

# Flag of Our Fathers: How Abraham Kohn Saved Chicago and Chicago Lost His Legacy

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On Wednesday evening, August 13, 1862, Chicago's Jews jammed Concordia Hall. Outside, people lined Dearborn Street, unable to cram into the packed hall. Inside, the air grew stuffy and hot. Excited voices turned into a din. It was the night when Jewish Chicagoans declared to themselves, and to their city, that they were not only Jews, but Americans.

The meeting came in the Civil War's second year. The Union's first big offensive in the East had met with defeat. President Abraham Lincoln called for more troops. The Jewish immigrants of Chicago decided to respond.

The crowded house came to order. A war speech was given by a man the crowd recognized. It was Abraham Kohn, the prominent clothing merchant. Kohn and the other speakers stirred up the crowd until it was pulsing with patriotism.

The meeting resolved that while they were *free* to act as individuals, they felt *compelled* to act as a group because of their attachment to the United States. They resolved to raise \$10,000 to form a Jewish army company to fight. The crowd pledged \$6,200. In ten minutes.

The *Chicago Tribune* trumpeted the news: "The Israelites Aroused—Enthusiastic War Meeting—Strong Resolutions and Splendid Liberality." Jewish Chicago topped its \$10,000 fundraising goal in the next two days and mustered nearly 100 soldiers from a population of 1,500. It was an extraordinary effort, but this was no ordinary immigrant group. They wanted to show their gratitude to the United States.

It was curious, however, that one of the speakers, the well-known Abraham Kohn, wanted to show *his* gratitude. Just 20 years before, Kohn had felt no gratitude at all.

### *Peddling in New England*

Abraham Kohn and many other Chicago Jews hailed from the German kingdom of Bavaria. In 1842, young Abraham Kohn decided to join the flood of Jews leaving. He was 22 years old. On a Wednesday morning in June, he set out with his brother Moses. He wrote in his diary that he wept bitterly as he said goodbye to his widowed mother, Dila. Abraham had one comfort: he carried a handwritten Torah his mother gave him.

The brothers endured a long sailing voyage across the Atlantic, reaching New York City in September. Like many German Jews, Abraham hoisted a bundle on his back and peddled. It was heavy work. Packs often held more than 100 pounds of dry goods, from needles, threads and lace to mirrors, jewelry and cloth. Abraham trudged through Massachusetts, selling to farmers' wives from Boston to Worcester. As winter came, Abraham was joined by Moses and another brother, Juda. The three traveled over snowy roads during the day and begged for lodging at farmhouses on cold nights, all to sell housewares for pennies.

To make it worse, Abraham was peddling during a cash shortage. Nor did it help that William Miller was drawing adherents by the thousands to his belief that the Second Coming was nigh. Given the Messiah's imminent arrival, some Millerites apparently saw no need to stock up on dry goods!

Abraham couldn't believe Americans' gullibility. "I should like to see this Dr. Miller in Germany, preaching such nonsense," he wrote. "The boys in the streets would drive him away by stoning."

Abraham had arrived in September. As fall went on, he grew more dismayed. In November, his first Thanksgiving was a disappointment. The governor had made it a legal holiday, yet people only observed it as a formality. There was nothing genuine about it, he wrote in his diary. "To the American one day is like another, and even Sunday, their only holiday, is a mere form. They often go to church here, but only to show the neighbor's wife a new veil or dress."

The Wednesday after Thanksgiving, a snowfall blanketed the Massachusetts countryside. He and Moses sought shelter at the house of a cooper named Spaulding. In those days, it was customary to take in travelers for the night. Mrs. Spaulding wasn't having it. She feared that it would be hard to sleep with strangers in the house. "Go on your way," she told them. Abraham begged her for 30 minutes, pointing out that it would be sinful to throw them into the blizzard. Mrs. Spaulding finally relented, but the sting lingered. "How often I remembered during that evening how my ... mother treated strangers. ... Every poor man ... was welcomed." Not in America!

By the next year, 1843, Millerism was declining. But, incredibly in Abraham's eyes, a second superstition arose! Abraham was astounded by what *he* called another "absurd" religion, this one spread out West by a man named Joe Smith. "Gullible people, these Americans!"

By the way, Abraham also thought we were hypocritical, spoiled, and lazy.

It was ironic.

Yes, America had liberty, but he had to work like a slave to eke out a living.

Yes, America let him practice his religion, but he had to peddle on Saturdays, violating the Sabbath.

Yes, America was a land of freedom, but people's dedication to individual liberty was downright unfriendly. "The Americans are a funny people. Although they sit together by the dozens in taverns, they turn their backs to each other, and no one talks to anybody else." Everyone's motto seemed to be, "Help yourself, that's the best help."

Back in Bavaria, he had suffered from royal taxes and religious inequality. But Abraham wished he was there. "Though oppressed by taxes and discriminated against as a Jew. I should still be happier than in ... America!"

Abraham compared the United States with a teenager. "He is a part of society, talking like a man and pretending to be a man. Yet he is truly only a boy. That is America!"

*Decision*

Abraham had a choice. He could: Retreat from his and America's problems and go home. Stay, and continue—justifiably—to criticize the problems. Or, solve the problems.

We face choices like this all the time. We know what the right choice is. Do we choose it? Abraham did.

Abraham decided to stay in America and solve the problems. He said to himself, "Let us ... look upon ... America as a new Canaan." Canaan was the land of milk and honey, the promised land.

Now why did Abraham think this gullible, hypocritical, spoiled, lazy country would be a promised land? We'll never know. His diary ended when he was still peddling in 1843.

I believe he spoke with his actions. America was going to be a promised land because young Abraham would make it that way. His diary was silent, but his actions spoke loud and clear over the next three decades.

### *Chicago commerce*

Abraham and his brothers *eventually* managed to make some money peddling in New England. They abandoned the road as soon as possible. In 1843, one year after immigrating, Abraham and his brothers moved to Chicago. Chicago was the perfect place for men on the make in the 1840s. The city's population in that decade sextupled, to nearly 30,000.

This is when Abraham began to build a promised land. His complaints had boiled down to three things. 1. He worked in exhausted poverty. 2. He couldn't practice his religion. 3. His adopted country was immature. He set about fixing these three problems.

He tackled the first problem, poverty, with his brothers. They realized that all those 30,000 Chicagoans needed something to wear. The Kohn brothers opened a wholesale clothing store downtown on Lake Street. We know little about the obstacles that the store faced. We do know that Abraham, who arrived in America during a recession in 1843, weathered the recessions of 1845, 1847, and 1853, the Panic of 1857, and, on the eve of the Civil War, the recession of 1860. The Kohn brothers' business made it through all the ups and downs. Chicago's clothing industry expanded as the city grew in the 1850s and 1860s, and the Kohn business took part in the boom. Abraham's success dug him out of poverty. It also gave him the luxury of time away from work. This he used to keep building a promised land in Chicago.

### *Chicago faith*

Just as commerce had to prosper in Abraham's promised land, so did faith. He had lamented his inability to worship. Now, in Chicago, he did something about it.

The city in 1843 had no synagogue. The Jewish population was tiny. It was a struggle even to form a minyan, the ten men required for public worship. In September 1845, for Yom Kippur, they managed to do it. The Kohn brothers, who numbered four by now, gathered with five others. That made nine. A man came in from Elgin. Now there were ten. With a *minyan* and the Torah that Abraham got



from his mother, they celebrated the holiday in a room over a Wells Street store. It was Chicago's first Jewish service, although it was shaky. When one man left the room, the service had to stop because the *minyan* was lost.

Mrs. Kohn played a historic role in the history of Jewish Chicago. The mother, accompanied by two more sons as well as a daughter, immigrated to the United States. For those counting, yes, she had seven children. Legend holds that Mrs. Kohn, who was strictly kosher, refused to eat *treif* meat. But *treif* meat was the only kind available. Her health weakened. Her sons grew worried and decided to form a congregation. Then they could hire a Jewish ritual butcher who could make meat kosher for Mrs. Kohn.

Chicago's first synagogue was born. On November 4, 1847, Abraham and 13 other men signed a constitution creating a synagogue they called Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv, or KAM. Now they could hire a butcher. But from where? Abraham traveled to New York and hired Ignatz Kunreuther, a rabbi and butcher. Mrs. Kohn would have her kosher meals.

The congregation elected Abraham its president six years later, in 1853. Abraham had made great strides in building a promised land, but now came the test. Could he and KAM survive the turmoil of the 1850s?

Trouble loomed at KAM. The Jewish Reform movement that began in Germany in the early 19th century swept into the United States. Reformers demanded synagogues adapt to the modern world. Traditionalists fought back.

Life was peaceful for a while at KAM. Membership rose. Abraham presided as KAM drafted a new constitution, obtained a charter from the Illinois legislature, and bought land for a cemetery.

KAM's newer members, however, started to press for reform. Abraham joined the traditionalist faction with men like Samuel Cole. The debate came to a head after Abraham left as president. Cole, Abraham's ally, wanted to follow him as president, but a reformer challenged Cole, and after a bruising campaign, defeated him. Reformers reveled in their victory. An anonymous letter writer to the *American Israelite* newspaper gloated in what he called the reformers' "glorious triumph" over outdated ideas. Abraham wasn't president anymore, but he stayed in the fray. He shot back with his own letter to the *Israelite*, informing the paper's readers that the real conflict in Chicago had been over men, not principles. He hinted that the reformers, all Bavarians, had opposed Cole not because of his ideas, but because he was from Poland. Not to mention the reformers had swayed votes by paying off the dues of the men who were in arrears!

The debate was bitter. KAM caught a break when it found a rabbi from Dublin who somehow managed to satisfy both factions. The peace, however, did not last. The more the congregation got to know the Irishman, the less it liked him. It turned out his impressive sermons were plagiarized. He was sent packing. KAM again managed to find compromise rabbi. A spider bite put him in his grave. With two compromise rabbis gone, the battle finally came to a head. Kohn, Cole and the other traditionalists tried to meet the reformers half way. They agreed to go along with choir singing and other reforms. It was not enough. The reformers broke off and in 1861, formed Sinai Congregation.

Years of strife for KAM and Abraham came to an end. The Jewish community had split, but there was a happy ending for KAM. KAM hired a charismatic rabbi from Detroit, Liebman Adler. He served the synagogue for 22 years, lifting its membership and influence. Adler's son, the future great architect Dankmar Adler, married one of Kohn's daughters. More important, KAM, with Abraham's involvement, was set to thrive for decades under Rabbi Adler.

### *Chicago government*

Abraham, having taken steps toward building a promised land with commerce and faith, turned to government.

As a newcomer, he had disliked Americans' go-it-alone attitude. He could hardly change American culture, but he could improve the way his adopted city governed itself.

Abraham joined the Republican party. The choice made sense for a businessman like Abraham. It was the party of free trade. It was also the party that opposed slavery, and Abraham was a bitter foe of slave holding. He was elected a delegate to the Republicans' county convention, then served as secretary at the city convention. He was poised to keep moving up.

A Republican, John Haines, won the race for mayor in April 1859. He named Abraham as his clerk. The city clerk was one of the municipal officers, like the city attorney and city treasurer. His duties included the keeping of ordinances and records, and collecting license fees. The position was appointed, but the city

council had to approve the mayor's choice. The city council in 1859 said Abraham lacked experience. Abraham was rejected.

Publicly, Chicago Jews often expressed satisfaction with their treatment in America. Privately, Abraham had noted in his diary that he was not taunted for being Jewish, as he had been in Bavaria. But now, the specter of anti-Semitism surfaced.

"Long John" Wentworth, a newspaper publisher and former mayor, cried foul. Wentworth contended there had been a bargain when he had joined the Republican party. It was understood that Germans and Jews would get a share of municipal offices. Now, Wentworth claimed, the council was denying Jews their share of the spoils.

The *Chicago Tribune* defended the city council, noting that the city clerk's assistant had just left. This was a time for a seasoned city clerk, which Abraham was not. The *Tribune* insisted that Jews would not be gulled into believing Abraham's rebuff had anything to do with anti-Semitism.

What Abraham thought about anti-Semitism and his rejection remains unknown. What is certain is in the next year, 1860, Long John Wentworth returned to the mayor's office. He appointed Abraham as clerk. A devout Jewish man was a municipal officer in Chicago.

Abraham was not the first Jewish city official in Chicago. Four years before, the Sixth Ward had elected Henry Greenebaum an alderman. But Abraham was the first Jew to hold a *citywide* office.

Clerks rarely made news, and Abraham was no different. He served for one year, seldom appearing in the newspaper. This was 1860, when Chicagoans were distracted by the presidential candidacy of another Illinoisan named Abraham. While campaigning, Lincoln stopped by the Kohn clothing store. Lincoln spoke of the Bible to Abraham as *their* book, leaving an impression on the merchant.

Lincoln went on to victory in November 1860. The next spring, Mayor Wentworth finished his one-year term. A new mayor appointed a new clerk with the long experience that the council said it wanted. Abraham, having made history, bid goodbye to political life. He had blazed a trail for future Jewish officeholders and helped Chicago's government run right. It was another step toward building a promised land.

### *Flag and war*

Businessman, synagogue founder, political leader: Abraham Kohn was a giant of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Chicago.

Yet he is little remembered. When he *is* recalled, it is for something that we have lost: his flag

After Lincoln won the election, Abraham decided to give the president-elect a parting gift. A Chicago Republican, J.Y. Scammon, delivered Abraham's present to Lincoln in early 1861, days before he stepped on a train to Washington.

Abraham's gift was a painted American flag in a gilt frame. It was no ordinary flag. Abraham had written in the white stripes verses from the Book of Joshua. Once again, Abraham had the promised land on his mind. The Book of Joshua describes how Joshua led the Jews into the promised land, where he conquered their enemies. Abraham thought that Lincoln, like Joshua, would conquer his enemies and rule in the promised land—America.

Abraham explained the meaning of the Book of Joshua in a letter to Lincoln. Abraham believed the book forecast American history *in great detail*. The Book of Joshua said the promised land contained “the wilderness and ... Lebanon.” Abraham thought that the wilderness signified Florida, which was thinly settled. Lebanon, known for its cedar trees, signified the forests of Maine. The book said that just as God stood with Moses, so he would with Joshua. Abraham explained that Moses represented George Washington, and Joshua represented Lincoln. The book said, “The law shall not depart out of thy mouth.” Abraham said the “law” signified the U.S. Constitution. The Book of Joshua predicted U.S. history. Abraham assured President-elect Lincoln that he would have God with him, just as Joshua did, as he led their promised land in crisis.

Abraham was confident in God's favor. But that didn't mean Abraham was going to sit by and watch as events unfolded. The next year, 1862, Abraham decided to give a little shove to the Bible's prediction of Lincoln's victory in the promised land. Abraham spoke in August to that packed meeting at Concordia Hall. He joined other Jewish leaders in organizing an infantry company that became part of the 82nd Illinois, a German immigrant regiment. The regiment fought at the Battle of Gettysburg and marched to the sea with General Sherman. It limped back to Chicago with 310 of its original 900 men. Horrible sacrifices had been made. But

Abraham and the Book of Joshua were right: President Lincoln had conquered his enemies.

*Where did the flag go?*

Abraham kept up a leadership role in Jewish affairs after the war. Unfortunately, injury and illness cut his life short. A carriage crash crushed his leg in 1868. Kidney disease afflicted him. In 1871, he died at age 51.

What ever happened to the Jewish Stars and Stripes? At first, Abraham didn't get a thank-you note for his present. Finally, a letter dated August 28, 1861, arrived from J.Y. Scammon, the deliverer of the gift to Lincoln. The letter read: "My dear Sir, The enclosed acknowledgement of the receipt of your beautiful painting of the American flag by the President got lost among my letters or it would have been sent to you before." Inside was a thank you note from President Lincoln himself.

A leading Lincoln scholar of today, Harold Holzer, believes Lincoln was inspired by Abraham's flag. The president hung it in the White House.

Thirty years after the Civil War, Abraham's gift was still remembered. Ohio Governor William McKinley, later the president, gave a speech in 1895 in which he hailed Abraham's present as a beautiful gift that must have cheered Lincoln and sustained his courage.

Scholars have recalled Abraham's flag from time to time. In 1924, it was mentioned in the *History of the Jews of Chicago*. This year, 2020, a rabbi from

New York's Yeshiva University cited the importance of the flag in a Presidents' Day column in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The flag, however, is lost. In 1924, the *History of the Jews of Chicago* had reported that the flag rested in the museum of the War Department in Washington. Where it is now is unknown.

Many have hunted for the flag. One searcher was Joseph Levinson, the head of the archives committee at KAM in the 1980s. He grew, in his own words, "infected" with a "fever" to find the flag.

Levinson, presumably knowing that the flag was last reported at the War Department, contacted the Department of the Army. It didn't have it. He contacted the Smithsonian Institution's Department of Armed Forces History. It didn't have it.

Levinson talked to the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Jewish Archives, the Chicago Historical Society, the Illinois State Historical Society, and the American Antiquarian Society. They didn't have it.

Poor Joe Levinson compared himself to a knight of King Arthur seeking the Holy Grail. The flag was equally elusive.

Abraham Kohn's life speaks to us across the centuries. He was an ordinary man who, finding his situation flawed, set about making it better. He made Chicago a



second promised land. Not bad for man who wanted to leave America within months of arriving.