Jewish Identity and Concepts of Tradition: An Archaeological and Ethnographic Study in Lancaster, Pennsylvania

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Introduction

Everyday in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, people drive past the Shaarai Shomayim cemetery without ever noticing it. Hidden amongst houses and businesses, the cemetery extends from Liberty Street to the railroad tracks; only visible to those who know where to look. Occasionally, noise from the surrounding area drifts in, but otherwise it feels like a calm and quiet bubble of space. From the gates only the most modern graves can be seen; however, about 500 feet into the cemetery, back toward the railroad tracks, there is a path that clearly divides the cemetery into two sections. The section on the Liberty Street side of the path contains only graves less than one hundred years old, whereas the section on the railroad side of the path contains very few graves that young. The younger gravestones are all of similar colors, shapes, and sizes. Even the inscriptions seem uniform. The graves are often marked with the Star of David or a Menorah but little else identifies these graves as Jewish. In comparison, the older graves are more personal because there is no uniformity in design or writing. The higher prevalence of Hebrew and Judaic symbols engraved on the older gravestones clearly identifies the deceased as Jewish.

I initially interpreted these differences as a change in what I considered to be the religiousness of the Jews that used this cemetery. It seemed to make sense that the older Jews with more of a connection to their European roots would be more religious. I researched the history of Jews in America and the shift to Reform Judaism because I thought this information would give me a better understanding of how Jews came to Lancaster and what they did here while establishing the fourth oldest Jewish community in North America. I also thought, since the cemetery is older than some of the first American documents written about Reform Judaism, and the Shaarai Shomayim...
synagogue is currently a Reform affiliate, it might be possible to see how and when Reform Judaism was introduced in Lancaster. This historical information is not the only key to understanding the Shaarai Shomayim cemetery; however, it highlights some of the contributing factors leading to the changes that occurred in American Judaism.

As I spoke to members of the Shaarai Shomayim Synagogue about funerary and burial customs in Judaism, they did not use the term religion as often as they used the term tradition. The congregants spoke to me about what they like doing, what they hate doing, what they feel is important, and what they feel is not. They explained what their families and communities do when someone dies. As I will discuss in the second segment of this paper, the people with whom I spoke repeatedly reinforced the idea that Jewish funeral and burial practices are “rooted in tradition.” Every time I asked why someone used the term “traditional,” he or she seemed to struggle to find an appropriate answer. When he or she finally attempted to respond to my question, it was to imply that these are universal actions among Jews. While this belief was obviously important to them, it did not hold up to scrutiny. If these actions were truly universal, even in Lancaster’s small Jewish community, every person I interviewed would have answered my questions in the exact same way. Yet, this is not what happened. Instead, I found each person defined tradition, both in terms of what they felt tradition dictated, and what they thought tradition was, differently despite using the term in similar contexts. Tradition is not a universal concept, but is linked to specific visions of community and the past; in fact, the term seems to have been co-opted for many different purposes. Eric Hobsbawm defines “invented tradition” as, “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values
and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1983:1). The people I spoke with rationalized their participation in Jewish rituals in exactly this manner. They seemed to think that “tradition” was a monolith that dictates how they should behave as Jews. To the contrary, Hobsbawm is more accurate; as societies change, the social patterns on which old traditions are based weaken or fade away. If those traditions are not applicable to the new social patterns, then new traditions must be created (1983: 4-5).

The gravestones in the Shaarai Shomayim Cemetery cannot tell me how religious the 560 or so people buried there were but they can tell me how they defined themselves and their relatives as Jews. It can also tell me how they chose to represent that identity. Lastly, this 259-year-old cemetery can show how modern concepts of tradition have been developed from old representations of Judaism.

This study that I am conducting uses an integration of historical records, ethnography, and archaeological analysis that is common in historical archaeology. Prehistoric archaeologists must rely on artifacts because there are no written records documenting the likes of the people they study. Historical archaeologists, on the other hand, study peoples affected by the spread of European culture throughout the world during the second half of the last millennium and have far more resources available to them. James Deetz suggests in his book *In Small Things Forgotten* that there is no point in basing the analysis of, for example, a type of structure solely on excavated material when buildings exemplifying this style still exist and are being used. In many cases of historical archaeology, there is so much collectable data from exposed artifacts, historical records, and ethnography that excavations are used only for the purpose of confirming
theories when necessary. In essence, because people of the recent past often left their mark on the world in conspicuous ways, an archaeological study can be conducted without ever picking up a shovel.

Honestly, there is no place where one can be confronted by the past as openly or strongly as a cemetery. Although it is socially inappropriate and religiously disrespectful to excavate a currently utilized burial ground, Deetz is one of several historical archaeologists who have proven that studying the changes in gravestone shape and design gains one a sense and understanding of the changes that occurred in past societies. By first examining the history of American Judaism, then discussing how the congregants of Shaarai Shomayim use and define “tradition,” and lastly, by analyzing the Shaarai Shomayim cemetery, this thesis will look at how American Jews define themselves.

History

It is important to understand that Jews came to America at many times and from many places. Each group of Jews came off the boat or plane with their own sense of what it meant to be Jewish and their own understanding of the best ways to show that identity. Many of the first Jews were Sephardic, coming from Spain or Portugal, but later the majority of Jews settling in the colonies were Eastern European Ashkenazim. “Sephardic” and “Ashkenazic” imply great differences in the rites used to express common beliefs. Nationality can also generate variation. Although it is collectively called American Judaism, Judaism in the United States is not uniform, and the factors that contribute to the changing understanding of tradition are numerous. It is impossible to address all of these factors but the role of history in creating tradition cannot be ignored.
or forgotten. I cannot examine every group of incoming Jews but I will look at how some of the earliest first came to and established their presence in the colonies. I will look at some reasons why Jews traveled to Lancaster, as well as how they established ways to be Jewish in Pennsylvania.

During the Spanish Inquisition of 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain. They fled throughout Europe, often to Portugal, the Netherlands and Northern Africa where they were welcome at that time; however, since Christopher Columbus had a large amount of scientific and financial support from Jews, it is not entirely surprising that six Jews joined him on his first voyage. In fact, it was one of those Jews, Luis de Torres, the fleet’s interpreter, who was the first person, before even Columbus, to step onto American soil. In 1631, the Dutch exiled the Portuguese from Recife, Brazil and the approximately 1,500 Jews living there gained nearly complete freedom (Brener 1976:1) as compared to their condemned and thus restricted lifestyle in both Portugal and its colonies. Unfortunately, when the Portuguese recaptured Recife, the Jews were forced to flee; some went back to Holland, but twenty-three boarded a ship bound for New Amsterdam. They arrived in September of 1654 and Governor Peter Stuyvesant greeted them with open hostility (Faber 2005:23, Marcus 1997:6). Luckily for these Jews, the ship’s captain refused to comply with Stuyvesant’s wish that he turn around without letting the Jews off; they did not have enough money to pay for the trip there let alone for a second trip elsewhere (Brener 1976:1).

The Jews who settled in New Amsterdam lived under harsh restrictions because Stuyvesant was afraid that their successful presence would encourage other, even less desirable, people to settle in New Amsterdam. Under his leadership, the Jews were not
allowed to purchase burial ground nor designate a formal place for worship. Asser Levy, the only Jew known to have remained permanently in New Amsterdam since disembarking the boat from Recife, is known best for challenging Stuyvesant’s attempts to curtail the Jews’ civil rights (Faber 2005: 23). Despite Levy’s efforts, it was three years before Jews gained the right to reside, trade, own land and hold private worship services in the city. New Amsterdam Jews were not able to acquire land for a cemetery until 1656 because until then no one had died. It is not surprising that this was the first action taken by early American Jews, because, while it is generally appropriate to have services of worship anywhere, Jews can only be buried in a sanctified space. Even a mikvah, the ritual bath, is required before a synagogue. Fortunately, in 1664, the early Jews subsequently gained further rights when the British took over New Amsterdam and renamed it New York. Due to the steadily increasing numbers of Jews in New York City, additional land for the cemetery was purchased in 1682, but at that time, there were not enough Jews to make the construction of a formal synagogue truly necessary; therefore, services continued to take place in private homes (Faber 2005:23). The Jews informally organized Congregation Shearith Israel in 1686 and were finally given a formal charter in 1729 (Marcus 1997: 7).

The second oldest Jewish community in North America is in Newport, Rhode Island and dates to 1677, a year before the Newport Jewish cemetery was purchased. Unfortunately, this initial community did not remain in Newport for more than a decade, and it was not until the 1740s that Jews from New York reestablished a Jewish presence in Rhode Island (Marcus 1997: 7). The Newport synagogue, built in 1763, known as the Touro Synagogue (formally called Yeshuat Israel), is the oldest surviving synagogue in
the United States. The name Touro comes from Judah Touro, the synagogue’s hazan\textsuperscript{1} from 1759-1779 (Faber 2005: 27). Although the Jews in those two cities are now mostly Ashkenazic (German-Polish-Russian), the original groups of Jews there were Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese), which is one reason why the Touro Synagogue is so famous. The building’s architecture remains distinctly Sephardic and is best known for its central bimah\textsuperscript{2}.

In actuality, the twenty-three Jews who arrived from Recife were mostly Sephardic but some were Ashkenazic. Despite the proclivity for Sephardic style services and synagogues, there was a strong sentiment that the custom established in an area was the law there as long as it followed the “governing norms of religious law,” and by 1720, the majority of Jews in the colonies followed the central and eastern European traditions (Faber 2005:25). Most likely what occurred in Newport is that, while the initial population may have been heavily Sephardic, slowly more Ashkenazic Jews immigrated to the area until they outnumbered their predecessors and by majority, changed the form of the synagogue service.

According to David Brener, Jews initially spread south into Pennsylvania because of Quaker William Penn who allowed merchants free access to Native American tribes, and more than tolerated minorities. Brener then suggests that Penn distributed flyers in order to attract Jewish settlers to the area (1979: 2). Individual Jews appear as early as 1704 in Philadelphia records. It was not until 1740 just after an imperial naturalization law granted Jews economic freedom in the colonies, Jews spread from New York to the north and also to the south of the city (Marcus 1997: 8). Jacob Marcus (1997) implies that

\textsuperscript{1} the reader who leads services in the synagogue and chants from the Torah.  
\textsuperscript{2} pulpit
it was only at that point that there were enough Jews in the Philadelphia area to form a *minyan*\(^3\) and allow for the construction of a synagogue. However, Eli Faber (2005) suggests the Jews who emigrated from New York worshipped in a private residence in Cherry Alley until this house was no longer big enough to support their growing congregation due to a large influx of Jews into the area because of wartime hostilities. Regardless, Marcus maintains that in 1771, the Philadelphia area Jews purchased the first of several buildings to house Mikveh Israel, which is the third oldest and longest continuously used synagogue (1997: 9). Interestingly, Faber disputes this date and argues that the first synagogue in Philadelphia was dedicated in 1782, though it is possible that he did not feel that the earlier buildings were significant because they did not remain standing for long periods of time (2005: 24).

Before the synagogue was built, the first thing Jews in Philadelphia did to formalize their presence was to acquire land for a cemetery. In 1740, a Jew named Nathan Levy purchased a parcel of land in order to bury his son. According to documents circulated by the Sephardic congregation, the Jewish community in Philadelphia did not flourish until the Revolutionary War, when Jews from New York traveled there to support the cause of the Founding Fathers and to avoid England’s oppressive control. Mikveh Israel’s statement regarding this seems to support Faber’s theory of what transpired in eighteenth century America.

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\(^3\) the requirement that ten Jews over the age of thirteen be present so that services may be held. Traditionally and in more religious communities, all ten individuals must be male but in Conservative and Reform congregations, women can also be counted. Moyel: sometimes also a Rabbi, this individual performs the bris, the circumcision ceremony.
After Philadelphia, most sources (including Marcus 1997 and Faber 2005) maintain the next two oldest Jewish populations in North America are found in Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina. While it is true large groups of Jews emigrated there before the Revolutionary War, there was a smaller and less well-known pocket of Jews living to the west from an earlier date.

Isaac Miranda was the first recognized Jew to travel to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He emigrated from Italy to Pennsylvania between 1710 and 1715, and after traveling on multiple occasions to trade with the Native Americans on the Ohio River, eventually set up a trading post on a 500-acre farm, which is now part of Lancaster County. Although Miranda was not the only Jew traveling between Philadelphia and Lancaster for trade, he provides the most concrete evidence for the presence of settled Jews in Lancaster County. This evidence establishes Lancaster, before Savannah (1733), as the fourth oldest Jewish community in North America.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, Lancaster gained a reputation for trade with the local Native American tribes. Until his death in 1712, William Penn was a friend to the Susquehanna, Conestoga, Ganawese, and Shawanse Nations who lived on the Susquehanna River. Penn visited these peoples in their homes to better establish trade between his citizens and the Native Americans. After he died, the governors of Pennsylvania continued to work hard to maintain good relations with the Native Americans. A 1728 proclamation by Penn’s government mandated Indians should be treated “with the same civil regard that they would an English subject” (Mombert 1869:111). This part of Chester County was considered an outpost in the west and many pioneers stopped there to buy goods before continuing into the western frontier.
Eventually the people in the upper parts of Chester County grew tired of not having colonial officials nearby to maintain peace. According to the minutes of a Council on February 20th, 1729, the Governor informed the House of Representatives that he intended to divide Chester into two counties in order to make the areas easier to govern. On May 2nd, 1729 Lancaster County was officially created, and, about a year and a half later, roads were laid out between Philadelphia and Lancaster (Mombert 1869: 112, 126).

Even during the French and Indian War, when relations with the Native American Nations fell apart, this region continued to thrive. At this time, Dr. Klein (1924) explains, Benjamin Franklin obtained from Lancaster City, the wagons and packhorses used to oppose the French. Later, during the Revolutionary War, when General Howe took Philadelphia, the Congress moved, and Lancaster was named the Capital of the United States for a period of nine months (Klein 1924:323-5). Lancaster was then one of the most important inland cities in the newly independent North America.

Although many Jewish merchants and traders passed through the area, one of the most important Jews to settle in Lancaster City was Joseph Simon in around 1740. Like many Jews at that time, he was a merchant and shop owner. It certainly cannot be denied that, like Simon, many of the Jews prospered in the colonies, despite a few early setbacks. Joseph Simon, to the dismay and embarrassment of the current Jewish community of Lancaster, was a slave owner. He lived primarily next to Isaac Nunes Henriques in a several storey house on Queen Street, in the southwest corner of Penn Square, which was one of many properties he owned (Brener 1976). He often rented his properties to other Lancaster Jews.
Joseph Simon was the heart of the Lancaster Jewish community. He owned Torah scrolls and an ark (Faber 2005: 39), both of which were extremely expensive and rare items. Some believe it was his death in 1804 that pushed the Lancaster Jewish community into alleged dormancy. The lack of records from that time period and the known migrations of several Jewish families to cities outside of Lancaster County suggest that the Lancaster Jewish community had disappeared; however, it is more likely they did not do anything noteworthy enough to merit mention in the Lancaster records.

It was not a large community; it consisted initially of approximately half a dozen families. Individual Jews passed through Lancaster often enough though that there were always enough people to form a minyan. Even the man whose name is on the cemetery deed with Simon, Isaac Nunes Henriques, was only in Lancaster for a few decades. Lancaster County’s Moyel, Barnard Itzhak Jacobs, kept records of all of the babies he circumcised providing evidence of other Jews living there. Since a Bris is held eight days after birth, the dates on which the babies were born can easily be calculated (Brener 1976).

Isaac Nunes Henriques was another of the earliest Jews to arrive in Lancaster. He came to the American colonies in 1733 on the boat that landed in Savannah, but did not feel welcome in Georgia. He went first to New York where he became a legal Shohet (ritual slaughterer) and Bodek (inspector of meat) before moving to Lancaster sometime between 1743 and 1747. Henriques’s name is listed first on the cemetery deed so it is suggested by Brener that he supplied most of the funds for the purchase but neither he nor any other relative of his is buried there in a marked grave. Henriques left Lancaster before 1756 and died the next year in Philadelphia.
According to Brener, Joseph Simon organized and motivated the Jewish community in Lancaster. When he died, the last threads of the community fell apart. Brener maintains that Simon’s and Henriques’s children moved to Philadelphia and Baltimore, and that they did not want a connection with their Lancaster roots. There are many sources, mostly about Simon’s famous granddaughter Rebecca Gratz that place Simon’s daughter Miriam’s family in Philadelphia near the end of her life; she died only four years after her father. The fact that all nine of her children were born in Lancaster and the court cases between the Simon and Gratz families would perhaps suggest that Simon’s and Henriques’s descendents were not entirely detached from their Lancaster heritage. Simon’s daughter Miriam married Michael Gratz of Philadelphia and it was Michael to whom Simon supposedly gave some of the contested land. If this land did not have important significance to their family, they would not have fought over it. At some point though, they left Lancaster. It was at about the same time that Lancaster City lost its economic and political status particularly as an outpost to the West after the Revolutionary and French and Indian Wars. The Jews who were drawn there for Lancaster’s trade and political status slowly moved away. It is rather ironic that one of the first Lancaster Jews would also be one of the last mentioned in the records for this initial Jewish settlement.

When the next wave of Jews arrived, it is possible they knew nothing of the previous community except to presumably deduce from the cemetery it had existed. It is doubtful they came to Lancaster because they knew of the earlier group of Jews. It is

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4 Rebecca Gratz founded the first Jewish Sunday School in America at Mikveh Israel. Coincidentally, her older sister Richea was the first woman to attend college in America and studied at Franklin College. I am fairly sure that three of their older brothers studied there as well.
probable the rest of the Lancaster community informed them, if they had not already known. Despite knowing about Lancaster’s Jewish history, it appears they did not feel it was an important or relevant topic of discussion since they never mentioned it in their synagogue meeting minutes.

Due to changing conditions in Europe related to the Napoleonic Wars, roughly 200,000 Jews emigrated from Central Europe particularly from Germany where the Congress of Vienna dissolved the rights of Jews in 1815 to the United States in the early nineteenth century. A small percentage of these new immigrants settled in and around Lancaster, which provided the beginnings of the three congregations that exist in Lancaster City currently. Unlike the previous Jewish community, this group of immigrants was primarily employed as peddlers and not merchants. Due to the sudden influx of peddlers in Lancaster, the government required all peddlers to have a license, which specify where and how they could pursue their trade. This is one of the first records to show the reestablishment of a Jewish presence in Lancaster; however, that presence was not confirmed until the first burial since Joseph Simon in the Shaarai Shomayim Cemetery on September 6, 1849. A group of roughly twenty men formed a congregation on February 25, 1855 and one month later, named it Shaarai Shomayim, Gates of Heaven. J.I. Mombert only writes one sentence in reference to the Jews of Lancaster, “the Jews have a handsome synagogue at Lancaster, which was consecrated September 18, 1867” (1869: 455). Not long after this, a second group of Jews settled in Lancaster and within about twenty-five years built the Orthodox synagogue, Degel Israel.

It is fairly likely that Shaarai Shomayim was founded as a Reform synagogue; however, Michael A. Meyer calls Reform Judaism not an institutional identity but rather
a unity of purpose (1988: viii). This means that the purpose of the Reform movement was to, literally, reform Judaism as a whole. Meyer feels that Jews should be united in this cause, but they should not identify themselves as “Reform” Jews. If this were true at the birth of the Reform movement or even eighteen years ago, I would maintain that it is not precisely now. In fact, it exists as neither one nor the other but as both. The movement still has its purpose but also an identity. An understanding of Reform Judaism as both purpose and identity is critical to a study of Jewish identity and tradition in America.

The Reform Judaism with which Shaarai Shomayim is affiliated originated in Europe but did not flourish there as it did in America. In Europe, Reform Judaism fought for survival against governmental control over religion and the set pattern of religious life established by powerful Rabbis in the community. In America, neither of these obstacles existed. In the purposefully multi-denominational melting pot that was and is America, religion was a voluntary choice. Perhaps it was because of this shift in perspective that the religious life exemplified by individuals in synagogue was not necessarily found elsewhere. Eventually, American Jews became dissatisfied with the change resisting services. In 1824, a Charleston community asked it’s synagogue to alter several aspects of its services and when this failed to happen, a dozen members of the congregation started an independent Reformed Society of Israelites (Meyer 1988: 229). As the Society grew, it increasingly expressed the need for change. Meyer quotes Abraham Moise, “we look not to the antiquity of rites and ceremonies as a just criterion for their observance by us but to their propriety, their general utility, their peculiar applicability to the age and country in which we live, to the feelings, sentiments, and opinions of Americans” (1988:
231). It was early Reform belief that Judaism had been altered substantially over time and that it was no longer “classical Judaism.” The ultimate desire of Reform Judaism was to return to the original biblical Judaism and the beliefs without the unnecessary rituals that had been attached to them by European Rabbis. There was much competition between Isaac Mayer Wise and David Einhorn who wrote the first Reform Jewish prayer books. Although they agreed ideologically, their views on the reforms necessary to make Judaism a modern religion differed substantially. In 1869, Einhorn asked Rabbis to assemble in Philadelphia to record the basic principles on which Reform Judaism differs from Orthodox Judaism. Thirteen Rabbis helped to create the seven Philadelphia Principles. They expressed Reform belief about the Messiah, sacrifices, Cohanim and Levi (the high priests), spiritual rather than bodily immortality, and Hebrew among other things. In 1873, fulfilling Wise’s greatest wish, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was formed to create unity among American Jews. At which time, Reform Judaism moved from being just a purpose to having an attached identity. During the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, Reform Jews were typically Jews of German descent. Both their cultural heritage and religious background set them apart from the Eastern European Jews who began flooding into the States (Meyer 1988: 264). Yet, even at that point, there were Rabbis who felt Reform Judaism was still tied to the manipulated rituals from which they desperately wanted to be liberated. The debate that arose between classical Judaism and what was called “living Judaism” delineated the separation between Conservative and Reform Judaism. The first conference of Rabbis created the Philadelphia Principles to distinguish Reform from Orthodoxy by harshly criticizing the latter; however, the third conference the Rabbis held in 1885, intended to
create the Pittsburg Platform, was organized to give Reform Judaism an identity based on what it is rather than what it is not, and then to distinguish it from Conservative Judaism. Now Reform Judaism was its own entity capable of translating the fundamental Jewish beliefs into rites more appropriate in the modern world.

Funerary Customs

The Reform movement was based on the desire to return to the beliefs on which Judaism was founded. The movement rejected the rituals European Rabbis had created from their own or previous Rabbis’ manipulations of Jewish law in favor of beliefs and rites it selectively chose to perpetuate as religious law. If it were possible for Judaism to exist solely as a body of beliefs and laws, then perhaps it would, but history seems to indicate otherwise. Judaism is about beliefs but it is also about creating unity among people who have common beliefs, through ritual action. Emile Durkheim considered shared beliefs to be a key function of religion.

Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single community called a Church, all who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995: pg 44). According to Durkheim, religion explains the ordinary aspects of life and nature rather than their exceptional aspects. The task of supernatural beings is to account for the everyday aspects of life, such as the stars, seasons, and existence of many species. In Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim reinforces the idea that religion is not reliant upon the existence of gods or spirits. He states that religious phenomena fall into two categories: beliefs, which are states of opinion consisting of representation, and rites,
which are modes of action that express or define beliefs. Durkheim felt the purpose of beliefs is to express the nature of sacred objects and how they relate to those objects that are profane. Rites are thus rules of conduct for how one should behave around sacred objects. A group of people will share religious beliefs and practice the corresponding rites. Individuals of this group know that many people share and their beliefs similarly. This knowledge creates a sense of power and more importantly, the social solidarity without which Durkheim believed society could not exist.

Durkheim’s definition of religion implies that it serves the same purpose as the “traditions” Jews selectively choose to perpetuate. In devising “traditions”, people are able to create a timeless social solidarity, which connects them to people in the past, present, and future under a collective identity. During interviews regarding funerary and burial customs in Judaism, members of the Shaarai Shomayim Congregation conveyed a deep understanding of tradition. Although I did not specifically mention “tradition” in the interviews, I got the sense that this word meant more to these individuals than what they may have considered to be standard practice at their synagogue. For example, I spoke with one woman who was insulted by the very idea that shiva, the period of mourning marked by special services and meals, lasts less than seven days as specified by halacha. Yet, she belongs to a Reform synagogue where the general practice is to sit shiva for only the first and most intense three days. As well, the Rabbi told me a story about three brothers who approached him before their father’s funeral and asked for a “traditional” ceremony, even though none of the three are practicing Jews. Regardless of what “traditional” specifically meant to them, this term represented something more meaningful than the “regular” Reform service.
Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a slow trend where the previously rejected practices of European Jews are revived and redefined as “tradition”, while, at the same time, congregations are creating new practices they also call “tradition.” Every person I spoke with expressed a sense of comfort in what they called “traditional”, perhaps because death is disruptive and upsetting and “tradition” is always perceived as a steady constant. People may die, but “traditions” never do. In this context, “tradition” is warm, comfortable, and safe. It would be inappropriate to say that people’s reactions to death are the sole reason for the revival of invented traditions in American Judaism, but it is most certainly a significant factor.

Several individuals expressed to me that when they buried a loved one, it seemed as though all of their Jewish friends and family knew what to do. Since Jewish law and “tradition” carefully explain how the funeral and burial should progress, they were relieved to have to make few decisions. The mourners need not worry about how to prepare the dead for burial because the *chevrah kaddisha*, burial society, handles these arrangements. Today, Reform communities only occasionally use the *chevrah kaddisha*. Instead, funeral homes are equipped with the necessary items for Jewish burials and are briefed on their requirements. The practice of not embalming the deceased’s body must be reinforced, since embalming is commonly used by non-Jewish funeral homes. Most of the duties performed by the *chevrah kaddisha* can be performed by anyone else, notably *tach’richim*, dressing the body in a white shroud to prepare him/her for the afterlife and to make them indistinguishable from the wealthy, poor, or even the criminal
or else to bury them in a “kosher”, natural and simple pine casket\(^5\). Burial societies have not disappeared entirely among Reform congregations because some families view *taharah*, the purification rituals, as a family tradition that must be continued. While the men and women I interviewed always mentioned the white shroud and plain casket, none of them mentioned the ritual washing. If ritual washing were something they did or at least felt were an important part of Jewish practice, they probably would have said something about it. This is a practice that Reform Jews have selectively chosen to not recreate as a tradition.

The last major task of the *chevrah kaddisha* is *shomeir*, the guarding of the body. Although no one spoke of burial societies in interviews, it is likely that if a *chevrah kaddisha* does not perform the act of staying with the dead, this practice does not occur. Humans’ natural fear of death and its “contaminating” nature and the inability to deny the reality of death in the extended presence of it, overrides individuals’ desire to spend more time with his or her loved one unless he or she really needed it. I did not discuss this in the interviews with Shaarai congregants, but based what they said in other contexts, they probably would have been divided on this topic. Some would have appreciated *shomeir* but others would have been bothered by it.

Once *taharah*, *tach’richim*, and *shomeir* have been completed, it is time for the funeral service and burial. In Jewish practice and law, one must be buried as soon as possible. Burial may be postponed for a short period of time so family members can be at the service but it cannot be postponed indefinitely. This is out of respect for the dead and

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\(^5\) Texts vary as to whether the casket must be “wood” or specifically of pine, but pine is cheaper than many hardwoods and would leave the deceased’s degree of wealth indistinguishable.
for the sensibilities of the living, since preservation techniques are avoided in the preparation of the body. Several people who I interviewed implied that a quick burial is like pulling off a band-aid; if one does it too slowly, the separation just hurts more. People appreciate the sense of closure that comes from a quick burial. Obviously, the introduction of morgue refrigeration allows Jews to continue avoiding most preservation techniques without having to bury the body immediately; however, this is a tradition that people held onto even though it was not necessary.

The setting for the service varies from synagogue to synagogue and over time. Even within a single community it can vary because a synagogue establishes a range of accepted practices rather than a single, absolute one. The reason why the dead body must be ritually purified and one must wash one’s hands before and after being in a cemetery is because in Judaism, death is considered to be polluting. According to a few of my informants, historically, the high priests, because of their role in the Temple, were so pure that they could not enter a cemetery without becoming defiled and thus unable to perform necessary ritual tasks. An Israeli woman told me that this tradition is still practiced in some Israeli Sephardic communities, including her own. Similar to the high priests, because a place of worship is pure and dead bodies cannot cross its threshold. In the past, the complete funeral service was held at the graveside; however, now they are held first at a synagogue, funeral home, or in a special building on the cemetery site, and then completed at the graveside. It is very rare for there to be a service held entirely outside of the cemetery. Regardless of affiliation, though some synagogues will allow the burial of non-Jews in their cemetery, non-Jewish graveside services are prohibited. Shaarai has buried several individuals who were not Jewish but the Rabbi was adamant about the
types of services allowed in the cemetery. The Rabbi has officiated at funeral services in Shaarai Shomayim synagogue rather than at a funeral home, but congregants waver about whether or not it is appropriate. One woman’s facial expressions made it clear that she was strongly bothered by the thought that a funeral could be held in the synagogue. If the belief that corpses can contaminate the purity of a synagogue is based a vague tradition supported by only a few Jews, then it is understandable that Rabbis would not hesitate to officiate funeral services in a synagogue; however, this belief appears to be fairly widespread. At the same time, at least one or two other individuals did not seem particularly to care and had been to services at both the synagogue and at funeral homes.

The graveside part of service is generally the most memorable aspect of the funeral. People who went to the funeral service at the funeral home or synagogue but were not particularly intimate with the deceased do not usually follow the family to the cemetery because the graveside ceremony can be a very personal experience for the immediate family and thus awkward for “outsiders” to see. When I offered to go to a friend’s father’s funeral, she asked that I not go to the graveside service and actually also suggested that I not attend shiva services at her house. She felt that her family would be uncomfortable with the presence of someone they did not know well. It is only very close friends and family saying the Mourner’s Kaddish at the open grave. In a large cemetery or one away from major streets, it is so quiet that the only sounds are the Rabbi and mourners crying out the prayers and lastly, dirt being thrown into the grave. This is an invented tradition that exists entirely for the mourners. Some hate the sound of the dirt hitting the coffin because it serves as a concrete reminder once again that they have lost someone they loved, but for most it creates a sense of finality, respect, and a last chance
to show their love for the dead. One couple told me about how, as they drove away from
the cemetery, they turned and watched their nephews filling the grave. This was a very
emotional and meaningful moment for them, because of the dead respect their nephews’
actions showed to the dead. They were proud of their nephews for doing one last act of
kindness that would never be repaid.

Once the person is buried, it is the Jewish belief that he or she goes to a place
between heaven and earth where he or she is spiritually purified. The length of time it
takes for purification to be completed depends on the purity of the individual in his or her
life and the number of Mitzvot, commandments, he or she upheld, but it should not be
less than nine months or more than one year. Many families, including my own, unveil
the gravestone one year after the date of death. This is not because we believe that the
deceased persons in our family are particularly impure. We were taught that this is the
proper way to behave as a Jew, and through repetition, this practice became our family’s
tradition, as well as many other families’ tradition. The one-year anniversary of death can
be quite significant for the mourners. Placing the gravestone at the grave on the
anniversary date of the individual’s death, helps mourners show the deceased that he or
she was not forgotten, while reminding themselves that they must move on with their
lives. It still shocked me though to see a stone with a date of death less than three months
prior to that day in a Jewish cemetery as can be found in Shaarai Shomayim. When I
asked Shaarai’s Rabbi about this, he replied that the stone cannot be unveiled less than
two months after the date of death but any time after that is fine. This is probably the
actual Jewish law regarding unveiling whereas waiting nine months to one year is an old
ritual that was revived and then defined by Jews as a tradition.
The gravestone is meant to be very plain and unostentatious. According to one person with whom I spoke, halacha does not require the use of gravestones but their use has become a prominent aspect of Jewish burials for two reasons. The first reason is that the act of visiting graves is very important in Judaism. The second reason is that in order to be able to find the graves, they must be marked with at least a small pile of rocks. As a marker, there is no need for a gravestone to be ornate because it only has to mention the name of the deceased. Historically, however, large or ostentatious gravestones were signs of high status. Since Jewish law states that status should not be distinguishable at any point in time during the burial and unveiling, the use of flashy stones almost never filtered into Jewish practice. It is because of this same Jewish law that the dead are buried in the same type of grave clothes unless they had a favorite prayer shawl in which case they should be buried wrapped in that. In order for the living to not be ashamed of their lack of funds, the stones should not exemplify stature. The same person who explained the meaning of gravestones in Judaism also informed me that the materials used for the stone, burial shroud, and coffin are intended to be natural because of the idea that humans came from the earth and when we die, we return to it. As it was not until more recently that any unnatural materials could be used, the usage of only natural materials appears to be another example of a modern redefinition for a pre-existing custom.

Many scholars noted that halacha does not focus as much on funerary customs as on mourning customs, and likewise, I found that people had more to say about the latter than the former, particularly in regards to shiva. This is the first week of mourning. It begins at the Meal of Condolence and for some people, ends with the chief mourner walking out of his or her house then around the block. When he or she return, the Rabbi
says a prayer to officially end the week of *shiva*. This revived practice originated in old European Judaism before Reform Judaism became widespread. Neither the Reform nor the Conservative feel this practice is necessary, but some people continue to follow it as a personal or family tradition. According to one woman, she did not feel as though her brother had moved on until she completed the walk around the block. She was also the only person I interviewed who observed the full week of *shiva*. When I asked another person what she meant when she said “a traditional service,” she included in her list only three days of sitting *shiva*. Perhaps to some people what is done during the days of mourning is more important that the actual number of days.

Jewish law suggests that the congregation support the family by providing a meal at the start of the week of *shiva*, eaten directly after the mourners leave the cemetery (*Shulchan Aruch*, volume four, chapter CCV: *Laws Concerning the Meal of Condolence*). Shaarai Shomayim is generally stricter about the Meal of Condolence than *halacha* specifies. For example, the *Shulchan Aruch* says that they should eat eggs or lentils first, “because they are round and have no mouths, just as the mourner has no mouth”\(^6\), but after that, they can eat anything—meat or dairy. I spoke with a woman on the committee that organizes these meals for Shaarai and she told me that although they alter little things each time, to serve rye toast instead of bagels if many non-Jews will be present, it is always a dairy meal. They also always serve eggs though they know that the non-Jews will not usually eat them. There is no clear reason for this but it is still a trend that the committee noticed and tries to accommodate. It is not strange to find that this

\(^6\) The meal of condolence was the only part of my great-grandfather’s funeral that I was allowed to be present at since I was only six or seven years old but I can recall being told that the eggs represented the cycle of life, suggesting that multiple interpretations exist.
congregation would have more rules and regulations or could be considered stricter than *halacha* requires. This happens frequently due to the creation of local traditions. For example, in a discussion just recently, it came up that in Israel, seven days of Passover are observed whereas everywhere else eight days are observed. None of us could properly explain why it was true, only that it was. This custom is based on Talmudic law, but still one must wonder if the tradition came before the law or the law after the tradition. Why are we not taught in synagogue about the basis of this custom in law?

Shaarai is not the only Reform synagogue that is strict about particular funerary or mourning customs as can been seen in *To Everything There Is A Season*, the published handbook distributed by the UAHC to synagogue board members, explaining basic funeral and mourning procedures. This handbook describes the practices that Jewish law requires, for example, details on the *chevrah kaddisha*, but also includes sample letters that would be sent to mourning families regarding the necessary arrangements for a funeral and burial at their synagogue. These letters, as well as the compilations of practices followed at specific congregations, show a range of what actual congregations do throughout the United States, but also demonstrate how their practices deviate from the *halacha* ritual.

During *shiva*, the mourners are not supposed to work in any way meaning that they cannot cook, clean, or even use the telephone. Conservative and Orthodox Jews cover all of the mirrors in their houses during this week because they should be thinking of the person that died rather than about how they look. This is a practice that Reform Judaism does not uniformly follow. Many Jews, including some of the people I interviewed, cover their mirrors because it is a tradition that their family follows. The act
of covering mirrors was originally a European, not just Jewish, practice based on the idea that the soul of the dead remains in the house and can be seen or even become caught in a mirror. Jews therefore reinvented this practice as a tradition.

This is supposed to be a time for prayer and reflection so that the mourners can face the world without their grief. Every person I spoke to expressed gratitude for this custom because not only can they take the time necessary to mourn their loss, in Jewish tradition, one does not grieve alone. One woman told me that her family shares memories and laughs during this time so that not only do they grieve, and relieve the pain they feel at their relative’s loss, but they also create stronger bonds with those who are still alive. An individual who buried both his father and his brother within a period of two weeks said that while it was nice the community was supportive of his needs, he found that having to sit through two weeks of shiva with everyone felt very intrusive. At times he wanted to be alone with his grief, but felt as though it was not possible. He also mentioned the extended period of mourning known as shlishim. He said this period is three months long, but the word is Hebrew for ‘thirty’ and represents only a single month of extensive mourning. Perhaps there are various practices regarding shlishim where different periods of time are observed. By halacha, if one’s spouse or child dies, one is supposed to mourn for a year. This is not a common practice outside of the most observant Jews. Jews do not generally observe shlishim. Several individuals told me even though they did not practice most of the “standard” mourning customs, they found that visiting the grave frequently was sufficient to deal with grief. One person said that she used to visit her father’s grave quite frequently but as she realized her father moved on
and she needed to as well, she began to visit less often. Now she only goes for Yarzheit and on Yom Kippur, one of the days the Yizkor service is said. The mourners initially believe that they visit the grave of their loved one for the deceased, but in realizing that he or she has moved on, the mourners begin to understand that they made these visits for themselves. As Francis, KellaHer, and Neophytou, noted, “for the bereaved who visit cemeteries, these burial grounds are special, sacred spaces of personal, emotional, and spiritual reclamation where the shattered self can be ‘put back in place’” (2005:3). More importantly, they saw that mourning “behavior, including their private, individual mourning rituals, is shaped in part by the existing cemetery landscape, itself a product of the cemetery’s history, the practices of previous and present generations of mourners and the current management’s policies” (2005:20).

Cemetery

I was alone the first time I walked to the cemetery. After passing through the gates, I immediately wished that I could lock them behind me. I never thought I could feel unsafe in a cemetery; it was the neighborhood, and not the burial grounds, that gave me this visceral feeling. The cemetery offered no security; there was no office and the gates did not lock. I was surprised that there was neither a building on the site for funeral services nor a building for taharah. It is customary to have purification rites performed on cemetery grounds to lessen the number of places contaminated by the dead. I realize now after learning that Shaarai Shomayim’s chevrah kaddisha is made up of Degel Israel

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7 Anniversary of the death of an individual. On this day a special candle is left to burn for a period of twenty-four hours.
8 Hebrew for ‘he will remember’, this is a special memorial service said on Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sh’miAtzeret.
congregants that it makes more sense for these rituals to occur near the Orthodox synagogue.

According to an article of the Daily Evening News from August 18, 1878, the cemetery was “unendurably” vandalized; tombstones were broken and defaced. The article proposes the vandalism was the result of “some ruthless hand that is evidently moved by something more than thoughtlessness.” The synagogue meeting minutes Brener includes in his account of the history of the cemetery, suggest that until at least 1875, there was a wooden fence around the cemetery. Shaarai’s congregation could not afford to maintain the land or repair stones broken through vandalism, let alone replace the fence with a metal one. This suggests that while the earlier community was known for its prosperity and affluence, the later one was not. There are also records of cows from the nearby stockyards wandering into the cemetery and adding to its already disheveled appearance. It seems that even when Shaarai Shomayim did replace the fence, the congregation chose a design that is not effective for security.

According to an old map of Lancaster shown in both of Brener’s books, the cemetery was the only major site in the area between Lititz Pike and Pleasure Road. Due to the nearby stockyards, the railroad tracks and train station were placed directly next to the cemetery. At the time of railroad construction, there were not many Jews in Lancaster. The local residents did not worry about accommodating the non-existing Jews by placing the railroad tracks in a less convenient location. They could not foresee that in less than fifty years, new groups of Jews would move to Lancaster.

I was startled to find the land did not seem well cared for; much of the grass was dead. There are two incongruous bushes and a tree within the boundaries of the land. One
of the bushes almost completely covers a gravestone and I had a difficult time moving it’s branches in order to read the name on the stone. It is not clear why the cemetery does not look nicer especially when one considers what synagogues (or churches) generally charge for cemetery plots. Shaarai charges synagogue members $2,000 for one plot and it’s perpetual care, and charges non-members $5,000. Old photographs suggest that during the cemetery’s early history, there were more bushes and trees on the land in. One woman reminded me that in the last century, people removed bushes and trees from cemeteries in order to make them appear more open.

Once I became more relaxed during that first visit, I started to walk along the paved path, which ran through the cemetery. At first, I could only see gravestones, mostly from the second half of the last century, due to the slope and curved shape of the land. The gravestones are large, grey, and uniform, which seems impersonal. As the path turned right, I stopped to look at the area in front of me. Unlike the neat rows of stones in the “modern” section, these stones appeared unorganized. The gravestones were not of a uniform size, shape, or even color. Moreover, the information written on the stones differed completely from the modern section of gravestones. This section not only looked old, but felt old too. The sun-bleached stones were often broken. I felt as though I stepped into the past, and something about the graves commanded infinitely more respect from me than the graves in the modern section. The Hebrew inscribed gravestones represent tangible pieces of Jewish history, which foster an incredible sensation of connectedness with one’s cultural heritage.

The older part of the cemetery, which includes some twentieth century burials, was all that Simon and Henriques purchased from Thomas Cookson on February 3, 1747.
They spent a total of six pounds for the land and buried only five individuals before the early community vanished. The 1897 and 1907 cemetery maps clearly show there are roughly half a dozen unknown burials. The physical characteristics of the land indicate the locations of these unmarked burials. The ground above the graves is spongy and the disturbed soil has a reddish tint. If these burials occurred during the period of time when there is no written record of the Lancaster Jewish community, then it is impossible to verify their exact locations without exhumation; however, halacha strictly prohibits both of the aforementioned procedures.

The five identifiable early burials belong to Joseph Simon, his wife Rosa Bunn Simon, their daughter Rachel Etting, their infant son Hiam, and Joseph Solomon. Although it is known that Joseph Solomon’s wife died in 1777, there is no stone or known grave belonging to her in this cemetery. Simon and Solomon have the only flat stones in the cemetery. They are mostly in Hebrew with a small amount of English (see Figures 3-5). Rosa and Hiam’s gravestones (see Figures 1 and 2) have about an equal proportion of Hebrew and English, but Rachel’s stone is illegible. All three of their stones are notably smaller than Joseph’s.

If these five graves are considered “area one” then there are two other distinctive areas in the old section of the cemetery. The second area belongs to the influx of German Jewish immigrants into Lancaster during the 1840’s and 1850’s. This area represents single, and not family, burials. These individuals were buried in rows according to the date of death except in the instance of couples, of which there are surprisingly few. The interesting aspect of this area is that while most adults were no longer buried here after 1880, all of the children who died between 1850 and 1909 were. There are several areas I
refer to as the Children’s Sections for obvious reasons. There are two main sections. The first includes plots 15-24 (one row) where only infants were buried, which are nowhere near their family’s plot (see Figure 15). For example, the Fox family has two infants buried in this section who died in 1897 and 1898 (see Figure 16). The second section is larger and crescent shaped. It includes plots 70, 72, 73, 87, 88, 104, 105, 117, 118, and 119. This section has a mixture of infants and young children.

The stones in this section are typical late 19th, very early 20th century stones (see Figure 9). In the context of this cemetery, the sun-bleached marble gravestones are short, thin, and worn down. Most gravestones are engraved with a mix of English and Hebrew writing. Sometimes I found that the only English was the name of the deceased. The person’s name was also written in Hebrew. Other information inscribed on the gravestones includes date of death, age at death, and the places of birth and death. Usually, the Hebrew writing found on the stones begins with pey’nun signifying “here lies” and ended with the abbreviation for rest in peace. This abbreviation stands for “tehi nishmato (nishmata) terura bi-tseror ha-chai ’im,” which means, “May his/her soul be bound up in the bundle of life.” These latter pieces of information are only found in the older section of the cemetery and the ages were often exact. For example, Philip Bernard’s stone reads, “Born in Posen, Prussia. Died in San Francisco, Cal. Aged 67 years, 3 months, and 29 days.” Philip’s, his wife Sophia’s, and his daughter Kate’s stones are all characterized by another style found only in this section (see figure 10).

This second style is characterized by a short stone wall connected to and of the same material as the gravestone, which surrounds the grave. Sometimes this space is filled with the remnants of flowers or plants. The Shulchan Aruch states, “It is forbidden
to treat upon the graves; because some authorities hold that no benefit may be derived there from” (Ganzfried, vol. 4 1927: 104). The wall is intended to prevent individuals from walking over the grave. In many modern cemeteries, these walls were removed in order to make the plots more uniform, more aesthetically pleasing, and easier to maintain; however, some families request that the walls around the graves of their ancestors not be removed. One woman told me that her father taught her not to walk on graves out of respect for the dead and she has upheld this custom.

Walking on graves as a form of disrespect and desecration is both an Ashkenazic and Sephardic custom, but when I spoke to a young Sephardic girl from Israel, she said the area inside the wall on the grave is often used as a place to put flowers and objects from the living. I believe this was an accidental benefit of having the space there. In Israel, gravestones often have small covered areas for Yartzheit candles and clearly marked areas in front of the stone, which are similar to the graves in Shaarai’s cemetery, but the Israeli graves are filled with plants and flowers that the living replace every time they visit. The size of the space seems to correlate with the size of the individual buried beneath. The graves of children have considerably smaller spaces than those of the adults. The difference in the sizes of the contained space is an easy way to differentiate between an adult’s and a child’s grave.

Children and strangers were still buried in the second area because they required single burial plots. After 1880, adults were generally buried in 4- and 8-grave family plots (third area). Usually, a large stone with the family name and small designs behind or in front of much smaller stones naming particular family members and his or her relationship to the person buried next to him or her (see figures 7 and 8). Even though
“couple graves” are not typically found in the older sections (see figure 12), married couples were still placed next to each, which makes large family plots like the Strauss’s, with long rows of stones reading “mother,” “father,” “wife,” “husband,” “daughter,” or “son,” far easier to comprehend. A picture of the cemetery in 1930 shows that there were once small hedges surrounding the family plots. I do not know why these were removed. It could possibly be for the same reason that the walls are removed.

Unlike the stones in first and second areas, the gravestones in the third area do not have Hebrew on them. This is interesting because the third area contains stones from the period of time when Shaarai Shomayim officially distinguished itself from the Conservative and Orthodox synagogues also in Lancaster. At that time, the specific ownership of the cemetery by Shaarai Shomayim was publicly contested in court. Although the deed says the cemetery belonged to Isaac Nunes Henrices, Joseph Simon, and their heirs, it also states that those individuals hold the land, “forever in trust for the society of Jews settled in and about Lancaster, to have and use the same as a burying ground.” (Lancaster County Court House, Record Book B. PG 441-442) On behalf of several members of the congregation, Solomon Moss argued that he should not have to pay for the right to be buried in the cemetery. Shaarai Shomayim made the case that since the heirs of Henrances and Simon did not care who used the land and since the Jews who worshipped at Joseph Simon’s house represented the beginnings of their congregation, they are the Jewish society the deed refers to, and therefore, they are the proper owners and caretakers of the cemetery. They particularly stressed the point that the congregation had spent large quantities of money to keep the cemetery looking nice and they needed more funds to continue properly taking care of the land. What this implies is that
synagogue members could not be buried there for free and that the Conservative and Orthodox Jews who later came to Lancaster, could not be buried in Shaarai’s cemetery unless they wanted to pay non-member fees, which were significantly higher than those of a member. According the Brener, the German Jews who formed Shaarai’s congregation did not associate well with the Russian Jews who founded Degel Israel in 1896 because of their different opinions on appropriate religious practice. The Russian and German Jews did not want to be buried in the same cemetery.

Reform Judaism maintains that Hebrew should not be the language of prayer unless it is the spoken language of the community. Therefore, gravestones of Reform Jews engraved with Hebrew would be rare. The gravestone of Allan M. Dove (1902-1932) reads, “Died in Shebat 3, 5692.” This is the only stone in the cemetery that lists the date of death according to the Jewish calendar, but it is written in English. Approximately twenty-six of about 320 graves in the older section of the cemetery are engraved with Hebrew.

Besides the use of Hebrew, there is another old practice of burying men and women separately; however, only one separated couple, David B. and Esther Greenawald (died 1862 and 1869), is in the cemetery and I believe this could be a mistake in the census due to David’s illegible stone. This is an example of a practice rejected in the selective creation of tradition. Even in this cemetery, the only men next to whom women are buried are their husbands or their fathers. This is a universal custom among Jews and is why couple graves are popular. Even after the death of their spouse and subsequent remarriage, most people will request burial next to their first spouse. This is what my grandfather and his second wife have requested for their burials. A person who remains
unmarried at the time of his or her death is supposed to be buried with his or her parents regardless of age if she is female but if he is male, he can only be buried with his parents if he or she is under the age of thirteen. I discovered that children were always buried to the right of their parents in this cemetery. I have not found halacha, tradition, or information from the Rabbi that provides the reason behind this practice. Still, there are too many instances of this practice, especially in the older section of the cemetery, for it to be simply coincidence. The presence of children near their parents is not as evident in the newer section of the cemetery, which is probably due to significant decreases in infant and child mortality; however, in the Firestone and Brener areas there are specific examples of unwed children being buried with their closest relatives.

The majority of stones in the new section though still represent couples. Sometimes the name of the not yet deceased spouse and his or her date of birth will be engraved on the stone so that when they do die, only their date of death will need to be engraved. These stones often state the relationship of the person, like “mother,” “father,” etc. Occasionally, the stones are engraved with quotes or proverbs, but this is not a frequent practice. In the new section, most of the designs on the gravestones are flowers and there are fewer instances of Judaic symbols.

When I first visited the cemetery, there were only three graves that had flowers in front of them and two with small flags. During at my second visit, I counted eighteen graves with flowers. According to the Talmud, in ancient times, fragrant flowers and spices were used at the funeral to offset the smell of the deceased but today this is no longer necessary (Lamm 1969:18). As was mentioned earlier, several of the older graves have a place for flowers and plants. Some graves, like that of young Sarah Zimmerman
have silk flowers. More than that, due to the fact that the custom of leaving flowers is primarily a Gentile one, it is a common practice for Jews to not leave flowers by the graves of loved ones. Although most Jews seem to understand that others might feel the need to place flowers on a grave, all of the individuals I spoke with felt it would be inappropriate for them to do this. Flowers as gifts may be aesthetically pleasing, but they are not as meaningful as gifts that attend to the basic needs of those still alive, for example food items.

At the same time, all of the Shaarai congregants I interviewed like placing stones on graves they visit. Fifteen new and one old gravestone had small stones or pieces of tree bark on the top of the gravestone. This is an old custom to curry good favor with the spirits and to show someone visited the grave. According to The Jewish Mourner’s Book of Why, the placing of stones is a custom belonging only to Orthodox and Conservative Jews only and is not practiced among Reform Jews. If so, then this custom was rediscovered by a large number of Reform Jews in the last fifty years.

Despite the large size of many of the head stones, they were not heavily decorated. Some gravestones have borders with flowers or spiral designs and a few had magen David$^9$ or menorah. One had lions, which is a prominent symbol in Judaism, a depiction of the 10 commandments, and flowers. According to Shaarai’s Rabbi, floral designs became popular in the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ centuries, but more interestingly, the use of symbols to depict profession or name became widespread. The latter was not something I noticed on any gravestones in this cemetery. There were approximately 170 floral designs.

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$^9$ ‘shield of David’. This refers to the six-pointed star that was most prominent on David’s shield.
designs, eleven menorahs, some of which were menorahs and magen David, forty-three magen David, and three lions. There were also three instances of “live long and prosper” hands and two eternal lights. One woman told me that when both a menorah and magen David are present on the gravestone, it is because the menorah is to represent the woman buried there and the magen David represents her husband next to her. In Shaarai’s cemetery, only women’s stones have menorahs on them; however some also have magen David. This might be because of the tradition that women light candles (Shabbat or otherwise) and men study the Torah. Women were not allowed to study Hebrew or the Torah with their husbands in old European communities and some communities, like the one I visited in Belfast, Northern Ireland, still distinguish the man’s and woman’s spheres of Judaism.

Discussions

More than just reflecting aspects of American Reform Judaism, the Shaarai Shomayim cemetery is American Reform Judaism. The oldest gravestones depict the European beliefs and practices that were taught as inflexible law to the early American Jews and express Jewish identity in the adherence to those same beliefs and practices. The European Jews defined themselves first as Jews and second as belonging to a specific nationality. This is why Yiddish and Hebrew were their popular spoken and written languages. The early American Jews represented in the cemetery covered their gravestones in Hebrew more than English, because they identified themselves as Jews before they identified themselves as Americans. The Jews acknowledged their departure from Europe by not using German and Polish but used minimal English to acknowledge
their new home. The earliest gravestones have floral designs and almost entirely lack Judaic symbols like the Star of David or the Menorah.

The second area represents the period of time when Reform Judaism developed in the United States. There is a slow change from the use of Hebrew and lack of Judaic symbols on the gravestones to the elimination of Hebrew and the beginning of the introduction of symbols into gravestone design. Jews became increasingly aware of the impracticality of rituals they previously conducted out of habit and without thought because of the sudden lack of overbearing rabbis in their communities. The walls around some graves are an old practice that would eventually be discontinued, but its presence in this area attests to the slowness of change. The second area’s gravestones are similar to standard American gravestones at that time because they increased in size and decoration; however, they were still not as ostentatious. Two other cemeteries in Lancaster are historical landmarks because they were designed during the late 19th and early 20th century to appear like gardens and parks, with many trees, plants, benches, and winding paths. This is not a trend that carried over into the Jewish cemetery. The similarities that do exist and the increased use of English on the stones suggest that the Jews were assimilating to American culture. Lastly, in this area, Jews were buried as individuals, rather than as part of families. This suggests that many of the individuals buried in the second area were not part of previously established families and possibly moved to Lancaster County not long before their deaths.

The third area conveys a slightly more evolved sense of Jewish identity than was clear in the second area. The transition from single burials to family plots indicates the permanent settlement of Jews in Lancaster. Families purchased land in the cemetery with
the intention of burying themselves, and their descendants there for many years into the future. At this point in time, American Reform Judaism finished inventing itself and the depiction of identity in the cemetery seems to reflect that. In all honestly, there is no sense of Jewish identity coming from these gravestones. The stones are very briefly engraved with names, the years of birth and death, and relationship. There are few stones with any use of Hebrew on them and no Judaic symbols. These are American gravestones.

The graves less than a hundred years old show a revival of Jewish identity. These gravestones have the highest percentage of Judaic symbols of any area in the cemetery. Nearly every stone has a Star of David, a Menorah, eternal flames, lions, or some symbol the people who chose the engravings felt represented “Jewish-ness.” Hebrew is once again used to state, “Here lies [name] born [date] died [date] RIP” or at least pey/nun, “here lies.” These are not the ways in which the early Jews in Lancaster identified themselves but these are the ways that are most meaningful to current Lancaster Jews. By reestablishing a sense of Jewish identity through gravestones, the Lancaster Jews show their desire to reconnect with their heritage through “tradition.”

Every Jew defines Jewish identity and Jewish tradition differently. If his or her family and community taught him or her the meaning of identity and tradition, then these groups will likely share those meanings. A family or community will have its own identity and traditions, even when the fundamental beliefs they are designed from are shared. For example, each year, at the same time, Jews all over the world sit down for the Passover seder. They may not have the same book or the same food but there is a sense of community and belonging that arises from the understanding that one is not alone in
one’s actions. Every year, at the same time, Jews fast for Yom Kippur and light the candles on a menorah at Hannukah. It is this feeling of being connected to people just like oneself all over the world and in the past, present, and future that perpetuates Jewish identity. There is a sense of pride in the heritage, triumphs and failures of the collective Jewish people. To practice the rituals of Judaism is to honor those who won us the freedom to do so. It is a sign of respect. To display one’s Jewish identity in whatever manner one is most comfortable but always with pride, honor and respect; that is tradition. I imagine that the old cemeteries of the other early Jewish communities would mirror Shaarai Shomayim’s cemetery, while showing their own specifically regional influences.
Cemetery Deed

“Witnesseth, that said Thomas Cookson and Margaret, his wife, for the consideration of the sum of six pounds, current money of the Province aforesaid, to them in hand, paid by the said Isaac Nunus Ricus (sic) and Joseph Simons (sic)… have granted, bargained and sold, aliened, released and confirmed and by these presents do for themselves and their heirs fully, freely and absolutely grant, bargain and sell, alien, release and confirm until said Isaac Nunus Ricus and Joseph Simons and to their heirs and assigns forever, all that certain piece or parcel of ground situated in the Township of Lancaster, in the said County; to have and to hold the said piece of land.. For ever In Trust for the Society of Jews settled in and about Lancaster, to have and use the same as burying ground.”
(Record Book B, pp. 441-2, Lancaster County Court House.)

The position of Congregation Shaarai Shomayim when members felt that they should not be charged for burial in the cemetery and brought it to court:

“That said society of Jews prior to the year 1856, took and had and since the incorporation of said society, said Congregation Shaarai Shomayim, has taken and had entire management and control and exercised exclusive ownership and possession of said burial ground described in the deed, has fenced and enclosed the same, and expended large sums of money in its care and maintenance and has sold and continues to sell lots and graves in said cemetery for the purpose of raising the necessary funds for its care and maintenance. That none of the heirs of Isaac Nunes Henriedes or Joseph Simon have since said incorporation made any claim whatever to said burial ground. That there was no other society of Jews incorporated or in existence at the time of the incorporation of Shaarai Shomayim.” (Paper Book of the Appellee)
Bibliography


PICTURES
Figure 1. Joseph Simon’s wife’s stone

Figure 2. Joseph Simon’s stone
THE SIMON FAMILY PLOT
ISAAC NUNES HENRIQUES AND JOSEPH SIMON
PURCHASED THIS BURIAL GROUND FOR THE SOCIETY
OF JEWS SETTLED IN AND ABOUT LANCASTER FOR
SIX HOURS ON FEBRUARY 3, 1747, ESTABLISHING
THE FOURTH OLDEST JEWISH CEMETERY IN AMERICA.
MEMBERS OF THE SIMON FAMILY RESTING WITHIN
THESE RAILINGS INCLUDE
RAIM SIMON, INFANT SON OF ROSA AND JOSEPH, 1756
JOSEPH COLOMON, UNCLE OF ROSA, 1740-1777
BACHET COLOMON, DAU. OF ROSA AND JOSEPH, 1764-1796
ROSA SHAIN SIMON, WIFE OF JOSEPH, 1727-1796
JOSEPH COLOMON, MASTER OF THE CEMETERY, 1740-180

Figure 3. Simon Family Plot plaque

Figure 4. Simon Family Plot
Figure 5. Joseph Solomon’s grave

Figure 6. Prior to the use of couple stones, husbands and wives were placed next to each other in individual plots enclosed in a larger family plot.
Figure 7. Especially in the old section, women were identified on their stones as the wife of someone rather than as a separately known individual.

Figure 8. This is an example of what a typical family plot looks like. There is a large stone with the family name, and sometimes there are small decorations. Either in front of or behind this stone, the individual gravestones are organized in rows according to their relationships within the familial context.
Figure 9. This is an example of a very late 19th century or very early 20th century stone. It is divided into Hebrew and English, has small designs, and includes the exact age of the individual at death.

Figure 10. These are also examples of late 19th, early 20th century stones but of a slightly different style. The area where the body was buried is covered by an enclosed space so that it cannot be walked across. These “tubs” are often removed to make a cemetery appear neater.
Figure 11. This is an example of one of the many small plates placed on the grave to indicate the individual’s involvement in the U.S. military. This particular one is for participation in the Civil War.

Figure 11. This stone appeared to be made of wood possibly part of an attempt to naturalize Jewish burials.
Figure 12. This is an example of less common types of material used for the gravestone but it is also one of the earliest examples of a couple stone in this cemetery. It has both English and Hebrew on it.

Figure 13. This is the top of the stone showed in figure 12. It is a book, possibly representing the book of death, with a Hebrew phrase written on it (yet to be completely translated)
Figure 14. This picture shows two of the most ostentatious gravestones in the cemetery. They are in the shape of obelisks.

Figure 15. One of the infant burial sections
Figure 16. This is one of the Fox infants buried in the infant section. In the far back on the picture is the Fox family plot.

Figure 17. This is one example of a modern couple stone.
Figure 18. This is another type of modern couple stone but it is in a design that is not common.