

FORWARD

Forward 50, 2009: The New Faces Of Leadership

By Jane Eisner
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The Forward 50 began 15 years ago, the brain-child of Seth Lipsky, founding editor of the English Forward, who went in search “of the men and women who are leading the American Jewish community into the 21st century.” Many of the names and faces on that original list were well-known stalwarts of the Jewish establishment, players in New York and Washington, powerful benefactors. They were representative of the kind of authority and leadership prevalent in 1994. The men wore suits and ties. The rabbis wore beards.

But examine that list carefully, and you will find intimations of change. A rabbi of the largest gay and lesbian synagogue is there. So is a right-leaning activist with grass-roots appeal.

In the decade and a half since, the dramatic shift in Jewish leadership mirrors larger trends in our society. Just as we no longer go one place for our news, we no longer look to only one powerful person in a position of authority for leadership. This year, in particular, we’ve seen some of the most established organizations questioned from the outside and challenged from within, while those who are creating and innovating seem to have history’s wind at their backs.

So perhaps it’s no surprise that only one person on the original Forward 50 list is included here today. And that person — filmmaker and philanthropist Steven Spielberg — hails not from Washington or New York, but from Hollywood, illustrative of the way that culture and entertainment are exercising a growing influence on American Jewish life.

Also telling about this year’s Forward 50 are the five people selected as the most influential and interesting: a businessman-turned-communal leader, a diplomat and best-selling author, a breakthrough female Orthodox leader and two iconoclastic filmmakers. None has ever been part of the Forward 50.

That may say something about our selection process, informed by the staff’s vast experience and assisted by welcome nominations from our readers. It says even more about the changing face of leadership. “There’s a shift in authority all over society. Those who once had great authority no longer do,” observes David M. Elcott, a professor in public service and leadership at New York University. “Authority is devolving, and that’s creating openings for the rise of exciting alternatives for leadership.”

One aspect of this process hasn’t changed: Each year, the Forward staff debates how to include those Jews whose impact in the past year has been dramatic — and damaging. We take no pleasure in highlighting misdeeds and embarrassments caused by fellow Jews, but they, too, are part of our story.

Consider this: Last year at this time, only those in the know had heard of Bernard Madoff; now his name is synonymous with the worst kind of greed and betrayal. Last year at this time, J. Ezra Merkin's name was associated with his revered, philanthropic family; now he is being sued in connection with his alleged role in Madoff's Ponzi scheme. Last year at this time, few might have guessed that Solomon Dwek, son of a prominent rabbi, was a cooperating witness in an FBI sting that nabbed New Jersey politicians and prominent members of his Syrian Jewish community.

We don't have to look back 15 years for dramatic change. One year will do.

Activism



Championing Their Causes: Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service; casino mogul Irving Moskowitz; writer Jay Michaelson, and Jeremy Ben-Ami, executive director of J Street.

Amy Dean

The labor movement — with all its internal divisions — needed a conciliator this year, and [Amy Dean](#) did her best to fill the role. Armed with “A New Deal,” the call to labor activism she recently co-authored with David B. Reynolds, the 47-year-old Dean toured the country trying to call the labor movement together. She did so from a distinctly Jewish perspective. Like so many modern Jewish labor leaders, Dean got her start at one of the successors to the old Jewish garment unions — The International Ladies Garment Workers Union. As Dean rose up the ladder, she became known for building coalitions involving the Jewish world in which she was raised, the labor arena she had joined, and the broader community of social activists. Dean has kept active on all of these fronts, serving for the last few years as national co-chair of the Jewish Funds for Justice and helping to usher the agency through a major merger and period of growth. Just as in the labor world she has called for greater engagement with religious communities, in the Jewish world she has called for greater engagement with the values of social justice. She has worked for this herself in her hometown of Chicago, thinking globally and acting locally as always.