the German Jews, that it would not be surprising to find Christmas trees ornamenting the living rooms of Amberly Village.

My great grandfather on my father's side, Samuel Greenberg, grew up in the Pale of Settlements, the rural Russian Jewish ghetto memorialized by the popular musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Around 1905 or 1906, having tasted something of cosmopolitanism as a procurement manager at one of the Tsar's estates, Sam decided not to return to the Shtetel and instead made his way to America. Sam came to St. Louis by way of Ellis Island, where he met and married Ruth Rosinsky, and the two moved to Covington, KY. Sam worked as a laborer for several years and earned enough to purchase a going concern: a horse-drawn cart out of which he peddled furniture. Family legend has it that upon acquiring the man's business, Sam went to all of his accounts and cancelled their debts in exchange for customer loyalty. In 1929, Sam completed construction on a brick-and-mortar location at 513 Madison Avenue utilizing an advanced type of ironwork that incorporated cross beams that allowed for an open-plan interior without the need for supporting pillars. My grandfather took over the business and ran it with my Grandmother until their retirement in the late 80's. I still meet longtime Covington residents who remember my grandfather for his charisma and kindness, his sense of humor and community, his stories and his generosity. The building at 513 Madison still bears the Greenberg name and I feel a sense of pride whenever I set eyes upon its brick façade.

Fortunately, the joke about my parents' mixed marriage was just that: a joke. My grandparents were thick as thieves and remained close all their lives. The stories and legacies passed down from both sides of my family have imbued my brother and I with a sense of honor and duty. Perhaps this is why the idea of our community's strange divide baffled me as it was the opposite of my experience of Ashkenazi alchemy. But as I grew older, I learned of another side of the American Jewish story. One shades darker than that of the industrious entrepreneur, or the diligent scholar. Jews, like many immigrants facing exclusion and oppression, were drawn to crime as a means of survival. Well known are the violent exploits of New York's "Murder Inc.," a group of mostly Jewish hitmen who operated between 1929 and 1941. Numerous books, films, and television shows portray these infamous and so-called "Tough Jews." Lesser known to audiences beyond our fair hamlet are the Jewish gangsters of Northern Kentucky. Names like "Sleepout" Louis Levinson and Joe and Martin Berman remind us that some Jews in this region rejected notions of polite society in favor of opportunity in the form of gambling casinos, brothels, and strip clubs. No doubt, the erudite German Jews turned up noses at the morally ambivalent lifestyles of their Ashkenazi *chaverim*, even if they sometimes (or often) enjoyed their establishments.

Though these Eastern European peddlers, laborers, and yes, criminals did not enjoy the public prominence and social privileges of their Bavarian counterparts, it would be inaccurate to suggest the Germans completely turned their backs on their fellow Jews. Philanthropic organizations established to provide support and upliftment to the influx of poor Eastern European Jews laid the groundwork for what continues to this day as one of the strongest and impactful Jewish non-profit networks in the country. And yet, according to anecdotes from friends and family, the German Jews did not want their children fraternizing with their Eastern European counterparts, did not want them joining their synagogues or social clubs. The most striking example of which is the fact that for a period of time there were two Jewish Country Clubs just two miles apart from one another. Crest Hills Country Club was no doubt established by Eastern European Jews who were either rejected from or had no desire to be a member of Losantiville.

The division between German and Eastern European Jews in Cincinnati followed a familiar script: the subtle elitism of an established group directed at the perceived weaknesses of a familiar incumbent. One need not look far to find similar examples of intracultural discrimination within other marginalized identities, but I will not elucidate as those are not my stories to tell.

As the theme of our budget is “What’s past is prologue,” I turn my attention to the present. I wish I could say that the Cincinnati Jewish community of today stands united in all things with a shared sense of purpose to preserve, persevere, and perform the work of *tikkun olam*—to repair the world, as one Jewish people. But this is not so. We are divided, occasionally bitterly so, on *what it means* to repair the world. Instead of cultural, historical, or class-lines, we’re divided on personal and political ones. We are divided about whether and how we support the state of Israel. We are divided on whether and how our Jewish values align with our civic ones—is it “Jewish” to support the expansion of government for the benefit of those who suffer indignity and loss through no fault of their own? Or is it “Jewish” to consider the purpose of government to reduce coercion and protect the individual freedoms our oppressors stripped from us time and time again? And we are still, as a Jewish people, divided on the fundamental question, what does it mean to be a Jew?

But these divisions are not unique to Cincinnati, not even unique to the Jewish people. These types of fundamental divisions, and many more, are felt and experienced around the world. Thankfully, the dominant sensibility in our local Jewish community is pluralistic when it comes to identity, rituals, even politics. Though we may disagree, we disagree together, in community. Many of our Jewish

institutions and organizations exist as spaces held for the exact purpose of dialogue and respectful disagreement out of a shared desire to see the next generation call themselves Jews, and for that to mean something; for this amorphous and ever-changing cultural and religious identity to continue on in the hopes that our efforts leave the world less fractured—the ironic result of our endless dialectic. We have found a way to heal many of the wounds of our past. Yes, even the country clubs have merged. Though mostly out of financial necessity, I read the merger as a metaphor for the erasure of arbitrary social borders. None of this transformation has occurred without the bitter intrusion of divisiveness, yet divisiveness no longer infects our general notion of capital “C” community.

The lingering question is why do we insist on defining ourselves through a negative comparison to the other—especially another so inherently and fundamentally similar to ourselves? It is as if we fabricate otherness as an inverted means of understanding our own being. And the real joke is that these fabrications eventually become authentic representations of ourselves. It’s easier to reach a sense of internal truth by projecting points of comparison onto the outside world, than to perform the work of internal reflection, the definition of self through the exploration of self. This is our charge, not just as Jews, but as humans: to

constantly reflect on who we are, where we came from, and what we seek in order to escape the often-self-imposed bondage of inequity.