

American Jewish History

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The Greatest American Jewish Leaders

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Jonathan D. Sarna

The question posed at the outset of this symposium is fraught with problems. First of all, what do we mean by the term "American Jewish leader"? Do we mean a leader of American Jews, or an American Jew (like Judah Benjamin or in our own day Henry Kissinger) who rose to national leadership? Do we mean a religious leader or a secular leader, an immigrant leader or a native leader, a leading thinker, a leading writer, a leading fundraiser, a leading planner, a leading philanthropist or a leading administrator? All of these may be great leaders in their own sphere, but I am dubious as to whether they can appropriately be equated. It is one thing to compare individuals who succeed one another in the same position — the greatest English monarch, the greatest American president, the greatest editor of the *New York Times*. It is quite another to compare individuals who have nothing in common save the elusive quality of leadership itself.

Second, I wonder if it is even possible to single out "one" American Jewish leader given the community's pluralistic cast. Elsewhere, I have made the case for talking about a "spectrum of Jewish leaders" — a model that relates leaders to one another as well as to those whom they actually lead. If this approach is correct, then leaders can best be discussed in a comparative vein, in terms, that is, of their contemporaries. Instead of looking for but one nineteenth or twentieth century leader, we need to identify a full range of individuals who represent different points on the leadership spectrum.

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In what follows, I have somewhat arbitrarily defined an American Jewish leader, following John Higham, as an American Jew who exercised decisive influence over other American Jews "within a context of obligation or common interest." Unable to confine myself to one leader, I have both for the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries selected a pair of leaders. Together (and more than either might have done without the other), members of each pair defined the central issues of their day, achieved a following, and affected the course of American Jewish history for decades into the future.

In the nineteenth century, two individuals — Isaac Leeser and Isaac Mayer Wise — left a particularly strong impact on American Jewish life. Their contributions are well known: Both men

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wrote, travelled, and lectured extensively to advance and defend Judaism; both sought to create a new American Judaism, synthesizing tradition and modernity; both edited leading American Jewish newspapers and involved themselves heavily in Jewish education; and both established new organizations and programs to carry their work forward. True, the two men were arch rivals for years: Leeser waved the flag of Tradition, Wise hoisted the banner of Reform. Each also put forward a different vision of what American Judaism should be. What is important for our purposes, however, is that these two leaders, through their work as well as through their public disagreements, defined the central problems and tensions in nineteenth century American Jewish life. They confronted them squarely, and formulated different strategies for meeting them. Both men, in different ways, strengthened American Judaism through their writings, their followers, and their influence on succeeding generations.

The twentieth century's greatest American Jewish leaders are more difficult to identify. We are clearly too close to many events to be able to view them with detachment, and besides, quite a number of the most influential Jews of this period remain alive and are therefore excluded from consideration. There are, of course, a coterie of remarkable leaders who held sway during the early decades of the century: Jacob Schiff, Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler, and most important of all, Louis Marshall. They created many of the institutions that American Jews now take for granted, and they oversaw the community's emergence as a center of world Jewish life. Yet, I am increasingly dubious, given all that has happened since the death of these titans, whether their impact on twentieth century American Jewish life will still loom as large a century from now. They were really turn-of-the-century leaders; by 1930 every one of them was either dead or played out. The two events that most affected contemporary American Jewish life, the Holocaust and the State of Israel, took place after they had already passed from the scene.

Here, I should like to propose, if somewhat tentatively, two other leaders whose impact on twentieth century American Jewish life may in the long run prove to have been greater. The first, Stephen S. Wise, was probably the most influential Reform rabbi of the century; the second, Mordecai M. Kaplan, may have been the century's most influential rabbi — period. Both represented a new generation of American Jewish leaders: raised in America, comfortable with East European Jews, and imbued with American liberalism. Their concerns focused on identity and survival, and in different ways they both strove to transform

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American Jewish life so as to stem the assimilationist tide.

Wise's strategy was primarily directed *outwardly* — toward social-communal activism, liberalism, and political Zionism. Kaplan's strategy, by contrast, was mostly directed *inwardly* — toward a "reconstruction" of American Judaism, a revitalized synagogue-center, and a deeper involvement of Jews (partly through Zionism) in Jewish civilization. Between them lay a vast middle ground where, in time, most American Jews found themselves comfortable. As leaders, these men commanded new and influential positions along the spectrum of American Jewish religious life. Through their activities, addresses, and writings, they helped to create a contemporary framework for Jewish communal debate.

To be sure, the majority of American Jews did not go so far as Wise did in his social activism nor did they follow Kaplan into Reconstructionism. Still, the agendas developed by Kaplan and Wise — the problems that they addressed and the solutions that they formulated — remains both critical and current. In reinterpreting what it means to be an American Jew, they gave twentieth century American Judaism itself new meaning and content.

June Sochen

The two people I have chosen as the greatest American Jewish leaders bridge the 19th and 20th centuries: Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932) and Henrietta Szold (1860–1945) were both born in and established themselves as major leaders before the last century's end, and continued their great work into this century. As they aged, they increased their activities and accomplishments, particularly to Jews, both in America, and especially in the case of Szold, in Palestine.

Both Szold and Rosenwald used their astonishing intelligence, unusual energy, and supreme self confidence to share with others their vision of what a good society should be. Consciously in Szold's case, and perhaps unconsciously in Rosenwald's, they exhibited the moral fervor of a prophet combined with the American penchant for pragmatic reform. Both were committed to good works, both believed in the environmental and Jewish view that humans can improve themselves and their society. Neither believed in genetic determinism; neither shared conservative and pessimistic views about America, about minority rights, and about human progress.