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Forward 50

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Pessimists have been warning for decades that as younger generations of Jews continued their acculturation into the American mainstream, those at the leading edge of the drift would float away from Jewish identity, leaving a smaller but more committed core. Optimists, if that's the right word, predicted that the younger, more acculturated Jews wouldn't disappear from the scene; rather, their Jewish identities would evolve in new and unpredictable ways, leaving the Jewish community as many small communities, with less and less identifiably in common.

This year's Forward 50 list shows what look to us, at least, like clear signs of continental drift. When we sat down to take a long look at the community, what we found was not a hardening core surrounded by an evanescent periphery, but numerous pockets of identity taking shape on the landscape, most showing clear signs of solidity, but most quite disconnected from — even unaware of — the others. The list that emerged from our efforts reflects that changing topography.

The Forward 50 is not based on a scientific study or survey. The list is compiled each year by the Forward's staff, based on what we have reported over the past year, what we have heard from community members speaking about other community members and whatever objective signposts — rising or falling budgets, book sales, published buzz, adoption of new laws or proposals — can be deemed to indicate public influence.

Membership in the 50 doesn't mean that the Forward endorses what these individuals do or say. We've chosen them because they are doing and saying things that are making a difference in the way American Jews, for better or worse, view the world and themselves. Not all these people have put their energies into the traditional frameworks of Jewish community life, but they all have embodied the spirit of Jewish action as it is emerging in America, and all of them have left a mark.

What do you think about our choices? [Weigh in here.](#)

Top Picks



Michael Mukasey

President Bush's choice of former U.S. District Judge Michael Mukasey for the next attorney general took Washington by surprise. Hardly an insider — indeed distant from the circles of power — Mukasey had other qualities that made him the logical Bush pick: a strong record in judging terrorism cases, full support for Bush's post-9/11 U.S.A. Patriot Act and — having first been proposed by New

York Democrat Charles Schumer — a seeming promise of easy Senate confirmation. Mukasey, 66, an Orthodox Jew, studied at New York's prestigious Ramaz School and is a member of the school's parent congregation, the tony, Modern Orthodox Kehillath Jeshurun. His years on the bench earned him a reputation for toughness both on national security issues and on white-collar criminals. Known among colleagues for his strict impartiality, Mukasey made a point of confining his Jewish involvement to household and congregation while on the bench, and he was never active in Jewish organizations beyond his synagogue. Still, critics said it was no coincidence that his hard-line stance on terrorism-related issues dovetailed closely with the hawkish worldview of his community, and defendants facing him on terrorism charges asked for a different judge — something that wasn't true of other Jewish judges. During his Senate hearings, a dithering answer on torture cost him some support, but confirmation still seemed likely. Together with another Jewish Cabinet member, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, Mukasey will be responsible for shaping America's anti-terrorism policy. He will also be in charge of rebuilding trust in the Department of Justice following the turbulent tenure of his predecessor, Alberto Gonzales.



Elyse Frishman

The last time a new prayer book was published for Reform synagogues, the 1975 "Gates of Prayer," America was just emerging from the rollicking 1960s, and Reform Jews, more than any other Jewish denomination, were swept up in the spirit of change and diversity. True to its time, "Gates" featured a diverse menu of services from which congregations could pick and choose. This year's publication of "Mishkan T'filah," only the fourth prayer book in the 150-year history of American Reform Judaism (the first was the 1856 "Olat Tamid," by Baltimore abolitionist Rabbi David Einhorn; the longest-serving was the stately "Union

Prayer Book" of 1892) marks a victory for tradition and a triumph for editor Rabbi Elyse Frishman. "Gates" quickly proved unpopular, and in 1985 work began on a replacement. After 14 years of discussion, studies and committee reports, Frishman, rabbi of New Jersey's oldest synagogue, submitted a detailed concept in 1999 that became "Mishkan." In what movement leaders called a "brilliant layout device," the 52-year-old Frishman used right-hand pages for Reform versions of Hebrew prayers with transliteration and faithful translations, while the facing pages offer alternative readings on the same themes. Thanks to Frishman's innovation, now, even when the movement's congregations are on different pages theologically, they can be on the same page as they pray. Not everyone is comfortable with the radical change; Rabbi Barry Block of San Antonio blogged to his congregants that because of the book's traditionalism, "the change to 'Mishkan T'filah' will be more difficult" than the 1975 switch to "Gates." "Many people feel that the world is changing at a pace that is far too fast." Block's own temple won't even use it for now. In time, though, he wrote, "it will be the prayerbook that will unite Reform congregations in the 21st century."



Seth Rogen and Judd Apatow

Seth Rogen and Judd Apatow have been called the saviors of film comedy, and their two box office hits this year perfect the art of transforming classic zh'lubs into

lovable super-Jew heroes. In "Knocked Up" (written and directed by Apatow), Rogen plays a pothead couch potato who unintentionally impregnates a beautiful blond shiksa and, after a series of awkward events, cleans up his act and wins her heart. "Superbad" (co-written by Rogen, produced by Apatow) is a coming-of-age slapstick about the friendship of two high school dweebs who ultimately save the day and get the girls. Peppered with Jewish references throughout, both films plainly draw on personal experience. Rogen, 25, raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, cites "Superbad" as semi-autobiographical. Apatow, 39, a Long Island native, is a self-described nerd who has said he was always picked last for sports teams. Apatow worked his way up through television comedy, writing for Ben Stiller and Garry Shandling and producing acclaimed but short-lived TV shows before winning success as producer of the 2004 hit movie "Anchorman," starring Will Ferrell. Rogen began doing comic shtick as a member of the anarchic Labor Zionist youth movement, Habonim Dror, and then honed his skills in local stand-up clubs. Moving to Los Angeles after high school, he landed an acting job in 1999 on Apatow's short-lived TV cult classic, "Freaks and Geeks." After Rogen spent a year writing for fellow Habonim-nik Sacha Baron Cohen's "Da Ali G Show," Apatow steered him into film, offering him a role in the 2005 breakout hit, "The 40-Year-Old Virgin." They haven't stopped since.



Sheldon Adelson

A former Boston newsboy, Sheldon Adelson worked his way up to become one of the richest men in America, and, this year, one of the most powerful philanthropists in the Jewish world. Adelson became the third-richest man in America, according to Forbes magazine, through the winnings of his Las Vegas Sands Corp. It's a business he grew literally from the ground up, after bringing down the famous old Sands Casino. Adelson, 74, has long been a force in the Las Vegas Jewish community, almost single-handedly funding the city's new Jewish day school. But it was only with the creation of a family foundation this past January that Adelson took on national stature as a philanthropist. Charity-world rumors have it that the foundation may soon give away \$200 million a year, dwarfing any other Jewish giver. Adelson has used other parts of his fortune to start an Israeli newspaper and to support hawkish causes, including a new campaign to support America's continued involvement in Iraq. Most of his major philanthropic gifts so far have gone to conventional causes, including Birthright Israel and Israel's national Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem. But he's said to be moving strongly in the direction of Jewish education. The community's schools have waited generations for a savior of this magnitude.



Peter Deutsch

After six terms in Congress, Peter Deutsch, 50, is no stranger to the national stage. This year, however, Deutsch gained fame in an entirely new area when he helped found the Ben Gamla Charter School in South Florida, the nation's first publicly funded Hebrew-language school. Deutsch, an observant Jew and lifelong Democrat, came to the project after losing a pitched battle for one of Florida's senatorial seats in 2004. The idea of a Jewish-themed charter school, with kosher food and Hebrew lessons, had been floated before in various parts of the country,

but it took someone with Deutsch's prominence and connections to make it happen. A number of detractors, most of them Jewish, have questioned whether the school violates constitutional church-state lines — and the traditional American Jewish support for inclusive public education — but Deutsch has remained steadfast. Deutsch's goal is more than a single school; he is looking to start a movement. He is already talking about opening other branches around the country, and philanthropist Michael Steinhardt has signaled his interest in the idea. Deutsch's campaign could change the face of Jewish education.

POLITICS

Henry Waxman

A member of the House of Representatives since 1975, Rep. Henry Waxman long ago earned his reputation as the chamber's resident bulldog, ever ready to chomp at the legs of miscreant tobacco executives, corporate polluters and their ilk. Since last November's election swept Democrats back into the majority, the Los Angeles lawmaker has used his new position as chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform to mount one of the toughest, most sustained attacks yet against the Bush administration's performance, from its handling of Hurricane Katrina to what Waxman has called "an epidemic of corruption" in Iraq. As the longest-serving Jewish member of the House, Waxman, 68, serves as informal dean of the unofficial Jewish caucus, and in this capacity, too, he has long been a respected player. When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi came under fire last spring for visiting Syria, Waxman's support helped defuse the criticism. This fall, on the other hand, he led the charge against a fellow Democrat, Rep. Jim Moran of Virginia, for laying responsibility for the Iraq War at the feet of Aipac. Waxman's office drafted a sharply worded letter of rebuke, signed by more than a dozen of his Jewish colleagues.

Reva Price

The Democratic takeover of Congress last year catapulted Reva Price into one of the most influential positions at the intersection of Jewish interests and Washington politics. As liaison to the Jewish community for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Price is the go-to person on any issue involving legislation of interest to the community — from health care and Social Security to foreign policy and homeland security. "Nothing can go through Congress without leadership approval, and for us that means not much can be done without having Reva on our side," said a Jewish organizational staffer who works the Hill. Price, a longtime policy professional with Jewish organizations in Washington, came to Congress when Pelosi was still minority leader, tasked with improving outreach efforts to the Jewish community. After almost a year on the job, Price managed to work with groups and lawmakers to move issues that had been stuck for years when the Republicans led Congress, but she also learned that not all items on Pelosi's "100-hour agenda" can actually be achieved.

Michael Bloomberg

A former Salomon Brothers wunderkind who went on to make a fortune with his eponymous financial services empire, Michael Bloomberg is accustomed to the fine, thin air at the top of the heap. This year, he catapulted from his perch as America's chief manager-as-mayor to become the nation's most buzzed-about potential CEO-in-Chief. A longtime Democrat, Bloomberg, 65, changed his party affiliation to Republican shortly before entering New York's mayoral race in 2001. Last June he fanned speculation of a presidential run when he dropped his GOP affiliation for a new life as a political independent. Asked repeatedly about a potential campaign, he sometimes played it coy: "A short, Jewish billionaire from New York? C'mon." In fact, Bloomberg is not too demonstratively Jewish as New York politicians go. A Reform Jew who attends Manhattan's Temple Emanu-El on the High Holy Days, Hizzoner wears his Jewishness proudly but lightly. At the same time, Bloomberg's tenure has been notable for his deployment of his results-based pragmatism in service of issues long championed by traditional big-city Jewish pols: social welfare, education, public health. In recent months, his administration has unveiled a new ban on trans fats in city restaurants and a major initiative to reduce the city's emission of greenhouse gases. Bloomberg has also used his heightened national profile to shine a spotlight on the case for tighter gun control. A gender discrimination lawsuit recently filed against Bloomberg LLP hasn't boosted the odds — already waning — that the mayor will actually mount a long-shot White House bid. If not, he still has two years left as America's most famous public CEO.

Jimmy Jamshid Delshad

The day after Jimmy Jamshid Delshad was elected the first Iranian-born mayor of Beverly Hills in late March, he visited three synagogues in the posh enclave to thank congregants for their support. Now America's most prominent Iranian-American officeholder, Delshad, 67, could count on the city's large Persian-Jewish community, where he garnered key support as he dove into municipal politics. From 1999 to 2001, he served as president of the nearby Sinai Temple. He was elected to the City Council two years later, serving four years before winning the mayoralty by fewer than 100 votes. The Shiraz native immigrated to America in 1959, after an 18-month stay on an Israeli kibbutz. While studying computer science at California State University-Northridge, Delshad and his two brothers performed Israeli-style music at weddings and bar mitzvahs to make ends meet. This year, he became board chairman of the Magbit Foundation, a Los Angeles-based Iranian-Jewish charity that gives Israeli students interest-free loans. And while Beverly Hills has had many a Jewish mayor, Delshad was the first to affix a mezuzah to the doorway of the mayor's office.

IDEAS & ACTIVISM**Jeremy Ben-Ami**

Jeremy Ben-Ami became the point man this year in the semi-secret attempt to transform the pro-Israel lobbying map and create a new pro-peace lobby. The endeavor, known to insiders as the "J Street Project," is still in the works, and critics say it might never materialize. Still, the first serious attempt by Jewish activists to take on pro-Israeli lobbying giant Aipac and build a peace-oriented advocacy group

has the traditional Jewish community leadership buzzing. Ben-Ami, 44, comes to the project from Democratic politics and dovish pro-Israel activity. He was on President Clinton's domestic policy team and is now a senior executive at Fenton Communications. The groundwork on the new lobby was conducted behind the scenes over the past year. Working with allies, including Pentagon-veteran-turned-Soros-aide Morton Halperin and Israeli political veteran Daniel Levy, Ben-Ami has reached out to potential donors while simultaneously trying to nudge existing dovish groups toward the idea of joining forces. The coming year holds the answer to whether this ambitious undertaking can actually take off. Supporters give it a 50% chance. Critics think even that estimate is too generous. Still, frustrated doves see it as their best shot yet at making a dent.

David Brog

It comes as a surprise to many that David Brog, executive director of the first pro-Israel lobbying group for evangelicals, Christians United for Israel, is actually a bona fide Jew. But for Brog, born and raised in a Conservative Jewish household outside Atlantic City, N.J., his work with Pastor John Hagee, the firebrand Texas preacher who founded CUFI less than two years ago, is a natural outgrowth of his passion for the Jewish state. Since its inception in February 2006, the hawkish Washington-based lobby has set up chapters in 50 states and hosted more than 70 "Nights to Honor Israel" — its signature pro-Israel fundraising dinners, which have attracted thousands of evangelicals, plus some Jewish community members — nationwide. Brog, 41, who previously worked as Republican Senator Arlen Specter's chief of staff, is outspoken in his criticism of liberal Jews who spurn Hagee's legions. As Brog sees it, the Jewish community should be thanking Christian Zionists for standing with Israel during trying times. Hagee, meanwhile, is no doubt thanking Brog for lending him some Jewish credibility.

Alan Dershowitz

With more than a little bit of chutzpah, Alan Dershowitz has established himself as Israel's single most visible defender — the Jewish state's lead attorney in the court of public opinion. Never press-shy, the famed Harvard law professor is always ready to argue Israel's case — whether it means writing op-eds, delivering speeches or challenging former president Jimmy Carter to a debate. (Carter declined.) Often, Dershowitz himself becomes the topic of debate, as happened recently during the high-profile fight over the tenure bid of anti-Israel academic Norman Finkelstein. Dershowitz's prominence makes him a lightning rod for critics, and his willingness to stake out controversial stances on issues such as torture and collective punishment gives them plenty of ammo. Yet at a time of political polarization, Dershowitz, 69, defies prevailing stereotypes of what it means to be a pro-Israel activist. While Israel's loudest defenders increasingly hail from the right, Dershowitz is an unabashed liberal and even something of a tough-minded dove, having quickly followed his popular 2004 tome "The Case for Israel" with "The Case for Peace." When he's not busy advocating for Israel, the prolific professor churns out books like "Blasphemy: How the Religious Right is Hijacking the Declaration of Independence" and "Finding Jefferson: A Lost Letter, a Remarkable Discovery, and the First Amendment in an Age of Terrorism," both of which came out in the past year.

Norman Podhoretz

While neoconservatism's star has begun to dim in many quarters, the same cannot be said of one of the movement's founding fathers. At 77, Norman Podhoretz has to his credit a new book on the threat of Islamic extremism, "World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism." (World War III was the cold war.) An unapologetic supporter of the Iraq War and outspoken advocate of military action against Iran, Podhoretz also landed a key spot on Rudy Giuliani's foreign policy team. Podhoretz has been a major figure in intellectual circles since 1960, when the then left-liberal essayist became editor of the American Jewish Committee's monthly journal, *Commentary*. He and the magazine took a sharp right turn in the late 1960s and helped to found neoconservatism. He continued to lead the magazine and the movement until he retired in 1995. (His son John is slated to take over the journal in 2009.) A conservative eminence grise, Podhoretz was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2004. Should Rudy win the 2008 presidential election, there's no telling what kind of influence Podhoretz may wield.

April Rosenblum

In recent years, many Jews have been alarmed by an apparently rising tide of antisemitism on the left. April Rosenblum, 27, a Philadelphia-based progressive activist, is also concerned about antisemitism. But she's skeptical of the community's response. While studying at Temple University, she saw fellow Jews responding to antisemitism in ways she thought were ineffective and counterproductive, circling the wagons and alienating potential allies. She spent two years doing research and facilitating focus groups with non-Jewish activists to discuss antisemitism. This past April, on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Rosenblum published the fruits of her labor: a 32-page illustrated pamphlet titled "The Past Didn't Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism Part of All of Our Movements," which can be downloaded free online (www.thepast.info). Deploying terms like "oppression," "ruling classes" and "liberation" (alongside harsh critiques of American and Israeli policies), the pamphlet is a sustained argument about what antisemitism is and why it should be opposed — all written in a language her target audience of self-identified radicals and progressives understands. Her pamphlet has had a warm reception in left-wing circles; one activist called it "a must-read" and another said it "needs to be studied and the lessons applied." Next, Rosenblum plans to work with Jewish college students to develop better ways of responding to antisemitism. By day she contributes her energies to Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History, organizing programs for young adults.

Charles Jacobs and Roz Rothstein

When it comes to defending Israel in the media, on campus and in the streets, America's long-established Jewish groups no longer have a monopoly. Increasingly, the agenda is set by scrappy startups like Boston's The David Project and the Los Angeles-based StandWithUs — often dragging the rest of the community along behind them. StandWithUs was founded in 2001 by a group of activists assembled by Roz Rothstein, a family therapist driven by what she saw as the larger community's anemic response to growing anti-Israel activism. The David Project was launched the following year by Charles Jacobs, co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Group, which targeted slavery in Sudan. Neither Rothstein, 55, nor Jacobs, 63, shies from confrontation. The David Project captured headlines in 2003 with a documentary alleging faculty intimidation of pro-Israel students at Columbia University. More recently, it waged a high-

profile legal and media battle with the Islamic Society of Boston over its controversial associates and its plans for a new mosque. This summer, StandWithUs took the lead in responding to a planned pro-Palestinian rally in Washington. While the D.C. Jewish Community Relations Council opted to ignore the demonstration (which was a dud in the end), StandWithUs organized a counter-protest and answered pro-Palestinian ads on Washington's subway system with ads of its own. Both groups have focused on campus activism, multimedia projects, leadership training and curriculum development. The courses Rothstein and Jacobs charted have proven popular with action-hungry donors: Their two startups already boast multimillion-dollar budgets and sizable staffs.

George Soros

George Soros himself doesn't keep count, but aides and outside observers reckon he's spent somewhere between \$4 billion and \$8 billion over the past 30 years trying to build democracy and "civil society" in countries that lack it, mainly in Russia and Eastern Europe. He was a principal funder of the Polish Solidarity movement, which helped topple the Soviet empire. He's built universities, launched daily newspapers, had laws and constitutions drafted and passed by a dozen parliaments. As long as the Soviet Union stood, his name was magic among foes of communist tyranny. Ever since the Berlin Wall fell, though, Soros has continued promoting freedom in countries the West considers free — and increasingly in the West itself. Now the wise men are getting nervous. Since last fall, when he publicly turned his democratic attention for the first time to Israel and the Jewish community, his name has regularly been attached to words like "obscene" and even "Tyranno-Soros." Born in Hungary in 1930, Soros (originally Schwartz; his father changed it) survived the Nazi occupation on the streets, living by his wits. He migrated afterward to London and then New York, where he took up stock trading and currency speculation. He did well; Forbes magazine reckons him the 80th-richest person in the world, worth some \$8 billion. His refusal to give to Jewish causes used to stir grumbling, but his aides insisted he didn't identify as a Jew. In 2003 he dodged his handlers for an afternoon and met with a group of Jewish funders, telling them he saw himself as within the tradition of Jewish philanthropy, albeit toward the "universalist" end of the curve. He also said antisemitism was sometimes a reaction to Jewish actions, citing Ariel Sharon's anti-terrorism tactics and his own financial manipulations. The words prompted outrage among community leaders, who said he was blaming the victim. Last fall, some of his aides participated in exploratory meetings among Jewish liberals seeking to create a more dovish voice within the community. His critics crowed that their point was proved. Soros quickly backed away, fearing his presence could sink the whole endeavor. In an essay in *The New York Review of Books*, he explained that he had always avoided the Israeli-Arab issue, fearing he might unintentionally harm Israel. Now, he wrote, things had reached the point where critics who care about Israel must stand up. He couldn't be deeply involved, because he didn't know the issues well enough, but he saluted those who did. Now the floodgates opened. Joseph Lieberman called him "anti-American," Jackie Mason called him a "self-hating Jew," Martin Peretz called him a "cog in the Nazi wheel," the *New York Daily News* said he had "demeaned the Holocaust" and *The New York Sun* called his words a "new blood libel." Soros's father had urged him to hide his Jewish identity. Maybe he should have listened.

Rita Katz

When Osama bin Laden resurfaced in a video a few months ago, Rita Katz was on the front lines. The 44-year-old Iraqi-born, Israeli-American terrorist hunter quickly dispatched the footage to the authorities through her SITE Institute, which stands for "Search for International Terrorist Entities." A few weeks later, she publicly accused the administration of leaking the tape prematurely, inadvertently tipping off Al Qaeda that its online operations had been infiltrated. This was vintage Rita Katz: cutting-edge expertise mixed with an abrasive personality, eager to go after bin Laden and his ilk but also ready to take on the FBI, the CIA and the White House. Katz's SITE Institute, which she co-founded in the wake of the September 11 attacks, has become a go-to resource for reporters on the terrorism beat, providing them with new video and audio recordings of master terrorists, helping them surf jihadist Web sites and chat rooms — and offering those sought-after "expert" comments. Katz's family fled Iraq for Israel after the Baath regime executed her father. She moved to America 10 years ago and created a niche for herself by mixing her Arabic language skills and an aggressive investigative nature. Her working skills were honed during her years working for terrorism analyst Steven Emerson. Those were years when she used to don traditional Islamic garb, with a hidden microphone, to attend undercover gatherings of Muslim groups and report instances of anti-Western and anti-Israel incitement. She's not undercover anymore.

RELIGION

Jen Taylor Friedman

Jen Taylor Friedman made history this year when she became the first female scribe ever to complete a Torah scroll. The sacred scroll was unveiled September 9 at New York's Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, an Orthodox feminist stronghold, before being transported to the United Hebrew Congregation, the St. Louis Reform synagogue that commissioned the Torah. Taylor Friedman, 27, is among just a few known female Jewish scribes in the world. She's said, however, that she wasn't trying to make a feminist statement in making the scroll — she simply wanted to write a Torah. The calligrapher, who born in Southampton, England, and currently lives in New York City, is also the brains behind last year's controversial Tefillin Barbie, a doll that comes with a long denim skirt, tefillin and a prayer shawl. Taylor Friedman completed a ceremonial Megillah, or Scroll of Esther, in 2004. Since then, she has scribed six more megillahs. She may not have a feminist agenda, but she's certainly a pioneer for women.

Boruch Shlomo Cunin

As California's top Chabad emissary, or shaliach, since 1965, Rabbi Boruch Shlomo Cunin, director of West Coast Chabad-Lubavitch, has established a formidable presence on the left coast. In California, where Chabad houses are popping up in just about every town where Jews can be found, Cunin has built something of an empire. With more than 200 West Coast Chabad houses and campus centers — dozens in Los Angeles County alone — Chabad's reach may surpass that of the Reform and Conservative movements. One of the first shlichim sent into the field by Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson in the 1950s to bring Jews back to the fold, Cunin early on established a reputation as an innovator with a knack for translating lofty goals into practical reality. He set up some of the first Chabad community centers and campus centers, now a nationwide phenomenon. He famously brought Chabad

into American living rooms, thanks to the annual Chabad telethon, launched in 1980 after his West Coast headquarters burned down. Now 67, Cunin is also a political presence, lobbying for more than two decades to secure the return of a Chabad library still held by the Russian government, more than 50 years after it was seized by the Soviets following World War II. With his legions growing by the day, Cunin's far-reaching influence is only poised to expand.

Laura Geller

Heading up one of Los Angeles's largest Reform congregations is no small job, but Laura Geller, senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, has been doing it with gusto and a flair for social activism for the past 13 years. Geller, 57, was only the third woman to be ordained when she graduated from Hebrew Union College in 1976. While things have certainly changed since then, Geller continues to be a trailblazer, injecting her congregation with a passionate commitment to social justice, and these days, environmental consciousness. This year, Geller kicked off the "Greening the Synagogue" campaign to reduce Temple Emanuel's carbon footprint by 20%, making her congregation a model for other area synagogues to follow. Geller also has remarkable foresight: Five years ago, before teen philanthropy was on the radar screen, she established "Match: Money and Teenagers Creating Hope," which places teens on the board of an endowment fund and asks them to decide how to allocate the interest. Geller's leadership will, no doubt, continue to blossom.

Eric Yoffie

Passing the 12-year mark as the unchallenged head of America's largest Jewish denomination would be reason enough for anyone to appear on a list of influentials. But Rabbi Eric Yoffie, 60, earns it anew every year. He never fails to surprise. In the last eight months alone, his Union for Reform Judaism, the movement's congregational arm, has: rolled out a program to engage Reform Jews in fighting malaria in Africa; published a new Reform prayer book with more Hebrew than ever; launched a series of teen rallies to free Israeli soldiers captured during the 2006 Lebanon war; begun pilot programs in six cities to help congregations reach out to the frail elderly, and convened a national Reform summit on disabilities. Boldest of all was his August 31 address to 30,000 American Muslims gathered in Chicago for the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America. The society, reputedly the largest Muslim organization in the country, is reviled on the right, accused of being an ally of Hamas and a front for the extreme wing of Saudi Islam — even as others have hailed it for its purported moderation and pursuit of interfaith dialogue. Yoffie's speech came just 16 months after another address he gave to students at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. Why does he do it, in the face of sometimes furious criticism? Because, he argues, moderates in every community need to reach out to each other and not allow extremists to set the agenda. "My task as a rabbi," he told the Muslim group, "is to rally that reasonable, often-silent majority and encourage them to assert the moderate principles that define their beliefs and Judaism's highest ideals."

Toba Spitzer

This year marked two major milestones for gays and lesbians in Jewish life: Not only did the Conservative movement approve the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis, but for the first time, one of the major religious denominations elected an openly gay rabbi to lead its clergy. In March, Toba Spitzer, a 45-year-old rabbi from West Newton, Mass., became the president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Assembly. While it comes as no surprise — the Reconstructionist movement was, after all, the first to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis — Spitzer's election raises the bar for gays and lesbians, not to mention for women, in organized religious life. Ordained in 1997, Spitzer has served as rabbi at Congregation Dorshei Tzedek ever since. A committed progressive activist, Spitzer is known for her Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and for her economic justice work with groups such as the Jewish Funds for Justice. Her activism, it would seem, is as much reflected in her own trailblazing career as in her work on behalf of others.

Arnold Eisen

With some of Conservative Judaism's own adherents publicly asking whether their ailing movement has a future, Arnold Eisen, the newly-inaugurated chancellor of its flagship institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, has no easy road ahead of him. But the plucky West Coast transplant is putting a bright spin on where the movement is heading, while at the same time acknowledging what he calls the movement's past "failure on message." Eisen, 56, moved to New York this fall from Palo Alto, Calif., where he was Koshland professor of Jewish culture and religion at Stanford University, to take over the reins at JTS from outgoing chancellor Ismar Schorsch. Eisen, a widely respected academic, is the first non-rabbi to lead the historic institution. After overseeing last year's process of deciding whether to admit openly gay and lesbian students into the rabbinic training program, Eisen will now have to contend with satisfying both the movement's left and right wings, as well as re-inspiring its graying ranks. But with his fresh-faced enthusiasm and dogged devotion to the movement he grew up in, Eisen might just be up to the task.

Andy Bachman

In the past few years, the leafy Park Slope section of Brooklyn has come to rival Manhattan's Upper West Side as a hub of non-Orthodox Jewish life — only hipper. Alongside the neighborhood's five established synagogues — which run the gamut from Orthodox to left of Reconstructionist — several independent minyans have sprung up to serve the area's burgeoning bourgeois bohemian set. As much as anyone, Rabbi Andy Bachman has been in the thick of the Jewish renaissance in so-called Brownstone Brooklyn. In 2003, Bachman and his wife, Rachel Altstein, launched a group called Brooklyn Jews, bringing youngish Jews together for low-pressure text study, holiday celebrations and socializing. The group's High Holy Day services quickly became the place to be for local 20- and 30-somethings. Last year, Bachman took over the pulpit at Brooklyn's largest Reform synagogue, Congregation Beth Elohim. Even as he has taken on the challenge of leading an established congregation, he has continued to nurture the independent Jewish scene, keeping Brooklyn Jews going and making Beth Elohim's facilities available to local minyans on the Sabbath. Beyond Brooklyn, the 44-year-old Bachman is a rabbinic favorite of the creative crowd, having participated in the Reboot network and serving on the advisory board of the Web site Jewcy.

Morris Allen

Until last year, Rabbi Morris Allen was known mostly as a local congregational rabbi and promoter of Jewish social justice efforts in the Minnesota Twin Cities area. That all changed when Allen decided to plunge headfirst into the billion-dollar kosher food industry. Prompted by a report in the Forward on working conditions at an Iowa kosher slaughterhouse, Allen pushed the Conservative movement to form a committee to look into the ethical and environmental implications of kosher food. The committee began its work by visiting the Iowa plant, the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse, where Allen and others interviewed immigrant workers. Soon after, Allen announced the creation of Conservative Judaism's Tzedek Hechsher, or Justice Certification, a bold new effort to certify kosher food that is produced with ethical considerations in mind. For years, kosher food certification has been dominated by Orthodox authorities, and Allen sees the Tzedek Hechsher as a way of re-engaging Conservative Jews and his own congregants with the spiritual implications of the food they eat. This, not surprisingly, has won Allen the ire of many in the Orthodox world. Questions remain as to just how the new certification would work — and it is clear that in this case the devil will be in the details. But Allen's energies show no sign of flagging.

COMMUNITY

Robert Wexler

Last March, Conservative Judaism's Los Angeles outpost, the University of Judaism, joined forces with a nearby Jewish retreat center, the 66-year-old Brandeis-Bardin Institute, to create a behemoth of Jewish higher education: American Jewish University. Rabbi Robert Wexler, the UJ's president of 15 years, negotiated and oversaw the landmark merger. Wexler, 56, a Los Angeles native and a graduate of UJ's first class of rabbinic students, is widely credited with bringing UJ into the black — the result, perhaps, of having earned a master's of business administration from Baruch College in New York. Now, as president of AJU, Wexler is not only overseeing one of the largest Jewish educational institutions in the world, but he is also taking it in a more pluralistic direction. Under Wexler's leadership, AJU now has 10,000 students at all levels of affiliation in its continuing education program. While he is targeting Jews of all stripes, Wexler has also continued to grow the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, one of only a handful of AJU's components still affiliated with Conservative Judaism.

Elise Bernhardt

A little more than a year into her tenure as president and CEO of the Foundation for Jewish Culture, Elise Bernhardt has enacted sweeping changes at the organization once known as the central address for arts and culture, as well scholarship, in the Jewish world. While some foundation insiders have criticized her brisk management style, Bernhardt has also won admirers in the Jewish philanthropic world, who credit her with bringing fresh energy to an organization gravely in need of a makeover. Bernhardt, 51, came to the foundation from the world of dance, where, among other things, she ran the Manhattan experimental performance space The Kitchen. If her new strategic plan, recently approved by the foundation's board, succeeds, the organization — previously known as the National Foundation for Jewish Culture — will be far more streamlined, operate in the black, and focus on supporting individual artists. Gone is the broad

mandate to fill every gap in the cultural landscape; after all, Bernhardt has noted, there are plenty of dynamic new start-ups that are managing to do it better than one central organization possibly could. What emerges in its place, however, will ultimately determine Bernhardt's legacy.

Howard Kohr

If anyone needed proof of Howard Kohr's status in the Washington lobbying scene, it was provided this year by GQ magazine. Kohr, 51, came in sixth in the prestigious list of the 50 most influential individuals in Washington, ranking ahead of such household names as Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. Kohr, executive director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee since 1996, navigated the organization through another complicated year, when negative attention was directed at the pro-Israel lobbying community, of which Aipac is the lynchpin. As he has in the past, Kohr largely managed to keep Aipac out of the debate, leaving the arena clear for other Jewish groups to fight it out. And for all the fireworks, the public debate over the role of the pro-Israel lobby in shaping American policy has had virtually no visible adverse effect on Aipac. Membership continues to grow, as do revenues, and its access to Capitol Hill seems unimpeded. This year the group succeeded in pushing tough anti-Iran legislation through Congress, winning final confirmation just last month. The looming trial, scheduled for January, of two former Aipac staffers accused of mishandling classified information, is expected to be a source of concern for Kohr. He might find himself called to testify about Aipac's lobbying practices, an issue he has tried to keep out of the limelight.

Abraham Foxman

Accused by The New York Times Magazine of crying wolf on antisemitism, by political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt of stifling debate on Israel and by Armenian groups of denying the truth of the Armenian genocide, it's been a rough year for Abe Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. Yet, despite all the barbs, Foxman, 67, shows little sign of slowing down. He is at once a lightning rod and a battering ram — with Foxman, the metaphors come easily — and quite possibly the most influential figure at work in the Jewish organizational world today. Though his most trusted medium remains the sharply worded press release, Foxman this year published a book, "The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control," that offers a sustained, sober retort both to Walt-Mearsheimer and to Jimmy Carter's "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid." But perhaps the most bruising battle of the year, both for Foxman and the organization he has headed for 20 years, was the debate over the Armenian genocide. The ADL, like other major Jewish organizations, has long avoided the term "genocide" in referring to the World War I-era massacres of Armenians, in deference to Turkey's role as Israel's most important friend in the Muslim world. But when Armenian groups in Massachusetts began to press for a boycott of an ADL anti-bigotry program — and when the ADL's own regional leadership repudiated the national organization's policy — Foxman was forced into an awkward about-face. It was an issue rife with painful ironies. The ADL, normally so vigilant when it comes to the language of genocide, suddenly let such sensitivities fall by the wayside. It was the Armenians who seemed to be using the ADL's usual playbook. And yet, when the House Foreign Relations Committee approved a resolution calling the massacres genocide — and Turkish-American relations became strained overnight as a result — Foxman's concerns suddenly seemed prescient.

Steve Gutow

When holidays approach, Rabbi Steve Gutow can be counted on to unveil a socially conscious initiative that captures the spirit of the season. Last Hanukkah the 58-year-old executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs exhorted the community to work against global warming by installing environmentally friendly compact fluorescent light bulbs in institutions and homes. And as the Yom Kippur fast approached this fall, he challenged Americans — Jewish and non-Jewish — to try eating for a week on \$21, the amount doled out to 20 million Americans surviving on food stamps. (Participants included Christian clergy and the first Muslim member of Congress, Rep. Keith Ellison.) A Texas lawyer for three decades before being ordained as a Reconstructionist rabbi in 2003, Gutow has a proven talent for creating communal platforms to further advocacy efforts. In 1984 he became the founding Southwest regional director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and six years later he was named founding executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council. After a break studying for the rabbinate and a brief stint in the pulpit, he was wooed to the JCPA, which coordinates public policy among the main national Jewish agencies and local federations, in August 2006. With Gutow at the helm, the JCPA is rapidly regaining its status as the national Jewish community's voice of justice.

David Saperstein

Thirty years leading the fight for social justice have earned Rabbi David Saperstein a reputation far beyond the Jewish community. The director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Saperstein is, above all, the chief Washington lobbyist for Reform Judaism. Over the years, he's turned his center into the second-largest Jewish lobbying shop in the capital — exceeded only by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — and into the most influential voice for Jewish liberalism. He's an outsized figure in national coalitions, promoting social justice on 100 fronts. He's a board member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and of People for the American Way. He was the founding chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, appointed by President Clinton in 1999 (and replaced in 2001 by Elliott Abrams). He has formed coalitions on issues ranging from African hunger to children's health care to prison rape. The past year found Saperstein at his prime, working with the restored Democratic majority in Congress to pursue the stalled hate crimes bill, the S-CHIP children's health bill and wiretapping — on each of which he's considered a major force. He's pressed the community to speak out on the Iraq War, arguing that "too few rabbis have preached from the pulpit on the issue." And he proved his independence this fall when he took part in a meeting with Jimmy Carter, showing respect for the ex-president despite his Middle East views, while all other mainstream Jewish leaders refused.

Andrew Tarsy

For all but a few days this past year, Andrew Tarsy, 38, was the New England regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. But it's those missing few days that are the key. In an August 16 phone conversation with the ADL's national director, Abraham Foxman, Tarsy labeled "morally indefensible" the organization's unwillingness to describe the World War I-era massacres of Armenians as "genocide." He

was fired the next day. But just four tumultuous days later, Foxman, facing an uprising from Boston Jewish leaders galvanized by Tarsy's act of defiance, changed course and called what happened to the Armenians "tantamount to genocide." Tarsy was reinstated soon thereafter. Tarsy, who served in the Civil Rights Division of the Clinton Justice Department before joining the League, showed that, contrary to popular belief, the ADL is more than just a platform for Foxman: It can be a forum for debate and dissent, capable of being nudged in the right direction when it strays.

Michael Weil

Michael Weil has years of experience leading urban renewal projects. But the British-born 59-year-old is now engaged in his most daunting task yet: rebuilding the New Orleans Jewish community after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Weil took the helm of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans last year, after coordinating the annual assessment of the worldwide Jewish community produced by the Jerusalem-based Jewish People Policy Planning Institute. With the same know-how he employed scanning global policy, and before that as Jerusalem's top city planner, Weil is now working to stem the exodus from a Jewish community whose numbers dropped one-third to 6,600 after the flood. With just one year on the job, Weil can already boast of several hundred Jewish households moving to the Big Easy since Katrina, enticed partly by Weil's mix of moving grants, loans and job-search assistance, and partly by a sense of pioneering and what some of them call tikkun olam. Looking down the road, Weil now has his sights set on convincing some of the 2,000 Jewish students at Tulane University to stay in New Orleans after graduation.

Ronald Lauder

It has long been rumored that while cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder, 63, was moving through leadership positions at other Jewish organizations, the prize he coveted was the presidency of the World Jewish Congress. This year he got his crown, albeit a bit tarnished. During the past few years, the World Jewish Congress has been riven by internal battles that have fractured the leadership and decimated fundraising. The organization's president until this year, Edgar Bronfman Sr., had previously said that Lauder, then WJC treasurer, was not up to the task of running the body. But after Bronfman was pushed to resign, he changed his tune and supported Lauder against South African philanthropist Mendel Kaplan. Lauder, a conservative Republican who served as American ambassador to Austria during the 1980s, has already been active, visiting world leaders on behalf of the WJC. At the same time, he has been using his massive fortune to boost his considerable profile in the field of German and Austrian art — both as a collector and as an advocate for returning Jewish holdings looted by the Nazis. A major exhibition of Gustav Klimt opened at Lauder's Neue Galerie in New York this fall, and his Ronald S. Lauder Foundation remains one of the biggest supporters of Jewish revival in Eastern Europe. It remains to be seen whether he can leverage his clout and will into the ability to lift the storied WJC out of its doldrums.

June Walker

This year June Walker breathed some fresh air into the Conference of Presidents of Major American

Jewish Organizations, becoming the second woman and the first Reconstructionist to serve as chair of a body widely seen as organized Jewry's chief representative voice on international affairs. A respiratory therapist by training, with degrees in chemistry and public health administration, Walker, 73, was elected in July to a two-year term as conference chair in her capacity as past president of one of its largest member-agencies: Hadassah, the 300,000-strong women's Zionist organization. During her stint as national president of Hadassah, the fabled women's group achieved prominence on the domestic stage as an advocate for stem-cell research and a wide range of women's rights and health issues. As chairwoman of the Presidents Conference, Walker has vowed to fight for the rights of another group that has often felt marginalized: the conference's 52 member groups.

Ruth Messinger

In 2005, writing about Ruth Messinger for that year's Forward 50, we described her American Jewish World Service as an "upstart" organization with an outsize impact. No more. Whether as a consequence of redoubled dedication, extra chutzpah, a change in the community's mood or the sheer magnitude of the need out there, AJWS has become a major player around the communal table, by anybody's measure. Revenues grew from \$14 million in 2004 to \$26 million the following year, and could approach \$30 million this year. Most of it goes in direct grants to some 270 indigenous organizations in nearly 40 countries, doing development work in small industry and sustainable agriculture, combating AIDS, empowering women and teaching the practical basics of democracy. A smaller piece of cash supports several dozen volunteers who go to recipient countries to head up projects, teach or heal the sick. Messinger, 67, oversees the whole operation as a combination field commander, cheerleader and guru. Her tireless lobbying for Darfur managed, almost single-handedly, to put the agonies of Africa on the agenda of the American Jewish community. Along the way, she's become a sort of symbol to young Jews across the country of the Other Judaism that once was and could be again — engaged with the world, driven by a passion for social justice for Jews and all humankind.

CULTURE

Regina Spektor

For a quirky, 27-year-old pianist-singer-songwriter, Regina Spektor is making quite a mark. Combining the emotiveness of a Tori Amos with the playful absurdism of Beck, and some classical thrown in for good measure, Spektor has rocketed out of New York's anti-folk scene to huge commercial success. (Quite literally — her songs are now featured in a number of big-brand television commercials.) Her critically acclaimed album, "Begin to Hope," has sold more than 500,000 copies, and for the past year Spektor has been playing to packed houses of adoring fans in cities around the world. While her music is not overtly Jewish, the Moscow-born, Bronx-bred Spektor displays an unselfconscious pride in her heritage that is unusual for a young celebrity. The cover of her latest album has her sporting a conspicuous Star of David pendant, and she speaks of her Jewish identity matter-of-factly, whether describing the Passover matzos she lugs around on tour or recalling how she discovered her songwriting talent during a teen trip to Israel. And while her songs span the spectrum from silly to soulful (sometimes both simultaneously), Spektor

sounds seriously smart in interviews when discussing her hybrid identity as a Russian-born American Jew.

Shalom Auslander

There's a new bad boy on the literary block, and he comes with yeshiva cred and Monsey yichus. "Foreskin's Lament," Auslander's memoir of growing up in an Orthodox Jewish household in the religious enclave near New York City, was released to wide critical acclaim and attention, with not one but two excerpts published in *The New Yorker*. In his book, the 37-year-old writer mined a seemingly inexhaustible wellspring of rage to advance an argument that feels at once deeply unnerving and perfectly reflective of our age: God exists, and He is very, very mean. At a time when religiously driven conflict has engendered a "new atheism" — championed by writers like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens — Auslander has given angry, hilarious voice to those for whom non-belief is an impossibility. Indeed, as some observers note, by engaging with the emotional underpinnings of religious fervor, the fallen yeshiva boy might actually do more to puncture the roiling bubbles of fundamentalist religion than all the scholars and pundits who look down their noses at true believers. Not that Auslander would ever cloak himself in the robes of the do-gooder. When asked about his inclusion on this list, Auslander remarked: "You people should be ashamed nominating this self-hating apikores [heretic]. Why don't you nominate Goebbels? Was Ahmadinejad busy?"

Michael Chabon

"These are strange times to be a Jew," writes Michael Chabon in "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," his bestselling novel released earlier this year. Indeed they are, proven not least by Chabon's own ability to spin an unlikely literary conceit about a fictional Jewish homeland in Alaska into a lyrical potboiler/allegory/satire on Jewish identity — and to see it debut at No. 2 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. A number of critics were left confused, even offended, by what some claimed were hidden (or not-so-hidden) messages about Yiddish, Hebrew, the State of Israel, even Jews as a people. One went so far as to accuse Chabon of Jewish self-hatred. But swarms of reviewers and readers alike viewed it as a triumph for contemporary Jewish literature as a whole and this author in particular. "With this novel," wrote our critic, Mark Oppenheimer, "Chabon has joined the community of Jewish Jewish writers at the moment of its renewed efflorescence. And he has joined their company very much his own man, a literary original." And as if a single Jewish-themed novel is not enough for a year's work, Chabon has just published "Gentlemen of the Road," a swashbuckling tale that he originally wanted to title "Jews With Swords."

Erez Safar, aka D.J. Handler

People of the Book? Not these days. The renaissance currently underway among the young Jewish culturati has a decidedly melodious tone to it, with each week seeming to churn up a new iteration of Jewish music. The landscape is too rich to credit any one individual but, based on recent innovations alone, this year belonged to Erez Safar, better known as D.J. Handler. Safar, 28, is himself a musician,

but he has made headlines recently as head of the Modular Moods record label — which represents artists like Y-Love, Smadar and Juez — and for founding and running the Sephardic Music Festival. This year, Safar added yet another project to his dossier: Shemspeed, billed as the largest Jewish music site on the Internet. Shemspeed offers an array of features, including Jewish music videos, four streaming online radio stations and a calendar of musical events around the world. "What drives me is my insatiable desire to create something new," Safar told the Forward. "I want to present a style that is Jewish and also stylin'."

Carolyn Starman Hessel

This year, The New York Times found out what observers of the Jewish literary scene have known for some time: The Jewish Book Council, led by Carolyn Starman Hessel, is officially a force in the world of books. In June, Rachel Donadio profiled Hessel in the Times Book Review, noting that in her 13 years at the book council's helm, she "has become a formidable power in the publishing industry." The council oversees the National Jewish Book Awards and coordinates some 70 annual Jewish book fairs at community centers nationwide. Under Hessel's leadership, the book fairs have become a major venue in the shrinking world of book marketing, filling a void left by an industry that has grown increasingly fixated on mega-hits and miserly about promoting the rest. With her savvy hand on that lever, Hessel has the power to make books and careers happen. Even when controversy erupts — as it did at this year, when one of the authors of the controversial book "The Israel Lobby" was allowed to appear at the annual meeting of book fair coordinators — Hessel manages to protect the council, proving herself not simply a communal clearinghouse, but an influential ambassador for Jewish books.

Jonathan Rosen

In three years, Jonathan Rosen has earned a track record that would turn most of his fellow book editors green with envy. As editorial director of the Nextbook/Schocken Jewish Encounters Series, which enlists writers to explore people, ideas and events from the Jewish past, the 44-year-old Rosen has steered the imprint toward uncommon success: 28 titles already in the works, eight of which have been published, most to critical acclaim. Each book is written by a different author, with a roster that includes such luminaries as Robert Pinky, Daphne Merkin, David Margolick, Leon Wieseltier, Ilan Stavans and more. Still, the line as a whole bears Rosen's distinct stamp: creative, witty and profound; intellectually ambitious yet ultimately widely accessible. And Rosen, who founded the Arts section of this paper and ran it for a decade, has accomplished this without neglecting the writing that has earned him a devoted fan base. February 2008 will see the publication of his fourth book, "The Life of the Skies," a nonfiction work about Rosen's private passion, bird-watching.

Jane Friedman

There were few bigger stories in publishing this year than the slaying of Judith Regan, the industry's seemingly unassailable dragon lady. Of those who wielded the sword, observers took particular note of HarperCollins CEO Jane Friedman. Regan had weathered a decade of controversy — from accusations

of questionable taste to serious charges of harassment and abuse — but after she purportedly accused Friedman and two others of constituting a "Jewish cabal" operating against her, the tide turned: Regan, who was then enduring a tidal wave of criticism over her planned publication of a memoir by O.J. Simpson, as well as an upcoming novel about Mickey Mantle's sex life, was fired — allegedly for, of all things, antisemitism. Friedman refused to comment on the brouhaha, but many observers, noting that the two women had been battling for years, saw it as a clear victory for the 62-year-old executive. Moreover, Friedman's Jewish identity is hardly a secret; she is vice-chair of the Entertainment, Media and Communications Division of the UJA-Federation of New York and a member of the American Advisory Committee of the Jerusalem International Book Fair. With Regan no longer a distraction, Friedman's light can now shine all the more brightly.

Diane von Furstenberg

When fashion insiders looked at their calendars for 2007, more than a few silk, taffeta and vicuna knickers undoubtedly got all bunched in a twist: New York's Fall Fashion Week was to coincide with Rosh Hashanah. Unsurprisingly for the historically Jewish shmatte industry, several members of the tribe, including Calvin Klein and Zac Posen, were among those slated to unveil their new looks just as the new year was ushered in. But it was designer Diane von Furstenberg, 61, recently installed as president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, who steered the clothing kingpins toward tradition, bumping the schedule up by two days. The change wasn't entirely a welcome one, not least because many European fabric companies are closed during the summer, forcing designers to place their orders much earlier than anticipated. But von Furstenberg, the Belgian-born daughter of Jewish emigres — her Greek-born mother survived Auschwitz and Ravensbruck, while her father, originally from Kishinev, spent the war years in Switzerland — carried the day, proving that, at least this year, celebrating the holidays was very much in vogue.

Mike Ashley

Champion race car driver Mike Ashley is vastly outnumbered in a sport often associated with the Bible Belt, but that hasn't stopped this Long Island native from taking a stand when it comes to his Jewish identity. This year, the 42-year-old father of two sat out a qualifying race that fell on Yom Kippur at the O'Reilly NHRA Fall Nationals in Dallas. This is the second time in Ashley's career that he was faced with the decision of whether or not to race on the holiest day of the year — he did not participate in another qualifying race in 2004. Both times Ashley put himself at a serious disadvantage to make it to the final rounds, despite the fact that he doesn't consider himself particularly observant. Three years ago it didn't matter and Ashley wound up winning the event anyway, but this year he wasn't so lucky. He lost in the first round, placing 11th in the event.

PHILANTHROPY

Lynn Schusterman

Over the past decade, the once-mighty network of federated Jewish philanthropies has been edged out of its dominant role in national Jewish community planning, eclipsed by individual mega-philanthropists who work singly or in partnerships, armed with the will and the resources to take charge. No partnership has left a deeper stamp than the trio of Michael Steinhardt, Charles Bronfman and Lynn Schusterman. Think of Birthright Israel, or the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, or the STAR partnership for Synagogue Transformation and Renewal or the rebirth of Hillel. All began with those three donors. In the last year or so, though, things have changed. Steinhardt and Bronfman have shown signs of fatigue or discouragement, while Schusterman looks like she's itching to keep moving. Her Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, begun in the 1980s with her late husband, an Oklahoma oilman, gives away about \$5 million per year, not enough to put one in the top ranks of mega-giving. Since her husband's death in 2000, however, she has learned to maneuver in the rarefied air of New York and Jerusalem, choosing achievable goals and leveraging her money. Her national Conference for Change, held last spring, brought together 150 Jews representing often marginalized groups within the Jewish community — blacks, gays, Hispanics, women — to explore shared issues of exclusion and inclusiveness in Jewish life. Her foundation is committed to donating 70% of its grants to Jewish causes (the rest of the money stays in the foundation's hometown of Tulsa), but unlike most other mega-donors, Schusterman's Jewish causes include domestic violence, gay rights, women's health and empowerment of teenage girls. The strategy opens up new sources of giving that haven't leapt into Jewish causes up to now; it also reopens some old values worth airing out and putting back in action.

Michael Steinhardt

With his public declaration in recent months that his Jewish philanthropic endeavors of the past 12 years have brought about little change, Steinhardt was said to be despairing of his efforts to entice young Jews back into the fold. But the hedge-fund manager turned mega-philanthropist, credited with injecting Jewish continuity efforts with a raft of new ideas and a heavy influx of cash to fund them, is not abandoning ship. Rather, he's rebuilding the hull. Steinhardt's foundation, the Jewish Life Network, bled at least five staff members over the past year, including its top professional, Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg. Steinhardt, 66, known as much for his iconoclastic comments as for his visionary philanthropy, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency he is re-jiggering his giving, cutting back on a host of programs and instead focusing in on three areas: establishing a follow-up program for participants in the wildly successful Birthright Israel program, which takes American Jews on free trips to Israel; creating a new \$100 million fund to reshape Jewish education, and giving to the Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative. If any of those projects have half the impact of Birthright Israel, which Steinhardt co-founded with other top Jewish donors, his swan song may be a long way off.

Roger Bennett and Sharna Goldseker

Few deserve more of the credit for the current trend toward creative, entrepreneurial Jewish philanthropy than Roger Bennett and Sharna Goldseker. As senior vice president at the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies for the past seven years, Bennett, 37, has been a key player in bringing young Jews into the world of philanthropy. Goldseker, a graduate of New York University's Wagner School of Public

Service and a vice president at the philanthropies, has made her mark as director of the division that deals with next generation and multi-generational strategic philanthropy, known as 21/64. Over her five years at the philanthropies, Goldseker, 32, has helped grow and nurture Grand Street, a collective of 18- to 28-year-olds involved in their families' philanthropies. Out of Grand Street sprung the annual Slingshot guide, a catalogue of the 50 most creative and effective Jewish organizations. Out of that, came the Slingshot Fund, overseen by Goldseker, which culls dollars from young philanthropists and gives general operating funds to the organizations listed in the guide. This year, the Slingshot Fund awarded its first batch, doling out \$45,000 grants to eight groups. In 2002 Bennett co-founded Reboot, an incubator for Jewish art and culture, and Rebooters have already launched their own magazine, Guilt & Pleasure. Reboot's successes don't stop there: "Sons of Sakhnin United," a feature-length documentary about an Arab-Israeli soccer team, developed by Reboot's nascent film division, premiered at this year's Tribeca Film Festival. Rounding out Bennett's Renaissance-man identity, the Liverpool native spent much of last year working with sociologists Steven M. Cohen and Ari Kelman on a series of studies exploring the ways young Jews engage with their identity. Between Bennett and Goldseker, we can only imagine how the philanthropies will continue to shift the landscape of Jewish giving over the next five years.

Robert Aronson

One of the major challenges facing the Jewish philanthropic world over the last few years has been the gulf between the sclerotic Jewish institutions that need cash to live and the high-worth donors who want to do their own thing. No one bridges this divide better than Detroit native Robert Aronson. The 56-year-old has spent the past 19 years as the professional head of Detroit's Jewish community federation, which has consistently fundraised well above its area's Jewish population numbers. But Aronson has also been a favored adviser to big-time Jewish donors who want to work on innovative projects. He has been the trusted counsel to Detroit Pistons owner Bill Davidson for years; just a few months ago he was chosen head the foundation of the best-known maverick of Jewish philanthropy, Michael Steinhardt. Aronson has worked his way into these positions thanks to his famous emotional intelligence — his ability to walk into a room and suss out what a person really wants within a few minutes. One reason for the success of his initiatives is that he rarely takes credit; recently, for example, he helped give birth to the Professional Leaders Project, which aims to address the crisis shortage in Jewish communal leadership. He is also the professional leader of the Arevim Philanthropic Group, a network of donors who are able to give at least \$5 million each to a Jewish fund. Aronson is responsible for convening the group, and with a few well-timed nudges he is able to direct millions of dollars.

Tad Taube

They could take the boy out of Poland, but they couldn't take Poland out of the boy, and this year philanthropist Thaddeus "Tad" Taube again broke new ground in his determined effort to revive Jewish life in what was once the center of the Ashkenazic world. The 76-year-old Krakow native has been a driving force behind the Museum of the History of Polish Jews now under construction in Warsaw, a \$65 million institution that will recall a millennium of Polish Jewish history when it opens its doors in 2009. A San Francisco real-estate developer and former sportswear executive, Taube is president of the Koret Foundation, a major supporter of Jewish education and culture as well as conservative causes like

Stanford University's Hoover Institution. In recent years, Taube has been outspoken in urging American Jews to think of Poland as more than just the land of Auschwitz. He has even called for a rethinking of what has become a rite of passage for many, the March of the Living, arguing that the pilgrimage for teenagers should visit not only the death camps, but also the centers of Jewish life in Poland today — and come 2009, presumably, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

[To comment on the Forward 50 click here.](#)

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