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Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929 (Judaic Studies Series)



Synopsis

This biography of a pioneering Zionist and leader of American Reform Judaism adds significantly to our understanding of American and southern Jewish history. Max Heller was a man of both passionate conviction and inner contradiction. He sought to be at the center of current affairs, not as a spokesperson of centrist opinion, but as an agitator or mediator, constantly struggling to find an acceptable path as he confronted the major issues of the day--racism and Jewish emancipation in eastern Europe, nationalism and nativism, immigration and assimilation. Heller's life experience provides a distinct vantage point from which to view the complexity of race relations in New Orleans and the South and the confluence of cultures that molded his development as a leader. A Bohemian immigrant and one of the first U.S.-trained rabbis, Max Heller served for 40 years as spiritual leader of a Reform Jewish congregation in New Orleans--at that time the largest city in the South. Far more than a congregational rabbi, Heller assumed an activist role in local affairs, Reform Judaism, and the Zionist movement, maintaining positions often unpopular with his neighbors, congregants, and colleagues. His deep concern for social justice led him to question two basic assumptions that characterized his larger social milieu--segregation and Jewish assimilation. Heller, a consummate Progressive with clear vision and ideas substantially ahead of their time, led his congregation, his community, Reform Jewish colleagues, and Zionist sympathizers in a difficult era. Â

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Customer Reviews

Malone writes a biography of the well-known New Orleans reform Rabbi Max Heller of Temple Sinai, beginning with his life in Prague and ending with his death in 1929. Malone examines Heller's family, education, career, travels and ties to the communities in which he lived. Alongside the biography of Heller is a story of the American Jewish community during his lifetime, touching upon such topics as would befit a Rabbi of a major synagogue in America: the Reform movement, Zionism, the New Orleans Jewish community, and immigration. Also, the growth of racial beliefs that affected the Jewish community's identity with and acceptance in a Southern community which was defined upon racial and caste grounds is also much discussed. Malone does an excellent job of giving the reader an "actual feel" for the person Max Heller. Between sharp letters to and from his wife while Heller was in Europe to pictures of him working the land in Palestine, Malone carefully outlines Max Heller the activist, the family man, the community leader, the Rabbi, and the Zionist. As Malone's dissertation, this book is extremely well researched and the sources of evidence are varied and credible. However, Malone does not discuss some of the larger aspects of her scholarly research. Mainly, Malone does not discuss how the environment of New Orleans helped shape Heller's career. Malone argues that Heller's public stance on controversial topics put him at odds with his congregation and community. Yet, why was Heller not fired, as would have occurred in other Jewish communities? The answer lies in a comparison of the relationship of the community, synagogues and Rabbi to other communities, such as Philadelphia.

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