



Building Orthodox Judaism in America: The Life and Legacy of Harold M. Jacobs

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New York City, 1968: a Jewish community under siege. Rising antisemitism was rupturing black-Jewish relations. Shifts in the Democratic Party threatened longstanding Jewish political alliances. Assimilation was undermining Jewish religious observance. Into this cauldron of political and religious turmoil stepped the remarkable Harold M. Jacobs. The son of an immigrant peddler, Jacobs was the classic interwar Jewish success story, overcoming personal hardships, working his way through college, and excelling in business by dint of his sterling work ethic. Unlike many of his coreligionists, however, Jacobs never compromised on his Orthodox Jewish lifestyle, remaining true to tradition despite the many countervailing pressures. Jacobs found his true calling at the helm of Jewish communal leadership. He served as president, or in other senior capacities, for an array of Orthodox synagogues and day schools, and played a central role in the successful 1960s fight against Blue Laws that were harming Shomer Shabbos businessmen. He was a strong voice against the growing antisemitism among African-Americans and threats to the Jewish community during crises such as the Oceanhill-Brownsville teachers strike and the Forest Hills housing controversy. By the 1970s, Jacobs emerged as a significant force in the national Orthodox leadership, as president of the Orthodox Union and then the National Council of Young Israel. There he focused his attention on a major expansion of Orthodox outreach to nonobservant Jewish youth, and the grooming of the next generation of young Orthodox leaders. At the same time, he provided a steady hand of leadership through times of tension between Israel and the Carter administration, shifting political trends in the Jewish community, and conflicts between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews. Simultaneously, Jacobs rose to the chairmanship of New York City's Board of Higher Education and steered the city's educational system through crises over college admission policies, tuition disputes, and campus antisemitism. Harold Jacobs was a pioneer, a role model who demonstrated that it was possible for Orthodox Jews in America to proudly maintain a traditional religious lifestyle while simultaneously leading the broader Jewish community and participating in the general community at every level. This is the story of a man and the community at whose helm he stood. Through the prism of his life's work, one can see the political and religious challenges faced by Orthodox Jewry, as well as American Jewry at large. It's the story of a community in the throes of upheaval, and an extraordinary leader whose steady hand and vision helped guide it through difficult times. ABOUT THE AUTHOR Dr. Rafael Medoff is the author of fifteen books about American Jewish history, Zionism, and the Holocaust. He has taught Jewish history at Ohio State University, Purchase College of the State University of New York, and elsewhere; served as associate editor of the scholarly journal *American Jewish History*; and contributed to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and many other reference volumes. Dr. Medoff is founding director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, based in Washington, D.C. which focuses on America's response to Nazism and the Holocaust (www.WymanInstitute.org). He was the winner of a 2014 Simon Rockower Award from the American Jewish Press Association for Excellence in Jewish Journalism.

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