Higher education has long played a defining role in shaping the lives of young American Jews and their families. Just how high a value they have placed upon it and how far its influence has extended beyond the classroom first became apparent to me during my own undergraduate years. The phenomenon was far too much taken for granted to be ignored, and as a theme it called for a historian’s closest attention. But how could one best document an experience that was by its nature so fleeting?

Years later in New York, as a graduate student in history researching the subject of U.S. Jews and higher education, I encountered in the reference section of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library a short 1923 history of the Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity. Founded in 1898 by students attending both the Seminary and New York area colleges, ZBT turned out to be the first of an entire system of some two dozen national Jewish Greek-letter fraternities and sororities that had once flourished, separate from Gentile fraternities, throughout the U.S. and Canada. Although the system as a whole had collapsed by the late 1960s, as individual groups a number of the historically Jewish fraternities and sororities continued to exist into the present day.

That such a thing as “Jewish Greeks” could exist in modern times struck me at first as ironic. Greek-letter fraternities had not existed at all at the college I attended, although it had a club system that was similar in many respects. I had never encountered their Jewish variants either through family ties or through historical literature. That very term our ancient history class at the Seminary was immersed in the fierce battle between Jews and Hellenizers culminating in the Maccabean victory of 163 B.C.E., an event commemorated annually in the triumphant festival of Hanukkah. Hadn’t that particular religious and
cultural confrontation been resolved a long time ago? Yet here a modern, syncretistic form of Jewish Greekdom had apparently been resurrected on twentieth-century North American college campuses. Surprisingly, while these institutions did seem to have bred some excellent athletes, they did not appear to have encouraged mass swine-eating, idol worship, or wholesale apostasy among their adherents. A remarkable number of my academic associates—future rabbis, cantors, teachers, and loyal Jewish communal supporters—turned out to be the children or grandchildren of couples that had met through fraternity auspices, if not members themselves. Verbal inquiries elicited a torrent of information on how important these fraternities had been in people's lives. Stories from those whose families originated from the Midwest, the West Coast, or areas beyond Metropolitan New York were especially vivid.

The written records of this historic Jewish Greek system, it turned out, were the perfect screen upon which to track the precise movements of American Jews as they took up higher end professional education and to shed light on unanswered questions. Other works of scholarship, for example, had described how Jewish students suffered from limited means, antisemitism, restrictive quotas and other obstacles on the ladder to success. How was it, then, that so many were able to get their education and prosper within one or two generations anyway? What was life like after they got past the barriers at the admissions office? What specific techniques had they used to transform themselves so quickly?

As a research tool the archives, magazines, yearbooks and photographs of the historically Jewish fraternities and sororities avoided major methodological problems in exploring these and many other questions of historical and sociological interest. The blessing of separation of church and state that American Jews enjoy, coupled with their own natural reticence, has always meant as well that any research project on them can turn into a major ordeal. Census and other official records did not include religious affiliation, and many college Jews thought it wiser to be discrete about their identity. They or their fathers could change their names. They could try and leave any reference to their Jewishness off the application form, off the registration card during freshman week, and out of the class yearbook when they graduated. When the young men went off to do their duty in World War II they could decide, as many did, that it was preferable to leave the telltale "H" for "Hebrew" off their dog tags in the event that they were captured by the enemy. The omission might save their lives but it could also have serious
consequences if and when they needed burial services and their deaths recorded. Choices such as these left legions of researchers guessing for years afterward.

With these fraternities, however, there was no need to guess if a member was or was not Jewish. Conversations and writings about matters of identity were much freer when the subjects believed the words were only among themselves and Gentiles were not listening. Basic demographic data abounded. Campus investigation reports from across the country included detailed information and population estimates not just for the college but for the Jewish community surrounding it, and rejections carried as much if not more information than the acceptances. Changes of name for purposes of business or marriage, weddings, births, professional school acceptances, occupations, job promotions, and communal achievements all appeared in alumni columns and articles. (Unlike college clubs, fraternity and sorority affiliation was meant to endure one's entire life.) Precisely which fraternity or sorority someone belonged to in the early years of the system was a probable key to his or her socioeconomic status as well. American Jews were never a monolithic group. Class, economic, and sub-ethnic divisions among them could be examined through the variety of Greek-letter groups that sprang up to service them, and the rhetoric used by the members of one group to reject members of another.

Finally, college fraternities appeared as a useful way to examine an underreported but extremely important sector of the American Jewish population. These young people of the 1910s through the 1930s did not fall into the category of rabbis, labor leaders, Zionist leaders, Bundists, Yiddishists, radicals, New York intellectuals, or any of the other fascinating groups that have tended to draw scholars' attention. Interwar fraternity students and alumni adumbrated what would in fact become the majority profile of mid-to late-twentieth century American Jews. It is not known how many of them left the community altogether. Those that remained for the most part aimed straight for the middle or upper-middle classes, went to college, married, raised families in the suburbs, succeeded in their professions and businesses, became officers in Jewish organizations, or otherwise quietly took up their places within the bourgeois community structure. These were the generations that faced and fought World War II. It was into their mature hands that the reins of world communal and philanthropic leadership passed even before the war ended and they knew that the great centers of European Jewish life were gone.
In setting parameters for this study I decided to focus on what are known in the Greek-letter world as national—that is, multi-chapter—college social fraternities, to the exclusion of Greek-letter local, honor, recognition, city, professional, and high school fraternities, or youth organizations such as Aleph Zaddik Aleph (AZA) and B'ni B'rith Girls (BBG), which themselves graduated thousands of members. To examine in detail every single historically Jewish fraternity or sorority was, regretfully, not possible, and future researchers are likely to come across groups that are not mentioned here. In addition, while material on both college fraternities and sororities is included, the balance of this study focuses on the men’s groups, which were older and more numerous than the women’s groups. There were indeed major differences between the men’s and women’s organizations, and gender was a significant variable influencing the fact, location, and nature of college attendance. However, Jewish college fraternities and sororities were at all times closely related. Here I chose most of the time to deal with themes common to both groups. The records of Jewish college sorority women alone represent an unmined treasure trove of information, and they deserve to receive their own full historical treatment.

A full comparative analysis of Jewish and non-Jewish fraternities has also been beyond the scope of this study. To map out the Jewish Greek world alone was a task of sufficient complexity. That the Jewish fraternities on the whole consumed alcoholic drinks and indulged in brutal hazing practices to a lesser extent than the Gentile fraternities was accepted as a truism in the American college Greek world before the 1970s, though concrete data on the subject is not easy to obtain. Another truism—that the Jewish fraternities demonstrated a higher level of scholarship—is far more easily documented. From the 1910s through the early 1960s individual university and supra-fraternal councils, in particular the NIC (National Interfraternity Conference) kept careful annual records of fraternity members’ academic grades. The results were commonly used as a basis for disciplinary action. While individual chapters might perform abysmally, national Jewish fraternities inevitably ranked at or near the top of their lists.

Fraternity terminology and slang is complex, beginning with the names of the groups themselves, composed of Greek initials meant to denote the organization’s secret motto. Each had its own customary shorthand designations. For example, Zeta Beta Tau members became “ZBTs” or “Zetes” or “Zebes” (frequently combined in a derogatory
sense by outsiders with the word "Hebes"); Sigma Alpha Mu members were "Sammys" or "Sammies," while Tau Epsilon Phi members were "TEPs." Fraternity members and officials, when communicating among themselves, frequently used the terms "brother," "sister," "frater" (sometimes spelled "fratre" or abbreviated as "Fra."), and "soror." In addition, they usually referred to chapters according to their Greek-letter designation, which most often indicated local seniority. For example, the Columbia chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi, the second to be founded within the national group, was called "Beta" while the New York University chapter, the tenth to be established, was called "Kappa." (The chapter at the City College of New York, as in the case of several other historically Jewish fraternities, was the "Alpha" chapter). In direct quotes using only Greek letter designations I have provided the name of the campus in brackets.

In referring to colleges and universities, I have followed the practice of writing the name out in full at its first occurrence and thereafter using its most common acronym or abbreviation: for example, "Penn" for the University of Pennsylvania, "Penn State" for Pennsylvania State College, "Carnegie Tech" for the Carnegie Institute of Technology, "Illinois" for the University of Illinois, and "NYU" for New York University.

Fraternities also used distinctive ceremonial names for their officers and national governing councils. The head officer in Zeta Beta Tau, for example, was originally known as the Nasi, a Hebrew term denoting "prince" or "president." Their governing council, also from the Hebrew, was at first called "the Supreme Beth Din" and later Anglicized to "the Supreme Council." Sigma Alpha Mu officers were known as "Priors," Phi Epsilon Pi's as "Superiors," Alpha Epsilon Phi's as "Deans," and so on. Phi Epsilon Pi's national officers met periodically in a Grand Council, while those of Alpha Epsilon Pi convened the Supreme Governing Board. I have usually maintained these usages.

As Jewish fraternities grew more affluent in the early 1920s, they followed the prevailing pattern by establishing central or national offices staffed by a professional secretary. It was through this "National" or "Central" office that reports were generated which investigated the potential for a new chapter or commented on the operation of one already in existence. What was known as "extension" or "field" work could be carried out by any authorized alumni official—a traveling or field secretary, an officer or alumnus who happened to live in the vicinity, a
“province director,” or a cooperative undergraduate. In cases where I do not specify in the text the status of the person writing the report, the simplest term, “investigator,” is used.

I have also used simply “the administration” or “college officials” to denote whoever was responsible for allowing or prohibiting the presence of a Jewish fraternity on a campus. The individuals that fraternity investigators consulted upon arrival usually consisted of the president of the university and the Dean of Men or the Dean of Women. Both of these were nonacademic offices created by growing universities in the early twentieth century to supervise the manners, morals, living conditions, and extracurricular activities of the undergraduates. The deans, especially the Deans of Women, were frequently alumni or national officers in Gentile fraternities. This could add an aspect of either tension or sympathy in their interactions with Jewish fraternity officials. Fraternity investigators also commonly consulted with Jewish faculty, area alumni, Jewish families living in the town, and local rabbis. They often left behind fascinating portraits of these small communities whether or not a chapter was ever actually established at the college.

My sources were mainly contemporaneous written primary materials consisting of correspondence, meeting minutes, speeches, and fraternity publications and periodicals. Critical secondary historical literature on Jewish fraternities consists of fewer than a dozen articles and unpublished papers, which I have found helpful. The work of the late George S. Toll of Alpha Epsilon Pi deserves special mention. Jewish fraternities are discussed in passing in histories of college life and of discriminatory admissions policies. Two of the historically Jewish fraternities have sponsored in-house histories, which are also helpful, but these were geared mainly to the interests of members and alumni. A majority of the groups has disappeared and not all of those still in existence preserved their old correspondence, although all did maintain their minute books. Libraries, seeing no value in them, often discarded fraternity periodicals. In most cases, it was necessary to travel to the national offices of the surviving fraternities in order to gain access to these records. The national directors of Alpha Epsilon Phi, Alpha Epsilon Pi, Sigma Alpha Mu, Sigma Delta Tau, and Zeta Beta Tau all graciously allowed me access to their files. Those of Alpha Epsilon Phi Sorority headquarters were especially well preserved, with complete copies of correspondence going back almost to their founding in 1909.

I was also fortunate to discover two invaluable independent archival collections: the Irvin Fane Papers at the American Jewish
Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, which contain extensive material related to the subject’s role as midwestern regional director of Zeta Beta Tau from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, and the Phi Epsilon Pi collection at the American Jewish Historical Society now in New York, which consists of some seventy boxes of national and chapter correspondence, publications, photographs and memorabilia dating from 1914 to the early 1960s. Much of it contains material related not only to Phi Epsilon Pi, but to myriad other Jewish fraternities as well. Maurice Jacobs, who among his many accomplishments was at one time editor of the Jewish Publication Society and himself a book publisher, was an active member and national officer in Phi Epsilon Pi for over fifty years. As executive secretary he preserved every scrap of paper with loving care and donated it all to the American Jewish Historical Society when his fraternity ceased its independent existence and was absorbed by Zeta Beta Tau in 1970. I am much indebted to his foresight.

Many persons and institutions have contributed to the completion of this book, and I am grateful for the opportunity to thank some of them here. My sponsor, Arthur Aryeh Goren, first introduced me to American Jewish history during a year of study with him at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His guidance, patience and compassion through the process of writing the dissertation upon which this book is based were invaluable. Kenneth T. Jackson, my second reader, painstakingly reviewed every word of the text, and it was much improved by his editorial suggestions. Aside from providing valuable support and encouragement during the difficult writing process, he also allowed me to give early chapters their first public exposure at the monthly meetings of the George Washington Plunkitt Benevolent Association, a group of American history doctoral candidates who met each month under his aegis. During my years of graduate study at Columbia Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi insisted that I gain a thorough grounding in all areas of history and set before me a high standard of scholarship and professionalism which I shall always try to emulate. Michael F. Stanislawski has likewise served as a model of professionalism and academic integrity, and my work has benefited from his careful reading and extensive comments. Evyatar Friesel of Hebrew University and the Israel State Archives, with whom I began my study of Jewish history, always had faith in the topic and urged me to proceed with it despite many doubts. So too did Jonathan D. Sarna, whose advice, encouragement, and comments on earlier drafts were of enormous value. Throughout all my re-
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M.S.