

Introduction for Jewish Soldiers in Blue and Gray

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Tonight's film, *Jewish Soldiers in Blue and Gray* was released in 2011, in honor of the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War.

These commemorative anniversaries are busy times for historians, as they are often the occasion for the publication of new books, the production of new documentaries, the creation of museum exhibits, and the sponsorship of public lectures. What this means behind-the-scenes is that these commemorative anniversaries give historians the opportunity to reexamine material; they invite a new generation of scholars to look at, in this case, the Civil War, and offer fresh interpretations and ideas –new perspectives.

Tonight's film, *Jewish Soldiers in Blue and Gray*, utilizes a new perspective-- a different lens for viewing the Civil War- the lens of Jewish history. By employing that lens, by examining the events of the Civil War through the lens of the Jewish experience, the filmmakers are able to expand our knowledge of the 19th century American Jewish community **AND** to deepen our understanding of American history.

I want to take just a few minutes to show you how that works – to pull out some of the larger themes about Jewish and American history presented in this film, and to give you some historical context for understanding those themes.

The film introduces us to American Jewish life in the 19th century. It traces the origins, the occupations, the community organization of the 150,000 Jews living in the US at the start of the Civil War. We meet Jewish soldiers and spies; we're introduced to rabbis and Jewish nurses; We learn that there were Jews in the north and Jews in the south, Jews who supported slavery and Jews who condemned it, Jews who fought for the Union and Jews who fought for the Confederacy.

In fact, one of the main features of the Civil War in the American Jewish experience is exactly this—that it demonstrates American Jews' real sense of identification with their neighbors-Northern Jews identified with the North and Southern Jews identified with the South.

The experiences that American Jews had as soldiers and nurses; their participation in the war effort at every level, and the sense of identification that they felt with their region also tells us something about **American** life and **American** history. America offered Jews the opportunity to enlist and fight as equal citizens, to rise through the ranks of the military, and this was an opportunity not to be taken for granted, because it was not always the norm in other parts of the world.

In comparison, consider, for example, the position of the Jews in the Russian army. In 1827, Tsar Nicholas I revised conscription laws in Russia to state that Jewish boys could be drafted starting at the age of 12, for a period of service lasting no less than 31 years. (Non-Jews in Russia were drafted at the age of 18 for a 25 year period of service; Jews were drafted younger so that they could spend 6 years in preparatory training academies,

where they learned Russian history and Christianity and were prohibited from practicing Judaism or speaking Yiddish.) Once boys were conscripted, their parents rarely ever saw them again; the conscripts either died in service or were converted. Either way they were lost to their families. Some 40-50,000 Jewish men, mostly boys, were conscripted in this manner in Russia during Tsar Nicholas' reign. This conscription policy was the reality of military service for the Jews of Russia-the largest Jewish community in the world in the middle of the 19th century. This is the very same time period that we're going to see portrayed in the film tonight.

But the film tonight will show us a very different portrait of Jewish military service. America, clearly, was offering something different, something better for Jews. Knowing the situation in Russia helps to explain, in part, American Jewish patriotism and loyalty.

So, as you watch the film tonight, keep in mind that the experiences of American Jewish soldiers are shaped by their Jewishness-we'll see how Jewish realities, like holiday observance, the strictures of Jewish law, or anti-Jewish feelings of their comrades impacts their service. BUT the experiences of Jewish soldiers in the Civil War are also defined by the fact that they are northerners or southerners and, at the end of the day, they are all Americans.

Tonight's film also shows us what happens when the promise of America breaks down for American Jews- when religious liberty and equality before the law are threatened. It's important to keep in mind that while America was different as far as world experiences go for Jews, it wasn't perfect. American Jews have, at times, been subjected to persecution and prejudice, social and political, on account of their religion. The film

tonight will address anti-Jewish sentiment and anti-Jewish activities during the Civil War. Specifically, the film tonight will pay close attention to two anti-Jewish features of the War,

The Military Chaplaincy Act of 1861 and

General Ulysses S. Grant's Order #11, issued in December 1862.

The Military Chaplaincy Act of 1861, passed by Congress, and thus applicable to the North during the Civil War, stipulated that a military chaplain had to be a "regularly ordained minister of some Xian denomination". This, of course, meant that Jews – or for that matter Muslims or Buddhists or any other non-Xian denomination—could not serve as chaplains in the Union Army.

General Ulysses S. Grant's Order #11, promulgated in December 1862, expelled the Jews from the territory under his control, which included parts of KY, TN and Mississippi.

Now, I don't want to say too much about the details of these incidents, as they are described and dissected in the film. What I do want to point out to you is their larger meaning in terms of American Jewish life and American history. In both cases, with the Military Chaplaincy Act and with General Grant's Order #11, the responses of Jewish community and American government were swift and decisive. American Jewish leaders published protests against both of these policies in their newspapers; American Jews also dispatched delegates to Washington DC to lobby their congressmen and meet with President Lincoln. In both instances, with the chaplaincy law and in response to General

Grant's Expulsion Order, American Jews tenaciously and courageously fought for their rights.

You cannot imagine that something like this could happen for Jews in Russia, right? Tsar Nicholas I not taking meetings with delegates from Jewish communities. Jews in Russia not even allowed in the capital city unless they had special permission from the government. But America, again, was different. America had promised Jews equality before the law, and American Jews stood up and made their voices heard when that promise was threatened.

The American government, for its part, heard America's Jews and it agreed with them. Both Congress and President Lincoln made decisions in response to Military Chaplaincy act and General Grant's Order #11 which affirmed the principle of Jewish equality. IN fact, Congresses' ultimate revision of the Military Chaplaincy Act was seen as a landmark in the legal recognition of America's non-Christian faiths. IN this case, American religious liberty was broadened by the demands of those who stood outside the American religious mainstream.

So, what do we learn about American Jews from these incidents- we learn that they fight for their rights; they believe in the promise of America and they feel comfortable enough to stand before their government and fight for it. And we also see, from these anti-Jewish episodes in American Jewish history, that the American government, under President Lincoln, was willing to support religious equality before the law.

The movie tonight will draw out the dramatic potential of these anti-Jewish incidents, so be sure not to miss their important conclusions, because the swift repeal of anti-Jewish legislation is, I think, as important as its existence in the first place.

So, in conclusion, tonight's movie will certainly widen your knowledge of 19th century American Jewish life; and I hope that you will also leave tonight with a deeper understanding of American and Jewish history.