Introduction

"Nonsense is nonsense, but the study of nonsense—is scholarship." These words, reportedly spoken by the eminent Jewish Theological Seminary Talmud and Rabbinics professor Saul Lieberman when introducing one of Gershom Scholem's lectures on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism in New York in 1947, might come to mind in scholarly quarters when confronting the theme of Jewish college fraternities and sororities. Certainly, at first glance, it might appear a more lighthearted and frivolous topic than is usually found in the often "lachrymose" (to borrow a well-known phrase from Salo Baron) annals of Jewish historical investigation.

And yet, what was and is known in the United States and Canada as the "Greek system" of national college fraternity and sorority chapters was anything but nonsense. Secret societies as such go back to the dawn of recorded human history. These modern American groups and the life-long peer networks they created played an important role in the lives of millions both during and after their college years. Some of the most prominent, wealthy, and powerful individuals in North America are college fraternity graduates. Moreover, beginning with the founding of Pi Lambda Phi and Zeta Beta Tau in 1895 and 1898, during the first two thirds of the century, an entire Jewish Greek subsystem for undergraduates flourished throughout all of the United States and Canada, consisting in the 1920s and 1930s of as much as one fourth to one third of all young Jews attending universities outside the New York City metropolitan area. As there were once clearly defined Jewish and Gentile law firms, town clubs, country clubs, summer camps, and debutante balls, so too were there clearly defined Jewish and Gentile college fraternities. An additional "sub-subsystem" operated to serve
Jewish male and female students at professional schools in such areas as medicine, dentistry, law, and pharmacology. For undergraduates alone, at its height in the late 1920s this Jewish Greek subsystem consisted of at least seventeen separate multi–chapter national groups for men and at least five for women. Overall, this American Greek subsystem had initiated well over a quarter million male and female students by 1968.

Overcrowding, mediocre grades, Jewish quotas, and various techniques of “selective admissions” in the large and prestigious schools of the Northeast fed the expansion of the fraternities in the 1920s and 1930s. In a phenomenon known as “Jewish student migrancy” ambitious students (overwhelmingly male), encouraged by their families, ventured hundreds and even thousands of miles from their homes on the northeastern coast of the United States to the state schools and smaller private colleges of the South, Midwest, and West to attend any university or professional training program that would accept them. Wherever in the country these students went, chapters of Jewish fraternities followed.

Although close to a quarter of the original fraternities succumbed to the economic pressures of the Great Depression, the system as a whole survived and even flourished through the 1930s. While their commitment to maintaining a pleasant social life did not waver, Jewish fraternities in the 1930s also sheltered German Jewish refugee students, provided career guidance and job opportunities for graduates, and worked to better community relations and to fight antisemitism. Their campus activities had to come to a virtual halt during World War II as students entered the armed forces. Still, fraternity national offices served as clearing–houses and nerve centers, sending out packages, disseminating news and letters, and letting soldiers know of the whereabouts and fate of their comrades. After the war, when the GI Bill of Rights sent millions of veterans to college, their chapter homes helped to alleviate a critical housing shortage.

Although rabbis and Jewish communal leaders frequently expressed disapproval of these groups for their supposed neglect of religious matters, the fraternities were counted as part of the panoply both of general campus and of American Jewish organizational life. Homecoming parades included their floats, yearbooks and annuals listed and photographed them, articles and columns described their activities in the Anglo-Jewish press, communal leaders sought them out, and their social events were documented in the society pages of the nation’s newspapers. After graduation, fraternity members filled the ranks and governing boards of American Jewish defense, fraternal, and communal
organizations, donating large sums to Jewish causes and putting to good use the parliamentary procedure they had honed through years of attendance at mandatory Monday night chapter meetings.

Why the need for two separate Greek systems? Divisions began at first at the turn of the twentieth century because Jewish students, arriving in significant numbers at American colleges for the first time, were excluded from the existing framework. On isolated rural or semirural college campuses, or any campus where fraternities with the blessings of the local administration were the mainstays of student life, such exclusion, aside from causing discomfort and demoralization, could have disastrous consequences. Assuming they could be admitted to a school in the first place, young Jews could still be left with no place to eat and sleep in towns where landlords and landladies did not wish to rent them rooms and fellow Gentile students refused to share quarters with them. The elaborate student cafeterias and democratically priced living complexes so taken for granted in later years were yet to be built, and college dormitories if they existed at all were apt to be too small to accommodate every student. Such practical benefits of membership could continue throughout a member's life. The traditional networking and job contacts that the fraternity provided were invaluable to people seeking to earn their living in a world hostile to Jews, in days when simply getting a job posed a major challenge. Moreover, adult members could relax, knowing in advance that the troublesome problem of restrictions against Jews would not arise at the hotels, resorts, and clubs where fraternity social events took place.

Fraternal divisions between Jew and Gentile also began because students and their families truly believed it preferable and advantageous that members eat, live, prepare for their livelihood, network, socialize, and marry among their own people—or, as the half-humorous saying went, "M.O.T." (Members of the Tribe.) Not all members of the tribe were regarded as equal, however. Ironically, Jewish fraternities could be every bit as exclusive and discriminatory as their Gentile counterparts, with each fraternity occupying a distinct place within the social hierarchy. The rhetoric of "rush week," when fraternities selected their new members, reflected sub-ethnic conflicts between "Germans" and "Russians" or among Jews of different denominations, social classes, incomes, and length of residence in the United States.

Until 1941, for example, the membership applications of the most elite Jewish fraternities and sororities included blanks for the applicant's birthplace, mother's maiden name, and the birthplace of both
parents—ironically, the very same information that was being used to exclude socially undesirable students from the nation's most elite undergraduate institutions. In the upper tiers of the Jewish fraternity hierarchy a name ending in “-sky,” origins in Eastern Europe or the Middle East, residence in the wrong neighborhood, or an overly “Semitic” appearance severely compromised hopes of acceptance. Fraternity officers and members obsessed over the details of maintaining proper manners, acceptable dress and quiet speech in public, and demonstrating good “school spirit,” believing that the performance of Jews in these areas would make or break the reputation of their individual fraternity and also serve as the best defense against external anti-Jewish discrimination. American Jews who did not conform to this “Best Behavior” syndrome, whether in or out of the fraternity, became objects of condemnation. The internalization of external anti-Jewish behavioral and aesthetic stereotypes almost to the point of self-hatred and the tendency to fling them back against their own people is one of the most striking, if disturbing, features of these fraternities’ records.

Amity and not enmity, however, was a more common result of Jewish fraternity associations. Since it encouraged and even mandated dating and marriage, the Jewish Greek subsystem served as nothing less than a national ethnic matchmaking bureau, a factor that garnered it considerable support from segments of the larger American Jewish community. Even members of the majority who hardly gave the national organization another thought after their university commencement ceremonies, or who might recall their youthful fraternity days with embarrassment, often continued to live, work, socialize, and raise their children in the company of friends or spouses first encountered within the fraternity circle. The details of these early encounters illustrate specific techniques and provide important clues on how a scattered, relatively acculturated, and highly educated group never amounting to more than three percent of the nation's population managed to maintain relatively endogamous marriage patterns for as long as it did.

When unprecedented numbers of World War II veterans and other Americans began to attend college in the late 1940s, the Greek system as a whole geared up for an era of uninterrupted expansion and growth. It was not to be, for the U.S. had undergone an important transformation. From the end of World War II onward, the basis for the insularity of sectarian fraternities and, indeed, the dominance of the system as a whole had already been steadily eroding. Factors included the democratizing influence of people united in a world war and the
subsequent GI Bill, post-war inflation, a housing shortage, ideological opposition to the Greek system as a whole, large-scale construction of alternative student room and board options, and most important of all, advances in civil rights legislation at all levels of government. Laws forbidding publicly supported educational institutions from discriminating based on race or religion were extended to include on-campus fraternity houses as well. There was also widespread communal distaste bordering on collective nausea that Jewish people after the war should be deliberately and actively discriminating against either Gentiles or other Jews in the traditional fraternity membership selection process. Instead, critics charged, it was both a duty and an enhancement of self-interest for Jewish people to surrender these antiquated organizations and lead the new peacetime battle of rooting out discrimination everywhere once and for all.

The issues of restrictive clauses, freedom in choosing members, and the ability of higher authorities to dictate the racial or religious make-up of these groups tore the American college fraternity world apart. Rabbis and communal leaders were no longer sure how they could formulate policy concerning such organizations. Jewish fraternity alumni officials did not know how to react when, at long last, Gentile fraternities began to accept Jewish students in significant numbers or, conversely, Jewish undergraduates began to demand the right to accept non-Jews into their houses. In many cases, it was not external interference that fraternity officials faced but opponents from within their own camp. Especially in Jewish groups, the younger and more progressive undergraduates, alumni, and particularly the new veterans of World War II pushed for changes in membership policy that older alumni leaders were reluctant to make.

Rebellion on the nation’s campuses and the ascendance of the counterculture during the Vietnam War years of the 1960s and 1970s sealed the fate of the separate Jewish Greek subsystem. Attitudes of hostility or complete indifference replaced the earlier drive for fraternity reform. While the entire American college Greek system suffered during this period of upheaval, the Jewish groups, whose potential membership was well-represented among the ranks of the campus protesters, was particularly hard-hit. Despite its size and complexity it was still smaller in absolute membership as well as younger and less well endowed financially than the older Gentile fraternities. Consequently, the weakest Jewish fraternities were forced to merge with their older contemporaries or else cease operations altogether.
In the mid-1970s and 1980s, college fraternities in general enjoyed a modest revival, although they have never again reached the position of prominence and influence that they once enjoyed on the American college campus. The Jewish Greek subsystem itself never ceased operations entirely. At the end of the twentieth century five of the original Jewish fraternities and four of the sororities were still in operation, although not more than three placed strong emphasis on their historical Jewish identity and all had a significant minority, and in some cases even a majority, of non-Jewish members. The question of how they should, or should not, relate to their religious and ethnic heritage continues to be a cause of internal dissent.

Regardless of the outcome of these contemporary debates, the records of the Jewish Greek subsystem in the heyday of its sectarian existence are a treasure trove of historical, sociological, and demographic data. Among other factors, they allow us a peek into the often cruel realities of American college life in days gone by, and the extensive anti-Jewish discrimination which young people encountered before, during, and after their graduation. Determined to live as happy and as normal a life as possible despite the obstacles in their path, these young people nevertheless often made desperate efforts to remake themselves and their fellows into the image of what they believed society was telling them a good American ought to be.

We may speculate that these efforts met with some success, given the remarkable socioeconomic rise of the American Jewish community within a relatively short period of time. And yet, we may also wonder—at what cost to their inner life and peace of mind did that success come? Evidence of a ceaseless struggle comes through the records of these men and women who went on to become the husbands, fathers, wives, mothers, businessmen, lawyers, judges and all-around leaders of the American Jewish community. We encounter them here in their most formative years before World War II. These were the professionally educated people who passed well beyond the world of their parents and grandparents and who set the agenda of the post-1945 world. As products of that relentless struggle they would have the power to shape their society and their nation according to all the lessons they had learned.