Review Essay

Father Abraham

MARK A. NOLL


The nearly simultaneous publication of these two books contributes significantly to a better understanding of Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and American Jewish history. Although their appearance might be deceiving—the Zola volume as “only” a documentary collection, the Sarna and Shapell book very much in the coffee table mode—both in fact deliver substantial historical insight. Drawing on hundreds of records, *We Called Him Rabbi Abraham* documents in roughly its first third the connections between Lincoln and Jews during his own lifetime, and then in its last two-thirds the many Jewish commentaries, celebrations, memorials, and remembrances of Lincoln from April 15, 1865, to very near the present. *Lincoln and the Jews* limits itself to Lincoln’s contacts with Jews but does so with painstaking scholarship illustrated by period photographs along with a stunning array of reproduced hand-written documents. Many of the latter come from Benjamin Shapell’s personal collection, which is augmented by reproductions from the Library of Congress, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, and several more depositories. A particularly helpful feature of the Sarna-Shapell book is a six-page appendix that records 171 documented personal connections between Jews and Lincoln. The first of these occurred on February 22, 1843, when Lincoln heard a Washington’s Birthday address in Springfield by Abraham Jonas, an English-born retailer, lawyer, Mason, ardent Whig (later Republican), and one of the founders of Congregation B’nai Abraham in Quincy, Illinois. The last came late in the evening of April 14, 1865, when Dr. Charles H. Liebermann, a Russian-born
eye doctor and in that year the president of the District of Columbia Medical Society, administered brandy as a stimulant to the unconscious president and joined other attending physicians in diagnosing his wound as mortal.

During Lincoln’s lifetime, the number of Jews in the United States increased dramatically, from fewer than five thousand in 1809 to as many as two hundred thousand in 1865, but still at that latter date constituting less than 1 percent of the nation’s population. The extent of Lincoln’s relationships—Sarna and Shapell designate five Jews as “friends,” with another fourteen as “associates and supporters,” fifty-five as “acquaintances,” and forty-eight as recipients of “appointments and pardons”—means that Lincoln in Illinois and Washington enjoyed more involvement with Jewish communities than all but a few of his Gentile peers. Perhaps no American outside New York City, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia sustained as many or such close connections. As set out expertly by Jonathan Sarna’s narrative in *Lincoln and the Jews* and as documented fulsomely in *We Called Him Abraham*, awareness of this special relationship significantly modifies conventional depictions of religion in America during the Civil War era. Of many specific features, five matters of fact and three more broadly interpretive conclusions are worthy of special attention.

A first important marker was the friendship that Lincoln sustained with Abraham Jonas from the mid-1840s until Jonas’s death in 1864. After immigrating to Cincinnati and living for a brief period in Kentucky, Jonas settled with his large family in Quincy, where he became active in Whig electoral politics, spurred to that calling, as Lincoln was to his, by great admiration for Henry Clay. Jonas and Lincoln cooperated in many campaigns, including Jonas’s local chairmanship of Lincoln supporters for his debate with Stephen Douglas at Quincy in the fall of 1858. In December of that year, when Horace Greeley traveled to Quincy for a speech, Jonas boldly promoted the idea of Lincoln as the next Republican presidential candidate. During the election campaign, Lincoln drew on testimony from Jonas to rebut charges that he had once supported the xenophobic Know-Nothings. After Lincoln’s election, Jonas passed on a warning to the president-elect from one of Jonas’s sons, who lived in New Orleans, that assassins had sworn to prevent his inauguration.

When in office, Lincoln appointed Jonas postmaster in Quincy. Then, when Jonas’s health began to fail, the president secured a parole for another of the four Jonas offspring who served with the Confederate army, so that he could visit his ailing father before he died. One of the many letters Jonas and Lincoln exchanged included both a rare
glimpse into Lincoln’s closely monitored private life and an indication of the unusual esteem existing between the two Whig lawyers. It came in early 1860, after Jonas had requested a printed copy of the Lincoln-Douglas debate speeches; Lincoln replied, “As you are one of my most valued friends, and have complimented me by the expression of a wish for the book, I propose doing myself the honor of presenting you with one, as soon as I can” (Sarna and Shapell, 52; Zola, 30).

Less intimate but considerably more mysterious was Lincoln’s friendship with Issachar (or Isachar) Zacharie, an English-born chiropodist who tended to the president’s corns and bunions in the White House but also served him as a private diplomat. Although uncertainties shroud much of Zacharie’s career, he seems to have been born in 1827 before immigrating to the United States as a teen and gradually gaining training in and a reputation for expert podiatric care. From early in the Civil War he was tending the feet of numerous senators, he offered his services to the Union forces through Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and by the summer of 1862 he was treating the president. On September 22, 1862, the same day Lincoln signed the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, he also wrote a testimonial for his chiropodist: “Dr. Zacharie has operated on my feet with great success, and considerable addition to my comfort” (Sarna and Shapell, 133; Zola, 46). Shortly thereafter, Zacharie followed General Nathaniel Banks to New Orleans, where he lobbied local Jews for the Union cause. A year later, on September 27, 1863, he explored possibilities for a negotiated peace in Richmond with a group of high-ranking Confederates that included Judah P. Benjamin, a fellow Jew and the South’s secretary of state. Because Zacharie was always an accomplished self-promoter who was not averse to expanding on his exploits, it is difficult to gauge exactly the importance of his diplomatic service. Yet as both books show, this self-taught foot doctor enjoyed Lincoln’s confidence in more than just his podiatric skill.

Lincoln’s speedy reversal of a notorious dictum from General Ulysses S. Grant is the best-known example of his solicitude for American Jews. With their full documentation of this episode, the two books nicely complement the expert monograph that Jonathan Sarna has recently provided on this incident, When General Grant Expelled the Jews (Schocken, 2012). In late 1862, as Grant prepared to move his army southward from the Upper South toward Vicksburg, he grew increasingly disturbed by the cotton speculators and smugglers, some of them Jewish, who were crossing his lines for their own pecuniary benefit. When his father and a family of Jewish merchants from Cincinnati approached him with a scheme that, in effect, would have
allowed them to profit from this illegal trade, Grant on December 17, 1862, blew his stack and issued General Order No. 11. This order banned not only illegal traders and not only Jewish traders but “Jews as a class” from the military Department of the Tennessee.

Jews in Kentucky and elsewhere mobilized immediately to petition authorities in Washington to reverse the order. Lincoln did not learn of Grant’s action until a day or two after he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. But when he did, he acted immediately with General-in-Chief Henry Halleck to countermand the order. On January 7, a Jewish delegation that included Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise arrived at the White House to offer thanks for this reversal. According to Wise, Lincoln affirmed that he knew “of no distinction between Jew and Gentile” and that he would not allow any citizen to be “wronged on account of his place of birth or religious confession” (Sarna and Shapell, 118; Zola, 100).

A fourth matter of historical significance was Lincoln’s self-consciously even-handed attention to petitions from Jews for federal appointments and military pardons. After Congress passed legislation authorizing military chaplains for “regularly ordained minister[s] of some Christian denomination,” Jewish editors complained loudly, a few individual rabbis served informally, and others petitioned to be accepted for regular appointment (Zola, 72). In response to this agitation and with the president’s approval, Congress passed new legislation limiting the chaplaincy to “a regularly ordained minister of some religious denomination.” After Rabbi Isaac Leeser informed the president that a suitable candidate had been chosen, Lincoln expedited the process for the appointment of the first official Jewish chaplain in the U.S. military on September 18, 1862. For many other presidential appointments or commissions as postmasters, justices of the peace, military officers, and more, Lincoln seemed not only aware of the need to insure a fair representation of Jews but also eager to seek such representation. It was the same with petitions for military pardons. Not all convicted Jews who applied for clemency received it, but Lincoln seemed particularly to notice when those appeals were made by or on behalf of Jews.

In light of this carefully documented record, Jonathan Sarna’s conclusion seems completely justified: “Lincoln dramatically improved the status of Jews in the United States” (Sarna and Shapell, 118). In an era when casual but no less dismissive anti-Semitism peppered the rhetoric of editors, generals, cabinet officers, and many members of the general public, the absence of such language in the obsessively documented record of Lincoln’s spoken and written words testifies almost as loudly as the many records of his positive actions.
Americans Jews have reciprocated that regard with respect, gratitude, and emotional depth that approaches hagiography. Thus, a fifth historical reality is the exhaustless torrent of positive memorials that have arisen from Jewish communities over the past century and a half. The rich documentation in Zola’s *We Called Him Father Abraham* outlines an enduring paean of unusual breadth and passionate depth. It began only hours after Lincoln died when in some parts of Jewish America the designated Sabbath reading from Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones became a lament for the fallen president. It continued through the week that followed when, in a representative statement, a Republican activist Lewis Naphtali Dembitz proclaimed to his Beth Israel Synagogue in Louisville that “of all the Israelites throughout the United States, there was none who more thoroughly filled the ideal of what a true descendant of Abraham ought to be than Abraham Lincoln” (Zola, 1).

Thereafter came encomia, memorials, evocations, and exhortations almost beyond number:

- many sermons and memorial speeches to mark the passage of the Lincoln funeral train from Washington, D.C., to Springfield and his burial at the latter site;
- extensive explanations after Lincoln’s death from Jews, like Isaac Meyer Wise, who had harshly criticized the president during his life, for why they now held him in such high regard;
- poems in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as English;
- a significant number of Jewish children named “Abraham Lincoln”;
- inspirational speeches to eastern European immigrants urging them to view Lincoln as a model for life in the United States;
- a flood of memorable centenary speeches on February 12, 1909, including as the most memorable Solomon Schechter’s address at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he recalled marveling at his first awareness of Lincoln conveyed by a Hebrew publication in his native Romania fifty years before;
- a distinguished line of Lincoln scholars and collectors including Isaac Martens, Emanuel Hertz, Ralph Newman, Bertram Wallace Korn, and not least Benjamin Shapell;
- the work of a Jewish engraver, Victor David Brenner, who provided the image for the Lincoln penny that first appeared in 1909;
- portraits, sculptures, sermons, prayers, textbooks, musical compositions, and lithographs depicting Lincoln as the ideal American;
evocative literary references, as when Philip Roth’s Alexander Portnoy contrasted his feelings for George Washington with his feelings for Lincoln: “Washington, I must confess, leaves me cold. Maybe it’s the horse, that he’s leaning on a horse. At any rate, he is so obviously a goy. But Lincoln! I could cry. Look at him sitting there, so oysgemitchet [exhausted]. How he labored for the downtrodden—as will I” (Zola, 392);

and humor: An immigrant Thai couple who established a restaurant in Chicago had admired Lincoln in their native land and so took an early opportunity to visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, whence they brought back a small statue of Lincoln to display in their restaurant, which seemed to have greatly improved business. Out of gratitude they set a full meal before the statue at the opening of the restaurant each day, with “everything, but no pork.” And why no pork? “He is Abraham Lincoln, yes? . . . Jewish people, they don’t eat pork” (Zola, 361).

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The two books’ unusually full record of Jewish engagement with Lincoln nicely supplements standard historical accounts. Yet they also do more by prompting broader reconsiderations of Lincoln himself, the character of American public religion, and the place of Jews in the national narrative. For Lincoln, they raise the distinct possibility that Jews contributed to his own religious development. It is of course necessary to underscore the speculative character of any claim about Lincoln’s personal faith, since that subject remains enigmatic, ambiguous, or simply beyond the reach of historians. Yet Jonathan Sarna’s careful account suggests a pattern of deepening theism combined with greater caution about evoking an explicitly Christian understanding of American civilization. To begin, near the close of his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861, Lincoln drew on conventional themes concerning the divinely chosen, but also Christian, character of the United States: “Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty.”

But then by December 1861, at the same time that he commended plans by the recently founded Christian Commission to distribute

Bibles and promote Christian observance in the army, Lincoln was also supporting Jewish efforts to have the requirement for military chaplains changed from “Christian denomination” to “a religious denomination.” In other words, at this early stage, Lincoln seemed to be moving beyond a narrow construal of the nation’s religion.

A year later, when he issued an executive order urging military commanders to let troops whenever possible observe the Christian Sabbath, Sunday, Jewish editors like Isaac Leeser complained about the absence of an equivalent provision for those who honored the Hebrew Sabbath, Saturday. Although there is no record of Lincoln’s response to these complaints, he may well have taken them to heart. In Sarna’s words, “One suspects . . . that the Jewish community’s complaints reached Lincoln’s ears. Significantly, he never again, in his official correspondence, referred to Americans as a ‘Christian people’” (Sarna and Shapell, 112).

At the same time, a deepening religious sensibility can be traced over the course of Lincoln’s time in the White House. His appreciation for the prayers and spiritual consolation he received from many individuals after the death of his son Willie in February 1862 is well recorded.2 He also seemed to be speaking from the heart when on September 7, 1864, he told a visiting contingent of African American clergymen, who had presented him with an ornamental Bible, that (in a rare specifically Christian reference) he regarded Scripture as “the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book.”3

Yet even as he occasionally used such Christian language, it is noteworthy that Lincoln discouraged efforts by the National Reform Association, whose advocates sought to amend the Constitution with an acknowledgment of the nation’s dependence on Jesus. Moreover, in the memorable words of the Gettysburg Address from November 1863 and the Second Inaugural Address of 1865, Lincoln movingly invoked “God” and “the Lord”—while quoting in the latter with great effect from the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures—but without direct reference to anything “Christian.”

Fairly reliable documentation attests that in March 1863, Lincoln told a visiting Jewish visionary, Henry Wentworth Monk, “I myself


have a regard for the Jews” (Sarna and Shapell, 140; Zola, 40). If that regard extended beyond the political to the personal, it supports the suggestion that Lincoln’s direct contact with Jews played a part in making him more seriously religious, but not in an exclusively Christian sense.

Beyond the question of Lincoln’s personal faith, these two books also illuminate public religion during the Civil War years. A recent study by Eran Shalev has shown that references to the Old Testament abounded in the first decades of the United States’ existence, only to recede significantly from about 1830 onward. Several other outstanding books have recently highlighted the fact that Christian rhetoric surrounded almost all aspects of the war itself, while heartfelt Christian devotion marked the lives of a minority of the combatants in both armies as well as many who remained on the home front. Intermingling with that language, both Zola and Sarna and Shapell document a public space in which references to the Hebrew Scriptures also surged in the years of national crisis. That surge reflected the increasing visibility of Jewish editors, publicists, and spokesmen who joined other Americans by interpreting the conflict in religious terms. It also stemmed in no small part from Abraham Lincoln.

Beyond the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln’s correspondence contained numerous offhand evocations of the Hebrew Scriptures, as when in February 1865 he urged that several Jewish merchants be granted “a jubilee” from prosecution that he regarded as unjust (Sarna and Shapell, 163). As it happens, his memorable opening to the Gettysburg address, “four score and seven years ago,” repeated a phrase that Rabbi Sabato Morais of Mikveh Israel congregation in Philadelphia had used four months earlier in a sermon on the Fourth of July (Sarna and Shapell, 146, Zola, 372). Whether Lincoln read and remembered Morais’s published sermon or both individuals drew independently from the phraseology of Psalm 90:10 (“the days of our years are three score years and ten”), the president’s speech reflected a consciousness steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Writing soon after the national day of mourning on April 19, 1865, Isaac Wise was quick to note that ministers on that occasion “all

4. For assessment of the documentary record, Sarna and Shapell, 252 (n. 84); Zola, 38–40.
5. Eran Shalev, American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).
resorted to Old Testament texts, or compared Lincoln to Old Testament heroes like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and others” (Zola, 226). If Wise exaggerated slightly, since ministers on that occasion in fact drew from the New Testament more than their predecessors did in memorial sermons for George Washington sixty-five years earlier, Wise nonetheless reported accurately concerning the great bulk of the biblical passages chosen for those sermons.

The point to be made is that the Hebrew Scriptures served as a well-traveled bridge between Lincoln and his Jewish friends and acquaintances. In turn, because that bridge was so public, a Hebrew frame of reference—drawn from the Old Testament and applied to the United States, its history, its woes, and its prospects—made something of a comeback in that era, in substantial part because of the president.

A third significant conclusion, which Zola’s collection thoroughly demonstrates, illuminates Lincoln’s large place in the process by which Jews became “American.” Until readers reach nearly the end of Zola’s documents, almost all of his authors are Jews born in Europe. As immigrants removed at least once (not Christian) and often twice (not Christian, not western or northern European) from the nation’s cultural mainstream, Lincoln served as a compelling inspiration for others who sought participation without assimilation.

In secular terms, Lincoln could be praised as an outsider who through diligent study, hard work, and steely resolution found his place in a society that was politically open but culturally often anything but welcoming. In religious terms, Lincoln’s life showed how a great leader could welcome Jews not only in fulfillment of American ideals of religious liberty but also by displaying a rare sensitivity to the ethical and scriptural monotheism of Judaism itself.

For their useful additions to the historical record but also for deepening understanding of Lincoln and his era, both *Lincoln and the Jews* and *We Called Him Father Abraham* deserve a readership far beyond the Jewish circles in which they will be especially appreciated.