Introduction

*Loving Kindness and Cultural Citizenship in the Jewish South*

Jews have desired to fit in, to be like everyone else. The problem is that there is an excess expressed in this desire that is aptly captured in the joke that says that Jews are like everyone else, only more so.
—Laura Levitt, *Jews and Feminism*, 1997

It is impossible to write a history of the Jews of the South without re-creating the history of the South itself.
—Harry Golden, *Our Southern Landsman*, 1974

Ralph A. Sonn, Bavarian-born superintendent of the Hebrew Orphans Home of Atlanta, addressed the Board of Trustees on New Year's Eve, 1917, on the subject of aiding poor Jews within the institution's five-state region. Opened in 1889 in the up-and-coming “Gate City” of the New South, the home was designed for needy Jewish children whose parents were either deceased or unable to care for them. Most of its 111 young charges were sons and daughters of the immigrants who had made the South their home in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many having fled the pogroms of Russia to establish a permanent home in the “golden land” of America.¹ It was up to Sonn and the other comparatively privileged and acculturated members of the Orphans Home Board to ensure that these future Jewish citizens did not become wards of Christian institutions or burdens to the public purse. In his speech, Sonn disparaged what he perceived as a “conservative” tendency to “let good enough alone.” Invoking the familiar wooden fence posts that surrounded many of the nearby middle-class homes in Atlanta's growing...
Jewish community, Sonn declared, “If you leave a white post alone, it will soon be a black post.” He continued, “If you particularly want it to be white you must be always painting it again . . . What does not go forward does not stand still, it goes backward.”

Delivered two and half years after Leo Frank’s death by lynching in August 1915, Sonn’s metaphor in black and white was no epistemological accident. He and the other Jews of Atlanta lived in the shadow of the scandal that ensued when Frank, a Texas-born and Cornell-educated Jew of German descent, was accused and found guilty of murdering thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, one of many young, poor white girls who worked under his supervision at the National Pencil Factory. The violent outcome of Frank’s trial broadcast to the southern Jewish community and beyond the ease with which Jewishness might translate to racial and sexual deviance, as public characterizations of Frank as a “Jew Pervert” and “lascivious simian,” driven to violence by his lust for a white, gentile girl, took on a close resemblance to pervasive depictions of the mythological “black beast” rapist.

The place of Jewish citizens was far from secure, and after Frank’s death, many closed down their shops and left the city, fearful of retribution and an escalating wave of anti-Semitic violence. Those who returned to or remained in the South were highly attuned to the need to fit into the social landscape, and they struggled to cultivate a low profile and to make Jewishness synonymous with exemplary southern citizenship. Benevolent social uplift—particularly efforts to support impoverished widows and orphans—centered on a need to ensure that fellow Jews internalized the localized racial knowledge that would enable them to adopt “American” values. Exploring the historical records and case files of charitable organizations and social uplift societies helps us untangle the ways in which southern Jews—in all their cultural and regional diversity—negotiated efforts to remain Jewish while also making a home in the South.

The rich legacy of Jewish benevolence is evident in the names of hospitals, schools, and charitable institutions spread across the contemporary American landscape, visible in all the places Jews have called home. Yet the southern origins of these civic contributions are less prominent in public memory and largely overlooked by scholars of Jewish culture and history. This book challenges northern-centric
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perspectives on American Jewish history by looking south to uncover the roots of Jewish benevolent traditions and to explore the ways in which region shaped a minoritized people’s pursuit of belonging. For Jews living in the Jim Crow South, charity and social uplift served as a vital citizenship project, a complex give-and-take whereby relatively privileged, established Jews worked to support and educate their poor, immigrant coreligionists. Theirs was also an effort to protect collective Jewishness from association with poverty and cultural degeneration, and their work on behalf of poor brethren reveals how the lessons of regional belonging and social mobility assumed concrete form. This book shows how Jewish southerners responded to the precariousness of their lives by instituting a sophisticated network of social uplift organizations to ensure that their poorest coreligionists did not endanger collective Jewish prosperity and belonging.

Through a complex dialectic of benevolence characterized by simultaneous self-interest and altruism, southern Jews navigated their relationship with regional authenticity by proving themselves to be exemplars of charity. This book argues that their exceptional performance of *gemilut hasadim*—Hebrew for “giving loving kindness”—provided the vehicle through which they negotiated the politics of belonging, particularly the cultural and symbolic properties of citizenship, in a time and place of extreme insecurity and social transformation. Ultimately, poor southern Jews’ encounters with their benevolent coreligionists confirm that the history of southern Jewishness is not simply that of Jews fitting in *despite* their cultural and religious differences. Rather, this is a story of how Jewish southerners absorbed the social mores of their adoptive homeland while shaping them, in journalist Harry Golden’s words, “re-creating the history of the South itself.”

The migration of roughly two million eastern European Jews between 1881 and 1924 sparked national anti-Semitic speculation about Jewish inassimilability, driving native-born coreligionists to step up efforts to provide material support as well as guidance on the finer points of becoming American. Jewish benevolence was thus a “categorical imperative” nationwide. Yet, in the post-Reconstruction South, the effort to take care of impoverished coreligionists was amplified at the crossroads of economic turmoil, profound shifts in the way racial differences were known, and violent policing of the color line, creating for southern Jews
a compulsion to excel in the performance of charity or else fall prey to the region's most lethal exclusions.

The approximately twenty-five thousand Jews who called the South home in the late nineteenth century saw their social stability and authenticity shaken by the arrival of over forty thousand immigrant coreligionists, whose poverty and cultural and religious differences called into question the ability of Jewish people to be truly southern.9 Classified by racial taxonomists as “Caucasian,” the predominantly eastern European newcomers were nevertheless foreign to the collective memories of postwar sectionalism in which modern southern white identities were grounded. Further, the new immigrants’ arrival coincided with what historian Rayford Logan termed the “nadir” of southern race relations, a period spanning from the end of Reconstruction into the 1920s, during which racist violence claimed approximately three thousand African American lives.10 As they bore witness to, participated in, and sometimes became subject to this violence, Jewish southerners internalized a sense of the region’s racial and gender hierarchies that in turn helped authenticate their status as true citizens of the South.11 This book tells the story of how the Jews of the South navigated the dangers of this crossroads by constructing a benevolent empire to provide irrefutable proof of their superior commitment to loving kindness and to cement their claims to southern authenticity.

Orphan societies and homes were among the most cherished institutional responses to the insecurity of Jewish citizenship in the South, and their archival records reveal the depth of leaders’ commitment to the protection and education of the region’s impoverished Jewish children. The genealogy of these orphan-protection efforts extends throughout the nineteenth century, from the 1801 formation of the Charleston Hebrew Orphans Society, to the establishment in 1856 of the Jewish Orphans Home (later renamed the Association of Relief for Hebrew Widows and Orphans) of New Orleans, to the 1889 dedication of the Hebrew Orphans Asylum (later renamed the Hebrew Orphans Home) of Atlanta. Their institutional records—including public speeches, newsletters, meeting minutes, annual reports, and social worker case files—testify to the ambivalent coexistence of selflessness and self-promotion, of altruism and opportunism that congealed at the vola-
tile intersection of immigrant acculturation, social uplift, and regional racial norms.

An active and ongoing investment in charity has long constituted a vital component of Jewish citizenship, yet the effort took on additional urgency in spaces where anti-Semitism, anti-immigration backlash, and Jim Crow culture coexisted. This book therefore looks south to understand how charity served as an essential defense against the cultural, social, and political uncertainties of Jewish belonging. While scholars of American Jewish history have documented the range and depth of Jewish charity as a collective effort to assuage poverty and to bolster Jewish belonging, few have investigated the charitable infrastructure established by southern Jews or explored the ways in which regional culture and politics influenced the provision of charity to impoverished coreligionists. Although the largest population of American Jews in 1820 was concentrated in Charleston, South Carolina, subsequent waves of Jewish immigrants settled chiefly in the North, creating a demographic disparity that influenced narratives of American Jewish history. One consequence of this imbalance was an amnesiac depiction of the North as the primary site of American Jewish life, culture, and history. The field of southern Jewish history emerged decades ago to correct this historical imbalance, and this book is part of that restorative intervention.

Scholars of southern Jewish history have opened many doors onto formerly unseen sources, contextualizing Jewish life in the South by revealing, for example, the extent to which southern Jews were pioneers in the larger national movement for Reform Judaism and illuminating the participation of Jewish immigrants as rank-and-file soldiers of the Confederacy. However, the intricate relationship between transnational Jewish identities and a culture in which Jim Crow segregation, economic turmoil, and state-sanctioned racial violence flourished remains under-analyzed. Some scholars assert that southern Jewish difference began and ended at population size; southern Jews lived in largely gentile communities in which they had access to fewer traditional lines of Jewish ritual and cultural continuity. While demographic factors influenced the emergence of distinct southern Jewish cultural practices and folkways, post-Reconstruction modes of racial
and gender etiquette, including the means of differentiating “citizens” from “noncitizens,” helped set the stage on which Jewish leaders, social workers, and the recipients of their benevolence forged a path to full citizenship in the South.

In a public presentation titled “How Southern Is Southern Jewish History?” historian Eric Goldstein called for “a new paradigm for the study of southern Jewish history,” one that takes into consideration the “particular social, legal and cultural framework operating in the South.” Given the post–Civil War prevalence of white longing for a mythologized era of unequivocal social order and white racial purity, this book explores how “the South” takes shape as a fictive historical space through which affiliations and exclusions are imagined and coded into language, memory, and social landscape. If culture and shared history play a pivotal role in shaping individual citizens, “the South” is not simply a location confined by the boundaries designating the Confederate combatants in the Civil War. Rather, it was (and continues to be) a set of collectively forged memories and practices, culturally and locally specific folklores and identificatory rituals that configure the lines dividing insider from outsider, citizen from stranger. Southern belonging was therefore framed in a series of interimplicated and overlapping relations of power, all of which influenced Jewish efforts to exemplify good citizenship through acts of loving kindness.

Cultural Citizenship and Southern Jewish Belonging

In addition to illuminating the sophisticated network of Jewish benevolent institutions in the southern United States, this volume contributes to contemporary ethnic studies scholarship by exploring a minoritized people’s multifaceted efforts to obtain access to the benefits of full citizenship. Drawing from recent work on “cultural citizenship,” a concept popularized by cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, this book looks beyond the rights, privileges, and protections delineated in legal structures to explore how collectively shared values, ideals, and practices shape historical actors’ authenticity as members of a community. According to Rosaldo, cultural citizenship constitutes the “everyday cultural practices through which [minoritized subjects] claim space and their right to be full members of society.” Recent scholarship
in Latino/a and Asian American studies has applied this approach in investigations of communal and individual negotiations for belonging and the complex interdependencies and fluctuating identity politics that comprise the realm of “culture.” The book builds on understandings of what American studies scholar Lisa Lowe calls “the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity” by illustrating how hegemonic understandings of gender and race inflected idealized notions of citizenship. I analyze the shared values, norms, and histories that, in Lowe’s words, “powerfully shape who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget.” Yet in a departure from Lowe’s analysis of national identities and citizenship claims, this book illustrates how regional culture and collective memory shaped the boundaries of citizenship for southern Jews. For Jews living in the post-Reconstruction South, loving kindness constituted an authoritative, historically rooted assertion of collective common cause, a representational strategy that tied Jewish southerners to one another and their southern homeland while policing the boundaries between insider and outsider, citizen and stranger.

This book frames the South as a critical site of Jewish cultural production, where some of the earliest Jewish settlers first initiated the networks of charity that would help prove their entitlement to full belonging in their adoptive homeland. Without reducing the South to its tired stereotypes, the book demonstrates how a southern environment configured by a war-torn economy and a forcefully defended color line, the latter supported by “Lost Cause” ideology and pervasive mythologies of sexualized race difference, shaped the experiences and collective identity of southern Jews. Benevolent leaders’ and social workers’ negotiations with their needy clients—orphans, widows, abandoned wives, and impoverished families—provide insight into a minoritized people’s encounter with their region’s shifting ideals of belonging. In this story of acculturation, benevolence provides a lens on the multifaceted give and take of Jewish identity formation, ultimately asking how an internally variegated community negotiated a path to inclusion with an eye to the larger community’s reckoning of citizenship.

The book explores and contextualizes the cultural roots of the Jewish obligation to give loving kindness to others, particularly to impover-
ished women and children. *Gemilut hasadim* emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to others and celebrates the performance of *mitzvot*—good deeds—in an effort to improve one’s community and the larger world beyond. In contrast to Christian principles of charity in which one’s reward for good deeds exists in the afterlife, the concept of *gemilut* implies the reciprocity of service in which one receives an immediate reward or recognition for his or her kindness. For Jews, whose historical experience of oppression and disfranchisement helped solidify their terms of mutual identification, *mitzvot* to the wider community often served as a crucial means of cementing their communal access to the benefits of cultural and juridical citizenship. From their first encounters with the New World, Jews experienced citizenship of a limited kind, their recognition and acceptance contingent on their capacity to become self-sufficient and to ensure that poor coreligionists never became a burden to the larger community. Thus an implicit association of citizenship, in its multiple manifestations, as a reward for broad-reaching charity characterized the earliest instances of Jewish settlement in North America, where benevolent infrastructures emerged wherever Jews settled permanently.

The significance of Jewish legacies of service to their collective progress and belonging was captured in the words of Benjamin Franklin Jonas at the 1856 dedication of the New Orleans Jewish Orphans Home. The Kentucky-born attorney, who later served in the Confederate Army and in the U.S. Senate, told the assembled crowd of celebrants, “It has ever been the boast of the Jewish people, that they support their own poor . . . Their reasons are partly founded in religious necessity, and partly in that pride of race and character which has supported them through so many ages of trial and vicissitude.” Throughout the nation, “supporting their own poor” comprised the core of a uniquely Jewish charitable tradition and served as a shared value to which Jonas and others could gesture in ways meaningful to the Jewish public and its non-Jewish allies. Jonas’s reference to Jewish “pride of race and character”—in the service of Jewish access to the benefits of universal citizenship—would recur among southern benevolent leaders, although explicit allusions to race would fade gradually to more subtle invocations of Jewish uniqueness.
“A Monument More Precious Than Marble”: Hebrew Benevolence, Collective Memory, and the Lost Cause

In the minds of those who claimed the post-Reconstruction South as home, and in the words of Wilbur J. Cash, “the South [was] another land,” one that vigilantly policed the boundaries between insider and outsider, and Jews struggled to remain in the former category. The Jewish South, a newspaper first established in Atlanta in 1877 under the tagline “Independent and Fearless,” exhibited the kind of regional influences that shaped ideals of southern Jewish citizenship. One of the paper’s first issues invoked the glory of a shared Confederate past to generate support for Atlanta’s Hebrew Benevolent Society: “Though the days of chivalry be past, its spirit yet remains; and in the audience before me many a heart beats wildly when woman weeps, and many a muscle stiffens to battle for the wronged.” Conjuring the idealized (white) woman in distress, the anonymous author urged, “Gallant men of Atlanta, respond to the appeal which lovely woman makes for the aid of suffering woman; and if you may not avenge her with your sword, relieve her distress with your purse.”

In the plea for “gallant men’s” financial support, postwar southern Jewish benevolence staked its legitimacy on a collectively produced sense of history that rested on the established logic of regional distinction and chivalric gender ideals. While “gallant men” of the past used force to “avenge” the “suffering woman,” men of this new era would channel their passions into the fortification of a benevolent empire. The author concluded by summoning the “memory of the lost cause, and the dead who died for that cause.” He urged, “Your dead heroes with one voice, could they speak, would exclaim, ‘build up the Benevolent Home for our bereaved and poverty stricken women—that will be a monument more precious than marble, more enduring than granite.’”

Jewish orphan homes in particular became these “enduring” and “precious” sites of authenticity and acculturation, and their procedures for aiding unfortunate brethren evince the complexities of transforming poor immigrants into respectable Americans, unambiguous citizens who would reflect a favorable image of Jewishness to the gentile world. The region’s widespread embrace of Lost Cause nostalgia—the
belief that the Union victory represented the bitter defeat of a noble and chivalrous way of life—provided an often unspoken but omnipresent backdrop for discussions of how best to protect orphaned Jewish children from the dual specters of pauperhood and conversion. If, in historian Gunja SenGupta's words, “pauperism marked a person as not quite white,” then Jewish benevolence stood as a bulwark against the racialization of coreligionists whose poverty and cultural backwardness threatened communal Jewish access to full citizenship.29 With a watchful eye trained on prevailing expectations for southern citizenship, benevolent leaders sought to inculcate their young charges with values of economic self-reliance and respectability while balancing Jewish cultural preservation with careful observation of the prevailing racial and gender etiquette. Taking care of those perceived as “their own” also enabled privileged Jews to showcase both their leadership in modern ideals of benevolence as well as their own success in class escalation. In the wake of the Civil War, the exemplary care provided by the southern orphan homes helped verify Jewish adherence to modern, capitalist ideals of progress in a war-ravaged region struggling to self-represent as civilized and cultured.30

Critical to the southern Jewish orphan homes’ efforts to support poor coreligionists was an emphasis on Jewish distance from blackness and the social degradation it conferred within a violently mandated system of racial segregation. Superintendent Sonn recognized the necessity of aggressive intervention into the lives of poor Jews, a vigilantly reiterative process of “painting and repainting” to ensure that white posts remained white, for to “leave things alone” would open these vulnerable Jewish orphans up to the stigma of blackness. In defiance of anti-Semitic depictions of the Jew-as-outsider, the white posts of Sonn’s report stood impervious to the dangers of the color line, their upright uniformity evidence of their indisputable belonging on the middle-class white southern landscape. In Sonn’s reckoning, white posts maintained through meticulously applied layers of fresh paint reproduced the ideals of elevated cultural capital—what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed the system of class-privileged knowledge by which one learned to navigate one’s particular social terrain—in the city’s finest neighborhoods.31 Yet their neglect would surely render them “black,” sullied by grime and emptied of aesthetic promise. Such contaminated
posts could not stand sentry to the class-aspirant Jewish homes of Atlanta, nor could they guard the collective legitimacy and belonging of their community. Sonn’s appeal to benevolent leaders to continue their efforts in “painting and repainting” suggests his awareness that race itself was a malleable construct, one that Jews could not leave to chance.

Race Uplift and the Ruling Ideologies That Produced Loving Kindness

Through their meticulous efforts to ensure that the fates of impoverished and unacculturated coreligionists were not left to chance, southern Jews demonstrated the significance of benevolence to the process of southern race-making. As historian Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, “Caucasians are not born . . . they are somehow made. It’s just a question of who does the making.” Indeed, the process of “making” race, and whether the tenuous category of whiteness would include Jews at a given moment, is a complicated story. Jews were white in the eyes of the law, as demonstrated in their designation as “W” in the U.S. and state Census; their categorization as white in antimiscegenation laws, which forbade intermarriage between whites and people considered not-white; their ability to occupy public spaces reserved for “whites only”; and in their access to naturalization. Despite their unequivocal legal classification and citizenship, Jews were sometimes characterized as racially suspect, and Sonn’s “white post” analogy suggests that they were aware both of their occasional liminality and the stakes involved in being perceived as indisputably white. Five years prior to Leo Frank’s death, North Carolina minister Arthur T. Abernethy published a book proclaiming The Jew a Negro: Being A Study of the Jewish Ancestry from an Impartial Standpoint. Abernethy’s invocation of scientific “impartiality” lent credence to his claims about the common ancestry of Jews and African Americans, and the title alone was cause for consternation among Jewish citizens. Shifting understandings of the boundaries delineating “white” from “not-white,” anti-Semitic and nativist responses to immigration, and the growing visibility of a newly resurgent Ku Klux Klan weighed heavily on the minds of Jewish leaders, like Sonn, who struggled to ensure that unacculturated and impoverished coreligionists did not bring dishonor to their increasingly variegated community.
To understand how southern Jews internalized and responded to shifts in their region’s racial norms requires a close look beyond one-dimensional ideas of individual agency and self-awareness to scrutinize the ways in which coercion and self-interest manifested themselves in the ostensibly pure and autonomous altruism of loving kindness. Literary scholar Susan M. Ryan’s analysis of “the power relations that structure well-intentioned acts” provides a model for analyzing the nuanced politics of Jewish loving kindness. As Ryan argues, “Self interest . . . is not the opposite of genuine benevolence but rather its complement,” and benevolent discourses must be studied within the contemporaneous systems of race, gender, and class inequality that gave them meaning. When relatively privileged, established Jewish citizens reached out to help their impoverished and immigrant brethren, they did so in the name of self-preservation as well as altruism, guiding their beneficiaries according to their own regionally specific visions of ideal citizenship and class escalation.

This book builds on scholarship on the complex politics of “race uplift” whereby historically minoritized people traversed “a relatively narrow set of tactics,” in historian Lawrence Schenbeck’s words, to win “civic rights and economic security.” In their examinations of African American race uplift and the accompanying politics of respectability, historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Kevin Gaines underscore the ambivalence with which historical actors on either side of the benevolent relationship navigated their precarious journeys to civic inclusion. A collective as well as an individual enterprise, uplift demanded that relatively privileged members of a minoritized community—in this case the black elite or “Talented Tenth”—struggle for communal improvement, helping lift their “race” as they scaled the social ladder. In defiance of the larger world’s racist exclusions, members of the “Talented Tenth” showcased their superior respectability and class status in their public performance of good works, in the process hoping to prove the collective entitlement of African Americans to full citizenship.

Established Jews similarly recognized that their individual success and acceptance depended on the success and acceptance of Jews collectively. In a 1914 letter to Simon Wolf, the first president of the Atlanta Hebrew Orphans Home, Mary Antin, immigrant advocate and author
of The Promised Land (1912), voiced her belief in benevolent outreach as vital to communal Jewish success:

There is not a Jew in this country . . . who is not affected in some degree by the triumphs or failures of Jewish public enterprises. The world is accustomed to judge us Jews in the lump. The sins of the least of us cover us all with shame; the merit of the greatest of us reflects credit on all of us . . . You and your colleagues in the good work have added another span to the bridge by which I, a Jewish woman, shall cross the chasm between my highest ambitions and the world’s interpretation of my life.  

Writing in the midst of Leo Frank’s trial, Antin saw to the heart of the command performance of Jewish charity. Imagined collectively by the non-Jewish world, regardless of their cultural heterogeneity, Jews would be judged “in the lump.” Despite individual strivings and public triumphs, Jewish legitimacy rested on the success of their lowest common denominator, the impoverished and unacculturated masses whose perceived backwardness threatened the social standing of all who identified as Jews. Loving kindness was therefore not solely a means by which to take care of their own, as Jewish law commanded; it was also a carefully choreographed response to the unstable, often hostile social terrain in which Jews sought full membership.

Loving kindness also involved coercion, where recipients of charity were expected to comply with the mandates of their benefactors as a precondition for receiving aid. In Jewish tradition, the most revered form of tzedakah—justice to the poor—valorizes “double blind” charity given anonymously to an anonymous recipient. Yet, during the period under study, national shifts in understandings of poverty increasingly demanded expert supervision of the poor to ensure that only the “worthy” received material assistance. By the late nineteenth century, social uplift leaders nationwide frowned on “handouts” as an ineffectual and antiquated mode of charity while the emergence of the social work profession provided an army of trained experts to supervise poor clients and oversee the distribution of financial support. Thus tzedakah could not be truly “blind” without violating the nation’s scientific standards of charity. Individuals might still donate anonymously to the many
benevolent institutions that served the Jewish poor, but the recipients of charitable aid were increasingly subject to the scrutiny and control of “professional altruists.” For the duration of the benevolent exchange—where orphans were fed, clothed, and educated and where widowed and abandoned mothers received financial support along with home visits from trained social workers—the recipient of charity navigated a complex web of surveillance.

As the sources reveal, recipients of charity were far from docile bodies on which uplift strategies for middle-class success could be inscribed. They often rebelled—sometimes subtly—against the directives of their benefactors, and in these moments of conflict we witness the intricate ways in which southern Jewish identities took shape. Immigrant clients of Jewish benevolent institutions often chafed under the mandates of their social workers, sometimes resisting institutional budgeting by (mis)allocating funds to “luxury” purchases like piano lessons or domestic “help.” These moments of resistance testify to the existence among impoverished, foreign-born southern Jews of distinct ideas about securing cultural citizenship and asserting their entitlement to belonging in a space hostile to foreignness and racial liminality.

Jewish efforts to find collective inclusion in the United States shared similarities on a national scale, but region proved a significant influence on the shifting meanings ascribed to citizenship in space and time. One’s pursuit of social legitimacy in the post-Reconstruction South required close adherence to a system of what Louis Althusser called “ruling ideologies,” the unwritten codes by which one negotiated one’s legitimacy as a citizen. The subjects of this study—the trained social workers, benevolent leaders, and the people whose hardship and poverty led them to the doors of charitable institutions—did not publicly announce their experiences as raced and gendered individuals, nor did they openly express the ways in which regional politics inflected their choices and behaviors. Yet traces of these historical actors’ entrenchment in larger systems of normative values are evident in a close reading of the sources they left behind. As in Ralph Sonn’s appeal for vigilant application and reapplication of white paint to so many vulnerable “posts,” the sources testify to the centrality of internalized racial knowledge to the performance of loving kindness.

The negotiations that took place between clients, social workers, and
benevolent leaders were part and parcel of the process through which minoritized people tried to self-define as normative citizens, entitled to the full benefits and protections of citizenship. This book attends to what literary scholar Helen Heran Jun calls “the constraining terms of citizenship” that often placed minoritized people at odds in their “coercively structured struggles and aspirations for national inclusion.”43 At this particularly volatile moment and location, the risks of challenging the ruling racial ideologies were high, and many complied with them as a matter of course and of survival. This book’s approach to southern Jewish struggles to obtain legibility—the capacity to be recognized by others as full members of the polity, rather than as outsiders—owes much to religious studies scholar Laura Levitt’s work on the “impossible assimilations” that compelled Jews to reinvent Jewishness to suit the dominant culture, in the process generating an “excess that always mark[ed them] as other.”44 The stories in benevolent institutional records lend insight into minoritized subjects’ participation in the process of reinforcing, rather than challenging, the governing ideologies of their region and culture, even when these very ideologies underwrote their continued subjugation.

The process of making and reinforcing southern Jewish citizenship was marked by ambivalence and incongruity in the private spaces of the Jewish South. The social, economic, and cultural gulf that separated benevolent Jews from their less privileged, immigrant coreligionists was a source of significant tension. As they worked to improve the living conditions of their less fortunate brethren, benevolent leaders often simultaneously emphasized the social, educational, and cultural differences between themselves and these very beneficiaries.45 And even as southern Jews benefited from what W. E. B. DuBois called the “psychological wage” of race privilege, collective Jewish identity formation was subject to the tensions and pressures of the color line, especially as more immigrant coreligionists made the South their home in the tumultuous years after Reconstruction.46

Given the volatility of what it meant to belong in the post–Civil War South, this book explores how Jewish ideals of benevolence and charity served as a means to help negotiate the color line for southern Jews. Often, this process of forging their claims to citizenship involved demonstrating their superiority over other racially marked groups,
especially African Americans. For example, commonsense understand-
ings about putatively natural human differences guided social workers’
judgments of their clients’ living conditions. Although they rarely used
explicitly racial terms in their official documentation, a “good” neigh-
borhood was by necessity a white one, and clients described as “fair”
or “light-skinned” carried more promise than those with “ruddy” or
“dusky” complexions. Jewish charitable institutions also helped intro-
duce immigrant coreligionists to the norms of their new homeland, and
understanding prevailing racial politics comprised a critical part of the
acculturation process. Benevolent leaders, institutional affiliates, and
professional social workers took great pains to ensure that poor Jew-
ish families did not live close to or socialize with African Americans,
although they often allowed their clients to hire black maids or laun-
dresses. Hiring black “help” and distancing oneself from racially sus-
pect neighborhoods were some of the myriad ways in which southern
Jews, regardless of class status or national origin, demonstrated elite
cultural capital and signaled to others their class mobility.47 Such mas-
tery of privileged class knowledge and its accompanying performances
of respectability in turn reinforced Jewish claims to citizenship in a
time and place marked by often violent racial struggle.

This book investigates the complex process of solidifying one’s claims
to citizenship at a time of significant change, social instability, and polit-
ical violence by illuminating the elusive systems of power and mean-
ing through which Jewish identities were constructed. Jews’ attitudes
toward their most vulnerable coreligionists—new immigrants, the in-
digent, orphaned children, and widowed or deserted women—reveal
some of the composite attitudes around cultural citizenship that helped
frame and contain southern Jewishness just as the category of “Jew” was
shifting in response to a massive wave of migration. The point is not to
show whether or not Jews were white in a given moment; the book asks
instead how Jews in the Jim Crow South used benevolence as a vehicle
to navigate the troubling waters of cultural citizenship in a region where
gendered Confederate nostalgias and white supremacy defined the very
contours of belonging.

In essence, this book argues that an exemplary performance of lov-
ing kindness was critical to the production of ideal Jewish citizenship in
the post-Reconstruction South. While privileged Jews both north and south of the Mason–Dixon line threw themselves into the task of aiding the less fortunate, location in the South—by the 1880s a space of rigid racial prohibitions and an especially violent, extralegal system for upholding segregation—indelibly marked the boundaries of benevolence and belonging. Southern citizenship ideals during the time of Jim Crow ordered the social and political terrain on which people framed themselves as members of the polity, demanding that benevolent leaders and immigrants alike conform to prevailing racial norms or else place themselves and their coreligionists beyond the pale of social legitimacy. It is in the context of appeals to white racial domination that becoming American took on a particularly problematic tenor for Jews as a community with considerable internal variation.

The Sex of Race

Gender and sex were fundamental to the process of reiterative race-making. The dialectic of benevolence—where established, relatively wealthy and educated Jews and their impoverished, often foreign-born clients grappled over the meanings of belonging—provides a lens on the centrality of gendered “racial formation” to Jewish identity and identification in the Jim Crow South. During the period under study, nationwide anxieties about the extension of formal citizenship rights to African Americans and immigrants gained expression through debates around gender, sex, and the reproduction of the citizenry. The popular science of eugenics, which purported to improve the nation through selective breeding, made a special appeal to native-born, middle-class white women to place motherhood above all other pursuits, in the service of the nation’s health. Mothers were the conveyors of culture to their children, and Jewish women in particular felt the burden of inculcating their children with the authenticity and quiet religiosity that would ensure the survival of Jewishness itself.

A simultaneous valorization and suspicion of motherhood was especially prevalent in the post–Civil War South, where white mothers served as the primary custodians and conveyors of the unwritten codes of racial etiquette. “Ladyhood” and its attendant entitlements
to chivalric protection applied only to white women, on whose sexual purity rested the endurance of the white race. Racial segregation and vigilante violence emerged as methods of protecting white women and children from the risks of sexual danger and contagion that were presumed to arise from social proximity to African Americans. At its root a means of policing sex, the color line was designed to protect white women from sexual violation by reputedly rapacious black men.\textsuperscript{51} Even as black women’s labor in the private space of the white home remained essential to the maintenance of white privilege, prohibitions against racial mixing were framed as gendered appeals to the security of individual and public welfare, and the protection of white women’s and children’s bodies was crucial to these projects of engineering the ideal citizenry.\textsuperscript{52}

A close reading of previously under-researched sources, including confidential case files and institutional records from southern Jewish benevolent organizations, provides insight into the ways in which southern Jews navigated this complex, paradox-ridden path to southern belonging. In Superintendent Ralph Sonn’s metaphor, a “black post” suggested not only racial degradation, but also a threat of interracial mixing that signaled a broader incapacity to blend into the southern, middle-class landscape. Such neglected “posts” were a threat to the others around them, as proximity to blackness and the contagion it signified compromised the respectability of all Jews. In Sonn’s mind, successful orphan protection demanded the cultivation of elevated cultural capital—including a performance of race privilege and its attendant gender and class ideals—among the children of impoverished Jews. The color line and its accompanying gender prescriptions loomed large in the process of accessing the benefits and protections of full citizenship. Rules of race, sex, and gender comportment scripted the boundaries of belonging while shaping the conventional wisdom by which southerners came to see themselves and those around them as full, partial, or nonmembers of their community. For southern Jews, exhaustive knowledge of and adherence to these norms proved vital to communal efforts to flourish as southerners on the white side of the color line.

While some of these sources, such as public speeches, news clippings, scrapbooks, and other public institutional records, are open to
the public, the vast majority of my research is based on the confidential social work files of southern Jewish benevolent organizations. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the organization that grew out of the Hebrew Orphans Home of Atlanta, the Jewish Educational Loan Fund (JELF), which has provided interest-free loans to Jewish college students since 1991. The JELF Board of Directors generously allowed me access to the case files on the condition that I not use the real names of their institutional clients. In my efforts to honor the wishes of JELF and other charitable institutions that have made their confidential files available to me, I have by default assigned pseudonyms to all institutional clients as well as to any non-clients whose stories may be embarrassing to their descendants.

Organization of the Book

Building on and challenging a predominantly North-focused history of Jewish migration, acculturation, and institution building, the book begins with the establishment of the first southern Jewish charitable and mutual aid organizations. The first Jews who arrived in the American colonies were allowed to remain only if they took care of their own poor, and this mandate became a central part of Jewish claims to exemplary citizenship going forward. Narratives of unique self-sufficiency and loving kindness fortified Jewish claims to belonging and shaped the character and form of Jewish benevolence nationwide. However, in the wake of the Civil War, early southern Jewish appeals to universal, national citizenship shifted to accommodate a regional model of belonging based on chivalric ideals of honor and collective memory of the “Lost Cause.” The concurrence of the violent “nadir” of southern race relations with economic crisis and the second wave of Jewish migration shaped the terrain on which collective Jewish claims to citizenship were made. As racialized gender ideals valorized white men’s obligation to protect white women and children from cultural degradation and racial contagion, southern Jewish benevolent leaders increasingly appealed to the familiar language of chivalry and the redemption of the South’s distinctly civilized way of life.

Chapter 2 addresses the historical context in which gemilut hasadim
helped legitimize collective Jewish claims to honor and citizenship at the turn of the twentieth century. As eastern and southern European immigration came under attack and emerging scientific theories of degeneration characterized these groups as racially suspect, established Jews struggled to provide solutions to their immigrant coreligionists’ poverty and cultural alienation. Jewish professionals, many of them women, joined the burgeoning social work movement, contributing their scientific methods and expertise to help systematize loving kindness for the poor. In the South, *gemilut hasadim* became inextricably tied to efforts to prevent coreligionists from falling into poverty and transgressing the color line. The public visibility of poor children—particularly girls—in spaces of interracial mixing challenged prevailing codes of gender etiquette, which placed white wives and daughters safely in private spaces, supported and protected by white fathers and husbands. Further, as shifting child-care standards brought orphanages into question, southern Jewish leaders and social workers toiled to transform their institutions into exemplars of modernization and respectable home life.

Enouncing chapters draw from institutional case histories to explore benevolent tensions among some of the critical constituencies for whom charitable institutions were designed: orphaned children, abandoned women, widows, and indigent families. Orphans and other dependent children take center stage in chapter 3’s analysis of southern Jewish orphan homes as exemplary spaces for developing cultural citizenship and transforming the children of the poor into paragons of white respectability. Established in 1856 and 1889, respectively, the New Orleans Jewish Orphans Home (later renamed the Association for Hebrew Widows and Orphans, and then the Jewish Children’s Home) and the Atlanta Hebrew Orphans Asylum (later renamed the Hebrew Orphans Home) provided shelter as well as superior care to the Jewish orphans of the South. Despite roiling debates over the viability of institutionalization, these homes served as vehicles not just for the relief of the poor but also for optimizing and showcasing communal Jewish success and belonging. For many Jewish leaders, the orphan proved a symbol of unsettling liminality, a harbinger of hope but also of danger, for her success promised communal pride and legitimacy, yet her failure to conform to the prevailing codes of gender and race respectability
threatened the foundation on which Jewish civic entitlements were based. In direct challenge to larger systemic and epistemological threats to Jewish belonging, the two southern Jewish orphan homes worked to produce respectable men and women who would represent their people as outstanding citizens in the eyes of the larger world.

Gendered notions of respectability and “worthiness” are key to chapter 4’s consideration of the ways in which Jewish benevolent institutions addressed the plight of the agunah—Hebrew for abandoned woman—and the development of policies for determining whether such women should receive mothers’ subsidies. A mother’s power to create an ideal home in which her children could carry on the traditions of their past was vital to Jewish continuity; so was her ability to inculcate her male children with the values of independence and self-sufficiency that were necessary to the attainment of full citizenship while modeling for her female children the principles of proper womanhood. Eastern European immigrants exuded the gender expectations of their former homes, which often clashed with the New South’s chivalric placement of white mothers and daughters in private spaces under the protection of white men. Mothers who did not follow benevolent workers’ prescriptions for social escalation and child-rearing, and those who allowed their children to stray into spaces of mixed-race sociability, were often subject to coercive measures ranging from gentle prodding to the loss of institutional funding and even the loss of custody of their children. Case files from various communities throughout the South reveal how attitudes towards agunot reflected the region’s anxieties about whether women whose husbands were unable or unwilling to protect them could qualify as true “ladies” and worthy Jewish mothers.

Chapters 5 and 6 investigate the case files of individual families who fell on hard times during the Depression, and the way Atlanta’s Jewish benevolent network addressed their needs during this economically and politically turbulent time. Chapter 5 explores the case of an Orthodox, widowed immigrant mother of two daughters in Fort Pierce, Florida, at the time a small community with a modest Jewish infrastructure. The subsidized mother’s six-year correspondence with her Atlanta orphan home social worker provides a window onto the intricate give-and-take of the benevolent exchange, and problematizes the process of acculturation by approaching it from the viewpoint of the recipient
of charitable aid. The immigrant mother’s insistence on hiring a black maid; her resistance to certain kinds of work; and her efforts to ensure her daughters’ access to the trappings of middle-class respectability illuminate the gender and racial politics that shaped her efforts to forge a life of refinement and culture.

In an effort to explore the politics of racial differentiation that often characterized the relationship between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, chapter 6 traces the story of a Sephardic family who immigrated to Atlanta from Turkey and whose inability to subsist on the father’s scant and unpredictable income drove them to request aid from Atlanta’s Montefiore Relief Association (MRA). As in many cases, the financial support was intended to be temporary, yet the family’s economic difficulties continued for almost a decade, during which time MRA social workers maintained a detailed file of their interactions with the family. While the case file provides only the Ashkenazic social workers’ perspective, it offers useful insight into the means by which immigrant clients adapted the benevolent institution’s interventions in ways they considered valuable, sometimes in direct defiance of their social workers’ instructions. Such exchanges reveal the multifaceted gender and racial politics that informed Ashkenazic social workers’ analyses of their Sephardic clients, and highlights the processes through which immigrant southern Jews worked to optimize their civic entitlements during a time of significant economic and political strain.

As these individual case histories reveal, loving kindness constituted a fundamental part of the Jewish response to the uncertainty of their cultural citizenship in the post-Reconstruction South. By the early twentieth century, the southern Jewish orphan homes were among the very best in the nation, providing their inmates with recreation, education, and cultural training far superior to most institutions serving the nation’s poor children. Yet the story of these exemplars of benevolence is not purely heroic, for charity and uplift often worked in the service of white supremacy. This book therefore provides a simultaneous focus on the most celebrated alongside the most shameful aspects of the southern Jewish past. A critical interrogation of the politics of benevolence provides new insights into the ways southern Jews sometimes reinforced, sometimes contested, their region’s shifting ideals of belonging and exclusion. Southern Jews saw themselves as active participants
in the construction and reproduction of southern citizenship, and to
demonstrate their “pride of race and character” represented a compli-
cated tangle of pragmatism and social yearning, sometimes with cal-
culated results, sometimes with unintended consequences. In Ralph
Sonn’s words, they signaled their communal claims to the benefits that
racial and class supremacy conferred, painting and repainting white
posts in an effort to fortify their authenticity as citizens of the South.