

TO OUR READERS...

The pendulum of historiography has been swinging back to the study of the political and cultural elite of American society. After several decades of the primacy of social history—history, as Jacob Rader Marcus often said, from the “bottom up,” the story of the masses and of the working people—the study of communal leadership in all its forms has been reincorporated in a substantial way. Historians are focusing more attention on how various societal groups interact and intersect at different times and in different spaces.¹ Dr. Marcus’s wisdom, as I have come to learn over the years, was in preserving and studying the documentary records of both American Jewish leaders and their constituents and making them readily accessible for future generations.

Even though Dr. Marcus was a vocal advocate for the study of social history—the “*realia* of Jewish life”²—he still devoted significant attention in his own scholarship to the study of leading figures in eighteenth and nineteenth century Jewish history, such as Israel Jacobson, Gershom Seixas, and Isaac Mayer Wise. Moreover, he would likely bemoan the fact that scholarship on the history of organizational leadership in the post-World-War-II American Jewish community has been far too limited. Aside from simply documenting the past, scholarship on previous generations of Jewish leadership might offer guidance to the current community. As the late John W. Gardner (1912–2002)—former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson—wrote in his 1990 volume, *On Leadership*:

Leaders today, at whatever level, in whatever segment of society, live with the reality of unceasing change. They cannot prevent it, they can only hope to channel it in such a way as to preserve values and other essential continuities. And they cannot do that unless they understand the larger framework in which change is occurring, and unless they know their own history. They cannot know what they want to preserve against the buffeting of change or what sources of strength they can draw on to channel change, unless they know that path already traveled.³

As far as the American Jewish experience is concerned, the first half of the twentieth century was arguably dominated by an impressive array of charismatic leaders such as Jacob Schiff, Louis Marshall, Hannah G. Solomon, and Henrietta Szold, who led the American Jewish community with passion and understanding since unmatched.⁴ Thirty Years ago, Melvin Urofsky argued that the apparent divisions that plagued leaders of that era—downtown versus uptown, German versus East European, Zionist versus anti-Zionist, and accommodation versus confrontation—were much more clear-cut than those today. Urofsky noted that they have been replaced by a more complex series of communal relations, thereby rendering leadership in the style of Wise and Marshall ineffective. The

articles featured in this latest issue of our journal offer us food for thought and push us to revisit Urofsky's thoughtful assessment.⁵

The nature of leadership, the various forms it can take—particularly in the American Jewish community—and the ways in which historical forces influence it lie at the heart of the three articles in this volume of *The American Jewish Archives Journal*. In the first piece, Michael Cohen explores religious leadership through his examination of the careers of four early ordainees of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which reorganized under Solomon Schechter in 1902. While all four were trained to be congregational leaders, some were more successful in this setting than others. As Cohen writes: “In the vast majority of cases, a rabbi faced a significant amount of congregational resistance, as lay control, generational conflict, and congregational ambivalence made it particularly difficult for him to shape the congregation as he might have liked.” Clearly, the circumstances of a given situation rendered certain types and tools of leadership impotent. When the vision of a leader, in this case a rabbi, was not compatible with that of his followers, he may have needed to look elsewhere for a different leadership opportunity. Such was the case with Louis Egelson, who, as Cohen shows, ultimately left his Conservative congregation and became the assistant director of the Department of Synagogue and School Extension of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC).

In the second article, Gregory Kupsky offers a nuanced portrait of Samuel Untermyer and Felix Warburg, two secular leaders in the Jewish community who were American Jews of German descent. Both were uptowners—members of the Jewish elite of New York—and active during the interwar period. However, what muddies the waters of conventional thinking about these *yahudim* is precisely what sets them apart: their feelings toward their German homeland and their response to the rise of Hitlerism. As Kupsky shows, Untermyer quickly grew disillusioned with Germany and became a vocal leader in the boycott movement through his American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights (ALDJR), later to be renamed the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights (NSANL). Warburg, on the other hand, took a much more cautious public stance toward Hitlerism and was more ambivalent about German cultural life in America. A study such as this reminds us that the complexities of a given leader's biography are often decisive elements in understanding the style and nature of his or her leadership.

Finally, Christopher Young, in his article on Barnet Hodes's efforts to erect a statue of the revolutionary hero Haym Salomon in downtown Chicago during the 1930s and early 1940s, documents the actions of a Jewish leader in the general community who served as a bridge between the official culture—that of the nation—and the particular culture of American Jewry: “Like the project's intended message, the Washington-Morris-Salomon sculpture's very existence testifies to Hodes's personal drive as well as his ability to bring together people

from a broad spectrum of American society in order to bring the monument to a successful completion during another era that would ‘try men’s souls.’” As a prominent member of the Jewish community in Chicago and a leading political figure on the city council as well as the Patriotic Foundation of Chicago, Hodes, like many of those profiled in these three articles, had a keen sense of the context of his own era. Ultimately, all leaders, according to Gardner, must understand the cultural context in which they function: “Much of the culture is latent. It exists in the minds of its members, in their dreams, in their unconscious. It can be discerned in their legends, in the art and drama of the day, in religious themes, in their history as a people, in their seminal documents, in the stories of their heroes.”⁶

These three articles point to the fact that the ability to lead successfully requires an appropriate understanding of those being led. As Woodrow Wilson once said, “The ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people.” This volume of the journal shows that, when history from the top down and history from the bottom up meet, there is much to learn.

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Notes

¹For more on this, see the new volume edited by Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) as well as recent articles that have appeared in the American Historical Association’s *Perspectives on History* (e.g., Julian E. Zelizer’s “The Interdisciplinarity of Political History,” [May, 2011], available online at www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1105/1105for2.cfm) (accessed 21 December 2011).

²Stanley F. Chyet, “Jacob Rader Marcus: In Memoriam,” *American Jewish History* 84, no. 1 (1996): 39.

³John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 164.

⁴That view, however, has not left those titans who led during the 1930s and 1940s immune to the harsh criticism laid on them by historians who argue that they did not do enough to save their co-religionists in Europe.

⁵Melvin I. Urofsky, “American Jewish Leadership,” *American Jewish History* 70, no. 4 (June 1981): 401.

⁶Gardner, 165.