

Small-town Judaism: Wharton, Texas as a Case Study of the Vitality of Small-town Jewish Life

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Introduction

The 1983 film *West of Hester Street* opens with the filmmaker recalling a question addressed to him years earlier at a family dinner after he had moved to Texas. “Are there any Jews in Texas?” asked his concerned family member.¹ This question is indicative of a much larger understanding about Jews in the United States; they live on the East Coast, in big cities and these are the only enclaves of Jewish life in this country. While *West of Hester Street* aims to counter this idea about (the absence of) Texas Jewry through an historical account of Jewish Texas, I am interested in another aspect of this same ideology. Namely, that Jewish life is synonymous with urban life.

In the same way that Jewish life is not relegated to the city of New York or the Northeast more generally, it is also not only existent in the city. However, Jewish life in small-towns, especially small Southern towns, is distinct from the experience of Jewish life in cities with larger Jewish enclaves. This means that through decentering the narrative of American Jewish existence and studying the small-town Southern Jewish experience, we can gain a unique understanding about interfaith relations, Jews’ place in the racial system, and a specific and underrepresented American Jewish experience.

Using Shearith Israel, a congregation in Wharton, Texas which was active from 1913 to 2002 as a case study, I will explore the composition of small-town Texan Jewish life as a socio-cultural phenomenon. I will argue that Wharton, and the many small-town Southern Jewish communities like it were and are not subsidiary to the Jewish communities of cities, but a unique and meaningful expression of a specific Jewish identity and experience in itself.

¹ Mondell, Allen and Salzman-Mondell, Cynthia, directors. *West of Hester Street*. Media Projects Inc., 1983. 58 min.

The Synagogue as a Religious Home

The history of Jewish life in Wharton is intimately connected to the history of the Shearith Israel synagogue. As both a religious and later an architectural structure, Shearith Israel was part of what set Wharton up to be a hub for Jewish life for the surrounding area. In nearly every extant document we have from Shearith Israel there is some allusion to Shearith Israel as a religious hub for the surrounding communities of Bay City, Boling, Columbus, Damon, Danevang, East Bernard, Edna, El Campo, Freeport, Hungerford, Newgulf, Palacios, Richmond, Rosenberg, and even Shreveport, Louisiana.² Undeniably it was the creation of the synagogue which drew individuals from other small-towns to Wharton, and the synagogue remained a center of Jewish life around which all other factors revolved.³ The erection of the first building in 1921 also offered a sense of permanency and physicality to the communities, and showed long term commitment to observing a Jewish life in Wharton.⁴ The cultural message enforced by a physical synagogue building is a testament to the vitality of the Jewish community in that place.⁵

Shearith Israel did not begin as a physical institution, but rather services were held in the homes of dedicated individuals, who were willing to individually fundraise for a Sefer Torah, despite the smallness of their community.⁶ The synagogue's first years were marked by Orthodox

² *75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee*. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel, 1988, and *Shearith Israel 50th Anniversary Jubilee Journal*,. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel,1963.

³ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

⁴ *Shearith Israel 50th Anniversary Jubilee Journal*,. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel,1963.

⁵ Weiner, Hollace A. & Miller, Lauraine "Little Synagogues Across Texas" in *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas* ed. by Hollace A. Weiner & Kenneth. D. Roseman. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007.

⁶ Institute of Southern Jewish Life. "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities- Wharton, Texas," accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.isjl.org/texas-wharton-encyclopedia.html>

practice, although it is unclear if they were ever officially affiliated with an Orthodox Union.⁷ By the 1950's, the congregation had shifted to more Conservative practice and became officially a part of the USCJ.⁸ This shift allowed the small-town to service a range of observance levels from their parishioners while accommodating the trend of more Liberal Jewish practice amongst the later generations of immigrants.

Although the official designation and general practice of the synagogue may have changed to be a more middle of the road approach, some elements of observance and spiritual guidance remained specially geared towards more Orthodox observance, including things like setting up cots on Yom Kippur so that people from out of town could stay the night between multiple days of services and not have to drive.⁹ This all-inclusive approach to Jewish practice differed from large cities, where rifts in theological or political beliefs caused formations of different synagogues.¹⁰ In a small-town like Wharton, the only choice was to get along and to compromise, if only because there was no other option of where to go.¹¹

Another unique feature of small-town Jewish religious life in Texas was the practice of hiring itinerant rabbis. Itinerant rabbis may have served congregations with less frequency than their stationary counterparts, coming in between twice a month or only for high holidays, but

⁷ Institute of Southern Jewish Life. "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities- Wharton, Texas," accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.isjl.org/texas-wharton-encyclopedia.html>

⁸ *Shearith Israel 50th Anniversary Jubilee Journal*,. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel, 1963.

⁹ Weiner, Hollace A. & Miller, Lauraine "Little Synagogues Across Texas" in *Lone Stars of David: The Jews of Texas* ed. by Hollace A. Weiner & Kenneth. D. Roseman. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ For example, the split between Beth Israel and Emanu El as described in: Weiner, Hollace Ava "The Celebrity Rabbi, or Splintering Over Zionism" in *Jewish Stars in Texas: Rabbis and Their Work*. College Station, TX; Texas A&M University Press, 1999: 182-209.

¹¹ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

their regularity offered small communities like Wharton more stability than permanent rabbis who were costly and wont to leave after short tenures.¹² So although itinerant rabbis may seem to indicate a disinterest in religious practice, it was a pragmatic choice, and individual community members did step forward to lead religious services while their itinerant rabbi was off serving other towns. Itinerant rabbi's ability to serve various small communities across a distance served Wharton well both as the congregation was growing in the early 1950's and later on in the 1990's as the community once again became too small for a single permanent rabbi.¹³

Being Jewish in Small-town Wharton

Part of the history of small-town Southern Jewish life is asking why individuals were drawn to the community in the first place. Although individual families had moved to Wharton before, the real influx of Jewish families came in the late 1890's.¹⁴ These families, who came to be merchants and were later prominent store-owners, were important figureheads in the founding of Shearith Israel and surrounding institutions, such as the junior college.¹⁵ In many respects, their business identities and their Jewish identities were inseparable, at least in their perception in the town. Stores across town would be closed for high holidays, even the other stores owned by gentiles, and Jewish businesspeople were also prominent in other social parts of the town.¹⁶

There were elements of being Jewish in a small-town that actually speaks to the perhaps

¹² Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007: 214-215.

¹³ Alexander, Louis. "Circuit Riding Rabbi." *Houston Chronicle Magazine*. 1953. and Bulletins. 1994-1996. Congregation Shearith Israel Papers. Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, TX. MS 738.

¹⁴ "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities- Wharton, Texas," Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.isjl.org/texas-wharton-encyclopedia.html>

¹⁵ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

¹⁶ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

surprising integration of non-Christians. Small-towns also participated in things like Brotherhood week.¹⁷

Just as the non-Jewish community accepted the Jewish residents of Wharton into their fold, the Jewish residents also participated or assimilated into aspects of the gentile Texan culture. For example, traditionally shabbat services are held after sundown on Friday evenings. However, this interfered with the high school football schedule and several young Jewish men in the 50s and 60s were on the high school football team. So, the community approached Rabbi Rosenberg and informed him that “if he wanted to have a minyan for Friday services, he would need to move services back.”¹⁸ Rabbi Rosenberg complied, and the community was able to participate in both the Jewish ritual of shabbat as well as the thoroughly Texan tradition and fixation of high school football.

Despite some forms of inclusion, anti-semitism was still a prevalent force in Wharton, both institutionally and interpersonally. At an institutional level, one of the most blatantly anti-Semitic institutions was the Wharton country club. The country club was created after the second World War, and did not allow Jewish members to join up until some unknown date, although at least into the 1960's.¹⁹ This exclusion was shocking to Jewish residents of the town, who in other ways were so accepted into the community, and who had just come back from serving in the war alongside their gentile counterparts.²⁰

¹⁷ “Rabbi Speaks to Coffee Class at El Campo.” Houston Chronicle, February 27, 1950.

¹⁸ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

¹⁹ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

²⁰ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

Institutionally there were also issues with the public school's unequal observance of religious holiday practices. This happened two fold in that Jewish religious practices were not accommodated for and Christian religious practices were salient. A perhaps ubiquitous example was the celebration of Christmas in secular classrooms, students were expected to bring ornaments for a class Christmas tree and to perform in the school Christmas pageant.²¹ Additionally, students for quite a long time could not have excused absences for the major Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.²² While these offenses may have seemed minor to those in the majority, it served to alienate Jewish students. They internalized their differences, knew not to make waves and speak out, and recognized themselves as the perpetual Other.

The Synagogue and Social Life

A synagogue is not only a religious home, but a social community as well. As ethno-religious minorities of a small-town, the synagogue may fill an even larger role in the social lives of its parishioners. The community in Wharton had a flourishing social element to complement their synagogue life, including a B'nai Brith, a Sisterhood, a Hadassah Chapter, and a Young Judea.²³ The social life of the synagogue is both what connects its members outside of religious roles as well as connecting the synagogue to the community outside. For the sake of brevity, I will briefly cover two social elements of Shearith Israel synagogue, one an inward focused organization and the other an outward focused social and interfaith event.

²¹ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

²² Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

²³ *Yearbook of Shearith Israel Congregation*. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel Sisterhood, September 1961.

Although Shearith Israel was largely egalitarian in their religious practice, Jewish gender-segregated social and activist organizations flourished side-by-side with the synagogue itself as a part of the social life of the Jewish community. Hadassah is a Zionist women's organization which was originally focused on supporting Jewish communities in Palestine. Hadassah was the first formal women's organization in Wharton and was planted by the founder of the organization, Henrietta Szold, merely one year after the synagogue itself was founded.²⁴ Szold had traveled to Texas to start Hadassah groups in the area, going first to Houston, where her message failed to take root. Szold then traveled to Wharton and spoke to a women's sewing circle there, and although the group was not large enough to charter a formal chapter of the organization, they did begin a Hadassah "circle."²⁵

Members remember Hadassah as being an important point of community engagement for the women of the Jewish community in Wharton as well as a point of pride. It was not merely a social gathering but an activist organization that national Hadassah leaders claimed "consist[ed] not of the leisure classes of women but of the working women."²⁶ While the foundation of Hadassah may have certainly been rooted in what could be considered "the working class," the importance of the housewife, a woman not formally employed²⁷, and her impact on the organization nationally and in Wharton cannot be overlooked. Hadassah offered a structured

²⁴ *75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee*. Wharton, TX: Shearith Israel, 1988.

²⁵ "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities- Wharton, Texas," Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.isjl.org/texas-wharton-encyclopedia.html>

²⁶ Simmons, Erica B. *Hadassah and the Zionist Project*. Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006: 18.

²⁷ I resist the idea that the American housewife and mother was not "working," as she is certainly working and providing labor even if it was in the feminist-Marxist understanding of work and not in the traditional understanding of "work" as defined only by full-time employment.

goal-oriented outlet for women, as well as an opportunity for leadership and influence, especially for those educated but unemployed women.²⁸ While Hadassah may have not been explicitly feminist or understood as such by the women involved in smaller Hadassah chapters, it undeniably served a need for Jewish women as well as offering the women to engage in political and humanitarian efforts.²⁹ Wharton Hadassah members fundraised and packed clothes for children in Palestine, and when the national organization released them of their fundraising quota the group was “indignant” at the idea that they would be unable to contribute financially.³⁰ This sense of pride and the activeness of communities may be exactly why Hadassah circles were omnipresent in small-Jewish communities across the U.S.³¹

As for the outward facing social life of Shearith Israel the single most important social annual event was the Shearith Israel Barbecue. The barbecue was held every year between the mid-1940’s up until 1998. Each religious faction of Wharton would host their own sort of large annual event for the entirety of the community, and the Jewish community was included in this.³² Thousands purportedly came to the barbecue at the height of Shearith Israel membership in the 1960’s and 1970’s, a large turnout for such a small community.³³ The barbecue was popular

²⁸ Katzburg-Yungman, Mira, trans. Tammy Berkowitz. *Hadassah: American Women Zionists and the Rebirth of Israel*. Portland, OR; Litton Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012: 272-273.

²⁹ Katzburg-Yungman, Mira “Hadassah in Erez Israel” in *American Jewish Women and the Zionist Enterprise* ed. by Shulamit Reinharz and Mark A. Raider. Waltham, MA; Brandeis University Press, 2005: 164-165.

³⁰ “Wharton Hadassah.” Institute of Southern Jewish Life, 2011. 3 min., 11 sec. <https://youtu.be/RIHGDj5bXqI>

³¹ Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007: 261-262.

³² “The Annual Shearith Israel Barbecue in Wharton, Texas.” Institute of Southern Jewish Life, 2011. 2 min, 31 sec.

³³ Milloy, Ross E. “Small-town Jewry on wane in Texas.” *New York Times*, April 29, 2002.

partially due to the chickens, grilled on-site at Shearith Israel, as well as coleslaw and pickles, each made from recipes which at the time of writing are still secret.³⁴ Speaking to the importance of various religious observance at Shearith Israel, the barbecue generally was not a kosher event and in fact individual's requests for some kosher chickens was a point of major contention amongst the organizers.³⁵

As childhood members of the congregation grew up and moved away from Wharton and surrounding small-towns, the barbecue expanded its purpose. Now, just as much as the barbecue remained an interfaith event for the current community of Wharton, it also served as a point of homecoming for relocated former members of Shearith Israel. Advertisements were taken out in Houston Jewish papers, and those who had lived in Wharton would come back to see old friends and family.³⁶ The barbecue only finally ended in 1998 when too few remaining synagogue members were present to properly prepare and host for the annually dwindling crowd.³⁷

While a barbecue, no matter how large, may seem trivial, the presence and success of such an event does speak volumes to the social nature of Shearith Israel congregation. We see that the community was tied together by more than just a common religious observance or ethical and political beliefs like they were for Hadassah, but by friendship as well. The success

³⁴ Holland, Arthur. A History of the Barbecue. c. 1986. Congregation Shearith Israel Papers. Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, TX. MS 738.

³⁵ "The Annual Shearith Israel Barbecue in Wharton, Texas." Institute of Southern Jewish Life, 2011. 2 min, 31 sec. and Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018. The ISJL website page incorrectly labels the event as a kosher barbecue, which it was not.

³⁶ Letter from Shearith Israel Treasurer Arthur Holland to Houston Jewish Herald Voice. March 15, 1994. Congregation Shearith Israel Papers. Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, TX. MS 738.

³⁷ Milloy, Ross E. "Small-town Jewry on wane in Texas." New York Times, April 29, 2002. Note that the age of those remaining at the synagogue was also probably a factor, as Arthur Holland had seemed to be in charge of the barbecue still in 1994 and while his exact age at the time is unknown, he was a WWII veteran.

of the barbecue also shows at least part of how Shearith Israel fit into the makeup of the primarily Christian town, and although there were issues of anti-Semitism as delineated prior, it is clear that the relationship between Shearith Israel and the town was much more than unidimensional.

Dissolution, Absorption, and the Effects of Urbanization

On April 27 of 2002, Shearith Israel hosted its final service.³⁸ The dissolution of Shearith Israel was both sudden and prolonged in its coming, as formal talk of closing the synagogue did not begin until December of the previous year, although the factors which led to its closing had been building for years.³⁹

Ostensibly, the main cause of the eventual dissolution of Shearith Israel was the decline in membership. Jewish people stopped moving to Wharton and surrounding communities and as the children of Shearith Israel members grew up and went to college they did not return after their graduation.⁴⁰ This is in turn probably because the economic role which earlier generations of Wharton Jews played in the town. While the earliest Jews to come to Wharton were shop-owners, their college-educated children did not want to return to Wharton to run the family businesses.⁴¹

It is clear that Wharton is not an outlier in its disappearance but is rather indicative of pervasive trends affecting Jewish communities throughout the South. Between the period of time

³⁸ “Shearith Israel congregation gathers for final service today.” El Campo Leader-News, April 27, 2002.

³⁹ Dissolution Papers. 2001-2002. Congregation Shearith Israel Papers. Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, TX. MS 738.

⁴⁰ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018.

⁴¹ Interview with Libby Marvins, November 28, 2018. and “Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities- Wharton, Texas,” Institute of Southern Jewish Life, accessed November 27, 2018. <https://www.isjl.org/texas-wharton-encyclopedia.html>

between the 1960's and the new millennia the number of small Jewish communities in the South, characterized as being comprised of between 100 and 499 people, decreased by 37%.⁴² Wharton residents saw themselves as a part of this trend, with the vice president of the synagogue saying upon their closing "It's really the end of a way of life, the end of small-town Jewry in Texas."⁴³

The language which is used to discuss the dissolution of Shearith Israel and of the shrinking populations of small-town Jewish life is far from neutral. This is clear in individuals quotations about the closing of Shearith Israel, but also abounds in scholarly research on the topic with terms such as decline, and even allusion to death.⁴⁴ Although reading about the dissolution of a synagogue which was once a spiritual and social home to so many inevitably brings up feelings of sadness, the extremity of the rhetoric surrounding Wharton and other communities like it does a disservice to the memory of Wharton. To trace the history of Shearith Israel and small-town Jewish life more generally as a failed project or a path towards decline does a disservice to all those who were served by and served Shearith Israel and the community surrounding it.

Instead of painting the dissolution of Shearith Israel and similar communities as a tragedy, I prefer to see Wharton and the way that it functioned as a hub for the small-towns surrounding it as merely one iteration in a continuing line of what is a uniquely Southern and Texas Jewish life. Rather than decry the loss of a "golden age" of small-town Southern Jewish life, I see a shift in the location and size of community hubs from smaller towns to cities, due in

⁴² Sheskin, Ira M. "The Dixie Diaspora: The 'Loss' of the Small Southern Jewish Community." *Southeastern Geographer* 40, no. 1 (2000): 60.

⁴³ Milloy, Ross E. "Small-town Jewry on wane in Texas." *New York Times*, April 29, 2002.

⁴⁴ Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007: 307.

part to the changing nature of transportation and infrastructure as well as larger economic trends which drive urbanization.⁴⁵ This is not to say that the Jewish “success story” also necessarily ends in the metropolis, but is merely an argument that we ought to treat the growth of Southern Jewish life in cities and the complementary effect of small Jewish communities becoming even smaller as a neutral phenomenon. Although the American Jewish Yearbook may consider Jewish communities of less than 100 “non-functioning,” the remaining Jewish population in such small-towns probably don’t view themselves as such.⁴⁶ Even places like Wharton where no Jewish community may remain still deserves to have its history and legacy framed as more than just a narrative of decline.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Jewish community of Wharton is in many ways no longer existent. The synagogue has closed, the Shearith Israel building itself no longer exists, and members of the former congregation are now scattered between Bay City and Houston. Many of the historical documents that could inform us about the history of Jewish life in Wharton were damaged in floods related to hurricane Harvey in 2017 and former congregants are aging. All of this is one reason why the study and preservation of Wharton Jewish history is important. However, Wharton is historically interesting and important even outside of its dissolution.

Wharton offers us as historians a window into what made a thriving Jewish community that was outside of the metropolitan northeastern hegemony. We see that although small-town

⁴⁵ Weissbach, Lee Shai. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007: 311-312.

⁴⁶ Sheskin, Ira M. "The Dixie Diaspora: The ‘Loss’ of the Small Southern Jewish Community." *Southeastern Geographer* 40, no. 1 (2000): 60.

⁴⁷ A subtle nod here to Hayden White and his narrative theory of history.

Southern Jewish life may have been lacking in number of congregants they were not suffering for lack of all the accoutrement that accompanies a bustling Jewish community. We also see that the Wharton community expertly toed the line between exclusion and assimilation, an issue as relevant for many communities today as it was for Wharton Jews in 1913.

More research deserves to be pursued on the Wharton community and small-town Texas Jewish communities generally. One interesting thread that I had wanted to pick up, but was unable to due to both scope and a current dearth of sources, was Jews' place in the racial hierarchy of small-town Texas. It should be clear from the previous section on Jewish identity in small-town Wharton that Jewish identity was in some ways a point of difference in Wharton and in similar small Southern towns. However, at least in the Texan racial hierarchy, Jews were afforded some level of congruency with White or Anglo residents. They may have been Others in terms of their religious identities, but something too separated them from from the racial distinction held by African American residents, especially in the time period leading in to the civil rights movement. It is unclear from current archival documents whether Shearith Israel and surrounding organizations were at all involved in any efforts towards desegregation or to maintain segregation in Wharton.⁴⁸ However, we do know that Rabbi William Malev of Beth Yeshurun was connected to Shearith Israel to some degree, and Malev was outspoken in his disagreement with desegregation and opposition to the civil rights movement.⁴⁹ Just as scholars of American Jewry should turn more of their work towards the small-town South, it may

⁴⁸ It is possible that as more documents are gathered bulletins and other information from the period of the 1950s-60s would hold more information, but very few documents from that period are currently available.

⁴⁹ Malev was at least present for Shearith Israel's educational building dedication, see: "Dedicate Educational Building." *Houston Chronicle*, December 3, 1952. and "Jewish Building Dedication Set Sunday at Wharton." *Houston Chronicle*, November 22, 1952. As for his stance against desegregation see: Malev, William. "The Jew of the South in the Conflict on Segregation." *Conservative Judaism*. 1958.

behove historians who employ critical race theory to turn to places like Wharton for a different view of race relations and racial hierarchy.

I hope that I have illustrated some of the many ways that Wharton can inform us historically about the place of Jewish people outside their usually circumscribed space. The story of small-town Jews in Texas should problematize the dominating narrative of a Jewish center, just as the Mondell's attempted to do with *West of Hester Street*. No, the Jews of Wharton were far from being in exile because they were not located in New York or in Jerusalem. Rather, they created their own homeland, a complex and varied home with a thriving social and religious community which still dealt with issues of Otherness and anti-Semitism. All of this existed at once in Wharton, and this complex memory is one that deserves to be preserved.

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2011. 2 min, 31 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

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