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Op-Ed: Re-examining the Jewish contributions to progressive reform

By Peter Dreier | July 15, 2012 7:25pm

LOS ANGELES (JTA) – When it comes to the entertainment industry, Jewish participation is legendary. But much less emphasized is the remarkable impact that Jews have had on social reform and activism. The depth of those contributions must be re-examined, particularly at a time when some observers ponder the long-term viability of American Jewish life.

While only 3.6 percent of the nation’s population in the early 20th century — and less than 2 percent today — Jews have played and continue to play a disproportionately large role in the key social justice movements of the last and the present century.

In 1900, you were a dangerous dreamer to call for things such as women’s suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the rights

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of workers, a progressive income tax, old-age insurance and more. Today such ideas are taken for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

Jews were among leaders and rank-and-file activists in all the great movements — labor, civil rights and civil liberties, feminism, environmentalism, gay rights and the crusade against militarism. They have more than done their part in making America a more humane, democratic and inclusive country.

Take Rose Schneiderman, a fiery socialist union organizer. She was on the front lines of the Progressive Era battles against slums and sweatshops. So were settlement house pioneer Lillian Wald, Rabbi Stephen Wise and lawyer Louis Brandeis (later a Supreme Court justice), whose writings and legal activism helped tame the growing power of corporate monopolies. Victor Berger, an Austrian immigrant and in 1910 the country's first Socialist congressman, introduced the first bill to provide old-age pensions. Eventually the idea was adopted in 1935 when President Franklin Roosevelt created Social Security.

Jewish social activism helped spearhead the early civil rights movement as well. In 1909, Joel Spingarn was a founder and then long-term president of the NAACP. Julius Rosenwald of Sears & Roebuck was a pioneer in the new field of progressive philanthropy. He endowed Jane Addams' Hull House and Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, funded more than 5,000 schools for African Americans in the rural South, and supported the Highlander Folk School, a Tennessee-based training

center for labor and civil rights activists.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, labor leaders Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky and Ralph Helstein led battles for workers' rights and economic reform, while composers Yip Harburg ("Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" and "Over the Rainbow") and Aaron Copland ("Fanfare for the Common Man"), artist Ben Shahn and playwright Clifford Odets ("Waiting for Lefty") gave shape to radical ideas that caught the public's imagination.

During the 1960s, Allard Lowenstein, along with African-American organizer Bob Moses, created the Freedom Summer project, which brought more than 1,000 college students to the South to register black voters. About half of the white volunteers were Jews. Many of them — including Barney Frank, Heather Booth and Vivian Rothstein — pursued careers in activism and reform that have lasted into the 21st century.

Lowenstein, along with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, journalist I.F. Stone, critic Noam Chomsky and other Jews, gave voice to the rising tide of anti-Vietnam War sentiment. Jews constituted at least one-third of the early leaders of Students for a Democratic Society, the leading campus anti-war organization.

When it came to modern feminism, Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem and Andrea Dworkin were at the forefront. Likewise with gay rights, where San Francisco activist Harvey Milk, poet Alan Ginsberg, scientist Frank Kameny and writer Larry Kramer helped catalyze the movement in the 1970s, a tradition continued today by playwright Tony Kushner.

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Today, a new generation of Jewish activists and thinkers, But Not For the Reasons You Think few of them well-known, is extending this tradition.

Business social activists Ben Cohen (of Ben & Jerry's) and George Soros are among those who are continuing the social justice philanthropy tradition started by Rosenwald and Boston merchant Edward Filene in the early 1900s.

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A 1970 Time cover story called scientist Barry Commoner the "Paul Revere of ecology." Jews in the arts and the academy — including playwright Arthur Miller, filmmakers Sidney Lumet and Stanley Kramer, TV producer Norman Lear, folksingers Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, writers Grace Paley, Adrienne Rich and Studs Terkel, and social critics Paul Goodman, Howard Zinn, Frances Fox Piven and Jonathan Kozol — gave voice to movements of dissent.

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Community organizer Madeline Janis, founder of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, helped catalyze the wave of local "living wage" laws (now in nearly 200 cities) and has built bridges between labor and environmental activists through campaigns to clean up the nation's polluting ports. Likewise, SEIU union organizer Stephen Lerner led the most successful union organizing drive of the past two decades — the Justice for Janitors campaign among low-wage immigrant workers. He also has forged links between the Occupy Wall Street movement and community and labor activists.

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Jews also are among today's most influential progressive opinion-shapers. They include writer Naomi Klein, columnists Paul Krugman of The New York Times, and Ezra Klein and Harold Meyerson of the Washington Post, Yale political scientist Jacob Hacker, "Democracy Now"

- Very Berry Shortcake
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host Amy Goodman, and “Daily Show” host Jon Stewart. Eli Pariser, an early leader of MoveOn.Org, pioneered the use of the Internet to foster political activism.

- Delicious Israel
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And let’s not forget recent progressive politicians such as City Council members Jackie Goldberg (Los Angeles) and Brad Lander (New York); Sen. Bernie Sanders (Vermont) and the late Sen. Paul Wellstone (Minnesota); and Congress members Barney Frank (Massachusetts), Steve Cohen (Tennessee), Bob Filner (California), Henry Waxman (California), Jerrold Nadler (New York), Jared Polis (Colorado), and Jan Schakowsky (Illinois), many of whom started their careers as grass-roots activists.

Since the early 1900s, these Jewish reformers joined others — on picket lines and stages, and in newsrooms and political campaigns — to move America in a more progressive direction. Like the Passover story, it is important to remind ourselves that people can overcome great obstacles and achieve great things if they have a vision and build movements that challenge the conventional ideas of their day.

(Peter Dreier is a professor of politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His newbook, "The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame," was published recently by Nation Books.)

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