

The American Jewish Community Anniversary Proclamations

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Throughout its more than 350-year history in America, the Jewish community has, at times, felt it necessary to issue public pronouncements about important issues. These pronouncements have taken various forms. They might be issued by individuals speaking on behalf of the entire Jewish community, such as the famous 1790 letter to President George Washington, signed by Moses Seixas; or they might be official positions issued by organizations — for example, the American Jewish Committee’s 1914 statement in support of American neutrality as World War I raged across Europe, to name just one. Very often these pronouncements were part of an attempt by members of the American Jewish community to create a unified front, explicating to the larger American community the Jewish stance on a specific issue or event. Just as often, however, the attempt to speak with one voice failed.

An examination of the proclamations issued during the celebration of the American Jewish tercentenary (1954–55) and the 350th anniversary provides interesting insights into which groups “spoke” on behalf of the American Jewish community, as well as furnishing a window into what communal leaders considered important.

The first document reproduced here (see insert Plates 9, 10, and 11) is from the tercentenary celebration of 1954–1955, and it is signed not only by a representation of the national tercentenary organization but by representatives of all the major American rabbinic organizations (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox). Its content reflects a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities America has provided for the Jews. As it was written in a post-Holocaust world, it should not surprise us that the writers made explicit reference to Jewish suffering: “In some lands across the seas our brethren have felt the searing flame of prejudice, persecution and death.” Such a statement challenges the old conventional wisdom that American Jewry did not discuss the fate of European Jews until many years later. The proclamation also charged the American Jewish community to help succor Holocaust survivors and to support the new State of Israel (founded only six years earlier). Finally, the document was written in three languages — English, Hebrew, and Yiddish — reflecting the predominant lingua franca of American Jews (English), its historic ties (Hebrew), and the salience of a Yiddish culture among a large segment of the population.

The second document is from the 350th anniversary celebration. Like the tercentenary proclamation, it is primarily the work of the religious leadership of the American rabbinate, although now the Reconstructionist movement has

joined the three older denominations in signing the proclamation, reflecting that movement's standing in the American scene.

While there are certain similarities between the two documents — especially in reference to the protection afforded by the U.S. Constitution and to the prejudice experienced by Jews in other lands — there are some striking differences. For example, while the 350th proclamation notes that “Even as we have worked for the well-being of people abroad,” it does not make an explicit reference to the Holocaust or Israel, reflecting the passage of time and the changing focus of the American Jewish community. In addition, this document appears only in English; the absence of Hebrew and Yiddish is particularly interesting. While the number of Yiddish speakers has declined since 1954, the vitality of Hebrew as a living language has grown. Indeed, in addition to being the official language of the State of Israel, it is taught in Jewish supplemental and day schools in the United States. Hebrew has also become an acceptable foreign language component in some public high schools and in many American universities. The absence of Hebrew in the 350th proclamation is one issue that future historians will likely grapple with.

We are publishing these documents for the edification of our readers, many of whom participated in 350th events but may not have had the opportunity to read the proclamation. Fewer still have enjoyed the opportunity to compare the 2004 document with the 1954 proclamation. We hope it will also prove useful in 2054, when American Jewry celebrates its quatercentenary.

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