

Highlighting Contributions of Jewish Americans

Note: These facts have been taken from ICS's [Jewish Americans: Identity, History, and Experience Fact Sheet](#)

- Jewish American allies to the African American community played a significant role in the founding and funding of the NAACP, Rosenwald Schools, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Julius Rosenwald partnered with Booker T. Washington to build over 5,000 schools for African American students between 1917 and 1932, and by 1928, one-third of the South's rural Black school children and teachers were served by Rosenwald Schools.
- Motivated by Jewish tradition's concern for the worker, and oppressive working conditions for Jewish immigrants, the U.S. labor movement included many Jewish labor organizers, such as Samuel Gompers (founder of American Federation of Labor (AFL) and president 1886-1924); Rose Schneiderman (active 1904-1940s in the Women's Trade Union League); and Pauline M. Newman (active 1907-1983), Clara Lemlich (active 1909-1951), and David Dubinsky (active 1932-1966 as president) in the International Ladies Garment Worker Union (ILGWU).
- Jews were pioneers in the new film industry in California in the early decades of the 20th century. This included studio heads Harry Cohn (Columbia Pictures 1919-1958), Samuel Goldwyn (active 1913-1959), Louis B. Mayer (active MGM 1915-1951), Carl Laemmle (Universal Pictures active 1909-1939), the Warner Brothers (active 1918-1973), and Adolph Zukor (Paramount Pictures active 1903-1959). Though there was less overt discrimination in California, anti-Jewish prejudice in the U.S. led many studio heads and producers to shy away from Jewish themes in movies for many decades.
- Jewish songwriters enthusiastically embraced American music and contributed to the Great American songbook (1911-1960), Tin Pan Alley (1885-1940), Broadway musicals (1949-2018), and folk and protest music (1930s-1970s). Among these were: George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Aaron Copland, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Bob Dylan, Arlo Guthrie, Phil Ochs, Art Garfunkel, Paul Simon, Peter Yarrow, Carole King, Country Joe McDonald, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.
- During the civil rights movement, a large percentage of allies were Jewish activists, disproportionate to their small percentage in the U.S. population. Nearly half the country's civil rights lawyers were Jewish, and more than half of the non-African American civil rights workers were Jewish, including two of the three men murdered during the 1964 Freedom Summer. In 1931, Jewish lawyer Samuel Leibowitz defended the Scottsboro boys.
- Jewish women played critical roles in the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s: Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Letty Cottin Pogrebin, and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg when she worked for the ACLU.

- Jews have also been at the forefront of the LGBTQ rights movement, contributing to major milestones such as the advancement of marriage equality and the fight for HIV/AIDS recognition: Evan Wolfson, Edie Windsor, Roberta Kaplan, and Larry Kramer. Pioneering LGBTQ Jewish elected officials include Harvey Milk in California, and Barney Frank from Massachusetts.
- For thousands of years, the value of saving and preserving human life has been central to Jewish tradition. This deep-rooted commitment has driven many Jewish Americans to pursue careers in medicine and medical research. For example:
 - Jonas Salk introduced the polio vaccine in the 1955
 - Gertrude Elion won the Nobel prize in 1988 for her work in developing drugs to treat leukemia, rheumatoid arthritis, malaria, and to prevent organ transplant rejection
 - Lillian Wald pioneered public health nursing, which helped shape public health care as we know it today and brought national attention to the powerful impact nurses have on the communities they serve
 - In 1977, Rosalyn Yalow became the second woman ever (Marie Curie was the first) to win a Nobel prize in medicine for co-developing radio-immunoassay (RIA), a groundbreaking technique that uses radioactive isotopes to quickly and precisely measure concentrations of hormones, vitamins, viruses, enzymes, drugs, and other substances in the blood.
- Jewish Americans have made significant contributions to science, driving advancements in fields ranging from theoretical physics and genetics to medicine (see above) and computer science. For example:
 - John McCarthy is a computer scientist who is one of the founders of the field of study of artificial intelligence
 - Larry Tesler, while working on the first word processor, developed the idea of the copy and paste functionality
 - Jaron Lanier is considered a founder of the field of virtual reality.
 - Henriette Avram developed the Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) format, which revolutionized library cataloging by enabling the automation and electronic sharing of bibliographic information. Her work laid the foundation for modern library systems and interlibrary loan programs, significantly improving access to information worldwide.
 - Judy Estrin helped to popularize the term “cloud computing”.

Did You Know? Contributions & Fun Facts About Jewish Americans

Levi Strauss, an immigrant from Germany, invented his blue jeans in 1873.

Hot Pockets were invented by Paul and David Merage, Persian Jews who immigrated to California in the 1970s.

Songwriter Irving Berlin wrote God Bless America and White Christmas.

The words "...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses..." on the Statue of Liberty were written by a Jewish woman, Emma Lazarus.

Superman is Jewish. His name, Kal-El, resembles the Hebrew words for "voice" and "vessel." His creator Jerry Siegel said that he was strongly influenced by antisemitism he experienced.

Yip Harburg, born to Yiddish-speaking parents from Minsk, wrote the lyrics to the Oscar-winning Over the Rainbow.

Judith Resnik was the first Jewish astronaut in space. She died in the Challenger shuttle disaster in 1986.

Immigrant Julius Meyer lived with Sioux Indians in Nebraska in 1867 and became known as Curly-Headed White Chief with One Tongue due to his honesty.

Baseball player Sandy Koufax refused to play in the first game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Scientist Jonas Salk discovered the polio vaccine in 1955.

Additional Sources to Learn About Jewish Americans' Impact on Society

1. [PBS: 10 Jewish Americans Who Changed History](#)
2. [Community Commons: Jewish Americans](#)
3. [The Genesis Prize: Jewish Achievement Throughout History](#)
4. [The Ed Snider Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame from the Weitzman National Museum of Jewish American History](#)