

# *Boomtown*

## *Tumult and Triumph in Gold Rush San Francisco*

SAN FRANCISCO CAME INTO BEING with the suddenness of an explosion. The discovery of gold in the Sierra foothills in 1848 triggered an influx to Northern California of a quarter of a million people, and the initial destination for nearly all of them was the Golden Gate. A remote and inconsequential Mexican outpost of fewer than a thousand inhabitants was rudely transformed into a monstrous center of commercial activity.

San Francisco swelled to thirty-five thousand by 1851, and by the eve of the Civil War it ranked as the nation's fifteenth largest city and sixth busiest port. In New York and Boston the transition from settlement to city had taken around two centuries, but San Francisco was transformed in less than a decade. And "the volume of this migration must be multiplied by its velocity," writes Carey McWilliams. "Not only were the emigrants in a great hurry [but] the same energy kept them in motion, jostling them about and sweeping them here and there."<sup>1</sup>

Overwhelmingly young and male, they came from all parts of the country and the globe, an unprecedented confluence of peoples. Foreigners outnumbered the American-born, making San Francisco the most ethnically diverse city on the continent, a nineteenth-century Babel. Along with Southerners, New Englanders, and New Yorkers, virtually every European country was represented. There were Chinese and Latin Americans, Polynesians and South Africans, Australians and Moroccans.

Among this “medley of races and nationalities” described by Hubert Howe Bancroft were the “ubiquitous Hebrews.”<sup>2</sup> Barely two-tenths of one percent of the American populace at midcentury, Jews “numbered in the thousands on ships’ passenger lists,”<sup>3</sup> constituting a disproportionately high percentage of those daring enough to take part in this greatest adventure of its day.

Every argonaut entered a social environment without a past, only a future. “The traditional mold was broken,” as a historian of San Francisco’s Irish community has said, and “relations between native stock and immigrant were set free from the shackles of history to take a new course.”<sup>4</sup> For no group was this truer than it was for the Jews.

#### PRIDE OF PLACE

The Jews who poured into multiethnic San Francisco were themselves a mixed lot. The overwhelming majority hailed from German-speaking lands of Central Europe—part of a migration numbering two hundred thousand that transformed American Jewry in the mid-nineteenth century—but this contingent was itself split into subgroups. The two largest, Bavarians and Prussian Poles, would be at odds in Northern California for more than two generations.

The Kingdom of Prussia had seized much of Poland in the late eighteenth century, and the province of Posen, conquered in 1793, became a large reservoir of Jewish immigration to California in the following century. Although Prussian subjects, Jewish Poseners lived among ethnic Poles and were more pious, parochial, and impoverished than Jews anywhere else in the German states.

But Berlin sought to “Germanize” the Jews. Beginning in 1833, Jewish children were required to attend Prussian elementary schools. By midcentury, although their religious rites remained East European, young Jews from Posen and other parts of Prussian Poland had much in common with their coreligionists from the western part of Prussia and other German states. They carried Prussian passports and spoke and wrote German as well as Yiddish.

In America, these Jews preferred to emphasize the German rather than the Polish element of their binational provenance for reasons of social status. Declaring themselves “Prussian” in official documents, they frequently concealed the names of their hometowns.<sup>5</sup> In 1858 two brothers from Posen even founded the San Francisco Turnverein, a gymnastic club that was a

pure expression of German mass culture.<sup>6</sup> Yet none of this helped very much. To their chagrin, Prussian Jews from east of Berlin were widely known in the United States as “Polish Jews,” and they were frequently derided as “Polacks” by the other major German-speaking Jewish group in America.<sup>7</sup>

These were Bavarians, among the first German Jews to emigrate and destined to achieve the most, particularly in business. Like Poseners, they came from devout towns and rural villages, spoke a variant of Yiddish as well as German, and chafed under discriminatory decrees. But in Bavaria Jews had nourished hopes of emancipation. As in neighboring Baden and Württemberg, the French Revolution had raised expectations that the chains of persecution would finally be broken. Instead, following Napoleon’s defeat, reactionary German monarchs crushed all aspirations to legal equality, restoring medieval restrictions on occupation and residence and even limiting the annual number of Jewish marriages. Immigration for Bavarian Jewry thus became “a substitute for emancipation.”<sup>8</sup> Particularly in the 1830s and ’40s, it was the poorer Jews in the southern German states who chose to emigrate, young people who “could neither work nor marry.”<sup>9</sup>

Socially acceptable to both Prussian Pole and Bavarian was the much smaller cohort of Sephardim, Jews of Iberian ancestry, established in America since Colonial times. Fully acculturated and often well educated, they would play a vital role in the city and its Jewish community, especially in the 1850s, as lawyers, judges, synagogue presidents, and community spokesmen.

There was also an important Jewish contingent from France, mainly from Alsace along the Rhine. Known for its Talmudic academies, Alsatian Jewry had been highly traditional before the French Revolution. But there, unlike in Prussia or Bavaria, the National Assembly conferred legal equality upon the Jews in 1791. Acculturation—and Gallic patriotism—grew at an astounding pace thereafter. Pioneer Alsatian Jews in San Francisco, although fluent in German and often Yiddish, proudly considered themselves French, and were perceived as such by Jews and non-Jews alike. They served in Jewish organizations (usually alongside the Bavarians) and held municipal posts, but much of their passion was reserved for establishing French cultural institutions in their adopted city.

Some Jews came from England, they or their parents (often from Posen or another part of Prussian Poland) having sojourned, usually in London, before immigrating farther west. In early San Francisco there was also a sprinkling of Jews from the Hapsburg Empire, czarist Russia, the Caribbean, and

South Africa. Just as “the world rushed in,” as one eminent Gold Rush historian put it, so did world Jewry.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE JOURNEY

Like most who headed to California, Jews were lured by the desire for riches. Rumors of “gold in the streets,” wild reports in newspapers, and hyperbolic accounts in guidebooks enticed thousands of people. One young Jew from Prussian Poland who had left his wife and children in mid-1849 to seek his fortune in New York remained there only a year and a half before undertaking the much longer voyage to California. What Abraham Abrahamsohn *thought* he had witnessed near the docks of lower Manhattan provided the impetus: “Everywhere the astonished eye saw people who . . . showed large chunks of gold or carried them braggingly around their necks.”<sup>11</sup>

The Gold Rush also attracted established New York Jewish businessmen. Bavarian-born Joseph Seligman sent two of his seven younger brothers to San Francisco in 1850 with \$20,000 worth of merchandise and the exhortation to be a supplier of goods, “not a gambler hoping to make a strike.”<sup>12</sup> He urged them to mine men’s pockets rather than the veins of the Sierra Nevada, not yet realizing that a purveyor incurred only slightly less risk than did a prospector.

Simply getting to California was perilous. In 1849 the Bavarian Louis Sloss, destined to become one of the most prominent corporate executives in America, traveled from Kentucky across the continent on horseback. At twenty-five, he partnered with two non-Jews and braved cholera, hunger, thirst, and floods before riding triumphantly into Sacramento.<sup>13</sup> Seventeen-year-old Fanny Bruck (later Brooks) was probably the first Jewish woman to cross the plains, in 1854. She and her husband walked alongside their wagon, which served as “a bedroom, parlor, kitchen, [and] sometimes boat.”<sup>14</sup> From a sheltered, middle-class home in Silesia (another Prussian province that had been Polish), Fanny quickly learned to use a gun, drive a mule team, and bake bread over an open fire. She lost her baby, born en route, and snowstorms forced the couple to winter in Salt Lake City, but the following spring they reached El Dorado.<sup>15</sup>

Yet among Jewish migrants, Sloss and the Brucks were exceptions; the large majority traveled by sea. Already veterans of one ocean voyage and usually embarking from a coastal city, Jews also tended to bring goods in tow, and a ship generally offered more cargo space than did a covered wagon.

Early on, sailing “around the Horn”—a 16,000-mile-long journey lasting up to five months—was the favored route. Accounts of those on board reflect the wonder they felt when visiting the tropics for the first time: seeing birds and fish they had never encountered before, experiencing sunsets unlike any in the northern latitudes, and encountering exotic tastes and aromas. But this was little compensation for the monotony, disease, discomfort, and at times terror they endured aboard old vessels hastily put into service, an ordeal likened to “half a year in a floating tenement.”<sup>16</sup> Myer Newmark, a fourteen-year-old Jewish New Yorker of Prussian-Polish ancestry who would become a prominent California attorney, embarked with his mother, brother, and three sisters in 1852. His diary reveals a near fatal disaster only one day out of port:

A great storm arose against us . . . and we covered the blankets over us glad to get into our berths. . . . The sea was mountains high, and the two life-boats attached to each side of our ship were carried off, together with a large portion of fresh stores and, worst of all, our Christmas turkey. The seas came in our cabin and relieved us of our stovepipe. In attempting to save one of the life-boats, the captain almost fell overboard.<sup>17</sup>

The greatest danger lay in rounding the Cape, where ships could be smashed by waves more than eighty feet tall. Young Newmark was fortunate, recording merely “cold, stormy and disagreeable” weather and his mother’s gastric distress.<sup>18</sup>

Fear of shipwreck and the desire to shorten the journey caused many to travel via the Isthmus of Panama or to cross Nicaragua, and a few even traversed southern Mexico. Panama’s Atlantic port of Chagres, only a few weeks from New York by steamship, was the transfer point more frequently used. But once passengers disembarked, a hellish odyssey began as they passed through malarial swampland in canoes and then cut across mountains on muleback. Along the way they usually had to sleep outdoors, exposed to thieves, animals, and insects. When they finally reached the Pacific they often had to wait for weeks in wretched circumstances before boarding a steamer for San Francisco. By 1855, a railway across Panama eased this segment of the journey, but those who crossed earlier often ranked the experience as one of the worst of their lives. Abraham Abrahamsohn writes of a fire in the night:

Worn out from the difficulties of the trip and the glowing heat, we fell asleep in the alleys of the village but were woken up . . . by dreadful cries and noises.

Several huts were going up in flames and after a few minutes the whole place. The copper-red Indians were running around like black goblins, trying to save what they could of their miserable possessions. After a quarter-hour the whole village was in ashes.<sup>19</sup>

Abrahamsohn's three-week delay in Panama City depleted his cash—\$150—and now he lacked funds for the last leg of the trip. A glazier, he hoped to earn money installing windows, but he found the town's residents too poor to afford anything more than wooden venetian blinds. A San Francisco-bound ship would transport him only after he agreed to work on board as a dishwasher and bootblack.<sup>20</sup>

Nor were circumstances any better for well-off Adolph Sutro, a twenty-year-old engineer from Aachen, a Prussian town near the Dutch and Belgian borders, who was destined to become mayor of San Francisco in 1894. On a riverbank near Chagres he spent four nights sleeping inside his canoe, pistols close at hand. On the mule trail he slept in the open, wet from the rains and hungry because food could not be had at any price. His riding mule was stolen in the night, so he walked the last seven miles to Panama City, pack animals beside him.<sup>21</sup> Then his ship to San Francisco would not accept the bales of high-quality cloth he had brought from New York and they had to be abandoned. Late in life he told his friends he wouldn't live in Panama, "were [he] made sole proprietor over all of it."<sup>22</sup>

Those traversing Nicaragua benefited from a shorter ocean voyage but faced a longer trek across disease-ridden jungles by boat and mule. At age six Mary Goldsmith Prag, later one of San Francisco's leading educators and the mother of Florence Prag Kahn, the first Jewish congresswoman, came through Nicaragua with her family. She recalled:

We each and all paid tribute . . . in the form of "Chills and Fever." . . . I was fretful and sick, so father placed me before him on the saddle and we jogged along. By water we were transported in canoes through dense masses of verdure which clogged the streams. Most of the time the natives were in the water dragging and pushing the boat along. Finally we were across and reached the western coast where we waited wearily for the steamer. She came and a thousand passengers were crowded into accommodations intended for four hundred.<sup>23</sup>

The overbooked *Samuel L. Lewis* was typical of the fleet dubbed "the death line," owned by Cornelius Vanderbilt. On a run prior to the

Goldsmiths' voyage, the ship's unsanitary conditions and rotten food contributed to the deaths of nineteen passengers. The ill-starred boat ran aground less than a year later, in a fog several miles north of San Francisco.<sup>24</sup>

Jewish accounts of the journey are similar to the hundreds of other testimonies documenting the rigors of travel in the Gold Rush years. There is but occasional mention of a Sabbath or holiday observance, or the need for kosher food. Other religious groups, such as the Mormons, sometimes chartered entire wagon trains so that they would be able to enforce their own moral codes along the way and halt travel on Sunday. New England trade associations sometimes purchased their own ships to take their members as a group to California. But there were neither Jewish caravans nor Jewish vessels. Jews made up a disproportionately large percentage of migrants, but they were thrown together with everyone else in tight quarters. It would be good preparation for the Jewish experience in San Francisco.

#### TURMOIL AND TEMPTATION

When their ships finally docked in San Francisco, weary travelers first set foot on wharves almost two miles long, which stretched from the deep water of the bay to the mud flats of Yerba Buena cove. The original shoreline was Montgomery Street, but the tremendous growth of the city, which was hemmed in by sand dunes and hills, mandated expansion east, into the harbor. People lived and worked on wooden piers and in the abandoned boats alongside them, and already by 1850 most of the cove was filled with beached ships, sand, and debris.

Walking toward the city proper, new arrivals saw a jumble of highly flammable canvas tents and flimsy shacks; San Francisco during the first two Gold Rush years was ravaged by six citywide fires, most of them the result of arson. Floods and sandstorms were also frequent. Rats and other vermin infested the area, which suffered a severe outbreak of cholera in 1850. And litter was everywhere: garbage was routinely strewn in the streets and the bay, and large quantities of unsold goods lay rotting on the ground or washed up on the beach.

There were few street lamps, but the town was illuminated by its many saloons, centers for prostitution, gambling, and brawling as well as drinking. Popular sports included not only horseracing and bullfighting, but also cockfighting and bearbaiting. The muddy streets were rife with crime, including gang warfare and murder, and despite the formation of vigilante

committees, justice was rare. The fifty-four homicides in the year ending in June 1851 all went unpunished.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from the onerous living conditions and recurring physical disasters, and apart from rampant vice and crime, new arrivals were astonished by the unbridled frenzy for lucre. As Abraham Abrahamsohn recalled,

On all the faces of the people . . . I clearly read the desire to become rich quickly in order to leave their Eldorado even more quickly. Many were proudly and triumphantly wandering through the streets with large pieces of gold, which looked like yellow, iron dross, or with bags full of gold grains in their hands. They had come from the mines in order to lose either hard or easily acquired winnings in the gambling halls in one night, and then have the pleasure of grubbing again for the yellow metal in the mountains.<sup>26</sup>

The values the immigrants had learned about work and money often collapsed as they saw fortunes made and lost in a day, and masters and servants change places overnight. In fact, “ruin [became] so ordinary,” wrote the French Jew Daniel Levy, “it no longer upset anyone.”<sup>27</sup>

Pioneer women provided a certain grounding influence, and there are many accounts of their strength and resourcefulness in making a home and raising a family amidst such chaos. At times they ran their own small businesses or taught school in the city or gold country. On the western frontier, more than elsewhere in the country at midcentury, necessity demanded that women work outside the home, and the relatively fluid social structure permitted it.<sup>28</sup>

But this was a society largely without women, not only in the mining camps but even in San Francisco, where among adults men outnumbered women 6.5 to 1 as late as 1852.<sup>29</sup> As a local historian wrote, “a woman was almost as rare a sight as an elephant. . . . Whenever a woman appeared on the street, business was practically suspended.”<sup>30</sup> The small female contingent included many prostitutes. Ladies of the night, mostly French and Hispanic, were the most elegantly dressed women in town and, as one scholar has said, were “admired” and “uniquely respectable.”<sup>31</sup> Abrahamsohn remembers the “beautiful girls . . . with perfumed flowers in their hair and on their bosom [who] flirted with word, smile and look, and in each gambling hall they offered to everyone . . . ale, port, various wines, punch and grog, white bread, butter, cheese, all of it for free.”<sup>32</sup>

“Everyone was affected by his own passions,”<sup>33</sup> Daniel Levy reported, including the Jews. He tells the story of a Jewish violinist from Hamburg

who earned enough performing in the gambling houses to purchase a half-share of a \$40,000 house—which he lost in a single card game.<sup>34</sup> Abrahamsohn, a certified *mohel*, or ritual circumciser, among other professions, used his skill to earn \$60 needed to tide him over during a lean time, yet he too squandered it in a casino.<sup>35</sup> Other Jews gripped by the gold fever turned to crime, including theft, fraud, and even attempted murder. Some ran gambling dens, frequented brothels, and drank to excess.<sup>36</sup>

But overall, the Jewish pioneers—who were twice as likely as non-Jews to remain in the area permanently<sup>37</sup>—were a stabilizing influence on the frontier and essential to the burgeoning mercantile economy of Northern California. Often relying on a relative in the East to ship dry goods, for which there was terrific demand, they carried packs on their backs or opened small stores in San Francisco as well as in the coarse mining towns. They were also middlemen: importers and exporters, auctioneers and salvagers, brokers and agents. As one observer wrote in 1856, “Merchandise[,] from the time it is freighted on the clipper ships until it is consumed, passes through the hands of the Jewish merchants . . . without them now trade would become almost stagnated in the State.”<sup>38</sup> Nor were they exclusively businessmen: as early as 1849 they served as lawyers and public officials, stevedores and water carriers.<sup>39</sup>

But most conspicuous were their clothing outlets, both retail and wholesale. By the mid-1850s one Jewish-owned textile warehouse stood next to another along Sacramento Street, in the heart of the business district. Just to the north, on Clay and Washington streets, were the smaller retail stores, called “cheap shops” or “Jew shops” (and, in the mining towns, “Jew sloop shops”), even if owned by a Christian. Here Jews were known to “stand ensconced the livelong day, waiting for a customer, and satisfied to argue and show their wares for an hour at a time, if there be a chance of making but a nominal profit.”<sup>40</sup> But the rent on even the most modest storefront could be prohibitive, so many sold their goods from a tent, stall, or even a box on the street or wharf.

“A MAN GOT ONE MISFORTUNE . . . AFTER THE OTHER”

Some of these humble Jewish vendors would become wealthy businessmen and community leaders, but others worked feverishly for years, eschewing every comfort, only to fail miserably and return east empty-handed. The letters of Alexander Mayer, a youth from the Rhineland, to his uncle in Philadelphia, who had capitalized him, reflect the despair felt by many.<sup>41</sup>

Mayer arrived in San Francisco via the Isthmus of Panama in early 1851, a portion of his goods waterlogged. Exhausted and running a fever he had contracted in Panama, he soon discovered the market glutted with pants and shoes—items he had intended to sell—and his spirits sank even farther. “There will be a great many failures here,”<sup>42</sup> he wrote home, directing his uncle not to send more wares. Oversupply—a problem because of poor communication with eastern shippers—worsened in the spring, and the sluggish economy required Mayer to extend credit to his customers, who soon fell into arrears. He struggled to repay part of his uncle’s investment and, on March 31, he repeated in a letter home that “the times [are] getting every Day worse and worse.”<sup>43</sup>

The Great Fire of May 3 dealt him the cruelest blow. In one night it destroyed eighteen city blocks, one fourth of the “cloth and board” city.<sup>44</sup> Property worth \$10,000,000, much of it belonging to Jewish retailers, was lost. With no insurance companies operating in San Francisco, and with underwriters in the East covering only a portion of the value, many merchants were ruined. Mayer, who could not afford a brick building (at a rent four times that of his wooden store), lost almost \$5,000 worth of merchandise as well as his personal effects. But in his letter home he stressed the human toll; he had just returned from a funeral for four Jews and reported that the fire had blinded another. His next missive, to his cousin, urged the youth not to follow in his footsteps: “I don’t like to advise no man to such a Country. If a man makes a living at home [he] should be satisfied.”<sup>45</sup> Two weeks later he added, “That was not the last [fire] we had. . . . It will come again, it can’t be other wise.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, within two months Mayer was burned out again. He was forced to flee the store after working up to the last instant to save some of his stock and had to “let [the rest of the] Goods Burne rather than my self.”<sup>47</sup> Even then he determined to “try to make up [his] Losses. He wrote, “My wish is only to bring back Again [what] I brought Here. . . . Believe me Since I left Philadelphia I look ten years Older. In all my days . . . I have not been so down Hearted as I have been for the Last 6 weeks. . . . A Man got one Misfortune then Comes one after the other.”<sup>48</sup>

By June 1851 the city was in the grip of a militant citizen’s group that, in the wake of the frequent fires and unchecked crime, had seized control from ineffectual elected officials. Seven hundred men—among them about thirty Jews—joined the extralegal and self-appointed Vigilance Committee. Throughout the summer the vigilantes arrested suspected lawbreakers, tried them summarily, and then dispensed “justice.” Their main target

was the Sydney Ducks, gang members usually of Irish ancestry who had immigrated via Australia, where some had done time in that country's penal colonies. About half of the ninety men tried were acquitted, but one was whipped publicly and four others hanged.

Mayer, who witnessed the execution of two prisoners dragged from their cell, "was very Glad of it" and mailed home a leaflet printed by the Vigilance Committee and his own crude drawing of the hangings. "I tell you," he wrote, "[this is] a great Country."<sup>49</sup> But the vigilantes brought neither peace nor prosperity, and in the fall Mayer left for the mining towns. He would have rather gone back east but "couldn't, because [he'd already] lost too much."<sup>50</sup>

Mayer traveled to the Mother Lode, where he joined hundreds of Jews who in a few years would establish thriving businesses, benevolent societies, cemeteries, and synagogues. Yet at the outset there was no more stability near the diggings than in San Francisco. Mayer tried to sell a new consignment of clothing in the town of Columbia, but he failed again because drought had dried up the swift streams prospectors needed to wash the dirt and gravel from the gold.<sup>51</sup> His potential customers simply returned to San Francisco, where they would swell the ranks of the unemployed. It is not known what Mayer did next.

Abraham Abrahamsohn also set off for the gold fields in 1851 with the idea of becoming a miner. Because he had lived on the wharf, he had lost even more than did Mayer in the spring fires, when "the boardwalks turned to glowing coals" and he became "a beggar without clothes."<sup>52</sup> With \$10 from a fellow Jew, he bought "pants, boots, a blue woolen overshirt, a wool blanket, a cap, a leather belt, a pick, spade, tin pan, [and] a strong wide knife."<sup>53</sup> For weeks he toiled at several sites near Placerville, one of several Jews who worked the mines, disproving the assertion of a few visitors<sup>54</sup> that all Jews in the gold country were merchants.\* But the paltry return for such hard labor induced Abrahamsohn to leave the diggings. He would work at several other trades, but in the spring of 1852, his "luck . . . not blooming," he left California for the Australian gold rush with others

\* Another was Bernhard Marks, who wrote his cousin in Philadelphia in 1854: "I wanted to see the Elephant [the gold fields]. . . . To the mountains I must go, and I went . . . to be a miner." He prospected near Placerville for several months (J. Solis-Cohen Jr., "A California Pioneer: The Letters of Bernhard Marks to Jacob Solis-Cohen," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44 [September 1954–June 1955]: 31).

“who had sought their fortune here in vain.” Of his year in El Dorado, he wrote, “Anyone who thinks that roast pigeons are flying around here on golden wings, just waiting to be plucked and eaten, should stay at home.”<sup>55</sup>

Even those who later became successful in San Francisco invariably met with terrible adversity in the early 1850s. Louis Sloss lost all his assets when a raging flood killed his livestock. Michael Reese, later one of the richest men in America, lost nearly all the merchandise he had brought with him when the riverboat carrying it sank in the Sacramento Delta; he was stripped of his cash reserves when his bank failed, and his warehouse burned in the May firestorms.<sup>56</sup> Adolph Sutro opened a store in Stockton and miraculously escaped a horrific conflagration there. But a few years later, on San Francisco’s mean streets, he was the victim of a knife attack that left his face disfigured. For the rest of his life he wore muttonchop whiskers to cover the scars.<sup>57</sup>

#### HOPE

The San Francisco economy began to recover in mid-1852, in part because the glut of unsold goods had gone up in flames. Prices rose and merchants who persevered were finally able to reap rewards. Business would turn down again eighteen months later, but the last two years of the momentous 1850s would usher in a long period of prosperity. Yet even during the most chaotic days of the Gold Rush there were businessmen and professionals who could see—“through the mud, stink, and immorality,”<sup>58</sup> as one historian has put it—that San Francisco had the potential to be the leading commercial center in the American West. They linked their future to the new city and sought permanence and security in their unstable surroundings.

Jewish merchants were a major part of that group. Some, like the farsighted Seligmans, invested in brick warehouses and thereby withstood the fires. Others sent for wives or fiancées and began to raise families. Still others served as aldermen, legislators, and judges just as the city and state were being born. While most of the transients in town gave little thought to the welfare of their community, Jews were conspicuous among those who cared about the rule of law, and about education, parks, culture, and religion. As one Bavarian Jew later wrote about the longing to make order out of anarchy, “Hope’s rosy finger beckoned us on to the joys she promised us in the future. Hope’s siren voice told us pleasant stories of what was in store for us.”<sup>59</sup>

Thousands of miles from their families, Jews also craved the emotional support their faith could provide: fellowship with their own kind, links to the past, and connections with home. These impulses led to the first Jewish services on the West Coast on Rosh Hashanah, September 26, 1849, when a group of perhaps thirty, including one woman, responding to a notice in a local newspaper, met in a wood-framed tent on Jackson Street near Kearny.\*<sup>60</sup> By Yom Kippur their number grew to nearly fifty. As they had no *sefer Torah*, a sacred scroll made of parchment, a printed copy of the Pentateuch was used instead.<sup>†</sup>

The first Jewish organization in the American West came into existence soon after these services were held. At the end of 1849 the First Hebrew Benevolent Society, composed largely of Prussian Poles, was founded to care for the sick and needy. Soon one of its leaders, Henry Hart, raised the funds to acquire two lots at the intersection of Vallejo and Gough streets for a Jewish cemetery. In the fall of 1850 the Eureka Benevolent Society, with goals similar to those of the First Hebrew, was established primarily by Bavarian Jews. Its founder, the twenty-six-year-old dry goods dealer August Helbing of Munich, later reflected upon the mix of social needs and charitable obligations felt by “the Jewish young men”:

We had no suitable way of spending our evenings. Gambling resorts and theatres, the only refuge then existing in 'Frisco to spend an evening, had no attraction for us. We passed the time back of our stores . . . disgusted and sick from the loneliness. . . . Besides, our services were in active demand; every steamer brought a number of our co-religionists, and they did not always come provided with means. In fact, some came penniless, having invested their all in a passage to the Coast. Some came sick and sore, and it needed often

\* Another version of the story puts the site of the first service on Montgomery Street, near Washington and Columbus, and the city has placed a plaque at that spot, but contemporary research tends to support the tent on Jackson.

<sup>†</sup>The partial list of those present reveals the diversity of the town's Jews. At least two were American-born: the Sephardi Joseph Shannon, soon to be elected county treasurer, and Albert Priest of New York, who had arrived by wagon from Sacramento. Englishmen included Benjamin Davidson, a future agent of the Rothschilds; Barnett Keesing, accompanied by his wife; and Lewis Franklin, of Silesian descent, whose tent-store housed the worship services. Abraham Watters was a merchant from Prussia; Samuel Fleishhacker was likely a relative of Aaron Fleishhacker of Bavaria, patriarch of the banking family. Joel Noah, a retailer, was Hungarian (Fred Rosenbaum, *Visions of Reform: Congregation Emanu-El and the Jews of San Francisco, 1849–2000* [Berkeley, 2000], 6n).

times a respectable portion of our earnings to satisfy all the demands made upon us.<sup>61</sup>

High Holiday services that autumn, now attracting a considerably larger group, were held in Masonic Hall, with “much pleasure felt at the cheering presence of many dark-eyed daughters of Judah.” Twenty-nine-year-old Lewis Franklin delivered the Yom Kippur sermon. He hailed from Liverpool, but his Orthodox family’s roots were in Prussian Poland.

Like the many Christian preachers during the Gold Rush whose favorite topic was the folly of greed, Franklin delivered a fiery oration, imploring each person present to “pause in [his] mad career ere it be too late. . . . Man thou art a very idiot! These shining baubles . . . will take unto themselves wings, and flee from thee, leaving thou as naked as when thou wert first created.”<sup>62</sup> He noted the familiarity with Jewish teachings of most of his listeners (who indeed had been raised in traditional households) but railed at their lack of piety: “Your very knowledge makes you doubly culpable.” He castigated “the Sabbath-breaker[, whose soul] shall be cut off from his people.”<sup>63</sup>

In his thunderous demand for strict religious observance in the midst of libertine San Francisco, Franklin showed little interest in adapting Judaism to its new environment; his faith had to be rigid because it was a shield, offering protection against immorality, natural disaster, and loneliness. The presence in the city of kosher butchers and boarding houses, matzah bakers and *mohelim*, documented as early as 1851, is evidence that he was hardly alone in clinging to tradition.<sup>64</sup> Franklin left San Francisco that year and sailed back to Europe at decade’s end. But in his sermon of September 1850, he issued a challenge to the Jewish community: “Shall there be no temple built to Israel’s God?”<sup>65</sup>

Yet there were no services beyond the High Holy Days because of the deep rift between the Eastern and Western Europeans on liturgy. One of the two factions (probably the one led by the Bavarians, who objected to *minhag Polen*, the traditional Polish ritual that Franklin almost certainly used) even walked out of the Yom Kippur services.<sup>66</sup> The German and Polish rites were virtually identical textually, but evidently the distinctions in pronunciation, melodies, and minor procedures made all the difference to immigrants seeking to replicate precisely their childhood religious experiences.

A semblance of unity returned early in 1851, as the community prepared for Passover and even began raising funds for a synagogue. By March of that year, \$4,400 had been collected from 182 contributors, more than half

the Jewish households in San Francisco.<sup>67</sup> A meeting was called for April 6, inviting “the Israelites of San Francisco” to form a congregation and elect officers. Alas, the group proved deadlocked on the election of a community *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), with the German and Polish factions, comprised primarily of Bavarians and Poseners, respectively, each supporting their own countrymen. At the “stormy” public meeting, reported an eyewitness, dissension was so great that there could be no other decision but to establish *two* congregations, just as there were two benevolent societies.<sup>68</sup>

Such disagreements between Bavarians and Poseners were common across the United States and split many of the dozens of new synagogues formed at midcentury.<sup>69</sup> One might have expected San Francisco—almost two thousand miles from the nearest synagogue, in St. Louis, and in many respects a social and cultural anomaly—to have been different, but here, too, age-old customs as well as prejudice and mistrust prevailed.

Moreover, the regional pride—according to one scholar, the “arrogance”<sup>70</sup>—of the Bavarians was based on more than ritual or liturgy. Even at this early moment, social and class gradations were evident. As a rule, the Bavarians had arrived in America about a decade earlier than most Prussian Poles and, in part because of that head start, they were usually more successful in business. They also tended to have more of a mercantile background than the Poseners, who, although often retailers, were more likely to have been trained as artisans. The Bavarians could identify fully with German culture, in vogue in America at midcentury, whereas the *Hinterberliner*, those from “beyond Berlin” (meaning east of Berlin), were prevented by other Jews from shedding their Polish skins.

This fragmentation within a religious group was hardly unique in early San Francisco. French Catholics worshipped apart from their déclassé Irish coreligionists. Even American-born Presbyterians were divided along regional more than doctrinal lines, with Southerners and New Englanders early establishing separate churches.<sup>71</sup>

As for the two Jewish congregations born in the same room on April 6, 1851, they would be as rival siblings ever since. One was Emanu-El, meaning “God is with us,” perhaps reflecting gratitude for a safe arrival on the West Coast, perhaps forging a link with its New York namesake, formed six years earlier by Bavarians. On April 8 it prepared a charter signed by sixteen men, mostly Bavarians but also at least three native-born Sephardim.<sup>72</sup>

The other congregation, Sherith Israel—also the name of a New York synagogue, the oldest in the nation—included Englishmen (largely of Prussian-Polish ancestry), Poseners, and Jews from Russian-occupied

Poland. A small group met on April 8 and prepared an advertisement for kosher meat, which ran in the *Daily Alta California* two days later. Sherith Israel's minute book (which, unlike Emanu-El's, survived the earthquake and fire of 1906) begins with a meeting held in a boarding house on April 13 at which officers were elected and a committee appointed to draft a constitution and bylaws. Emanu-El began with sixty members, Sherith Israel with forty-two. The founding document of the former explicitly required the German rite known as *minhag Ashkenaz*;<sup>73</sup> that of the latter mandated strict adherence to *minhag Polen*.<sup>\*74</sup>

A recent study of Emanu-El's founders reveals they were typically in their early twenties, significantly younger even than the youthful founders of comparable synagogues in other parts of the country.<sup>75</sup> Their wives (or future wives, because many were still unmarried) were younger still. Nearly all the founding members were in commerce.

Given their later orientation, it may be surprising that in infancy both congregations were Orthodox. But this was the form of Judaism with which most of their members had been familiar in the small towns of Europe.

\*The controversy and confusion about which is the older congregation has never ceased. In 1900 Emanu-El's spiritual leader, Jacob Voorsanger, adamantly claimed that distinction for his synagogue, claiming it was founded in 1850, but in 1974 two researchers demonstrated that he based his conclusion entirely on a misdated document (Stern and Kramer, "A Search for the First Synagogue," *WSJHQ* 7 [October 1974]: 3–20). As they pointed out, no reference to either congregation—either in newspapers or municipal records—exists before April 1851. Their finding is corroborated by Alexander Iser's *Almanac* listing the local Jewish organizations. This earliest Jewish resource guide lists April 1851 as the founding date for both congregations (Alexander Iser, *The California Hebrew and English Almanac for the Year 5612, Corresponding with the Years 1851–1852* [San Francisco, 1851], in WJHC/JLMM).

Sherith Israel has claimed both 1849 and 1850 as its starting date, citing the High Holiday services of those years as its first service. But in fact few of those worshippers later joined the congregation; a large majority either became members of Emanu-El, left the area, or remained unaffiliated.

The strong desire to be considered the first congregation has led to tampering with Sherith Israel's founding documents. Although the opening page of the original, bound minute book is dated April 13, 1851, the words "Record of previous meetings held August to date lost" are written with a different pen and handwriting in the upper margin. On the title page of the congregation's constitution appears "Organized 1851," but the "1" is crudely changed to a "0" in a different hand and a differently colored ink (Minutes of Congregation Sherith Israel, in WJHC/JLMM).

Moreover, in the tumultuous early 1850s the desire for acculturation was neither fully awakened nor clearly directed. On the frontier most Jews felt forced by necessity to relinquish many religious practices in their daily lives, but this did not preclude pioneers from founding synagogues that would put them back in touch with the old-world piety they had left behind not so long ago.

In addition to attaching importance to the office of *shochet* and to the form of worship, both constitutions required members to attend a minyan, the quorum of ten men for prayer services, when notified. Also, no one married to a non-Jew could join, and any congregant taking a gentile wife automatically forfeited membership. At Sherith Israel membership was also contingent on a man and his sons being circumcised.<sup>76</sup>

While dues were only \$2 a month, a great deal of lay involvement was required from both congregations. Sherith Israel's members were obliged to come up to the Torah when called, attend meetings, serve on committees, and (as at Emanu-El) accept election as an officer. Stiff fines were levied for any infraction. Each congregation also required the written permission of its board of trustees for a member to marry within the city of San Francisco.<sup>77</sup>

The two fledgling institutions struggled amid the horrendous fires of the spring and shocking vigilantism of the summer of 1851. Although they grew rapidly, each passing the one-hundred-member mark within the year, it was difficult to collect dues. Both groups met in plain rented quarters a few blocks apart on Kearny Street and engaged knowledgeable laymen to perform a variety of religious duties. Sherith Israel hired the versatile Alexander Iser as *shochet*, *shamas* (sextant), Torah reader, and bill collector, all for \$60 a month. Emanu-El was even more parsimonious; its payroll consisted only of a nominal amount to a Torah reader.

But there were some encouraging signs, most notably the first marriage at Sherith Israel in late December 1851. Emanuel Linoberg, thirty-three, one of the earliest settlers of the mining town of Sonora, had been in San Francisco to purchase supplies for his several businesses when he met Pauline Meyer, whose parents belonged to the congregation.<sup>78</sup> Weddings occurred about every other month in 1852 and more frequently the following year. Due to the dearth of females, many men were less fortunate than Linoberg and had to send for a wife from the East, women known "only by reputation, or because her brother or friend recommended her."<sup>79</sup>

The early marriage records of Emanu-El are not extant, but the congregation received an invaluable gift in 1851: a Torah scroll, less than two feet

tall, donated by the renowned British philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore.<sup>80</sup> In later years it was used by the congregation on Yom Kippur, but it would be destroyed in the disaster of 1906.

As the economy improved in early 1852, each congregation sought to build a new synagogue, hoping to leave its rented storefront for a permanent home, but both made a point of not conferring with the other. In the end, they bought lots only a block and a half apart from one another in North Beach, a relatively fashionable area where many Jews resided and from which they enjoyed a short walk to the business district. The cornerstones were laid only two weeks apart in July 1854, and in September of that year both buildings opened their doors in the same week.

Not surprisingly, each board of trustees was preoccupied with its capital project almost to the exclusion of everything else. And because the next downturn in the city's roller-coaster economy began in 1854, both groups had been forced to scale back their original designs. Emanu-El, on Broadway between Mason and Powell, ultimately spent \$20,000 and Sherith Israel, on Stockton near Broadway, about half that amount, each institution forced to take a large mortgage at a high interest rate.

Neither of the two utilitarian buildings conveyed a hint of the magnificent synagogue architecture that would grace San Francisco in future decades. Emanu-El, with a seating capacity of eight hundred, was the larger, a solid redbrick structure with a neo-Gothic façade and separate entrances for men and women. It had a modicum of elegance, with its Brussels carpet and handsome chandelier, but hardly impressed out-of-town visitors; there were thousands of similar houses of worship across the country. Sherith Israel, about half the size and covered only by gray cement, was even more modest.<sup>81</sup>

Yet given the obstacles faced by pioneers in such a distant land, the erection of two synagogues by the mid-1850s was an achievement. The emerging community also had cemeteries and benevolent societies, kosher meat and ritual circumcisers. But it still lacked rabbis, and attracting them would prove the greatest challenge of all.

#### THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

What kind of rabbis were the young laymen seeking? They had formed two Orthodox congregations in 1851, but within a few years many who had survived the trauma and disorientation of the Gold Rush began to feel comfortable in their new home and less in need of the same religious experience

they had known as children. Now, as they became solid citizens, “the new focus of their lives was San Francisco,” writes a Gold Rush historian of a change in sentiment found among most ethnic groups in the city by mid-decade, and “no hankering after the past could repel its demands.” As Robert Lotchin continues, “The narrow streets jumbled people up together; business, pleasure, educational, and ceremonial life multiplied their contacts . . . and the growing use of English gradually wiped out the main European criterion of nationality.”<sup>82</sup>

Religious insularity was beginning to erode as well. By 1855 there were twenty-two Protestant churches in the compact city, many of them with a high profile.<sup>83</sup> Jews had at least a passing acquaintance with the universal message of the Unitarians, the cultivated aestheticism of the Episcopalians, the tireless benevolence of the Methodists, and even the popular Sunday schools of the Baptists. They were annoyed at the handful of Christian proselytizers (a problem throughout America at this time) but also had to be aware of the broad-minded preachers among the Protestants, some with degrees from Harvard or Yale, who delivered inspiring sermons in the streets and wharves as well as in the churches.<sup>84</sup>

Particularly at Emanu-El the vision of an Americanized synagogue emerged, shorn somewhat of its Jewish and German distinctiveness. The Bavarians, Sephardim, and Alsatians were groping toward a rational and dignified religious expression that would not seem strange to the non-Jews with whom they had such close contact. They hoped as well to resolve the growing contradiction between lack of observance outside the synagogue and strict ritual practice within it.

For these reasons, Emanu-El sought for its first spiritual leader a reformer, a man in the coterie of Central European rabbis that had recently come to America seeking to bring Jewish life more into line with that of the host country. The leader of this new school of thought was Isaac Mayer Wise, who by the mid-1850s was ensconced in Cincinnati, an expanding young city that became the national headquarters of his new weekly, the *American Israelite*, and of the burgeoning Reform movement.<sup>85</sup>

As early as 1853, the twenty-five-year-old president of Emanu-El, Henry Seligman, sought to bring west a man in Wise’s camp. Seligman convinced the membership, already hard-pressed by the building campaign, to pledge an additional \$3,500 annually to retain a full-time rabbi.<sup>86</sup> Yet even at that lofty salary, almost triple the amount then earned by an experienced physician or lawyer, few ordained rabbis were available. Most of the nation’s seventy-five congregations were led by cantors or laymen, because

the yeshiva-trained rabbi—whether a reformer or not—was an unlikely candidate for immigration to the “American Babylon.” Seligman offered San Francisco’s first rabbinical post to several allies of Wise, but in vain.<sup>87</sup> In the end, the congregation reluctantly engaged a rabbi far more traditional than it had wanted.

The learned Julius Eckman had arrived “on his own hook” (that is, without a formal invitation and at his own expense) in July 1854, in time to perform the ceremonies of laying the cornerstones for both synagogues.<sup>88</sup> After leading High Holiday services at Emanu-El on a trial basis, he was given only a one-year contract at \$2,000, far below the advertised compensation.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps the Emanu-El leadership was concerned that, since immigrating to America in 1849, he had lasted no more than a year at each of three congregations he had led in the South.<sup>90</sup> But with a swelling list of members, many of them now with wives and children, the board felt it could leave the pulpit vacant no longer.

Because Eckman had spent three years in London as a teenager, his English was flawless, and it was expected his sermons would rival those of any American rabbi. To be sure, he had been born and raised in low-status Posen, but he had earned a doctorate from the University of Berlin, usually sufficient, in the minds of Bavarians, to turn a Posener from a “Polack” into a German. In any case, the Bavarians had little choice: a large percentage of ordained Jewish clergy in America in the 1850s hailed from the devout communities east of Berlin.

Eckman would live on the West Coast until his death in 1874, but this first San Francisco rabbi remained at Emanu-El only one year. Clearly a major reason for his failure was that he was at best a halfhearted reformer. Even by mid-nineteenth-century standards, he was resistant to change when it came to the role of women. He abided the mixed classrooms and choir organized before his arrival, but women worshippers were still required to sit in the upstairs gallery of the new Broadway Synagogue. In contrast to Isaac Mayer Wise, who favored universal suffrage and allowing females to serve as synagogue board members, Eckman viewed the “so-called Emancipation” of women as “ridiculous foolery.”<sup>91</sup> “In a woman,” he wrote, “an ounce of heart is worth more than a pound of brains.”<sup>92</sup> Claiming that a woman’s ultimate goal ought to be matrimony, he opposed divorce in all circumstances.<sup>93</sup>

Eckman’s temperament also clashed with his new surroundings. In a city of frenetic young men, his manner was calm and ascetic. A lifelong

bachelor now past fifty, he lived in a garret on meager rations of food.\* The only possession he prized was his library, comprised of books in the many languages he read and studded with illuminated Hebrew manuscripts.<sup>94</sup>

Eckman chastised the whole country for its excesses, claiming, “We eat and dance ourselves to death [more] than they do at the Sandwich Islands.”<sup>95</sup> His advice to hard-drinking San Francisco was temperance, a cause taken up by few other Jewish leaders in the city’s history.<sup>96</sup>

The gentle rabbi delighted in animals and related best to small children.<sup>97</sup> Shortly after his arrival he opened a supplementary Jewish school, the first on the Pacific Coast, which he headed for many years thereafter. Known as Hefzibah (referring to the people of Israel), it required attendance week-days as well as at Sabbath services and a Sunday lecture. Although Hefzibah was a major achievement, Eckman’s lack of administrative and business expertise and his reluctance to charge reasonable fees, or any tuition at all for the children of the poor, caused the school, like its director, to be in dire financial straits.

As for his congregational work, his tactlessness became obvious early. He published a haughty letter in the *Daily Herald* denying his synagogue’s right to oversee its ritual butchers and claimed that prerogative for himself.<sup>98</sup> Many members demanded his resignation at a congregational meeting, and Eckman did not survive the rancorous annual assembly the following year.

What brought him down, though, was more a struggle over rabbinical authority than a disagreement about kosher slaughtering. Eckman had in mind a European model of tight rabbinical control over every religious matter. But America was different, he would painfully learn, for the ultimate authority was the lay leadership, not only at Emanu-El, but at all of the young synagogues across the country. His attack in the press on his own board of trustees showed that Eckman had no idea of the congregational rabbi’s role in the New World.

But if Eckman was unsuited for the pulpit, other skills enabled him to make a deep impact on the pioneer Jewry for almost twenty years. After his

\*His austerity and introspection bring to mind the Eastern religions, and in the 1860s he seriously considered ministering to the Jews of Kaifeng, China, although he never did so (Joshua Stampfer, *Pioneer Rabbi of the West: The Life and Times of Julius Eckman* [Portland, Ore., 1988], 127).

dismissal he turned even more vigorously to his first love, education, codirecting a secular day school and Jewish day care center along with the Hefzibah venture. Now lacking congregational backing, he was forced to move Hefzibah out of the Broadway Synagogue to shabby rented quarters a few blocks away. Yet the love the youngsters felt for their grandfatherly teacher overcame the squalid setting. As Mary Goldsmith Prag remembered:

It was a ramshackle, weird old building, falling into decay, full of strange noises and haunted corners; its halls and stairways unswept, and decorated with cobwebs and dust. . . . How slowly we ascended the rickety old stairs . . . how we held our breath and shivered with fear as we heard the rats . . . scurrying across the rafters; how we finally made a rush for the door of the room, to be welcomed by our dear old friend; to forget all our fears and troubles in the charm of his presence and the magic of his instruction.<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, the irrepressible Eckman embarked on another consuming career: journalism. In 1857 he unveiled the *Weekly Gleaner*, for the next six years the most influential Jewish newspaper in the western states (predating the first viable periodical of the city's far more numerous Irish community). Circulating along the entire Pacific Coast, the *Gleaner* offered scholarly essays on Judaica as well as news from growing Jewish communities in the American West and around the world.

But the failure of subscribers to pay their bills often brought the *Gleaner*, like the Hefzibah school, close to bankruptcy. In order to maintain them both, Eckman worked long into the night, slept on a sagging couch in the newspaper office, and remained impoverished.<sup>100</sup>

For all of his later accomplishments, Eckman remained bitter about his removal from Emanu-El as well as the lack of an offer from Sherith Israel or any of the local congregations formed later. He complained, with some justification, that he had been “found wanting not in honesty, integrity, or energy, nor in zeal and knowledge—not in self denial and self-sacrifice [but rather in] pliancy, worldly policy, and hypocrisy—hence in popularity.”<sup>101</sup>

Sherith Israel also engaged a full-time rabbi shortly after its first synagogue was completed. Rabbi Henry A. Henry, a Londoner probably of Prussian Polish ancestry, was brought from New York in September 1857. A large man with a long white beard, he strode through the streets in flowing black robes. Fifty-one years old when he arrived, Henry was strictly Orthodox, but if he was out of place in youthful, sinful San Francisco, he was much more suitable for his congregation than Eckman was for Emanu-El.

For Sherith Israel firmly rejected reform during the first decade and a half of its existence. An Americanized service seemed far from its members' minds, judging from the impression of a visitor to the Stockton Street Shul who praised its congregants as "more assiduous" than Emanu-El's but faulted them for the "unforgivable wrong of making their fervor too loudly vocal. [Like] the classical and venerable uproar in the synagogue in the good old days of the faith . . . the Poles have not fallen away."<sup>102</sup>

Henry, who served Sherith Israel for twelve years, meticulously followed the Polish rite. As early as 1859 he proposed a Jewish day school, an idea that gained almost no support even within his own congregation and predated the establishment of such schools in San Francisco by more than a century.<sup>103</sup> In the national Jewish press he sharply criticized Eckman (hardly a dangerous reformer) for laxity in performing conversions and suspending a few Talmudic laws regarding marriage.<sup>104</sup>

Yet Henry was not as parochial as all this suggests. The rabbi may have come west to be engaged with the non-Orthodox more than was possible in his native England or on the East Coast, where he had sometimes been sanctioned for his contacts with Christians and even liberal Jews. In San Francisco, of course, he had no fear of an attack from the right.

A powerful writer and sermonizer when many American rabbis were more comfortable in German than English, he made a compelling case for traditional Judaism in the many books he wrote while serving on Stockton Street. Trying desperately to reach the younger generation—he had nine children himself—he penned three handsome high school primers that reflected an educator in touch with the needs and abilities of his student-readers, hardly commonplace in Orthodox circles in the mid-nineteenth century. Henry, who spoke French and German fluently, was well versed in world literature and science and active in organizations ranging from the Freemasons to the Alliance Israelite Universelle. He appeared frequently as a dignitary at civic ceremonies.<sup>105</sup>

But in the 1860s, when even at traditional Sherith Israel the demand arose for some liturgical reform, the elderly Henry showed no inclination to comply. In a letter to the nationally respected Orthodox journalist and cantor Isaac Leiser of Philadelphia, he vowed to "suffer no innovations" and sounded almost like a warrior out of the Book of Joshua: "Although at times I have to go into the battlefield . . . [I] do not flinch."<sup>106</sup>

Henry was especially resistant to allowing men and women to sit together in the pews. However, as with Eckman at Emanu-El the decade before, the larger dispute was over rabbinical authority. Henry "has not only ignored

and disregarded my orders,” President Charles Meyer angrily reported to his board in April 1869, “but [he] seems to think that he . . . has a right to do so, for when I censured him for having disobeyed [me] he gave me the vulgar American ‘I shall not play second fiddle,’ insulting not only me and the whole Board but also [those] who have elected us to conduct the Congregation’s affairs.”<sup>107</sup> For this insubordination the venerable rabbi was soon terminated.

It is not clear if Henry, who worked primarily as headmaster of a Jewish school in England before immigrating to America in 1849, had ever been ordained, but the depth of his learning was never in question, nor was Eckman’s. Both were solid scholars as well as devoted spiritual leaders. Yet the pioneer West also had its charlatans, untrained men who reinvented themselves on the coast as rabbis. The charismatic Herman Bien, who followed Eckman at Emanu-El for a year, feigned both rabbinical ordination and a doctorate and had only passing acquaintance with classical Jewish texts. He conducted services wearing a distinguished white neckcloth and a cap embroidered with the words *Kadosh L’Adonai*, or “Sacred to the Lord.” But his sermons, though long on histrionics, were short on substance.<sup>108</sup>

Eckman was enraged at his successor, not least of all because “Reverend” Bien, half his age, had also decided to compete with him as a journalist, publishing the *Voice of Israel* when the rabbi launched the *Gleaner*. Bien’s newspaper was short-lived, but, like many pioneers, he quickly switched to other things: running a jewelry store, staging two lavish productions of a play he had written, and then founding a second Jewish newspaper, the *Pacific Messenger*. When that went bankrupt, he simply started a successor, the *True Pacific Messenger*.<sup>109</sup> And before he left San Francisco in 1864 for Nevada, where he was elected to the first state legislature, he had opened—and closed—several different Jewish schools.<sup>110</sup> One can imagine what Eckman and Henry thought of him as an educator.

#### CIVIC DUTY

The emergence of an instant city did not ensure instant citizens. To most of the footloose young men who arrived from all over the world, San Francisco looked like “a traveling carnival,” as one Gold Rush scholar has put it, “that would disappear when the festivities were over.”<sup>111</sup>

But there was also a countervailing trend. From Alexis de Tocqueville on, observers have stressed the importance of voluntary associations in budding

American communities, and this was particularly true of San Francisco, where the municipal government was weak and corrupt. The organizations born in the early 1850s furthered self-interest of course; many members sought business contacts or useful information. But in bringing like-minded people together, religious groups, fraternal orders, civic societies, and cultural institutions served larger purposes. They strengthened the individual's sense of identity amidst his or her amorphous new surroundings and helped provide stability in the newly born metropolis by addressing social problems.

Each of San Francisco's ethnic and religious groups had its organizations, but the early network of Jewish groups was especially extensive and influential. First of all, the good-sized Jewish population offered a critical mass of potential members. By 1860 there were roughly ten thousand Jews in the West, half of them in San Francisco, where they comprised perhaps nine percent of the inhabitants, no small figure given that the entire country counted only 150,000 Jews.<sup>112</sup> About forty thousand of U.S. Jews lived in New York on the eve of the Civil War, but San Francisco, one of the nation's larger Jewish communities, was not far behind Baltimore and Philadelphia, numbering around eight thousand each.<sup>113</sup>

The city supported three synagogues: Emanu-El, Sherith Israel, and Shomrai Shabbes, a small group of Orthodox Polish Jews. In 1861 a fourth—Beth Israel, also traditional—would be founded. For a while in the early 1850s there had been a Sephardi congregation as well.

The two benevolent societies were established at the beginning of Jewish settlement, and as early as November 1850 they worked together to aid victims of the cholera epidemic, which killed almost 5 percent of the city's population.<sup>114</sup> By the decade's end the Eureka Benevolent Society (EBS), with three hundred members, was the largest Jewish organization in the West, its annual fundraising balls major events. Like the First Hebrew Benevolent Society and the Chevrah Bikkur Cholim Ukedusha (established in 1857), the EBS, forerunner of today's Jewish Family and Children's Services, aided the needy, cared for the ill and indigent, and buried the dead. Women organized mutual aid organizations of their own, including the Israelite Ladies Society.<sup>115</sup> And prominent non-Jews, such as San Francisco's mayor in 1854, C. K. Garrison, sometimes made significant financial contributions to the city's Jewish charities.<sup>116</sup>

In 1860, Emanu-El joined with the EBS to purchase a burial ground on Eighteenth and Dolores streets in the Mission District, then an undeveloped part of town. Known as the Home of Peace Cemetery, it adjoined a

block bought at the same time by Sherith Israel and served the community for almost thirty years. The first lodge of B'nai B'rith in San Francisco, Ophir, was founded in 1855 by William Steinhart, a young native of Baden, who headed a thriving textile enterprise. For the next century, the B'nai B'rith would be one of the most powerful Jewish organizations on the Pacific Coast.

In the open atmosphere of the pioneer West, Jews also gained an early foothold in nonsectarian life. Even a man under as much stress as Alexander Mayer found time to belong to the Odd Fellows, and other Jews joined lesser-known fraternal groups such as the Red Men, United Workman, and Foresters.

But it was to the largest of these fraternities, the Masons, that Jews were especially attracted. Emanu-El's first president, the Sephardi clothier Abraham Labatt, was likely Master of California's first lodge, which also included many other Jewish leaders, including Rabbi Henry. The Masons, known at the time for their disdain of Catholics, reacted warmly to Jews who soon would account for 12 percent of the San Francisco membership, a high level of integration given that any lodge member could block a candidate by secretly casting the legendary black ball.<sup>117</sup>

Jews were also well represented in German cultural organizations and were the earliest pillars of the city's exclusive German social clubs. Joseph Brandenstein, the tobacconist who later led the German Benevolent Society, its hospital, and old age home, was devoted to the San Francisco Verein, or Association, founded in 1853, which became the Argonaut Club.<sup>118</sup> Levi Strauss and Martin Heller were among the earliest leaders of the Alemanian Club, later known as the House of Concord and eventually the Concordia.\*<sup>119</sup> Central European Jews often spoke German at home in this first generation, and they basked in the respect most Americans had for German culture. Later, Jewish Francophiles became the backbone of key institutions such as the French Library, Hospital Society, and National League.

Jews were highly visible in the well-regarded Mercantile Library Association. Their own Hebrew Young Men's Literary Association, essentially a debating club, offered an opportunity for newcomers to improve their public speaking skills. The tremendous Jewish impact on the arts would

\* Within only a few years, however, these German clubs consisted almost exclusively of German Jews.

await the second generation, but even in the 1850s Jewish patrons were a major element in the success of the opera—almost a hundred performances of Verdi's works were performed in San Francisco during the decade—the theater, and, later, the symphony. As one visitor observed, “Whenever an undertaking of public interest or benefit is to be carried out, the Jews are looked to first of all, because they are always ready to contribute.”<sup>120</sup>

Jews served in the volunteer fire department as well, fulfilling a vital function in a city of so many devastating blazes. But another aspect of Jewish civic involvement has left a more controversial legacy. Armed vigilante groups (the largest in American history) claimed to benefit—indeed, to save—the entire city, but they used force and intimidation to advance the interests of one group in particular: the merchants. This extralegal militia suspended due process when it seized control of the city in 1851 and again in 1856, and in the latter instance it enlisted eight thousand members for three months in a move that was little short of a coup d'état. Sparked by the assassination of a popular anti-Catholic newspaper publisher, the vigilantes severely punished alleged killers, arsonists, and thieves, hanging four (as in 1851), deporting twenty-five, and intimidating hundreds more who left on their own.<sup>121</sup>

At Emanu-El the sanctuary was draped in black and kaddish was said for the vigilantes' martyr, James King of William, a Christian who added his father's first name to his own to differentiate himself from the other James Kings in the city.<sup>122</sup> The memorial service was evidence of the support enjoyed by the movement among Jews such as the well-known journalist and Emanu-El board member Seixas Solomons, who served as officers in the vigilantes' five-thousand-man military arm.<sup>123</sup>

Many other Jews simply hoped the militia would sweep the streets of the criminal element. According to one pro-vigilante newspaper, Jewish businessmen were vulnerable to “scoundrels and cowardly bullies,” who “have omitted no opportunity to harass and vex and rob them.” Referring by name to two Irishmen targeted and deported by the insurrectionists, the writer continued, “It was the pride of the Mulligans and the Billy Carrs to scoff at the Jews and in pure fun to appropriate their wares and merchandise. No wonder they rejoice at the expatriation of such pests. They can walk the streets of San Francisco today without being jostled and derided by cowardly shoulder strikers.”<sup>124</sup> Modern scholarship, however, has revealed little support for the claim that the Vigilance Committee actually brought down the crime rate.<sup>125</sup>

The vigilantes also won the support of many Jewish merchants by forming a new party in 1856, intended not only to destroy Mayor Broderick's corrupt political machine, but also to reduce taxes and sharply curtail municipal expenditures. Jesse Seligman (brother of Emanu-El's president) was one of the powerful Committee of 21 that nominated the candidates of the pro-business People's Party, which remained in power until the mid-1870s and essentially ran the city on behalf of the merchants.<sup>126</sup>

Even before the vigilantes, however, Jews engaged in politics to a degree unusual in the United States at the time. Native-born Sephardim led the way, since the far more numerous Central Europeans were often not yet citizens nor in full command of the English language. Emanu-El's first two presidents, Abraham Labatt and Joseph Shannon, were also local office holders, and in 1852 two Jews were sent to the State Assembly from San Francisco: Isaac Cardozo, uncle of the future U.S. Supreme Court justice, and the half-Sephardi Elcan Heydenfeldt. Although the Southern-born Heydenfeldt shamelessly opposed the right of blacks to testify in court, this first Jewish California legislator also advocated some progressive causes, most notably a statewide system of public education.<sup>127</sup>

The most respected Jew in town was Heydenfeldt's older brother, Solomon. In 1851, soon after arriving from Alabama, he was nearly chosen by the legislature as a United States senator. The following year he became one of the three state supreme court justices, joining another Jew, Henry Lyons of Philadelphia. (Although born of Jewish immigrants from Frankfurt, Lyons does not appear to have practiced the Jewish faith or to have been connected with any Jewish institution.)\* Heydenfeldt, deeply committed to the rule of law, was one of the few prominent citizens to speak out against the vigilantes. Regrettably, his outstanding career, like that of his brother, was blemished by his opposition to nonwhites being put on the witness stand: in 1854 he ruled against allowing the testimony of Chinese in any case involving a white.<sup>128</sup>

\*The same may be said of two distant relatives of the Heydenfeldts: Washington Bartlett, who became governor of California in 1886, and his cousin Washington A. Bartlett, who, installed by the U.S. military in 1846, became the first *alcalde* (mayor) of the settlement by the bay and renamed the town known as Yerba Buena "San Francisco" on January 30 of the following year (Norton B. Stern, "Washington Bartlett: California's Jewish Governor," in *Sephardic Jews in the Western States*, vol. 1, ed. William M. Kramer [Los Angeles, 1996], 67).

In the 1850s Northern Californian Jews were numerous and easily identifiable, influential, and, in some cases, conspicuously well off. Yet despite the frustration and violence that the boom and bust economy of the Gold Rush decade naturally brought in its wake, Jews were invariably spared their neighbors' wrath, with the exception of a few scattered incidents, mainly in the mining towns. As a contemporary commentator points out, they could not be viewed as "intruders." He continued, "There was no aristocracy . . . only a rag tag gang of money-hungry pioneers of heterogeneous origins, welded together into a 'frontier brotherhood' community. As the 'first families' became encrusted, they became encrusted necessarily in amalgam with the 'first families' of the Jewish community."<sup>129</sup>

Other minority groups were racially excluded from that instant aristocracy and bore the brunt of the masses' discontent. American Indians were virtually exterminated, Mexicans and Chileans often driven off their mining claims, blacks prohibited from voting or testifying in court. The most common scapegoats were the Chinese, and their plight in California recalls the ordeal of the Jews in Russia during the same years. Persecuted because they clung to a distinct ancient and unfamiliar culture, they banded together for self-protection and were then accused of being inassimilable.

California, though, was not scarred by a millennium and a half of Judeophobia emanating from the Church. Of course, aggressive missionary activity could be found on the Pacific Coast, organized first by Catholic orders and then by Protestant evangelists. But the diversity of the population precluded the dominance of any one religious group (with the later exception of the Mormons in Utah), and in this respect the West differed even from other regions in the United States.

Whether it was caused by the great distance from established religious centers, the emphasis on the individual, or even the dramatic landscape that lent itself to a personal spirituality, doctrinal and theological conflict somehow lost its sharp edge west of the Rockies. Race was determinative, as it was everywhere in America; religion was not.

Of course, antipathy to Jews could also emanate from a deep-seated fear of "Jewish influence" and innovation. In late nineteenth-century Europe Jews came under heavy attack for their growing activity in such fields as industry, banking, transportation, retail trade, journalism, and politics. Yet the entrepreneurial spirit that permeated the dynamic American West

made this modern anti-Semitism a rarity. In California, Jews were admired precisely because of their efforts at modernization.

The most serious attack on pioneer Jews was provoked by the controversy over the Sunday Closing Law. In 1855 Assembly Speaker William Stow, originally from upstate New York, who represented Santa Cruz, attributed Jewish opposition to the blue laws to a desire to make a fast dollar and leave. Stow, an adherent of the antiforeign, secretive Know Nothing Party, powerful in California in the mid-1850s, urged a special tax on Jews to drive them away.<sup>130</sup>

When anti-Semitic incidents did occur, Jewish leaders met them forthrightly and adroitly. San Francisco assemblyman E. G. Buffum fiercely denounced the Speaker's remarks. The primary response, though, was prepared by Abraham Labatt's son Henry, who acted as the unofficial spokesman for the Jewish community. Only twenty-three, the Yale graduate was already one of San Francisco's most prominent attorneys. He authored a number of law books (welcome in these years, when "generally the lawyer carried his library in his hat and his office on the back of a mule")<sup>131</sup> and in 1855 was elected clerk of the superior court. Labatt's incisive letter to the Speaker, printed in several western newspapers, skillfully exposed both Stow's ignorance and his dishonesty. Labatt enumerated the Jews' many contributions on the coast and then asked,

Have the Jews squatted upon your lands? If so, I have yet to learn who; the Jews are not squatters.

Have they built groghshops to poison the people? Surely not; they are not rum-sellers. Have they filled your jails or taxed the state with criminal trials? Surely not; they are not robbers, murderers, or leading politicians [i.e., political bosses].

Have their females prostituted the morals of young men? Surely not; they are noted for the virtue of their mothers and the chastity of their daughters.

I do claim Mr. Speaker . . . that [the Jews] are good citizens, and better than you; and . . . worthy men, worthier than you; and that they would scorn to vilify the Gentiles as you have grossly and falsely vilified them. . . .

Pray on whom will you commence [to levy the special tax]? In the Supreme Court where sits on the bench . . . one Jew? . . . What will you do in the halls of legislation, or public offices, the bar, and medical fraternity? Surely Jews fill or have filled these positions in our state, and without the like disgrace . . . that hovers over yourself!<sup>132</sup>

Labatt warned that “voters of this state will remember these facts, and . . . every Jew will bear it in mind a long day,”<sup>133</sup> and one local newspaper stated that Stow’s anti-Semitism cost him the gubernatorial nomination.\*

However, there emerged in the 1850s a more subtle form of anti-Semitism that eluded even those as watchful as Labatt. As urban historian Peter Decker has revealed, Jewish merchants seeking commercial loans were held to a much higher standard than non-Jews:

R. G. Dun [forerunner of Dun and Bradstreet] almost always noted if a merchant was a “Jew” or “Israelite.” If . . . not accompanied with a positive qualifier such as “White Jew” or “an Israelite of the better classes,” the religious affiliation more often than not carried with it an assumption of bad credit. . . . A credit report on two German Jews who owned rather substantial assets warned: “They are Hebrews. May be good (for credit) *if well watched*; they are *tricky*.”<sup>134</sup>

But Jews usually prevailed, often borrowing from family members or other coreligionists. Like a number of Asian groups in America today, Jews were able to overcome economic discrimination through their social cohesion and close family ties.

Overall, San Francisco Jews achieved unparalleled standing in mid-nineteenth-century America, and one gesture in particular demonstrates the sensitivity to the “Israelites” shown by the city. In September 1858, “Steamer Day,” when mail and packages were to be put aboard a ship to the East Coast, fell on Yom Kippur. So that Jews could observe the holy day, Steamer Day was officially postponed. The *Daily Alta California*, the city’s leading newspaper, respectfully described the Day of Atonement and enthusiastically approved the “deference” paid to the Jews, “who occupy prominent positions and have won the respect and esteem of all.”

\*The Sunday Closing Law, less important to Labatt than the anti-Jewish tirade it triggered, passed the legislature, but it was declared unconstitutional in 1858, when Solomon Heydenfeldt, now in private practice, successfully defended a Sacramento Jew who had kept his store open on the Christian Sabbath. The court held that because he shut his shop on Saturday he should be exempt from having to close Sunday (William M. Kramer, “The Earliest Important Jewish Attorney in California, Solomon Heydenfeldt,” *WSJH* 23 [January 1991]: 154–55). Yet later the court overturned that decision, and blue laws remained in force until repealed by the state legislature in 1883.

The paper concluded, “No other part of the world can instance a similar act of liberality.”<sup>135</sup>

#### UNITED IN THE FACE OF CRISIS

From the outset, San Francisco Jewry not only defended itself well but also felt committed to aid oppressed Jews elsewhere. By mid-decade ninety families in the city subscribed to national Jewish newspapers;<sup>136</sup> from these organs and the local Jewish press they were well informed about the condition of their brethren overseas. Early on they contributed to communities under pressure, such as the Jews in Morocco. In 1861, under the guidance of Rabbi Henry, Congregation Sherith Israel responded with warmth and generosity to the first *shaliach*, or emissary, from the Holy Land to visit San Francisco, Abraham Nissan.<sup>137</sup> A few years later another messenger from Jerusalem, Nathan Notkin, was rewarded for his long journey with a check for \$460 from the Grand Lodge of the B’nai B’rith and smaller donations from Jews in Sacramento and the mining towns; he would return to Northern California in the late 1870s.<sup>138</sup>

Most impressive, though, was the mass meeting in January 1859 protesting an outrage in Bologna, Italy—the kidnapping of a Jewish child by papal guards. Edgardo Mortara, aged six, had been secretly baptized by his nurse and was therefore considered Catholic by Pope Pius IX, who placed him in a monastery rather than return him to his parents. The Vatican was flooded by a storm of criticism, and San Francisco’s response was the largest in America.<sup>139</sup> More than three thousand people gathered in Musical Hall to hear a series of speeches and resolutions.

The deep regional and class differences within the Jewish community were bridged during this event, and the list of the event’s conveners, which included the presidents of the two leading congregations, the three benevolent societies, and B’nai B’rith, reflected unity in the face of crisis. Justice Solomon Heydenfeldt, the meeting’s chair, spoke of “the power of public opinion, which, if excited properly in this instance, [will make] the Mortara Case the last of its kind.”<sup>140</sup>

A committee chaired by Rabbi Henry drafted resolutions, the most important of which urged the U.S. government to cooperate with European countries “to suppress religious intolerance and persecution, such as exhibits itself in the Mortara case.”<sup>141</sup> The declarations were sent to Moses Montefiore in London, coordinating a global effort to have the Mortara boy released.

Rabbi Eckman, whose *Gleaner* covered the case extensively, was rarely so impassioned. His speech excoriated “the superannuated Roman Canon Law . . . antagonistic to civilization, progress and religious toleration all over the world.” But he also sensed the danger of vehement anti-Catholicism overtaking the huge crowd of Christians and Jews. Mindful of the violence recently directed against Irish immigrants, he urged that “the deed of the Roman Executive [not be] instrumental in raising any ill-feeling against Roman Catholics.”<sup>142</sup>

Like Eckman, Rabbi Henry also delivered one of the most important addresses of his career that night. Sherith Israel’s spiritual leader declared that the purpose of his committee’s eight resolutions was “to show the world at large that, even on this far western shore, the broad Pacific, humanity has found a home.”<sup>143</sup> Echoing his colleague, he declared he “had not come to denounce Catholicism, but to denounce an act of outrageous cruelty.”<sup>144</sup> The rabbis’ prudence was in sharp contrast to the incendiary anti-Catholic remarks of Jewish leaders in other parts of the country, most notably Isaac Mayer Wise, who castigated all priests as hypocrites.<sup>145</sup> In the West, though, cooperation and mutual respect tended to characterize interfaith relations from the beginning. The event in Musical Hall revealed the goodwill of several Christian clergymen, including William Anderson Scott of Calvary Presbyterian, the leading minister in the city, who expressed their indignation at the Vatican and sympathy for the Mortara family.<sup>146</sup>

With the exception of the Catholic organs, the local press uniformly lauded the mass meeting. A *San Francisco Times* editorial declared it “*the sacred duty of our government to protest against the Mortara outrage.*”<sup>147</sup> That editorial and many others, as well as the entire proceedings of the mass meeting, were soon published in a pamphlet circulated throughout the city—an early document of highly effective Jewish community relations.

Leading Jews, overwhelmed by such an ardent and ecumenical public response, realized perhaps for the first time that the diverse, open society taking shape on the West Coast could not only be a center of protest against injustice but also serve as a sanctuary for the politically persecuted. This was articulated in the evening’s closing speech by Manuel Noah, who was soon to become editor of the *Daily Alta California*. Like his eminent father, Mordecai—diplomat, playwright, New York sheriff, and proto-Zionist—Manuel had a propensity for looking into the future: “This grand swelling voice of sympathy . . . will redound to the credit of California as the eyes of all . . . oppressed people may look toward this great State on the Pacific as a land of refuge.”<sup>148</sup>

By the late 1850s it was clear that the Jewish community had played a key role in transforming a crude frontier outpost into a thriving center of commerce and culture. None of the groups in the diverse metropolis could match the upward occupational mobility of the Jews, who often made a rapid leap from peddler or petty shopkeeper to solid merchant. "Almost all of them are doing well," claimed the Jewish world traveler I. J. Benjamin, who arrived in 1860: "A large part of the wealth of California is in their hands; they have acquired it by thrift and sobriety, by steadfast industry and toil."<sup>149</sup>

As has been noted, San Francisco also produced many spectacular failures in its first decade, human wrecks ruined by the vagaries of nature or the economy. Peter Decker contends that economic opportunity was actually no greater in early San Francisco than in the East and that Thoreau had a point when he declared California "three thousand miles closer to hell."<sup>150</sup>

But using quantitative analysis, Decker has demonstrated that Jews were the exception. Despite the hard-luck stories of men like Abraham Abrahamsohn and Alexander Mayer, Jews as a group "were more successful than others. . . . For them, at least, the 'American Dream' was a reality."<sup>151</sup> The self-discipline and mercantile skills with which they came and the social cohesion and community consciousness they developed on the West Coast served them well in the Darwinian struggle that was nineteenth-century capitalism.

Daniel Levy may have romanticized the impact of the newly won prosperity on Jewish daily life, but his description of 1858 is nevertheless instructive:

Anyone leaving California in those [Gold Rush] days, not so long ago in time, but far removed by events, and returning today, would certainly not recognize it. Instead of the social chaos he had left, he would be pleased and delighted to find about a thousand Jewish families with pure morals and with homes that contained all the conditions necessary for comfort and even luxury. In place of the old and miserable hovels, ravaged by vermin and constantly exposed to total destruction by fire, he would see elegant brick homes or dainty and graceful cottages, hidden among trees and flowers; charming nests for people, where Americans have learned so well to shelter their domestic bliss.

The ladies, almost all of them young, well brought up, more or less musical (there is a piano in every parlor), get together either for Saturday or

Sunday visits, at the Temple, at dances or at the theater, or for their charitable meetings. All this creates a charming and serene social life. I do not think that many European communities can boast of as large a number of young and happy households living in affluence.<sup>152</sup>

In less than a decade a San Francisco Jewish identity had begun to emerge. Much of it, as Levy indicates, was a bourgeois mentality, the result of recently gained wealth and respectability. But also evident were the variations within the Jewish community. Politically, it tended to be centrist, yet conservative and liberal strains were noticeable too, sometimes in the same individual; socially, it was tightly bound by convention, though one could make out faint hints of a nonconformist streak to come; religiously, it was relatively unobservant, but pockets of Orthodoxy could be found. Money counted for a great deal in this Jewish community, and place of origin only slightly less. Yet from the very beginning Jews were also known for their generosity, both in taking care of their own and in improving the city as a whole. Perhaps most noteworthy was the uncommon degree of acceptance, indeed respect, accorded Jews by the larger society. As the well-traveled Benjamin wrote, "Nowhere else are they regarded with as much esteem by their non-Jewish brothers and nowhere else . . . so highly valued in social or political circles."<sup>153</sup>

It must have been exhilarating for the young immigrants, most of whom only a few years earlier had chafed under repressive regimes of European kings. Indeed, Jews in the American West in the second half of the nineteenth century were arguably the freest anywhere in the world. But they did not take that freedom for granted, as shown by the skill and unity with which they faced enemies both at home and overseas. The unprecedented conditions of life on the Pacific Coast, already evident in the 1850s, would allow for the development of a notably creative and adaptable Jewish community. And California in turn would be shaped to a remarkable degree by Jews. That mutual process would characterize the next century and a half.