

Marshall and the American Jewish Committee

Founded in 1906, the American Jewish Committee was the first organization in US history to be formed by an ethno-religious group for the purpose of defending its rights and those of its brethren overseas. Formally, Louis Marshall became the AJC's president in 1912 (and served in that capacity until his death in 1929), but he was also the driving force responsible for the definition of the organization's broad purposes and practical efforts at the time of its formation and in its first years.

In the period of the AJC's creation, its Jewish founders, drawn primarily from the community's "Uptown" New York elite, sometimes knew *what* they wanted to do, without knowing *how* to achieve their goal, whereas other times they had strong ideas about *how* Jews ought to go about things in an open democratic society without really grasping *what* the masses of Jews in the country wanted (or, at least, why "Downtown" Jewish immigrants championed ideological causes with such intensity). The sorting out of these definitional issues in the emergence of a uniquely influential American Jewish organization have been explored in scholarly studies of the AJC's past; but they can be understood with a particularly vivid clarity when they are put in the biographical context of the one individual who did more than anyone else to articulate the AJC's goals and organize its early, signature endeavors. Marshall's biography and the AJC's early history overlap in creatively symbiotic ways — the full richness of one cannot be understood without the other.

Marshall defined the new organization's purposes at the AJC's constituent meetings in February 1906. Believing that the bonds and duties of American citizenship required all persons in the country to transcend affiliations of creed or ethnicity, he struggled creatively to formulate an action platform that would ascribe concrete purposes to the new organization, in a period when masses of immigrant Jews in New York City were demanding redress for their brethren in tsarist Russia, following waves of pogroms sparked by Kishinev. The AJC, declaimed Marshall at this constituent meeting, would "deal with problems as affect them [American Jews] as a religious body, and their brethren who suffer from persecution throughout the world."

A skilled attorney, Marshall's finesse with words had constructive impact in the founding of the AJC, just as it did in the resolution of labor disputes lower Manhattan

immigrant sweatshops or in the prosecution of claims for rights made by the NAACP or environmentalists. The real measure of Marshall's contribution to the founding of the AJC is not his words but rather the role he played in strategizing the new organization's formative campaign, a crusade that helped define the AJC's purposes and which promoted key Jewish interests. This was the effort to "abrogate" America's 1832 commercial treaty with Russia because of the tsarist empire's discrimination of Jews who held American passports and who sought entry to the country.

For several years, Marshall, together with AJC cohorts such as Jacob Schiff, mobilized indefatigably for the annulment of this Russian treaty, both to help alleviate Jewish distress in Eastern Europe and to send a message to "Downtown" New York's immigrant Jews that their new country would hold no truck with anti-Semitism. At key phases in this abrogation campaign, Marshall willfully steered the AJC away from traditional preferences of Jewish *shtadlanut* diplomacy for quiet, behind-the-scenes contacts, and lobbied in a resolutely vociferous manner on Capitol Hill, in the media, and even in the White House. (In one memorable meeting, Marshall and Schiff abruptly quit a meeting with William Howard Taft because of dissatisfaction with the president's equivocation about treaty abrogation).

Somewhat to the surprise of Marshall, who was a careful tactician, the abrogation campaign picked up sudden, powerful momentum in Congress and swept through both houses just a little more than a century ago. When the White House signed off on abrogation, the new Jewish organization had effectively challenged and changed the foreign policy of the United States and also had deftly fused the defense of world Jewry against anti-Semitism and the defense of American Constitutional principles of liberty and equal treatment of all citizens. This accorded directly with Marshall's organizational strategy and his vision as a Jewish leader. "The little snowball which began to roll from the mountain top, finally became a tremendous avalanche, which swept everything before it," Marshall exclaimed, as the Congress resoundingly voted for abrogation.

The abrogation campaign was the crucial formative moment in the AJC's history, a juncture when American Jews realized that American ideals of freedom could be wedded to global struggles for the betterment of Jewish life. It set key precedents for future struggles in American Jewish History, such as the key notion of "linkage" in

the mid 1970s struggle to free Soviet Jewry, a campaign which conditioned American foreign policy toward Russia upon improvement in the despotic regime's treatment of its Jews, exactly as the AJC had done 60 years earlier in the abrogation fight. In this sense, Marshall warrants recognition as the architect of continuing strategies of organized Jewish endeavor in the US, just as the American Jewish Committee can be credited for transforming the character of American Jewry's public profile.