



# PROJECT SHEMA'S JEWISH AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH RESOURCE

# WHAT IS PROJECT SHEMA?

Project Shema is a training and support organization working toward a future in which collective Jewish inclusion and safety are ensured inside healthy pluralistic institutions and societies.

Built by progressive Jews, we help people understand Jewish identity, lived experiences, and trauma. Our depolarizing and nuanced approach strengthens allyship for and within the Jewish community, nurtures empathy for all, and honors diverse perspectives.

Though we do not offer education or advocacy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we do explore how anti-Jewish ideas and implicit biases can be carried alongside discourse on Israel and Palestine.





# OUR APPROACH

## Nurturing Understanding

The word *shema* comes from the Hebrew word “to hear,” and it’s this concept that guides everything we do. Listening with curiosity and compassion is at the center of our relational engagement approach.

We are a team with diverse identities who have invested our lives in uplifting vulnerable communities. Our goal is to help others understand or community’s diverse stories, identities, and lived experiences.



# ANTISEMITISM IS A SYSTEMIC BIGOTRY IMPACTING ALL OF US

No person, group, movement, or political party is immune to anti-Jewish ideas. We are all socialized into them and we all must do the work as allies to unpack and disrupt this conspiratorial bigotry, including in mainstream society and Israel & Palestine discourse. Regardless of intent, these ideas demonize and isolate the collective Jewish community, undermining our safety and inclusion.

**Anti-Jewish ideas and reductive binary narratives are enabling anti-Jewish harm to go unnoticed & unchecked. We all have a responsibility to address this.**

We also recognize how antisemitism intersects with and fuels other forms of bigotry including white supremacy, and how anti-Jewish conspiracy theories erode democratic, pluralistic societies

## **A paradigm shift in this critical moment**

We need new ways to engage peers who don't wish to harm the Jewish people, but may accidentally perpetuate anti-Jewish ideas. We do this by creating space for curious, empathetic exploration grounded in relationships and nuance. We know when we transcend binaries, demonstrate allyship, and call out all dehumanizing language, all of us, including Palestinians, Muslims & Arabs, are more safe





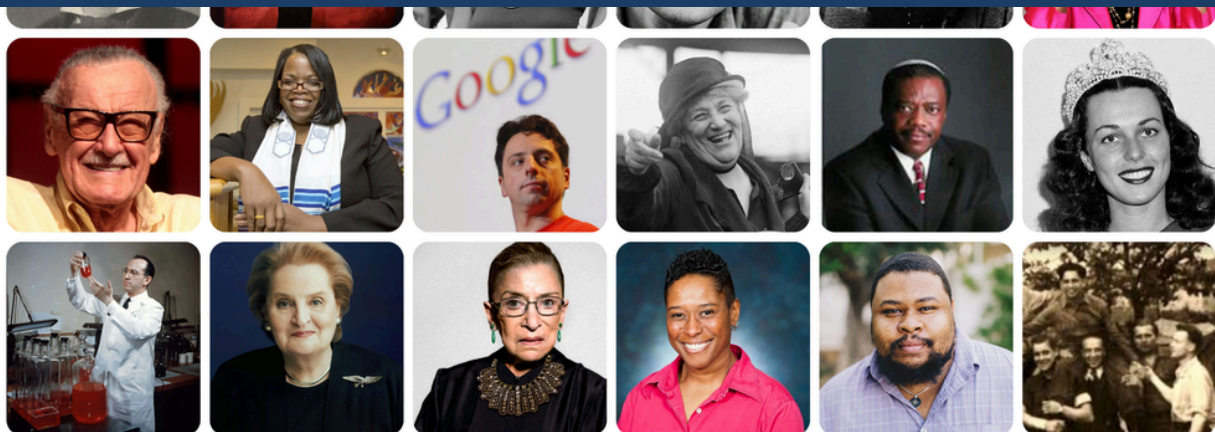


# CELEBRATING JEWISH AMERICAN HERITAGE

This resource captures the Jewish American journey through an exploration of **Jewish identity and antisemitism ('oys')** while illuminating the eclectic stories of Jews who have enriched **American society and culture ('joys')**.

The Jewish American story is one of milestones and breakthroughs in spite of arbitrary glass ceilings, exclusion, quotas, and even violence.

**The stories we spotlight are Jewish stories, but they are also quintessentially American stories—woven into the fabric of this country's history and steady progress**



# SPOTLIGHT

## ON 18 GROUNDBREAKING JEWISH AMERICANS

---

Emma Lazarus .....	07
Jonas Salk .....	08
Joachim Prinz .....	09
Ruth Bader Ginsburg .....	10
Sammy Davis Jr .....	11
Harvey Milk .....	12
Haim Saban .....	13
Judith Heumann .....	14
Diane von Furstenberg .....	15
Louis Brandeis .....	16
Lani Guinier .....	17
Irving Berlin .....	18
The Ritchie Boys .....	19
Michael W Twitty .....	20
Madeleine Albright .....	21
Rose Schneiderman .....	22
Rabbi Sandra Lawson .....	23
Haym Salomon .....	24



# EMMA LAZARUS

"Give me your tired, your poor, your  
huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."



These famous lines from *The New Colossus*, and emblazoned on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, were written by Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus. Lazarus's seminal poem reimagines the statue as a welcoming "Mother of Exiles," reflecting her empathy for Jewish immigrants fleeing pogroms (violent attacks on Jews) in Russia and Eastern Europe.

## A DEEPLY JEWISH AND AMERICAN STORY

Born in New York City in 1849, Emma Lazarus's story is the Jewish and American story in one. Lazarus was the daughter of German Jews on one side and Portuguese Jews on the other, who trace their roots directly back to the original twenty-three Portuguese Jews who arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) after fleeing Brazil in an attempt to flee from the Inquisition.

Emma Lazarus's Jewish identity was a driving force behind her literary and humanitarian efforts. She was deeply influenced by her heritage, particularly in response to the persecution of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe during the late 19th century.

Lazarus was one of the first American writers to openly embrace the idea that Jews had the right to and need for the right to national self-determination in some part of our ancestral homeland, long before Zionism became a widespread movement.

# JONAS SALK

## INVENTOR OF THE POLIO VACCINE

Jonas Salk was an American medical researcher and virologist best known for developing the first effective polio vaccine. Salk was born in 1914 in New York City to Jewish immigrant parents from Eastern Europe.

In the 1940s and 1950s, polio was one of the most feared diseases in the world, crippling and killing thousands of children each year. Notwithstanding the limiting reality that Jews were subjected to quotas at universities, Salk, working at the University of Pittsburgh, developed a vaccine using inactivated polio viruses. In 1955, after nationwide trials, his vaccine was declared safe and effective, leading to a massive immunization campaign that dramatically reduced polio cases worldwide.



## COUNTLESS LIVES SAVED

Remarkably, Salk chose not to patent the vaccine, ensuring it remained widely accessible. When asked who owned the patent, he famously replied, **“There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”** His selfless dedication to public health saved millions of lives and cemented his legacy as a humanitarian.

Later in life, Salk continued medical research, focusing on diseases like influenza and HIV/AIDS. His contributions to science and global health, shaped in part by his Jewish values of tikkun olam (repairing the world), remain an inspiration today.



# JOACHIM PRINZ

Speaking just before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, Joachim Prinz declared that **“the most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”** It was a call borne out of his own lived experience.



## CRITIC OF THE NAZIS

Prinz was a German-American rabbi and civil rights activist whose Jewish identity deeply influenced his fight for social justice. Born in 1902 in Germany, he became an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime as a young rabbi in Berlin, urging Jews to leave Germany while they still could. His defiance led to repeated arrests by the Gestapo and ultimately forced him to flee to the United States in 1937. Just a couple years later, in 1939, Madison Square Garden, inside of a city that is home to the second-largest Jewish population on Earth, hosted a full, open & proud Nazi rally.

Antisemitism & hostility toward Jews inside of the U.S. led the American government under President Roosevelt to deny entry to Jewish refugees from Europe. The American government literally sent Jews back to Europe and to the death camps. This blight on our nation’s history cannot be overlooked when we talk about the story of immigration or migration in America.

## RABBI & CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

In America, Prinz became a leading advocate for civil rights. He spoke out against racism and injustice, drawing parallels between the discrimination faced by Jews in Europe and African Americans in the U.S. He was a key figure in the civil rights movement, serving as president of the American Jewish Congress and working alongside Martin Luther King Jr. to push for racial equality.

# RUTH BADER GINSBURG



Born in 1933 in Brooklyn, New York, to a Jewish immigrant family, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a pioneering Supreme Court justice, legal scholar, and champion of gender equality.

Despite facing discrimination as a woman and a Jew, Ginsburg excelled in her studies, attending Harvard Law School, where she was one of only a few women in her class. She transferred to Columbia Law School, graduating first in her class, but struggled to find job opportunities because of her gender.

## CAREER ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

Ginsburg dedicated her career to fighting gender discrimination, co-founding the ACLU's Women's Rights Project & successfully arguing landmark cases before the Supreme Court that advanced women's rights. In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed her to the Supreme Court, making her the second woman and the first Jewish woman to serve on the nation's highest court.

## THE NOTORIOUS RBG

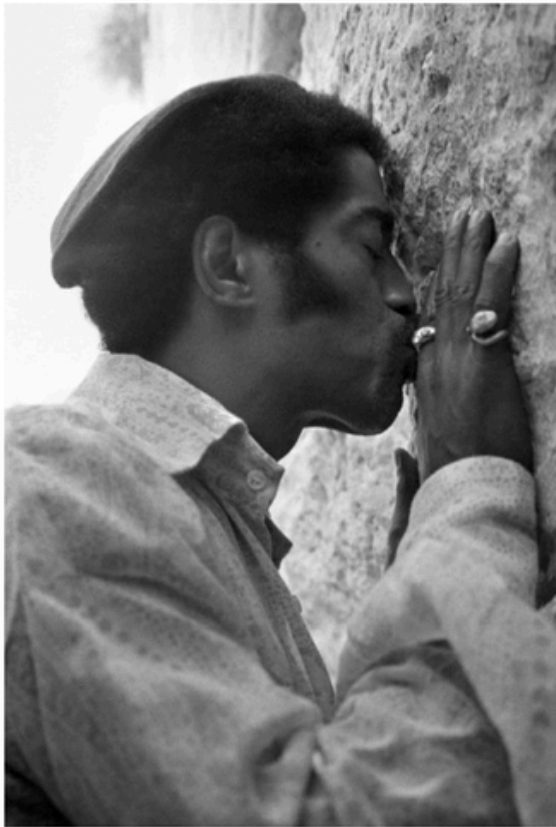
As a justice, Ginsburg became known for her fierce dissents and her unwavering commitment to equality and civil rights. She was a cultural icon, affectionately called "Notorious RBG," and inspired generations with her dedication to justice.



# SAMMY DAVIS JR

---

Sammy Davis Jr. was a legendary entertainer and trailblazer known for his extraordinary talents as a singer, dancer, and actor in spite of the racism, discrimination, and segregation he faced throughout his career.



## CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

After surviving a near-fatal car accident in 1954, Davis studied Judaism and converted, feeling a strong connection to its teachings on perseverance and resilience. He often spoke about the parallels between the struggles of Black and Jewish communities. One of those parallels is the systemic discrimination that both Jews and Blacks faced in America at the time, including access to public facilities. Both Jews and Blacks were prevented from industries, homeownership, public facilities, and faced quotas at universities.

Davis used his platform to advocate for civil rights and was a close supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. His life was a testament to breaking barriers and embracing multiple identities with strength and dignity.

# HARVEY MILK

Harvey Milk was a groundbreaking politician and LGBTQ+ rights activist, best known as one of the first openly gay elected officials in the United States. He won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, becoming a powerful voice for LGBTQ+ equality and civil rights before his tragic assassination in 1978. One of his biggest achievements was helping pass San Francisco's first anti-discrimination ordinance protecting LGBTQ+ individuals.



## LED BY HIS JEWISH VALUES

Born in 1930 to a Lithuanian Jewish family in Woodmere, New York, Milk grew up in a household that emphasized civic duty and social justice. Milk's Jewish background informed his values of activism and standing up for marginalized communities. He often referenced his Jewish identity in speeches, particularly when drawing parallels between anti-gay discrimination and the oppression faced by Jewish people throughout history.

## RECOGNIZED AFTER HIS DEATH

In 2009, President Barack Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.



# HAIM SABAN



The creator of the hit show, Power Rangers, Haim Saban is an Israeli-American entertainment industry mogul, investor, and philanthropist. Born in Alexandria, Egypt, Saban's family immigrated to Israel in 1956 during the Suez Crisis, where he later built a career in music and media before moving to the U.S.

## IMPACT ON THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

The entertainment industry, largely built by Jews, was an industry safe haven at a time when Jews often faced barriers in many other professions, Saban co-founded Saban Entertainment, which became highly successful after adapting Super Sentai into Mighty Morphin Power Rangers in the early 1990s. In addition to his media ventures, he is a major political donor and philanthropist, including his lifelong support for the Democratic Party and investments toward peace in the Middle East.

His Egyptian background is an interesting part of his story, as he was born into a Mizrahi Jewish family in Alexandria, a city with a rich Jewish history. As a result of rising antisemitism and anti-Zionism, his family was forced to flee Egypt with nothing but the clothes on their backs and \$200 among them, sailing to Greece, where they were received by the Jewish Agency for Israel. This experience influenced his later perspective as an immigrant and businessman.

# JUDITH HEUMANN

## THE MOTHER OF THE DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement,” Judith Heumann was born in Philadelphia to German Jewish immigrants whose family members were killed in the Holocaust. Growing up in Brooklyn as a child with polio, she had been denied entry into school because she was deemed a “fire hazard.” This came at a time when Jews had to confront the systemic legalized discrimination targeting them in many places in the US, including in academic institutions, homeownership, etc. This denial ignited in Judith a fire that would drive her to become a leader in the disability rights movement.

### MAKING HISTORY

When the Board of Education refused to grant her a teaching license, Judith sued them, in what would become a historic lawsuit and one of the first of its kind. And she won. With that victory, she became the first wheelchair user to teach in New York City public schools.

In the years that followed, Judith became a powerful activist, organizing protests, lobbying lawmakers, and advocating for the rights of disabled people across the country. In 1977, she helped lead the 504 Sit-in, one of the longest sit-ins in U.S. history, demanding the enforcement of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act—a law that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities. For weeks, she and other activists occupied a federal building in San Francisco, refusing to leave until the government listened. And they won.

### A LASTING IMPACT

Her work paved the way for the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** in 1990, a groundbreaking civil rights law that ensured accessibility and equal opportunities for disabled individuals.





# DIANE VON FÜRSTENBERG



## A LIFE SHAPED BY THE HOLOCAUST

Born in 1946 in Belgium, Diane von Fürstenberg is a renowned fashion designer. Her life was profoundly shaped by her family's Holocaust history. Her mother, Liliane Nahmias, was a Holocaust survivor who endured 13 months in the Auschwitz concentration camp. After the war, her mother moved to Belgium and met her father, who was also a Holocaust survivor.

## A FASHION PIONEER

Diane credited her mother's survival and determination as a driving force behind her own approach to life and fashion. Beyond fashion, Diane von Fürstenberg has been a philanthropist and advocate for women's leadership and Holocaust remembrance.

# LOUIS BRANDEIS

## MAKING HISTORY

Justice Louis Brandeis was a pioneering legal mind and social reformer. In 1916, he became the first Jewish justice to serve on the United States Supreme Court. Born in Kentucky in 1856 to Jewish immigrant parents from Prague, Brandeis became a highly respected attorney, known for championing progressive causes, workers' rights, and the idea of a "right to privacy."

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson nominated Brandeis to the Supreme Court, but his appointment faced fierce opposition. His progressive views, commitment to social justice, and his Jewish identity in particular made him a controversial choice. His nomination was delayed for four months—longer than any previous nominee—and triggered the first-ever confirmation hearings for a Supreme Court justice, where he faced intense scrutiny and antisemitic attacks, including questioning his loyalty to the United States, accusing him of prioritizing Jewish interests over American ones, etc. Despite this opposition, Brandeis was ultimately confirmed, serving on the Court from 1916 to 1939, where he became known for his strong defense of free speech and privacy rights.



## AN EARLY ZIONIST

Brandeis played a key role in the early Zionist movement, advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland. Brandeis's Jewish identity informed his broader commitment to justice. He saw the struggles of Jewish immigrants in America—many of whom faced poverty and antisemitism—as part of a larger fight for social and economic reform.



# LANI GUINIER

## FIRST WOMAN OF COLOR TO BE APPOINTED A TENURED PROFESSOR AT HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Lani Guinier was a brilliant Jewish American legal scholar and civil rights advocate known for her work on voting rights, democracy, and racial justice. She made history in 1998 as the first woman of color appointed to a tenured professorship at Harvard Law School, breaking barriers in the legal academic world. Though this groundbreaking achievement was tied to barriers faced by Black academics, her rise also came in the wake of a period that witnessed quotas on Jews at universities across the United States.



## CIVIL RIGHTS CAREER

Born in 1950, Guinier was deeply influenced by the civil rights movement and dedicated her career to fighting for equal representation and fairness in the political system. She worked as a lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton nominated her to lead the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, but her nomination was controversially withdrawn due to conservative opposition to her ideas on voting reform.

Despite this setback, Guinier continued her influential work, writing extensively on race, democracy, and the need for a more inclusive political system.

## MENTOR AND ADVOCATE

At Harvard, she mentored generations of law students and continued advocating for social justice. Her scholarship challenged the status quo and pushed for innovative approaches to civil rights law.

# IRVING BERLIN



Irving Berlin was one of America's most prolific and influential songwriters, known for timeless classics like God Bless America, White Christmas, and There's No Business Like Show Business. Born Israel Beilin in 1888 in modern-day Belarus, his family was among the hundreds of thousands of Jewish families who emigrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

## A CELEBRATED SONGWRITER

Arriving in New York City, Berlin grew up in the crowded tenements of the Lower East Side, where he worked from a young age to help support his family. Despite having little formal education, he had a natural talent for music and songwriting, rising to fame in the early 20th century.

Berlin's Jewish heritage remained a subtle but important part of his identity. Though he often wrote music that celebrated American culture and patriotism, he never forgot his immigrant roots. God Bless America, one of his most famous songs, was a heartfelt tribute to the country that gave his family refuge. His life and career reflected the broader story of Jewish immigrants who, despite facing discrimination, such as religious prejudice, social exclusion, workplace discrimination, etc., made lasting contributions to American society.



# THE RITCHIE BOYS



Named after Camp Ritchie in Maryland, the Ritchie Boys were a group of mostly Jewish immigrants, many of whom had fled Nazi Germany, who were recruited by the U.S. Army during World War II for their expertise in language and intelligence gathering against Axis powers.

## FROM VICTIMS TO VICTORS OVER THE NAZIS

Many of the Ritchie Boys had experienced firsthand the horrors of Nazi persecution, making their work deeply personal. Fluent in German and other European languages, they were deployed to interrogate prisoners of war, translate captured documents, and spread disinformation to weaken enemy morale. Their knowledge of German culture and psychology gave them an edge in extracting valuable intelligence that contributed to the Allied victory.

After the war, many of the Ritchie Boys went on to successful careers in academia, law, and government. Their contributions remained largely unrecognized for decades, but in recent years, their story has gained more attention as an essential part of World War II history, including in a 60 Minutes documentary. Their bravery and intelligence not only helped defeat the Nazis but also demonstrated the resilience of those who had once been victims of persecution, turning their experiences into a force for justice.

# MICHAEL W TWITTY

Michael W. Twitty is a culinary historian, author & activist known for exploring the intersections of food, culture, race, and identity. As a Black, Jewish, and openly gay man, Twitty's work focuses on the ways in which African, Jewish, and Southern food traditions shape history & identity.

## BRINGING BLACK & JEWISH TRADITIONS TOGETHER

Growing up in Washington, D.C., Twitty developed an early passion for history and food. He converted to Judaism, finding deep personal and spiritual meaning in Jewish traditions. His work often highlights the shared experiences of Black and Jewish communities, particularly their struggles with oppression, resilience, and cultural preservation—especially at a time of rising antisemitism and anti-Black racism in the United States.

## THE COOKING GENE

Twitty gained widespread recognition with his 2017 book *The Cooking Gene*, which traces the roots of African American food and their connection to slavery and Southern cuisine. **The book won the James Beard Award for Best Writing and Book of the Year, making him the first Black author to receive the honor.**

Through his writing and cooking, Twitty educates audiences about the power of food as a storytelling tool and a means of reclaiming history. His work continues to bridge cultural divides and celebrate the rich, diverse traditions that shape identity.





# MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

## FIRST FEMALE SECRETARY OF STATE

Born in 1937 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Madeleine Albright was a trailblazing diplomat, scholar, and the first female U.S. Secretary of State, serving under President Bill Clinton from 1997 to 2001. Albright was raised as a Catholic and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1948 to escape communist rule.

## SECRET JEWISH HERITAGE

Just days after being sworn in as Secretary of State, Albright was stunned to learn—through a Washington Post investigation—that her parents had hidden their Jewish heritage. She discovered that she was born to Jewish parents who had converted to Catholicism to protect their family during World War II. She also learned that three of her grandparents were murdered in the Holocaust.

## CHAMPION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Albright was a staunch champion of human rights and democracy—values that were, in many ways, linked to her family's painful past. Throughout her career, she was a powerful advocate for international diplomacy, fighting against genocide, and promoting peace.



Albright's legacy is one of resilience and leadership, breaking barriers for women in foreign policy while navigating the profound personal discovery of her own history.

# ROSE SCHNEIDERMAN

Rose Schneiderman was a pioneering labor activist and feminist who dedicated her life to improving conditions for working-class women. Born in 1882 in the Russian Pale of Settlement, her family immigrated to the United States in 1890, settling in New York City's Lower East Side, where they joined a growing community of Jewish immigrants.

## EARLY LABOR ADVOCATE

Rose Schneiderman was a pioneering labor activist and feminist who dedicated her life to improving conditions for working-class women. Born in 1882 in the Russian Pale of Settlement, her family immigrated to the United States in 1890, settling in New York City's Lower East Side, where they joined a growing community of Jewish immigrants.

## A TURNING POINT

One of the defining moments of her activism came after the **Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911**, where 146 garment workers—mostly young Jewish and Italian immigrant women—lost their lives due to locked exits and unsafe working conditions. On top of that, Jews were subjected to social and employment discrimination, political and institutional antisemitism, and even violence (four years after the fire, Leo Frank was lynched after being falsely accused of murder). **Her advocacy helped spur workplace safety reforms and stronger labor laws.**



# RABBI SANDRA LAWSON

---



## A WORLD FIRST

Rabbi Sandra Lawson is a trailblazing spiritual leader, activist, and military veteran. At a time of rising antisemitism and anti-Black racism, in 2018, she made history by becoming the world's first openly gay, Black, female rabbi after being ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Her groundbreaking achievement challenged traditional notions of Jewish leadership and helped create a more inclusive and diverse representation in the rabbinate.

## EXPANDING JEWISH INCLUSION

Rabbi Lawson has been a vocal advocate for racial justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and expanding Jewish spaces to be more welcoming to people of all backgrounds. She uses social media and music to engage with people and make Judaism accessible in modern ways. Her leadership continues to inspire those who have felt marginalized within Jewish communities, proving that Jewish identity is rich, diverse, and ever-evolving.



# HAYM SALOMON

**Haym Salomon's life encapsulates the ebbs and flows of Jewish history in one.** Born in Poland to a Sephardic (Jewish cultural practice originating in Spain and Portugal) family whose migration traced back to the expulsion of Jews from Spain during the Inquisition, Salomon immigrated to America in 1775 where he **played a major but largely unknown role in the American Revolution.**

## ROLE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

At a moment where the war chest was nearly depleted and troops were without adequate food or supplies, General George Washington summoned Salomon to help raise funds, which he did, and which directly contributed to the decisive revolutionary battle at Yorktown. Salomon's fundraising and personal giving accounted for over \$650,000 (approximately \$14.8 million in 2024) in financing to General George Washington's war efforts.



In the end, Salomon donated his entire fortune to the American Revolutionary army, various Founding Fathers, and men he viewed as unsung war heroes who were in the throes of poverty. Despite his generosity of spirit and crucial wartime contributions, Salomon was never repaid, and his family was left penniless upon his death.

## JEWISH AMERICAN PIONEER

An American pioneer in his own right, Salomon was equally a pioneer for America's burgeoning Jewish community. His heroism didn't immunize him from being a target of antisemitism, nor did he waiver in his commitment to his people: **"I am a Jew; it is my own nation; I do not despair that we shall obtain every other privilege that we aspire to enjoy along with our fellow-citizens."**

His obituary in the Independent Gazetteer read, "Mr. Haym Salomon, an eminent broker of this city, was a native of Poland, and of the Hebrew nation. He was remarkable for his skill and integrity in his profession, and for his generous and humane deportment."

# CONTACT US

**EMAIL**

[info@projectshema.org](mailto:info@projectshema.org)

**WEBSITE**

[www.projectshema.org](http://www.projectshema.org)

**CONTACT**

[april@projectshema.org](mailto:april@projectshema.org)