

BOOK REVIEWS

Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family.

By Laura Arnold Leibman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 291. \$30.99 (cloth); \$14.99 (digital). ISBN: 9780197530474.

Paul Finkelman

Robert F. Boden Visiting Professor, Marquette University Law School; President William McKinley Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, Albany Law School, USA
paul.finkelman@yahoo.com

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While not essentially about law, Laura Leibman's *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family* illuminates the intersection of law, religion, race, and ethnicity in the early United States and the British Caribbean. Leibman, a historian at Reed College, documents the complicated racial history of some important early Jewish American families, navigating census, naturalization, property, and other records, to flesh out her complex story. She shows how the children of a Sephardi Jewish businessman in Barbados, Abraham Rodrigues Brandon (1766–1831), and a Black slave woman, Sarah Esther Lopez Gill (c. 1780–1823), who was always called Esther (and I will use that as her first name here), became members of some of the most elite early American Jewish families. In an age when race matters and Jews of color are a growing population, this is truly an important book. Leibman illuminates a far more complicated history, ancestry, and genealogy than most Jews realize.

Passing through this book are the founding mothers and fathers of the Jewish American world. Many—among others, the Seixas, Lopez, Nones, and Phillips families—were Sephardi originally from Iberia. Others, like the Gratz, Moses, Etting, and Hart families, were Ashkenazi. These were the early leaders of two of the earliest Jewish congregations in the nation: New York's Shearith Israel and Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel. Some were business associates of extremely wealthy gentiles, including John Jacob Astor and Stephen Girard. These relationships illustrate the opportunities for Jews in the young nation, at a time when Jews faced political, economic, and legal discrimination in England. For example, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Jews could not vote or be barristers in England or Barbados nor could they be naturalized in England. In the new United States, they voted; held elected office; were lawyers and judges; and when immigrants, became naturalized citizens.¹

¹ On the right of Jews to naturalize in the United States—a right they did not have in any other Atlantic world country—see Gabriel Jack Chin and Paul Finkelman, “The ‘Free White Persons’ Clause of the Naturalization Act of 1790 as a Super-Statute,” *William and Mary Law Review* 65 (forthcoming 2024). For a discussion of the political and



At the center of Leibman's story is Abraham Rodrigues Brandon, who began as a small-time merchant in the British Caribbean, gradually engaging in the sugar trade and acquiring plantations and slaves to grow his own "white gold" (4). By 1800, he was "the most influential Jew in Barbados" (1) and a leader of Nidhe Israel, the first Jewish congregation in North America and, by the eve of American Revolution, the largest Jewish community in the British New World. Brandon eventually relocated to New York, where he died the wealthy owner of a four-story mansion in Manhattan. His estate included a spectacular wine cellar with hundreds of bottles of mouthwatering French wine, including Margaux, Léoville las Cases, and Chambertin—expensive delights that would have impressed the best palates in New York or the late Mr. Jefferson in Virginia. Success has its rewards.

Leibman cleverly contrasts a tiny watercolor portrait by an unknown (and not very good) painter Brandon commissioned at about age thirty, with a three-foot-tall oil portrait done thirty years later by John Wesley Jarvis, the most important portraitist in New York. The first shows a young man barely making it—and possibly faking it. The second shows a prosperous community leader, master of his small universe, living in his New York mansion.

Brandon's success enabled him to send his sixteen-year-old daughter, Sarah Rodrigues Brandon (1798–1828) to an elite Sephardi Jewish boarding school in London. Her London education, a commissioned portrait, which functioned as an early nineteenth century selfie used to attract a husband, and her £10,000² dowry led to her marriage at age nineteen to Joshua Moses (1780–1837), an up-and-coming Jewish American cloth merchant who was on his way to being one of the "financial leaders of [his] day" (61). Moses was in London buying goods for Stephen Girard, "the richest man in America," remembered through the litigation over his estate in *Vidal v. Girard's Executors*, upholding the creation of a school for orphans that prohibited religious education.³

Sarah's father-in-law, Isaac Moses (1742–1818), had helped establish Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, where he was the wealthiest Jew in the city, partnering with Michael Gratz and Stephen Girard. A few years after her marriage to Joshua, Sarah's brother, Isaac Lopez Brandon, married Lavinia Moses, Joshua's sister. Meanwhile, Solomon Moses (brother of Joshua and Lavinia and thus brother-in-law of both Sarah and Isaac) married Rachel Gratz, the daughter of the wealthy Philadelphia businessman Michael Gratz and the sister of the most influential Jewish woman of the period, Rebecca Gratz.

Sarah's son, Lionel Moses (1825–1895) married Selina Seixas (1839–1917), a granddaughter of Gershom Mendes Seixas (1745–1816), the Hazzan of Shearith Israel and the most important Jewish leader in the nation during and immediately after the American Revolution.⁴ This was an enormous step up the Jewish social ladder. Another son, Israel (1821–1870), graduated from Columbia College (now Columbia University) and the College of

economic rights of Jews in the early United States, see Paul Finkelman and Lance J. Sussman, "The Emergence of Jewish Legal and Political Equality in the New American Nation," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 75 (forthcoming 2023).

² This would be worth close to a million dollars today, but on a calculation of buying power, it would be more. It was, however calculated, an impressive fortune.

³ Michael W. McConnell, "The Supreme Court's Earliest Church-State Cases: Windows on Religious-Cultural-Political Conflict in the Early Republic," *Tulsa Law Review* 37, no. 1 (2001): 7–43, at 20; *Vidal v. Girard's Executors*, 43 U.S. (2 How.) 127 (1844). For a history of *Vidal*, see McConnell, "The Supreme Court's Earliest Church-State Cases," 20–30.

⁴ Gershom Seixas is often incorrectly called a rabbi, but he was not ordained and never described himself as such. He was known as Rev. Seixas at the time, especially within the Christian community, and was the spiritual leader of his congregation. His official role at Shearith Israel was as the Hazzan, or cantor, for the synagogue, who led all worship services. There were no ordained rabbis in the United States at this time. It is also worth noting that he was an invited spiritual leader at George Washington's inauguration and was a trustee of King's College when it was renamed Columbia College (now University). At this time, Jews could not even attend universities in Great Britain.

Surgeons and Physicians, enlisted in the Army during the Mexican-American War, and was a lieutenant colonel during the Civil War. Both Lionel and another brother, Alfred, also served in the diplomatic corps. Another son, Isaac Moses, Jr. (1819–1889) served as a captain in the Civil War. In short, within two generations, the Brandons went from a middling (at best) merchant family in Barbados, with a matriarch who was born enslaved, to members of what can only be described as Jewish American royalty and military and patriotic leadership within the nation.

These marriages and successes came through Sarah Rodrigues Brandon Moses and to a lesser extent through her brother Isaac Lopez Brandon. Neither Sarah nor Isaac was born Jewish. Nor for that matter, were they the legitimate heirs of Abraham Rodrigues Brandon because he never legally married their mother, although he always claimed them as his children. He also asserted that “Sarah had always ‘professed our holy religion’” (1), although as an infant, before she could profess anything, Sarah was baptized as an Anglican.

More importantly, at birth, Sarah and Isaac were considered neither legally White nor free. Their mother, Esther Lopez Gill, was a slave in Barbados of mixed African and European ancestry. In Barbados, as in the United States, the child of an enslaved woman was born a slave, and as a person of mixed ancestry, was legally Black. Her children, Sarah and Isaac, thus began life as mixed-race Black slaves and became free White members of the Jewish elite in the United States. More remarkably, in violation of American law, they became naturalized citizens in the United States, even though at the time the naturalization law allowed only “free White person(s)” to become naturalized citizens.⁵

These complicated ancestries begin with Jemima Lopez-Gill, an enslaved African woman, owned for most of her life by a Jewish widow, Hannah Esther Lopez, who rented her to work in the home of George Gill, an Anglican. Gill had at least five children with Jemima, including Esther Lopez Gill. Under British Caribbean slave law, Hannah Esther Lopez, as the owner of Jemima, also owned her children. Gill had his daughter Esther baptized as an Anglican, but she grew up with her mother, Jemima, in the Jewish household of Hannah Lopez, where Esther absorbed a great deal of Jewish culture.

Abraham Rodrigues Brandon rented Esther from Hannah Lopez, fathered Isaac and Sarah with her, and around 1800 had purchased all of them from Hannah Lopez. Under Caribbean and American law, the child of a slave woman was also a slave, no matter what the status of the father might have been. Thus, Abraham was both the father and the owner of his young children, Sarah and Isaac.

Eventually Abraham manumitted Esther and their children, Sarah and Isaac, all of whom formally converted to Judaism and went by the surname Brandon. During this period, Nidhe Israel, the synagogue in Barbados, refused to let Isaac Lopez Brandon become a full member of the congregation because he was not White, despite being free and the son of the synagogue’s most important donor. Racism among Jews in Barbados, consistent with local practice, trumped Jewish law. This rebuke influenced Abraham Brandon’s decision to move to the United States, where Sarah and Isaac were accepted as members of a wealthy Portuguese Sephardi family.

Leibman does not explore this, but it is possible that the eventual demise of the Barbados Jewish congregation (today, the remains of the synagogue building are part of a museum), can be traced to the refusal of a majority of the members to accept their mixed-race co-religionists and neighbors who grew up in their community.

At a time when Americans often scrutinized strangers if their ancestry was uncertain, Sarah and Isaac passed as the White children of the wealthy Abraham Rodrigues Brandon. People may have assumed that as Sephardi, the Brandon children had a Mediterranean

⁵ Naturalization Act of 1790, Act of Mar. 26, 1790, 1 Stat. 103.

complexion. With their Black and slave ancestry hidden, the New York and Philadelphia Jewish communities welcomed them.

Abraham lived with Esther in Barbados until they moved to New York, where she was known as his wife, although Abraham never married her.⁶ Esther Lopez Gill, of mixed African and European ancestry, born a slave, and baptized a Christian, would die a Jewish woman who passed as White⁷ and was the mother and grandmother of important members of the New York Jewish community who were viewed as (or assumed to be) White. At her death in 1823, she was buried in Sherith Israel's cemetery. Under Jewish law only a Jew could be buried in that cemetery.

By the time Esther died, her daughter Sarah was Mrs. Sarah Brandon Moses, married into a very elite Jewish family. The 1820 US Census considered her White, as did her fellow congregants at Shearith Israel. Although, as noted above, under federal law only "free White person(s)" could be naturalized, she became a citizen through her marriage.⁸ In 1829, her brother Isaac formally naturalized, swearing that he was a free White person, as the law required.⁹ Probably no one beyond their most immediate family knew Sarah and Isaac were one-quarter African (and thus Black under the law of most US states) and were born enslaved. Sarah's son Lionel, who was one-eighth Black, married into the elite Seixas family. Her son Dr. Israel Moses was an army officer during the Mexican-American War, at a time when Blacks were not legally allowed to serve in the army, even as enlisted men. As noted above, both Lionel and Alfred served in the diplomatic corps. As long as no one knew their grandmother was Black and born enslaved, these positions were open to them.

Abraham Rodrigues Brandon was hardly unusual in fathering children with his slave. Jewish men in the Western Hemisphere, like their Christian neighbors, had liaisons and children with slave women and also free Black women in Barbados, Suriname, and the United States. For example, Francis Lewis Cardozo (1836–1903), the Black secretary of state and treasurer of South Carolina (1868–1872; 1872–1877) was the son of a Jewish American of Sephardic ancestry and a free Black woman in Charleston, but they could not marry under the laws of South Carolina. Francis Lewis's cousin was the first Hispanic member (and second Jewish member) of the United States Supreme Court, Benjamin N. Cardozo. Such relationships were common in almost all slaveholding societies. The biblical patriarch Jacob had children with his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and with two enslaved women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Since ancient times, the children of such relationships were often acknowledged and raised by their fathers and considered their heirs, as Jacob did. But in the British Caribbean and later in the United States, where slavey was predicated on race, and interracial marriages were forbidden in all slave states and some free states, this did not happen. Untold thousands of White men rarely acknowledged their paternity of their slave children or mixed-race free children, and when they did in the American South, the mixed-race children were often sent north, where they were educated and could be free. Some slave-owner fathers displayed affection for their enslaved children,¹⁰ but most did not. In slave jurisdictions, even those who acknowledged, supported, and openly loved their children

⁶ Brandon later had six children with a white Christian woman who raised the children Jewish. He never married her, either.

⁷ She does not show up in the 1820 census for New York, perhaps suggesting that Abraham Brandon understood the importance of hiding her from careful scrutiny.

⁸ Naturalization Act of 1790, Act of Mar. 26, 1790, 1 Stat. 103. For a history of this clause, see Chin and Finkelman, "The 'Free White Persons' Clause of the Naturalization Act of 1790 as a Super Statute."

⁹ Soundex Index to Petitions for Naturalization Filed in Federal, State, and Local Courts Located in New York City, 1792–1989, New York, National Archives at New York City, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

¹⁰ See for example, Bernie D. Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

could not make them true members of their families. They certainly could not imagine that their mixed-race slave children would marry Whites, especially those of elite families.

But Sephardi Jews in the Caribbean and Suriname may have had a different experience. In Suriname, some Jewish men manumitted and married their slaves. Brandon's children were not the only Afro-Jews in the Nidhe Israel community. Other children of Jewish men and their slaves, or their free Black partners, at least for a time, prayed in the synagogue. In the early nineteenth century, there was a huge backlash against allowing mixed-race Jews to be full members of the synagogue. In the end, most of the White Jews left the island (some with their mixed-race children and their Black partners), and the community evaporated. We can only wonder if the community might have survived if most of the Jews on Barbados had placed faith and community above racism and bigotry.

Why were these Caribbean Jewish men more likely than mainland Whites to acknowledge their mixed-race children and bring them into their communities? Perhaps as Sephardi they were not as obsessed by color or race as were their Ashkenazi co-religionists. The fight in Nidhe Israel over Afro-Jewish members was also a fight between economically successful Sephardi fathers of mixed-race children and less affluent Ashkenazi members, who feared and hated the mixed-race children of the richer Sephardi.

What do we make of this incredible, complicated story? What is the importance of Leibman's heroic and painstaking research in reconstructing eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jewish life and genealogy in the Caribbean (with side stories on Suriname and Jamaica), London, Philadelphia, and New York?

In the past few decades some White southerners in the United States have begun to recognize their African American relations. In *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball discovered he had Black relatives, but *not* Black ancestors.¹¹ Similarly, Monticello now acknowledges Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, and some White Jefferson descendants recognize their Afro-European cousins. There are many family reunions in the South that now include Black and White relatives. While the Black relatives all have White ancestors—the White relatives only have African American cousins—or at least acknowledge only *that* relationship.

But Leibman's story is different. In 1942, Sarah Brandon Moses's granddaughter, Blanche Moses (1859–1946), created a comprehensive family genealogy, with its Brandon, Lopez, Moses, Gratz, and Seixas branches. Blanche knew nothing about her grandmother Sarah, but assumed she was from the Jewish Lopez family in Barbados. And so she was, to the extent that Sarah's mother, Esther, was a half-African, half-English slave *owned* by Hannah Lopez.

Thus, Blanche Moses and the other descendants of Sarah Brandon Moses and Joshua Moses and of Lionel Moses and Selina Seixas did not just have collateral relatives who had been Black slaves. They had *ancestors* who were Black slaves. Thus, *Once We Were Slaves* is literally about the core genetic ancestry of more than a few Jewish Americans.

This leads to the seemingly endless question: What does it mean to be Jewish? Are Jews people who practice a faith, accept the laws of Moses, have a Jewish mother, or were formally converted under Jewish law, and live Jewish lives? If so, then why did Nidhe Israel reject the membership of Isaac Lopez Brandon? Jews are surely not simply the children of women born Jewish. In the twenty-first century, Jews by choice are a large and growing segment of the American and world Jewish community. Thus, no one doubts that Ivanka Trump Kushner and her children are Jewish, despite her gentile birth and heritage. And a half century ago, American Jews knew that the most prominent Jewish

¹¹ Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998).

member of the famous Hollywood Rat Pack was Sammy Davis, Jr. who documented his spiritual conversion in his book *Yes I Can*.¹²

Despite the fame of Sammy Davis Jr. as the Black Jew in Hollywood, many Jews are ambivalent about race and Judaism. Jews reject a genetic definition of being Jewish because it smacks of the Nazi ideology of the Jewish race. But the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother—like Sarah Rodrigues Brandon—must convert to be Jewish, while the child of a Jewish mother is Jewish, no matter who the father is. Conversely, someone is a *Cohanim* (a member of the Aaronic priesthood) only if his biological father was one. Under Jewish law, a man adopted and raised as a Cohen (or one conceived with a sperm donor) cannot be called for the first *aliya* (to give the first prayer for a Torah reading) at his Orthodox synagogue. So, for some purposes, status as a Jew is about genetics. And now, with an increasing number of Jews of color, the complexities grow.

Leibman's terrific book does not answer these questions or solve these problems. But her book reminds the reader that American Jewish heritage comes from many genetic sources. And that at a Passover seder, some American Jews—indeed, many more than we might think—could say, “We were slaves in Egypt and the Americas.”

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¹² Sammy Davis, Jr., Jane Boyar, and Burt Boyar, *Yes I Can: The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965). The other Jew in the Rat Pack was Joseph Abraham Gottlieb, who had adopted the very Christian stage name of Joey Bishop.