
THE NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH PRESS

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same time, no one shrank from the reality that the press will have to re-evaluate its mission to remain relevant to future generations.

It is particularly fitting following this Forum to note that the Brin Forum was established to honor the memory of Alexander Brin, long-time publisher and editor of the Boston *Jewish Advocate*. We wish also to note that the

Forum's primary patrons are Bernard Hyatt, recently retired publisher and editor of the *Advocate*, and his wife Barbara, who is the daughter of Alexander Brin.

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THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PRESS IN NORTH AMERICA

Jonathan D. Sarna

The history of Jewish Journalism in the United States presents something of a challenge.¹ Traditionally, historians like to recount the story of progress: development onward and upward from primitive origins to flourishing contemporary success. The history of Jewish journalism in the US, by contrast, represents, at least until recently, a story of marked decay. From a period when they were independent, innovative and national in scope, American Jewish newspapers declined in quality, lost their independence, and became far more consensus oriented and narrowly focused. Admittedly, recent decades have witnessed some great improvements in American Jewish journalism and a new willingness, at least among some newspapers, to tackle sensitive and controversial issues. It is nevertheless worthwhile to understand why the earlier, prolonged decline took place, because the reasons shed light on problems that are endemic to American Jewish journalism, and I suspect to all minority group journalism; problems that plague the field to this very day.

First, some background. The oldest Jewish newspaper that we know dates to 17th century Amsterdam. Traditionally, the *Gazeta de Amsterdam* (1675) was considered the first Jewish newspaper; recently it has been argued that the paper was only printed by a Jew,

and that the first paper published for Jews was the *Dinshtagishe un Fraytagishe Kurant*, published in Yiddish in 1686-7.² I cannot resolve this question, but I do want to observe that, from the very beginning, Jewish journalism has not been easy to define: does a Jewish publisher make a journal Jewish, does a Jewish readership make it Jewish, does a Jewish language make it Jewish? I am going to focus today on newspapers that defined themselves as Jewish newspapers, but it is worth recalling that Jewish journalism might also embrace a broader field, particularly since Jews (indeed a disproportionate number of them) have been involved in the field of journalism from its earliest days.

Why Jews have been so involved in journalism is in itself an interesting question. I do not want to take us too far afield, but I suspect that the opportunities found in journalism (especially during its period of rapid growth), the fact that it offered practitioners a great deal of independence, and the comparative advantage that people with cosmopolitan backgrounds, like Jews, enjoyed in the field all help to explain the phenomenon. Even early on in American history, when the Jewish community numbered no more than a few thousand, Jews played a disproportionate role in journalism. Their importance in the profession has, in the intervening

¹ The literature on this subject to 1983 is reviewed in Robert Singerman, "The American Jewish Press, 1823-1983: A Bibliographic Survey of Research and Studies," *American Jewish History*, 73 (June 1984), pp. 422-444.

² Joel Cahen, "Amsterdam, Cradle of the Jewish Press?" *Proceedings of the Symposium on the Jewish Press: Why? Past, Present, Future* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad, 1985), pp. 17-23.

years, in no way diminished.³ In the United States, the earliest newspaper with a Jewish name is *Cohen's Gazette and Lottery Register* (1814-1830), published by Jacob I. Cohen, Jr. While published by a Jew and read by Jews, this was hardly a Jewish newspaper; it was, in essence, a gambling sheet.⁴ A journal of a different sort was published in 1823-1825. Its title was *The Jew*, and its subtitle explained that it was "a defence of Judaism against all Adversaries, and particularly against the insidious Attacks of *Israel's Advocate*," which was a missionary journal. *The Jew* adumbrates one of the major functions of every vernacular Jewish newspaper: to defend Jews against their adversaries. But one can scarcely imagine anyone actually reading *The Jew* for news. The only significant news that it printed was a series of scoops about scandals within the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, the society dedicated to converting Jews to Christianity.⁵ Jewish news was published in various American newspapers, particularly those edited by the distinguished Jewish journalist-politician, Mordecai M. Noah. But like today's *New York Times*, Noah's dailies were designed for a broad audience. They never claimed to be Jewish newspapers, even if they did devote disproportionate attention to Jewish matters.⁶ Jewish journalism as we know it in the United States dates quite specifically to April 1843 and the publication of *The Occident* by Isaac Leeser, Chazzan of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia and the most significant Jewish traditionalist religious leader of his day. Leeser was influenced by a range of factors: the development of

national Jewish periodicals in Germany, France and England, the evident need to unify the far-flung American Jewish community (a need made painfully evident by the Damascus Affair of 1840), the emergence of newspapers as instruments of Jewish enlightenment, and most immediately by the need to respond to a new missionary journal published in New York entitled *The Jewish Chronicle*, not to be confused with the distinguished London Jewish newspaper (1841-) of the same name. Publicly, Leeser described his journal as an "advocate" for Jewish interests (the full title was *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*), and its announced aim was "diffusion of knowledge on Jewish literature and religion"—in other words, communal defense and Jewish education, two principal aims of Jewish journalism forever after.⁷ To carry out these aims, the *Occident* published news from American Jewish communities, and from abroad (often reprinted from foreign Jewish publications), as well as sermons, editorials, historical articles, book reviews, innovative policy proposals (for schools, Jewish colonies, unity etc.), religious philosophy, and controversial (or apologetic) articles levelled against missionaries and other enemies of the Jewish people. Leeser admitted into his pages many writers with whom he disagreed (sometimes he mentioned the disagreement in an introductory paragraph), and he published many verbatim documents. Especially in his early years, he saw his as the newspaper of record for the American Jewish community, and he opened its pages to a wide range of contributors, including non-Jews.⁸

³ Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), pp. 5-6; Stephen J. Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984), pp. 180-207; Stephen J. Whitfield, *American Space, Jewish Time* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988), pp. 129-150.

⁴ Extant numbers of this journal are available in the American Periodical Series, reel 93. On Cohen, see Isaac M. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community: The History of Baltimore Jewry from 1773 to 1920* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), pp. 22-24.

⁵ George L. Berlin, "Solomon Jackson's *The Jew*: An Early American Jewish Response to the Missionaries," *American Jewish History*, 71 (September 1981), pp. 10-28.

⁶ On Noah's newspapers, see Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, passim.

⁷ Naomi W. Cohen describes early American Jewish newspapers as "Pioneers of American Jewish Defense." See her article by that title in *American Jewish Archives*, 29 (November 1977), pp. 116-150.

⁸ The best study of Leeser, including his newspaper, is Lance J. Sussman's forthcoming *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995). On the origins of the *Occident*, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Impact of Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions on American Jews," in *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. Todd Endelman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), pp. 242-243. The journal's first number is reprinted with an introduction in Abraham J. Karp, *Beginnings: Early American Judaica* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975).

The *Occident* was a quality production, and it remains a magnificent historical source: one of the finest journals that the American Jewish community has ever produced. There were nevertheless significant limits to what it was prepared to print. "On no account can our pages become the vehicle for violent denunciation or unfounded aspersion," Leaser wrote in his introductory remarks, and he naively urged readers "never to send us any thing which may require contradiction or amendment in a future number."⁹ Although he understood that controversy and error were unavoidable, he hoped to project an image of Jewish consensus—a projection of the community as he wished it to be, rather than the community as it was. In this, I think, he adumbrated a problem that has long plagued the field: a tension between the Jewish journalist as a reporter of news and the Jewish journalist as a shaper of community. In Leaser's case, this explains why he mostly closed his columns to divisive debates over slavery and the Civil War: he feared that such debates would be harmful to the Jewish community (and perhaps also to himself since he personally sympathized with the South and supported the idea of compromise for the sake of Union). But, as the slavery issue demonstrates, self-censorship comes at a price: Jews who sought to debate the hotly-contested issues of slavery and union had no regular Jewish forum in which to do so.

The success of the *Occident* generated a spate of new journals on the American scene, published in diverse locations, including New York, New Orleans, Cincinnati and San Francisco. Already by the 1850s one can discern a movement in American Jewish journalism parallel to what we know in American journalism generally, a movement away from all-embracing national newspapers and toward local or regional papers that were more narrow in focus and more circumscribed in their ambitions and aims. Most of these newspapers were weeklies, not monthlies like the *Occident* (the *Occident* itself became a weekly for a brief and unsuccessful period), and they modeled themselves after American religious and family news-

papers, rather than highbrow magazines. As a result their format was different from the *Occident*'s: they looked like newspapers (some were printed on cheap newsprint), and they aimed to be much more entertaining than it was; at least one of them, for example, published chapters from a serial novel each week on its front page. I am not able to deal with every newspaper from this period, but let me briefly mention three that represent to my mind different directions, or options, for American Jewish journalism to follow.

The first, which was also the first significant Jewish newspaper to be published in New York, was entitled, the *Asmonean*. It was edited on business principles by a (failed) New York Jewish businessman named Robert Lyon, and perhaps for this reason it was livelier, bolder, and much more diverse in its subject-matter than other 19th century Jewish newspapers. The *Asmonean* billed itself as "a family journal of commerce, politics, religion and literature devoted to the interests of the American Israelites," and represents a model of American Jewish journalism not seen again, at least in English, until our own day: a journal for American Jews but by no means limited to Jewish subject-matter. It lasted for nine years (1849-1858), until Lyon's death, but the absence of a follow-up suggests that most English-speaking American Jews conceived of Jewish journalism in more restrictive terms. Just as they compartmentalized their lives into secular and Jewish realms, so too their newspapers.¹⁰

A quite different direction was followed by the first Jewish newspaper in Cincinnati, now the oldest continuous Jewish newspaper in the United States: the *Israelite*, renamed the *American Israelite* in 1874, and published by the pioneer of American Reform Judaism, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Here we have the first example of an American Jewish newspaper committed to advancing a particular ideology and unafraid of controversy in defense of that ideology. Wise was blessed with a lively pen and an engaging, often biting style, and his newspaper, which was much more entertaining than the

⁹ *Occident*, 1 (April 1843), p. 5.

¹⁰ Cohen, "Pioneers of American Jewish Defense," pp. 133-140; H.B. Grinstein, "The 'Asmonean': The First Jewish Weekly in New York," *Journal of Jewish Bibliography*, 1 (1939), pp. 67-71; Henry S. Morais, "Robert Lyon," *Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Edward Stern & Co., 1880), pp. 221-222.

Occident, gained a wide national readership. So long as Wise was alive, it was recognized as his semi-official organ representing the Reform Movement in American Judaism.¹¹ Although the *American Israelite* lost this mantle after Wise's death and steadily deteriorated into a run-of-the-mill local newspaper, a pattern had been set. Thereafter in American Jewish life, we have many examples of significant, movement-sponsored periodicals. In the best cases, the idealism, energy and commitment that stand behind the movement are reflected in its journal. Such was the case, for example, with the *American Hebrew*, the vibrant weekly created in 1879 by religiously traditional young Jews (ages 21-29) hoping to revitalize American Jewish life.¹² Later, we see this same pattern in such journals as the *Menorah Journal*, the *Reconstructionist*, *Jewish Frontier*, and in the Boston student newspaper, *Genesis II*.

The third model that we have beginning in this period is the foreign-language Jewish newspaper. Several of them appeared even before the Civil War, *Sinai* and *Die Deborah* being the most famous, and all of them were published in German. This is not the place for a full-scale discussion of the foreign-language Jewish press in America.¹³ Suffice it to say that significant Jewish newspapers were published in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino, and they deserve a separate analysis. A whole documentary film, in fact, has been produced just on the *Jewish Daily Forward*. For our purposes, however, let me confine myself to four salient points: (1) Foreign language journals consisted of two types: intellectual (high brow) journals and popular (low brow) ones. The former, like *Sinai* (in German) and *Di Tsukunft* (in Yiddish) addressed immigrant intellectuals, the latter, like *Die Deborah* (in German) and *Der Hoyzfraynd* (in Yiddish) were directed to the masses and

especially to women (although it was widely recognized that men read these journals as well). (2) Foreign language Jewish newspapers were much less compartmentalized than English ones. Like the *Asmonean*, they presented secular and Jewish news as well as features. One can see this clearly in Abraham Cahan's *Forward*; it remains true even today in the newspaper produced for Israeli immigrants, *Yisrael Shelanu*. (3) The foreign-language press was much more focused on issues of immigration, Americanization, and developments in the old country than the Anglo-Jewish Press. The Yiddish press, in particular, covered developments in Eastern Europe with a depth not seen in parallel English language Jewish newspapers. (4) Finally, foreign-language Jewish newspapers were often bolder and more critical of America and American Jewish life than English-language ones. This is especially true of the intellectual journals and the Hebrew journals that had a small, well-defined readership and editors far less fearful of the journal "falling into the wrong hands." Intellectuals, to be sure, tend to be alienated no matter what language they write in, but the secure sense that they were being read by a select and sympathetic audience made it possible for them to criticize people, institutions, and social trends in a way not often found in the parallel English-language Jewish publications that were more widely circulated and that gentiles sometimes perused as well.

So much, then, for the early decades of American Jewish journalism, when so many of the central trends and central tensions that characterize Jewish journalism in this country were determined. Now it is time to move on to the question with which I began: why did the once varied and vibrant world of Jewish journalism in the United States deteriorate into the so-called "weakies" that Jewish leaders like Stephen S. Wise used so regu-

¹¹ Cohen, "Pioneers of American Jewish Defense," pp. 140-149; Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 112-124.

¹² Philip Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew* (New York: The International Press, 1932), pp. 40-111; Charles Wyszowski, *A Community in Conflict: American Jewry During the Great European Immigration* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), pp. xiii-xvii.

¹³ See, inter alia, Arthur A. Goren's analysis in his thoughtful survey of "The Jewish Press" in *The Ethnic Press in the United States*, ed. Sally M. Miller (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 203-228; Joseph Gutmann, "Watchman on an American Rhine: New Light on Isaac M. Wise," *American Jewish Archives*, 10 (October 1958), pp. 135-144; Mordecai Soltes, *The Yiddish Press: An Americanizing Agency* (New York: Teachers College, 1925); Michael G. Brown, "All, All Alone: The Hebrew Press in America from 1914 to 1924," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 59 (December 1969), pp. 139-178; and Marc D. Angel, *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982).

larly to deride? Let me suggest three major reasons: First, the proliferation of local Jewish newspapers, while probably unavoidable given the character of American journalism generally, changed the focus of Jewish journalism from the kinds of national issues that dominated the *Occident* toward a much narrower local-oriented journalism with a strong component of boosterism. Local Jewish newspapers, especially those outside of major population centers, could not attract the kinds of contributors that a national newspaper could, and their goals became proportionately more modest and consensus-oriented. Primarily, they sought to convey information, promote local communal involvement, and if necessary defend Jews against their enemies. Only a small number of local newspapers, like New York's *American Hebrew* which, as I mentioned had a larger objective—to revitalize the American Jewish community on a more traditionalist basis, or, to take an example closer to home, Boston's *Jewish Advocate* which under Jacob De Haas had the larger objective of promoting Zionism—only these ideologically motivated newspapers managed to stave off the narrow parochialism that affected so much of American Jewish journalism in the Twentieth Century. Unsurprisingly these were also among the most vibrant and significant Jewish newspapers of their day.

Second, financial pressures led to the deterioration of Jewish newspapers. Most proved unable to break even, especially in smaller population centers, and like it or not they came to depend on financial backers. Beginning in the 1940s, in cities like Philadelphia, the local Jewish Federation stepped in to cover the annual deficit. Inevitably, this financial dependence affected the ability of local Jewish newspapers to remain independent—as we say in Hebrew, *baal ha-meah, baal ha-deah* (translated idiomatically, that means “he who pays the piper picks the tune”). In Philadelphia, where the subject has been studied, criticism of Federation-supported Jewish agencies, and even widely-available negative news concerning these agencies stopped appearing in the Jewish newspaper (or in some case found mention only long after news was widely available elsewhere).¹⁴ In smaller communities, even independent

editors found that they dared not alienate subscribers or advertisers, so they played it safe. Faced with the choice of having a bland Jewish newspaper or no Jewish newspaper, most editors understandably chose the former. They justified their journalistic compromises as necessary to keep their local Jewish newspapers alive.

Finally, antisemitism, particularly in the period between the wars, had a chilling effect on the Anglo-Jewish press. As fear stalked the Jewish community and conditions for Jews domestically and abroad deteriorated, newspapers became frightened of controversy, scandal or of other news that reflected badly on the Jewish people, and they worked all the harder to promote an image of consensus and sobriety, lest they unintentionally play into the hands of Israel's enemies. While there was no shortage of intra-communal controversies or scandals during this era—witness the fierce debates over Zionism, the tactical debates over how best to respond to anti-semitism, or the many scandals connected with Prohibition violations—these were not by and large reflected in the Jewish weeklies. Even anti-Jewish violence such as regularly occurred here in Boston only rarely found mention in the press. To write about such violence, Jews feared, was to risk stirring up trouble and making the situation worse.

Once again, then, the press exercised considerable self-censorship. It did so, I think, with the best of intentions; it believed that it was serving the larger interests of the Jewish people. The result, however, was a loss of credibility. Jews seeking accurate and reliable Jewish news turned elsewhere. Where did they turn? For years, many Jews read the Yiddish press or in far fewer cases the Hebrew press, which as I indicated felt less constrained than the English-language weeklies; they were a much better and more accurate source of news. Other Jews subscribed to national Jewish magazines which then (and by and large still today) were much more vibrant than the local weeklies and did open their pages to debate: one thinks of the *Menorah Journal*, the *Reconstructionist*, *Jewish Frontier*, the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, *Commentary*, *Midstream* and so many

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¹⁴ Maxwell Whiteman, “A Century of Jewish Journalism: The Jewish Exponent, 1887-1987,” *A People in Print: Jewish Journalism in America* (Philadelphia: National Museum of American Jewish History, 1987), pp. 19-20.

others. The number of English-language national Jewish periodicals proliferated in the twentieth century. There were a grand total of four such periodicals in 1900: one for “Young People” (*Young Israel*), one for “the Jewish Religious School and Home” (*Helpful Thoughts*), one for Hebrew Union College students and alumni (*Hebrew Union College Journal*), and one, *The Menorah*, the official organ of B’nai B’rith. Today, by contrast, the American Jewish Year Book lists more than sixty such periodicals, not including those for religious schoolchildren, catering to the widest array of ideologies and interests. As a result of this exponential growth, Jews dissatisfied with local Jewish newspapers, who want more serious and in-depth analyses, have in the twentieth century been able to find alternative publications to read.

Finally, I should mention two other sources that American Jews began to turn to for reliable news: first, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, founded in 1917 to provide world Jewry with news about the World War from a Jewish point of view. Its cable service, set up in the 1920s, soon became the dominant provider of worldwide Jewish news for most American Jewish weeklies, improving the quality of their Jewish news. Yet this development also created a certain uniformity of perspective, as almost all American Jewish newspapers came to rely on the same source—the “JTA”—for Jewish news from around the nation and the world. Moreover, as a Jewish sponsored agency, the JTA faced some of the same tensions that local weeklies faced: its commitment on the one hand to journalistic detachment, and on the other hand its very strong attachment to the American Jewish community to which it has always been beholden. Second, the *New York Times* became increasingly influential within the American Jewish community. Purchased by Adolph Ochs, the son-in-law of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, in 1896, it consciously paid special attention to news of Jewish interest both because of its Jewish ownership and because Jews comprised a substantial percentage of its New York readership. In return, Jews rightly or wrongly came to perceive the *Times* as the ultimate authority on substantial news stories of Jewish interest. The *Times*, in reporting such stories, has always projected an air of objectivity and detachment that no Jewish newspaper can match.

Recent years, as we all know, have witnessed a considerable revolution in the world of American Jewish jour-

nalism. This is not the place to analyze this revolution—especially since so many of the revolutionaries are participants in this forum—but I think it is fair to say that Jewish journalism’s long downward slide has during this time period begun to be reversed. The strong national emphasis on journalistic independence in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate have echoed in the halls of Jewish journalism, and almost all major American Jewish newspapers have been affected by this revolution. As a result, a new high-quality national Jewish newspaper, the English-language *Forward*, has been established that sets a new standard in the field, while the best local Jewish newspapers have displayed a willingness to tackle controversial issues that would just a few years ago have been shunned.

Rather than ending on this happy and uplifting note, however, I want to close by restating in question form three central problems that seem to me to have plagued American Jewish journalism over the past century and a half, problems that help to account for its decline early in the century, and problems that remain on the agenda today, even as we hope that Jewish journalism is improving. First, what is the mission of Jewish journalism? Is its mission primarily to inform? to educate? to defend? to support one or another Jewish ideology? to promote community and continuity? And if one insists that its mission embraces all of the above, what happens when two or more of them come into conflict? Second, what are the responsibilities of Jewish journalism? Should the “good of the Jewish people” (or the good of the local Jewish community) be the highest goal, or should “truth” be the highest goal? What happens when these two come into conflict? Finally, what compromises should a Jewish newspaper be prepared to make in order to ensure its survival? Should it seek private or communal support? How much independence should it be prepared to sacrifice in return for such support? Where must it forcefully draw the line?

These are not easy questions. Nor do I pretend that history provides us with sure answers to any of them based on past experience. What I do believe is that the quality of Jewish journalism depends on our willingness to confront these questions honestly—and to wrestle with them continuously.