

## ***Haym Salomon and Jewish Exclusion from the Historiography of the American Revolution***

**By: NICK J. SCIULLO**

Haym Salomon was an important backer of the American Revolution and played a significant role in financing George Washington's victory at Yorktown. Yet, he is rarely discussed in the history of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to present Salomon's contribution to the American Revolution in the context of the general perceptions of the Jewish community and the complex treatment of Jews during the Revolutionary Era. We argue that rather than contemporaneous anti-Semitic sentiment, it is more the modern anti-Semitism that has kept him out of much of the American Revolution's written history.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the Revolutionary Era was no era of total religious freedom and open multiculturalism. Yet, despite anti-Semitic sentiments during that era, many Jewish people seem to have experienced less discrimination in North America than in other parts of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup>

This article seeks to recover Haym Salomon's importance to the American Revolution and it examines how contemporary anti-Semitism has hindered the discussion about Salomon's contribution to American history.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jack Stevenson, "The American Patriot We Do Not Talk About," *The Sampson Independent* (Clinton, NC), December 9, 2018.  
<https://www.clintonnc.com/opinion/35655/the-american-patriot-we-dont-talk-about>.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews," *Modern Judaism* 1 (1981): 149.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "Anti-Semitism and American History," *Commentary* 71, no. 3 (1981): 42, 46.

---

Dr. Nick J. Sciullo is an associate professor of communications at Texas A&M University, Kingsville. He has published widely on race, law, history, and culture. This article was completed while pursuing a master's degree in American History at Pace University.

## Haym Salomon's Financial Contribution to the American Revolution

Haym Salomon risked his personal finances to support the American Revolution with no guarantee he would get those funds back.<sup>4</sup> His sizeable contribution helped American forces advance toward the British which ultimately caused the British Army's surrender. Yet, he receives little attention in history books and relatively little discussion in peer-reviewed history literature. This absence is odd. Indeed, as Nathan M. Kaganoff writes, "Without doubt, the most prominent Jewish figure in American history of the eighteenth century and especially for the Revolutionary War period is Haym Salomon."<sup>5</sup> As such, his exclusion from much of the Revolutionary War discussion is odd at best, and at worst part of a larger systematic exclusion of Jews from historical study.

Salomon was subject to contemporaneous discrimination because he was a Jew. This would color how later generations would view him. This, combined with anti-Semitic forces in American historiography, including overt hatred of Jewry, further complicates the matter.<sup>6</sup> That Salomon was a Polish immigrant was well known and factors into his exclusion from the history of the American Revolution, as nativist sentiments have been common throughout United States history.<sup>7</sup> Although there are relatively few primary sources to work from, there are a wealth of commemorative texts, biographical notes, and present-day discussions about Salomon's

---

<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, "The American Patriot We Do Not Talk About."

<sup>5</sup> Nathan M. Kaganoff, "The Business Career of Haym Salomon as Reflected in his Newspaper Advertisements," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1976): 35.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Kirsch, "Why Jewish History Is So Hard to Write," *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/26/why-jewish-history-is-so-hard-to-write>; Deborah Dash Moore et al., *Moving Beyond Haym Solomon [sic]: The Teaching of American Jewish History to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jews* (Philadelphia: Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Center for American Jewish History, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Herbert A. Adams and J. H. Hollander, "A Sketch of Haym Salomon from an Unpublished Manuscript in the Papers of Jared Sparks," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 2 (1894): 7.

importance to the Revolution.<sup>8</sup> Even in his public commemoration, however, his Jewishness is “deemphasized.”<sup>9</sup>

Salomon traveled throughout the major cities of his day including New York and Philadelphia, suggesting that he was interacting with significant people, and was involved with the relevant commercial and political centers of North America. He was not from a sparsely populated settlement where he would have had little opportunity to engage with important people, nor was he isolated within a Jewish neighborhood in a large city. He conducted business in two of the then most prominent financial centers. His exclusion from the history of the era suggests something else must be at play—perhaps in the way scholars write history and regard Jewish participation in that history.

### Haym Salomon and the Jewish Enlightenment

The Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, was part of the general Enlightenment taking place throughout much of Europe, from as early as the mid-seventeenth century through the early-nineteenth century. The Jewish Enlightenment sought to include Jews in the European Enlightenment with its focus on cultural, economic, and political improvement. Notions of freedom were part of the Jewish Enlightenment and Salomon’s participation in the American Revolution was an expression of his interest in both freedom and inclusion. Another key facet of the Jewish Enlightenment was economic empowerment in an increasingly connected and diverse European economy.<sup>10</sup> That Salomon was economically empowered and that he used it to help the American Revolution is part-and-parcel of the Jewish Enlightenment ethos. His financial empowerment was evident in a range of business activities throughout the American East Coast.<sup>11</sup>

The Jewish Enlightenment also brought about increased solidarity among Jews, bringing together strands of Judaism that were in conflict. It emphasized education beyond the Talmud, and it encouraged Jews to

---

<sup>8</sup> Olivia B. Waxman, “George Washington and the Real History Behind a Yom Kippur Legend,” *Time*, September 27, 2017, <https://time.com/4958652/yom-kippur-george-washington-history/>; Michael Feldberg, “Haym Salomon: Revolutionary Broker,” *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/haym-salomon-revolutionary-broker/>.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. Young, “Haym Salomon, the Almost-Forgotten Jewish Patriot of the American Revolution,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 63, no. 2 (2011): 55.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Mack, “The Fate of Political Theology: Reflections on Shmuel Feiner’s ‘The Jewish Enlightenment,’” *Journal of Religion* 87, no.1 (2007): 80.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. Hollander, “Some Further References Relating to Haym Salomon,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 3 (1895): 7–11.

move beyond their European ghettos.<sup>12</sup> Salomon's life, in many ways, reflects the principles and practices of those involved in the Jewish Enlightenment, which helps to explain his travel to and around the United States as well as his multiple business ventures and wide-ranging social circle. This may also have been the impetus for his financing of the American Revolution, which would give him solidarity with the people of his new country.

Haym Salomon's story is one of conflicting opportunities—empowerment and inclusion during his life, in stark contrast with the disempowerment and exclusion after his death. The contrast between extensive commemoration and commentary and elision from the historical record suggests a complicated relationship between the American Revolution, historiography, and Jews. The Jewish Enlightenment surely influenced some of Haym Salomon's actions and indeed his successes justify his hard work for his own interests and for what would become the United States. The Revolutionary Era was not just the revolutions of several countries, but also a revolution in the development, integration, and advancement of Judaism. Thus, Haym Salomon provides an important case study for understanding this relationship, as well as the legacy of the American Revolution.

### **Jewish Exclusion from American Historiography**

Haym Salomon was certainly active in financing the American Revolution. Yet, despite the Jewish Enlightenment, which emboldened his commitment to freedom and economic empowerment, Salomon has largely been absent from mainstream historical study. This does not seem to be based on any specific animus against Salomon, but rather due to broader anti-Semitic sentiments in the study of history. Anti-Semitism has a long history in the United States and spans a variety of historical and educational areas, including admissions to Ivy League universities and a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities across universities and colleges.<sup>13</sup> Non-Jewish scholars, and their respective colleges and universities, have often discriminated against Jewish scholars, forcing them into the social sciences and out of the potentially revolutionizing humanities, although this would change rapidly after World War II.<sup>14</sup> Jewish history was at a

---

<sup>12</sup> Mack, "The Fate of Political Theology," 112–114.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie B. Kolko, "A History of Jews in American Higher Education," *Journal of Indiana University Student Personnel Association* 2013, no. 1 (2013): 20–25.

<sup>14</sup> David Brown, "Redefining American History: Ethnicity, Progressive Historiography and the Making of Richard Hofstadter," *The History Teacher* 36, no. 4 (2003): 529.

disadvantage because it could not readily find a home in the history departments associated with the humanities. As such, prior to World War II, there were few Jewish historians at prominent universities teaching history. One need not be Jewish to teach Jewish history, but the exclusion of many Jewish scholars from history reduced the chance of Jewish history being taught at the university level. This is compounded by competing notions of who was Jewish or “Jewish-enough.” As the historian David Hollinger notes, we ought to do away with “purity tests” for Jewish historical figures as it complicates the study of the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

Anti-Semitism is remarkably resilient across the United States and Europe.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Gervase Phillips has written, “Antisemitism has been called history’s oldest hatred and it has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable.”<sup>17</sup> As such, both in Salomon’s time and in later historical writing, one should not be surprised by anti-Semitic discrimination nor by the exclusion of Jews from historical writing.

While Jewish Studies is increasingly popular in universities with large Jewish student populations, many universities do not offer classes in Jewish history or culture.<sup>18</sup> This, no doubt, accounts for the relative underdevelopment of Jewish history. It also leaves open the possibility that Jewish history is not being taught because scholars and professional teachers do not believe that Jewish history and culture are worth teaching. Daniel Goffman has also argued that many students maintain prejudices against Jewry that many scholars had hoped were long abandoned.<sup>19</sup> Jewish history scholars, “outsiders and newcomers to the academy,” have struggled against anti-Semitism from their institutions and their students. This has affected their careers and research agendas.<sup>20</sup> That is, the university has

---

<sup>15</sup> David Hollinger, “Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era,” *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (2009): 4.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Is It Time for the Jews to Leave Europe?,” *The Atlantic*, April 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/is-it-time-for-the-jews-to-leave-europe/386279/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gervase Phillips, “Antisemitism: How the Origins of History’s Oldest Hatred Still Hold Sway Today,” *The Conversation*, February 27, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/antisemitism-how-the-origins-of-historys-oldest-hatred-still-hold-sway-today-87878>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Goffman, “Teaching Jewish History to the ‘Other,’” *The History Teacher* 24, no. 2 (1991): 158.

<sup>19</sup> Goffman, “Teaching Jewish History,” 159.

<sup>20</sup> Todd M. Endelman, “In Defense of Jewish Social History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 7, no. 3 (2001), 52.

been a difficult place for Jewish students and Jewish studies and has negatively affected the study of Jewish history in the United States.

One indicator of anti-Semitism in American historiography is that much of the writing about Jewish history is aspirational—it is about what should happen or what would be best.<sup>21</sup> Scholars write as if Jewish history is not what it could or should be. As a result, scholars of Jewish history must work harder, advocate for more resources, justify their pedagogical and scholarly choices and make the case for Jewish history's importance. Rarely is there a need to justify the importance of teaching about the American Revolution, the Gilded Age, or World War II. Yet scholars must consistently defend teaching Jewish history and the Jews who shaped the United States. American historians still struggle with justifying why Jewish history matters in curricula.

Furthermore, traditional discriminatory beliefs about wealth and Jewry may have caused a situation where the interests of anti-Semitism and resisting discrimination converge. Edward S. Shapiro argues that Jewish business leaders have not been studied because of both these traditions.<sup>22</sup> Haym Solomon's place in American history seems to have suffered as a result of both anti-Semitism and what Shapiro describes as "defensiveness" about Jewish economic success.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, it is difficult to hold Salomon up as a successful businessperson and financier of the American Revolution. To do so would embrace Jewish economic success, which reinforces stereotypes about Jewish financial acumen. This creates a difficult situation for historians writing about Jews in America; promoting Jewish economic success may fuel myths of Jews being in economic control of the United States.

Shapiro goes so far as to provide a counterfactual assessment of successful American Jewish business leaders. He writes, "American history is replete with colorful and successful Jewish businessmen who, had they been Gentiles, would have been the subjects of novels and plays."<sup>24</sup> Shapiro's point suggests that anti-Semitism has hampered writing about American Jewish business leaders in a variety of contexts. Haym Salomon falls into Shapiro's grouping of business leaders who have been largely left out of cultural productions. One may wonder: If Salomon had been

---

<sup>21</sup> Jon A. Levisohn, "Patriotism and Parochialism: Why Teach American Jewish History, and How?" *Journal of Jewish Education* 70, no. 3 (2004): 11–12.

<sup>22</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, "The Absent American Jewish Business Mogul," *Society* 50 (2013): 300.

<sup>23</sup> Shapiro, "The Absent," 300.

<sup>24</sup> Shapiro, "The Absent," 299.

Gentile, would he have had a more robust place in the history of the American Revolution?

This does not discount the difficulties of teaching Jewish history.<sup>25</sup> A people with a history of displacement, discrimination, and conflicting values and political objectives is difficult to encapsulate in historical writing. How does one account for the diaspora? What does one do with religious schisms? Can one be patriotic without being parochial?<sup>26</sup> Should one be parochial? These questions and others shape Jewish history, and there are no agreed-upon answers. At the same time, Jewish people are caught in a confluence of new historical, ethical, scientific, and religious understandings that make Jewish history complicated at best, and fractious and contentious at worst.<sup>27</sup> Where Haym Salomon fits into Jewish history is almost a secondary question to the broader “What is Jewish history?” which still puzzles historians and scholars of Judaism. To be sure, the university setting has often limited the advancement of Jewish Studies, but so too have historians struggled with what Jewish history is and how historians should engage with it.

### Recovering Haym Salomon in American Historiography

Haym Salomon had a significant impact on the American Revolution. Clearly, financiers are much discussed in American history from Alexander Hamilton to John Pierpont Morgan and beyond. Salomon’s exclusion from history can be explained by his Jewish immigrant status, and by rampant anti-Semitic sentiment in American historiography and in American universities. While there is evidence that some Jewish people were treated well in Revolutionary America, Salomon was subject to discrimination, as were many other Jewish people.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, historiography has not always treated Jewish scholars nor Jewish history respectfully. To rectify Haym Salomon’s absence from much of the history of Revolutionary

---

<sup>25</sup> Kirsh, “The Difficulties.”

<sup>26</sup> Levisohn, “Patriotism and Parochialism,” 11–14.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Chazan, “From ‘Jewish Memory’ to Jewish History: Two Perspectives,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 25 (2017): 304.

<sup>28</sup> Pamela R. Winnick, “The Jews of Early America,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 1, 2012, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2012/07/01/The-Jews-of-early-America/stories/201207010164>; William Pencak, “Jews and Anti-Semitism in Early Pennsylvania,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126, no. 3 (2002): 378–389; Lawrence A. Peskin, “From Shylocks to Unbelievers: Early National Views of ‘Oriental’ Jews,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 2 (2019): 297–298.

America, scholars ought to examine the anti-Semitism that has marred the discipline. Such an act of recovery can be as simple as adding those people, events, and texts left out of history journals, books, and classrooms. Recovery work is often political in that it tends to address marginalized people who were left out of history—which has been especially true of women and people of color.<sup>29</sup> Writing in the context of the study of women's rhetoric, Kathleen J. Ryan writes, "Recovery... specifically refers to recovering historical women rhetoric, recuperating contemporary and historical women's writing and speaking not traditionally viewed as rhetoric, and analyzing recovered women's texts."<sup>30</sup> Recovery, in a broader sense, involves finding people, events, and texts left out of history, understanding these people, events, and texts as historical and worthy of analysis, and engaging in the analysis of these historical subjects. Ryan's description of recovery supports this article's attempt to properly document Haym Salomon's role in the American Revolution.

By recovering his contributions to the American Revolution, this article seeks to correct—in a small way—the exclusion of Jews from American history. Only when scholars ask questions about historiography and how the stories of Jews are taught in American history, can they hope to understand the history they teach. This is consistent with the political understanding of Jewish history that posits that scholars of Jewish history must continue to assert and argue for the broad importance of Jews in a range of places and times periods in history, culture, economics, arts, and politics.<sup>31</sup>

Scholars can do more to understand the American Revolution by recovering the stories and circumstances of prominent and common Jewish people throughout the Revolutionary period. While simple inclusion in history textbooks and in the discipline's journals are insufficient for this purpose—as Ryan's description of recovery indicates—scholars should ask important questions about who is missing from history and why, and utilize analysis and critique to better position Jewry in American history. This can take many paths and can be motivated by many theories, but until scholars recover the important contribution of Jewry to the American Revolution, the story of the American Revolution will be incomplete.



---

<sup>29</sup> Nick J. Sciallo, "George Jackson's December 1964 Letter to His Father: Agency from Within the Prison Walls," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 11, no. 2 (2017): 180; Kathleen J. Ryan, "Recasting Recovery and Gender Critique as Inventive Arts: Constructing Edited Collections in Feminist Rhetorical Studies," *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 1 (2006): 24.

<sup>30</sup> Ryan, "Recasting Recovery," 24.

<sup>31</sup> David Vital, "Writing Jewish History," *Israel Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2016): 288.