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THE SPECTRUM OF JEWISH LEADERSHIP IN ANTE-BELLUM AMERICA

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STUDENTS OF

American ethnic leadership have three basic conceptual models within which to organize their data. The first is based upon *source* of authority. Kurt Lewin pioneered this approach, distinguishing between leaders from the center “who are proud of the group, who wish to stay in it and to promote it,” and those who are marginal, interested in moving out of the group, in short, “leaders from the periphery.” John Higham further refined these categories into (1) received leadership, “leadership *over* an ethnic group,” (2) internal leadership, “leadership that arises *within* the group and remains there,” and (3) projective leadership, “leadership from an *ethnic* group . . . [that] affects its reputation without being directly subject to its control.”¹

The second model derives from conscious leadership *strategy*. Higham, in an earlier, now apparently rejected formulation, adapted Gunnar Myrdal’s famous typology and divided leadership into two basic polar types: (1) leadership of accommodation, in this case accommodation to America, and (2) leadership of protest, resistance to accommodation. This model, as Higham later realized, applies best to leaders of persecuted groups, like





American Indians and African Americans. Still, the paradigm has broader implications since it relates action to ideology. Leaders, the model claims, either look favorably on America and encourage acculturation, or do the opposite.²

Finally, there is a third model which examines leadership *function*. Some ethnic leaders preserve tradition: others promote change. Most, as Victor Greene has pointed out, simultaneously do both. They unconsciously serve as mediating brokers, or to use Greene's terminology, "traditional progressives." They seek to maintain the old ways, even as they act as agents of the new.³

These three classification schemes are not the only ones possible, nor are they mutually exclusive. In at least two unfortunate ways, however, they are alike. First, they are static models, requiring that leaders be pigeonholed into one or another preexisting categories. Second, they are elite models, ignoring, though less in Greene's case than the others, the relationship between leaders and led.

The model proposed in this essay seeks to overcome both of these problems by positing a "spectrum of leadership" rather than just another series of categories. On a spectrum, leaders can be placed in relationship to one another and change over time can be graphed. Furthermore, the spectrum approach clarifies the relationship between leaders and led by revealing that those at the top and those on the bottom share a common set of tensions and aims. Viewed from this perspective, an ethnic group divides into traditionalist leaders and followers, assimilationist leaders and followers, and people arrayed at various points in between. The spectrum of leaders mirrors the spectrum of followers and vice versa.

To test this model, I have examined ethnic leadership in America's ante-bellum Jewish community. This may seem an odd choice, considering Nathan Glazer's comment that "between the 1840s and the 1880s the American Jewish community was a remarkably homogeneous one."⁴ Glazer, however, is mistaken. The two decades before the Civil War, and for that matter the two

decades that followed its outbreak, saw many of the same kinds of subethnic ("Bayer" vs. "Pollack"); religious (Radical Reform, Moderate Reform, Orthodox); and social tensions manifested in later years. Many called for unity and worked to secure it, but they never succeeded. A contemporary view of American Jewry in 1861, found in the *Occident*, the first major Jewish newspaper in America, tells the story. "There is actually no union between the natives of Poland and Germany nor even between those born in this country if their parents happened to be attached to one or the other modes of worship."⁵

My survey of ante-bellum Jewish leadership is limited, for the sake of simplicity, to a discussion of four people who represented four different ideological positions. Two of the four were rabbis: two not.⁶ Two of them were "major opinion leaders"—the central Jewish communal figures of the day—two of them more peripheral. If leaders may broadly be defined as "individuals who exercise decisive influence over others within a context of obligation or common interest."⁷ then all four men were leaders, for all in one way or another exercised active or passive influence over some of their fellow Jews. All four men served as role models: their activities received publicity, and others learned from them.

There is no anachronism in speaking about a "Jewish community" during this period. Research has shown that Jews in various states corresponded with one another, exerted themselves as a group in time of crisis, and by the end of our period could boast of several newspapers and a central Board of Delegates. Long before the Civil War, Jews were viewed as a separate community, and saw themselves as such. Admittedly, the Jewish community differed both from "racial minority" communities, and from geographically based ethnic communities. Still, minority groups in general share much in common. So long as obvious differences are kept in mind, parallels between Jews and others can prove revealing.⁸

The initial leader I am going to discuss is Abraham Rice [Reiss (1800?-1862)], generally considered the first



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properly ordained rabbi in America: Rice emigrated from Bavaria in 1840, and after short stints in New York and Newport, he was invited to serve as rabbi of New Israel (the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation). He quickly came into conflict with his congregants, lashing out against those who violated the Sabbath and employed Masonic rites at funerals. But his efforts to punish such deviations came to naught. His railings against such sins—from intermarriage and dietary law violations to prayer abbreviation and mixed dancing—were apparently no more successful. In 1847, Rice considered leaving America for the Holy Land, but decided to remain. His mission, stated in 1840, was to “introduce the pure Orthodox faith into the country.” In 1849, Rice resigned from the rabbinate, promising to “fight the battle of the Lord” as a private citizen. He became a merchant, continued to teach, hold services in his house, issue rabbinic opinions, and agitate on behalf of traditional Judaism. He briefly resumed the pulpit at Nidche Israel in 1862, but died shortly thereafter.⁹

Rice was not a major ethnic leader in terms of followers or direct influence. He received notice—the *New York Herald* once dubbed him “Grand Rabbi of the United States”—and a few congregants, notably young Aaron Friedenwald, later a pioneering American ophthalmologist, venerated him.¹⁰ His importance, however, lies not so much in his impact as in his ideological function. For ante-bellum American Jews he symbolized tradition at the extreme. They viewed him as a “defender of the faith” committed to preserving all aspects of Judaism in the face of outside pressure. To many, Rice may have served as a negative example, a foil against which they measured their own acculturation. Yet, they respected Rice as “leader of the opposition,” even if they did not follow his ways. Rice’s opposition stance should not be seen as a “protest” against America. To the contrary, he appreciated the country’s free institutions. He rather felt that Jews should accommodate themselves to their new land in a very different way. “I conduct myself as I did in da-

of old in my native country," he reassuringly wrote to his teacher in Germany.¹¹ No doubt he wished that his fellow Jews would do the same.

This wish remained unfulfilled. Instead, most Jews acculturated, following the ways of their neighbors. Jewish leaders generally supported acculturation in principle, although they debated among themselves how many concessions to make to the outside world. A few notables, however, championed thoroughgoing assimilation. For obvious reasons, assimilationists did not become leaders of the Jewish community; they did not support the community's continued existence. As leaders who happened to be Jewish, however, assimilationists exercised considerable passive influence over the Jewish community. Theirs is an example of projective leadership; once they won recognition in the larger community their fellow Jews took notice of them. Thoroughgoing assimilationists no more represented a mainstream position than did traditionalist defenders of the faith. Most Jews rejected both extremes. But Jews who sought success in the outside world certainly had assimilationist role models from which to choose.

The most prominent Jewish assimilationist in antebellum America was Judah P. Benjamin (1811-1884): brilliant lawyer, senator from Louisiana, and then, during the Civil War, attorney general, secretary of war, and finally secretary of state of the Confederacy. Benjamin married a Catholic, Natalie St. Martin, in 1833, and his only daughter was raised in her mother's faith. But Benjamin did not convert—except perhaps on his deathbed—and his Judaism was a matter of public knowledge. Enemies spoke of "Judas Iscariot Benjamin" or "Benjamin the Jew." Jews sought to prove that this most successful of their coreligionists maintained some tenuous connection with his ancestral faith.¹²

The stories told of Benjamin's Jewish activities—including quoted pro-Jewish statements, a supposed Yom Kippur sermon, and legends of his attending various synagogues—all prove spurious. Bertram Korn, who



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thoroughly investigated the evidence, concluded flatly that “Benjamin had no positive or active interest in Jews or in Judaism.”¹³ Jews, however, had considerable interest in Benjamin, and understandably took pride in his achievements. They fashioned a mythical Benjamin—a Jewishly conscious Benjamin—in order to blunt the assimilationist message that rang out from his life’s story. “If Jews intermarry and follow in the ways of the Gentiles they can succeed handsomely” was the lesson that Judah Benjamin’s life really projected. If, in the case of Benjamin, mythologizers later refashioned that lesson, there always were other Jewish assimilationists, like August Belmont, whose life stories could demonstrate the original point.

Benjamin and Rice represent something close to the polar extremes. The one, a secular leader, projected a message of wholehearted assimilation; the other, a religious leader, openly demanded thoroughly traditional identification. Each of these positions found support in the Jewish community, but for most American Jews neither choice by itself was acceptable. They sought both to identify as Jews *and* to integrate into American society. Unsurprisingly, their role models—the men quite generally viewed as the two greatest Jewish leaders of the antebellum period—were men who insisted that some sort of synthesis was possible. One could, they claimed, be active Jews and active citizens at the same time.

The leaders I refer to were Mordecai M. Noah (1785-1851) and Isaac Leeser (1806-1868). They were the Jewish “opinion leaders” of their day, widely respected by their coreligionists throughout the country. Noah was a New York journalist-politician, at different times consul at Tunis, sheriff of New York, and Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall, a man who was intimate with leading figures in the Jacksonian period and well-known in non-Jewish circles. He was active in Congregation Shearith Israel; he once tried to establish a Jewish colony (“Ararat”) on Grand Island, New York; he was president of the Hebrew Benevolent Society; and most important of

all, he served as a representative Jew in the eyes of leading Christians. Simply by virtue of his position he demonstrated that in America, one could openly and simultaneously be a leader in the political world and in the Jewish one.¹⁴

Leeser, by contrast, was a religious leader, a *chazan*, first at Congregation Mikve Israel in Philadelphia, and somewhat later at Congregation Beth El Emeth in the same city. He founded and edited the *Occident*; he was actively involved in Jewish education and the publication of Jewish textbooks; he translated prayer books and the Bible into English for a Jewish audience; and he played a leading part in the major Jewish activities and organizations of his day. Outside Philadelphia, however, non-Jews hardly knew of his existence. His life and work were mainly within the context of his own minority group. He sought to defend his faith, but unlike Rice, he worked to Americanize Judaism so that it might be more accessible and appealing.¹⁵

The ante-bellum American Jewish community thus had two primary leaders. They derived their authority from different sources, held certain similar goals, and operated in quite different spheres. Unsurprisingly, major issues arose that brought them into conflict.

The most interesting dispute between the two men was occasioned by Mordecai Noah's 1844 Restoration Address, delivered to a mostly Christian audience, in which Noah urged missionaries to work for the restoration of Jews in their *unconverted* state to the Holy Land. Noah asked missionaries to hold off their conversionist efforts, and to rely "on the fulfillment of the prophecies and the will of God" to determine who would convert and which messiah would come. Pending the end of days, he did not believe that these ultimate theological differences should pose an obstacle to close Jewish-Christian cooperation.¹⁶

Isaac Leeser, when he read this speech, was horrified. He was devoting his life to creating books and institutions aimed at protecting Jews from Christian encroachments.

How dare a Jewish leader—even one significantly older and better known than himself—call on Jews and missionaries to work together. Leeser thundered his disapproval: “With conversionists as such we cannot, as Jews, enter into any league . . . if they grant us any favors they do it for the sake of a return.”¹⁷

The acerbic clash demonstrates the fierce tension between the “integrationist” and the “traditionalist” even within the narrower spectrum containing only widely respected ethnic leaders. Noah called for harmony and cooperation with Christian America; Leeser feared for Jewish group identity. The same array of forces took place during a subsequent clash over Sunday blue laws. Leeser, eager to strengthen Jewish Sabbath observance, opposed the laws since they wrought great hardships on Jews who either had to violate their Sabbath or lose one full day of business a week. He believed that the Constitution’s religious liberty clause protected Jews from having to make this heartrending choice. Noah, on the other hand, feared the implications of a Jewish-Christian battle over this issue. He defended the blue laws’ constitutionality, terming them “mere local or police regulation[s],” and warned Jews not to “disturb the Christian by business or labor on his Sabbath.” He concluded that the question “ought not to have been raised” in the first place. To his mind, the threat which the Sabbath issue posed to intergroup relations far exceeded any possible threat to the integrity of Judaism itself.¹⁸

Over the years, Leeser and Noah also clashed about other issues, but their areas of agreement are just as important. When Jews faced threats, internally or externally, the two could be found working together in their defense. Similarly, both favored Jewish education, and both were staunch supporters of Jewish charities. Broadly speaking, both men saw the need to preserve Jewish identity while both understood that Americanization was essential. No disagreement existed over basics; clashes occurred only when these two goals came into conflict. Then decisions had to be made based on the

weight attached to each goal: how much identity would be sacrificed for how much integration. At that point it became clear that each man held to a different scale of values.¹⁸

This brief survey of American Jewish leadership in the ante-bellum period suggests two broad conclusions. First, it should be clear that great advantages accrue from an open and dynamic model of ethnic leadership. By viewing leadership as a full spectrum stretching from “completely traditionalist” on the one hand to “thorough-going assimilationist” on the other we can more accurately classify leaders, and show how they changed over time. Leaders arrayed themselves along different points on this spectrum, and shifted their positions as circumstances changed. Most of the best known minority group leaders, like Noah and Leeser, mediated between tradition and change, and never moved far from the middle of the spectrum. But others, not generally as well known, like Rice, took extreme positions. Uncompromising assimilationists or traditionalists may have found few adherents: indeed, as in the case of Benjamin, they may only have exercised leadership passively by setting examples which others followed. Nevertheless, they form part of the history of ethnic leadership, and so deserve recognition. In fact, their extreme positions probably helped to define the “middle of the road” where most people felt more comfortable.

Second, the tradition/assimilation spectrum shows that leaders and led both were grappling with precisely the same basic dilemmas. Leaders gave expression to tensions over Americanization which immigrants and their children confronted—but did not solve—in their daily lives. Most immigrant and ethnic groups looked approvingly on a range of popular leaders, with varying conflicting outlooks on problems of tradition and change, because they offered a range of potential alternatives to choose from. Thus, mid-nineteenth century Irish, German and Swedish immigrants looked for guidance to assimilationists like Congressman Mike Walsh, Senator Carl Scars and pioneer Hans Mattson as well as to traditionalists like



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Archbishop John Hughes, Lutheran Church leader C.F.W. Walther, and Pastor T. N. Hasselquist.¹⁹ They learned that disagreements existed at all levels, even among leaders. Leadership tensions merely reflected life-tensions—and they were irresolvable. By contrast, on matters of security—the battle against hatred and discrimination—major leaders were agreed. On such issues their followers were united as well.

Alone, no ethnic leader ever satisfactorily embodied, much less integrated, the collective hopes, fears and problems which played so great a part in immigrant and ethnic life. For this reason, no ethnic community ever enjoyed a single, universally acknowledged spokesman, regardless of what outsiders may have believed. As a group, however, leaders succeeded far better. They defined complicated issues, represented diverse interests, and ultimately forged an informal polity within which debate took place. Leaders never solved the contradiction between tradition and assimilation, nor could they have. But they did present to their followers the range of options that America held open to them. Individuals had then to make critical choices on their own.

NOTES

1. Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts* (New York, 1948), pp. 190-197; John Higham, "Leadership" in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Themstrom (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 642-47.

2. John Higham, ed. *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 1-18; Higham, "Leadership," pp. 646; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944).

3. Victor Greene, "Becoming American: The Role of Ethnic Leaders—Swedes, Poles, Italians, and Jews," in *The Ethnic Frontier*, eds. Melvin G. Holli and Peter d'A Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), pp. 144-175. See also, Judith R. Kramer, *The American Minority Community* (New York, 1970), pp. 129-34; Nicholas Tavuchis, *Pastors and Immigrants: The Role of a Religious Elite in the Absorption of Norwegian Immigrants* (Hague, 1942); Josef Barton, *Peasants and Strangers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), pp. 71-72;

Yonathan Shapiro, *Leadership of the American Zionist Organization, 1897-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1971); S. N. Eisenstadt, "Place of Elites and Primary Groups in the Absorption of New Immigrants in Israel," *American Journal of Sociology*, 57 (1951-52): 222-231; and Alvin M. Gouldner, *Studies in Leadership* (New York, 1950).

4. Nathan Glazer, "The Jews" in *Ethnic Leadership*, p. 21. On Jewish leadership, see also Edwin Wolf II, "Leadership in the American Jewish Community," in *The American Jew: A Reappraisal*, ed. Oscar Janowsky (Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 363-72; and Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity* (Philadelphia, 1976).

5. *Occident* 18 (1861), p. 245; cf. Rudolf Glanz, *Studies in Judaica Americana* (New York, 1970), pp. 187-202; Moshe Davis, *Yabadut Amerika Be-Hitpathutab* (New York, 1951), pp. 218-88; and more generally Allan Tarshish, "The Rise of American Judaism," (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College, 1935).

6. Religious and ethnic leaders are not readily separable in the case of Jews, since most Jews see themselves both as members of the Jewish people and as adherents to the Jewish religion. See Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 3-22; and more generally Timothy Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review*, 83 (December 1978): 1155-85; and Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzik, eds., *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia, 1977).

7. Higham, "Leadership," p. 642.

8. Rufus Lears (Israel Goldberg), *The Jews in America, A History* (New York, 1972), pp. 53-89; Malcolm H. Stern, "The 1820s: American Jewry Comes of Age," in *A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (Waltham, Mass., 1976), pp. 539-49; and Abraham J. Karp, *The Jewish Experience in America* (Waltham, Mass., 1969), vols. 2 and 3.

9. Israel Tabak, "Rabbi Abraham Rice of Baltimore," *Tradition*, 7 (Summer 1965): 100-120; Moshe Davis, "Igot Hepekidim Veba'amarchalim Meamsterdam," in *Saló Baron Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew section, eds. Saul Lieberman and Arthur Hyman (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 95-103; Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue 1820-1870* (Hanover, N.H., 1976), pp. 70-74; Isaac M. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 54-57; and (New York) *Sunday Times and Noab's Wzckly Messenger* (28 February 1847), p. 2.

10. New York Herald, 29 September 1845; Fein, *Making of an American Jewish Community*, p. 58.

11. Tabak, "Rabbi Abraham Rice," p. 102.

12. Bertram W. Korn, "Judah P. Benjamin as a Jew," *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Cincinnati, 1954), pp. 79-97; idem, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham, Mass., 1969), pp. 187-90, 226-28, 232-

33; Richard S. Tedlow, "Judah P. Benjamin," in *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, eds. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, Va., 1979), pp. 44-54.

13. Korn, "Judah P. Benjamin as a Jew," p. 93.

14. Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York, 1980), esp. pp. 119-42; see pp. 220-222 for earlier studies.

15. Book-length studies of Leeser include: Lance J. Sussman, "Confidence in God: The Life and Preaching of Isaac Leeser (1806-1868)" (Ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1980); Maxine S. Seller, "Isaac Leeser: Architect of the American Jewish Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1965), and E. Benet, "An Evaluation of the Life of Isaac Leeser" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1959). See also Jick, *Americanization of the Synagogue, passim*; Bertram W. Korn, "Isaac Leeser: Centennial Reflections," *American Jewish Archives*, 19 (1967): 127-41; Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 48 (1959): 207-44; and Henry Englander, "Isaac Leeser," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, 28 (1918): 213-52.

16. Mordecai M. Noah, *Discourse on the Restoration of the Jews* (New York, 1845); Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, pp. 152-56.

17. Quoted in *Occident*, 2 (1845), p. 605; 3 (1845), pp. 29-35; Maxine Seller, "Isaac Leeser's Views on the Restoration of a Jewish Palestine," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 58 (September 1968): 118-35.

18. *Occident*, 6 (1848), pp. 186-93, 302, 367-8; Seller, "Isaac Leeser, Architect of the American Jewish Community," p. 145; Morris U. Schappes, ed., *Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York, 1971), pp. 279-81; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, p. 134.

19. In addition to items cited above in notes 1-3, see appropriate articles in *Dictionary of American Biography*, and A. F. Ander, *T. N. Hasselquist* (Rock Island, Ill., 1931); Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education: Bishop Hughes, Governor Seward, and the New York School Controversy* (Cleveland, 1968); Lars Ljungmark, "Hans Mattson's *Minnen*; Swedish American Monument," *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, 29 (1978): 57-68; Claude M. Fuess, *Carl Schurz, Reformer* (New York, 1932).

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1. Choose three leaders in the North American Jewish community that might reflect the stature of the individuals highlighted by Professor Sarna. Do they measure up?
2. Use the three standards of measurement that Professor Sarna describes in order to measure leadership effectiveness in your organization or community. Do you measure up?
3. As you identify the strengths and weaknesses of the ante-bellum Jewish leaders, how can you improve your own strengths as a leader?