

Did you know that there is a Jewish military cemetery in Richmond Va? It's the largest Jewish military cemetery outside the land of Israel and the oldest Jewish military cemetery in the world.

Now, did you know that it's a cemetery for Jews who died in the Civil War?

I didn't either and I was really surprised when I began to investigate it. Here are the facts that are generally agreed on.

There are thirty Jews buried in this cemetery which is part of a larger Jewish Cemetery which is part of an even larger Christian cemetery. The original charter for the main Jewish cemetery was given to Congregation Beth Shalome in 1816 and the land began to be shared equally with Congregation Beth Ahabah in 1843.

Some of the men buried there were brought to the cemetery directly from the battle fields. Others were buried where they fell and later moved to Richmond. They came from Mississippi, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana.

Individual gravestones were put up for each soldier in the late 1800's. But when they began to deteriorate from the weather in the 1930's, they were replaced by one large marker at the front of the cemetery. Each soldier's name, home town and date of death are on this marker. The soldiers were killed between 1862 and 1864.

This leads to the obvious question: How much were Jews involved in the confederacy and what does this mean about Jews believing in the concept of slavery or even owning slaves themselves?

Bonnie Eisenman is a member of Temple Beth Ahabah which now is in charge of the cemetery upkeep. Eisenman also runs the synagogue museum and its archives. She says she is often asked why Jews fought in the confederacy. Her answer is that Jews were a part of the community and they did the same thing their neighbors did.' In other words they joined the Confederate Army and fought for the South.

In my research on that, I found out there were anywhere from 3000 to 10,000 Jews who fought for the Confederacy. Isaac Levy, an Orthodox Jew from Richmond wrote home that during one year of the war he and the other Jewish soldiers were actually able to have a Passover seder with kosher food.

During the war, Rabbi Michelbacher of Richmond wrote a letter asking the Confederacy to allow the Jewish soldiers 13 days off for the High Holidays. This request was met with a polite but resounding no. None other than General Robert E. Lee responded, 'It would give me great pleasure to comply with a request so earnestly urged by you, & which I know would be so highly appreciated by that class of our soldiers. But the necessities of war admit no relaxation of the efforts requisite for its success, nor can it be known on what day the presence of every man may be required.'

In terms of whether Jews held slaves or not, from what I read, Eisenman is correct. Jews in the South did what other Southerners did. There were

approximately 25,000 Jews living in the South before the Civil War and as with their Christian neighbors, the ones who were wealthy enough had slaves, directly in proportion to their percentage of the population.

As there were fierce arguments on both sides of the slavery issue among Christians, the same was true with Jews. Pro- and Anti-slavery advocates even used the Torah to bolster their beliefs. Proslavery advocates use The Ten Commandments as their proof text. Because it requires male and female slaves not to work on Shabbat, they said it codifies that slavery is allowed. But the Antislavery Jews said that the Torah reminds us many times to treat the stranger well because we were strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt. therefore we are not allowed to enslave others.

We wonder how Jews reading the same text could interpret it so very differently.

There was a movie that came out in 1983 called Zelig. The main character is able to morph himself into anyone he wants to become. Not only does he look and speak differently in each different incarnation, his clothes also morph in front of our eyes. This is very much the story of Disapora Jews. We have become like every people we have lived among. People often talk about 'Jewish food.' If they mean blintzes, lox and borsht, they're actually talking about Russian food. Falafel, humus, babaganous? They are Middle Eastern. There really is no such thing as Jewish food that doesn't have some connection to a country we lived in.

This is also true of our history here in the United States. If we came here before 1860, we took on the beliefs of the part of the country we lived in. In the North we were antislavery because that was the custom. In the South we fought and died for the confederacy. It makes sense for us to take on the customs and beliefs of the people who are in the majority wherever we live. But we also have to remember that there is always a division, a place of separation that we have to maintain so that we don't lose our integrity and our identity as Jews.

May we each enjoy the treasures and pleasures of our lives in the Diaspora and may we always remember that it's our differences that allow us to maintain our Judaism so that we can pass our beliefs and practices down l'dor v'dor, from generation to generation.