When general grant expelled the jews

By jonathan d. sarna

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On Dec. 17, 1862, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant issued General Order No. 11. Designed to combat a Civil War black market in cotton, which Grant believed was run primarily by Jewish traders, the order expelled Jews in his military district (covering areas in Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi). Responding to protests by Jewish leaders, the press and some politicians, President Abraham Lincoln rescinded the order a few weeks later.

In "When General Grant Expelled the Jews," Jonathan Sarna, a professor of history at Brandeis University, provides a thorough and thoughtful analysis of this incident. Sarna agrees that Grant deserves condemnation for punishing all Jews for the actions of a few. But, he notes, Grant subsequently apologized, insisting that Order No. 11 "never would have been issued if it had not been telegraphed the moment it was penned, and without reflection." As president of the United States, moreover, Grant appointed more Jews to public office than any of his predecessors, publicly condemned pogroms in Russia and Romania, and attended the dedication of Adas Israel, a synagogue, in Washington, D.C.

Sarna also examines the profound - and still relevant - questions asked by many Jews during Grant's 1868 presidential campaign. Should one issue, General Order No. 11, dictate their vote? If it did, and Jews voted as a bloc for the Democrats, whose policies they loathed, would they stir up canards about Jews forming a state within a state?

No "final decision ever resolved this debate," Sarna concludes. But Ulysses S. Grant was listening. To atone, perhaps, for what he had done, he advocated a strict separation between church and state, opposing efforts to declare the United States a "Christian nation." Maybe it's time, as Sarna suggests, to revise upward our estimate of the man who is buried in Grant's tomb.

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