

Transcript: Peering Into the Past

Podcast written, recorded, edited and transcribed by JMM intern Marisa Shultz.

Hello, and welcome to the first and only episode of Peering into the Past. I am your host, Marisa Shultz, Education and Programs intern at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, and I am delighted that you have decided to join me today.

Today we are going to be learning about a fascinating and somewhat forgotten portion of American Antebellum history: Jewish perspectives on slavery and abolitionism. In the Civil War field, we often discuss how preachers from various protestant congregations used their pulpit to share their views on the hot-button issue of the time, but we often forget to acknowledge that there were Jews living in the United States, and that many of them would fight during the Civil War on both sides of the battlefield. Today we're going to start by talking about the different positions people had on slavery and a general overview of some of the most outspoken Antebellum Jewish figures. Then we will look specifically at two Rabbis on opposite sides of the argument who both served in Baltimore, Maryland.

Perspectives on slavery are often grouped into three broad categories: Abolitionism, anti-slavery, and pro-slavery; these positions exist on a spectrum, with pro-slavery on one side, Abolitionism on the other, and anti-slavery somewhat in the middle. I would like to start by clearing up some confusion I often see about these terms, namely I would like to highlight the difference between Abolitionism and anti-slavery.

Abolitionism is the moral argument against slavery: the idea that owning another person is inherently wrong and immoral. Abolitionists wanted to see all of the slaves across the United States freed as soon as possible, and many abolitionists even wanted to grant citizenship and voting rights to those freed. Abolitionists, generally speaking, took two approaches to accomplish their goal: the lawful and the unlawful

Those that took the lawful approach, such as the pacifist William Lloyd Garrison of Massachusetts wanted to pass specific legislation that would free the slaves. Some took to peaceful protesting and oration, and while some did help the underground railroad (which was technically illegal under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850), none looked to start slave uprisings.

Unlawful Abolitionists, on the other hand, believed that no legislative act could fix this problem, and that only violence and rebellion could free the slaves. One of the most notable unlawful abolitionists, is failed businessman John Brown, who went on a rampage of destruction in Kansas, tried to make his own country within the Blue Ridge Mountains, and famously attempted to raid the Harpers Ferry federal arsenal in order to arm the local slaves. To these Abolitionists, the sacrifice and bloodshed was worth the freedom it brought.

Anti-slavery on the other hand, was not necessarily a moral argument about slavery. Rather, proponents of the anti-slavery position wanted to stop the spread of slavery into the West. During the Antebellum period, American territories were looking to become full-fledged states. This caused great uproar, because new states threatened to upset the balance between the number of slave and free states. So in 1820 under the direction of Henry Clay, the Federal Government passed the Missouri Compromise, which did two things. First, it admitted both

Missouri (a slave state), and Maine (a free state) into the union. Second, and more importantly, it set a precedent for future territories. All states admitted above the 36°30' parallel would be free, and those below it would be slave. Fun fact: this is one of several reasons many Southerners pushed to try and add places in South and Central America to the Union, because they would have been all been slave states. Anyway, the Missouri Compromise lasted for a short while, and then a politician by the name of Stephen A. Douglass, one of Abraham Lincoln's staunchest rivals, proposed the government use a process called Squatter Sovereignty, in which the people of a territory would have a democratic vote as to whether or not they would enter the union Free or Slave. Those that supported the anti-slavery position wanted to prevent the spread of slavery into the western territories, but they did not have any plans to disrupt slavery in already established slave states.

It may seem small, but the distinction is rather important. For Abolitionists they wanted to stop slavery everywhere in the United States. For proponents of the anti-slavery position, they wanted to limit the growth of slavery in the west. Both wanted to prevent the pro-slavery position from getting what it wanted, which was to expand their institution across the United States.

Some may ask: how did pro-slavery proponents defend this horrendous practice? Some felt that it was necessary because the South was economically dependent on the system. Some argued in a paternalistic approach in which this was a much better situation for the uncivilized slaves; this argument does not hold up to scrutiny both then and now, but it was often used as a justification and to make it seem as though supporters of slavery were doing some great generous service. Some, and most common in the Jewish community, was the use of holy texts, in our case the Tanakh, to justify the peculiar institution of slavery.

Jewish perspectives on the slavery literally encompass this entire spectrum. On one hand there is Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York who argued at the pulpit that the Tankah legitimizes slavery, and on the other you have August Bondi, an Austrian immigrant, so staunchly Abolitionist that he befriended and supported John Brown. You have Ernestine Rose, suffragette, an atheist and daughter of a rabbi, who campaigned and orated in New England on the importance of abolitionism. You also have Rabbi George Jacobs of Richmond Virginia, who owned slaves and profited from their labor.

But I truly think that the experiences of two Rabbis from Baltimore, namely Rabbi Bernard Illoway, and Rabbi Einhorn, exemplify just how the Antebellum Jewish communities spanned this entire spectrum of thought.

Rabbi Illoway was born in 1814, in Kolin, Bohemia, which is now part of the Czech Republic. He came from a long line of Talmudic scholars, all of the way back to his great-grandfather. Illoway studied at the Pressburg yeshiva under Rabbi Moshe Sofer, and also earned his PhD in Languages and Classics at the University of Budapest. The next several years of his life, he would teach at gymnasiums in France and Austro-Hungary. A major turning point in his life came in 1848 and 1849 when large spread revolts began in Austro-Hungary, especially in Bohemia. While Illoway was not particularly active in these revolts he quote: "spoke in the public square of Kolin in support of revolutionary forces as they marched through town on their way to Prague." He was even found to have a stamp proclaiming "Liberte Equalite Fraternite," one of the most famous phrases to come out of the French revolution of the 1700s, second only to maybe "Let them eat cake." The revelation of his support for the revolutionaries in Austo-Hungary was the

death knell of his career in Europe; Illoway knew that if he wanted to continue his work as a Rabbi, he would have to seek a congregation somewhere else.

This brought Rabbi Illoway to the United States in 1852, where he largely spent his time “[fighting] a rear-guard defense of orthodoxy,” and trying to encourage and enforce traditional practices on his various congregations in America. At the beginning of his career in the United States, Illoway bounced around, starting in New York with Anshei Chesed, then to Shaaray Zedek in Philadelphia, United Hebrew Congregation in Saint Louis, and Keneseth Shalom in New York once again.

In 1859, he came to Baltimore and assumed his position as the Rabbi of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation which worshipped in the Lloyd Street Synagogue, right here on the Jewish Museum of Maryland’s campus. But it was in 1861 on National Fast Day, just several months before the Civil War began, that Illoway made his opinions on slavery clear to the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. While historian Lachoff argues that Illoway “while not condoning slavery, fretted over the southerner’s loss of rights,” his strong language and constructed argument indicate that he believes in the southerner’s right to own slaves. Illoway expresses his concerns for the south by arguing that they have a right to leave the union because the “government cannot, or will not, protect the property rights and privileges of a great portion of the Union against the encroachments of a majority misguided by some influential and ambitious aspirants.” To Illoway, slaves are obviously property; he does not question that, and since the federal government is not protecting the right to own said property, the south, in Illoway’s mind, has an absolutely airtight reason to leave the union. While that is a more political argument, Illoway also uses the Tanakh to convince his congregants that the holy scripture itself condones slavery. Illoway questions: “Where was ever a greater philanthropist than Abraham, and why did he not set free the slaves which the King of Egypt made him a present of?” He argues, essentially, that since biblical figures owned slaves, that this legitimizes the claim that slavery should exist, and that it is morally acceptable for slavery to exist.

In some ways, I find it rather ironic that Illoway was caught with a Liberte Equalite Fraternite stamp, since those words were intended to champion the idea that all men are deserving of human rights. The fact that he didn’t see this irony illustrates just how deeply and unquestioningly Illoway believed that slaves were property and not humans deserving of rights.

The Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, it seems, had little to no problem with Illoway’s opinions on slavery; they did not ask him to leave or change his sermons based upon what he said on National Fast Day. In fact, when Rabbi Illoway left, it was because a congregation in New Orleans, called the Gates of Mercy, invited Illoway, now a second time, to lead them because quote “of [his] appearance southern sympathies.”

While certain factions of the Gates of Mercy congregation disliked and clashed with Illoway’s stalwart orthodoxy, his pro-slavery perspective was never a problem for the congregation and was one of the reasons the congregation hired him in the first place. When Illoway left Gates of Mercy for Congregation Shearith Israel in Cincinnati, Ohio, it was largely because of a schism in his congregation regarding desires to reform. Illoway died in Cincinnati in 1871 due to injuries incurred in a carriage accident.

So that's the history of Rabbi Bernard Illoway, leader for a brief time of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation; let's now take a look at one of Illoway's quote "fast personal friends" with whom he had quote "lengthy and heated religious debates." Rabbi David Einhorn.

Rabbi David Einhorn was born in Bavaria, now part of Germany, in 1809. He began growing his reputation as a staunch reformer of Judaism while living in Europe, attending the Frankfort Rabbinical Conference, and arguing that the Talmud has no divine authority. Ironically enough, like Illoway, Einhorn also could not gain appointment to a congregation due to his political stances; congregations would select him, but the Bavarian government routinely refused to appoint him. This brought Einhorn to the United States, where he became the Rabbi at reform congregation Har Sinai in Baltimore in 1855. During this time, Einhorn produced a shortened prayer book in German, known as *Olat Tamid*, and also published his own German journal known as *Sinai*. He often published his sermons and articles in this journal, and frequently he discussed his stance on slavery.

Einhorn made his argument for abolitionism in two major ways. First, he refuted the major Tanakh based argument of Illoway. Einhorn rejected this idea saying that "[t]he moral sentiment, in spite of its absolute authority is subject to all kinds of modification growing out of time and place, and youthful impressions;" Einhorn basically said just because Abraham owned slaves does not mean that slavery is an okay practice in the modern world.

But Einhorn didn't just spend his time refuting those who opposed abolitionism, he also went on the offensive, making a connection between the Jewish experience in Egypt, retold on Pesach each year, with the experiences of the African slaves in bondage in the South. In a response to Rabbi Morris J. Raphall's pamphlet *The Biblical View of Slavery*, Einhorn penned this beautifully written gem:

"A Jew, the offspring of a race which daily praises God for deliverance from the bondage of Egypt... undertakes to parade slavery as a perfectly sinless institution sanctioned by God and to confront those presumptuous people who will not believe it with somewhat of an air of moral indignation! A more extraordinary phenomenon could hardly be imagined!"

He concluded with: "But to proclaim in the name of Judaism, that God has consecrated the institution of slavery! Such a shame and reproach to the Jewish religious press is in duty bound to disown and disavow."

Einhorn routinely made his abolitionist views extremely clear, and in 1861, this brought him a great deal of trouble. "A mob threatened to tar and feather him," a common Victorian and Antebellum technique to humiliate and attempt to exile someone in the community. This forced Einhorn to flee north, to Philadelphia, where he became the Rabbi at Congregation Keneseth Israel. It may seem like Baltimore was uncompromisingly pro-slavery, some of Baltimore wanted to see Einhorn return, namely his congregation. Har Sinai offered Einhorn the opportunity to come back if he promised to not preach about the controversial politics of the time. Har Sinai said this was for his own safety, but nonetheless, Einhorn refused the offer and remained in Philadelphia, where he continued to influence the Reform movement until his death in 1879.

Baltimore, and more specifically Rabbi Illoway and Rabbi Einhorn, serve as a small microcosm of the wide variety of opinions regarding slavery held by members of the Jewish community during the Antebellum period in American history.

I hope this has piqued your interest in the history of American Jews during the Antebellum period, and I hope that you learned a little something today! If you did learn something, or if you have a question, please post it down in the comments section below!

This has been Peering into the Past, Marisa Shultz, signing off.