

---

## TO OUR READERS . . .

Abraham Lincoln aptly noted that “the better part of one’s life consists of his friendships...”<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Dr. Lance J. Sussman has been a friend, colleague, and collaborator for nearly a half century, and that is, by any reckoning, the better part of our lives! Our paths first crossed during our student days in Cincinnati. Drawn together by a deep interest in the history of the Jewish people—especially the American Jewish experience—we found ourselves pursuing similar professional interests. We were acquiring a rabbinical education with a keen focus on the American Jewish past. Above all, we relished the precious opportunity to study with a man known as the “dean of American Jewish historians,” the inimitable Jacob Rader Marcus (z”l).

Marcus introduced me to Lance Sussman, then a student rabbi, in the spring of 1979. Having completed the school’s required course in American Jewish history, I approached “the doctor” to ask if he would be willing to craft an advanced independent readings course over the summer. After agreeing to my request, we began to discuss topics that might be explored, as well as the nature of the written assignment that such a course would require. Dr. Marcus informed me that he expected me to read several predetermined volumes on a given topic broadly construed and required a term paper based on original research. He then recommended that I speak to an upperclassman named Lance J. Sussman who had already studied with Marcus the previous summer. Mr. Sussman’s term project, Dr. Marcus solemnly declared, was “outstanding.” He therefore urged me to review Sussman’s work and use it as a touchstone for my own efforts.

The next day, I found Sussman’s research project at the American Jewish Archives. The work was entitled “Jewish Intellectual Activity and Educational Practice in the United States: 1776–1840.” This so-called term paper immediately provoked a cascade of anxiety and insecurity. Not only was Sussman’s “term paper” lengthy— *two hundred*

---

1 Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1:302.

---

*and fifty-five* pages!—but it also seemed as if a seasoned scholar had written it! To the best of my knowledge at that time, such a work was the equivalent of a PhD dissertation!

It did not take long, however, to discover that the heart of the person responsible for this impressive research project was every bit as large as his astonishing intellect. Many academics and scholars hold the fruits of their laborious research close to their chests, hesitating to share archival documents or research discoveries with colleagues who may somehow benefit or derive credit from the sweat of their brow. My schoolmate had no such tendencies. Shortly after he passed his doctoral comprehensive examinations, which required many months of dedicated preparation, Lance provided me with copies of the excellent bibliographies he compiled in order to sit for those onerous tests. This unsolicited and thoughtful gesture saved me countless hours of preparation in advance of the comprehensive exams.

Sussman also offered me extremely valuable scholarly counsel regarding the writing of a dissertation, which he began a year or two before me. “If you elect to write a biographical study as I am doing,” the experienced Sussman informed me laconically,

make sure you avoid the error that I have made: I elected to study the life of Isaac Leeser (1806–1868), but I failed to realize when I selected my research topic that Leeser lived a *long* life during which he published copious volumes and composed mountains of correspondence. If you choose to research the life of an important American Jew, make certain you select a significant personality who died young!

This advice made good sense to Zola, and in no time at all, I found my man: Isaac Harby of Charleston, the great intellect of the Reformed Society of Israelites and a fascinating figure who, fortunately for me, died at the age of forty (1788–1828).

In sum, Lance J. Sussman has been for so many of his colleagues what he was for me—the very model of a scholar and a gentleman. The much-overused accolade is nevertheless true when it comes to Sussman: he is a thoroughgoing mensch. To the best of my knowledge, Lance has only one major shortcoming: if he only had red hair!

---

Sussman's approach to the study of American Jewish history constitutes a marvelous alchemy of rigorous scholarship and rabbinical discernment. Today, most historians of the American Jewish experience received their doctoral training at a secular university, not in the halls of a scholarly seminary. These scholars are comfortably ensconced in the academic world, which sometimes still looks suspiciously at "clergy-scholars" whose objectivity and historical neutrality may be unintentionally suspect. Like every rabbinical student who studied with Marcus, Sussman learned that the rabbinate and the critical study of the past must never become antithetical enterprises. Marcus insisted that the Reform rabbi's leadership capacities were fortified and enhanced through lifelong learning and advanced study:

Every rabbi has 3,000 years of intelligent ancestors. If you do not become increasingly more and more a learned rabbi, you betray the heritage of those who gave you birth. Without learning there is no Judaism. Count that day lost in which you have not opened a Jewish book. If you do not learn, you cannot lead; if you do not study, you are only a hireling.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, Marcus memorably insisted that the study of history demanded scholarly detachment:

One must fanatically detest falsehood; one must search his soul every time he writes a sentence. The fact scrubbed clean is more eternal than perfumed and rouged words. The historian's desk is an altar on which he must sacrifice his most cherished prejudices. One must be dedicated to the truth.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Marcus readily acknowledged that partiality was an inherent human trait. No historian, he wrote, could "jump out of his skin." The "critical method" of study, to use his preferred terminology, must never

---

2 Jacob Rader Marcus, "The Larger Task," An Address delivered at the Ninetieth Ordination Exercises of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 1974, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

3 Herbert C. Zafren and Abraham J. Peck, *The Writings of Jacob Rader Marcus: A Bibliographic Record* (Cincinnati, OH: American Jewish Archives, 1978), frontispiece.

be sacrificed to personal biases. Yet Marcus willingly conceded that every historian, just like every human being, possessed his or her own perspective on the facts. "I like Jews," Marcus frankly admitted. "I am convinced that they are an unusually gifted lot."<sup>4</sup>

Sussman has consistently emulated his *Doktorvater's* academic methodology. He has produced meticulously researched scholarship and, concomitantly, he is regarded by his congregants and his rabbinical colleagues as a truly learned rabbi. In following this path, Sussman has earned a worthy place among a select group of Marcus disciples. Bertram Wallace Korn (1918–79), Marcus's first doctoral student, made enduring contributions to the field through his impeccably researched works on American Jewry, the Civil War, and the early history of New Orleans. Korn produced these publications while serving as the senior rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, a pulpit that Sussman would assume in 2001 and lead with distinction for more than two decades.

Another Marcus disciple, Stanley Chyet (1931–2002), produced a valuable biography on colonial Newport's wealthiest Jew, Aaron Lopez (1731–1782). Chyet meticulously reconstructed the life of this complicated Jewish refugee from Portugal who immigrated to Newport in 1752. There he built a successful business and became the wealthiest Jew in his community. Lopez generously funded the community's synagogue even as he marketed thousands of enslaved human beings. He seemed to have forgotten his upbringing in Portugal, where he and his family had suffered bitterly from anti-Jewish oppression. Chyet served on the faculty of Hebrew Union College for decades. He was a researcher at heart, but, like his mentor Marcus, Chyet relished his role as a teacher of rabbis. He also remained actively involved in the rabbinate, composing liturgical poetry and always willing to substitute for rabbinic colleagues who were on vacation, ill, or in need of some rabbinical assistance.

Lance Sussman's professional career, like that of Marcus's other

---

4 Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989–93), 1:14; and Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865*, 3 vols. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 1:5.

rabbinical disciples, constitutes an affirmation of his teacher's unflagging commitment to exemplary research seasoned by an unfeigned admiration for the history of the Jewish people. His seminal volume on Isaac Leeser will remain the authoritative resource on this pioneering American Jewish personality for many generations. So many of his fine articles, like "‘Toward Better Understanding’: The Rise of the Interfaith Movement in America and the Role of Isaac Landman" and "The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism" will be repeatedly cited by future historians.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Sussman has also been a true credit to the Reform rabbinate. He has taught thousands of congregants over the decades. He imparted his love for the Jewish people and its past from the pulpit, under the marriage canopy, and even at the funeral bier. These attainments must never be minimized or overlooked.

One of Isaac Mayer Wise's students memorialized a noteworthy incident that occurred during a class that Wise was teaching. Wise suddenly began to feel ill and decided to end the class early. As Wise began to step down from his teaching platform, a well-meaning rabbinical student jumped up from his seat, grabbed his teacher's arm and said, "May I help you down, Doctor?" The famous rabbi shifted his glance and said in a voice loud enough for the rest of the class to hear: "Never help a person down, my boy, a rabbi must *always* help people up!"<sup>6</sup> This is how Rabbi Dr. Sussman has led in the various communities he served over the past four decades. He has been a learned rabbi who never lost sight of his obligation to help people up.

---

5 Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995); Sussman, "‘Toward Better Understanding’: The Rise of the Interfaith Movement in America and the Role of Isaac Landman," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 31, no. 1 (1982): 35–51; and Sussman, "The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 57, nos. 1–2 (2005): 29–52.

6 Stanley R. Brav, *Telling Tales Out of School* (Cincinnati, OH: HUC-JIR Alumni Association, 1965), 68.

This issue of our journal is intended to serve as a tribute to Rabbi Dr. Sussman. It consists of new contributions to the field written by distinguished scholars who have known and admired Sussman for many years. Our readers will enjoy each one of the articles contained herein because they enhance our understanding of the American Jewish experience and also because they were written and assembled to fete and salute our accomplished colleague and friend, Lance J. Sussman.

The sages of yore famously taught: ביום טובתו של חברך שמח עמו, “On the day that something wonderful happens to your friend, rejoice with him” (Qohelet Rabbah 7). All of us who know and admire this special colleague are rejoicing over this fine *Festschrift* written in Lance’s honor. As he reads these words of tribute, we remind him to pay heed to the wise counsel that the prominent lawyer and Jewish communal leader Simon Wolf (1836–1923) proffered when his colleagues and friends feted him with meeds of praise on his eightieth birthday: “I’d rather have a stick of taffy while I’m living,” Wolf rejoined, “than a column of *epitaffy* when I’m dead!” We are confident that our readers will enjoy these new, fascinating scholarly essays written in earnest recognition of our colleague and friend, Lance J. Sussman. There is more than enough historical taffy in this issue of our journal to sweeten every reader’s palate!

Gary P. Zola  
Cincinnati, Ohio.