



Temple Israel  
330 Joe Clifton Drove  
Paducah, KY 42001

# Past Presidents Tribute: An 18 Year Retrospective

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# **The Synagogue President: Unsung Hero of American Judaism<sup>1</sup>**

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Anyone who has been a synagogue member or professional knows that the synagogue president is the unsung hero of Judaism in America. The synagogue president, often by personal nature and always by congregational legislation, is the number one volunteer at a synagogue, performing work that often borders on being a full-time, albeit unpaid, job. The president is charged with vast governance, management, and financial powers. Partnering with the clergy, overseeing the business operations of the synagogue, presiding over the governance of the congregation, and serving as the chief financial officer and revenue generator is just the tip of the iceberg of a modern synagogue president's responsibilities.

Despite the enormity of this role in synagogue life, the congregational president is virtually absent in the history of American Judaism. Whether in full-scale academic publications, 100-year anniversary books, or online descriptions of individual synagogues, little is reported about the synagogue president.

Who are they? What do they do for a living? Do they have a background in Jewish studies? What are their reasons for volunteering? What business skills do they have to do their synagogue-based work? Are they active in other non-profits? Are they personally observant or are they serving for non-religious reasons? What do they view as their greatest responsibilities and, later, accomplishments as synagogue president?

One day, perhaps, every gallery of lay leaders' portraits in our synagogues will include labels with basic biographical information about each of our congregational presidents and what they did during their time in office. It would be good to know these facts and, equally important, to weave them into our institutional and denominational narratives. Perhaps, one day, a social history of the American synagogue will be written that includes a significant focus on the vast volunteer population of lay leaders who actually make our congregations run.

Currently, we only know basic contours of the history of the synagogue presidents. First and most importantly, from 1654 when Jews first settled in North America to 1840 when Rabbi Abraham Rice was called from Bavaria to serve the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation as the first resident rabbi in America, no ordained rabbi led an American synagogue. In other words, for its first two hundred years, American Judaism was lay led, a characteristic deeply embedded in American congregational by-laws. Indeed, the Reform Movement in American Judaism has a uniquely Congregationalist polity once reflected in its denominational name, the Union of American Hebrew *Congregations* (emphasis added).

As proto-rabbis (Isaac M. Wise, among others), professional preachers, and ordained rabbis began to appear on the American scene in the decades prior to the Civil War, tensions with existing lay leadership quickly developed. In 1850, every major Jewish religious leader in the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/synagogue-president-unsung-hero-american-judaism>

United States was dismissed from his pulpit. The most infamous incident was an “on the pulpit” fistfight on Rosh HaShanah between Isaac M. Wise and his congregation’s president in Albany, NY. Years later, a dispute allegedly erupted between Rabbi Stephen Wise and the president of New York City’s Congregation Emanu-El over the sensitive topic of freedom of the pulpit. Wise, Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, dean of the field of American Jewish history, boldly maintained, “would not serve under Marshall Law.”

Several major changes have taken place in the world of synagogue presidents since World War II. First, for nearly three decades it was not unusual for a person to be a congregational president for 10 or more years, sometimes nearly 30 years and for a rabbi to serve a brief term of two to three years. The nature of volunteering in America changed and the rabbinate professionalized.

Second, although women began serving on synagogue boards before World War I, it was not until the 1950s that women began serving as congregational presidents. Today it is possible if not likely, that women make up the majority of synagogue presidents outside of Orthodox Judaism in America, although lay male leaders continue to cluster around positions of power and authority in the synagogue.

Third, synagogue presidents historically did not train for their jobs and learned the ropes experientially in synagogue boardrooms. Although the formal qualifications to become a congregational president still did not include any educational requirements, a number of continuing education opportunities were developed beginning with the Reform Movement’s Scheidt Seminar for synagogue presidents in 1998 and the publication of a guide to synagogue management the following year. Today, The Tent, the communication and collaboration platform for congregational leaders offers an online presidents’ lounge and a forum specifically for presidents of large congregations. In addition, special learning and meeting opportunities are increasingly available at URJ Biennial conventions and *ad hoc* meetings.

Finally, within congregations, it is often said that the best job is the IPP – the immediate past president! For some IPPs, that may be true. However, the majority of IPPs seem to continue with their congregational responsibilities and, in some cases, even revert to setting up chairs and tables for special events and stuffing envelopes for mass mailings. The historical reality of the American synagogue is that it would not exist and probably could not persist without its number one lay leader, the synagogue president, the unsung hero of Judaism in America.

"A leader is not one who commands, but one who serves." - Talmud

## **Rabbinic Reflections**

### **Student Rabbi Rachael Houser 2022 – Present**



Student pulpits are the forge in which rabbis are made, and Temple Israel has an illustrious legacy of being one of the synagogues in which our finest rabbis and clergy learned their craft. The love and support that Temple Israel envelops each student with are a testament to the great heart of this community. Our temple presidents, through their hard work and dedication, have nurtured our community and served as remarkable examples of leadership. We are blessed to have such *menschlichkeit* in our midst.

#### **A Prayer for Our Congregational Leaders**

We thank You, G-d, for the time, energy, and dedication that our congregational leaders give to our community.

May You bless our leaders with wisdom and compassion as they guide us on our journey of faith. Help them to lead with integrity, to make wise decisions, and to act in the best interests of the people they serve.

As they work tirelessly to create a welcoming, inclusive, and vibrant congregation, we pray that they find strength and inspiration in Your teachings. May they continue to grow in their own faith, and may they inspire us to do the same.

We ask that You bless our leaders with the support and resources that they need to fulfill their responsibilities. May they be a source of encouragement and inspiration to us all, and may their efforts be blessed with success.

We offer this prayer with love and gratitude for all that our congregational leaders do for our community, Amen.

## Presidential Perspective

### Fred Allen, Ph.D. 2020 - Present



Temple Israel of Paducah was incorporated in 1893 and moved to its current location on Joe Clifton Drive in 1963. Prior to WWII, up to about 1940, there were about 600 Jews living in and around Paducah among a total population of 34,000 (<2%). By 1960, the number of Jews had already peaked and by 1985 was less than 200 out of 28,000 people (<1%). Today, there is thought to be on the order of 100 Jews living in the greater Paducah area comprising the Quad State region (KY-IL-TN-MO), of which 35 are affiliated with Temple Israel.

The steady decline of the number of Jews has certainly made it challenging to maintain the synagogue - inside and outside of the building - and to sustain a Jewish community. The key has been its dedicated leadership over the past 18 years.

Since 2005, Temple Israel has had eight presidents including me. My seven predecessors have worked hard to keep up the synagogue and cemetery while supporting the congregants who remain involved, precisely as described in the preceding article.

Skillful leaders study the past to address the present and shape the future. Leadership is about converting a shared vision into a new reality. This involves working with others to size up a situation and adapt to changing conditions over space and time. Leaders act today but keep tomorrow in mind. They prepare for the worst yet hope for the best. They look, listen, and learn. They rely on teamwork to plan, do, and then review. Executing a plan means turning words into tasks. In the process evolution or revolution occurs. The leader and team successfully transform, thriving under a new set of conditions, defining a new or improved situation. Then the cycle starts all over again as new leaders emerge.

May the good work of our past presidents be an inspiration to us all, as they guided our synagogue with dedication, wisdom, and grace. Their commitment to our community is a shining example of what it means to serve with love and compassion. We are grateful for all that have done, and we honor them today for their outstanding contributions as leaders of Paducah's Jewish community.

"The greatest leaders in history were those who empowered others." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

"A leader is not measured by their accomplishments, but by the accomplishments of those they lead." -  
Rabbi Avraham Twerski

# Temple Israel's Past Presidents 2005-2020

## Louis Michelson 2005-2006 (also 1974-1975)



I don't remember much because it's been so long since I was President of Temple Israel.

I have always cared greatly about Judaism in Paducah and our Congregation. I have seen unfortunately a significant population decline locally and its ramifications on our community. Change often can be difficult, however these ramifications have been met with a dedicated nucleus of strong, loyal, and dedicated members, without whom we would not be here today.

I offer my prayers and ask God to bless those who continue the "good fight!"

"A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." - Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides)

## Jonathan Freed 2006-2008

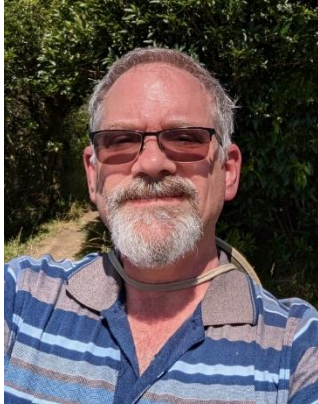


My recollection of my term as President of the Congregation (unaided by minutes from our Board meetings) revolves around the tenure of our outstanding student Rabbi, Jean Eglinton. Her rendition of the Binding of Isaac during the High Holidays was so expressive; it made me feel like I was present for the troubling dialogue between father and son.

At the annual Congregational dinner Jean prepared a sing-along service of music from her favorite Jewish composers' Broadway musicals. Several conversions to Judaism were guided by Jean. After her tenure at Temple Israel concluded, I learned from a lawyer friend, John Rosenberg, in Prestonsburg, Kentucky, that Jean and her husband (also a lawyer) relocated to Huntington, West Virginia. The two towns are only 74 miles apart, so John and his family also got to enjoy Jean's contributions from the pulpit.

"The mark of a true leader is not necessarily the one who does everything right, but the one who knows how to correct his mistakes and learn from them." - Rabbi Yisrael Salanter

## **Bill Flarsheim, Ph.D. 2008-2010**



Reading back through the President's Messages I wrote for the Temple Israel Bulletin I was struck by how fast those two years passed. It was a busy two years, and I don't recall any big problems, but I know that is thanks to the help I got from the Board, and others in the Congregation.

Three accomplishments I remember from my term were hosting the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service in 2009, replacing the front doors on the building, and replacing most of the old exit signs with new LED exit signs.

The Interfaith Thanksgiving service drew a big crowd, and we were able to coordinate it with a visit by Rabbi Marshal Klaven of the Institute for Southern Jewish Life that weekend. The service went off without a hitch, and Rabbi Klaven impressed the visitors.

The new doors really helped the building's appearance; I hope they have held up well. The western sun takes a toll on the front of the building. The exit signs weren't a big deal, but I installed them myself, saving a bit of money. I'm sorry there were a couple left in the basement that someone else had to finish.

The biggest concern in those years was the lack of new families moving to Paducah. The financial crash in 2008 may have made prospects look worse than they were, because I know there have been new arrivals since I left.

As many of you know, when Georgia and I left Paducah, we moved to Zhuhai, China. It was a great experience, but we are glad to be back in the US and settled in Louisville. Our kids live there, Philip and Sarah are married, and we have two grandsons. If any of you are visiting Louisville, please look me up!

"A good leader takes a little more than their share of the blame, a little less than their share of the credit." -  
Rabbi Arnold Glasow

## **Fran Johnson 2010-2012**



As I reviewed my tenure as Board President, the challenges we have today are the same as those at that time: building and cemetery maintenance, balancing the budget, attracting new members, and future planning. Life goes on and often permanent solutions are never found for these, but we keep trying. Maybe we should revisit good ideas of the past and work together to reach a successful conclusion. But, also be open to new ideas.

During my tenure, Temple Israel was honored to be invited to represent small congregations during Hebrew Union College's 135<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner celebrating its founding in Cincinnati. My husband Darrell and I traveled to Cincinnati to attend this special event to share how vital its student rabbinical program was to small communities. In addition, keeping the congregation informed was important and this was accomplished through a newsletter that was sent on a regular basis. Included were messages from the Board President and the Student Rabbi, announcements, the student rabbi's schedule, list of donations, congregational notes, and more.

There are many exciting happenings in that two-year period that I would like to share, but space will not allow me to do so. The most important is to say **thank you** to the Board members for their hard work and for trusting me to serve as their president.

"The best leaders are those most interested in surrounding themselves with assistants and associates smarter than they are." - Rabbi Yaakov Salomon

## **Malla Pollack 2012-2014**

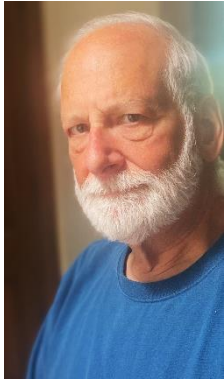


Temple Israel will always live in my heart as a community which took me in after I had wandered the United States as an itinerant law professor. The school that brought me to Paducah died, but I stayed – nourished by the kindness of other Temple members. The handful of members who pitched in to keep the Temple alive worked together and worried together about the future of the community. My little bit was to write and obtain congregational adoption of modern by-laws whose legal status could be proven (if necessary). I left Paducah after seven years to move closer to my birth family, but I will never forget the warm, Jewish community holding on to its place in western Kentucky.

"The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. They are the one that gets the people to do the greatest things." - Rabbi Jason Miller



## **Michael Resnick 2014-2016 (also 1976-1977; 1995-1999)**



I was President of Temple Israel three times, and each term had its own challenges.

During my first term, we were given the big Star of David by Grace Episcopal Church, and I had to give a speech. That evening, there were more Episcopalians than Jews in the building.

The second time, we had to replace the HVAC system because it was over 30 years old. Since we are a religious group, we had some of the design and installation donated. We did the best we could to make it work given the available resources.

By the third time, it was evident that our membership was in serious decline. When I first got to Paducah, there were between 45 and 50 guys in the B'nai B'rith Lodge. Now, there's one - me. We had a Men's Club that would have a turnout of 15-30 guys for monthly meetings. It is long gone. There was a very active Sisterhood that planned and scheduled the Onegs, the Seders, and the Deli Dinner. It is a much smaller group now.

What with HUC no longer producing rabbis in Cincinnati, I feel that, in the event we are unable to find a new young person to come for a "get-experience" pulpit, our only chance for survival might be to find a retired rabbi. That might provide us with a few more decades.

"The leader who exercises power with honor will work from the inside out, starting with themselves." -  
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

## **Dr. Laurie Ballew 2016-2020**



I "grew up" in Temple Israel having started religious school at the synagogue on Broadway at the age of five and being in the first confirmation class at the new and current synagogue on Joe Clifton Drive. Here I am now pictured with our oldest congregant, Marcia Nemer (on the left).

As President, I was focused on the maintaining the health and continuity of Temple Israel. Several improvements and upgrades were made during my tenure including new front doors for the synagogue, new carpeting and seat coverings for the sanctuary, kitchen remodeling and new lighting for the social hall. Also, clean-up of the storage area in the lower level.

Other accomplishments include:

- Introduced "Blue Jean Shabbat" as a casual attendance to Shabbat Services.
- Arranged and coordinated the "Unity Service" at Temple Israel after the mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pennsylvania, working with local TV, radio, and community leaders to create awareness of the event and to provide safety and security for the event.
- Led two Holocaust Memorial services at Temple Israel with the participation of the local Abrahamic Faith council and hiring of a security guard to be present during Temple events and services.
- Developed personal Memorial Books for Yom Kippur and instituted special High Holiday music performances to enhance the beauty of the Holy Days.
- Conferred with Rabbi Julie Schwartz of the HUC about restoration and repair of our Torah scrolls.

Now as a Past President, I look forward to staying involved with the synagogue I grew up with and love.

"A true leader is one who leads by example and inspires others to follow in their footsteps. -  
Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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