

How Do We Reconcile Wrongdoings in our Past?

American Jews and the Civil War (1861-1865)

Discovering
American
Jewish History
Through
Objects

01 TWO PATHS

Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn oneself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is theirs. Should one desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is theirs.

רשות לכל אדם נתונה. אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו. ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 5:1

AN UGLY HISTORY 09

It's hard to overstate how racist, sexist and jingoistic most American comic strips and comic books have been throughout their history. But expurgating leaves us without a history at all.

Art Spiegelman, artist and illustrator, in *Society is nix: gleeful anarchy at the dawn of the American comic strip: 1895-1915*. edited by Peter Maresca and Philippe Ghielmetti, published, 2013

02 REVOLUTION

How does it make you feel to learn that Judah Benjamin and other Jews enslaved people?

It is a revolution; a revolution of the most intense character; in which belief in the justice, prudence, and wisdom of secession is blended with the keenest sense of wrong and outrage, and it can no more be checked by human effort for the time than a prairie fire by a gardener's watering pot.

Judah Benjamin, letter to lawyer Samuel L. M. Barlow, Dec 9, 1860

03 SILENCE

Should we choose sides with one of the parties? We cannot, not only because we abhor the idea of war, but also we have dear friends and near relations... in either section of the country.... Therefore, silence must henceforth be our policy... until a spirit of conciliation shall move the hearts of millions to a better understanding of the blessings of peace, freedom and union.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, "Silence, our Policy," published in *The Israelite*, April 19, 1861

04 DISBELIEF

Have you ever had a friend or family member support something you strongly disagreed with?

How is it possible, one asks oneself in astonishment, that members of a tribe, which for millennia has been oppressed, persecuted, and enslaved, like few here, in America, where they are afforded full freedom, are defenders of the most shameful institution on earth, slavery, and enemies of the struggle for freedom?

Bernhard Felsenthal, report published in *Sinai*, July 1862



Confederate \$2.00 bill, issued December 2, 1862
National Museum of American Jewish History, 1984.30.7.1

MOVING ON 08

Most American Jews, as a recent poll by the Pew Research Center showed, now position "remembering the Holocaust" at the center of Jewish identity....Most Jews would find it deeply offensive to be told to "move on" from the Holocaust. We should not, therefore, ask the same of our African American neighbors.

Eric K. Silverman, "A Jewish perspective on slavery reparations," *The Jewish Advocate*, 2015

Why do you think a society might try to move on from a painful tragedy?

FOLLOWING THE PATTERN 07

Because I believe in the rights of the individual to conduct his business according to his own best judgment, I have continued to operate my restaurants in conformity with the pattern I found when I came to Atlanta.

Charles Lebedin, restaurateur, announcing that his restaurant would now serve integrated clientele, 1964

VICTORY IN DEFEAT 06

The continuous columns of these martial hosts, their victorious cheers... seemed to give utterance to but a single thought, and that was: "This is the Northern army returning from its victory over the South;" but today, as I look back over twenty years of peace and prosperity, I feel that there was victory for the South in the defeat. It cost the lives of many dear ones, but this was the only loss. We are to-day one people - we might have been a dozen.

Septima Maria Levi Collis, *A Woman's War Record, 1861-1865*, published 1889

ARRESTED FOR TREASON 05

Again I ask myself what is my crime? If an ardent attachment to the land of my birth and the expression of deepest sympathy with my relatives and friends in the South, constitute treason - then I am indeed a traitor.

Eugenia Levy Phillips, in her diary while under house arrest, August 30, 1861