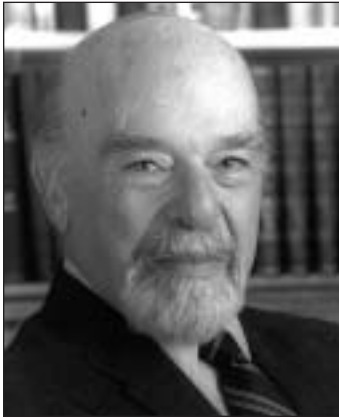


WE REMEMBER OUR COLLEAGUES

LEON JICK 1924–2005

Arnold J. Band



The first annual AJS conference never really took place. For the record: Leon Jick organized and chaired an advisory committee in December 1968 and subsequently assembled a group of forty-seven scholars for a Colloquium on the Teaching of Judaica in American Universities at Brandeis University on September 7–10, 1969. During the colloquium the participants established the Association for Jewish Studies and elected Leon Jick as its first president. Retroactively we called that colloquium the First Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies. When I would often accuse him of this momentous falsification of history, Leon would argue that history is what we write about human events. “Besides,” he countered with a sparkle, “it was my dime.”

It was, indeed, his dime, or rather the Lown Institute’s dime, that he wisely utilized to initiate the meeting of the advisory committee that met in December 1968. It was Leon’s initiative and I am not sure when or if AJS would have come to life without him. This initiative, like many others in his productive, varied career, was not merely an administrative exercise, but was informed by a firm grasp of Jewish

history and his place in it. When, for instance, colleagues recollected during that initial colloquium that we were meeting 150 years after the beginnings of *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, after the pioneering efforts of Zunz and Geiger, Leon protested that we were in 1960s America, not Germany. In fact, only in retrospect can we realize the profundity of Leon’s insight that AJS was in many senses a child of 1960s America: rebellious, optimistic, democratic, and rambunctious.

Leon Jick was a man of many parts. The author of the seminal *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (1976), he participated fully in public life as a pulpit rabbi. He had experience in the kibbutz movement at Geshur Haziv, the Civil Rights movement (including a jail sentence together with Martin Luther King), the struggle for Soviet Jewry, and academic administration at Brandeis University as both departmental chair and dean. Leon, more than most, had a keen sense of where we were or should be in the flow of historical events.

He knew that AJS was necessary to serve different needs than those that had given rise to the American Academy for Jewish Research in the 1920s. At the Tenth Annual Conference recorded in the *AJS Newsletter*, number 24, Leon recollected:

It became clear to a few of us then that if Judaica was to become a recognized discipline, if the field was to develop . . . there was need for an address to which any interested party might turn. Who could undertake the necessary tasks other than the community of Jewish scholars? The need was clear to some. But how to fill this need, how to bring scholars together and create the necessary instrument? This was not clear at all. Whose responsibility was it? Who could claim the right? The appropriate instrument did not exist.

This sense of responsibility was inculcated in Leon’s adolescence in St. Louis. In his brief autobiography he wrote:

In October 1942, I turned 18 and the following month, a black-bordered edition of the *Jewish Frontier* arrived which spelled out the full scope of the Holocaust. That month, I enlisted in the Army Air Force. . . .

I first met Leon in 1954 when he came to Boston to serve as Assistant Rabbi in Temple Israel, and I was a graduate student at Harvard. In one of our first conversations I discovered that he, like me, had been a member of *Habonim*. When I asked him how one drifts from *Habonim*, from the secular labor movement, to Hebrew Union College, a rabbinical seminary, he offered an explanation that overwhelmed me for its candor and insight:

When I grew up in the 1940’s, I realized I wanted to serve the Jewish people in some sort of leadership position. I looked about me and noticed that the two leading figures, Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, were Reform Rabbis. So I went to HUC. It’s that simple.

Several years ago, after the death of Marvin Fox, it became evident that much of the history of the Association had never been recorded. At that time Leon initiated a videotaping project of the first few presidents, but little came of this endeavor. However, as we draw near the fortieth anniversary of the Association—only four years from now—it would be a proper memorial to Leon to undertake a serious project for the recording and writing of the history of the Association, clearly one of the most salutary achievements of American Jewry in the past half century.

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