

ESCAPE FROM BONDAGE

IF I WERE TO ASK YOU which city had the largest Jewish community in America in the early nineteenth century, what would you answer? New York? Boston? Philadelphia? You'll probably be surprised to learn, as was I, that it was Charleston, South Carolina. In 1750 the Jews of Charleston had formed Beth Elohim, the fifth American Jewish congregation.

In 1824, cognizant of the reform of Orthodox doctrine and practices in Europe, several of the congregants of Beth Elohim no longer wanted to worship "as slaves of bigotry and priestcraft," but as part of the "enlightened world." They petitioned the rabbinical authorities to permit them to enact certain modest reforms to allow, as they put it in the document, "the free citizens of America to worship God in an enlightened fashion."¹ When their petition was, not surprisingly, rebuffed, in 1825 they formed the Reformed Society of Israelites. The Society's constitution couldn't have been plainer: "The great cause of many calamities with which mankind have been so often visited resulted from blind observance of ceremonial law, to the neglect of the essential spirit of [the] religion."² The society "equated Talmudic rabbis with the medieval monks and priests whose power and prejudice had held back the progress of civilization. Not only had the rabbis made false claims as to the authority of revelation, they had plunged Israel into a 'bondage of the mind deeper than Egyptian darkness.'³