

## A Jew Among Mormons

*Steve Siporin*

IN THE FALL OF 1990, I was asked to speak to an undergraduate honors seminar at Utah State University about being a Jew among Mormons. I warned the student assigned the task of recruiting me that first, I was not a practicing orthodox Jew, and that second, as a traditional Jewish saying emphasizes, "Where there are two Jews, there are at least three opinions." Thus, my opinion was only one of many. In other words, I could hardly "represent" Jews in Logan, much less some generally held Jewish point of view. That was all the "yes" the student needed, and I found that I was not only scheduled to speak for ten minutes, but also to answer questions afterwards.

As the date of the seminar approached, I began to realize that the talk had taken on more significance than I had expected. The weekly honors seminar, called "Interactions," reaches beyond the university to the public, and my neighbors began telling me they were looking forward to my talk. So did staff at the library, former students, and faculty friends. I was alternately excited that I might attract a good turnout and nervous that I was about to be examined.

Although I had thought of the question of being a Jew among Mormons as a question about Jews, I was becoming aware that many of my Mormon neighbors might perceive it as a question about Mormons. They might be thinking of the subject in terms like "How are *we* doing? Are we *tolerable*? Are we *tolerant*?"

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No one person could answer those questions, but I felt glad that Mormons were concerned and wanted to know how others, a Jew in this case, felt about living among them. I also thought that such questions as I guessed my LDS neighbors were at least subconsciously asking might have sprung partly from their awareness of contemporary anti-Mormon prejudice. As a non-Mormon living in Mormon country, I and many others occupy a position that allows us to witness the unpleasant persistence of prejudice. When I travel and explain where I live, I sometimes hear the same kind of blanket, bigoted comments about Mormons that I heard aimed at blacks when I was growing up. I guess this is a “benefit” of living as a non-Mormon in Mormon country; people in other parts of the United States assume that I, as a non-Mormon, will share (and perhaps reinforce) their prejudice and thus invite me to eavesdrop on theirs. The “benefit”—a painful one—is to have learned something about the changing fashions of bigotry in America. As a nation, we are not as free of stereotyping other individuals as we seem to think we are. I probably would not have learned this without living in Utah.

Mormon neighbors and friends have been good to my family. When we first arrived at our house in Logan with a truck filled with all our belongings, two young men working in the yard next door came over and unloaded our truck for us. That was, literally, the beginning. Only a week later, when my wife and I were invited to a dinner, I already had realized that I could tell my twelve and seven-year-old sons they could go to any of our neighbors if they needed help while we were gone. Any of them. Each summer we are inundated with home-canned foods and fresh garden produce. I joke that our friends and neighbors won’t let us plant a garden—they keep us too well supplied. We have never lived anywhere like this before. Nor had we ever before received greeting cards on our (Jewish) holidays from non-Jewish friends and neighbors. This pleasant practice continues, and we truly appreciate the acknowledgement of our difference as a valid and valued part of the neighborhood.

Part of the background to our welcome, I believe, is the Mormon assumption of a special Mormon-Jewish relationship. There is, of course, a theological basis to this relationship in the Book of Mormon. Both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young transformed this mythic idea into contemporary action.<sup>1</sup> And it was no coincidence that the first two

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Steven Epperson, “Jews in the Columns of Joseph’s *Times and Seasons*,” *DIALOGUE* 22 (Winter 1989): 135–42. I use “mythic” not in the sense of something that is false but to mean something that is deeply believed by members of a religious faith. Myths take place in the deep past, reveal ultimate truths, and usually

elected Jewish governors in the United States were elected in Mormon country: Moses Alexander in Idaho (1914) and Simon Bamberger in Utah (1916).

Some revealing stories are told about Governor Bamberger. According to one account, when he was campaigning he sometimes ran into blunt opposition based on religion. Once when he was about to get off the train in a small, Danish Mormon town, he was threatened by gun-toting men who insisted that they didn't want any gentiles campaigning there. Bamberger responded, "But I'm not a gentile, I'm a Jew." And the men replied, "Come gather around. Let's listen to this Jew" (Zenner 1991, 2-3). In other words, Jews are perceived by Mormons to be even closer to Mormons, in some ways, than other Christians are.

I was told before I moved to Utah that I would encounter something called "philo-Semitism" (as opposed to anti-Semitism). Given a choice, there is no doubt which I prefer! Nonetheless, there is always the danger of exoticizing and stereotyping members of other groups we admire distantly and abstractly and turning individuals into objects. The fascination with Jews holds that potential danger.

Moreover, anti-Semitism does exist in Utah, and it is especially painful for children. I am grateful that anti-Semitism is not LDS policy. In fact, just the opposite is true. But anti-Semitism remains at an unconscious level, carried forward by language, probably the unfortunate inheritance of European and Euro-American converts and their descendants. Quite recently a student of mine told me that someone could have "jewed him out" of something. We all know what that means, but we rarely examine its insidiousness. The student and I were alone in my office, and so it was easy for me to make him aware of what he had said. He was embarrassed and hadn't ever realized the stereotyped prejudice that lay behind that expression.

But it is not always so easy to deal with such comments when they come up. What if they occur in public? At a party? In such cases (assuming the speakers are unaware of their meaning) must I embarrass them nonetheless, seeing that they need an education immediately? Or should I let public comments pass—and thus betray myself, my fellow Jews, my ancestors, and my children? How much harder this question becomes for my children and other Jewish children when they hear such expressions. What can they say or do? What pain and responsibility do they feel?

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explain the cosmological, social, and moral order. Thus the Bible, for instance, is myth for many Christians and Jews. Coyote stories function like myths for many Native Americans.

I have a son in high school. He came home in anguish one day when his best friends reacted weakly to the pseudo-argument that “maybe the Holocaust never happened.” What was at best an ill-informed intellectual exercise for his peers seemed like the triumph of evil over human suffering to him. My son has met Holocaust survivors—he has heard their stories and seen the harsh, blue numbers in their flesh.

The Holocaust has seared the consciousness of all Jewish children; for them the Holocaust is not just another historical event to be memorized for an exam—it is an unbearable reality, as it should be for every human being. The pain a Jew feels, the pain a Jewish child feels, at the denial of the incalculable human suffering of the Holocaust is the feeling that Hitler is still winning. It is a new brand of unconscious anti-Semitism abetted by pseudo-scholarship.

Mormon country is not free of another kind of anti-Semitism that Jews encounter elsewhere: anti-Semitism masked as anti-Zionism. In 1975, Jews saw the United Nations declare that “Zionism is racism”; no other people’s desire for nationhood has been branded in this way. Thus, we live in an age in which only one national liberation movement, the Jewish one, has been singled out as unworthy. Of course, not all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, nor is it fair to reject all criticism with a blanket accusation of anti-Semitism. But it is obvious that being anti-Israel has become a new mask anti-Semites use to disguise their racist agenda.

All the above forms of anti-Semitism can be found in Mormon country, though probably not as frequently as elsewhere in the United States. The truth is that everywhere in the United States where I have lived—from Omaha, Nebraska, to Salem, Oregon—a nearby synagogue has been desecrated, defaced, or bombed. That includes Boise, Idaho, and Ogden, Utah. I do not think that any of these acts were committed by Mormons; in fact, the weekend of the fire-bombing of the Boise synagogue, the new Boise LDS Temple was defaced with graffiti. In other words, all forms of anti-Semitism can be found in Mormon country, even though they are discouraged by the Mormon Church. The linguistic anti-Semitism that I encountered in a Mormon student is older than the LDS Church. It was probably part of the fundamentally racist English culture brought to this country by pioneers who had had little, if any, real contact with Jews.

When I look at the subject, a Jew among Mormons, from a Jewish point of view, it first becomes “a Jew among Christians.” In other words, the problems are generic. Jews, naturally, do not distinguish between the various Christian groups the way Christians do. Differ-

ences that are significant up close seem less significant from far away. Many Jews will naturally place their experience “among the Mormons” within their long (and unhappy) history “among the Christians.”

We Jews try not to forget—not because we are unforgiving, but because not forgetting is nearly a divine commandment in our understanding of G-d’s will. One of the qualities that seems to characterize Judaism and the Jews, according to both religious and secular points of view, is a strong historical sense. Not only is our religion part of our history; our history is a central part of our religion. Consider the holidays of Hanukkah, Purim, and Passover, for instance, all of which commemorate historical (or pseudo-historical) events (of, one might add, a mysteriously recurring nature).<sup>2</sup>

We carry history not only within our holidays, rituals, and books, but within our families as well. We have faced the same difficulties for many generations. Christmas, for instance, was the time of year I hated most as a child; but I was not the first (or the last) Jewish child to feel that way. At Christmas, all the differences between my non-Jewish friends and me grew larger. (One precocious Jewish child in Logan recognized the defining power of the holiday when she referred to Jews and Christians as “Hanukkah people” and “Christmas people.”) I felt that overwhelming feeling of alienation most strongly in public school where Christmas seemed to take over the curriculum from Thanksgiving until the end of the year. I remember the stressful feeling during the long days of rehearsing Christmas plays and singing Christmas songs in school. Would I betray my religion by singing these songs that were clear expressions of a different religious belief? The argument that “you could just sing it but not believe” didn’t cut it, even with an eight-year-old. Was it wrong to disobey my teacher and call attention to myself by not singing? My mother faced the same problem in the 1920s, and she told me how she used to sing out “loud night” instead of “silent night.” Her powerless, child’s protest might seem laughable to us, but how else could she maintain her dignity?

The point is that the same thing happens to my children today in Logan. When Christmas approaches, our usually sensitive system suddenly suspends the separation of church and state. Ethnocentrism takes over and runs amuck. To protest puts one in the position of Scrooge in

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<sup>2</sup> Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem in 164 B.C., after a successful war of liberation against the Greco-Syrian Seleucid Empire. Purim, based on the biblical book of Esther, celebrates the deliverance of the Jews from destruction in Persia during the fifth century B.C. Passover celebrates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, sometimes dated as 1450 B.C.

the perennial favorite, *A Christmas Carol*.<sup>3</sup> To protest is to spoil everyone's fun, to refuse to join in and be a part of it all. But Jews cannot, by definition, be part of Christmas, if they are to be Jews.<sup>4</sup>

During Christmas, I still want to disappear, as my ancestors did during Easter when it was unsafe for Jews to be seen in public. They hid in their homes, and I suspect that today many Jewish children are torn between wanting to hide and wanting to join. How often can one explain oneself? A simple, innocent question like "What did you get for Christmas?" sets up the conflict, even in children: Do I have to explain, to a perfect stranger, that I'm Jewish and Jews don't celebrate Christmas, and maybe embarrass him? Do I just lie and say I got X? This problem, of course, is not particular to Jews living among Mormons but to Jews living among Christians.

So is the more serious problem of conversion. Jews have suffered, yet survived as a people, under the pressure to convert to Christianity for at least 1500 years (see Baron 1952-83). Nineteen-ninety-two will be commemorated not only as the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage but also as the five-hundredth anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. By 1492 some Jewish families had lived in Spain for eight hundred years. Still, their choice in that year was conversion or expulsion. All Jews had to be out of Spain by the very tide on which Columbus sailed. In 1497, all Jews remaining in Portugal were forcibly converted. In Italy, where many of them fled, quotas of Jews were forced to listen to Christian sermons in church each Sunday. Any sign of interest in conversion was exploited. Even as late as the late nineteenth century, a Jewish baby who had been baptized by his Catholic nurse when his parents were gone was stolen from his home and (legally) raised as a Catholic (Korn 1957).

Our twentieth-century experience has been the worst of all. Following the pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Holocaust of World War II, Jewish demographic projections are bleak. A scholar has called it the "silent holocaust" (Reines 1989, 478). One projection is that the six million American Jews of today will be, at best, less than one million by the

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<sup>3</sup> One might even ask if Scrooge is somehow the perennial Jew, spoiling the unanimity of Christians. He is characterized by stinginess and greediness, stereotypical Jewish attributes. But more to the point is the message of *A Christmas Carol* (perhaps unintended by the author) that whoever does not join in Christmas is a spoilsport.

<sup>4</sup> In recent years we see more and more labored attempts by Jews (often in mixed marriages) to celebrate Christmas without betraying their heritage, but the contradictions are painfully obvious.

year 2076 (Waxman 1989, 429). Conversion is one element in the decline of the American Jewish population and is a very real threat to the existence of the Jewish people.

That is one reason I felt so encouraged by my introduction to Mormon Utah. When I first came to Logan for a job interview, I was invited to a dinner at a private, non-Mormon home. The host asked a Mormon bishop who was present to say grace. As a folklorist, I noted the traditional verbal formulas in his prayer, but I noticed that although many Christians often end their grace with something like “we accept these gifts in the name of Jesus Christ, amen,” this man ended his blessing simply by thanking G-d. Later I found out that this was not his usual grace; he had made room for me, had made me comfortable, without betraying his own religion. I resolved that if this religion produced people of such tolerance and sensitivity, these were people I could learn from and would be lucky to live among.

Proselytizing, on the other hand, makes me feel hurt and betrayed. I am devalued for the person I am, and, even more important, my priceless heritage is devalued. When I was younger, I reacted with anger; now I see that the proselytizer is grossly ignorant. To him or her, I am not an equal but only a potential equal. Proselytizing makes me question the basis of a friendship. Is this a real friend, or am I just a potential convert, a “mark?”

With our children, the effects of proselytizing, or even potential proselytizing, are multiplied manifold. Children are vulnerable in ways most adults are not. They are pressured by other children. My eleven-year-old son has been told, “Your way is the wrong way.”

Nevertheless, the problem Jews face in Utah, as I see it, is not one of being among Mormons; it is really a problem of *not* being among Jews. We are not only living at the core of Mormon culture, we are living at (or beyond) the periphery of our own.

Being Jewish, by definition, tends to mean living in a Jewish community. There is a story told in the Ehrlich family of Springfield, Massachusetts, about how a family ancestor came to settle in Springfield:

My great-grandfather, Moses Ehrlich, was apparently a very important man in Springfield, Massachusetts. The story was that Moses had actually come to Hartford and set out as a very young man, about fifteen, to go to Boston to make his fortune. The train goes from Hartford to Springfield to Boston. He was an orthodox Jew, so I assume he must have been wearing a black long coat and a black hat, with long *pairs* [earlocks] on the side. At Springfield, a man got on the train dressed like him and sat down next to him. The train apparently had a twenty-minute stop or so, and [the man] said, “Where are you going?”

He said, “I am Moses Ehrlich. I am going to Boston to seek my fortune.”

“Well, why don’t you seek your fortune in Springfield?”

He said, "What would I do in Springfield?"

"The Jewish community has sent me to the train, because we're trying to get thirteen Jews to settle in Springfield so we can have a *minyán*. If you get off the train with me here, I'll get you a job."

So he said, "Fine!" and he got off, and he said, "What's the job going to be?"

"You meet all the trains from Hartford to Boston, try to get 'em to come off and settle in Springfield." (Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker 1982, 76)

An unlikely story, if taken literally, but a story that demonstrates that being Jewish usually means living in a Jewish community. The *minyán* referred to means a "quorum," which, for orthodox Jews, is a minimum number of ten adult males without which certain daily prayers cannot be said.<sup>5</sup> *Kaddish*, for instance, the prayer for a departed parent, is to be recited every day for one year following a parent's death. But it can be said only in the presence of a *minyán*, as part of the daily morning or evening prayer service. Thus, the most private pain is publicly acknowledged on a daily basis, for the full year of mourning, no doubt helping the healing process in a way "modern" people outside traditional communities can only envy.

Other customs reinforce community and actually demand that a community be present for Judaism to be performed and lived. Eating, unless one is vegetarian, requires kosher meat, and kosher meat requires a specially trained butcher. Obviously, this also requires a community of some size so the butcher can make a living. In other words, beyond the theological/ritual requirement of eating meat slaughtered and prepared in a certain way, which is a commandment of G-d, keeping kosher has a social function: keeping community together.

There are many other examples. Jews are not supposed to travel by car on Shabbat (the sabbath), nor are they to walk beyond a certain distance. On the one hand, these rules are religious prescriptions; but they are also a prescription for Jewish community since they in effect mean that Jews must live within walking distance of their synagogue and each other. (One gets some feeling for how this custom works by observing Mormon neighborhoods in Logan on Sundays. The sidewalks are filled with dressed-up people walking to the same place. The subjective feeling of community manifests itself physically.) The prayer of confession, which takes place on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, is a group confession, recited aloud by the congregation together. One confesses for every imaginable sin—but it is the community as a whole confessing for all the sins that any one among them may have committed—not an individual confessing for personal sins.

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<sup>5</sup> The reason there is a need for thirteen in the story is so that there will be enough extra to fill in in case of illness, vacation, or other absences.



The meaning is clear: each of us is responsible for the other. Jewish identity, indeed, is hard to separate from Jewish community.

Thus, the effects on Jewish children of *not* being in a Jewish community are easy to predict: without formal and informal Jewish education, they are likely to be assimilated even without attempts at conversion. A certain amount can be taught in the home, but without group experiences and without other Jewish adult role models around, it is hard to “become” Jewish as one grows up.

On the other hand, Jews have always moved to new places and reestablished their Jewish culture and identity in those places. From their ancient homeland in what is now Israel, diasporas were created in Babylonia (today’s Iraq) even in ancient times, in Western Europe beginning at least during the Hellenistic period, and in Eastern Europe especially at the beginning of the modern era. The major influx of Jews from Eastern Europe to New York City and the Americas began only a little more than one hundred years ago, and today New York is the most Jewish city in the world, with more Jews than in the state of Israel. Israel itself became Jewish once again only in the past one hundred years. Going to new places and establishing new communities is part of our tradition.

Jews today are concentrated in three places: the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union. One hundred years ago the map would have shown very few of us in the United States or Israel; most would have been in Poland, Russia, and throughout the Arab world. In a short time, historically speaking, the fulcrum of events has led us to change “homelands” more dramatically and rapidly than at any other time in our long history. Where will we be one hundred years from now?

A Jew among Mormons has difficulties but is not such an anomaly after all. Being marginal has almost always been part of our social experience. In exile, hopefully, we learn to think, to become sensitive to others. Maybe *this* is one essence of our tradition—a tradition we continue wherever we go.

It seems to me that both this sensitivity and this sense of outsider-ness are part of Mormon experience as well. Was it my own projection or was I correct in thinking that my neighbors wanted to know not only if they were tolerable but also if they were tolerant? Hasn’t the intolerance early Mormons experienced at the hands of their neighbors taught them a lesson not to be forgotten? Isn’t this one of the deep reasons for the missionary experience?—not just for the sake of conversion but so that the missionary will understand what being “a stranger in a strange land” means? Wasn’t that a shaping experience of Mormons in the early Church as well?

Once when I was in Israel during the holiday of Passover, I heard a guest rabbi ask a congregation, rhetorically, why we Jews suffered as "strangers in a strange land" in Egypt, for so long. His answer was definite: so that we would never forget what it was like to be a stranger, so that we would overcome our natural mistrust of those who are different from us, open our doors, our hearts, and share our bread.

A Jew among Mormons in Utah, Mormons among Jews in Israel—the world has become small, and we are all among each other. More than three thousand years after Moses and less than 150 years after the Mormon exodus, we reach for the same elusive ideal. We have a long way to go.

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