

The American Jewish Experience: A Testament to the Founders' Vision

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F*ew groups illustrate the success of the Founders' design as clearly as American Jews. Article VI of the Constitution barred religious tests, the First Amendment protected free exercise, and George Washington's 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport replaced toleration with the language of inherent rights. Jews helped to finance the Revolution, commanded warships, interpreted the Constitution, helped to build hospitals and schools, and advanced American science. This report traces that record through citizenship, military service, law, civil society, commerce, and civic memory. As the nation marks its 250th anniversary, policymakers, educators, and civic institutions should teach this history as constitutional history and answer antisemitism with historical truth.*

Introduction

The American Jewish experience is one of the clearest historical tests of the Founders' design. As the United States marks 250 years of independence amid renewed antisemitism, civic fragmentation, and historical amnesia, the point is not academic. It goes to the heart of what belonging, responsibility, and the promise of the republic truly mean.

America did not abolish prejudice, and it did not always spare Jews from exclusion or hatred. Yet it did something extraordinary: It built a nation in

which a people long treated elsewhere as outsiders could become citizens without ceasing to be Jews and could defend, strengthen, and sometimes even lead the country as equals.

A free republic cannot assume that each generation will understand how its liberties were secured. That history must be taught clearly and persuasively. Highlighting that record fights antisemitism with historical truth and shows how constitutional principles turned legal equality into lived loyalty, allowing Jews to flourish as Americans.

That record is more than a chronicle of minority achievement. Through the lives and choices of actual American Jews, it shows how religious freedom and equal citizenship allowed Jews to become active participants in American life.

This report traces that story through citizenship, military service, law, civil society, commerce, finance, science, innovation, and historical memory. Its recommendations are intended to help policymakers, educators, civic institutions, and Jewish organizations bring this history back into the public square during America 250 and use it as a truthful response to antisemitism.

The American Jewish Experience as a Test of the Founding

The American Founding has generated one of the richest bodies of historical scholarship in modern literature. Historians, political scientists, legal scholars, and constitutional theorists have studied the origins of independence, the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, the emergence of political parties, and the continuing influence of the Founders on American political life.

At the same time, a substantial literature has explored the history of American Jews, tracing one of the nation's oldest religious minorities from the arrival of 23 refugees in New Amsterdam in 1654 to the vibrant and influential community that exists today.¹

Yet these two stories are too often kept apart. Histories of American Jews understandably focus on topics such as immigration, religious life, economic achievement, antisemitism, and cultural assimilation. Studies of the Founding, meanwhile, emphasize constitutional design, republican theory, federalism, and democratic institutions but too rarely ask what those arrangements meant for religious minorities like the Jews. The result is a serious gap in the national story: What does the American Jewish experience reveal about the republic the Founders created, and how should Americans talk about that in an age of rising antisemitism?

That question matters because antisemitism is not only a security problem or a social prejudice. It is also a symptom of historical amnesia and civic decay. When Jews are cast as strangers to the national story, or when

American history is reduced to a permanent struggle between oppressors and victims, the actual record disappears.

The Jewish experience in America included real prejudice and exclusion, but it was never defined by them alone. Over time, the country widened membership and drew a vulnerable minority into responsibility for the nation they now regarded as their own.

The United States did not erase prejudice, exclusion, or suspicion from public life. At various points in time, Jews faced antisemitism, social barriers, university quotas, professional discrimination, and moments of political hostility. The difference was not that America had no prejudice. It was that Jewish life no longer depended on charters, royal favor, or the whims of rulers. In America, the ground gradually shifted. Jews entered public life and eventually assumed responsibility for many of the country's most important institutions.

This report is not simply a catalogue of notable Jewish achievements. The deeper question is what those achievements say about America. The answer, drawn from the historical record, is striking. The Founders created a system in which Jews could move from formal equality to full participation in American public life. American Jewish history is therefore part of the history of the republic itself, not merely the story of one minority community.

This framing offers a grounded conservative alternative to the identity-driven accounts that increasingly dominate discussions of minority life in America. Recovering this history is not group self-congratulation. It is historical truth. Jews were not guests in the American story. From the Revolution forward, they helped to finance independence, defend the nation, interpret its laws, build its institutions, strengthen civil society, expand commerce, advance science, and enrich the country's shared culture.

America offered a form of belonging that did not require Jews to surrender their faith or identity. It enabled Jews to become defenders and guardians of liberty, something they had rarely, if ever, experienced throughout the centuries in the Diaspora. That matters for America 250 because it underlines what makes this country truly unique. Restoring this history is therefore an act of civic renewal.

For that reason, this report is organized around institutions rather than biography alone. Biography matters because men and women make history and because antisemitic narratives so often erase the humanity and patriotism of actual Jews. Still, the larger purpose is not biographical. Each figure discussed here illuminates a different part of American life: the Constitution, the armed forces, the judiciary, voluntary associations, free enterprise, scientific inquiry, and national culture.

A list of Jewish accomplishments may stir pride, but it will not necessarily strengthen constitutional literacy. It can even miss the deeper lesson if those achievements are presented as isolated curiosities rather than evidence of how a free republic works. The task is to connect individual lives to the laws, practices, and institutions that made their public service possible.

For policymakers and civic educators, this history should be taught as constitutional history because America's religious freedom became a key source of national strength. Equal citizenship became meaningful through actual participation in the courts, the armed forces, commerce, education, and public life. America's inheritance remains worth defending because it allowed different communities to join a common national project without dissolving into sameness.

From Toleration to Citizenship: The Constitutional Transformation of Jewish Political Life

The emergence of the United States opened a new chapter in Jewish political history. For centuries, Jewish communities had lived as persecuted minorities whose standing depended on rulers, charters, and the arbitrary and often uncertain mercy of toleration. The American Founding did not erase that inheritance at once. But it began to change the terms of Jewish political life in a way that was historically extraordinary.

The key change was the replacement of conditional toleration with citizenship grounded in law rather than indulgence. That change can be seen in the Constitution, in the language used by national leaders, and in the conduct of early American Jews themselves, who already behaved as if the republic was theirs to defend and build. That is why the Jewish experience in the Revolutionary and early national periods matters far beyond the small size of the Jewish population at the time.

By the eve of the American Revolution, Jewish life in the colonies remained modest in size but meaningful in impact. The approximately 2,500 Jews living in British North America² represented only a tiny fraction of the colonial population, yet their experience reflected broader features of colonial political culture that would later shape the American framework. Unlike much of Europe, the colonies lacked a single, uniform religious establishment. Authority was divided among separate colonies, local institutions exercised real influence, and commercial relationships often encouraged cooperation across religious boundaries. These conditions did not produce civic equality in the modern sense, nor did they eliminate legal disabilities or social prejudice. But they did create an environment

in which religious diversity could increasingly be accommodated without threatening political stability.

The 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The delegates who assembled for the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in May 1787 faced the challenge of designing a stronger national government. They had to create a political home for a remarkably diverse people. Their answer was bold: National unity would not rest on a common church but rather on a shared American framework. Article VI of the Constitution declared that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”³ The sentence was brief, but its implications were enormous.

Ratified in 1791, the First Amendment carried the same idea further by denying Congress the power to establish a national church and by protecting the free exercise of religion.⁴ Together, Article VI and the First Amendment gave Jews a national language of belonging that could be claimed not as a favor, but as a right. That marked a decisive break from the older world of permissions, privileges, and revocable toleration. The new order did not depend on the mood of a monarch, the convenience of a local magistrate, or a life of dhimmitude in Muslim lands. It rested on a public commitment.

The federal achievement of the Founders becomes even clearer when placed against the uneven record of the states. The Constitution did not instantly abolish every state-level religious restriction, and the early republic still contained remnants that elevated Protestant political culture above all others. But the national framework changed the argument. Once the Constitution rejected religious tests and protected free exercise, state-level exclusions based on religious identity looked increasingly inconsistent with the country’s stated principles. That gave minorities a vocabulary with which to challenge inherited disabilities and press the republic toward upholding its own commitments. Religious discrimination increasingly had to be justified in light of those principles rather than accepted as the natural order of things.

James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. James Madison, a principal architect of the Constitution, and Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, matter here because their defense of religious liberty created a public language broad enough to include Jews. Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance, which he penned anonymously in 1785, argued against coercive religious assessments, while Jefferson’s statute declared that civil rights should not depend on religious opinion. These arguments helped to move religious liberty from prudence to justice. For Jews, that shift mattered profoundly. Civic standing could now be defended as a right, not requested as a concession.

But legal provisions tell only part of the story. One of the most revealing examples is the correspondence exchanged between the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, and President George Washington in August 1790. Moses Seixas, the congregation's warden and a civic leader in Newport, praised the new government for affording "liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship."⁵ Washington's reply sharpened the point. "It is now no more," he wrote, "that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." The passage rejected the older logic of toleration and replaced it with the language of natural rights and citizenship.⁶

Washington's letter has endured because it stated a clear republican standard: Jews were not to be tolerated as useful outsiders but protected as citizens whose rights were inherent. The difference was not semantic. Toleration implies hierarchy; one group permits another to exist. Citizenship implies equality under law; members of the political community possess rights by virtue of their humanity and their status as citizens. That shift became one of the defining achievements of the American Founding.

The Newport exchange was more than a gracious note sent to a small congregation. It publicly defined the relationship between the new government and its Jewish citizens. Washington did not ask Jews to prove that they deserved toleration, nor did he describe their security as a gift from the Christian majority. He placed them within the same framework of natural rights that protected every other citizen. For American Jews, that language offered both reassurance and a standard by which the conduct of government could be judged.

Haym Salomon. Washington's words carried special weight because they reflected Jewish actions during the Revolution itself. Haym Salomon, a Polish-born Jewish immigrant, merchant, and broker, joined the Sons of Liberty, was arrested by the British, escaped confinement, and helped to marshal the funds that sustained the Patriot cause. He was not merely a donor. He used his commercial skill, linguistic ability, and credit networks to turn patriotic conviction into material support when the cause was on the brink. Legend has it that in 1781, when Continental troops threatened mutiny over unpaid wages, it was Salomon who arranged for \$20,000 to fund the Battle of Yorktown, which decided the war for independence.⁷ From 1781 to 1784, Salomon worked closely with Robert Morris, the Superintendent of Finance, negotiating bills of exchange and raising badly needed funds for the government. Salomon's name appears in Morris's diary at least 75 times, and later accounts credit him with providing or arranging roughly \$650,000 in support of the American cause.⁸

Francis Salvador. Francis Salvador offers a different Revolutionary example. A Sephardic Jew from a prominent family, Salvador settled in South Carolina, entered colonial political life, and became the first Jew elected to a colonial legislature in British North America. He died in combat in 1776 during the struggle for American independence. His life joined political participation and military sacrifice at the birth of the republic. For a community often treated elsewhere as politically suspect, Salvador's service made a powerful point: Jews could be not only beneficiaries of the American cause, but actors willing to pay the ultimate price in its defense.⁹

Mordecai Sheftall. Mordecai Sheftall of Savannah provides a third example. A religiously observant Jew, merchant, and communal leader, Sheftall served as a colonel and Commissary-General for Patriot forces in Georgia. His work required logistics, trust, and responsibility for provisioning troops, all of which were central to the survival of the army. His career shows that Jewish participation in the Revolution extended into the practical, unglamorous work of sustaining the war effort.¹⁰

No Footnotes to the Revolution. These figures, as well as others, were not footnotes to the Revolution. They risked their lives, spent their fortunes, and sacrificed for the American cause because they believed the new republic offered Jews a different future. They financed, fought, supplied, and served because the American cause promised an alternative to the insecurity Jews had known elsewhere.

The timing of their service is important. Salomon, Salvador, and Sheftall acted before the durability of the American experiment was known and before Jews could be certain what place they would occupy within it. Their loyalty was therefore not a response to generations of settled acceptance. It was a wager on the promise of the Revolution. They believed that the principles being proclaimed could create a country in which Jews would no longer live at the sufferance of rulers, and they helped make that country possible.

The early republic did not produce full equality overnight, but the direction of political life had changed. Article VI, the First Amendment, and Washington's reply to Moses Seixas gave Jewish citizenship a language sturdier than toleration. The Revolution had already drawn Jews into finance, military service, public administration, and civic life. The Founding gave those acts a firmer home.

Nowhere was this new belonging tested more clearly than in military service. Jews were willing to risk their lives for the republic, and the republic increasingly entrusted them with arms, command, and military responsibility.

Citizenship, Service, and the Defense of the Republic

Military service made the meaning of Jewish citizenship unmistakable. It asked Jews to accept discipline, risk, and sometimes death for a country they regarded as their own. It also required the United States to entrust them with arms, command, and responsibility, duties it would never place in the hands of permanent outsiders.

In many societies, Jews served in armies without gaining equal political standing. The American experience developed differently. Jewish service increasingly reflected belonging rather than conditional acceptance, even as prejudice persisted and the armed forces slowly adapted to religious difference.

The Revolution itself established the pattern. Jewish participation in the Patriot cause made clear that the struggle for independence did not belong to one denomination or one ethnic group. The republic was defended from the beginning by men whose presence complicated older assumptions about political belonging. That fact did not end prejudice, but it set a standard against which prejudice could be judged.

Military service did not by itself eliminate antisemitism or guarantee advancement. Jewish officers and enlisted men could still encounter suspicion and hostility. Yet service gave them a direct claim on the nation whose dangers they shared. It also confronted the country with a practical question that prejudice could not easily answer: How could men be treated as outsiders after they had accepted the same discipline, endured the same hardship, and faced the same enemy as their fellow citizens?

Uriah Phillips Levy. The Navy occupied a special place in the young republic, and Uriah Phillips Levy's career is tied to that setting. Levy, born in Philadelphia in 1792, was a pioneering Jewish naval officer who rose through the ranks despite antisemitic hostility and became the first Jewish commodore, then the Navy's highest rank.¹¹ He is also remembered for purchasing and preserving Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in 1834, eight years after the Founding Father's death, a striking act of patriotic remembrance by a Jewish officer devoted to the author of the Declaration of Independence.¹²

Levy's importance did not lie only in his rank but also in the reform he championed. His long campaign against corporal punishment¹³ sought to bring a coercive arm of the state closer to republican ideas of discipline, dignity, and lawful authority. He understood that military effectiveness did not require degrading treatment. Levy's key contribution was that he worked to make the Navy more consistent with the principles of the republic it defended.

Hyman G. Rickover. A century and a half later, the same pattern appeared on a much larger stage in the career of Admiral Hyman G. Rickover. Rickover, a Jewish immigrant from Poland who arrived in the United States as a child, rose to become a four-star admiral and the architect of the nuclear Navy.¹⁴ By the mid-20th century, American security depended on scientific innovation, administrative rigor, and relentless attention to safety. Rickover supplied all of them. He built a culture that shaped one of the most important strategic programs of the Cold War.¹⁵

The United States relied on Rickover at the highest level of national defense. A Jewish immigrant was entrusted with a program central to deterrence, naval power, and national survival. Trust of that kind cannot be faked.

Jacob Frankel. Jewish military service cannot be measured only by command or innovation. It must also be judged by whether the armed forces made room for religious conscience. During the Civil War, federal law initially limited chaplaincies to ordained ministers of “some Christian denomination,” thereby excluding Jews by statute. The successful effort to change the law and commission Rabbi Jacob Frankel in 1862 as the first Jewish chaplain showed that religious liberty could enter even the most hierarchical institution of the state.¹⁶

Frankel’s appointment deserves attention because it turned principle into military practice. Frankel was a prominent Philadelphia rabbi, cantor, and communal leader, and his commission made clear that Jewish soldiers did not shed their religious identity when they put on the uniform. They remained citizens with consciences, and the Army recognized that fact. The change in the law showed that Jewish soldiers could serve as Jews, not despite being Jews.

The Army also acknowledged that Jewish soldiers had legitimate religious needs. Accommodating those needs did not undermine military unity; it brought military practice closer to the nation’s constitutional commitment to liberty of conscience.

Jewish Service in World War II. The experience of American Jews in World War II further strengthened the bond between citizenship and service. About 550,000 American Jews¹⁷ served in the armed forces during a war against regimes that had made antisemitism a central doctrine of state power. Their service joined American patriotism and Jewish survival in a particularly direct way. They fought not as a separate interest group, but as American citizens defending their country against tyranny.

World War II also exposed the difference between a nation that protects religious liberty and regimes built on racial ideology. American Jewish

soldiers could serve as Americans while remaining Jews. They could carry prayer books, seek chaplains, observe religious duties when possible, and fight under the flag of a country whose principles rejected the blood-and-soil nationalism that had consumed Europe. Their service gave moral force to the American cause because it embodied the civilization the enemy sought to destroy.

Accommodating Jewish religious practice did not weaken military unity. It allowed Jewish soldiers to serve without pretending that their faith no longer mattered. Soldiers need discipline, but discipline in a republic is not the same as enforced uniformity of belief. A free country asks its citizens to serve without demanding that they erase the deepest sources of their identity.

That point is especially important for understanding Jewish service. Jewish soldiers did not prove their patriotism by becoming less Jewish. They proved it by serving faithfully as Americans while remaining members of a religious community with its own obligations, calendar, and memory. That balance is one of the achievements of American life. It allowed service to deepen collective belonging rather than demand personal self-negation.

Full citizenship also meant being trusted to interpret and administer the nation's laws.

The Rule of Law and Constitutional Self-Government

Military service was one measure of belonging. Another was whether Jews could take part in interpreting and administering American law. For minorities, confidence in impartial law was especially important because legal insecurity had long been one of the clearest signs of exclusion.

Over time, American Jews entered the judiciary, executive administration, and constitutional advocacy. They were no longer simply asking the law for protection; they were helping to interpret, to administer, and to defend it.

The Founders understood that law would have to restrain power as well as express public will. Alexander Hamilton's defense of the judiciary in *The Federalist Papers* emphasized the need for courts independent enough to guard the Constitution and the rights of individuals. That principle mattered for all citizens, but it carried special importance for minorities whose security depended on impartial law rather than popular indulgence.¹⁸

Louis D. Brandeis. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that principle was being tested under the pressures of industrialization, administrative growth, and concentrated power, which forced Americans to ask whether older constitutional principles could govern modern conditions. Jewish

lawyers and jurists entered that debate not as outsiders but as Americans arguing over the shape of the common legal order. Louis D. Brandeis became one of the central figures in that struggle. Born in Louisville to Jewish immigrant parents, Brandeis became a leading lawyer, reformer, and public advocate known as the People's Lawyer before his appointment in 1916 as the first Jewish Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.¹⁹

As a lawyer and jurist, Brandeis sought to define liberty in a modern republic. He challenged monopolies, defended privacy, argued for public accountability, and insisted that concentrated private power could threaten republican freedom as surely as government overreach. His career showed how American Jews helped define liberty under the Constitution.

Benjamin N. Cardozo. Benjamin N. Cardozo brought a different temperament to American law. Where Brandeis was often a reformer, Cardozo became known for careful reasoning, judicial restraint, and respect for legal continuity. He came from a distinguished Sephardic Jewish family rooted in New York's oldest Jewish community and served as chief judge of the New York Court of Appeals before his appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1932.²⁰

Cardozo rejected both mechanical formalism and judicial free will. His warning that a judge is "not a knight-errant, roaming at will in pursuit of his own ideal of beauty or of goodness" remains one of the clearest statements of judicial humility in American legal thought. In a republic governed by law, judges must interpret law, not substitute personal preference for public authority. Cardozo helped to explain why courts deserve trust only when they are disciplined by law.²¹

Felix Frankfurter. Felix Frankfurter's career centered on the proper limits of judicial power. He believed that courts preserved democratic government partly by respecting the authority of the elected branches. Born in Vienna and brought to the United States as a child, Frankfurter became a Harvard Law School professor, an influential public intellectual, a close adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court from 1939 to 1962.²²

Frankfurter's answer was a jurisprudence of judicial restraint rooted in concern for boundaries and democratic legitimacy. Later generations have not agreed with him in every instance, but that is not the central point here. He argued over the proper limits of power from the center of American legal life. That shows how far the American Jewish experience had traveled. A community long accustomed elsewhere to legal vulnerability had produced figures trusted to define the responsibilities of the nation's highest court.

Oscar Straus. Judicial service was only one part of this story. Oscar Straus illustrates the executive dimension. Straus, a German-born Jewish immigrant, served as a diplomat, American representative to the Ottoman Empire, and in 1906 became the first Jewish Cabinet secretary when President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him Secretary of Commerce and Labor. His appointment showed that the federal government could entrust one of its highest administrative offices to an American Jew on the basis of competence and trust.²³

The executive story is important because constitutional government is administered as well as interpreted. Straus's service demonstrated that Jews could be entrusted not only with rights, but also with the ordinary burdens of governing. That was a crucial marker of belonging. A citizen is not fully integrated into a republic unless he too can be trusted to serve the state and the public faithfully under law.

Louis Marshall. Louis Marshall points in the same direction from the world of constitutional advocacy. Marshall, a prominent New York lawyer and longtime leader of the American Jewish Committee in the early 20th century, defended minority rights, religious liberty, and constitutional principles in public controversy and litigation. He framed Jewish claims not as sectarian exceptions but as claims tied to the rights of all Americans. That was essential. In the American system, minority security is strongest when it is tied to principles that protect everyone.

Jews as Loyal Custodians of Public Office. The presence of Jews in the legal profession, the judiciary, and executive administration also helped to refute an old antisemitic suspicion: the claim that Jews could not be loyal custodians of the nation's courts and public offices. Brandeis, Cardozo, Frankfurter, Straus, and Marshall answered that charge with service. They interpreted law, administered policy, defended rights, and argued over constitutional limits as Americans responsible for the public order.

Their success did not mean that prejudice had disappeared from American law or public life. Brandeis faced bitter opposition, and Jewish lawyers continued to encounter barriers in firms, universities, and professional circles. The deeper point is that such barriers no longer defined the limits of Jewish public service. American Jews could reach the highest levels of the legal system and take part in the country's most serious arguments over liberty, authority, and constitutional restraint. Their presence changed both the institutions they entered and the public understanding of who could be entrusted to lead them.

Their careers showed that Jews were no longer merely protected by American law. They had become responsible for shaping and administering it.

Jewish participation was not confined to government and the courts. It was equally visible in schools, charities, hospitals, and other voluntary institutions.

Civil Society, Philanthropy, and the Social Infrastructure of Liberty

Much of American life is built outside government, in schools, charities, hospitals, congregations, and other voluntary institutions.

The American Jewish experience in this sphere is especially revealing because Jewish communal life had long depended on voluntary organization. In America, those traditions did not remain confined to self-preservation. They moved outward into institution-building that strengthened the nation. Jews did not have to disappear into the broader culture to contribute to it.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French observer whose *Democracy in America* remains one of the classic accounts of American self-government, famously saw the “spirit of association”²⁴ as indispensable to democratic life. Tocqueville was not writing specifically about Jews, but his insight helps to explain why American Jewish communal life fit so naturally into the country’s traditions of self-government. Early American Jewish communities built congregations, schools, burial societies, benevolent organizations, and mutual-aid networks. Their significance lay in the practices they cultivated: deliberation, trusteeship, responsibility, and organized service.

These associations were also schools of self-government. Their members raised funds, selected leaders, settled disputes, kept records, and decided how limited resources should be used. In doing so, they practiced the ordinary disciplines on which democratic life depends. Jewish communal institutions preserved religious life, but they also prepared immigrants and their children for participation in a society where citizenship required initiative rather than passive dependence. The habits learned in a congregation, charity, or school board could readily be carried into business, local government, and national service.

Rebecca Gratz. The 19th-century American Jewish educator and philanthropist Rebecca Gratz offers an especially revealing early example. Gratz, born into a prominent Philadelphia Jewish family, became a pioneer of Jewish education and charitable organization. She helped to establish institutions devoted to women, children, orphans, and religious education. Her life shows that citizenship cannot be reduced to officeholding or suffrage alone. Much of the work on which a republic depends is performed through voluntary institutions built outside formal political power.²⁵

Gratz's significance is also moral. Her work strengthened Jewish communal life while serving broader needs. That combination is central to the American Jewish experience. Religious distinctiveness did not prevent public contribution. In many cases, it supplied the traditions and obligations that made such contribution possible.

Julius Rosenwald. Few figures better illustrate the civic force of Jewish philanthropy than Julius Rosenwald. Rosenwald, the son of German Jewish immigrants, built Sears, Roebuck and Company into a national enterprise and became one of the most consequential philanthropists in American history. His importance lies in the way he used private wealth to strengthen the social conditions on which republican life depends.²⁶

The Rosenwald Schools, built in partnership with black communities and public authorities across the South, showed philanthropy at its best: not condescension from above, but partnership, local initiative, and educational opportunity. Rosenwald's model required community participation and local commitment. Durable institutions are built when private generosity, local responsibility, and public purpose reinforce one another.²⁷

Felix Warburg. The philanthropy of Felix Warburg illustrates a related development: the organization of large-scale giving. Warburg, a German-born banker and member of the prominent Warburg family, became a major figure in Jewish and general philanthropy in the early 20th century. His support for hospitals, educational institutions, relief organizations, and wider philanthropic networks showed that civil society in a free republic depends on good governance, fiduciary discipline, and administrative capacity.²⁸

More than Generosity. Effective philanthropy required more than generosity. Jewish institutions also developed the financial discipline, professional leadership, and administrative skill needed to build organizations that lasted. Their work showed that voluntary association could operate at scale without becoming an arm of the state.

The growth of Jewish hospitals, charities, and educational institutions also responded to real social needs. Immigrants often arrived poor, disoriented, and vulnerable. Communal institutions helped them adjust to American life without forcing them to sever their religious and cultural roots. That process mattered not only for Jews. It strengthened the wider republic by helping newcomers become self-supporting citizens through voluntary initiative rather than permanent dependence on state power. The result was an integration rooted in confidence rather than self-erasure.

At their best, these institutions also served people and causes beyond the Jewish community. Hospitals treated patients regardless of race or creed, schools formed citizens, charities relieved suffering, and cultural

organizations enriched public life. Jewish civil society did not remain a closed system of group preservation. It became part of America's social fabric. The skills and forms of cooperation that developed in one community became assets for the whole country.

Civil society also helped American Jews to navigate the tension between integration and identity. Congregations, schools, charitable agencies, and other institutions preserved Jewish life while connecting Jews to the broader public. These institutions preserved Jewish identity while helping immigrants and their children enter American public life.

This is one reason why identity-driven accounts of American life miss the mark. They often treat group identity as a claim against the nation. The American Jewish experience shows something different: that a distinct religious community can strengthen the nation precisely because it brings traditions of memory, obligation, charity, and learning into public life. The result is not fragmentation, but a richer form of common citizenship.

American freedom also opened professional and economic opportunities that Jews had often been denied elsewhere.

Innovation, Economic Life, and the Productive Uses of Liberty

The United States gave Jewish immigrants and their descendants opportunities in commerce, finance, medicine, and science that had often been closed to them elsewhere. Its legal and social framework allowed initiative, intellectual inquiry, private property, and voluntary association to flourish with unusual freedom.

This allowed Jews to turn talent, hard work, and practical ideas into enterprises that served the wider public. The examples here should therefore be read not as isolated success stories, but as evidence of how freedom worked in practice.

America, of course, did not guarantee success or eliminate prejudice. It did, however, make it harder for religious identity to determine how far a person could advance. Talent could be tested in the marketplace, the laboratory, or the university rather than stopped in advance by law. That distinction helps to explain why Jewish achievement in America was so broad. The country did not assign Jews a single economic role. It gave them room to move across fields and to apply their abilities wherever opportunity and need met.

Paul Warburg. Paul Warburg's contribution was institutional. Warburg, a German-born banker whose brother Felix was discussed earlier, immigrated to the United States and became a leading advocate of banking

reform. He helped to shape the financial architecture of the modern American state. In the wake of recurring financial panics, he argued for a more coherent central banking structure and became one of the intellectual forces behind the Federal Reserve System.²⁹

Whatever one thinks of the later history of the Federal Reserve, Warburg's role showed that America could rely on a Jewish immigrant for designing institutions central to national economic life. That was a remarkable act of trust. The American economic system allowed his expertise to enter national service.

Jacob Schiff. Jacob Schiff illustrates the link between capital formation and responsibility. Schiff, a German-born banker who became a senior partner at Kuhn, Loeb & Co., was one of the most important financiers in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His career involved railroads, investment banking, philanthropy, education, and Jewish communal leadership. He understood capital not simply as accumulation but also as obligation.³⁰

Levi Strauss. Levi Strauss illustrates the practical side of American enterprise. A German immigrant, he traveled to San Francisco during the Gold Rush era in the mid-19th century and built a company around durable clothing that became part of American life. His story highlights the opportunities the country offered to people with initiative and a strong work ethic, regardless of their religious creed.³¹

The power of the Strauss example lies in its ordinariness as much as its success. Blue jeans became associated with workers, miners, farmers, cowboys, students, and eventually global American culture. A company founded by a Jewish immigrant produced an article of clothing that became an icon of American practicality and rugged individualism.

Julius Rosenwald. Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist, must also be understood as a builder of the national market through his role at Sears, Roebuck and Company. His importance in commercial history reflects more than private success. Sears helped to integrate the American economy, expanded access to consumer goods, and helped to organize modern commercial life on a national scale. Rosenwald's later philanthropy also demonstrates that free enterprise and civic obligation need not be opposing principles. In his career, the productive energies of the market were joined to a serious sense of duty.³²

Milton Friedman. Born in Brooklyn to immigrant parents from Central Europe, Milton Friedman became one of the most influential economists of the 20th century and a dedicated defender of free markets and limited government. His influence did not arise from wealth, office, or communal representation. It arose from the force of his argument.³³ Friedman insisted

that economic liberty was inseparable from political liberty and that excessive concentration of power in government threatened both prosperity and freedom.³⁴

Friedman's importance lies in the way his ideas reinforced a central insight of the Founding: Liberty depends not only on rights written in law, but also on institutions that limit coercion, protect voluntary exchange, and preserve personal responsibility. He did not write as a representative of a minority group but as an American economist arguing about the conditions of freedom. That itself is part of the story. America made it possible for a descendant of Jewish immigrants to shape national and global debates about liberty.

Friedman challenged prevailing assumptions, defended unpopular conclusions, and trusted open debate to test his ideas. That intellectual independence was itself a product of the freedom he defended. His career shows that Jewish participation in American life was not limited to entering existing institutions. American Jews also helped to reshape the country's understanding of the proper relationship among government, markets, and individual choice.

Jonas Salk. Jonas Salk's development of the polio vaccine reveals the same pattern in science. Salk, born in New York to a Russian immigrant mother and a father born in New Jersey to immigrants from Eastern Europe, became a physician and medical researcher whose work helped to protect millions from one of the most feared diseases of the 20th century. His achievement mattered because it saved lives. But it also mattered because it grew out of a free society's ecology of universities, laboratories, philanthropy, and private initiative.³⁵ Salk's work therefore belongs not only to medical history, but also to the civic history of the republic.

Albert Einstein. Einstein's arrival in the United States demonstrated America's ability to provide refuge to scholars driven from Europe by tyranny. Born in Germany and already world-famous for his scientific achievements, he came to the United States after the Nazis rose to power. His presence showed that a free society could shelter inquiry and benefit from it.³⁶

Einstein was not a conventional political figure, and his views did not align neatly with American conservatism. But his American refuge reveals a vital truth: Societies that protect liberty attract talent that closed and tyrannical societies drive away.

The Same Underlying Reality. These men worked in very different fields, but their careers reflected the same underlying reality: America allowed Jewish talent to contribute directly to the nation's economic, scientific, and intellectual strength.

These histories suggest that innovation depends not only on talent, but also on law, stability, free inquiry, private initiative, and moral responsibility. The American Jewish experience is especially revealing because it shows how a historically vulnerable minority could help to build the financial, commercial, scientific, medical, and economic capacities of the nation. America allowed Jewish success to become part of the nation's strength.

These contributions also raise an important question about how America remembers its own history during its 250th anniversary.

Civic Memory, Constitutional Identity, and the American Future

Institutions cannot be preserved if citizens do not understand how they arose or why they matter. Arguments about history are therefore never only about the past. They shape the inheritance through which a people understands its future.

American Jewish history shows how constitutional liberty allowed a once-vulnerable minority to become deeply invested in the country's future. Over time, American Jews became involved in the military, legal, scientific, economic, philanthropic, and cultural life of the republic. That is not a marginal story. It is one of the best tests of the American promise.

The American Jewish experience confirms that America's commitments to equal citizenship, liberty of conscience, and the rule of law were not empty slogans. Over time, they changed lives, opened doors, and drew Jews into responsibility for the nation itself.

This matters directly in a period of renewed antisemitism. Historical ignorance does not create hatred by itself, but it gives hatred room to breathe. A truthful account of the American past narrows that space by showing that Jews have long helped to build, defend, and sustain the republic. The rights of Jews, like the rights of all citizens, do not depend on a ledger of contributions. But memory must rest on truth, and truth requires acknowledging that Jews have been part of the American story from the beginning.

Teaching the Full Story. Schools should teach about American Jews not only as victims of persecution, but also as soldiers, judges, entrepreneurs, scientists, philanthropists, and public servants. Lessons about persecution, immigration, and the Holocaust remain important, but they are not the whole story. Teaching only the history of victimhood leaves students with an incomplete picture and can unintentionally

reinforce the idea that Jews stand apart from the American experience. A fuller account shows the obstacles that Jews faced *and* the responsibilities they assumed.

The same point applies to contemporary identity politics. If American history is taught mainly as a struggle among fixed groups competing for recognition, the meaning of the Jewish experience is easily lost. The better lesson is that a free republic can preserve unity without demanding uniformity. It can allow religious distinctiveness while building common citizenship. It can call minorities not merely into recognition, but into responsibility.

Irving Berlin. Irving Berlin's patriotic music gives that truth a melody. Berlin, born Israel Beilin in the Russian Empire, immigrated to the United States as a child and became one of the great composers of American national feeling. He did not erase his origins, nor did he make patriotism the property of any one group. He helped to give musical form to an American identity broad enough to include those who came from elsewhere and made the country their own.³⁷

Berlin's example is especially powerful because he reached Americans in a way that legal and historical arguments often could not: through music that became part of the country's shared culture. His patriotic songs showed that American identity could be adopted, loved, and strengthened by those who came from elsewhere and wholeheartedly embraced their new country.

America at 250. The semiquincentennial should be more than an anniversary. It should prompt Americans to consider what made the country's experiment in liberty possible and why it remains worth defending. "America 250" will fail if it becomes only a sequence of ceremonies. It will succeed if it strengthens historical understanding and renews gratitude for liberty under law.

The American Jewish experience belongs near the center of that inquiry. It shows that the United States, despite its failures and limits, gave Jews the security and freedom to take an active part in national life. Recovering that history during America's 250th anniversary would strengthen civic literacy, answer antisemitism with truth, and reaffirm religious liberty and equal citizenship.

A truthful account of America must acknowledge its failures without allowing those failures to swallow the whole story. The American Jewish experience helps to preserve that balance. It shows that prejudice was real, but it also shows that the country's founding principles gave citizens the means to challenge it.

This understanding has practical consequences. Schools, museums, civic organizations, military academies, law schools, and public officials should not treat American Jewish history as a narrow ethnic supplement. They should present it as constitutional history. Jewish contributions matter not merely as a record of achievement, but because they reveal what religious liberty and equal citizenship made possible.

Acknowledging Jewish contributions should not become merely a parade of famous Jewish names. The individuals discussed in this report matter because their lives illuminate larger features of American government and society. George Washington's letter explains the difference between toleration and rights. Jewish military service shows how belonging is proved through sacrifice. Jewish jurists demonstrate the importance of impartial law, while philanthropists and entrepreneurs reveal what voluntary initiative can accomplish. The aim is not ethnic pride for its own sake, but a clearer understanding of the country.

That lesson is badly needed now. Antisemitism thrives when Jews are portrayed as alien, parasitic, or detached from the national good. The historical record shows the opposite. American Jews helped to finance independence, defend the country, interpret its laws, build its institutions, expand commerce, advance science, and enrich national culture. Recovering that record will not end antisemitism by itself. But it deprives antisemitism of one of its most useful lies.

The challenge for America 250 is not simply to add Jewish names to an existing commemorative calendar. The challenge is to tell the national story more truthfully. When Jewish contributions are presented as part of the central American narrative, citizens can see how religious liberty and equal citizenship enabled Jews to identify with the country and contribute to its future.

What Policymakers, Educators, and Historical Societies Should Do

In order to strengthen civic education and counter antisemitism with an accurate account of American history, think tanks, universities, and historical societies should:

Commission a series of focused studies on the Revolution and Founding, military service, constitutional law, free enterprise and philanthropy, and science and innovation. Each study should be written for policymakers and public leaders, not only for scholars, and should show how American Jewish history illuminates the practical achievements of the Founding.

Civic education organizations and public history institutions should:

Develop policy briefs and educational toolkits for lawmakers, state officials, educators, museums, and community organizations. These resources should shape the historical findings into useful materials for public programs, lectures, exhibits, classrooms, and antisemitism education.

Congress, state education agencies, military academies, law schools, bar associations, and public history institutions should:

Incorporate American Jewish history into their curricula and programming. It should be taught as part of the nation's constitutional development, not as a detachable minority sidebar.

Public officials, civic leaders, and Jewish communal organizations should:

Respond to antisemitism not only with condemnation, but also with historically grounded explanations of the role that American Jews have played in building and defending the nation. Condemnation addresses the moral offense. Historical literacy addresses the falsehood beneath it. Both are necessary.

Foundations, universities, think tanks, and philanthropic organizations should:

Support further research and educational work on the role religious minorities have played in American self-government. The American Jewish experience should be a central case study because it links religious liberty with full participation in national life.

Free societies endure when citizens regard the country and its institutions as their own. American Jewish history shows that the United States has repeatedly made that kind of belonging possible. Recovering this record is an act of civic renewal.

The American Jewish Experience and the Meaning of the American Founding

The history examined in this report points to a clear conclusion: America gave Jews a form of citizenship that had rarely been available to them elsewhere. Jews did not merely find refuge in the United States. They became active participants in its public life and defenders of the country.

This progress was neither immediate nor complete. It occurred because the country's constitutional principles gave Jews the means to challenge exclusion and claim their place as equal citizens. In that sense, the American Jewish experience vindicates one of the Founding's most ambitious claims: Liberty secured by constitutional government can produce citizens who regard the nation as their own.

That lesson is urgent as the nation celebrates America 250. Antisemitism is in part a symptom of historical amnesia and civic decay. When Americans forget the role Jews have played in building the republic, they become more vulnerable to narratives that cast Jews as strangers to the national story. Historical truth is therefore an essential element in the fight against antisemitism.

Recovering the record of American Jewish service, leadership, and patriotism can provide a fact-based and constitutionally grounded alternative to identity-driven accounts of American life so common on the Left. It can show that the Founders' principles of religious liberty, equal citizenship, freedom under law, and civic responsibility made possible one of the most remarkable stories of minority integration in modern history.

National memory does not preserve itself. Each generation must learn the history of the country it has inherited. If America 250 is to be more than a commemoration, it should remind citizens that the Founding allowed religious minorities to enter national life without erasing their identities. That achievement is not incidental to the American story. It is one of its strongest proofs.

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