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Project Follow Up: Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South

The extraordinary program convened at the College of Charleston will be a gift that will keep on giving. For me, it offered an entrée into the historiography of American Jewry, southern Jewry and their intersections. In order to consolidate the knowledge that I gained, I will be giving a community lecture in Memphis as part of Beth Sholom Synagogue's Lehrhaus Program under the title of "Privilege and Prejudice: An Introduction to Jewish History in the American South" in October or November. The talk will be framed around a paper I plan to finish titled, "The Zacuto Complex."

In "The Zacuto Complex," I begin with a vignette of Avraham ben Zacuto, whose story I argue is paradigmatic for a widespread complex faced by many modern Jews who must navigate between being objects of the racial gaze and themselves complicit with the forces of structural racism. Zacuto was a renowned fifteenth century astronomer who helped make possible Vasco da Gama's and Columbus's voyages, but who was nonetheless ruined by the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal. Fleeing Spain, then Portugal, he ended up in North Africa where he wrote one of the first overarching histories of Jews (Yerushalmi, Zachor).

Zacuto's life serves as a paradigm for the fraught situation of Jews caught in the crosshairs of colonialism who are nonetheless complicit with colonization, victims of racism who collude in racial formations. As Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain point out, the heirs of Zacuto were the first Jews to land in South Africa, and their legacy echoes through the

history of South African Jewry. There are analogs to Zacuto's story in the French imperial context as well, best testified to by the Franco-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi. Maud Mandel, Lisa Leff, and Ethan Katz's recent volume, *Colonialism and the Jews*, calling for an imperial turn in Jewish history, along with earlier work by Susannah Heschel and Daniel Boyarin, expand the corollaries of what Michael Rothberg has recently termed "the implicated subject" to wider swaths of modern Jews.

My hope from this seminar was to learn how Jews in the American South fit into this paradigm. In a sense, the Zacuto complex names one central thread through the seminar. In one of our opening sessions, Adrienne Rich explores this phenomenon and its consequences in her article "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity,"; the site visit to the Coming Street Cemetery indicated how some Charleston Jews have yet to adequately confront it; our discussion of "Port Jews" led by Jonathan Sarna provided a long durée viewpoint on the phenomenon in the Americas (and supplied additional reading to draw from in making this case); the documentary *Carvalho's Journey* could serve as another quintessential example of the problem. But the issue emerged with precise clarity when the seminar turned to the role of Jews in the slave trade, ultimately revealing that there were a number of Jews involved, but also that there were almost no Jews who opposed the trade before or during the Civil War. Judah P. Benjamin would be a poster child for the Zacuto complex, since he was a foil for Judeophobia during the Civil War, and yet a key architect in the southern struggle to maintain slavery. As anticipated, the sessions with Eric Goldstein were particularly helpful in clarifying how this worked in the post-Civil War period, as the relationship between Jews and whiteness shifted with the influx of eastern European Jews. Michael Cohen and Marni Davis helped me to

understand the economic ramifications. The documentary on the Leo Frank lynching is prime evidence that the potential for violence against Jews was always a possibility. But the general exceptionality of the incident reinforced that Jews in America and the South lived in security, comfort, and privilege, especially in relation to other racialized minorities, most importantly Blacks. Despite the overrepresentation of Jews in the Civil Rights movement, the majority of Jews in the South did not want to ruffle the social order, a phenomenon that continues today. In short, this powerful and stimulating seminar helped to make clear that Jews in the American South are exemplars of those who need to work through the Zacuto complex. The single line on the subject in the original paper can now easily be filled out into a huge component of the larger paper.

The knowledge I gleaned from the seminar will take some time to fully germinate. This paper is only one iteration of a process of my own rethinking of the place of Jews within what I want to term heterophobic entanglements. So there is more to come.