Of Confederate flags and statues of anti-Semites

BY ROBERT A. COHN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EMERITUS

The legislature of South Carolina is in the process of voting this week on a request by Gov. Nikki Haley that the Confederate battle flag be flown in the Statehouse. This is a reminder of what the measure has already passed in the Senate, and it is hoped that it will also pass in the House, so that the flag which has come to symbolize South Carolina's racist past, will come down.

Robert A. Cohn is Executive-Chief Emeritus of the St. Louis Jewish Light.

Why marriage matters

BY RABBI YONASON GOLDSON

From the United States Constitution to the French Revolution, from the Emanicipation Proclamation to the 19th Amendment, from the Civil Rights Act to last week's Supreme Court decision affirming the right to gay marriage, the world has taken from 5 to 4 another great step forward on the road to universal equality and justice.

That's what the pundits would like us to think. Except that it wasn't a step forward.

And, more important, it was never about the right to marry.

It wasn't a step forward for jurisprudence, because a handful of judges followed the spurious example of the Massachusetts Supreme Court by changing the definition of a hallowed institution and retroactively declaring it a right. By doing so, as Justice Antonin Scalia so passionately articulated, the foundations of civilization were expunged because the Confederacy army during the Civil War, should the names of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson be removed because each of them was a slave owner? Should the “Lee” from its official designation? And if Robert E. Lee's family name is expunged because he led the Confederate army during the Civil War, should the statues of Confederate soldiers but as a gesture of reconciliation, when the North and South were trying to heal, and the “Lee” from its official designation? And if Robert E. Lee’s family name is expunged because he led the Confederate army during the Civil War, because each of them was a slave owner? Should the “Lee” from its official designation? And if Robert E. Lee’s family name is expunged because he led the Confederate army during the Civil War, should the statues of Confederate soldiers be taken down or moved to a museum? Should the Confederate flag be taken down or moved to a museum? Should the Confederate flag be expunged from the top of the South Carolina Statehouse, so that the flag which has come to symbolize South Carolina's racist past, will come down.

It's time to stop demonizing Michael Oren

BY YOSSI KLEIN HALEY

Michael Oren is my friend. During his nearly five years as Israel’s ambassador to the United States, we’d speak on an almost daily basis. Often those phone calls would come at 3 or 4 a.m., Washington time, and Michael, enduring another sleepless night, would share his fears about how the Obama administration was compromising Israel’s safety. While too discreet to reveal confidential information, he’d repeatedly say: You won’t believe what the administration is doing. It’s worse than you can possibly imagine. But I can’t talk about it. In his new book, “Ally,” Michael has gone public with his anguish. “Ally” has been burning in him for years. It is an impassioned critique of the Obama administration — including some of the details Michael couldn’t reveal as ambassador, when his job required him to publicly insist that American-Israeli relations were strong and unbreakable.

Michael’s accusations need to be debated. And a few who’ve criticized the book have engaged with its ideas. Too many others, though, have turned personal and vicious. I have been pained almost physically to read and listen to the ways in which the Michael Oren I know has been distorted beyond recognition by an assault on his integrity, his credibility, even his honesty.

Why marriage matters

Rabbi Yonason Goldson is author of the book, “Proverbial Beauty: Secrets for Success and Happiness from the Wisdom of the Ages.” Read more of his work online at torahideals.com.

The statue of Louis IX at the top of Art Hill in Forest Park. Photo: Colin Faulkingham

Polish rulers. Paul Johnson, in his one-volume “A History of the Jews,” writes: “But the principal animus was directed against the Jews, with whom the peasants had the most contact… Thousands of Jews from the villages and shtetlach scrambled for safety.”

In all, according to Johnson, about 6,000 Jews were massacred in the affected town. Despite this well-documented anti-Jewish bloodbath, a defiant equestrian statue of Casmirvski stands in the town square in Kiev. Should not that statue be removed despite the fact that its subject is a hero to many Ukrainians?

The statue dilemma strikes closer to home. St. Louis is named in honor of the French King Louis IX, the patron saint of Louis XV. Historian Johnson describes Louis IX, whose statue appears atop Art Hill in Forest Park, as “a crusader and anti-Semite, (who) was the only mon- arch to cooperate with (Pope Gregory IX) in the pope’s ban on the Talmud and...”

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**Philadelphia museum celebrates Jewish role in promoting gay rights**

BY HIELL KUTTNER

PHILADELPHIA — On July 4, 1965, 40 people gathered outside this city's Independence Hall for the first Annual Reminder demonstration on behalf of civil rights for gays.

For this weekend’s 50-year commemoration, the museum is honoring a key 1965 demonstration that included a reenactment of the initial protest. The milestone, which came barely a week after the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark rulings affirming same-sex marriage as a constitutional right, is being marked by several Philadelphia museums, including the National Museum of American Jewish History across the street from Independence Hall. When the court ruling was announced on the morning of June 26, the museum waived all admission fees in celebration.

“Mazel tov,” proclaimed a sign on the building’s Market Street facade. A placard expressing a similar sentiment is among the items featured in the museum’s new exhibition, “The Pursuit of Happiness: Jewish Voices for LGBT Rights,” which highlights the contributions of Jews to the gay rights movement. The sign, which reads “Mazel tov (to everyone!)” in the six hues of the gay pride flag, was held aloft by Cody Owen Pomeranz outside the Supreme Court in 2013 on the day the justices struck down a key provision of the 1965 Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibited the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages.

The sign appeared in news photographs and caught the attention of local organizers who, in turn, approached Pomeranz and secured his donation of the poster. “We thought it was a joyous and culturally relevant expression of the role Jews have been able to play in the LGBT rights movement,” said Yael Etlan, the museum’s director of marketing and communications. “The sign was also a witness to a moment of triumph that paved the way” to last week’s court decision. The exhibition, which runs through October, focuses on three Jewish pioneers of the American gay rights movement: Frank Kameny, an astronomer who unsuccessfully appealed his firing from a federal job in 1957 because he was gay; Clark Polak, a Philadelphia businesswoman whose magazine, Drum, advocated for gay rights; and Martha Shelley, the president of a New York City lesbian organization, Daughters of Bilitis, who in 1970 fought the National Organization of Women’s exclusion of lesbians from prominence in the feminist movement.

Among the items featured is a 1971 poster for Kameny’s failed congressional campaign and a photograph of him at the 1965 demonstration. There’s also a photo of a lesbian couple marrying beneath a chuppah in Brooklyn in 2004; a copy of the 1985 issue of “A New Haggadah: A Jewish Lesbian Seder”; and a 1970 issue of Gay Youth’s “Gay Journal” published by Mark Segal, the present-day publisher of the Philadelphia Gay News.

On display as well is a booklet reporting on the last Annual Reminder march, in 1969, and handbills distributed prior to a 1963 protest at Dewey’s, a local restaurant that refused to serve gay customers. Polak was arrested at an earlier protest at Dewey’s that “strongly evoked desegregationists sit-ins in the South,” a display panel explains.

The museum also set up a Tumblr site to encourage the sharing of perspectives about being an LGBT Jew in America and, on Thursday, hosted a panel discussion that included Douglas Hallward-Driemeier, the attorney who successfully argued the marriage equality case before the Supreme Court. “Jews, who are only a very small percentage of the American public, have been very engaged in civil rights struggles in this country,” said Marc Silber, a Philadelphia who created the Stonewall National Museum and Archives, a museum of gay history in Florida. “It makes perfect sense that Jewish gays and lesbians were at the forefront. I’m a gay man. Of course I take pride in that.”

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authored an article for the New Republic warning against American complacency toward a nuclearizing Iran.

I don’t believe that Michael would have written “Ali” if the Israeli-American crisis initiated by President Obama had been confined to the Palestinian issue. Before becoming ambassador, Michael was a vocal proponent of unilateralism — that is, extending the policy of unilateral withdrawal from Gaza to the West Bank, to save the Jewish State from the occupation that led to Israel to determine its own borders without waiting for a peace agreement that might never come.

Michael surely believes that President Obama, in overemphasizing the effect on settlements on the peace process, has disastrously mishandled the departure of Palestinian rejection of Israel’s existence. Yet Michael is hardly a proponent of the peace movement. Although he has opposed building in settlements outside the so-called settlement blocs — areas near the 1967 borders that will almost certainly be annexed by Israel as part of an eventual agreement.

But what impelled Michael to write “Ali” is revealed in what I see as the book’s crucial passage, when Michael learned that America had been secretly negotiating with Iran: “Most disturbing for me personally was that our closest ally had entreated with our deadliest enemy on an existential issue without so much as informing us.” That is the decisive moment when Israel felt betrayed by President Obama. The negotiations — in which America deliberately weakened its hand and allowed Iran to dictate terms — were the sin. A deal is merely the consequence.

“Ali” contains some hard criticism of the American Jewish community. What’s been overlooked, though, is that it also contains criticism of Israeli attitudes toward American Jews and laments the lack of religious pluralism in the Jewish state. Still, “Ali” does offer the harshest critique of American Jewry that any Israeli has offered in a long time. I’ve gotten used to the criticism being one-way — from American Jews toward Israel. Now an Israeli has offered a counter-critique — especially of American Jewry’s inadequate response to the administration’s Iranian policy.

I write and speak often about relations between American Jewry and Israel. I celebrate the miraculous, simultaneous emergence of the two most extraordinary Jewish experiments in our history. As part of creating a deeper relationship between these two communities, I believe that American Jews not only have the right but the responsibility to criticize Israel when it senses it failing Jewish values. Criticism is an expression of our shared “citizenship” in the Jewish people.

But that responsibility is reciprocal. If Michael feels that American Jewry is failing Israel at the most dangerous moment in its history, he has the obligation to say so. Ironically, the Israeli-American Jewish relationship has become the reverse of its old problematic dynamic. Where once it was forbidden for American Jews to criticize Israel, now apparently it is forbidden for an Israeli to criticize American Jewry.

Is Michael wrong in his assessment of American Jewry? Is he wrong about the Iranian deal? By all means, argue with him. But argue the argument, not the person. Stop demonizing a man whose essence is service to Israel and the Jewish people.

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fulminations against European Jews.”

The French monarch after whom our fair city is named is quoted by Johnson as having said that “the best way to argue with a Jew was to plunge a sword in him.”

Even harsher indictments against King Louis IX (1226-1270) are detailed in a comprehensive article on France in the Encyclopaedia Judaica (1972 edition). The article states: “During the reign of Louis IX, several anti-Jewish persecutions took place in 1236 in the western provinces. … The king, ostentatiously scrupulous of benefiting from money earned from the sin of usurpy, dedicated it to the financing of the Crusade.”

Also noted is that Louis IX and Alphonse of Poitiers riled one another in their brutal methods of extorting money from the Jews.

I would not advocate removing the statue of King Louis IX from its prominent place atop Art Hill. Vandals over the years have stolen his sword, which was a kind of posthumous punishment for the anti-Jewish tyrant. Reasonable people on both sides of this issue can disagree on whether there should be a statute of limitations on statue and monument removal.

From a historical viewpoint, the Confederate battle flag in South Carolina and the statues of anti-Jewish historic figures in Kiev and St. Louis provide “probable moments” for the entire community.