Going Greek

Marianne R. Sanua

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No easy answer ever evolved to satisfy the obvious question of what was "Jewish" about Jewish college fraternities. From the dawn of their founding at the turn of the twentieth century, these organizations were embroiled in what the renowned psychoanalyst and author Erik H. Erikson would no doubt have diagnosed as a severe identity crisis. What role should, or should not, Judaism play in the membership selection or programming choices of a supposedly secular, social, American-style organization never meant to resemble a religious congregation? Should membership be restricted to Jews only or theoretically open to everyone? And what about social distinctions between Jews of different background, income, denomination, and level of observance? By perpetuating such distinctions, weren't these fraternities violating the very values of brotherhood and solidarity they supposedly sought to embody and actually playing into the hands of the antisemites?

Each of the first three men's groups founded between 1895 and 1904 began with distinctive approaches to questions of Jewish identity that in turn led to tension and dissension within the ranks. The students who founded the very first fraternity in the subsystem, Pi Lambda Phi at Yale in 1895, were so revolted by what they saw as the religious prejudice of that era that they refused to acknowledge religious divisions of any kind. So thoroughly did they embrace the ideology of nonsectarianism and membership open to all faiths that they would not admit officially,
or chose to forget, that all of their founders and the majority of their members until World War II were, in fact, Jewish. Three years later fourteen young men pursuing studies simultaneously at the Jewish Theological Seminary and at secular colleges in the New York area took the exact opposite approach when they established the Z.B.T. Society in 1898, an organization which was destined to involve into the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity. Not standing for Greek letters at all, the acronym, suggested by the young men’s Talmud instructor, stood for the popular Hebrew motto “Zion shall in judgment be redeemed”—zion be-mishpat tipadeh. At the beginning, ZBT’s constitution and ritual were deeply Jewish, with emphasis on Zionist ideals. Until 1954, only Jewish men could become members.\(^2\) The founders of Phi Epsilon Pi, established third at City College in 1904, at first embraced the militant nonsectarianism of their Yale predecessors. Soon, however, internal opposition led its officers to a compromise stance: acknowledgment of Jewish membership and activity but maintenance of a nonsectarian constitution, leaving expressions of Judaism up to each individual.

The extremes of Zeta Beta Tau and Pi Lambda Phi set the subsystem’s parameters when it came to specific Jewish identification. All subsequent twenty-odd national college Jewish fraternities and sororities founded between 1895 and 1920 began with a stated identity somewhere between these two poles and through the years frequently shifted between one and the other. In the fraternity world, official sectarianism was expressed first mainly in two ways: by the organization’s published constitution, denoting conditions for membership, and in its secret rituals, or the specific vows that a “pledge” had to make before becoming a full lifetime member. Some of the younger historically Jewish fraternities and sororities never placed either sectarian or nonsectarian clauses in their constitutions at all, believing that Jewish or non-Jewish membership would never become an issue. Therefore identity questions revolved around aspects such as programming, holiday observance and fraternity symbolism. In their periodicals, correspondence, and private conversation, members from both ends of the spectrum engaged in heated debate and soul-searching on exactly what the nature of their religious and social identity should or should not be.

The debate that raged was entirely an internal one. In the early years of their existence, whether they accepted the name “Jew” or struggled for the cause of true nonsectarianism, to the outside world, these Greek-letter societies without exception were perceived as “Jewish.”
Pi Lambda Phi

On March 21, 1895, three German Jewish students at Yale University—Henry Mark Fisher ’97, Louis Samter Levy ’98, and Frederick Manfred Werner ’98, rebelled against the social barriers of their school’s Greek system by forming the first chapter of a national fraternity that would not raise any tests of race, religion, color or creed for membership. Leading their organization along lines “broader and more liberal than those employed at the present time,” they stated their guiding principle as “non-sectarianism and the recognition of men on the basis of ability above all considerations.”

This notable innovation in collegiate fraternalism flourished, albeit with an overwhelmingly Jewish membership. Within two years of its founding at Yale, additional chapters of Pi Lambda Phi were established at Columbia, City College, Cornell, New York University, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Union College. Founder and chapter president Henry Mark Fisher, who went on to receive his rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1903, found sufficient happiness during his undergraduate days to call Yale in his yearbook entry “the best college on earth.”

However, as often happened in transient undergraduate organizations, the founders graduated and left fraternity activities behind. None took their place and the first chapter at Yale ceased to exist. Soon after, all the other chapters except that at New York University succumbed as well, and Pi Lambda Phi added no new chapters until it suddenly emerged again at Columbia University in 1912. The undergraduates who reorganized the society at that point somehow transformed the founders at Yale into a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jew—or at least all subsequent fraternity publicity and entries in "Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities" would have it, "undergraduates of different faiths." Even the clerical denomination of Rabbi Mark Fisher, who after his ordination became a prominent congregational leader in Atlantic City and presumably paid little attention to his fraternity’s progress, became transformed. In an article appearing in the "Jewish Daily Bulletin" of May 1929, during the protracted struggle of Pi Lambda Phi leaders to be accepted as a truly nonsectarian fraternity at Brown University, he was identified as "Rev. Henry Mark Fisher of Atlantic City, who is a Christian." Rumor and collegiate folklore had somehow become a virtual fact. Such blurring of the lines of transmission could happen easily...
on any campus, after all, where the distance between three graduating classes could be infinity. Moreover, events leading to the founding of the original Pi Lambda Phi had occurred before some of the 1912 Columbia students had even been born.

Strong leadership, ideological purity, and no doubt the ultimate cachet of having been founded at Yale (as opposed to Jewish Theological Seminary, City College, Columbia, Cornell, or the University of Rochester) helped to fuel the new Pi Lambda Phi’s rapid expansion across the United States and into Canada after 1912. Indeed, as the century progressed, and in particular after World War II, Pi Lambda Phi was able to enroll within its ranks more non-Jews than any of the other historically Jewish fraternities. In the process, it would appear that it became the fraternity of choice for the small number of relatively upper-class college men—such as Oscar Hammerstein II—who were products of interfaith marriages, particularly those between Jewish men and Episcopalian women. However, between 1900 and 1912, Pi Lambda Phi enrolled few if any students, and the organization lay moribund.

Zeta Beta Tau

Zeta Beta Tau, which did not begin as a Greek-letter group at all, enjoyed far more success in the first decade of the twentieth century, although the ideological path it traveled was far from smooth. It was established on December 29, 1898 at the Jewish Theological Seminary under the leadership and inspiration of Professor Richard J.H. Gottheil. The Jewish identity of what he called “my ZBT boys” remained a preoccupation of Gottheil’s until the end of his life, and his young charges found themselves struggling with his ideals even as they admired his personal qualities. Born in Manchester, England, in 1862, Gottheil moved to New York City at the age of eleven when his father Gustav was called to the pulpit of Temple Emanu-El, one of New York City’s oldest and most prestigious Reform Jewish congregations. Gottheil received his BA from Columbia in 1881. One of his classmates, who graduated one year later, was Nicholas Murray Butler, the Nobel-Prize winning educator who gained fame as Columbia’s president from 1901 to 1945, during which time he came to be known in some quarters as “Tsar Nicholas.” While Butler’s relationship with the Jewish communities of Columbia and of New York City was often complex and paradoxical, the two men enjoyed a life-long association which was cordial if not outright warm, and Butler came to serve as a valuable professional ally when Gottheil took up his teaching career at Columbia.
After graduation from Columbia, Gottheil continued his studies abroad at the universities of Berlin, Tübingen, and Leipzig, where he received his doctorate in Semitics in 1886. Upon his return to America he was appointed as an instructor at his alma mater, and quickly rose to the rank of full professor and chairman of the Department of Oriental Languages, an unusual achievement at the time for a Jewish scholar. In addition to his impressive academic credentials and remarkable erudition, Gottheil, in his first years of teaching enjoyed the advantage of a position endowed by the members of the Temple Emanu-El congregation; it is not known what his professional fate would have been had his funding been left up to Columbia alone. His teaching career at Columbia spanned forty-nine years. During that time, Gottheil became the de facto advisor and advocate for Columbia's Jewish student body. He and his Beirut-born and Paris-educated wife Emma Leon Gottheil also opened their home as a gathering-place not only for Columbia men but also for students from the Jewish Theological Seminary, City College, and New York University.

Gottheil's interests were not limited to purely academic pursuits. With the encouragement of his father, he also embraced the cause of political Zionism. After attending the second World Zionist Congress in 1898, he was elected president of the FAZ (Federation of American Zionists, a precursor to the ZOA—Zionist Organization of America). His doctoral student at Columbia, the young Rabbi Stephen Wise, served as Secretary. At the time, the Zionist movement was in its infancy. Most Jewish immigrants to America were far too busy trying to establish themselves in the country that in, practical terms, had become their Promised Land. Any ideology that called for the establishment of a Jewish state in an Ottoman province half a world away smacked of wasteful dreaming at best and disloyalty at worst.

The cause of Zionism was equally remote for the young, acculturated, well-to-do Jewish college men whom Gottheil encountered daily back at Columbia. Yet it was precisely these young men who represented to him the best and brightest of their people, the most promising potential leaders in the quest for a Hebrew renaissance. A Zionist student society modeled after similar groups recently formed in Central Europe, Gottheil believed, might help convince these potential leaders of American Jewry that a Jewish homeland was worth fighting for. More importantly, the adoption of Zionist ideals might bolster their self-esteem, confidence, and pride in their heritage. In acting upon this idea, Gottheil had in mind a discussion which had taken place at the annual conference of the Central Conference of American Rabbis
(CCAR) a U.S. Reform rabbinical group, in 1896. When they investigated the lot of Jewish collegians the rabbis discovered to their dismay that Jewish students were commonly ashamed of their background, going to great lengths to change their names and hide their identity. If this was to be the path of the American Jewish educated elite, Gottheil and America's Reform rabbis wondered, then where could the community expect to look for its leaders in the future?

Gottheil was therefore eager to use any influence he had to encourage his student followers to form a collegiate Zionist fraternal organization. Those who were studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary in addition to Columbia were particularly quick to grasp the potential of such a group. There is in fact some evidence that Z.B.T. itself was a product of a small, preexisting organization, the Young American Zionists, founded independently by the students in 1897 immediately after the first World Zionist Congress. Four of the original group—Aaron Eiseman, Herman Abramowitz, Bernard C. Ehrenreich, and David Liknaitz—were ordained and went onto prominent careers in the American and Canadian rabbinate and Jewish organizational life.

In their founding statement, the young men of Z.B.T. specifically cited Vienna's *Kadimah* as their model. In addition to borrowing the Zionist symbols of a blue-and-white flag and the Star of David, they adopted Hebrew names for their officers and institutions. The Nasi (prince or president) was the head officer; Segan Rishon and Segan Sheni were the first and second vice-president: the Sopher (scribe) acted as secretary, while the positions of financial secretary, treasurer, and sergeant-at-arms were called the Ro'eh Cheshbonoth, the Gizbar, and the Shomer Hasaph. Presiding over the Beth Din (advisory and executive board) was the Ab Beth Din, a title going back to Talmudic times. The stated objectives of the organization according to its original constitution were "to promote the cause of Zionism and the welfare of Jews in general; and to unite fraternally all collegiate Zionists of the United States and Canada." The name itself, Z.B.T., represented a Hebrew letter acronym for a motto that adorned the badges of delegates to the earliest World Zionist Congress convened by Theodore Herzl in Europe.

For two years, the original Z.B.T. flourished as a Zionist-oriented society, and the original fourteen members in New York City were joined by others who later became well-known public figures. These included Mordecai Kaplan, American Jewish leader and founder of Reconstructionism, U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Harvard Law Profes-
sor Felix Frankfurter, and Abraham Arden, NYU Class of 1901, better known as A.A. Brill, Austrian-born psychoanalyst and American translator and popularizer of Freud. By 1900, the organization had chapters in New York, Baltimore, New Haven, and Cincinnati, and it represented eighteen different colleges and universities.

In its earliest years, ZBT would not have been recognized as a typical American college fraternity. Instead, it functioned more in the manner of German student clubs that operated in such places as Tübingen and Heidelberg. This development was not surprising, since the majority of the founders were either German Jews or from families which had embraced the dominant German Jewish culture and who might otherwise have sent their sons to Germany to pursue their higher education. There were no chapter houses or living quarters and they did not restrict membership to students from one particular school. All of the members of what came to be known within Zeta Beta Tau’s history as “The Home Fraternity” came together from several schools and gathered at cafés and beer cellars in Manhattan, their favorite being the Café Logeling on Fifty-Seventh Street. There, at monthly meetings, they would listen to speakers—frequently Gottheil himself—and then discuss and debate various topics. These began with Zionism, anti-semitism, the nature of Jewish identity, Jewish literature, and methods of furthering Jewish observance. Soon they progressed to burning political issues of the day including labor unrest, votes for women, and tariffs vs. free trade. They also drank beer, ate sandwiches and pretzels, smoked their pipes, and sang songs.

Defending Jewish rights was high on the agenda of this original Z.B.T. (in its pre-Greek days, the custom was to place periods between the letters.) In the fall of 1899 for example, its Committee on Press and Propaganda published an open letter entitled “Stand for Your Faith” in the American Hebrew newspaper as part of an attempt to rally New York’s Jews against the Columbia University practice of holding classes and entrance exams on Saturday. Classes on the Jewish Sabbath had already been, and for years continued to be, a regular feature of American college life. However, only at the end of 1898–1899 academic year did Columbia officials decide to schedule certain required college entrance examinations on that day as well. At that point, the consternation of Jewish parents who wished to send their sons to Columbia stirred Z.B.T. to action.

Committee president David Levine chided his readers for passively enduring this affront and taking the traditional religious attitude
“that Israel is, after all, in ‘Galuth’ [Exile] and that we must reconcile ourselves to circumstances.” By then, he pointed out to them, the number of Jewish students studying at Columbia was not small. “If we all show that we do not take kindly to instruction and examinations on the Sabbath,” he declared, “such instruction and examinations will be prescribed for weekdays only. . . . If we are not tardy in giving this important matter the attention it deserves the schedule for next year will eliminate the undesirable hours. It is only of late that Sabbath sessions were introduced, and, as they are few in number, their abolition will not be a radical procedure.”

From Zionist Society to American Fraternity

Despite its early successes, the political and Zionist ardor of Z.B.T., following again a common collegiate pattern, faded after the original members graduated. From 1900 to 1902, when the renowned scholar and rabbi Solomon Schechter arrived from England to complete the reorganization of Jewish Theological Seminary, Z.B.T.’s focus shifted gradually away from the dual-curriculum rabbinical students and toward those pursuing secular studies only at City College, NYU, and Columbia full-time. The Seminary became less a part-time afternoon school and more of a full-fledged, full-time institution. It could no longer serve easily as a center for all of New York’s Jewish university students. At the same time, the political and cultural background of Z.B.T.’s potential membership was broadening. By November 1901, less than three years after the organization’s founding, its leaders resolved, as then-secretary Maurice L. Zellermayer recalled, to change the object of the fraternity to “the promotion of Judaism” since “it was found that as a Jewish College Fraternity we ought not to shut out those Jewish college men who were desirous of entering our Fraternity, but had not as yet taken any definite stand on the Zionist question.”

Other factors encouraged the transformation. Z.B.T. began to abandon the “Home Fraternity” model in favor of the more conventional multiple campus chapter form of organization when it absorbed Omicron Epsilon Phi, a local Greek-letter Jewish fraternity at City College. The Z.B.T. men themselves had already decided that their Hebrew initials could also represent the Greek letters of Zeta Beta Tau. After the merger on February 2, 1903, the former local group, not the group at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was designated as Zeta Beta Tau’s
first or "Alpha" chapter. Subsequent chapters were designated with the customary Greek letters in the order of their founding.

The change was almost unavoidable as the Jewish fraternity idea spread across the country. Particularly on campuses outside large metropolitan areas, students were clamoring for an organization that would supply them with the room, board, social life, and a place within campus life that they could not find among the Gentile fraternities. Zeta Beta Tau's earliest entry in the national fraternity bible, Baird's Manual, stated the nature of the change explicitly: "It soon became apparent that Jewish college men in colleges other than those situated in New York were interested in any society which called itself a fraternity, because they were themselves not members of the fraternities existent at their colleges. The insistent demand for an exclusively Jewish Greek-letter college fraternity therefore changed ZBT into Zeta Beta Tau." 25

In 1904 Bernard Bloch (who later anglicized his name to Block), one of the founders, articulated a further new mission for Zeta Beta Tau: the instruction of its members in the social graces and gentlemanly conduct, according to the standards of their surroundings, which would aid in professional, personal, and family success, ease the impact of antisemitism, and add to members' own enjoyment and happiness in life. A plethora of adult American Jewish organizations was even then in the process of formation. These organizations were already addressing every cause on the political spectrum, from the rescue of Jews everywhere else around the world, to the question of a Jewish homeland. Social training, however, would become the mission taken up with enthusiasm by the entire Jewish Greek subsystem. "The Jewish college man, like his Christian colleagues, seeks an outlet for social recreation," Bloch wrote. "He looks about him and sees college organizations, known as fraternities. He knocks for admission, but admission is denied him . . . We have banded together because we have recognized that a fraternity is a necessity. The Jewish student today is inferior to his colleagues in his social training. It is the purpose of our fraternity to train its members in a social way." 26

Concern for social life and recreation did not mean that the evolving Zeta Beta Tau abandoned its Jewish educational programming. Lecturers on Jewish history and culture continued to address the members periodically. For decades, reading at least one Jewish book and answering basic questions on Jewish history were part of every pledge's
preparation for admission. The charge to remember that one was representing “the highest type” of one’s people and thus carried the burden of extra responsibility was written into ZBT’s rituals in the 1920s. Until 1954 the final secret vows of an initiate included the words “I am a believer in God and the Brotherhood of Man; I am a Jew.”

On the American college campus, however, it was clear that the prevailing winds were blowing from Athens and not from Jerusalem. In 1906, after several years of discussion, planning, and informal use of Greek letters, Z.B.T. was officially reorganized and incorporated as Zeta Beta Tau, adopting all the constitutional and organizational features of a regular American college fraternity. With the exception of the term Nasi to denote the highest leaders of the fraternity or of an individual chapter, the Hebrew names for officers and governing bodies were discontinued. (Even the Hebrew title Nasi, pronounced in those days “NOH-si,” was jettisoned in the 1930s because members and especially German Jewish student refugees sheltered in ZBT houses did not feel comfortable using a title so close to the dreaded term “Nazi.”) The “Supreme Beth Din,” for example, became the “Supreme Council.” The fraternity’s crest and lapel pin, which identified it to the outside world, still included a small Star of David. The letters ZBT were still used. However, it was understood that the acronym—now to be written without periods between the letters—represented Greek and not Hebrew letters. In the new crest, designed by Herbert Lippman (Columbia ’09) the traditional Star of David was still there, but it was now deemphasized in favor of more common symbols of fraternal life, including the censers of Justice, the lamp of Learning, the clasped hands of Friendship, a Greek Temple representing nobility of spirit, and the memento mori, a skull and bones—a powerful symbol which, among other things, was supposed to remind its viewers of their ultimate destination and the fate of a man left alone and without friends.

For those who wished to enjoy conventional fraternity life without denying their origins in a theoretically nonsectarian organization such as Pi Lambda Phi, Zeta Beta Tau provided an alternative. In time, its seniority relative to other groups and its relative nobility of origin made ZBT the fraternity of choice for the American Jewish aristocracy. Most commonly, this meant affluent native-born Jews descended from German or French Jewish Reform families or those from a related Central or Western European culture, as opposed to more recent Yiddish-speaking immigrants from parts of Tsarist Russia or Poland. In part because of their exclusion of other types of Jews, ZBT unwittingly
helped set into motion what would become the rapid proliferation of alternative Jewish fraternities from 1904 to 1920.

ZBT and the Fight for Jewish Identity

The long transformation from a Hebrew-letter to a Greek-letter organization could not and did not come about without tension. Debates about just how far Zeta Beta Tau should go in committing itself to Jewish education or social work activities remained a constant feature of the fraternity's internal life. Each issue of the *Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly*, a periodical whose first issue appeared in 1913, carried editorials urging members to participate in such organizations as the Young Men's Hebrew Association, the Jewish Big Brother movement, and most importantly, the local campus Menorah Societies, grouped under the Intercollegiate Menorah Association (IMA). No discussion of the history of Jews in American higher education in the early twentieth century could be complete without reference to these societies.

The first college Menorah Society, a Jewish cultural and literary club, had been established at Harvard University in 1906. Not unlike a national fraternity, the organization subsequently established chapters at schools across the country. As the largest, most vigorous, and in many ways the most competitive Jewish college movement outside the burgeoning Jewish fraternities, the Menorah Society, more than any other Jewish student organization, served as the indicator of the presence—or absence—of a strong Jewish identity within Zeta Beta Tau. It was perhaps not surprising that Richard Gottheil, deeply disappointed by the Hellenistic turn that his beloved ZBT had taken, embraced the cause of Menorah and similar organizations and repeatedly urged the brothers of Zeta Beta Tau to join its ranks. "There is now hardly a college or a university that has not its society of students devoted to the care of Jewish interest—a Menorah, a Forum, or the like," Gottheil reminded his readers in April 1916 in an open letter published in the *Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly* entitled "Our Proper Position." "I trust I am wrong when I say that our Zeta Beta Tau members are conspicuous in their councils—by their absence. But that, at least, has been my experience." Henry Hurwitz, the editor-in-chief of the Menorah Journal and later Chancellor of the organization, also urged Zeta Beta Tau men to join all Jewish students in the Menorah without regard for exclusivity or social divisions. Menorah, he declared should serve as a common forum for all, both "Greeks" and "Barbarians," where "the spirit of mutual understanding
and friendship thwart all social and other cleavages” and members could move beyond their “narrower fraternity interests.”

However, a wide social gulf tended to separate adherents of the Menorah societies and adherents of the Jewish fraternity system. Menorah's leaders were largely the children or grandchildren of immigrants from Eastern Europe, usually with some traditional Jewish learning. The organization's leaders, in complete contrast to the fraternity ethos, actively discouraged holding purely social events, catered to the intellectual elite, and were by nature particularistic in their programming. Meanwhile, Jewish fraternity members sought to blend in and advance their collective Judaism, if at all, through conformity to Gentile manners and standards of excellence in mainstream campus activities. The very existence of the Menorah movement rendered Z.B.T.'s official participation questionable. By assuming the original cultural and educational goals of the former Z.B.T. society (although not, to the same extent, its strong Zionism), Menorah became what could easily be seen as the proper address for distinctively Jewish campus activities. The fraternities took care of the immediate needs and desires of a typical American college student.

Though a scion of a rabbinical family, Gottheil should perhaps have realized that his high standards for Jewish observance and public activity could no longer be met by the new Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity. The young members had reason to believe that these old standards were unfair. More than a decade had passed since ZBT's membership ceased to be composed primarily of theological students. Yet membership was still limited to Jewish men, and pledging allegiance to the Jewish people was still an important part of the organization's rituals and training exercises for newcomers. Moreover, each young man had taken a significant step in choosing to affiliate with an openly Jewish fraternity and not choosing other nonsectarian alternatives. What more could Gottheil ask of them?

Still, the Zionist professor was not satisfied, and made a valiant effort to return ZBT to what he saw as the complete Jewish and Zionist spirit of its founders. After successfully running for the position of Supreme Nasi of the fraternity in December of 1911, Gottheil took every opportunity to exhort members to participate in the Menorah societies of their respective campuses and to take the lead in Jewish activities. He openly accused his charges of abandoning Jewish values altogether when, as their executive leader, he addressed the 1914 Zeta Beta Tau Convention in New York. There, delegates gathered from nineteen chapters across the United States and Canada, including students from
Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, Boston University, Western Reserve, Ohio State, the University of Illinois, Tulane, and McGill, as Gottheil accused them of allowing "the social aspects of fraternity life to become all-absorbing." Among other criticism, he decried the lack of any Jewish works of art or books in ZBT chapter houses. For that year's keynote speakers, he secured two of the best-known and most persuasive Jewish notables of the era, Israel Friedländer and Louis Brandeis, and made sure that the convention opened and closed with invocations and benedictions from prominent rabbis. Satisfied with these efforts, in a letter afterward to his friend Horace Kallen at the University of Wisconsin, a leading American intellectual who had embraced Zionism, Gottheil confided with obvious glee that at the convention "the boys had more Jewish material shot into them on that one day than they usually get during the whole year." 

Two years later, at the 1916 convention Gottheil again accused the members point-blank of not recognizing "the reciprocal duty" they had taken upon themselves by electing him Supreme Nasi. Once again he deplored the lack of Jewish books in chapter houses and the small number of ZBT members enrolled in university courses of Jewish interest. Finally, in 1919, after Gottheil had stressed one too many times the importance of Zeta Beta Tau candidates being dedicated adherents to Judaism, the members of the McGill chapter dared to publish a plaintive letter in the Zeta Beta Tau Quarterly rejecting his criteria for membership and substituting their own.

"If a prospective pledgee is a good student and interested in Jewish affairs, but lacks good fellowship, i.e. the ability to get along with the fraters, he will not be initiated," they wrote, defending their selection process. "But if a man has the personality to make himself well liked by the fraters, he will be accepted whether he has the first two qualities or not. So, fellowship is the primary consideration. Of course, if he has the other qualities, all the better." 

That fall, Gottheil announced his decision to resign as Supreme Nasi of Zeta Beta Tau at the end of the 1920 academic year in order to pursue a sabbatical year at the University of Strasbourg and to conduct an extensive tour of post-war Europe. Immediately editorials and letters from students began to appear in the Quarterly, indirectly criticizing their old Nasi and calling for the abandonment of all mandatory Jewish educational efforts. One group of youthful correspondents, writing in the last months of Gottheil's official stewardship, struck out at their adult targets in despair and confusion, denying both that they had failed
to live up to ZBT's ideals and that the ideals propounded by the adult Convention speakers were truly those of their fraternity.

Despite all of the speeches stressing the need for "Jewishness," the young men pointed out, "no one seems to have more than a hazy idea of what that means." Living a "clean and upright life" and conducting themselves at all times in such a way as to prove equal to their non-Jewish fellows was their true ideal, not taking an active part in establishing centers for Jewish learning in the colleges. "How can we," they demanded,

inexperienced and pressed for time, be expected to hold these weekly discussions on subjects of Jewish history and philosophy, when the Rabbis whose life work is to do that sort of thing are meeting with no marked degree of success? We would appreciate any practical suggestions from our honorary members as to how we can be of greater service to our religion. We would appreciate any constructive criticism on their part, and we believe that the fraternity would be grateful for any help that they might give. But let them not accuse us of having failed to live up to our ideals when they do not seem to even know what our ideals are.\(^{39}\)

In May 1920 another strongly-worded editorial written by student editors outlined a new set of goals for the fraternity in the post-Gottheil years. It clearly stated principles that had first surfaced in 1901-1906 and had in all probability been the goal of the majority of Zeta Beta Tau's undergraduate members all along. "The prospective pledge," the editorial ran,

ignorant of our raison d'être, sees a group of Jewish college men who are the leaders of their classes in mentality, refinement, good fellowship, ability, and character, banded together by the closer bonds of fraternal intimacy . . . and he joins the Organization, not because of its Jewishness, but because it is a successful collegiate organization which will help make his college life more interesting, profitable, and attractive.

The writers continued:

This, we maintain, is our real purpose. To demand a certain amount of Jewish learning as a requirement for admittance into our Fraternity is to misunderstand the ideals which a great majority of our members now profess. . . . Our Fraternity is now frankly a collegiate organization striving to adjust the Jew to his collegiate environment. . . . By so doing we present a united front of the best young blood of our race and make the best possible impression on the outside world. The average college man is apt to forget
that the successful Jew is a Jew. We label our men as Jews by the fact that he is a ZBT man. We say to the world, "Remember, all ZBT men are Jews. Wherein do they differ from you?" But we do not strive to emphasize our Jewishness in other ways. It is enough if we make them realize that we are Jews: we need not accentuate our Jewishness.  

The resignation of Richard Gottheil as Supreme Nasi sealed the ideological fate of Zeta Beta Tau fraternity. To the end of his life in 1936 and even after, he was revered as the founder and guiding spirit of the fraternity. As a professor at Columbia, he continued to welcome visits by the undergraduate fraternity leaders of the campus and to dispense advice and counsel. In the expression of his final wishes, written to Rabbi Stephen Wise in 1935, he requested that the brothers of Zeta Beta Tau—whom he referred to as "my boys"—line the aisle of Temple Emanu-El as his coffin was carried out after his funeral services there. When he died his black-bordered portrait was displayed in every chapter house and all Zeta Beta Tau men were asked to observe a period of mourning. Zeta Beta Tau continued to graduate its share of rabbis and individuals active in Jewish social, educational and charitable affairs. But from the 1920s onward, the balance of ZBT's undergraduate membership was content to demonstrate its loyalty to Judaism by membership in a fraternity modeled along Greek collegiate lines.

**Phi Epsilon Pi and the Struggle for Nonsectarianism**

The first two fraternities, Pi Lambda Phi and Zeta Beta Tau, represented two ideological and religious extremes in the developing Jewish Greek subsystem. In contrast, later fraternities took the option of leaving matters of religion and culture up to the individual members, whether they specifically limited their membership to Jews, pursued the route of official nonsectarianism, or chose to ignore the entire question. The third group in the subsystem, Phi Epsilon Pi, was founded by a group of seven friends at City College in 1904. While retaining some of the social cachet of Pi Lambda Phi and Zeta Beta Tau and striving to provide its members with the best features of a Gentile fraternity, Phi Epsilon Pi's officers considered themselves "the legitimate child of feelings of disapproval with the narrowing horizon of social ideals of the older fraternities." By constitution and ritual, in contrast to Zeta Beta Tau, Phi Epsilon Pi was to be ecumenical and nonsectarian. Theoretically, young men of any faith were welcome to join, and no mention of Judaism ap-
Phi Epsilon Pi’s officers stressed this repeatedly in their correspondence, although it should not be thought that they ignored the subject of religion entirely. In fact, when drawing up the fraternity’s identifying crest, these City College students chose to include the symbols of the three great monotheistic religions: a large central cross to represent Christianity, flanked on either side by a small crescent to represent Islam and an even smaller star to represent Judaism, although whether by error or by intention the star had five points rather than the traditional six. 44 A group of transfer students formed the fraternity’s second chapter at Columbia University in 1905, followed by the third and first out-of-town chapter established at Cornell in 1911. 45

Phi Epsilon Pi’s forthright nonsectarianism in many ways was similar to that of Yale’s dormant Pi Lambda Phi. It reflected not only the members’s refusal to acknowledge the religious differences which barred them from full participation in college society, but also their obvious dislike and direct competition with Zeta Beta Tau. In the first twenty-five years of its existence Phi Epsilon Pi tended to draw its membership from the same socioeconomic pool as Zeta Beta Tau—that is, middle- or upper-middle-class German Reform Jews of some affluence—who had either been rejected by Zeta Beta Tau, preferred the company of the men in one fraternity over another, or who were repelled by what they considered the overly Jewish emphasis of their fraternal predecessor. Competition developed along geographic lines as well. Some fraternities and sororities, such as Phi Epsilon Pi, developed special dominance in the South, while others might have a greater presence in the northeast and Midwest. Also, as in the case of Pi Lambda Phi, stressing their nonsectarianism was an important tactic in combating the anti-Jewish barriers placed in their way by college presidents and administrators who did not want to attract any more Jews to their campuses by allowing Jewish fraternities to establish a foothold there.

However, as inevitably happened in the first two decades of the twentieth century when a college fraternity was founded by Jewish students, translating the nonsectarian theory into fact proved to be virtually impossible. Phi Epsilon Pi found the task of recruiting any more than a handful of Gentile members fruitless. According to one calculation made by the organization’s national secretary, the non-Jewish members never numbered more than fifty, and all them were no longer active by 1923. 46 In addition, college administrators, when dealing with Phi Epsilon Pi’s requests to establish chapters at new schools, revealed that they
were not fooled by the fraternity's alleged nonsectarianism. That the officers nevertheless persevered and felt it necessary to go to almost comic lengths in their efforts illustrates just how religiously divided American social institutions were and just how desperately some American Jewish college students sought to deny it.

By 1916 Phi Epsilon Pi had grown to eleven chapters, including branches at the University of Rochester, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State College, Dickinson College, and Rutgers. The organization was eager to grow further. In strong competition with Zeta Beta Tau, it had established its preeminence in the American South by establishing two chapters at the University of Georgia and the University of Virginia, the former for a brief time providing the fraternity's most energetic national leadership. However, the desire to persuade non-Jews to join was a constant obstacle to growth. "You are sufficiently aware of the non-sectarian character of Phi Epsilon Pi and of the fact that its members are mostly Jewish," cautioned the fraternity's secretary, Jesse Acker, a graduate of City College, to a former classmate and medical school student attempting to form a chapter at the University of Michigan in 1916. "You will undoubtedly explain this part of it [to Philip Weisberg, their contact there] better than I can . . . You are also aware that the National Committee encourages initiation of both sects into the fraternity and in acquiring new chapters always impresses upon them the necessity for maintaining the non-sectarian character." The acquisition of non-Jewish members, Acker hinted, would also insure that the fraternity drew those men who truly wanted to be in it and not "men who merely want to come in to a fraternity for the sake of wearing a pin regardless of its significance"—i.e. Jewish students who could not have been accepted anywhere else. The warning was repeated throughout the year to anyone contemplating the formation of a new chapter.

Occasionally, the fraternity was successful in finding a Gentile to join it. Acker rejoiced a week later when he heard that a chapter at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta had been installed with eight men. One of them was a Roman Catholic. "With the nucleus we have down there, we certainly have a tremendous start," Acker wrote to Herman Kline (previously Klein) one of the fraternity's leading field organizers. More typical, however, was the situation at the University of Michigan, where efforts to form a "mixed" group met with no success at all. Not a single Gentile name appeared on the list when Philip Weisberg, a Penn Phi Epsilon Pi graduate attending law school in Ann
Arbor, sent to New York City the names of the six young men he had found who were ready to form a new chapter. Acker was not pleased. “We would call to your attention the fact that Phi Epsilon Pi is non-sectarian and that the names appearing on the pledge list signify members of the Jewish descent only,” Phi Epsilon Pi’s leader sternly reminded his Ann Arbor associate. “This condition should be remedied at once, if possible.” Weisberg, who despite a heavy load of legal studies had been putting great effort into setting up the new Michigan undergraduate chapter, defended his actions. “I have not included Gentiles among our numbers because we have not as yet come across any men of that faith, whom we would like to have as fraternity brothers, and who are not members of fraternities already,” he wrote back. “However, we would gladly consider such a fellow, if the opportunity presents itself.”

By the end of the year, Acker was becoming impatient. In writing to A.N. Krieger of Baltimore, who was then attempting to form a chapter at Johns Hopkins University in November 1916, Phi Epsilon Pi’s leader in New York warned:

If I were you, I wouldn’t try to make up a local of all Jewish men. We are always trying to boost the non-sectarian character of the Fraternity, but it seems that the Chapters insist upon getting only Jewish men. I admit that there is some difficulty in getting good gentile fellows, but there certainly seems to be lack of cooperation some place. I hope that if we start a chapter at Johns Hopkins, it will be done on a truly non-sectarian basis.

Despite all these efforts Phi Epsilon Pi chapters out in the field became so thoroughly Jewish, with some actually joining the Menorah Society en masse and sponsoring prayer services on the Sabbath and other holidays, that a group of discontented students at the University of Alabama chapter in the spring of 1917 threatened to secede from the national fraternity union and join the older organization Pi Lambda Phi. By that year “Pi Lam,” which had faded from the collegiate scene in 1903, was flourishing once more. Even though its membership was still virtually all Jewish, the older fraternity appeared to be far more faithful to the nonsectarian creed than the younger Phi Epsilon Pi.

In hopes of averting Alabama’s secession, the National Committee of Phi Epsilon Pi strove to collect sworn data that would prove to the discontented members the truthfulness of the fraternity’s nonsectarian claim. Ralph Dubin, the secretary of the fraternity’s “Alpha” chapter at CCNY, expressed surprise at the actions of his Alabama fraters and was pleased to report on his own chapter’s relatively cosmopolitan nature.
City College's Phi Epsilon Pi alumni in fact included "50 Hebrews and 21 Gentiles," while the current undergraduate membership consisted of fourteen Hebrews and four Gentiles. In addition, Dubin cooperated by sending certified statements, signed by leaders of the Gentile fraternities, attesting to Phi Epsilon Pi's rank in City College as "a real non-sectarian fraternity."

Eventually the Alabama chapter did refrain from leaving the fraternity over this issue. Others, however, were not so easy to convince, particularly college officials eager to maintain the Christian character of their institutions. Even Jewish college officials were skeptical of the possibility of any college fraternity being truly nonsectarian and fearful of the negative influence such a de facto Jewish group might bring. They refused to allow Phi Epsilon Pi to establish a foothold on their campuses. At the University of Missouri at Columbia, Dean of the Faculty Bernard Loeb—himself an American Jew of German origin—viewed consistent requests to form a separate fraternity as "inadvisable." The regrettable restrictions against Jews in the existing fraternities were the policy of the national fraternity leadership, he insisted, and not the fault of local chapters. On the other hand, he pointed out, outside these social organizations Jewish students were admitted to all other university organizations and class honors, with "little if any evidence of racial and religious prejudice." To introduce a Jewish social fraternity on the campus would "promote rather than eliminate" this prejudice, and despite all claims to the contrary no one but Jews would join Phi Epsilon Pi anyway. "The fact that your fraternity does not restrict its membership to Jewish students is in its favor," he wrote in April 1916, "but of course the inevitable result would be the same, as if it had such a clause in its charter."

Phi Epsilon Pi's officers in New York City at first refused to take no for an answer. Once more, they instructed their Missouri contact to emphasize their alleged nonsectarian character. "We, of course, have a great many Jewish Fratres; in fact, the vast majority are Jewish," they conceded to their agent in the field.

At the same time, we do not want to dwell on this point, for the non-sectarian character of our organization can only be upheld by our insisting on fraternalism without religion. In case you correspond further with Dean Loeb, or in case you go to see him, we trust that you will make this point fully understood, and that if a Chapter is started at Missouri, it will be started with Gentile as well as Jewish fellows as Charter members."
Dean Loeb, however, was still not convinced. Not wishing to deal further with the young men's persistent inquiries, he turned the matter over to a lower-ranking Jewish member of the Missouri administration—the secretary of the University's extension division, Norton J. Lustig. Lustig wrote back to New York in May 1916 rejecting Phi Epsilon Pi's petition on the grounds that he had interviewed prominent and "representative" Jewish students at Missouri and that "with a surprising unanimity of opinion," they were completely opposed to the project. In explaining their reasons, he was even more blunt than Dean Loeb had been. Any fraternity composed of both Jewish and non-Jewish students, he wrote, was "not a feasible idea"; fraternity lines were so strongly drawn at their college that "ultimately only the residue of desirable Christian students would affiliate themselves." Furthermore, what might be expected to work in "eastern universities" (such as in New York?) would not work in the "peculiar atmosphere" of Missouri, where the greater part of the student body came from agricultural backgrounds. Indeed, it was generally felt that a Jewish collegiate fraternity would "arouse a greater feeling of racial prejudice," not reduce it. 55

Thus all the youthful optimism and energy which Jewish college men could muster in the Progressive Era was not successful in the formation of a truly nonsectarian fraternity. American society as it was organized at the time would apparently not allow it, and the attempt of Jewish college men to ignore this left them open to jokes and increasing ridicule. In the case of Phi Epsilon Pi, the final break with its idealistic origins came at the fraternity's December 1923 convention. Here, a single individual made a significant impact. Maurice Jacobs, a 1917 Phi Epsilon Pi from the University of Maine, led and won a campaign for the fraternity's Grand Council to remove the cross and the crescent from its crest, to stop apologizing for the Jewish background of their membership, and to cease from hobbling expansion by their constant search for elusive and ultimately unattainable Gentile fraternity brothers. Jacobs would go on to become the executive secretary of Phi Epsilon Pi, providing it with leadership for almost fifty years. He also became a prominent figure in the American Jewish communal, cultural world, and publishing world, among other activities heading the Jewish Publication Society of America. 56

In the 1920s, one of Jacobs' strongest supporters toward the end of de-ecumenicizing the fraternity's crest was Ralph E. Cohn of the University of Michigan chapter. He helped to prepare the membership for the change by documenting in the pages of the Phi Epsilon Pi Quar-
terly the “considerable embarrassment” which the crescent and the large elongated cross were causing in the eyes of outsiders. “In regard to the world-at-large,” he wrote,

I am reminded of our former friend, Mr. Levy, as that gentleman covers his nose with one hand and presents the card of Mr. Abraham Murphy. Can Mr. Levy-Murphy ever expect to command the respect due either Mr. Levy or Mr. Murphy? If I were a statistician, I might make up tables of data showing the percentage of times that a sentence like this arose upon the mention of Phi Ep: “O, yes; that non-sectarian Jewish frat,” or “Have you a little Goi in your chapter?” or “You mean the ones who pretend they’re not Jewish.”

The true Jewish identity of Phi Epsilon Pi, Cohn wrote, was no secret to anyone but the Jewish members themselves, and certainly not to the occasional deluded Gentile pledge who wandered their way: 57

The Mohammedan boys, of course, sing their praises to Allah in the broad inspiring spirit of Phi Epsilon Pi. Your loving son! The Christian boys soon find that religious differences are of little consequence compared to the racial differences manifested in the actions and thoughts of the Hebrews. They soon retire from the chapter house and from the fraternity. The Jewish frater, however, is the true ostrich with his head in the sand. The average Jewish boy of our colleges bothers very little about his ancestral theological doctrines, and his membership in a non-sectarian fraternity is a very convenient excuse for non-participation in Jewish groups or affairs. True, Phi Ep is not a Sunday School. On the other hand, it is not altogether proper for a group of Jewish men to dodge obligations which may present themselves to them.

Samuel M. Kootz, the influential editor of the Phi Epsilon Pi Quarterly and one of the oldest members of the fraternity, cast his vote along with Jacobson in favor of jettisoning both the old shield and the nonsectarian policy. In a personal article written under the title “Air Castles and Dissimulation,” he declared: “Non-sectarianism is but a florid gesture at the moon. It is not practiced, it cannot be practiced. Held out as an enchanting democratic vista before the fledgling pledgee’s eyes, it but gives way to derision and delusion, flagrant disciples of unfulfilled promises. It is not fair, it isn’t playing the game.” 58 In an editorial appearing just before the final vote at the 1923 convention he expressed the matter far more bluntly, invoking again the analogy of the ostrich hiding his head in the sand. “Ranging over a number of years,” he wrote, “we have found that Phi Epsilon Pi today, in its active membership, is
composed entirely of Jews, that its governing officers are all Jews, and that its predominating sentiment is away from non-sectarianism. It was inevitable.”59 When delegates from Phi Epsilon Pi’s thirty-one active chapters gathered that month, the vote went in favor of abandoning the old shield, and thereafter the general stress of the fraternity upon Jewish programming and the fostering of Jewish leadership noticeably increased.

By 1933, even an officer of Pi Lambda Phi, which throughout its existence remained stubbornly faithful to the nonsectarian ideal, had to report regretfully, “So far as I know, there is in fact no non-sectarian fraternity.”60 Fraternity chapters with no restrictive clauses of any kind and with students of all faiths as members could not and would not become widespread until well after World War II had broken down the nation’s rigid social barriers.

Until that day, the Progressive era myth of a nonsectarian fraternity might appeal to some Jews who wished to affiliate with an exclusive social organization while both maintaining a clear conscience and protesting their exclusion from fraternities limited only to Christians. The nonsectarian Jewish fraternities also might appeal to young, eager, fun-seeking Jewish collegiates who preferred to avoid the bothersome issue of religious divisions altogether. However, as the few Gentile members fell by the wayside and as quotas and anti-Jewish restrictions of various kinds became a fact of college life in the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish nonsectarian fraternities for the most part had to face reluctantly the reality of their true Jewish identity, and to abandon what had become for most of them an embarrassing and hopeless charade.