

For Immediate Release

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**DID THE CIVIL WAR TURN JEWS INTO AMERICANS?
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
PRESENT NEW EXHIBITION WITH PROVOCATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON VOLATILE TIME**

***“Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War”
Illuminates President Lincoln’s Embrace of Jews in American Life***

Filmmaker Ken Burns to Speak on Jews and the Civil War at Public Program, April 14

WHAT:	<i>Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War</i>
WHEN:	March 3, 2013 - August 11, 2013
WHERE:	American Jewish Historical Society and Yeshiva University Museum @ the Center for Jewish History, 15 W. 16th Street, NYC, 212-294-8330
COST:	Adults: \$8; seniors and students: \$6. Free for members and children under 5
WEB:	http://yumuseum.tumblr.com/CivilWar or www.yumuseum.org or www.ajhs.org

New York City, February 12 – In the midst of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, a new exhibition presented by the American Jewish Historical Society and Yeshiva University Museum offers a provocative and revealing perspective on the bloody conflict: The Jewish experience.

Passages through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War, which opens March 10, tells a story that might surprise even history buffs: The Civil War was a crucible for American Jews, laying the groundwork for their integration and Americanization on a large scale. It enabled the full participation of Jews in American life – militarily, politically, economically and socially – and set the stage for massive Jewish immigration decades later.

Co-presented by the American Jewish Historical Society and Yeshiva University Museum, *Passages through the Fire* brings to life the active role Jews played in all aspects of the war, and also provides an unvarnished look at Jewish involvement in slavery – the era’s key issue. As original documents and artifacts make clear, Jews shared attitudes about slavery with most of their compatriots. Many Jews, despite their own history, considered slavery justified.

This groundbreaking exhibition, curated by Ken Yellis, includes the largest and most comprehensive collection of materials relating to Jews and the Civil War assembled in the last 50 years. The core of the exhibition is the unmatched collection of Robert D. Marcus of Fairfax, VA, generally regarded as the world’s most significant collection of Civil War Judaica.

While portions of the Marcus collection have appeared in previous exhibitions, the collection has never been exhibited on this scale. *Passages through the Fire* also showcases dozens of magnificent documents and artifacts from museums, libraries and private collections across the U.S, including: the Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to Sergeant Leopold Karpeles, a flagbearer in the Union army – and one of six Jewish Medal of Honor recipients; religious and ceremonial artifacts (*haggadas, mezuzahs, dreidels*) used by Jewish soldiers

during the war; an incompletely printed Confederate \$500 note on whose blank side the Jewish Major Sidney Alroy Jonas handwrote the poem that became the basis for the Southern myth of the “Lost Cause.”

With Abraham Lincoln himself as a major character, the exhibition also spotlights little-known episodes that shook American history. As *Passages through the Fire* illustrates, President Lincoln reversed an order by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant expelling Jews “as a class” from the massive Tennessee Territory after accusations of disloyalty. Another part of the exhibition reveals how the role of military chaplains had been reserved for Christians only until President Lincoln engineered the law’s reversal during the Civil War – a landmark moment.

Through handwritten letters, photos, and little-seen documents, we also meet larger-than-life historical characters including the brilliant Jewish Confederate Secretary of State, Judah P. Benjamin; Lincoln’s friend and podiatrist, the resourceful Isachar Zacharie, who performed spying missions on the President’s behalf; and the fearless Eugenia Levy Phillips, a Jewish woman of New Orleans who dared to defy the Union general, Benjamin F. “Beast” Butler.

“The exhibition demonstrates that the Civil War was a major turning point in American Jewish history,” said Dr. Jacob Wisse, director of Yeshiva University Museum. “Ironically, given that it was a civil conflict, it vastly accelerated the process of Americanization; and it laid the groundwork for Jews’ identification with America – and for America’s acceptance of Jews.”

Dr. Jonathan Karp, executive director of the American Jewish Historical Society, agreed. “The Civil War was the first opportunity presented to Jews in large numbers to participate fully in American life. It was war that let Jews demonstrate their belonging and membership,” he said. “The Civil War battleground gave the same Jews the opportunity to perform numerous services – as soldiers, nurses, running patriotic fairs, being spies, also doing something very traditional – peddling.”

The exhibition will feature three short films created exclusively for *Passages through the Fire* by award-winning filmmaker Oren Rudavsky. The mini-documentaries – on Jews and slavery, Grant’s expulsion of the Jews and anti-Semitism, and the legacy of the Civil War for Jews – will feature interviews by leading historians, including Jonathan Sarna, Harold Holtzer, and Hasia Diner.

A series of public programs will examine different aspects of the Civil War. Emmy-winning, Oscar-nominated filmmaker Ken Burns will speak on Jews and the Civil War on April 14. A June 3rd panel will explore the role of Jews in the Battle of Gettysburg. And a curator’s tour on March 13 (at 6pm) will allow visitors to see firsthand and gain insight on some of the remarkable objects from the period. More public programs will be announced. From New York, *Passages through the Fire* will travel to the Jewish Museum of Maryland, in Baltimore, which will present the exhibition from October 2013 to February 2014.

ABOUT THE AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The American Jewish Historical Society provides access to more than 25 million documents and 50,000 books, photographs, art and artifacts that reflect the history of the Jewish presence in the United States from 1654 to the present. Among the treasures of this heritage are the handwritten original of Emma Lazarus’ *The New Colossus*, which graces the Statue of Liberty; records of the nation’s leading Jewish communal organizations and important collections in the fields of education, philanthropy, science, sports, business and the arts. Founded in 1892, AJHS is the oldest national ethnic historical organization in the nation. AJHS is one of five partner organizations at The Center for Jewish History in Manhattan and has a branch in Boston.

ABOUT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Yeshiva University Museum is dedicated to the presentation and interpretation of the artistic and cultural achievements of Jewish life. The Museum, founded in 1973, is distinguished by its wide-ranging and intellectually rigorous exhibitions and, as the cultural arm of Yeshiva University, by its strong educational mission. As a partner in the thriving Center for Jewish History and a participant in New York's lively downtown cultural scene, Yeshiva University Museum makes a distinctive and important contribution to Jewish life and to the world of culture and the arts. The Museum's rich and diverse collections preserve Jewish artifacts, art, texts and material culture for posterity, making objects accessible through exhibitions, educational programs, and research and conservational initiatives.

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