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The Jewish Publication Society 1888-1988*

THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY OF AMERICA will be one hundred years old on June 3, 1988. It has compiled an enviable record over the past century: publication of over seven hundred different titles, distribution of some nine million Jewish books, translations of nearly one hundred foreign-language volumes of Judaica into English, and sponsorship or co-sponsorship of some of the most significant Jewish cultural undertakings of the last century, including two Bible translations; a six-volume revised translation of Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*; seventeen volumes of the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics; seven volumes of Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*; and eighteen volumes (to date) of Salo W. Baron's *Social and Religious History of the Jews*. No Jewish subject has been alien to the Society. History and Bible, Talmud and Midrash, Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism, Literature and Art, America and Israel, Contemporary Jewry and Contemporary Judaism, books for children, and books for collectors — all these and more have been represented on the Society's list of publications. No Jewish publisher in the whole history of Jewish publishing has a comparable record of achievement.

The Society's centennial offers an appropriate moment for a look back. This is not the place for a full-scale history of the Society; that will require a volume to itself. Instead, I propose to return to 1888, the year that the Society was actually founded. What happened in that fateful year, and, as I shall more briefly describe, what was achieved in the quarter-century that followed, shaped a good deal of the Society's subsequent history, revealing much about the Society's ongoing aims and objectives.

* This article is partially based on the second chapter of my forthcoming history of the Jewish Publication Society, to be published in 1988. Full documentation may be found there.

The Jewish Publication Society was American Jewry's third try at founding a society for the publication of Jewish books: two earlier attempts had ended in failure. The first, in 1845, was the brainchild of Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia. His devotion to American Jewish education and culture is legendary, but even he could not shoulder both the literary and administrative burdens of a publication society alone. In 1851, after publishing fourteen numbers of a series entitled the *Jewish Miscellany*, including reprints of Anglo-Jewish volumes and several anti-missionary tracts, Leeser's undercapitalized society was hit by a disastrous fire that destroyed most of its stock. It never recovered.¹ A second Jewish publication society, founded in New York in 1871, fared even less well. It published three books in four years, and disappeared; it never could muster the members, money and leadership that it needed to carry on.

NEW SPIRIT

By 1888, however, the American Jewish situation had changed. While no single factor can account for this, one can point to a pronounced awakening of interest in Judaism and Jewish culture on the part of young, native-born Jews — people like the editors of the *American Hebrew* or the poet Emma Lazarus — who returned to their faith eager to reacquire themselves with the heritage they now knew to be theirs. The onrush of East European Jewish immigration played an important part in this revival, as did religious currents in the nation at large. But there was also a growing feeling among leading American Jews that they were destined to play a central role in world Jewish affairs, and had better be prepared. Jewish learning and Jewish books were what they needed most.

In Philadelphia, at about this time, the new, American-trained young rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Joseph Krauskopf, gathered a coterie of like-minded young men and women around him, and organized what he called the "Society of Knowledge Seekers." It was, originally, a literary discussion group, but it soon took on other missions as well. Its very first

¹ Solomon Grayzel, "The First American Jewish Publication Society," *Jewish Book Annual* 3 (1944), pp. 42-45; Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1963), pp. 51-53.

undertaking aimed to meet what Krauskopf, in a sermon entitled "The Need of the Hour," spoke of as American Jewry's top priority: "We need first and foremost a Publication Society."² Krauskopf thought it would take "some modern Judas Maccabee" to rouse American Jews to action, but as it turned out he did fine himself. Working side by side with Solomon Solis-Cohen and traditionalist Jewish laymen in Philadelphia, he and the Knowledge Seekers put out a call for a national convention in Philadelphia to which "Jews of all shades of opinion and wherever residing"³ were invited. The meeting had but one purpose: to call a Jewish publication society into being.

Sunday, June 3, 1888, was, according to contemporaries, "a great day in Philadelphia Judaism, for there was gathered there a convention which included the leading intellectual minds among the Hebrews in America." Rabbis and laymen, men and women, young and old — about one hundred persons in all — crowded into Touro Hall in the building of the Hebrew Education Society. Never in memory had American Judaism "been represented by so scholarly, thoughtful and intelligent a body of men and women coming from such diverse sections of the country and holding such various opinions on subjects apart from that which brought them together."⁴ What made the national convention particularly impressive was the "immense preponderance" of young Jews among those assembled. It was they who carried the day when the Jewish Publication Society was finally born.

Morris Newburger, a member of the Society of Knowledge Seekers, and a leading Philadelphia clothing wholesaler, opened the convention, summarizing what had transpired in preliminary meetings. He then vacated his chair in favor of Simon W. Rosendale, a distinguished native-born Albany lawyer (he would later serve as New York State Attorney General) and one of the most widely respected American Jews of his day. At this point, according to the account sent by Baltimore physician Aaron

2 Joseph Krauskopf, "The Need of the Hour," A Sunday Lecture before Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, December 11, 1887. See also *American Jewish Year Book* [= *AJYB*] 26 (1924-5), pp. 431-433. I am grateful to Rabbi Simon J. Maslin for making a copy of this sermon available to me.

3 Ephraim Lederer, "The Origin and Growth of the Society," *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), p. 63; Abraham J. Feldman, "Joseph Krauskopf," *AJYB* 26 (1924-25), pp. 433-36; *Jewish Exponent*, May 13-27, 1892.

4 *American Hebrew*, June 8, 1888, pp. 70-71.

Friedenwald to his son Harry, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler "took to the floor and talked until everybody got tired of listening to him. He spoke of storms likely to arise, and tried to conjure up all sorts of improbabilities." Kohler, German-born, German-trained, the son-in-law of Rabbi David Einhorn, and one of the most radical (and most brilliant) of America's Reform rabbis — a man who would eventually play an important role in the Jewish Publication Society — believed that prior to any formal organization of a society there needed to be a specific plan "as to the literary work to be done and the method of securing and selecting the right men for the work." He was also miffed that the organizers of the society included only "a sprinkling of such whose position ought to offer a certain guarantee that Jewish literature is well taken care of" — men, for example, like himself and his fellow New York rabbi, Gustav Gottheil.⁵ Many of the rabbis present agreed with Kohler; they felt that those planning the new Society meant to exclude them. Some even threatened to walk out.

AMICABLE CONCLUSION

In the end, however, cooler heads prevailed. David Teller, president of Rabbi Marcus Jastrow's Congregation Rodef Shalom, effectively appealed for harmony. Rabbis Jastrow, Gottheil and Kohler agreed to have their names added to the lay committee planning the Society's constitution, and Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf had his name added to it as well. After that it took only one hour for all the necessary documents, most of them carefully prepared in advance, to be agreed upon. In the meanwhile, a cablegram from Jacob Schiff, away in Berlin, brought welcome news of the philanthropist's first major donation to the society: \$5000 in honor of the recently deceased polymath and tireless communal worker, Michael Heilprin. Following a well-earned supper prepared by Philadelphia's foremost Jewish caterer,

5 For accounts of the national convention that created the Jewish Publication Society, see *American Hebrew*, June 8, 1888, pp. 70-71; letters of Aaron Friedenwald to Henry Friedenwald quoted in Alexandra Lee Levin, "The Beginnings of the Jewish Publication Society" (typescript in author's possession); the Philadelphia *North American*, quoted in Edward Wolf II, "The Annual Report of the President [of the Jewish Publication Society] For the Year 1957," *AJYB* 60 (1959), pp. 377-380; Ephraim Lederer, "The Origin and Growth of the Society," *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), pp. 62-65.

Jacob Wiener, a slate of officers was elected "without much loss of time." The hour was late, past ten, before the weary delegates finally adjourned. They had accomplished what they had come to Philadelphia to do. The rest would be up to the Society's new board of officers.⁶

The twenty-one member executive committee elected by the convention and charged with the task of organizing and running the Jewish Publication Society resulted from a careful process of selection carried out with an eye toward prestige, balance and commitment. The committee included businessmen, professionals (most of them lawyers), community leaders, two lay scholars, and four rabbis. It reflected theological pluralism — a full spectrum of Jewish beliefs and practices — and geographical diversity (thirteen different Jewish communities). It even included one woman, Mary M. Cohen, a local Philadelphia writer and communal worker, and according to the fashion of the day she was appointed corresponding secretary. Most revealing of all, fully eight committee members were in their mid-thirties or younger (Cyrus Adler was only twenty-five), and nine were native born.⁷ They represented the audience that the Society would seek to attract.

Morris Newburger, who had presided over the opening of the convention that created the Jewish Publication Society, won unanimous election as its first president. Under him served four vice-presidents from around the country who were supposed to organize membership solicitations in their areas. But for its other officers, the Society recruited local talent, ensuring that its "Philadelphia character" would continue to be preserved. The Society's twenty-six year old paid clerk, Ephraim Lederer, soon elevated to "assistant secretary," was also born and bred in Philadelphia. His small office became the Society's first headquarters.⁸

With its organization in place, the leadership of the Jewish Publication Society could move on to its next essential task: appointment of a Publication Committee. Names were suggested, ballot-

6 Based on the list in *American Hebrew* (June 8, 1888), p. 71.

7 *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), pp. 65, 69. For the most accurate listing of J.P.S. officers, board members, and committee members, 1888-1952, see Joshua Bloch, *Of Making Many Books* (Philadelphia, 1953), pp. 283-293.

8 *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), pp. 65, 69.

ing accomplished by mail, and at the meeting of August 19, 1888, the results became public. The nine-member committee would consist of Mayer Sulzberger, Marcus Jastrow, Joseph Krauskopf, and Simon Stern of Philadelphia; Cyrus Adler and Henrietta Szold of Baltimore; Bernhard Felsenthal of Chicago; Charles Gross of Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Abram S. Isaacs of New York. Three of these nine also served on the Executive Committee, four were rabbis, three (including Isaacs who was also a rabbi) were professional scholars, and all had themselves published books or articles in English on matters of Jewish concern. Four of the nine — Adler, Szold, Krauskopf, and Gross — were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-one.

Of all of these men, the one who wielded the most power was Mayer Sulzberger, one of Philadelphia's leading citizens, among the best legal minds in America, and a highly cultured and knowledgeable Jew, who had a traditional background, and belonged to Philadelphia's Sephardic synagogue, Mikve Israel.⁹ To nobody's surprise, he was elected Publication Committee chairman. From this position, which he held to his dying day, he shaped the Jewish Publication Society's direction during its whole first period of activity.

GOALS OUTLINED

The Publication Committee's first accomplishment, a joint undertaking, apparently, with the Executive Committee, was a thirteen page circular setting forth the new Society's aims and aspirations, and appealing "for generous sympathy, active encouragement and liberal support."¹⁰ The circular elaborated on the need for a publication society, and spelled out for the first time the governing principles under which the new society would operate. Reread now, one hundred years later, the circular is in many ways surprisingly fresh. Most of the goals and objectives discussed back in 1888 are no less valid today.

The document stressed first and foremost the Jewish Publication Society's potential contribution to Jewish unity. Through its publication program, the Society promised to show Jews how

9 For a capsule sketch of Sulzberger's career, see Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism*, pp. 362-65.

10 *The Jewish Publication Society of America* (Philadelphia, 1888).

much they had in common, how in spite of differences they all remained bound to one culture. The Society even held itself up as a symbol of Jewish unity, for, as it repeatedly insisted, it was theologically neutral: "it favors no special views and supports no particular party."

Second, the document underscored the Society's value for improving community relations. While the need to combat anti-Semitism, later given more prominence, found no explicit mention in 1888, the circular did point out that as a minority group, Jews wherever they are, even in America, have a duty "not only to avoid being misunderstood, but to secure . . . a patient hearing and fair judgement" for themselves, especially given that so many tend "toward a certain contempt for our beliefs and our very name." The Society, through its books but without apologetics, pledged to do its part to convert "the mind of the world around us to juster conceptions of duty and fraternity."

Last but not least, the document pointed to the Society's role in addressing the problem of Jewish youth. "If we would inspire our youth to hopeful partisanship in our cause," it argued, "they must learn that we are the bearers of something worth preserving." Since Jewish culture could only be transmitted to the bulk of Jewish youth through books in the English language, it considered its mandate clear: to educate the coming generation of American-born Jews, and to raise their Jewish consciousness.

Yet more than just problems motivated the Society's founders; given the evident Jewish revival in America, the document also appealed for support on the basis of American Jewry's "growing . . . prosperity and intelligence." The circular noted that "scholars are arising among us who, by their devotion to Jewish literature and their high general culture reflect honor on our community." Through their scholarship, they were realizing in America that synthesis that was the post-Emancipation Jewish ideal. With German Jewry "hampered by a revival of mediaeval prejudices," its cultural activity impeded by late nineteenth century anti-Semitism, it was up to Americans, "free citizens of the noblest of countries," to assume the mantle of Jewish culture "in their stead." The Society pledged to do its part "so that Israel in America may proudly claim its literary period, as did our ancestors aforesaid in Spain, in Poland and in modern Germany." German Jewry's "valuable contributions to modern Jewish literature" gave the Society a scholarly goal to strive for. The financial

success displayed by the publication societies of "other religious denominations" in America — Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists — suggested an appropriate financial goal: "more than \$30,000 per year for publication purposes." The Society's seven governing principles, set forth in the circular and long influential in terms of policy, sought to ensure that both of these goals, along with their attendant benefits, would be effectively met by the books produced:

(1) All periods in the history of Israel, from the time of Abraham to our own, are integral portions of the life of our community.

(2) Our career in the past and our activity in the present cannot be adequately set forth either to our own community or to our neighbors without a literature.

(3) Such a literature must be free from mere aggressiveness against differing opinions, whether within or without our ranks. It must combat error by presenting truth and not by assailing adversaries.

(4) Such a literature must be in the main popular; that is, adapted for general reading rather than for scholars in special branches.

(5) It must aspire to excellence of style and tone, and, as a rule, it must be in the English language.

(6) The mechanical execution of the work must be good, and the publications should preserve such a uniformity of appearance, that subscribers will be encouraged to keep them together and thus make them a library of reference.

(7) Above all, the publication committee must have in view the sole purpose of doing the most good, and to that end must be entirely free from prejudices, for or against particular opinions or persons; since all Jews of every shade of belief are equally concerned in our work.

ORGANIZATIONAL SETUP

The new "Constitution of the Jewish Publication Society of America," published as an appendix to the circular, continued in the same vein. It committed the Society "to publish works on the religion, literature and history of the Jews; and . . . to foster original work by American scholars on these subjects." It set up three classes of membership: three dollar regular members, twenty dollar patrons, and one hundred dollar life members. It fixed benefits, assuring "every member of the Society . . . a copy of each

of its publications." And it set up other necessary administrative regulations. Presumably to assure the Society's basic character, the Constitution explicitly limited membership, which entailed voting rights, only to people "of the Jewish faith." Non-Jews interested in receiving the Society's publications had to apply as non-voting "subscribers."¹¹

By the time it was six months old, then, the Jewish Publication Society had an impressive outer appearance. It already boasted a constitution, a formidable array of officers and committee members, a circular stating its aims and principles, and a treasury filled with over \$11,000, including the original five thousand dollar bequest from financier Jacob Schiff and a matching gift from the industrialist Meyer Guggenheim. Membership was still small — less than two thousand, most of them Philadelphians — but a drive to increase membership was underway, and leading Jews from around the country had "accepted the task of organizing their respective cities and states."¹² At the same time, the Publication Committee, led by Mayer Sulzberger, was planning the Society's initial publications.

Thereafter the Society developed quickly. Its first book was Lady Katie Magnus's *Outlines of Jewish History* (1890), a popular history textbook reprinted from a volume prepared for English Jews, with the addition of new illustrations, valuable chronological tables, and most important of all, new chapters covering American Jewish history. The volume filled a long-felt need, and won wide acceptance: tens of thousands of copies were sold and demand was such that a revised edition was published in 1929. Other books — fiction and non-fiction, popular and serious — followed in its wake, usually at the rate of three or four a year.

By 1893, the Society had grown sufficiently to move into offices of its own. That same year, Henrietta Szold was appointed to a full-time salaried position as "Secretary of the Publication Committee" — in effect editor. Her tireless efforts, wondrous administrative capabilities, and natural brilliance made all of the difference in the two decades that followed. Early in her career, in 1898, the Society completed publication of Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, translated from the German by Bella Loewy. Issued as a six volume set, including Henrietta Szold's magnifi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *American Hebrew* (December 21, 1888), p. 132.

cent "Index Volume," the history did more than any previous publication to establish the Society's reputation as a publisher of first rank.¹³ Besides Graetz, there were also many additional triumphs during the Society's first quarter century: Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*; the founding of the *American Jewish Year Book*; Helena Frank's translations from Yiddish literature; Solomon Schechter's *Studies in Judaism*; Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*; and Ahad Ha'am's *Selected Essays*. Other triumphs — including Simon Dubnow's *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*; the 1917 Bible translation; and the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics — lay just a few years ahead.¹⁴

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

On April 5th and 6th, 1913, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding, the Society staged a gala ceremony in Philadelphia that attracted nationwide attention. Many of its former authors gathered for a special evening in their honor, leaders of the Society delivered major addresses, and a banquet for three hundred and fifty people took place at the Mercantile Club with Mayer Sulzberger serving as toastmaster. Nahum Sokolow, Herman Struck, Moses Hyamson, and Aaron Aaronson represented Eastern Europe, Western Europe, England and Palestine respectively at this event, and a diverse group of notables from across the country attended as well. All of the great Jewish cultural institutions, foreign and domestic, sent messages, many of them filled with praise for what the Society, Henrietta Szold specifically, and American Jewry generally, had accomplished.¹⁵

The ceremony symbolized in its own way what the Society had come to stand for: unity of American Jews, centrality of American Jewry, perpetuation of Jewish culture in America and beyond. With twenty-five years behind it, and many significant projects in the works, the Society, notwithstanding evident problems, could take pride in its accomplishments. No Jewish publica-

¹³ Solomon Grayzel, "Graetz's *History* in America," in Guido Kisch (ed.), *The Breslau Seminary* (Tuebingen, 1963), pp. 223-237.

¹⁴ Bloch, *Of Making Many Books* contains a full list of the Society's volumes to 1952; for an evaluation see *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), p. 122.

¹⁵ The proceedings are printed in *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), pp. 25-187, and were also published separately.

tion society anywhere had done as much. It was easy, then as later, to criticize the Society and point to its shortcomings. But those who looked up to the Society from afar were understandably impressed. They saw in its achievements a portend of American Jewry's future course.

A message sent on this occasion from Jews' College in London, captured the prevailing mood:

We on the other side, in the older country, watch with deepest interest the marvellous strides you have made and are making in this great and glorious land of freedom and independence, where careers and opportunities are open to talent and industry.

Your great philanthropic institutions are the admiration of all visitors to the United States. They bear witness to the munificence of their founders, the generosity of their supporters, and the efficiency of their administrators. But the Publication Society whose semi-jubilee we are today celebrating proves that, in this land of material progress, you recognize that man does not live by bread alone. You care for things of the spirit, you are alive to the intellectual and spiritual side of life. You provide windows for the soul of Israel.

The wondrous success of your Society proves that Jewry in the United States is sound at the core and alive. It is responsive to the intellectual stimulus. It answers to the spiritual call. . . .

May you advance by leaps and bounds, and when we celebrate the Jubilee, which may we all live to see, when America will be the centre of Jewry, may this Publication Society be a world-wide organization fostering the Jewish spirit, strengthening the Jewish consciousness giving adequate expression, and thus helping to do justice, to the Jewish life, the Jewish character, the Jewish soul.¹⁶

As the Society now enters its second century, it faces new challenges. The days when it stood practically alone in the field of Anglo-Jewish publishing are long gone. Popular presses and university presses are also now publishing Jewish books, often without the same commitment to quality that the Society always insisted upon. Nor can the Society depend upon its members the way it once could. Literary tastes, reading habits, indeed, the whole nature of the book business in America have radically changed in recent years; the Society must inevitably change as well. But if there are new challenges to be overcome, there are also old ones that after one hundred years remain as urgent as

¹⁶ *AJYB* 15 (1913-14), pp. 155-156.

ever. The Society's broad cultural and educational mission for American Jews, its general goal of promoting a more learned and culturally vibrant community, as well as its specific efforts to further Jewish unity, to improve community relations, to stimulate the Jewish consciousness of young people — all of these are timeless concerns that no Jewish community can long afford to ignore. Others may publish Jewish books occasionally, to make a profit, or for prestige, but none do so for the same community-minded reason that the Society, now with one hundred years of experience to back it, holds up as its goal: "to provide significant, worthwhile, and informative books of Jewish interest in the English language, so that the Jewish religion, history, literature, and culture will be understood, and read, and known."¹⁷

¹⁷ *A List of Books Issued By the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1890-1978* (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 1. For earlier evaluations of the Society's work, see Maurice Jacobs, "Generations of Jewish Literary Labor," *Jewish Book Annual* 7 (1948), pp. 89-100; and Solomon Grayzel, "Two Generations of Anglo-Jewish Book Reading," *Yivo Annual* 9 (1954), pp. 109-125.