

## The Proudest Moment of American Jewry

Delivered by Bob Silverman

April 6, 2019

When my father died last month at the age of 92, I wrote his eulogy. In assessing his legacy I wanted to look also at the achievements of his generation of American Jews before they passed into memory. I started with the name Silverman because therein lies a mystery. My dad's grandfather left Russia in 1881 with the name Yaakov Golombek and settled in the Lower East Side under the name Charles Edward Silverman. Family lore that an immigration official gave him the name Silverman turns out to be false – he changed his own name shortly after arriving in New York, as did many other immigrants.

Why did Yaakov Golombek choose to become Charles Edward Silverman? Staring at an old colored photo of Charles as a young man with shy smile and handlebar moustache, I think I found the answer. Choosing the name Silverman is a decision to stay Jewish. But it is an Americanized version of Jewishness and perhaps also a status upgrade – Silverman sounds like someone involved in the jewelry trade. The occupation of Charles Edward Silverman, according to census records, was pantsmaker in a sweatshop.

The hope and dream of my dad's grandparents and parents, and their Russian Jewish fellow immigrants, was that his generation of new Jews would finally leave behind the shetls of the Pale of Settlement and the tenements of the Lower East Side, and become fully American while staying fully Jewish, no contradictions between the two, achieving the American dream as proud Americans who were also proud Jews. Jack Silverman, my father, realized this dream along with his generation. Their path of individual achievement, and happy fusion of American and Jewish identities, is the one many of us continue to follow. But here is another legacy question: what have American Jews achieved not as individuals but as a community? What is the distinctive achievement of this community thus far?

Assessing the American Jewish community by necessity involves comparison to the other major extant Jewish community, Israel. The two are today roughly equal in size – a little over 6.5 million Jews in each country, together representing close to 90 percent of worldwide Jewry. The comparison may seem unflattering to the Americans. The community in Israel restored Jewish sovereignty for the first time in over 2,000 years. While Jack Silverman and his cohort, the new American Jews, were building businesses and JCCs in post World War II America, their counterparts the new Jews of Israel (many of them too had taken new names) created the institutions and culture of a Jewish state. The achievements of the one are historic in nature, overshadowing a less visible but to my mind equally important role of the other community in terms of Jewish continuity.

For me, the distinctive achievement of American Jews is in reaching outside of the community to form strategic alliances with non-Jews and thereby advance the common interests of all citizens. The best example to date was the full Jewish community embrace of the nascent NAACP, the first national civil rights organization, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a story which all Americans should know and celebrate.

The story begins on August 14, 1908. In Springfield Illinois, two African American men are arrested and charged with the rape of a white woman. When a mob of white men marches to the jail with the intention of lynching, they discover that the sheriff of Springfield has removed the two men from the

city in order to protect them. The enraged mob, swelling to 5,000 persons, converges on the African American neighborhood of Springfield, killing nine African Americans and burning down homes and stores before the state militia restores order.

The Springfield race riot, the first such attack in the North and in the city whose most famous resident was Abraham Lincoln, shocked several groups into action – especially White American socialists and African American activists. They began meeting separately. The African Americans were led by Harvard sociologist W.E.B. Dubois, an activist considered radical at the time for his opposition to the gradualist policies of Booker T. Washington. Energized by a sharp rise in White supremacist violence, they met at a hotel in Canada (to avoid US segregation laws) across from Niagara NY and form the Niagara Movement. Four white socialists begin meeting in an apartment in New York City, two of whom were East European immigrant Jews – Henry Moscowitz and Anna Strunsky. Anna Strunsky and her journalist husband William Walling had earlier visited Russia to investigate the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, in which 49 Jews were killed and hundreds raped and injured. In an early example of intersectional politics, Anna Strunsky drew explicit parallels between anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia and race riots in the US, as Steven Zipperstein describes in his book Pogrom.

In January 1909, Strunsky and Walling issued a national Call in the Independent, a liberal weekly magazine: “What large and powerful body of citizens is ready? Silence...means tacit approval. The indifference of the North is responsible for more than one assault on democracy.”

WEB Dubois signed the Call, uniting his group of African American activists with the White group of mostly Jewish socialists and Protestant liberal Republicans who together formed the National Negro Committee, which began meeting on Feb. 9, 1909, the centenary of Lincoln’s birth.

What happened next is the proudest moment to my mind in the American Jewish experience. Rabbi Stephen Wise, the leader of the Reform movement in the US, signed the Call. So did German-born Emil Hirsch, the rabbi of Chicago’s iconic Temple Sinai. Dozens of American Jewish leaders subsequently joined the group which was incorporated in 1911 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or NAACP. They included Louis Marshall, a constitutional lawyer and founder of the American Jewish Committee, who proclaimed when he joined that he would fight the Ku Klux Klan just as hard if it spared the Jews and focused only on “Negroes or any other part of our population.” Marshall publicly defended the NAACP in legal briefs, as did future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter. And Jacob Schiff, the wealthy banker and acknowledged leader and spokesman of the American Jewish community, joined the NAACP board, helping to fundraise in German Jewish circles. Prominent early donors included Julius Rosenwald CEO of Sears Roebuck and Lillian Wald the NGO entrepreneur. Later Herbert Lehman, Democratic Governor of New York in the 1930s and the son of German Jewish immigrants, served on the NAACP Executive Committee.

Two brothers – Joel and Arthur Spingarn, sons of a prosperous Austrian immigrant and well connected to New York’s German Jewish elite - were the most committed NAACP Jews. Joel, a comparative literature professor at Columbia, convened organizational retreats of the NAACP in his upstate New York home, served as the first chairman of the Board in the 1910’s and in the 1930’s as the second president. In 1930, he endowed the Spingarn Medal which the NAACP continues to award annually for achievement by an African American. Arthur Spingarn, a litigation attorney, was instrumental in leading the NAACP to challenge Woodrow Wilson’s re-segregation of the federal work force and led the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, working with the future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

At the birth of the civil rights movement, American Jews joined forces with African Americans to lend organizational, legal, political and financial weight to this nascent enterprise. The Jews had a variety of motives, including enlightened self interest as well as an altruist desire to help America live up to its ideals of equality and justice, as well described by Hasia Diner in her book In the Almost Promised Land. The morale of the story is the effective, self-effacing way in which the Jewish community engaged back then.

First, they stayed largely out of the limelight. Louis Marshall, Jacob Schiff, Julius Rosenwald were hugely successful lawyers, bankers and entrepreneurs. Rosenwald for instance grew Sears & Roebuck into the first mail order retail titan that was the template for Bezos's Amazon. They also ran active family philanthropic foundations and communal organizations like AJC and ADL. But when they decided to form a political alliance with African Americans to advocate for civil rights, they joined an outside board, the NAACP, and contributed resources, time and connections to the welfare of an organization that would be mainly, and eventually completely, run by the other community.

Second, they didn't have litmus tests for leaders of the African American community. W.E.B. DuBois when he co-founded NAACP was not a philo-Semite. Writing about the American South in 1903 he said "the Jew was the heir to the slave baron" impoverishing the African American through money-lending. Nevertheless, DuBois was an effective ally on civil rights, and he later became a strong ally in countering anti-Semitism as well. In 1940, WEB Dubois dedicated his autobiography to the memory of his co-founder of the NAACP, Joel Spingarn, who had died the prior year.

American Jews have many other achievements as a community, including support for the State of Israel, advocacy for Soviet Jewish emigration and reshaping Jewish-Catholic relations. I don't intend to diminish them. But reaching outside of our community to help found the NAACP is to my mind the proudest moment for us to date.

The Jewish-African American alliance that founded the civil rights movement is largely forgotten today. Even in 1948, an ailing and elderly Rabbi Stephen Wise wrote a letter to the young Roy Wilkins, then President of the NAACP, thanking him for an invitation to the NAACP annual conference, and noting "It is good that you know that I was one of the founders of the Association and have never ceased to be proud of its magnificent service."

Wade Henderson, the immediate past president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, reminded me of this proud legacy a few months ago. He showed me a cellphone photo of him awarding the Spingarn Medal and told me the story of Joel Spingarn, after a meeting of a Muslim-Jewish coalition meeting. He supports the Muslim – Jewish alliance because he sees in it the same mix of coalition building challenge and excitement that he has managed in his own civil rights journey.

The American Jewish legacy of reaching out to form coalitions broader than our own community, exemplified by the Jewish-African American alliance, remains alive. We need to draw on it both to strengthen the African American alliance and to form new ties between the US Jewish and Muslim communities, for the betterment of the entire country.

The integration path chosen by my father and his generation, of being both fully American and fully Jewish, is part of this outward looking legacy. It has its existential dangers, and has led to complete assimilation of many of my generation who no longer identify as Jews. And yet, the warnings of the

death of American Judaism, dating back to a 1964 Look magazine cover story “The Vanishing American Jew,” are premature at best. Jewish numbers are holding steady even if declining as a percentage of the US population. There are still some 6.5 million of us who manage to varying degrees of success the delicate balance of being true to both of our heritages as Americans and Jews. Delicate balances are in fact intrinsic to Judaism, which has both particularist and universalist tendencies. If Israel highlights among other things the achievements of Jewish particularism, American Jews are especially important for the vitality of the universalist tendency. I know that my father and his generation of new Jews who are now passing from the scene were confident that we would continue to blaze the path they pioneered and further build this American Jewish story.

Baruch dayan ha-emet. Blessed is the true judge.

Bob Silverman

Co-founder, Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance (IJMA)