

Jewish Voices  
of the  
California Gold Rush

A Documentary History, 1849–1880

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## Introduction

TO STUDY THE TOTAL EXPERIENCE OF THE JEWS OF THE GOLD RUSH era and beyond in northern California is to share in much of the optimism and excitement of the mid-nineteenth century. It was a time perhaps similar to the launching of the American space program a century later. Just as people in the mid-twentieth century learned that it was possible to travel to the moon, so men and women in the mid-nineteenth century learned that they could break previously proscribed boundaries, communicating instantly by telegraph across immense distances, traveling over vast oceans on steam-powered ships, and even crossing formerly almost impassable continents by rail. This era of innovation was also the era of the first great migration to the United States, and Jews participated significantly. For many of them—dizzied by the lure of the Gold Rush—California would be the ultimate destination.

In 1848, the year of the initial gold strike, California had no more than 100,000 inhabitants, but within four years the population of the eight Gold Rush counties alone had exploded to 123,822 and the state had taken a prominent place on the world stage.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the number of Jews in the United States—only 50,000 in 1850—multiplied threefold by 1860, thousands emigrating west to the new El Dorado.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at how California's communities sprang up, developed rapidly during the first rush to the goldfields, and then declined as gold fever waned and the economy shifted provides us with an excellent paradigm for studying how pioneer Jewish religious and social institutions took shape. Furthermore, it creates an opportunity for examining how Jews of this time and place became one with American life. It also enhances our perspective on the complex process of migration, immigration, and urbanization during the years that saw the lightning-quick rise of San Francisco.

This documentary history provides students of California and the West with an intimate portrait of Jewish life at a critical period in the history of the state and nation. The documents take the reader from Europe to California's towns, goldfields, and nascent religious communities, and from the founding of the Jewish community to its maturity. Most notably, the documents reveal the instant city of San Francisco, which emerged in little more than a quarter-century as the nation's and the West's incontestable metropolis and most cosmopolitan city.

While it is part of the total American Jewish experience, California Jewry also needs to be seen in its own terms. Just as historians of the West have generally viewed California's Jews as indistinguishable from others of European origin, so

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until recently historians of American Jewry have scarcely mentioned California in their accounts. Focusing on universal Jewish commonalities throughout the United States, they have given little attention to regional differences. But because of the rapid growth of a multiethnic population in an era of mass immigration, California Jewish history took a new direction. Jewish men and women were less restricted in their pursuits than they had been in Europe or in the eastern United States, and also may have been able to participate more effectively in the development of its Jewish communities. In the East, where they arrived in large numbers in the 1840s, Jews had to accommodate themselves to a preexisting Jewish social and religious structure. In the Pacific West, all was their own creation.<sup>3</sup>

## European Jewry

As the first reports of gold set in motion a worldwide frenzy, central Europe was entering the throes of a modernization process that affected all segments of society. Especially unsettled by the changing political economy were young Jewish men and women. Whether craftsmen, tailors, seamstresses, or small merchants, they often found that the new economy had no place for them.<sup>4</sup> Although Enlightenment concepts were beginning to break down anti-Jewish occupational and residential restrictions in some western European countries, Jews were simultaneously losing the security provided by traditional Jewish community structures. The disruptions caused throughout western Europe by the failed revolutions of 1848 sent some Jews fleeing political repression as well as economic discrimination.<sup>5</sup> Others fled to escape military conscription in armies whose governments and military oppressed Jewish recruits.

This repression in much of central Europe included increasingly restrictive laws that made it difficult for a Jew to acquire a residency permit to own a business, marry, and establish a family.<sup>6</sup> In Bavaria from 1813 to 1861, for example, Jews could not move from one town to another without authorization, which virtually stifled their chances for employment. A Jewish marriage was permitted only after one Jewish inhabitant had died and thus made room for another on the prescribed town list of Jewish families. Not surprisingly, many young men and women were eager to seek their spouses as well as their fortunes in the United States.<sup>7</sup> In the 1840s, nearly as many Jewish women as Jewish men left Bavaria's towns for America, with most women traveling to California with their husbands, brothers, friends, or other family members.<sup>8</sup> Of two brothers who left Württemberg's small village of Jebenhausen in 1846, Moses Einstein, a twenty-year-old butcher, became secretary of the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Sacramento and a spokesman for its Jewish community. A study of emigration from this village concludes that more than half of the 207 Jews who came to America from Jebenhausen before 1870 consisted of brother-and-sister family groups.<sup>9</sup>

These young people had been born during extremely difficult times, and repression and turmoil provided a catalyst for many of them to pursue new

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opportunities in the United States, a country that welcomed Jews as no nation ever had. As faster and safer transportation made travel easier, men and women also left their homes with less fear for their lives and more assurance that communication with their loved ones at home could be maintained.

### The Birth of Community

“Among all the areas in the world, California is possibly the one in which the Jews are most widely dispersed. I do not know of one village, one hamlet, one *settlement* of any kind . . . where they have not established themselves,” wrote Daniel Levy from the Gold Rush town of Indian Diggings in October 1855.<sup>10</sup> Far from their origins in Europe or the eastern United States, Jews sought kinship and familiar rituals with their coreligionists during this chaotic time. With a sense of urgency, many communities founded societies and Jewish newspapers to disseminate news and give new immigrants a feeling of community. Associations became the primary social agencies and caregivers, as there were few family members, cultural activities, or community structures to offer support, provide companionship, care for the sick, or even bury the dead. In some instances, Jews in California organized burial societies and obtained cemetery land before their non-Jewish neighbors had done so. Women too were an integral part of the history of the West, becoming wives, mothers, teachers, and shop owners. Although we have yet to discover the letters of a Jewish Dame Shirley, the documents of the era vividly describe Jewish women’s activities in synagogue life, as volunteers, as choir members, as religious school teachers, and as members of their own benevolent and mutual aid associations. If Alexis de Tocqueville, who noted the spirit of voluntarism in American, had visited California during these years, he would have admired the many voluntary associations founded by Jews from different parts of the world.<sup>11</sup>

On September 22, 1849, the year 5610 of the Jewish calendar, San Francisco’s Jews, including one woman, assembled to celebrate their first Jewish High Holiday service in a wood-framed tent-store. Less than two years after failing to unite, San Francisco Jewry formed two congregations, Emanu-El and Sherith Israel, which adhered to different Jewish traditions or *minhagim*—the Ashkenazi, or German, and the *Polen*, or Polish. Conducting services largely in German, Emanu-El’s membership included a majority of Bavarian Jews and those who identified with them from other German states, as well as American Sephardim and French Jews. Among the members of this congregation were men who would become the elite of the Jewish community. Sherith Israel, known as the Polish congregation, did not have as distinctive an ethnic identity, most of its members coming primarily from England, Poland, Russia, and the eastern and southern United States.<sup>12</sup> The two pioneer congregations, eager for instant recognition and status, named themselves after the leading German and Sephardic congregations of New York City, replicating the rivalry of these paired religious traditions.

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These two San Francisco congregations joined sixteen new congregations founded in the United States during the 1850s whose members came from a variety of European backgrounds. Six were Polish while only three were German.<sup>13</sup> While historians have traditionally labeled the European Jewish migration of the mid-nineteenth century the “German wave,” more recently scholars have questioned the accuracy of this designation. Immigration officials often recorded a person’s nationality as German if the immigrant spoke some German and held documents from a German port, but many of these immigrants were from Prussian Posen, a densely populated Polish Jewish settlement culturally different from Germany.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, because German nationality was considered more prestigious, Jews of Polish origin often chose to identify themselves as German.

It is clear that pioneer California’s reputation for religious apathy is unfounded. Yet, as contemporary commentators observed, it was often difficult if not impossible for religious leaders to enforce observance by all Jews. By the 1860s, there were four regularly meeting congregations and several smaller, provisional ones in San Francisco.<sup>15</sup> In Sacramento, Placerville, Sonora, Marysville, Nevada City, Grass Valley, Mokelumne Hill, Stockton, and Jackson, services were well attended at least during the High Holidays and Passover, when Jews from the mining camps and small towns would seek to take part in services that reminded them of the way they were observed in their former homes.<sup>16</sup>

Yet some new Californians were genuinely observant, and their traditionalism is well documented. Their maintenance of Jewish dietary laws, their celebration of Jewish holidays, and their adherence to Jewish rituals, even during long sea voyages, is incontestable. Once in San Francisco, newcomers established kosher butcher shops and boarding houses where Jewish dietary laws were observed. Indeed, the San Francisco congregation split in two after its members failed to agree on a proper *shochet* (ritual butcher). In short, traditional Judaism found its place in the cities and towns of Gold Rush California because some of the pioneers were religiously knowledgeable Jews, able to build a *mikvah*<sup>17</sup> and provide the skills of the *shochet* and the *mohel*, as well as proficient prayer service leaders who were committed to keeping Jewish ritual and worship alive, no matter the obstacles.

Although there was concern for preserving traditional religious practices in California, Judaism was changing. Over the millennia Judaism has always adapted to its host culture.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, this meant a pervasive American Protestantism, with its emphasis on innovation, decorum, a weekly sermon, and women’s participation in congregational life. Encouraged by the absence of a well-educated, authoritative rabbinate, Judaism followed suit and became increasingly American. Yet reforms came slowly and were adopted by only a few congregations at first. While these trends influenced newer and older congregations alike throughout the United States, including some in California, it was in the East that change came first. In 1851, when Emanu-El of San

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Francisco was founded as an Orthodox congregation, Emanu-El of New York was already beginning to initiate reforms. By the 1860s, however, abridged prayer services and family pews at San Francisco's Emanu-El were becoming accepted practice. More resistant to change, Sherith Israel's congregation waited until 1870, upon moving to a new synagogue building, before eliminating the *mechitsa* (partition) separating men from women. More substantial modifications in traditional religious practices had to wait until the end of the nineteenth century. The same was true of other congregations in the region.<sup>19</sup>

As the community grew and prospered, most notably in San Francisco, so did its need for larger and more fashionable places of worship. San Francisco's two premier congregations first met in rented quarters, then constructed their own modest structures, and by the 1870s both were housed in impressive new synagogue buildings. In the period of avid synagogue and church building that followed the Civil War, San Francisco rivaled New York, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia in erecting impressive, often Moorish-style synagogues.<sup>20</sup> Completed in 1866, a year before its New York namesake, Emanu-El's Sutter Street temple, with its 165-foot-tall twin spires, could be seen for miles by ships sailing into San Francisco Bay, gracing the city skyline and attracting "the eye before all of the Christian churches."<sup>21</sup>

San Francisco became the center of Jewish life, as it did of California life. By the 1870s, a distant, drowsy California outpost had become "the City," a center of Jewish journalism and publication second only to New York City, as well as home to debate and literary societies, clubs, libraries, an orphan home, and a host of fraternal and benevolent organizations.<sup>22</sup> The pride of its inhabitants, both Jewish and gentile, San Francisco became not only the great metropolis of the West but one of the nation's greatest cities. Only one generation after California achieved statehood, its "Jewish population . . . was to stand second to that of New York State, [and] San Francisco's . . . second only to that of New York City."<sup>23</sup>

But San Francisco was not New York, and the distance from Jewish religious authority only exacerbated congregational conflict. In Cincinnati, when a question arose over the certification of a *shochet*, the *shochet* was sent to Baltimore or New York to be examined.<sup>24</sup> This was not an option for Californians, who had to rely on a single rabbi whose impartiality was not always universally trusted. Ultimately, laity had to make decisions on their own. Inevitably, synagogue leaders in California became more independent than their eastern counterparts and had no inhibitions about speaking up or standing out. At times the community was nonconformist in its practices. Such anomalies as the recitation of the Kaddish, or mourner's prayer, in tribute to the memory of an admired non-Jew, reflected an ability to synthesize Jewish traditions with a new, American way of life.

In California as elsewhere, Jews found they could remain Jews while adopting American ways. They joined with coreligionists to form the Concordia and