



***Museums in Strange Places***  
**“Baltimore’s Jewish Roots ft. Harry Houdini”**  
**(S02/E08)**

**Episode Description:**

What do Baltimore, one of the oldest synagogues in America, Eastern European Catholics, seances, and Harry Houdini have in common? You’ll find out in this episode, a visit to the Jewish Museum of Maryland, an institution that prioritizes storytelling (and is pretty good at it). Join me for a tour of the historic Lloyd Street Synagogue, a journey back in history to the heyday of the Jewish market on Baltimore’s East Lombard Street, and a celebration of the life of Harry Houdini, the son of a rabbi.

This episode is sponsored by [Grove History Consulting](#).

All the music in this episode is by [Seth Kibel and the Alexandria Klezmet](#).

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[Street sounds..]

**Hannah (Scripted):** *I’m standing outside the Lloyd Street Synagogue in the Historic Jonestown neighborhood in Baltimore. Here at 11 Lloyd Street is the third oldest synagogue building in the US, the first to ever be built in Maryland. Over the course of its life, it served the spiritual needs of German Jews, Lithuanian Catholics, and Orthodox Russian Jews from Eastern Europe.*

*This building hold so many stories, told and untold.*

*And in many ways, it tells the story of Baltimore, a city shaped by its role as one of the largest ports of entry for immigration into the US in the 19th and early 20th century. As different peoples arrived in Baltimore, they established houses of worship, often moving into the sanctuaries and synagogues' who previous congregations had advanced enough economically to move into nicer neighborhoods.*

*Today, the synagogue is a portal to the past, and an important part of the Jewish Museum of Maryland, an institution dedicated to finding, protecting, and sharing the stories of Maryland's Jewish communities.*

*In this episode, a talented storyteller is going to take us on a journey through the history of the synagogue's many congregations and introduce us to nearby East Lombard Street and its history as a bustling market in the heart of a Jewish neighborhood. Finally, we'll hear the story of one of the most famous Jewish entertainers who no one knew was Jewish, Harry Houdini.*

[Music begins]

*Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, a consultant specializing in podcasting for museums and cultural nonprofits. And this a show for people who love museums, stories, culture, and exploring the world.*

*Museums are the keepers of our history and culture, but they are also reflections of who we are now. I'm currently exploring the museums of Maryland, my home state, to discover how they reflect and shape this state's unique identity.*

*This episode is sponsored by Grove History Consulting.*

[Sound of door opening]

**Marvin Pinkert:** The Jewish community came to Baltimore in the 1700s.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *This is Marvin Pinkert, Director of the Jewish Museum of Maryland.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** However, they didn't have a permanent home. There were many reasons for this, one of which was that the constitution of the state of Maryland said that you could not hold office or sign a contract or be a witness at a trial if you were Jewish, because you had to sign a Christian oath. Until 1826 when the document with the unfortunate name the Maryland Jew bill gets signed. It's intent was good. The intent was to nullify that provision of the

constitution. And with that, they could now apply for this organization, what was initially called Nidche Israel, the scattered of Israel.

They were determined to build their first home. And in 1827, they start on that pathway. It takes them until 1845 to raise the money, \$20,000 to build the building and actually create the structure. In the meantime, they go out and hire a rabbi, the first ordained rabbi in America, Rabbi Rice. Rabbi Rice is hunting around for a congregation in the United States and he's in Newport, Rhode Island. You saw the saw those metal gates outside? The man who made those gates went to Newport to try to persuade Rabbi Rice that he'd be far better off in Baltimore than in Newport. And he was persuasive. Newport didn't look like it had a big future at the time. Baltimore had great years ahead.

And so Rabbi Rice comes here, and he is thinking that he will become Chief Rabbi of the United States. One problem. The United States has no deep desire to have a Chief Rabbi. So instead he becomes a very influential figure. But he is troubled by the fact that people aren't sufficiently observant. They break the sabbath, they eat non-kosher foods. They intermarry he says in the thousands, which is hard to believe because there are only 7,000 Jews in Baltimore. In any case, he decides to give up, form his own smaller Orthodox congregation, and leave this one to the next generation, which is still very traditional in its beliefs. I hesitate to use the word Orthodox because Orthodoxy doesn't yet exist as the modern Orthodox movement.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Before he tells me about the next era of the the Lloyd Street synagogue history and its second leader, Rabbi Illoway, Marvin climbs the stairs to the Bema, a raised platform in the center of the room used for Torah reading.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** Let me go where I feel more comfortable...

So from this Bema in 1861, Rabbi Illoway is asked to make remarks on a national day of fasting. This was an idea by one of our least effective presidents, President Buchanan, that all the churches and synagogues in nation should pray for prohibition of Civil War

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Spoiler alert, those prayers didn't work.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** And he gets up here and he says, who can blame our brother in the south for wanting to avoid the cruel despotism imposed upon them. So he makes this long speech that is pro-slavery. Across the street at a second congregation formed by people who deserted this one for more reformed background, there is a rabbi by the name of David Einhorn, and Rabbi Einhorn says, who is this man who gets up in the morning and thanks God for his deliverance from Egypt and in the evening condones slavery from the highest pulpit.

So there was a little civil war here on Baltimore Street between two halves of the Jewish community and, uh, that actually had very significant consequences for this congregation. What happened was that, during the Civil War, the leadership, the lay leadership of the congregation lost its authority. The president of the congregation was arrested for allegedly selling uniforms to the Confederacy and was sent to prison in upstate New York. The vice president has his children more or less shooting at one another. And that sort of was a distraction. And so, so in the end they lost authority. And you see their names disappear from the minutes of the congregation.

The people who take over have some different ideas. Among these ideas is, well maybe with men away at war we should have women in the choir. This doesn't pass in 1865 or in the next few years, but in 1870, that resolution passes.

And now the congregation, this congregation is divided. The vice president, having recovered from the civil war, says, wait a second, I want this to be run the way it used to be run. And he goes to court to try to challenge the leadership of the congregation. He fails to succeed. And uh, at that point, he takes half the congregation, walks down to the other end of the block and acquires the property and builds another synagogue that's a few feet taller than this synagogue.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Back in the Lloyd Street Synagogue, shorter by a few feet than its more traditional neighbor, the shift towards reformed practices, like seating men and women together, continues. But that's not all that's changing at the time. The German Jewish community that built the synagogue, the Baltimore Hebrew congregation, is becoming more affluent. In the 1880s, they decide to move northwest in the city, becoming the first of several Jewish communities to leave the area for a more wealthy one once they are able.*

*But it's not a Jewish congregation that occupies the newly vacant Lloyd Street Synagogue. Lithuanian Catholics living in the area had no church of their own, and instead had to worship at the Polish Catholic Church despite tensions between the two communities. Like the Baltimore Hebrew congregation before them, they wanted their own space to worship, and so the synagogue became St. John the Baptist Catholic Church from 1888 until 1905.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** The hole you see, the cutaway beyond the chandelier, the hole in the ceiling is where the steeple was.

**Hannah:** So they added a steeple.

**Marvin Pinkert:** They added a steeple. They also put an altar directly under the Star of David, that remained in the building. This is the oldest star of David as far as we can tell on the exterior of the Jewish building, for a Jewish synagogue. For the first time, people felt confident enough of their position in America to put a star of David on it. And it has persisted since 1845.

[Noise of creaky wooden floors]

[Going down the stairs noises]

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Stepping down from the Bema, Marvin leads me down the stairs into the basement of the synagogue where, along with a historic mikvah for ritual bathing and a matzah oven, a small exhibit share more of the building's history and the different congregations who made it their spiritual home.*

*But before we hear the rest of this incredible story, I want to tell you about this episode's sponsor, Grove History Consulting. As you may know, podcasts require a huge time investment. This show is no exception. And traveling to museums costs money. If I didn't have sponsors, I wouldn't be able to keep episodes coming out. That's why I'm so grateful to Grove History Consulting for helping to keep Museums in Strange Places going. Grove History Consulting empowers history organizations to demonstrate their relevance and define their impact through exhibition development, education strategy, and writing. Tim Grove has been described as one of the most engaging, innovative, and entrepreneurial leaders in our field. He has years of deep experience in public history work, and is the co-founder of the History Relevance Initiative. I had the privilege to work with Tim on several history projects during my time at the American Association for State and Local History, and can personally recommend Grove History Consulting to any history organization looking to develop more effective education programs and engage visitors with relevant exhibitions. Learn more about Grove History Consulting's services and Tim's qualifications at [GroveHistoryConsulting.com](http://GroveHistoryConsulting.com).*

**Marvin Pinkert:** As I mentioned, in 1905 the Lithuanian congregation gains enough affluence to move northwest and is succeeded by a poor Russian Jewish congregation, which pays half as much for the building as did the Lithuanians who paid half as much as did the original people who built the building. So as a real estate investment, the Lloyd Street synagogue wasn't that great, but it still was an important and influential synagogue in the community, especially in the Orthodox community, both in Baltimore and beyond.

But by 1959, the Jewish community here, even the Russian Jewish community had mainly moved on to other parts of the city. And that meant that there weren't enough people to sustain the synagogue. You can see the awful condition that the building was in. So the city

decided that it would be best if the building was simply torn down and replaced by a parking lot. But there was someone who objected. His name was Wilbur Hunter, as you can tell from the name, or might guess from the name, he's not Jewish. He was the director of the Peale Museum, the city museum at the time. And he said, you can't do this. This is one of the 12 most important buildings in Baltimore. And he helps organize the synagogue directors to create something called the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, which through several iterations became the Jewish Museum of Maryland, in order to preserve this building. That was its original purpose.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Since its founding in 1960 as the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, the museum's mission has extended beyond the preservation of the Lloyd Street Synagogue, which today is the third oldest standing synagogue in the country. In the late 1970s, a historian named Helen Sollins began advocating for the restoration of the B'nai Israel synagogue. B'nai Israel was build just down the street from the Lloyd Street Synagogue in the 1880s, by Eastern European Jews, but had fallen into disrepair. Thanks to the organizing efforts of Sollins, whose grandfather had studied the Talmud at B'nai Israel in its heyday, a plan was created to not only renovate this younger synagogue, but to create a museum building for the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland, who would maintain both synagogues and create exhibits about Jewish history in the region. Today, B'nai Israel is the spiritual home of a growing congregation and the Jewish Museum of Maryland is an established community anchor with a large collection and exhibitions that tell the story of everyday people.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** We're now headed to *Voices of Lombard Street*, which picks up where our last story left off about the Jewish community and the folks who moved in here in the 1890s and afterwards. And yes, this is very cold. That's in part because right below this room is where the collections are held. We have 11,000 objects and thousands of files of archival material, and those need a temperature adjustment. And so the space above them is also quite chilly.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Voices of Lombard Street: A Century of Change in East Baltimore is a permanent exhibition organized into various scenes of everyday life from the days when East Lombard Street, only a few blocks from the museum, was a bustling market. This neighborhood was the center of Jewish life in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and people from many different backgrounds, including many immigrants worked in the shops and stalls of the market street. As soon as you enter the exhibit, you hear the many sounds and voices of the busy street coming from speakers throughout the gallery. The first room we enter gives us a glimpse into a family home with life-size historical photos of family members, quotes from Lombard Street residents on the wall, and a real bathtub occupied by a picture of a fish.*

**Marvin Pinkert** The exhibit has material that relates to the lives of everyday people, which is really the heart of what this museum is all about, the lives of everyday Jewish Marylanders.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Quotes on the wall highlight the voices of these everyday people, including one memory that explains the fish in the bathtub: "My mom used to make gefilte fish every Friday. She would go down to the fish market, which wasn't too far, just past the Jones Falls. And she'd buy fish and bring it home and they would be swimming. And because the fish occupied the tub, God forbid we should bother the fish, we had to go to the public facility where they had showers. Her gefilte fish was absolutely out of this world."*

**Marvin Pinkert:** So Lombard Street is known for its row houses, which typically had on the lower level some type of small factory shop and on the upper level, residences. And the factory floors were dominated in the turn of the turn of the 20th century by clothing shops. These were the sweatshops of the era. Typically they had German Jewish ownership and Russian Jewish workers. This section of the exhibit depicts the types of conditions under which people worked in the 1890s.

Then we talk about the fact that the neighborhood was never exclusively Jewish. The original Jonestown actually had Little Italy is a part of it, uh, before it became a distinctive neighborhood. So people were in close proximity to each other.

Uh, we also feature in this area the exhibit a special treat for kids, which is the outhouse. Since this was one of the last areas of the city to get plumbing.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *As we move through the exhibit, we see Lombard Street changing. Marvin stops at a depiction of the many shops and their owners in the mid-1900s.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** And this depicts a Lombard Street that people in my generation would remember. This is Lombard Street as a commercial boulevard—small merchants from one end of the street to the other. And it's where you came if you wanted really fresh chicken. Mr. Yankelov love would dispatch the chicken right in front of you. We depict Mr Yankelov over there.

It's also where....Tulkoff started making horseradish here. And so it had not only a distinctive look, but a distinct to order... and it is a very warm memory for many people coming down to Lombard Street.

And we mentioned some of the other types of businesses that were here: Hendler's ice cream. The Yiddish theater was performed in this area. It was the original home of the Jewish Education Alliance, which today we know as the JCC. And it was a lot about people who had just come off the boat learning how to assimilate into American society.

This is also where we make our, paean to a Harry Atman and Attman's Deli, the oldest institution still existing in the neighborhood, now over a hundred years old. Still makes great corned beef. I can tell you from personal experience.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Before getting a tour of the museum's new exhibit on Harry Houdini exhibit from Marvin, I wanted to understand how the Jewish Museum of Maryland fits into this historic neighborhood's present and future. And how they fit into the larger Jewish community.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** We are an anchor institution in Jonestown. We are a part of the Jonestown Planning Council and Historic Jonestown Inc., and we have helped develop a community visioning process here. There is no successful Jewish Museum of Maryland without a successful Jonestown, just as there is no successful Baltimore region without a successful Baltimore City.

In terms of the Jewish community, we are a front door for many people who are not tightly affiliated, they don't belong to a synagogue, they don't have other types of ties to Jewish life. For a \$10 ticket, they become a part of the Jewish experience. And that's an important part of what we are. We say that we connect the Jewish community to its roots and everyone else, visitor and resident alike, to the Jewish experience, because of course, you don't have to be Jewish to come to the Jewish Museum of Maryland.

[Musical break]

**Hannah (Scripted):** *And now, as promised, the story of Harry Houdini, one of the most famous Jewish people that no one knows is Jewish.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** So one of our special features is our changing exhibit gallery, and every three-to-six months there's something new here. And this one is, uh, one of my favorites: *Inescapable: the Life and Legacy of Harry Houdini*. You may be wondering what is this doing here? First of all, I have to explain that Harry Houdini is a son of a rabbi. And most people are, even people who know the name Houdini well are not aware of that.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *But what does Harry Houdini the great escape artist have to do with Maryland? Marvin points me to a black and white photo, blown up fill the wall in front of us. It's a photo of Charles Street in Baltimore, absolutely packed with people.*



**Marvin Pinkert:** You can't see Houdini in the photo, what you see are the 50,000 people looking at Houdini. If you think about it, I first saw this photo is about the size of a three-by-five card

**Hannah:** And now you've got it blown up to the whole wall.

**Marvin Pinkert:** Right. And you see the detail in the photo that you couldn't see before. And you wonder, how did 50,000 people in 1916 even assemble on Charles Street? Given that it, there are no easy, uh, mass transit vehicles. A few street cars that are locked in this traffic. But it's not clear how all these people arrived. And you also notice that there are people doing things far more dangerous than Houdini is doing, they're standing on the ledge to watch Houdini. He at least has ropes around him.

*Over 27 years, Houdini performed almost 100 shows in Maryland. But it was another magician's performance that sparked the idea for this exhibit.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** We had a gap in our calendar for the summer this summer, and I ended up at Artscape last July, and I'm sitting there trying to get out of the heat and I escape into one of the theater spaces that's there, and I'd be willing to see anything in that theater space. And what shows up as a magician by the name of David London. And I'm sitting there, sweating, thinking about what am I going to do next summer? And suddenly the thought goes through my head. I remember from my American Studies class that Harry Houdini was a son of a rabbi, and this man standing in front of me looks like he might be an interesting candidate to be a guest curator. And so on a whim, I write to him and say, "Have you ever thought about doing an exhibit on Harry Houdini?" And he writes back and says, "Well, I gave my Bar Mitzvah speech on Jews and magic. So yes, I have."

He did this is a labor of love, and it is just wonderful because he was of course already connected with the Society of American Magicians, which gave him access to all the collectors who have in their basement little pieces of Houdini memorabilia. And so as he went around the country doing his act, he would stop by these small "museums"—I put that in air quotes—and would try to persuade them that they should share with us a few pieces that they had. And eventually the few pieces became an entire exhibit.

Well, Harry Houdini was perhaps the most famous a man of his time, certainly the most famous celebrity of his time. Most exhibits that have talked about Houdini, and there've been several, there are about 150 biographies, two movies and documentaries, but most of it focuses on the period in which he is Harry Houdini the great success. Our exhibit is divided in two. The first half is his first 26 years of life where he is Eric Weiss, the struggling person who tries to transform

himself into Harry Houdini, which is his greatest trick of all. And the second 26 years are represented in the second half of the exhibit. It gives a little more balance to the story and tells you that he did not become a Houdini overnight. Eric Weiss is born. Harry Houdini is invented.

One of the challenges that David faced in putting together the exhibit was that Harry Houdini tells many stories about himself and only some of them are true. He was a master marketer. But with the help of some other researchers, including David Saltman who was here last week speaking, he got to some interesting facts.

We start in Budapest, which is where Harry is born.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *But like Marvin points out, our leading man becomes Harry Houdini, but he's born as \*Eric\* \*Weiss\* in 1874.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** At age four, he comes to the United States. His father gets a job as the first rabbi in Appleton, Wisconsin.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Fun fact, about a hundred years after the Weiss family moves to Appleton, my mom's family moved to the town, where she would spend her high-school years before leaving to go to college in Milwaukee. Shoutout to my mom, who is not a magician, but who always listens to my podcast episodes.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** Rabbi Weiss does okay for about four years. And then the congregation decides that they have had enough of Rabbi Weiss and they break their contract with him. The whole congregation came from one town in Germany, and they hire their former school teacher to be their rabbi.

And so Rabbi Weiss subsequently finds himself out of work. He heads to Milwaukee, and those are the darkest years of Harry's life, because there's such privation in Milwaukee. According again to Mr. Saltman, these are the years that the family lives in a stable. But Harry runs away from home at age 12. We have the note, a copy of the note that Harry sends to his mom, "...your truant son, Eric Weiss." This is one of the early contacts he has with the circus, begins in Milwaukee and on his escape afterwards to, think about performing. His first formal performance comes when he reunites with his father in New York, and he goes to the young men's Hebrew Association where he is a popular athlete and he does a show as Eric the Prince of the Air. And that's his first magic performance.

At some point, he decides that he and his friend Jacob Hyman are going to form an act, which they named after a famous 19th century magician, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. And somebody

convinces Harry that if he adds an “i” to something in French, it means like “partisan of,” something like that. And so he calls the act The Brothers Houdini, and they have a great trick called metamorphosis, which we allow visitors to try to repeat in some form, which is that he and his partner switch places. One is in locked in the trunk and one is standing on top, and they raise a curtain and they reverse position. Um, It's also when they perform in Coney island, where the Houdini brothers, who are not brothers, meet the Fluoro sisters who are not sisters. And Harry falls in love with one of them, Beatrice who becomes his wife Bess. And Bess Houdini is for the rest of his life will be his partner. He comments that Bess fits into the trunk a whole lot better than Jacob does. And so she becomes part of the act.

In the 1890s, Harry tries everything in the entertainment business to keep himself alive. This is about the period where he worked with Welsh Brothers Circus and, you notice this small thin diary, Harry Houdini's diary of his travels with the circus, and we've turned it to the page for his, first trip to Maryland, and I have to tell you things did not work out so well. So you see it, you know, September 22nd: “Arrived Cumberland,” and then it goes through and it says, “Rained hard, no dinner.” So he was literally starving on his first trip to Maryland, but he tried. He was...some people called him the nickname Dime Museum Harry, because he performed at Dime Museums, the lowest form of entertainment in this period. He was also a snake oil salesman at medicine shows. He went to the 1893 World's Fair, and he had variable luck in Vaudeville, until he met a man by the name of Martin Beck. Martin Beck says, basically, “Harry as a magician, you're one of a thousand. But as a handcuff artist, you're one of a kind.” And he persuades Harry that he should focus on his escapes rather than on his magic. And that turns out to change Harry Houdini's whole fortune. He will bring magic back into his act later on, but his claim to fame, literally, in the period of the early 1900s is his work as an escape artist.

In terms of escapes, we managed to have quite wide collection....

**Hannah:** Wow look at all that stuff!

**Marvin Pinkert:** Handcuffs and picks and locks, some of which are monogrammed with an H in the middle of the key for Houdini. And somebody managed to save a bobby pin that they claimed Houdini used as an escape lock. The, the large crowbar is part of how he got out of the crates. When you get dropped in the river, locked in handcuffs in a crate, he did need a crowbar to lift out the wood on the other side.

**Hannah:** Wow. That's a great collection of tools.

**Marvin Pinkert:** And we illustrate one of his escapes is from milk can. We illustrate what it took just to crouch into the milk can. Not everyone can do this. It's certainly I can't.

And this is the only known recording of Harry Houdini's voice.

[Clip of the recording]

**Marvin Pinkert:** It says, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I take great pleasure in introducing my original invention, the water torture cell."

And we have an original Harry Houdini straight jacket on display as well as many of the posters used in his challenges. Harry Houdini, as I said, was a master publicist. First of all, he always did his hanging out of the building trick, the one where he escapes from a straight jacket upside down hanging out of the building. He did that either in front of or across from the city's biggest newspaper, whatever city he was in. The other trick of his was...these challenges which look like they are spontaneous...both he and his confederates would write letters saying please challenge Harry Houdini to to break out of your jail or to a breakout of your beer bottle, or whatever it was that they wanted him to break out of. And then they would respond. We know that in part because a Baltimore beer company writes a letter back to Harry that says, due to the numerous requests we received, we are challenging you to break out of our beer barrel.

**Hannah:** That's awesome.

**Marvin Pinkert:** That must have been one of the most fun challenges since I assumed the beer barrel was filled with beer.

Then we have aspects of Houdini that aren't as well known. Houdini was in movies, and was a silent film star and even started his own film studio where he unfortunately lost a lot of his money on trying to patent some film techniques. He did have several patents that were successful.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *And it's through patents that the museum discovered a new connection between Houdini and Maryland...*

**Marvin Pinkert:** On opening night, the secretary of state of Maryland showed up with a folio under his arm and I was kind of surprised and he said, "Well, my grandfather was Houdini's patent attorney and I have the correspondence." I wish I had known this is three months ago when we started to put together the exhibit, but it was wonderful.

This is one of his movie posters. It's supposedly is the first time a robot is shown in the movies. And I would have you notice Harry's forehead and have you think about whether there's another Harry who might have been based on this.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *The movie is The Master Mystery, and the poster shows Harry Houdini with a large diagonal scar across his forehead...à la Harry Potter. I did a bit of digging around online to see if anyone had made this connection before, and all I turned up was a fan theory by blogger Sweet Peas and Bees pointing out that Harry Houdini is considered one the greatest magicians of all time and that he died on the same day that Harry Potter's parents are killed by Voldemort, October 31st. In 2014, when someone racist on Twitter said there were no Jews at Hogwarts, J. K. Rowling replied "Anthony Goldstein, Ravenclaw, Jewish Wizard."*

*So maybe I'll tweet at Rowling and see if she confirms or denies that this uncanny Harry Houdini Harry Potter connection is intentional.*

*Harry Houdini obviously didn't have any real magical powers, but that didn't stop a giant....among British writers...from telling Harry that he was a wizard.*

**Marvin Pinkert:** By 1920, Houdini was known throughout the world and, among other things, was an author. And his most recent book was one that he wanted to share with the elites of Britain because he thought that they would help him promote the book. So he writes to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, famous for Sherlock Holmes, and they strike up at least a short term friendship. Conan Doyle becomes convinced that Harry is actually a wizard in real life and that he's able to have special spiritual powers because Conan Doyle, especially after World War One, is a committed spiritualist. Like so many people, he lost people dear to him during the war. His brother, his son...and he sincerely believes that he can reach across the veil, as they put it in those days, and communicate with his lost relatives. And so there is a tremendous increase in the number of mediums in the United States right after World War One for this reason.

And Conan Doyle comes back and offers Houdini a chance to have a seance with his wife in order to contact Houdini's mother, remember how attached he was to his mother. So she is an automatic writer, meaning that the spirits move her arm...sort of a giant weegee board...and she writes out what his mother's messages are, and Houdini comes out pale. And Conan Doyle thinks that he's convinced that this is true. Instead, what Houdini is thinking is how do I break it to Conan Doyle that this can't possibly be true? First of all, the first thing she did was create large cross, which would definitely not be his mother's first preference...

**Hannah:** ....as a Jewish woman

**Marvin Pinkert:** ....and then after that, everything is written in perfect English. And he said, my mother could barely speak English. So unless she took lessons in the world beyond this isn't possible.

So, he decides that this is the other people are being defrauded. And so having spent his whole life fooling people, he says, you know, it's one thing to pay to be fooled and another thing to be fooled into paying. He decides to take on mediums as a crusade. He spends the next three or four years of his life debunking all sorts of spiritualists, and it in fact becomes part of his act. Literally, there's a poster that says that his first act as magic and illusion, his second act is his escapes, and his third act is fraud mediums exposed, which he would do on stage. He had an early version of a slideshow called the lantern show that he would put on and show how the spirit photos were faked. And we in fact allow visitors to make their own spirit photo in the exhibit where they can see exactly how it was faked. If you take your picture here with a flash, you will find that Houdini has joined you in the picture. He also went around in disguise and along with his confederates who like Madam Mackenburg, who would come into seances, and his tagline was, I am Houdini and you are a fraud. He'd pull off the disguise and have that dramatic moment. He usually tried to bring reporter with him, sometimes a policeman as well, just to short circuit the process. He testified in the anti-fortune telling bill before Congress, and it's a fascinating chapter in his life. He is accused of being against fortune tellers because he's Jewish. And so when I entered this exhibit, I asked myself, did anyone actually know in his own lifetime that Houdini was Jewish? And the answer is most definitely yes. Not always for good reasons, but they did.

Then the last sections of the exhibit deal first with Houdini's death. He is punched in the stomach in Montreal and then continues to perform for four days before going to doctor way too late in Detroit. And he dies on Halloween in 1926. That is made for legend.

He supposedly sent Bess an envelope with the message that he would deliver if he could come back from the grave and talk to her, and so Bess for 10 years held seances to see if she could communicate with Houdini. She was not successful and they get, the seances is, have gone on now for 90 years, first by Houdini's brother, and then his other relatives along the way. And the 91st seance, which is this Halloween, will be held here.

**Hannah (Scripted):** *Did Houdini make himself known at the 91st seance, held in the Jewish Museum of Maryland? No, of course not. I like to think that even if Houdini did get to the other side and realize he could come back, he would probably have stayed there just to stick it to the fraudulent spiritualists that he campaigned against during his life.*

*If we can't learn what the afterlife is from the Houdini seance at the museum, we can learn something about how museums fit into the cultural fabric of our communities. They are places where history comes alive through storytelling and creative exhibit design. They are places where the physical fragments of a life—like the Houdini memorabilia collected from magicians across the country—can occupy a space of reflection and curiosity...a space where we can gather to try and make contact with the lives that came before us.*

*And that's what the Jewish Museum of Maryland is doing more broadly as well. They are a point of connection where anyone can come to find out more about the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Maryland's Jewish communities. Through sacred historical spaces like the Lloyd Street Synagogue and the first-person stories of everyday people in the Voices of Lombard Street exhibit, you, the visitor, can partially lift the veil between the present and the past and get to know the people that came before you. Perhaps, along the way, you'll also learn something profound about yourself.*

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*Thanks for joining me on this adventure as I explore Maryland's museums. Today's episode was sponsored by Grove History Consulting. If you enjoy Museums in Strange Places, please help me keep it going by leaving a review on iTunes or sharing this episode with a friend.*

*The featured songs in this episode are by Seth Kibel, an award-winning instrumentalist in the Washington-Baltimore area who records independently and with his klezmer band The Alexandria Kleztet. Klezmer, in case you don't know, is a musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. Find more of Seth Kibel's music, information on the topics discussed in this episode, and picture of the Jewish Museum of Maryland on my website [hhethmon.com](http://hhethmon.com)*

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BONUS: Underneath the Synagogue

Yeah. So I'm going to take you back into one of the very special places it's here. Have you heard of a Mikvah?

A Mikvah is a ritual bath and most people associated with women, but it's actually used by both men and women, uh, at certain times of the month and certain times of ritual like Friday nights for men. Um, and there are actually two mikvahs here. There is a mikvah for the men with its changing stalls and a Mikvah for women with bathtubs. Uh, because we were supposed to be clean before you got into the Mikvah how this uh, was in a statement about men's hygiene, I don't know, but uh, it evidently changing stalls were sufficient. And this was from 1905 to uh, 1959 Mikvahs of the Shamari Mish Mirror synagogue.

And we knew they existed from the beginning, but I should have pointed out there's a window sill upstairs that is tilted a bit. And so they went looking for the cause that window sill tilting and what they found was rather remarkable.

We're not walking over a picture of yet another excavated Mikvah. This one is from 1845, which is remarkable on several scores. One, the wall of the building. Remember I mentioned upstairs that the wall had to be moved out. The wall, the building is sending it on. This side of us were beyond the wall of the building. So they had to go back and look at the minutes and discovered that there were in fact two outbuildings with this structure. One was a one room school, a Hebrew school, and one was a ritual bath because a ritual bath is one of the real requirements for observant Jews in any community they enter.

So these would have been part of the outbuildings of the synagogue?

That's correct.

From the beginning, From the beginning. And uh, what you see in the various pipes is that this Mikvah needed to be fed by two natural sources of water, one of which would be rainwater. So there was a cistern associated with it and the other would be a flowing stream. We believe it's Jones Falls in this case, that is the fourth source of it. Whatever the Stream is. The one thing I can tell you is that it's still running. How do I know this? Because they went and the plan was to excavate the Mikvah completely. And they went to the level that you see in the picture and what you see is a pipe with the Mikvah starting to fill up with water. And they realized that they had a problem. So instead of covering over with a sheet of Plexi that people could walk on the fully excavated Mikvah they quickly took a picture, sanded it in, and it's for another generation to work on and you walk over a picture of the 1845 Mikvah.



Wow. So

with the stream was still running when they excavated it. That's incredible.

Also, I cannot explain how in 1845 given heating conditions, how this would've worked in winter. Uh, but I suspect that it was a short immersion experience most winters. Uh, the, the other thing is that, remember I said it needed another source of water, a cistern, well, the cistern and that you see here feeds the newer Mikvehs. But that wasn't where the cistern was for the original Mikvah. This cistern for the original Mikvah was over here on this map. You can see it. It's right underneath the wall. And that was a reason that the wall was tilting. Cause what they did was they filled in the cistern and with rocks and then built a wall over it. What could go wrong? Well 170 years of compression can actually be enough to tilt the window up above.

Well, Hey, I'm amazed that lasted 170 years in that condition. I'm going to for my own notes, describe this.

It's kind of, maybe I'm about five feet deep. I'm like a small, uh, rectangular, kind of like a, a, um, like a submerged bath and there's stairs going down so you could stand down there and to imagine what it is full. You'd be, it'd be really easy to get yourself fully submerged in there. Yes. And there's lovely tile work there, so it's, it's nicely decorated but it kind of goes down from the floor. Um, and then they're in the two rooms that are like that.

I've never seen one of these. Most people haven't, I mean, yeah, if you're not going in synagogue and again, Mikvah is rarely used in modern reformed synagogues but it's very common in....

Um, I was just going to mention, uh, the safe that you see here was not only for keeping valuables, but during the period of uh, um, prohibition was use to keep the synagogue schnapps.

One last item to point out is the Matzah oven. The communal Matzah oven. This is from the second congregation, the Orthodox congregation in 1905. They repurpose the church's kitchen oven, uh, and restructured it so that it could be used to bake Matzah, which has to be, if you're truly observant, it has to be baked for exactly 18 minutes. And since they could not be sure that the newly commercial packaged Matzah was baked for 18 minutes, they bake their own and uh, it's called [inaudible] or watched Matzah because it is carefully watched and observed.