Jewish American Legacies: Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG)



Photo from Remembering Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Supreme Court Justice Who Demonstrated the Power of Dissent , Sebastian Kim

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second woman to serve on the Supreme Court, was born in 1933 in Brooklyn, New York, to Jewish parents who attended a Conservative synagogue and lit candles every Friday night. Ginsburg recounted that her fondest memories were asking the Four Questions at the Passover Seder: "That was always the best part of the Seder for me, that the youngest child, which I was for a time, got to ask the questions and then the whole rest of the evening was providing answers."

When her mother died just before her high school graduation, when she was 17, Ginsburg was not allowed to join a minyan (prayer service) to say the Mourners' Kaddish. At the time, most traditional synagogues, including many Conservative congregations, did not permit women to count for a minyan. (Decades later, Conservative Judaism would change this rule, though widespread adoption took more time.) This barrier was a painful moment for Ginsburg, which she often described as formative in her understanding of gender discrimination. Some later accounts mistakenly reported that this caused her to "leave" Judaism; one obituary even erroneously reported that she had "abandoned her faith" at 17.

In truth, although she was not traditionally observant, Ginsburg deeply connected her Jewish upbringing with a lifelong pursuit of justice, often quoting the biblical imperative: "Justice,

justice shall you pursue." She was known to have a mezuzah on her office door and often quoted Jewish heroes as her inspiration.

Ginsburg also faced gender discrimination in her career: law firms wouldn't hire her, and many judges refused women clerks. Undeterred, she became a law professor and, later, a pioneer for gender equality, arguing groundbreaking cases before the Supreme Court. In 1993, she was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court. She served until her death in 2020, becoming one of the most influential Jewish justices in American history. Her opinions and dissents on voting rights, healthcare, and civil liberties shaped national debates and pushed the Court in more inclusive directions.

While admired widely, earning the nickname "Notorious R.B.G.," she was not without controversy. Some critics argued she should have retired earlier to allow a like-minded replacement on the Court; others challenged her views on issues ranging from race to the balance of judicial activism and restraint. Still, her legal legacy remains central to discussions about equality under law.

RBG in Her Own Words:

> Laws as protectors of the oppressed, the poor, the lonely, is evident in the work of my Jewish predecessors on the Supreme Court. The Biblical command "justice, justice shalt thou pursue" is a strand that ties them together. I keep those words on the wall of my chambers, as an ever-present reminder of what judges must do "that they may thrive". . . I am a judge born, raised, and proud of being a Jew. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish tradition. --- *"What Being Jewish Means to Me," Ruth Bader Ginsburg, New York Times, January 1996 (as part of an AJC newspaper ad series)*

Discuss with your group:

1. Had you heard of this person before? If so, did you already know they were Jewish? If so, how/why do you think you knew that?
2. How would you describe how this person related to their Jewish identity? Does it feel similar or different to your own way of relating to your Jewish identity?
3. Where, if at all, do you see Jewish values in their civic engagement?

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Jewish American Legacies: Henry Kissinger



Henry Kissinger was born in 1923 in Germany into a Jewish family. Fleeing the Nazis, his family emigrated to the United States in 1938, where Kissinger later served in the U.S. Army during World War II and helped detain Nazis after the war. These early experiences shaped both his American identity and his complex relationship with Jewish identity.

As National Security Advisor and later the first Jewish Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford, Kissinger became one of the most powerful U.S. policymakers of the 20th century.

He pioneered a policy of easing Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and managed secret diplomacy opening relations with China. He also helped negotiate the Paris Peace Accords, earning a Nobel Peace Prize in 1973.

Yet, his legacy is controversial. Critics point to his support for secret bombing campaigns in Southeast Asia, involvement in Cold War conflicts, and cautious stance on Soviet Jewry and Israel, which some saw as downplaying Jewish suffering. Jewish communities were outraged when, decades later, a recording emerged of him saying to President Nixon, “if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern.” One critic denounced him as a “court Jew” -- meaning someone who goes overboard proving their loyalty to the government while hurting their own people.

Despite his attempts to downplay his Jewishness, he faced antisemitic slurs, with President Nixon referring to him as “Jew boy,” “k*ke,” and accusing him of having “dual loyalty” to Israel. Perhaps this context helps understand why Kissinger expressed coolness towards his Jewish identity, once telling a friend that Judaism “has no significance for me.” He is famously quoted as having said, “First I am an American, second I am Secretary of State, and third I am a

Jew," and even suggested he would have been antisemitic had it not been for the "accident of [his] birth."

Although he distanced himself from his Jewish heritage, Kissinger's approach to civic engagement was shaped by the fact that he survived Nazi persecution as a child and emigrated to the United States, which he came to see as the center of his loyalty and service. Kissinger's realist philosophy - prioritizing national interest, balance of power, and long-term stability -- reflected a commitment to the United States as his primary identity and duty.

Discuss with your group:

1. Had you heard of this person before? If so, did you already know they were Jewish? If so, how/why do you think you knew that?
2. How would you describe how this person related to their Jewish identity? Does it feel similar or different to your own way of relating to your Jewish identity?
3. Where, if at all, do you see Jewish values in their civic engagement?

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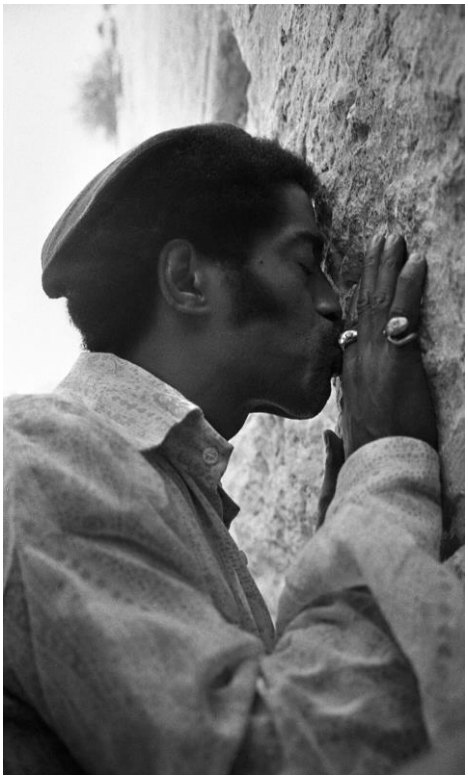
Jewish American Legacies: Sammy Davis Jr.



Sammy Davis Jr. was born in 1925 in Harlem, New York, to a Black father and an Afro-Cuban mother. He started performing at age three in his father's vaudeville act. When he was drafted into the Army during World War II, he served in one of the first mixed race units, facing constant physical and verbal abuse. He later went on to become one of the most famous entertainers in the world as a singer, dancer, and actor. Even when he was a star in Las Vegas, however, he could perform in hotels where he wasn't allowed to stay or even eat because he was Black. Later, he refused to perform anywhere that was still segregated as part of a protest which helped open up clubs in Las Vegas and Miami Beach.

Davis's path to Judaism began with a friendship. The Jewish entertainer Eddie Cantor gave him a mezuzah, which Davis brought with him everywhere for good luck. In 1954, he lost his left eye in a terrible car accident, and later said it was the one night he forgot to wear the mezuzah. While recovering, he read about Jewish history and found meaning in the similarities between the struggles of Jews and Black Americans. He then began studying for conversion. In 1959, he refused to film scenes for a movie on Yom Kippur. In 1961, he formally converted to Judaism. On a 1969 visit to the Western Wall, he called Israel his religious home.

Davis used his fame to fight for civil rights. He joined the 1963 March on Washington and marched from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, and he gave generous donations to the United Negro College Fund.



Israel Press and Photo Agency (I.P.P.A.) / Dan Hadani collection, National Library of Israel

His legacy as a Black Jew is complicated. Fellow entertainers, including Jewish comedians, made crude jokes suggesting it was ridiculous for a Black man to become Jewish. Some Black critics believed he only converted to win acceptance from white audiences. Later, he embraced Republican President Nixon, which some Black Americans saw as a betrayal. After he performed at the 1972 Republican convention, he was booed at a civil rights event. Still, he remained Jewishly observant for the rest of his life and when he died in 1990, a rabbi led his funeral.

Discuss with your group:

1. Had you heard of this person before? If so, did you already know they were Jewish? If so, how/why do you think you knew that?
2. How would you describe how this person related to their Jewish identity? Does it feel similar or different to your own way of relating to your Jewish identity?
3. Where, if at all, do you see Jewish values in their civic engagement?

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Jewish American Legacies: Bella Abzug



Photo by Lynn Gilbert | 1978

Bella Abzug was born Bella Savitzky in 1920 in the Bronx, New York, to Russian Jewish immigrant parents. Her grandfather, an Orthodox immigrant, often brought her to synagogue and taught her Jewish prayers and Hebrew. As a girl, she joined Hashomer Hatzair, a socialist Zionist youth movement, and gave passionate speeches at subway stops to raise money for a Jewish homeland.

When Abzug was 13, her father died. Her Orthodox synagogue did not allow women to say the Mourner's Kaddish, a prayer traditionally recited by sons. But her father had no son, so every morning before school, for a year, she went to synagogue and said it anyway. The congregants disapproved, but no one stopped her. She later said that standing behind the curtain separating men and women gave her some of her first feminist ideas.

Harvard Law School, her first choice, rejected her because it didn't accept women at the time, so she went to Columbia instead. As a young labor lawyer, she was often overlooked when she walked into meetings, so she started wearing large hats to be more noticeable. It worked and hats became her “trademark.” In the 1950s, she was one of the few lawyers willing to defend people accused of being Communists, and she defended Willie McGee, a Black man in Mississippi many believed was falsely accused of a violent crime.

In 1970, at age 50, she ran for Congress with the slogan "This woman's place is in the House,” referring to the House of Representatives. She became the second Jewish woman elected to the House. Nicknamed "Battling Bella," she was the first member of Congress to call for

President Nixon's impeachment, as she strongly opposed the Vietnam War, wrote the first law banning discrimination against women seeking credit cards and loans, and in 1975 proposed adding gay and lesbian rights to the Civil Rights Act. Later, working on women's rights at the United Nations, she fought the UN's "Zionism is racism" resolution, insisting Zionism was a movement about freedom, not racism.

Abzug's loud, blunt style won her fans and enemies. She lost a 1976 Senate primary by less than one percent, and in 1979 President Carter fired her from his women's advisory committee after she criticized him. Her mix of left-wing politics and strong support for Israel also meant she sometimes clashed with people on both sides of the political aisle. She died in 1998.

She strongly identified with Judaism her entire life. As a youth, she attended Hebrew school and even served as a Hebrew teacher as an adult. A colleague once said of her, “There was no one like Bella; [she was] one of a kind. I think of her as tikkun olam incarnate. She’s been repairing the world from the time she arrived in it.”

Discuss with your group:

1. Had you heard of this person before? If so, did you already know they were Jewish? If so, how/why do you think you knew that?
2. How would you describe how this person related to their Jewish identity? Does it feel similar or different to your own way of relating to your Jewish identity?
3. Where, if at all, do you see Jewish values in their civic engagement?

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