

Our American Legacy: looking back and moving forward

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In the first week of September, 1654, almost 350 years to this day, a small vessel, the Sainte Catherine, sailed into what is now New York harbor. Among its passengers were sixteen Jewish refugees from the Dutch colony of Recife, Brazil, which had been recaptured earlier in the year by the Inquisition eager Portuguese. Their arrival in the then small frontier town of New Amsterdam (now the much larger town of Manhattan) was very different than the arrival of the thousands of their ancestors that would follow them to this land of opportunity. It would be over two hundred years before Lady Liberty would welcome new immigrants to these shores.

In fact, the reception these sixteen homeless and tempest-tossed refugees received was anything but welcoming. On September 22nd, 1654 Peter Stuyvesant, the overseer of this settlement for the Dutch West India Company sent a letter to his employers which read, in part, “The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but ... we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place ... deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart ... that the deceitful race ... be not allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony ...”

The next spring, much to his dismay, Stuyvesant’s request was denied in a letter that read, in part, “We would have liked to effectuate and fulfill your wishes and request that the new territories should no more be allowed to be infected by people of the Jewish nation, for we foresee therefrom the same difficulties which you fear, but after having further weighed and considered the matter, we observe that this would be somewhat unreasonable and unfair especially because of the considerable loss sustained [by them] in the taking of Brazil, and also,” and here we get to the real reason, ‘and also because of the large amount of capital which they still have invested in the shares of this company.’¹

So, with rather dubious support, and thanks, mostly, to fortuitous Jewish investment, Jewish life took root in America. And, while perhaps not enthusiastically welcomed, Jews were at least considered to be preferable to indigents, felons and to, horror of horrors, ... those most undesirable of neighbors, Catholics.

Fast forward 350 years to this past January, when an article by Elizabeth Bernstein in the Wall Street Journal caused quite a stir when she reported on the emerging desire among gentile teens for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs - well, at least for the parties. Throughout the spring and summer articles in newspapers and magazines followed up on this trend noting that a growing number of non-Jewish teenagers are begging their parents for a “bar” or “bat mitzvah like their Jewish friends.” From reticent acceptance of our place on this continent to being “it” - socially chic. To quote the Grateful Dead, “What a long strange trip it’s been.”

The story of Jewish life in America is truly fascinating. There is no aspect of American life and history that has not been touched by Jewish hands and Jewish lives. Let’s start at the very beginning: Dr. Phillip Moses Russel was George Washington’s personal doctor and Isaac Moses successfully ran British blockades in order to provide supplies to the American revolutionary army; and, of course, Hayim Solomon almost single handedly financed the American forces in the revolutionary war.

How many of you know of Samuel Sanders, the Jewish born, adopted son of Daniel Boone. Or, Jonah Kline, better known as Johnny Kling, who, in 1901 became the first Jew in major league baseball. More importantly, he

¹Morris U. Schappes, “A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875,” pp.1,4.

was partly responsible for one of the most storied double play combinations in all of baseball lore. You see, the arrival of Jonah (or Johnny) allowed the Cubs to move catcher Frank Chance to first base where he became the last piece in the storied double play combination of Tinkers, to Evers to Chance. Then there is Josephine Sarah Marcus who left her rather mundane San Francisco home in 1879 for a more exciting life - which she eventually found as Sadie Earp, the wife for fifty years of legendary lawman, Wyatt Earp.

The Jewish impact on the mechanisms of American finance, is certainly more renowned, unfortunately often derisively so. But, there is no denying the impact of Jewish businessmen in the building of this, the most powerful economic force in the world. Four Jewish businessmen were co-founders of the Stockbrokers' Guild which would come to be known as the New York Stock Exchange. In Southern California, banking got its start thanks to Isaac Wolf Hellman who opened a bank in the corner of his cousin's clothing store. Wall Street abounds with the names of Jewish men like Lehman, Sachs and Goldman who found their way from pushing carts door to door to pushing stocks and bonds across Wall Street.

The story of American commerce is likewise filled with tales of young peddlers. Isidore Straus, the eldest son of an immigrant from Bavaria used the family's hard earned money to buy a failing business on the bottom floor of a building owned by Captain R.H. Macy. Later the grandson of another Jewish peddler, Bernard Gimbel opened his own store just a block away. In San Francisco, Solomon Gump arrived originally to work in his brother-in-law's mirror shop. When he eventually opened his own store he would hire a young Dutch Jewish wood carver whose name was Isaac Magnin. And know you know ... the rest of the story.

For each of them, and for thousands more, America was indeed the land of opportunity. Our ancestors took full advantage of the personal freedoms and possibilities that America offered, creating for themselves and their families a Jewish community like none other in Jewish history.

Nothing was more desired than to be an accepted part of the social fabric of this great social and democratic experiment. To be an American was the ultimate, the highest ideal. Nothing could be a higher form of praise than to be recognized as an American. I don't think that we, today, can quite grasp the tremendous pride that our ancestors took in calling themselves American. We take it for granted. For them it was everything.

And, as they celebrated their life in this land, they also never forgot where they came from. I don't mean Europe or Africa or other parts of the world from which they found refuge on these shores. But rather, that they had come here from lands of oppression. When they read in the Torah of the Exodus from Egypt, when they were reminded in their prayerbooks of the continual obligation to remember the oppressed because they too had been oppressed, it was not simply an exercise of imagination, as it is for most of us. The story of the Exodus was their story as well. As they worked with heart and determination and imagination to build here the life and the land of their dreams they never forgot where they came from. The words that we read each Passover were very real: "In every generation, each of us, is obligated to see oneself as if we, personally, had been freed from Egypt." Indeed, for the vast majority of our immigrant ancestors they were the ones who had been freed from Egypt and as they basked in the freedom of this Promised land, Egypt was never very far away.

As they elevated themselves they refused to forget those still suffering and so became integrally involved in matters of political, social and economic welfare, fighting for the rights of all those still oppressed both in this country and throughout the world. Jewish values fit America like a glove. Justice Louis Brandeis proudly declared that "The twentieth century ideals of America have been the ideals of the Jew for more than twenty centuries."² His contemporary, Rabbi Stephen .S. Wise, in a speech delivered on July 4, 1905, confirmed the shared perspective and ethic of the American and Jewish communities when speaking as both a Jew and an American he proclaimed, "Ours is become a nation too great to offend the least, too mighty to be unjust to the weakest, too lofty and noble to be ungenerous to the poorest and lowliest."

² Louis Brandeis, *Menorah Journal*, January, 1915

The commission for celebrating 350 years of Jewish Life in America points out that our parents, grandparents and great grandparents, “built communities, schools, libraries, hospitals, houses of worship, and enterprises of every description. Here they developed the determination and capacity to aid their fellow Jews throughout the world. Here, as participants in America’s civic, social, economic, and cultural life, they became ardent champions of America’s highest values, active in great social reform movements, in the pursuit of justice, in the expansion of knowledge, and in the realization of human dignity.”³

As we celebrate and give thanks for that incredible legacy, we also have the obligation “to assess what American Jewry has achieved over the past 350 years, [so that we might] transmit the lessons of the past to those who will carry on after us ...”⁴

Let me share just two of many, many possible stories that teach so much about what it means to be a Jew in this great land; stories that suggest, as well, a vision for the future worthy of the legacy we have received.

Louis Pizitz was born in Poland in 1868. He arrived in the U.S. in 1889. Like many he began life in America as a peddler. By 1892 Louis had scrimped and saved enough to open his own store and in 1895 moved to Birmingham, where he opened an even larger store. Finally, in 1919 Louis began building the seven-story Pizitz Dry Goods Co.

Like so many who had found success in this land of opportunity, Pizitz never forgot his responsibility to those less fortunate. In 1909 and again during the great depression when Alabama coal miners were facing starvation, Pizitz, at great personal risk, bought out many mines and then sold the coal at the cost of production in order to keep the miners employed and food on their families’ tables. In 1914 when the cost of Alabama cotton plummeted to 11 cents a pound, Pizitz bought it up at 15 cents a pound, stored it until prices rose and then returned what he got over and above his 15 cents per pound to the farmers. During the depression, Pizitz began opening his department store on Thanksgiving Day, giving away free turkey dinners to any and all in need. When banks closed and teachers could not cash their paychecks, Pizitz cashed them himself, often supplementing their checks with donations of goods from his store.

Mr. Pizitz lived the by the words of our tradition that teach us that to lift up those who have fallen is to be a reflection of God’s power and presence in this world. That legacy, passed to Louis Pizitz has been handed on to us that we might be diligent in continuing to make this a land of opportunity for all.

How great remains the need today to lift up and support those who have fallen. According to the U.S. Census Bureau nearly 36 million people, including 13 million children, live at or below the poverty line, which for a family of four is defined as an annual income of \$19,000. Imagine trying to live in this city, even as a smaller family, on \$19,000 a year. In fact, the real threshold for remaining out of poverty, that is, the cost of maintaining a safe and decent standard of living, including food, housing, health care, transportation, child care, and taxes, is almost twice the officially recognized federal poverty threshold. So, how many millions more are living in “unofficial poverty?”

In any given year, in this most prosperous nation on earth, close to 3.5 million people will go to sleep on some night, under a bridge, or on a bench, or in a dark corner of a parking garage. While we might write them all off under the rubric of the mentally ill or drugged out, or both, the reality is much more stark. As pointed out by journalist Bill Moyers, “[P]overty is showing up where we didn’t expect it – among families that include two parents, a worker, and a head of the household with more than a high school education.”⁵ and it is a pressure that even many

³Celebrate 350: Jewish Life in America 1654 to 2004, <http://www.celebrate350.org/>

⁴Celebrate 350

⁵Bill Moyers address, Inequality Matters, New York University, June, 2004.

here in this sanctuary feel on a daily basis. New York Times contributing economist Jeff Madrick describes the severe pressures being placed on middle and working class Americans. He writes, “The strain on working people and on family life, as spouses have gone to work in dramatic numbers, has become significant. VCRs and television sets are cheap, but higher education, health care, public transportation, drugs, housing and cars have risen faster in price than typical family incomes. And life has grown neither calm nor secure for most Americans, by any means.”⁶

We learn from our sages that: “If all the troubles of the world are assembled on one side and poverty is on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.”⁷ As Louis Pizitz responded to those of his community who had fallen, so too do we, as receivers of that legacy, have a responsibility to support and lift up those who have and are falling on hard times.

In Chapter 15 of *Deuteronomy* we read, "there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you, open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land." The Torah recognizes that we cannot necessarily eliminate all poverty, but, we are taught that we must work to alleviate its impact. That is why the Union for Reform Judaism has committed itself, this year, to a serious fight against the oppression of poverty. A resolution passed at last year’s bi-ennial called on congregations to educate themselves about the causes and consequences of poverty, to generate programs addressing the needs of local communities, and participate in advocacy at all levels of government to support programs designed to help the poor and lift those in need out of poverty.”⁸

Certainly the growing economic pressure on middle and working class families is felt nowhere as severely as with health care. Health care costs continue to rise at rates far beyond those of those of personal income. In this the greatest economic power on the globe it is shameful that nearly 45 million people have no health insurance. Left unchecked, that number will only continue to increase as the costs of medications become increasingly prohibitive and as long as our medical system is run by those whose sole concern is increasing the bottom line.

Our tradition is clear: Providing health care is an societal obligation. The great scholar Maimonides, listed health care first on his list of the ten most important communal services that a city had to offer to its residents.⁹ In fact, throughout history, almost all self-governing Jewish communities set up systems to ensure that all citizens had access to health care. Doctors were required to reduce their rates for poor patients, and when that was not sufficient, communal subsidies were established.¹⁰ As noted by the Religious Action Center, “Medical care is not simply another commodity. Medical care is about saving and improving the quality of lives. Access to medical care is a fundamental test of how we treat the most precious of God's creatures.” Louis Pizitz acted to support and care for his fellow citizens because of the fundamental value Judaism places upon each individual created in God’s image. Don’t we, who share in that legacy, share, as well in that responsibility?

Julius Rosenwald of Springfield, Illinois ran a small business producing men’s garments. One of his clients

⁶Jeff Madrick, contributing Economic columnist for the New York Times, quoted by Bill Moyer in address to Inequality Matters, New York University, June 2004.

⁷(*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 31:12)

⁸RESOLUTION ON CONFRONTING AND COMBATING POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES, 67th General Assembly, November 2003, Minneapolis, Minnesota,

⁹(*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot IV: 23*)

¹⁰ (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 249:16; Responsa Ramat Rahel of Rabbi Eliezer Waldernberg, sections 24-25.*)

was Richard Sears, who bought Rosenwald's clothing for his catalog. In time, Julius would become a partner in Sears, Roebuck & Co.; and eventually become president of the company. During his lifetime, in the late 19th and early 20th century, Rosenwald gave away \$63 million dollars and another \$12 million in bequests in his will. He alone was responsible for the construction of 5,367 schools, in addition to shops, homes, libraries, health clinics and YMCAs for the black communities in 883 different counties in fifteen Southern states. In fact, his commitment to fighting prejudice in the south and raising the standard of living in the southern black community led those who opposed him and who competed against him to spread the rumor that Rosenwald was really a black masquerading as a Jew.

Rosenwald, a great leader of the Chicago Jewish community, was a *matir asurim* a liberator of the enslaved. And, he provided this liberation in the greatest manner of our tradition, by providing the means and mechanism for those still enslaved by social and economic conditions to liberate themselves. Like Julius Rosenwald, our commitment to education goes without saying. It is a core value confirmed each time we say in the *v'ahavta* 'you shall teach them to your children.' Public education was the gateway through which our families entered American society. By teaching students about the meaning of citizenship and cultivating a community of informed citizen, public education continues to serve the vital role of gatekeeper of the commonwealth. Indeed, it is precisely because public education promotes tolerance and diversity; because it fosters interactions and understanding among people of different ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, that it serves a vital role in the social, political and economic integration of this country. Julius Rosenwald, understood this both as a Jew and an American. He hoped that education would provide the same avenue toward liberation for the black community that it had provided for the Jewish community. It would take a bit longer. And while his dream is still waiting to be wholly fulfilled, public education must remain a crucial and foundational institution in American life. Unfortunately the ship of public education is being battered by wave after wave of ineffective administration, over populated classroom, unreasonable expectations and ineffective standards. Yet, we dare not let this ship sink, for with it will go one of the most important common places of American society. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, again sounds the call to conscience, "... I tremble for our nation when I hear the constant drumbeat of attack on our public school system. The public schools take the poor and the handicapped, the abused and the foster children, the Christian and the Muslim, the Roman Catholic and the Jew. They do more of God's work in a day than most institutions do in a lifetime." Regardless of our own personal choices, we must not let the demise of public schooling slam the door shut on those seeking a way into the American mainstream.

Our Torah demands, Tzedek, tzedek tirdof ... justice, justice shall you pursue. Our ancestors thrived because this country was founded on a commitment to those words. Our commitment to those principals must be equally as firm. We will certainly debate the means by which to achieve the end. After all that is as much a part of our tradition as pursuing justice for all. What we can not do is ignore the issues, because they are not going away. They will pursue us if we do not pursue them. And we must move beyond the symptoms and address the root causes that challenge the very nature of our commonwealth. Unfortunately it's unlikely that you are going to hear these issues addressed - at least in an open and frank way by either party, because, that would be political suicide. (Anyone notice the deafening roar of debate as the assault weapons ban neared?) That kind of discussion just won't happen in the world of 30 second t.v. spots and well spun and managed media opportunities. So, I have a suggestion, let's have that discussion here. Not right now, but, how about Sunday mornings, starting October 10th at 9a.m.? Rabbi Brown, Rabbi Deitsch and I invite you to join us for a real discussion of critical issues as we approach this election season. Because as the children of those who were enslaved, as inheritors of a grand Jewish American legacy our obligation is clear - to hear the call of our tradition urging us to pursue justice, to choose life and to proclaim liberty throughout the land.

You know, we have a unique opportunity now that we are so *en vogue*. While everyone is watching let's let them know that there is more to being Jewish than incredible balloon decorations and playing Pepsi-Seven-up. Let us hand to our children, indeed to all of America's children, the precious legacy that has been handed to us, a Jewish and American legacy so beautifully expressed by one of the descendants of those first sixteen immigrants. That

descendant, Emma Lazarus, wrote words that welcomed so many of our families as they sailed by Lady Liberty towards a new life in America. "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Let her words live on in our continuing commitment to those who came before. More importantly may her words be an inspiration to us as we build a future Jewish and American legacy for our children.