Final Research Paper:

A History of Jewish Americans & Jewish Community in the Phoenix, Arizona Area

Casey McCollum

University of Colorado Boulder

December 17, 2023

Today, Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona is home to almost 100,000 Jewish-Americans[1]. At the beginning of the 20th century, this number was less than 500[2]. The rapid growth of Arizona's Jewish community—predominantly centered around the city of Phoenix—is a fascinating historical event and one that this paper will seek to illuminate. This will be done through identifying and analyzing the role of broader national trends like Westward expansion and the opportunities it brought, discussing some of the key figures involved in the construction of Jewish life in Arizona, and examining first-hand personal accounts of the Jews who were a part of creating this community. This paper will be organized into three broad categories to best understand the growth of Phoenix's Jewish community. First will be the early history of Jewish Americans in Arizona, particularly Prescott and Phoenix, focusing on the period of the late 19th and early 20th century to understand the context and foundations of the later population swell. Next will be a focus on the expansion of the Jewish-American population and also the religious community in Phoenix, with a focus on Phoenix's Temple Beth Israel and Rabbi Albert Plotkin who oversaw the congregation during a time of rapid growth, as well as on stories from Jewish residents in the area. Lastly, this paper will focus on the current state of Phoenix's Jewish community and what the future of Jewish identity and Judaism looks like in the area. Taken together, this paper aims to synthesize these components of Phoenix's history and investigate how its rich history compares with broader national trends and fits in with the American Western Jewish experience specifically.

Although the Jewish population in Arizona was relatively low before the 20th century, there were many Jewish pioneers who played a significant role in the state's early history during

---

[1] Mark Seale et al., *2019 Maricopa County Jewish Community Survey*, (Arizona State University, 2019), 7.
[2] "Arizona Jewish Pioneers", The University of Arizona: Special Collections: Southwest Jewish Archives, accessed December 15, 2023, https://swja.library.arizona.edu/content/arizona-jewish-pioneers, par. 1.

the age of westward expansion—this portion of the paper will focus on some of the major developments in the Prescott and Phoenix areas brought about by Jewish Americans during the period from 1850-1920 and the significance of these developments in the broader arc of Phoenix's history. Broadly, the story of early Jewish settlers in Arizona can be characterized as quite similar to their experience across the American West—unlike their experiences in Europe, where many had emigrated from, "Jews were accepted readily into the dominant Anglo culture of frontier Arizona"[3] and Jewish men in particular were able to participate freely in frontier society due to their ascribed status as white settlers. In the early development of Arizona, many Jewish settlers and in particular merchants "located in central Arizona's two urban centers, Prescott and Phoenix. Of these, Prescott was the first to attract substantial numbers of Jewish settlers"[4]. Prescott was the source of much of the Jewish merchant activity in the mid-to-late 19th century, with many examples of Jewish entrepreneurs setting up shop in Prescott. Early merchandiser Michael Wormser, "after some fruitless prospecting attempts", set up several general stores across Arizona, eventually settling in Prescott. Later, "Heyman Mannasse arrived on the scene and began a similar operation. Other Jewish pioneers who came to Prescott from La Paz during the 1860s also entered the general merchandise business. These included Sol Barth, Aaron Barnett, Isaac Levy, F. H. Wunderlich, and German immigrants Aaron Wertheimer and Louis Landsberger"[5]. Prescott served as the main commercial hub of Arizona during this time, but toward the end of the century, Phoenix became an increasingly important city in the history of Arizona broadly but also in terms of its relation to Jewish American settlers. One family in particular—The Goldwaters—serves as an enlightening case study. The Goldwaters played an

[3] Blaine Peterson Lamb, "JEWISH PIONEERS IN ARIZONA, 1850-1920", (Arizona State University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1982), iv.
[4] Lamb, "JEWISH PIONEERS", 59.
[5] Lamb, "JEWISH PIONEERS", 60-61.

important role in the history of Arizona's development and the development of Phoenix. Born in Poland, Michael "Big Mike" and Joseph "Little Joe" Goldwater—originally the "Goldwassers"—moved to America in 1952. Their story was always a western one; originally, they moved to California but later found their way to Arizona after Prescott was named the capital in 1863. Michael in particular did quite well in Arizona, and "In 1872 … decided to open a store in Phoenix, a town that was later that was to become one of the west's largest cities but at that time was so unimportant that when the railroad came to Arizona it by-passed Phoenix"[6]. Ultimately, this original store was closed in 1876 due to bad business—but later, around the turn of the century in 1895, "Morris, Baron, and Henry Goldwater, together with businessman E. J. Bennitt, organized the firm of M. Goldwater & Bros"[7] in Phoenix, Arizona. These 3 were the sons of Michael Goldwater—Baron was the father of the most well-known member of the family, U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater, who unlike his ancestors did not identify strongly with his Jewish heritage, since he "was raised as an Episcopalian"[8]. The second Phoenix store was a success, and by the beginning of the 20th century, "Phoenix, unlike Prescott, grew and expanded its commercial influence … reflected in the development by Jewish merchants of a number of specialty shops along with the beginning of department stores"[9]. Despite the small number of Jewish settlers in Arizona overall, their importance in establishing a strong foundation in Phoenix as an integral part of the community is an important contextual piece of the overall history of the city—indeed, they played a major role in building its success. The frontier of the

[6] "The Goldwaters: An Arizona Story and a Jewish History as Well", The University of Arizona: Special Collections: Southwest Jewish Archives 1, no. 3, (The University of Arizona, 1993), https://swja.library.arizona.edu/content/goldwaters, par. 18.
[7] Lamb, "JEWISH PIONEERS", 79.
[8] The University of Arizona, "The Goldwaters", par. 3.
[9] Lamb, "JEWISH PIONEERS", 84.

American West during the period of westward expansion tended to attract those with entrepreneurial spirits, and Phoenix was no exception.

In 1897, the Jewish population of Arizona was about 2,000, but just 10 years later that number had fallen to 500. Although Jews played an important role in establishing the foundations of Phoenix, the lion's share of the growth of Phoenix's Jewish population occurred after World War II. During this time of rapid postwar growth, Jewish community and religious institutions played an increasingly vital role in Phoenix's Jewish history. Perhaps most emblematic of this phenomenon was Temple Beth Israel in Phoenix and Rabbi Albert Plotkin, who moved with his wife Sylvia Plotkin to Arizona in 1955—at a "time there were only 3,000 Jews living in Phoenix and Temple Beth Israel only had 350 families in their congregation"[10] and would go on to serve the community until his retirement in 1992. Reflecting on his journey, Rabbi Plotkin recalls how even when their numbers were small in the early 1950s, Jewish Americans played an extremely active role in Phoenix's community and served important roles in civic life—Sophia Kruglick, Harry Rozensweig and David Bush all served roles on the Phoenix council, and Plotkin singles out state senator Harold Giss, who he described at the time as the man who "practically runs the state"[11]. That is to say, the community had strong foundations to begin with. In a 1988 interview, Phoenix resident Saul Lebeau recalls coming to Phoenix in 1934 and starting his life there. The intimacy of Phoenix's early Jewish community is easy to understand when Lebeau reminisces upon his marriage, explaining that he and his wife "got married at Beth Israel at 122 East Culver Street. There were 300 Jewish families in Phoenix

[10] "Rabbi Albert Plotkin and Sylvia Plotkin", Arizona Jewish Historical Society: Cutler Plotkin Heritage Center, accessed December 15, 2023, https://www.azjhs.org/mid-century-rabbi-albert-plotkin-and-sylvia-plotkin, par. 3.
[11] Albert Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi Who Came from Notre Dame", (*Western States Jewish History* 27, no 2., 1995), 138.

and we sent out 300 invitations"[12]. Importantly, then, Beth Israel was a central part of Phoenix's Jewish community before Rabbi Plotkin's arrival as well. At the time of Lebeau's marriage (1939), the Rabbi who presided over Beth Israel was Rabbi Abraham Lincoln (A.L.) Krohn[13]—Rabbi Plotkin's predecessor, who Plotkin fondly remembers as "a wonderful community leader" and someone who worked actively to promote civil rights through political action, educational opportunities for minorities, greater awareness around mental health, and the arts[14]. Plotkin was dedicated to following in the footsteps of Rabbi Krohn, and in the process of growing Temple Beth Israel's number of families from 350 to over 1,000[15], he explains that reaching out beyond just his congregation and making an impact on the Phoenix community was very important to him[16]. Cooperation and good relations between religious communities also characterized Temple Beth Israel—Religious scholar Mary Christine Athans recalled Rabbi Plotkin laughing alongside a Catholic clergy, jokingly remarking, "If Jesus came to Phoenix, Arizona, he would not go to any of your churches! He would come to my synagogue! He was a good Reform rabbi!"[17]. Temple Beth Israel was not the only synagogue in Phoenix, but Reform Jews constitute the bulk of Phoenix's Jewish community, so Rabbi Plotkin is significant as a Reform Rabbi who served the community during a time of significant growth—he recalls that at the time of his arrival, Beth Israel was the only Reform synagogue alongside "Conservative Beth El, and Orthodox Beth Hebrew" and that by the time of his departure, three synagogues had grown to eighteen and

[12] Saul Lebeau, "An Interview with Saul Lebeau", interview by Bobbie Kurn, (Arizona Jewish Historical Society, 1988).
[13] "Temple Beth Israel", Arizona Jewish Historical Society: Cutler Plotkin Heritage Center, accessed December 15, 2023, https://www.azjhs.org/mid-century-temple-beth-israel, par. 3.
[14] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 142.
[15] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 140.
[16] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 143.
[17] Mary Christine Athans, "Courtesy, Confrontation, Cooperation: Jewish-Christian/Catholic Relations in the United States", (U.S. Catholic Historian, 2010), 107.

Phoenix's Jewish population had grown from 3,000 to almost 50,000[18]. It's important to note that even before this period of rapid growth significant progress was made in growing Arizona's Reform Jewish community through efforts made by earlier Jewish residents. Nat G. Silverman recalls serving alongside Rabbi A.L. Krohn to build Beth Israel's religious schooling apparatus, which, in 1941 Silverman describes as suffering from a "scarcity of religious school teachers in the Reform movement in Phoenix," and so at the time he recalls that "Rabbi Krohn and I, with the assistance as a secretary of Bess Feldstein, actually ran the school itself"[19].

As demonstrated through the key role of Temple Beth Israel, then, religious life played an important role in Phoenix's Jewish community. But equally important was Jewish cultural life—Plotkin proudly recalls, for instance, that his wife Sylvia built a "first class" Judaica collection & museum[20]. He notes the purpose of this is "not only [to] show what Jews have done through the ages, but locally to keep a record of Arizona Jewry, what Arizona Jews have done over the last 100 years"[21]. This cultural Jewish identity, of course, continues to become increasingly important heading into the 21st century as more Jews may identify with their heritage culturally but not necessarily religiously—22% of Jews nationally describe themselves as having no religion as of 2019[22]—or at the very least, are connected to their religiosity to different degrees. Additionally, with the massive level of growth in Phoenix's Jewish community after World War II, raising the population to almost 100,000 as of 2019[23], more diversity of thought, opinion, and practice is to be expected among the community. Today, the majority of Maricopa County Jews

[18] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 137.
[19] Nat Silverman, "Interview of Nat G. Silverman", interview by Bobbie Kurn, (Arizona Jewish Historical Society, 1988).
[20] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 143.
[21] Plotkin, "The Arizona Rabbi", 145.
[22] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 2.
[23] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 7.

identify with Reform Judaism[24], but on average Maricopa's Jews are less likely to attend religious service than the national average, with 43% of Maricopa Jews on the voter file saying they never attend religious services compared to 22% nationally[25]. The high number of Reform Jews should come as no surprise given Phoenix's rich history of Reform Judaism spearheaded by Temple Beth Israel throughout the 20th century. Efforts to improve Jewish cultural life and upbringing served a vital role in tandem with the religious traditions of the Jewish community in many cases—for instance, around half of all Jewish Americans under 50 in Maricopa County surveyed went to a Jewish summer camp—64% among Synagogue Members—[26] which connects again with the broader trends of Jewish life in the American West (and America broadly), as summer camps also played a prominent role in regions like Colorado and the Northeast United States. Jewish Americans in Phoenix are not a monolith, nor is any group, but tend to retain a tight community—for instance, over 90% of Jews in Maricopa were born to two Jewish parents[27]. Additionally, certain key beliefs tend to appear across Jews in Maricopa, such as some degree of attachment to Israel. A majority of Phoenix Jews feel either very or somewhat strongly attached to Israel, with this being especially pronounced among Synagogue Members, with 92% feeling very or somewhat strongly attached[28]. Broadly speaking, this connects to the influence of Zionism in American Jewish communities—while degrees of attachment over Israel can vary wildly and opinions over Israeli policy among the Jewish community are hotly contested, many Jewish Americans in Phoenix do feel at least somewhat emotionally connected to the Jewish state. This highlights a trend visible throughout Phoenix's Jewish history—that

[24] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 5.
[25] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 20.
[26] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 12.
[27] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 12.
[28] Seale et al., *Jewish Community Survey*, 13.

despite disagreements in various areas, or differences in religious belief, there is a certain kinship felt among Phoenix's Jewish residents by virtue of their history and upbringing.

From its beginnings as a small and entrepreneurial community in a frontier state, to its rapid development post-WWII, to its status today as home to the largest Jewish community in the American Southwest, Phoenix, Arizona serves as an important cultural and religious hub for Jews in the American West. An important takeaway is that while the story of Phoenix's Jewish community shares many characteristics with the broad story of America's frontier—early waves of entrepreneurial risk-takers, and large demographic shifts in the postwar era, to name a few—it also possesses unique cultural institutions like Temple Beth Israel which reflect the spirit and tenacity of the individual Jewish Americans who built them. As such, Phoenix stands as an exciting example of the clash of broad trends in the West and individual stories that make its Jewish community unique.

Bibliography

"Arizona Jewish Pioneers." The University of Arizona: Special Collections: Southwest Jewish Archives. Accessed 15 December 2023. https://swja.library.arizona.edu/content/arizona-jewish-pioneers.

Athans, B.V.M. Mary Christine. "Courtesy, Confrontation, Cooperation: Jewish-Christian/Catholic Relations in the United States." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28 (January 2010): 107–34. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=e9f045b8-d038-3238-8a05-ada0272a05f4.

Lamb, Blaine Peterson. "JEWISH PIONEERS IN ARIZONA, 1850-1920." Order No. 8216446, Arizona State University, 1982. https://colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/jewish-pioneers-arizona-1850-1920/docview/303220107/se-2.

Lebeau, Saul. Interview by Bobbie Kurn. *ASU Library: Shema Arizona - the Arizona Jewish Historical Society Oral History Project*, 11 April 1988, https://www.asu.edu/lib/archives/shema/transcripts/LEBEAU_S.TXT. Accessed 15 December 2023.

Plotkin, Rabbi Albert. "The Arizona Rabbi Who Came from Notre Dame." *Western States Jewish History* 27, no. 2 (January 1, 1995): 137–50. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=099549d3-a1a8-3a39-9f2a-b3834f93cd35.

"Rabbi Albert and Sylvia Plotkin." Arizona Jewish Historical Society: Cutler Plotkin Heritage Center. Accessed 15 December 2023. https://www.azjhs.org/mid-century-rabbi-albert-plotkin-and-sylvia-plotkin.

Searle, Mark, Patrick Kenney, Elizabeth Wentz, Kenneth Goldstein, and Frank Jacobson. Rep. *2019 Maricopa County Jewish Community Survey*. Arizona State University, 2019. https://thecollege.asu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-jewish-community-report.pdf.

Silverman, Nat G. Interview by Bobbie Kurn. *ASU Library: Shema Arizona - the Arizona Jewish Historical Society Oral History Project*, 21 June 1988, https://www.asu.edu/lib/archives/shema/transcripts/SILVERMAN_N.TXT. Accessed 15 December 2023.

"Temple Beth Israel." Arizona Jewish Historical Society: Cutler Plotkin Heritage Center. Accessed 15 December 2023. https://www.azjhs.org/mid-century-temple-beth-israel.

"The Goldwaters: An Arizona Story And a Jewish History As Well." The University of Arizona: Special Collections: Southwest Jewish Archives 1, no. 3. (Spring 1993). https://swja.library.arizona.edu/content/goldwaters.