

## Is Coca-Cola Kosher? Rabbi Tobias Geffen and the History of American Orthodoxy

*Adam Mintz*

The ability of the American Orthodox rabbinate to enhance Jewish life through its involvement with the broader American community is taken for granted today. Yet for the immigrant Jewish community of the early twentieth century, such rabbinic influence was for the most part a distant dream. The American rabbi, whether educated in Europe or in the United States, rarely possessed the connections or credibility necessary to influence the outside community. One important exception was the successful effort in the 1920s and 1930s by Rabbi Tobias Geffen to convince the executives of Coca-Cola to make the necessary changes in the formulation of its famous beverage so it would meet the standards of *kashrut*. The story of Rabbi Geffen and the beginnings of his rabbinic supervision of Coca-Cola offers an early model of the ways in which the Orthodox rabbinate adjusted to changing circumstances in order to serve the Jewish community of America.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Kovno in 1870, Tobias Geffen was raised in a traditional Lithuanian Jewish home with its emphasis on the study of Torah.<sup>2</sup> As a teen, he studied under the renowned scholar Rabbi Eliakim Shapiro, and later he received rabbinical ordination from

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Rabinowitz and Rabbi Moshe Danishevsky of Slobodka. In 1898 Geffen married Sara Hene Rabinowitz, the daughter of a prominent Jewish businessman in Kovno. In the wake of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and other eruptions of antisemitism in Eastern Europe, the Geffens decided to emigrate to the United States, ignoring criticism from friends and rabbis who felt that Rabbi Geffen should have taken a local rabbinic position.<sup>3</sup>

During their first months in the United States, Rabbi Geffen worked in a Lower East Side sweatshop owned by relatives of his wife. A brief stint as the rabbi of a neighborhood synagogue proved inadequate to support their family, but a subsequent position as a traveling fundraiser for Kovno's *Kollel Perushim* proved fortuitous. During a fundraising trip he was making to Canton, Ohio, leaders of a synagogue there were so impressed by his remarks that they hired him on the spot to serve as their spiritual leader. Among Rabbi Geffen's most notable achievements during his five years in Canton was the mending of a deep rift within the local Orthodox community, which he accomplished by serving simultaneously as the rabbi of two rival synagogues. In 1910, unable to adjust to Canton's difficult winters, Rabbi Geffen accepted the pulpit of Atlanta's Shearith Israel Synagogue. He would remain there for the next sixty years.<sup>4</sup>

When the Geffens arrived in Atlanta, the city had a Jewish population of about 4,000 out of a general population of 150,000. A majority of these Jews were, like the Geffens, of Lithuanian origin. At the turn of the century the only Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta was Congregation Ahavath Achim. However, its policy of permitting men who worked on Shabbat to be called to the Torah provoked the departure of its more devout members. In 1902 this group that broke away established Shearith Israel Synagogue.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Geffen quickly made his presence felt. He improved and streamlined *kashrut* supervision, initiated the community's first organized effort to raise funds for needy European Jewish families, and founded the city's first Hebrew school. A staunch Zionist,

Rabbi Geffen was a leader of the Atlanta branch of Mizrachi, the religious Zionist movement, as well as the Keren Hayesod and the Jewish National Fund. He also assisted Jewish prisoners in Atlanta's federal penitentiary and ministered to Jewish soldiers stationed in local military camps.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the insular image of East European rabbis, Geffen maintained friendly relations with a local Reform rabbi, David Marx, and even delivered the benediction at the dedication of Marx's synagogue. Many years later, in June 1965, he gave the benediction at the graduation exercises of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America when two of his grandsons were among the graduates.<sup>7</sup> For all the interesting and noteworthy items on Rabbi Geffen's impressive resume, it was his Coca-Cola *Teshuva* for which he would become best known.<sup>8</sup>

Coca-Cola was founded in 1885 in Columbus, Georgia, by John Pemberton as a coca wine. Later that year, when Fulton County, Georgia, passed Prohibition legislation, Pemberton responded by developing a carbonated, nonalcoholic version of his coca wine. The beverage was named Coca-Cola because the stimulus mixed in the drink was coca leaves from South America, the source of cocaine. Initially, each glass of Coca-Cola contained nine milligrams of cocaine. However, the cocaine stimulus was removed in 1903. As a marketing technique, the secret formula of Coca-Cola is reputed to be known by only a few Coca-Cola executives; the original recipe resides in the vault of the Sun Trust Bank in Atlanta.<sup>9</sup>

In his Coca-Cola *Teshuva*, Rabbi Geffen wrote that in 1935, "an inquiry was addressed to me concerning the well-known soft drink Coca-Cola, which is manufactured in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Is it kosher for drinking during the entire year and on Passover?"<sup>10</sup>

The surviving correspondence from this episode, while unfortunately consisting only of letters that Rabbi Geffen received and not the ones he wrote, nonetheless indicates that Rabbi Geffen had in fact become involved in the Coca-Cola issue considerably

earlier than 1935.<sup>11</sup> His earliest correspondence on the subject dates to 1925, when Rabbi Elihu Kochin, rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish Community of Pittsburgh,<sup>12</sup> wrote him: "I inquire of you to inform me concerning the kosher status of Coca-Cola.... For at this point, many of the people are drinking Coca-Cola without proper rabbinic certification and claiming that it is kosher. Please clarify this matter."<sup>13</sup> No reply to that inquiry is extant. A letter dated May 5, 1932, from an entity referred to simply as "Congregation Mischne" of Memphis, Tennessee, asked: "It has been a very long time since we have written to you but as we wish to get a little information from you as to let us know whether you have got the information concerning Coca-Cola which you stated that the company was not willing to give you the exact contents which goes into the manufacturing of this Coca-Cola. Lately we notice there are a few cities in the United States as well as Memphis that several Rabbi's [sic] O.K. the Coca-Cola as Kosher for Passover."<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Geffen evidently responded promptly to this letter, since we have another correspondence from Congregation Mischne to Rabbi Geffen dated May 20, 1932. In this letter Congregation Mischne made reference to the fact that Rabbi Geffen had written that he had inspected the Coca-Cola plants and that Coca-Cola contained glycerin, which was not kosher. They concluded the letter as follows: "The reason why Rabbi Taxon<sup>15</sup> is interested in same is that he happened to give a [heksher] on this drink through the Rabbi Pardes of Chicago."<sup>16</sup>

From this correspondence, it is evident that by 1932 Jews were drinking Coca-Cola and considered it kosher. Furthermore, there were some rabbis who were actually certifying Coca-Cola as kosher. At the same time, Rabbi Geffen had already investigated the Coca-Cola plant and determined that in fact Coca-Cola contained glycerin, a nonkosher ingredient. In line with the history of kosher supervision one would imagine that Rabbi Geffen's view would prevail and that Coca-Cola would be declared nonkosher by the rabbis. In this case, however, this is not what happened. It is possible that Rabbi Geffen's view was not known to the general public.

However, there seems to be another factor in the continuation of the rabbinic allowance of Coca-Cola, namely, the involvement of Rabbi Shmuel Pardes. Rabbi Pardes was a respected Orthodox rabbi in Chicago and the editor of the well-known rabbinic journal *Hapardes*. In the previously mentioned letter, Rabbi Pardes, together with Rabbi Taxon, was referred to as authorizing the kosher status of Coca-Cola in Memphis.<sup>17</sup>

As we learn from the following correspondence, Rabbi Pardes himself had already been in touch with Rabbi Geffen. In a 1931 letter, Rabbi Pardes wrote that he had heard that Rabbi Geffen believed Coca-Cola was not kosher. Rabbi Pardes explained that there were several cities in North America where Coca-Cola had received rabbinic supervision both for year-round use and for Passover, and that therefore the burden of proof fell upon Rabbi Geffen to prove that Coca-Cola was not kosher.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Geffen's reply evidently arrived quickly, because Rabbi Pardes responded just ten days later stating that although he read Rabbi Geffen's response several times, he still did not understand what bothered him about the kosher status of Coca-Cola. He reported that in his own investigation of the Coca-Cola plant in Chicago, he found no nonkosher ingredients. He wrote that he could not imagine that the Coca-Cola plant in Chicago included different ingredients than the plant in Atlanta but would nonetheless travel to Atlanta to investigate the plant himself. He concluded the letter with the following comment: "I wrote last week to all the rabbis who give kosher supervision to Coca-Cola advising them of this problem."<sup>19</sup>

There is no further communication between Rabbi Pardes and Rabbi Geffen concerning Rabbi Pardes's visit to Atlanta to investigate the kosher status of Coca-Cola. There is, however, important information included in the contemporaneous rabbinic journal *Hapardes*. In his initial letter to Rabbi Geffen, the journal's editor, Rabbi Pardes, wrote that in 1930 several rabbis asked him to include advertisements in *Hapardes* for Coca-Cola announcing that it was kosher for Passover. Initially he refused, but after

clarifying that Coca-Cola was indeed kosher, he included a notice in the December 1930 issue. The same issue included an article by Rabbi Pardes entitled, "Coca Cola: The American National Drink." After surveying the product's history and popularity, he concluded with a description of the ingredients and declared unequivocally, "Coca Cola is kosher with the ultimate standards of *kashrut*." He reported that the beverage had been inspected by chemists, who determined that there were no nonkosher ingredients.<sup>20</sup> In the next issue (January 1931), Rabbi Pardes published a Yiddish advertisement for Coca-Cola, which included this statement: "I have investigated and checked all the beverages in the Coca-Cola factory and I found that there is no problem of the inclusion of a nonkosher ingredient. This drink is made of all natural ingredients and it is worthy of being served at the table of rabbis."<sup>21</sup> Finally, in the March 1931 issue of *Hapardes*, Rabbi Pardes included another advertisement for Coca-Cola, with a slightly different statement signed at the bottom: "In the recent past I visited the main factory of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia. The workers in the factory revealed to me all the secrets and even the secret formula. I investigated and found that Coca-Cola is kosher and may be consumed."<sup>22</sup>

How did Rabbi Geffen respond to the imprimatur that Rabbi Pardes gave to the kosher status of Coca-Cola both during the year and on Passover? Did he continue to express his view that Coca-Cola was not kosher or did he take a different approach? In 1935, in an introduction to his *teshuva* concerning the kosher status of Coca-Cola, Rabbi Geffen wrote:

A few months ago I sent a letter to the Orthodox rabbis of America in regard to the *kashrus* of the well-known drink known by the name Coca-Cola which is manufactured in Atlanta, Georgia. Since that date I have received many inquiries and requests for more information and positive proof according to the laws of the Shas in regard to this matter. It is a very difficult matter for me to answer each of these inquiries and

for this reason I have determined to give a reply [*teshuva*] in regard to this matter in my book "*Karnei Hahod*," which is now in press and will soon appear. Every person who is interested to know the real sources and reasons for this "*Heter*" of Coca-Cola will be able to find them in this book under the heading "The *T'shuvah* in Regard to Coca-Cola."<sup>23</sup>

In the *teshuva* that followed, Rabbi Geffen described in detail the process that led him to determine that Coca-Cola was kosher for all year and for Passover. Rabbi Geffen began by explaining what he found in his investigation of the ingredients of Coca-Cola. "The 'M' is a liquid product made from meat and fat tallow of nonkosher animals: it is an item which Jews are forbidden to eat and drink."<sup>24</sup>

The first curious aspect of this *teshuva* is the fact that Rabbi Geffen identified this liquid as "M." In the published Hebrew version of the *teshuva*, however, the word *muris* is used to describe this liquid.<sup>25</sup>

The letter "M" is an abbreviation of the Hebrew word *muris*, a Talmudic term defined as pickle brine. In a version of the Hebrew *teshuva* located in Rabbi Geffen's papers (and reprinted in 1963 in his collected essays, *Nazar Yosef*), Rabbi Geffen identified this liquid as glycerin oil.<sup>26</sup> This identification of glycerin is also found in a typewritten copy of the English translation found in the collection of Rabbi Geffen's papers.<sup>27</sup> As will be shown below, Rabbi Geffen was instructed to remove the name of the problematic ingredient by the attorney for Coca-Cola in order to maintain the secrecy of the formula.

Rabbi Geffen explained that glycerin was found in Coca-Cola only in very minute proportions – in a ratio of 1 to 1000. Generally such a small percentage would not make a product nonkosher; however, because this ingredient was a planned part of the recipe rather than an accidental ingredient that fell into the mixture by chance, it could not be consumed by Jews. There, was, however, a solution:

With the help of God, I have been able to uncover a pragmatic solution according to which there would be no question nor any doubt concerning the ingredients of Coca-Cola. This solution came to my mind when it was revealed to me by some of the expert chemists that the 'M' could also be prepared from plant oil such as that made from coconut, cottonseed oil and other plants.<sup>28</sup>

According to Rabbi Geffen, however, even after solving the glycerin problem, there remained an issue with the use of Coca-Cola on Passover: "in its processing the employees insert and mix the ingredient 'A,' which is made from *chametz*. Since any amount of *chametz* prohibits its use on Passover, it is expressly prohibited to drink Coca-Cola on this holiday."<sup>29</sup>

In the Hebrew *teshuva*, this "A" ingredient is identified as *anigran*, a Talmudic term defined as a sauce of oil and garum.<sup>30</sup> But in the version in Rabbi Geffen's papers, the ingredient is described as alcohol and it is so translated in the typewritten English translation.<sup>31</sup> Yet here too Rabbi Geffen found a solution:

Now, in regard to the prohibition of its use on Passover because of the question of *chametz*, I discovered that it is possible to prepare 'A' not from grain kernels but instead from sugar beets or sugar cane.<sup>32</sup>

Rabbi Geffen concluded his *teshuva* with the following reflection:

"I thank God for the opportunity that He has given me, making it possible to protect the general Jewish public from eating a mixture composed of tallow, a sin punishable by excommunication, and from eating *chametz* on Pesach. This matter is firmly established, and it has become possible for those who have been eating that which is forbidden to eat that which is permitted."<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Geffen's *teshuva* is a fascinating statement of his view of the role of the rabbinate in America at the time. He had initially stated that he believed that Coca-Cola contained a nonkosher ingredient and that he deemed it unacceptable. He was opposed by Rabbi Pardes and the other rabbis who had followed Rabbi Pardes' lead. Rabbi Geffen could easily have stood his ground and continued to insist that Coca-Cola was not kosher. After all, he lived right there in Atlanta and had personally inspected the plant. While there was no guarantee that his decision would be generally accepted, his position was certainly legitimate and required no apology. Nevertheless, he chose to involve himself in a process that ultimately led the Coca-Cola Company to alter its secret formula regarding two ingredients, a process whose outcome Rabbi Geffen might have doubted until the very end.

Rabbi Geffen's attempt to find a means by which he could satisfy the regulations of Jewish law while not challenging common practice reflects an attitude that was critical to the development of Orthodoxy in America in the first half of the twentieth century. Rabbi Geffen was sufficiently astute to recognize that a position declaring Coca-Cola nonkosher, while *halakhically* valid, would have been ignored by most of the Jewish community. He would have defended a *halakhic* position but he would have made himself irrelevant to the Jewish community that was drinking Coca-Cola under what they considered to be acceptable rabbinic supervision. Instead, Rabbi Geffen took an alternative approach, as he wrote toward the end of his *teshuva*:

Because Coca-Cola has already been accepted by the general public in this country and in Canada, and because it has become an insurmountable problem to induce the great majority of Jews to refrain from partaking of this drink, I have tried earnestly to find a method of permitting its usage.<sup>34</sup>

Rabbi Geffen's decision to lobby for changes in the ingredients of Coca-Cola in order to satisfy the needs of the Jewish community

indicates his perception of American Jewry. Struggling to find their place in a land that was often hostile to their religion, American Jews respected and appreciated rabbis who sought to include them within the Orthodox camp rather than simply condemn them as sinners. Of course his approach would not have been possible had he not felt confident in his powers of persuasion, despite the fact that he was never comfortable speaking English since it was not his native tongue.<sup>35</sup>

Rabbi Geffen's decision to find a solution that would make Coca-Cola kosher would never have been possible without his ability to work with the decision makers at Coca-Cola. How was a Lithuanian rabbi whose preferred language was Yiddish able to accomplish this feat? According to Nathan Kaganoff, it was Harold Hirsch, the attorney for Coca-Cola and influential member of the Atlanta Jewish community, who introduced Rabbi Geffen to the company's executives.<sup>36</sup> Hirsch (1881–1939) was a native of Atlanta and a Columbia Law School graduate. In 1904 he joined the Atlanta law firm of John Candler, whose brother was one of the original owners of Coca-Cola. In 1909 Hirsch assumed responsibility for all of Coca-Cola's legal affairs, and in 1923 he was appointed vice president of the company. Among his many achievements, he fought for the trademark "Coca-Cola," which was finally granted in a decision by the United States Supreme Court. He was also influential in protecting Coca-Cola from its many imitators.<sup>37</sup> Hirsch was affiliated with the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, an influential Reform synagogue founded in Atlanta in 1867, where he served as trustee, secretary, vice president, and president. He was also active in the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.<sup>38</sup>

According to Geffen family lore, Rabbi Geffen's daughter, Helen Geffen (1914–2003) attended public high school with one of Hirsch's children. Helen was chosen as the class valedictorian and delivered the valedictory address at the graduation. Harold Hirsch was so impressed with her address that he paid for Helen's college education at the University of Georgia, his beloved alma mater.<sup>39</sup>

Rabbi Geffen remained indebted to Hirsch, and a friendship developed between them. His volume of essays, which included the Coca-Cola *Teshuva*, was dedicated, "For his kind assistance and interest in the publication of this volume, the writer extends grateful thanks to Mr. Harold Hirsch of Atlanta, Georgia."<sup>40</sup> After Hirsch's death in 1939, Rabbi Geffen's eulogy was published as a pamphlet in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English.<sup>41</sup>

According to this family tradition, when Rabbi Geffen was initially approached by other rabbis concerning the *kashrut* of Coca-Cola, he asked Hirsch for permission to see the secret formula of Coca-Cola. Otherwise, he explained to Hirsch, he would have no choice but to declare Coca-Cola not kosher. Six months passed and finally Hirsch replied that he had gained access to the secret formula for Rabbi Geffen but that the rabbi would not be allowed to share this formula with anyone. Supposedly Rabbi Geffen's daughter Helen, who was studying chemistry at the University of Georgia, analyzed the ingredients for her father and found the two that were not kosher.<sup>42</sup>

The earliest extant communication between Rabbi Geffen and Coca-Cola is found in a letter dated April 6, 1934, from Roy Gentry, assistant to Coca-Cola Vice President Harrison Jones. Gentry apologized for the fact that there had not been enough time to prepare the Atlanta Bottling Company for the Passover season of 1934. He alluded to the fact that the rabbi had already been in contact with Coca-Cola and that a solution had been found for the *kashrut* problem. It seems the only obstacle had been the lack of sufficient time before the holiday. The letter also mentioned a visit that Gentry paid to the Geffen home.<sup>43</sup>

In a letter dated July 17, 1934, from Gentry to L. F. Montgomery, general manager of the Atlanta Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Gentry addressed Rabbi Geffen's bona fides:

I have found Dr. Geffen to be very conscientious and fair... This is a matter of principle and not money with Dr. Geffen and he has signified that he will be more than pleased to

cooperate with you next year when you get ready to kosher Coca-Cola in the bottling plant for the Passover season.<sup>44</sup>

A later letter from Gentry to Rabbi Geffen, dated February 25, 1936, reported that the vegetable glycerin which would substitute for the animal glycerin was going to be produced by Proctor and Gamble in Cincinnati. Gentry supplied affidavits from Proctor and Gamble verifying that the glycerin was completely derived from vegetable sources. In keeping with Coca-Cola's insistence on guarding the secrecy of its formula, Gentry instructed the rabbi to keep the glycerin information "most confidential."<sup>45</sup> In addition, in a letter to Rabbi Geffen dated February 7, 1935, Hirsch described how Rabbi Geffen had shown him a draft copy of the English translation of his *teshuva* on Coca-Cola. Hirsch made the following suggestion, which he asked Rabbi Geffen to accept: "We are most grateful for what you have done in this connection, but at the same time the information we have given to you in regard to 'Coca-Cola' is confidential and we should not like to have published to the world anything in regard the contents of 'Coca-Cola,' I ask, therefore, that you eliminate from your proposed article any reference to glycerine or alcohol as such."<sup>46</sup>

The Gentry-Geffen correspondence does not explicitly delineate the reasons for Coca-Cola's decision to accede to the rabbi's request. On the one hand, it appears that Rabbi Geffen, despite his accent and other traces of his foreign background, succeeded in making a strongly favorable impression on the executives at Coca-Cola. On the other hand, one would assume that Coca-Cola would have agreed to the changes only if it were in its business interests to do so. However, in Gentry's letter to General Manager Montgomery dated July 17, 1934, he wrote, "While I know that your volume of sales through this channel is going to be very small, I feel sure that Dr. Geffen's distinguished position in the orthodox church in this part of the country will cause those orthodox Jews who do feel inclined to buy Coca-Cola koshered for the Passover season to appreciate all the trouble and inconvenience that this

may entail."<sup>47</sup> While engendering goodwill is always a good business practice, it seems unlikely, given the small number of Jews who kept kosher at that time, that this would have been enough reason to alter the special Coca-Cola formula.

In fact, while Coca-Cola's amenable position on the *kashrut* issue engendered goodwill among Jews, it also provoked some controversy that could have been bad for business. Nazi sympathizer Karl Flach, manufacturer of a German imitation drink called Afri-Cola, returned from a goodwill visit to the United States in 1936 with a handful of Coca-Cola bottle caps stamped "Kosher for Passover," which he had obtained while touring Coca-Cola's New York bottling plant. A photograph of the bottle caps soon appeared in Nazi literature to illustrate the extent of Jewish influence in the United States. Hirsch's role in the company was cited as evidence that Coca-Cola was secretly controlled by Jews, and the director of Coca-Cola's operations in Germany, Max Keith, urged the company to remove Hirsch from the board. To their credit, the executives of Coca-Cola stood by Hirsch and ignored both the Nazi attacks and Keith's pressure.<sup>48</sup>

The kosher status of Coca-Cola that Rabbi Geffen worked so hard to achieve came under attack several decades later from Rabbi Eliezer Silver, one of the leading Orthodox rabbis of the time and the head of the Agudath Harabbonim.<sup>49</sup> Rabbi Silver issued a proclamation in 1957 stating that Coca-Cola had not been kosher up to that point and claiming that Proctor and Gamble, the source of the glycerin for Coca-Cola, did not adequately separate the meat and vegetable glycerin from one another. He reported that on a visit to the Proctor and Gamble plant in Cincinnati, he observed the use of glycerin from both animal and plant products running through the same pipes. He wrote that Proctor and Gamble had agreed to change its production methods but that until this change was achieved, Coca-Cola was not kosher.<sup>50</sup> Over the years, Coca-Cola has had a number of rabbinic supervisors, and ultimately, in 1991, the supervision was assumed by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.<sup>51</sup>

Tobias Geffen lived through several generations of American Jewry. He came to America as part of a wave of immigrants who struggled to find their place in this country while maintaining their religious commitment. He witnessed the steady erosion of traditional practices among much of the Jewish community, including in his own synagogue, where mixed seating was introduced in the main sanctuary in 1958. Willing to search for flexibility within *halakha* but unwilling to go beyond its parameters, Rabbi Geffen insisted on maintaining an additional *minyān* with separate seating in the synagogue's chapel, where he personally officiated until shortly before his death.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, he worked hard to ensure that American Jews would have an easier time maintaining their commitment to Judaism in the United States. His successful efforts to guarantee that Coca-Cola was kosher provide an instructive example of the creativity and adaptability of the early twentieth-century American Orthodox rabbinite.

## ✿ NOTES

To Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, my mentor in the rabbinite and in the appreciation of the history of American Judaism.

1. For a review of American Judaism at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, 2004), 135–207.
2. A biographical sketch of Rabbi Geffen's life was written by his son, Louis Geffen, in *Lev Tuviah: On the Life and Work of Rabbi Tobias Geffen*, ed. Joel Ziff (Newton, Mass., 1988), 19–40. While it contains much useful information, it is written from a son's perspective. There is an excellent biographical article on Rabbi Geffen by Nathan N. Kaganoff, "An Orthodox Rabbinite in the South: Tobias Geffen, 1870–1970," in *American Jewish History* 73:1 (September 1983), 56–70. This article is based on material from the Tobias Geffen Papers in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society, including a typescript of an autobiography written in Yiddish in 1951 entitled *Fifty Years in the Rabbinite: Chapters of My Life*. For a complete list of Rabbi Geffen's writings and biographical material, see Moshe D. Sherman, *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn., 1996), 73–4.
3. Kaganoff, 57–58.
4. *Lev Tuviah*, 23, and Kaganoff, 59–61.
5. Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 232.
6. Kaganoff, 66–67, and *Lev Tuviah*, 33.
7. Kaganoff, 68, and *Lev Tuviah*, 39. The Hebrew text of Rabbi Geffen's benediction is found in *Lev Tuviah*, 57–58 (Hebrew section).
8. The Hebrew original of this *teshuva* can be found in Tuviah Geffen, *Karnei Ha-Hod* (Atlanta, 1935), 244–247. The English translation, prepared by his son Louis Geffen and his

grandson, David Geffen, is found in *Lev Tuviah*, 117–121. All references will be to the English translation.

9. The history of Coca-Cola has been documented in both popular and academic sources. The most recent and most complete history of Coca-Cola is Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (New York, 1993). See esp. pp. 456–460 for a discussion of the legend of the "sacred formula." For an article on the "sacred formula" and the problems that *kashrut* presented, see Laurie M. Grossman, "The Big Problem Is: If They Tell, That Wouldn't Be Kosher, Either," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 29, 1992), B1.
10. *Lev Tuviah*, 117.
11. Rabbi Geffen's efforts to examine the ingredients of Coca-Cola and to determine its kosher status can be pieced together through an examination of some of the documents found in his collection of letters now housed at the American Jewish Historical Society. Rabbi Geffen was meticulous in preserving all communications that were sent to him. Unfortunately, we lack most of his responses to these letters.
12. For a short biography of Rabbi Kochin, see Yosef Goldman, *Hebrew Printing in America 1735–1926: A History and Annotated Bibliography* (Brooklyn, 2006), 11:688.
13. Letter from Rabbi Kochin dated the third day of the portion *Matot/Massei* (July 14, 1925), Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
14. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
15. Rabbi Morris Taxon was the rabbi of Baron Hirsch Synagogue in Memphis, originally called Congregation Mischne. For a short biography, see *Who's Who in American Jewry 1926* (New York, 1927), 616, and *American Jewish Year Book 44* (1942–1943), 345.
16. Letter dated May 20, 1932, in Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
17. For a short biography of Rabbi Pardes, see Sherman, 161–162.
18. Letter from Rabbi Pardes, Tuesday *Parshat Terumah* (February 17, 1931), in Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
19. Letter from Rabbi Pardes, Saturday night, *Parshat Tetzaveh* (February 28, 1931), in Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
20. *Hapardes* 4:9 (December 1930), 3.
21. *Hapardes* 4:10 (January 1931) n.p. (back of cover).
22. *Hapardes* 4:12 (March 1931), 20.
23. This paragraph appeared as an introduction to the typewritten English translation of the Coca-Cola *Teshuva* and as the closing paragraph to the original Hebrew *teshuva* in Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1. Interestingly, it is absent both from the printed edition of *Karnei Ha-Hod* and from the English translation published in *Lev Tuviah*. I am perplexed by the reason for this omission. The letter to the rabbis is dated July 2, 1934, and appeared in both Hebrew and English. This letter is found in the collection of Stanley Raskas, Rabbi Geffen's grandson.
24. *Lev Tuviah*, 117.
25. *Karnei Ha-Hod*, 244.
26. Tuviah Geffen, *Nazar Yosef* (Atlanta, 1963), 11:157–61.
27. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1. In the English translation it is identified simply as glycerin without the word "oil."
28. *Lev Tuviah*, 120–121.
29. *Ibid.*, 121.
30. *Karnei Ha-Hod*, 246.
31. *Nazar Yosef*, 11:161, and Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
32. *Lev Tuviah*, 121.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 120.
35. For an analysis of this rabbinic approach in America, see *Jewish Commitment in a Modern World: Rabbi Hayyim Hirschenson and His Attitude to Modernity* by David Tamar, reviewed by Marc Shapiro, *Edah Journal* (Tammuz 5765) 5:1 [http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/5\\_1\\_Shapiro.pdf](http://www.edah.org/backend/JournalArticle/5_1_Shapiro.pdf).

36. Kaganoff, 64.
37. For a biography of Harold Hirsch, see Mark Bauman, "Role Theory and History: The Illustration of Ethnic Brokerage in the Atlanta Jewish Community in the Era of Transition and Conflict," in *American Jewish History* 73:1 (September 1983), 79–85, and a wonderful, though brief, biography of Hirsch in *American Jewish Year Book* 42 (1940–1941), 165–172.
38. See *American Jewish Year Book*, 170–172.
39. Based on a conversation with Stanley Raskas, Rabbi Geffen's grandson, on February 26, 2008, and an email correspondence with Rabbi David Geffen, also a grandson, on February 23, 2008.
40. *Karnei Ha-Hod* (Atlanta, 1935).
41. Rabbi Tobias Geffen, *Memory in Script: Eulogy on That Noble Personage Mr. Harold Hirsch* (Atlanta, 1940).
42. Based on a conversation with Stanley Raskas, Rabbi Geffen's grandson, on February 26, 2008, and an email correspondence with Rabbi David Geffen, also a grandson, on February 23, 2008.
43. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
44. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
45. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
46. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1. As is mentioned above (f.n. 23), on July 2, 1934, Rabbi Geffen wrote a Hebrew document addressed to "Honored Rabbi" stating that he had visited the Coca-Cola plant and replaced the nonkosher ingredient. This letter is translated into English and typed with Rabbi Geffen's signature and stamp. This letter used the word "glycerine" in Hebrew and English. This was most likely the letter that Hirsch had in his possession, and he insisted that the word "glycerine" be removed. I have not been able to locate a corrected copy of the letter. It is also possible that there was another letter pertaining to Passover containing the word "alcohol," since Hirsch referred also to "alcohol." I have not been able to locate this letter either.
47. Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
48. See Pendergrast, 219–220, and an excellent internet post at <http://ajhistory.blogspot.com/2006/07/rabbi-tobias-geffen-harold-hirsch-and.html>.
49. For a short biography of Silver, see Sherman, 199–200.
50. *National Jewish Post* (October 18, 1957) n.p. Located in Geffen Papers, Box 15, Folder 1.
51. In 2003 Rabbi Shmuel Gruber quoted Rabbi Geffen's *teshuvah* and agreed with his argument that the glycerin could not be considered nonexistent since it was a necessary ingredient. However, Rabbi Gruber ignored the remainder of the *teshuvah*, where Rabbi Geffen explained that Coca-Cola no longer used animal glycerin and Gruber argued that Coca-Cola is not kosher. See Rabbi Shmuel Gruber, "Be-Din Bittul Davar She-Derekh Tikkun Asiato Be-Khakh," in *Ohr Yisrael* 8:2 (Tevet 5763), 124.
52. Kaganoff, 69.

## Middle Eastern Antisemitism: Indigenous Affliction or Imported Plague?

Michael Oren

During the siege of Beirut in the 1982 Lebanon War, when I was serving as a paratrooper in the Israeli Army, my unit stumbled upon the abandoned headquarters of the Popular Front for the Liberation Palestine. There, in addition to stacks of Kalashnikov rifles and Claymore mines, we found numerous Arabic translations of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Mein Kampf*. Most poignantly, plastered to the wall was a large swastika flag and next to it a colored portrait of Adolf Hitler. The meaning of these items for the PFLP was, at the time, a mystery to me. What interest did these avowedly Marxist, secular Palestinians have in rank antisemitic paraphernalia?

A few weeks later I returned to the United States and began my doctoral studies in Middle Eastern history at Princeton University. My arrival at Princeton coincided with the beginning of a debate, which continues to this day, over whether Jews fared better under Islamic rule than under Christendom, particularly during the Middle Ages. One school of thought argued that there was basically no difference – Jews in Islamic lands were as subject to pogroms, discrimination, and sumptuary laws as were their



# RAV CHESED

---

*essays in honor of*

---

Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein

VOLUME II

EDITED BY  
RAFAEL MEDOFF



KTAV Publishing House, Inc.  
Jersey City, New Jersey

2009