

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 87)

A Jewish Father's Letter to Abraham Lincoln

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

The Jewish population of the United States in 1860 was between 150,000 – 200,000 out of a total population of approximately 31,443,000. Thus Jews formed but a small percentage of the population during Abraham Lincoln's presidency.

Political sentiment over the issue of cessation and slavery was sharply divided amongst the Jewish population in the years leading up to the Civil War. This is reflected in the fact that approximately 3,000 Jews fought on the Confederate side and 7,000 fought on the Union side.

President Lincoln's administration was marked by a few noteworthy incidents affecting the Jews as a body, the most important being the attempt to appoint a Jewish chaplain in 1861- 62,¹ and the proposed expulsion of the Jews "as a class" from within the lines of General Grant's army in 1862-63.²

On two occasions President Lincoln was sharply criticized by the Jews for his objectionable phraseology. "In his first inaugural orders he declared:

Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way our present difficulty."³

Clearly Jews were not pleased with his reference to Christianity and the blatant exclusion of any mention of other religions.

"In his 'General Order Respecting the Observation of the Sabbath Day in the Army and Navy,' issued November 15, 1862, he announced:

The importance for man and beast of the prescribed weekly rest, the sacred rights of Christian soldiers and sailors, a becoming deference to the best sentiments of a Christian people, and a due regard for the Divine will demand that Sunday labor in the Army and Navy be reduced to the measure of strict necessity."⁴

This order, which made no mention of soldiers of other religions, generated a fair amount of discussion in Jewish circles. It also elicited a moving letter from a Mr. Bernhard Behrend, the father of an observant Jewish soldier who had enlisted in the Union Army. His moving letter is given below:

*To His Excellency Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States*⁵

By your order of the 16th day of November, 1862, you recommend that the officers and men of the army shall observe the Sabbath and do no work on Sunday, because we are a Christian people. But according to the Declaration of Independence and according to the constitution of the United States, the people of the United States is not a Christian people, but a free, sovereign people with equal rights, and each and every citizen of the United States has the right and liberty to live according to his own consciousness in religious matters, and no one religious denomination, be it a majority or minority of the people, can have a privilege before the other under this our beloved constitution.

Now by the order of your Excellency you give the privilege to those officers and men in the army who by their religious creed do observe the Sunday as a holy day and a day of rest; but you make no provision for those officers and men in the army who do not want to observe the Sunday as a holy day, (as for instance those Christians called the Seventh-day Baptists and the Jews, who observe the Saturday as a holy day and a day of rest,) that they may enjoy the same privilege as those who observe the Sunday as a holy day, as well as for the heathen or the so called infidels, who do not want to celebrate either the Sunday or the Saturday as a Sabbath, but choose perhaps some other day as a day of rest.

Now I stand before you as your namesake Abraham stood before G-d Almighty in days of yore, and asked, "Shall not the Judge of all earth do justice?" So I ask your Excellency, the first man and President of all the United States, Shall you not do justice? Shall you not give the same privilege to a minority of the army that you give to the majority of it? I beseech you to make provision, and to proclaim in another order, that also all those in the army who celebrate another day as the Sunday may be allowed to celebrate that day which they think is the right day according to their own conscience; and this will be exactly lawful, as the Constitution of the United States ordains it, and at the same time it will be exactly according to the teaching of the Bible, as recorded in Leviticus xix. 18: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

I gave my consent to my son, who was yet a minor that he should enlist in the United States army; I thought it was his duty, and I gave him my advice to fulfill his duty as a good citizen, and he has done so. At the same time I taught him also to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, when it would not hinder him from fulfilling his duty in the army. Now I do not want that he shall be dragged either to the stake or the church to observe the Sunday as a Sabbath. Your Excellency will observe in this my writing that I am not very well versed in the English language, and if there should be found a word which is not right, pardon it, and never such a word shall be construed so as if I would offend your Excellency or the people; for I love my country, the Constitution, and the Union, and I try to be always a loyal citizen.

I remain, respectfully, your most obedient servant and fellow citizen,

B. BEHREND

Narrowsburg, Sullivan Co. N.Y. Dec. 4, 1862

Dr. Gary Behrend of Raleigh, NC, a descendent of Bernhard Behrend, supplied the following additional information about this letter.

“Regarding the attribution of the letter to Abraham Lincoln requesting observance of the Sabbath on Saturday by Jewish soldiers, the letter was written by one of my ancestors, Bernhard Behrend, then of Narrowsburg, NY, on behalf of his son, Adajah Behrend (1841-1932) a hospital steward and an officer in the field (no unit designation is available), later a legendary physician in Washington DC.”

Apparently, Behrend did not receive a reply from President Lincoln to his moving letter. However, Dr. A. Behrend reported “that in 1863 a general order was issued permitting Jews to be furloughed over their Holy Days, and that at Fairfax Seminary he furloughed eleven on that occasion.”⁶

“We do not know if a reply was returned, but we do know of a man’s love for his son, a family’s love for their new country and their devotion to their faith.”⁷

¹ See “**The Jewish Chaplaincy Controversy**” *The Jewish Press*, January 6, 2012, pages 52 & 53 (<http://tinyurl.com/7eswhw4>) and “**Unsung Hero: Reverend Arnold Fischel**” *The Jewish Press*, February 3, 2012, pages 51 & 58 (<http://tinyurl.com/7zaeffn>)

² See “**General Grant’s Expulsion of the Jews**” *The Jewish Press*, March 5, 2008, pages 34 – 35 (<http://tinyurl.com/7yxqjwh>)

³ **Lincoln and the Jews** by Isaac Markens, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1909; 17, AJHS Journal, p. 109 – 166. (Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/shabbat.htm>

⁶ <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/simonwolf.html>

⁷ <http://knowlescollection.blogspot.com/2010/12/beh-behrend-family-of-germany-and.html> This web page also contains some genealogical information about the Behrend family, originally from Germany, who changed their family name from Behr to Behrend around 1800.