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HAPPY 250TH BIRTHDAY, AMERICA

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The 250th birthday of the United States is only weeks away. Let's (very) briefly consider the positive role Jews have played in the development of this country.

The first Jews reached the shores of America in 1654. This group of 23 Jewish men, women, and children originally lived in Recife, Brazil, which was then under Dutch control. When Portugal reconquered the territory, these few families fled on a ship named the St. Catrina (often referred to as the "Jewish Mayflower"), eventually docking in Dutch-controlled New Amsterdam. Peter Stuyvesant, the director-general of the colony, greeted them with hostility; he actually tried to ban them from settling! However, wealthy Jewish shareholders in the Dutch West India Company back in Amsterdam supported the refugees. With that support, the refugees petitioned for their rights.

Early advocates like Asser Levy and Jacob Barsimson fought for the community's right to remain, serve in the militia, and eventually acquire land and build a community. This group laid the foundation for the first Jewish congregation in the country, Congregation Shearith Israel, established in 1654.

During the Revolutionary War, Jews contributed heavily to the colonial victory. Haym Salomon, known as the "Financier of the Revolution," was born in Poland. He moved to and from several countries in Europe to escape persecution and finally fled, yet managed to learn several languages and international financing along the way.

Upon reaching America in 1775, he helped fund the Continental Army and personally advanced funds to key leaders like James Madison. He died penniless, having given his entire fortune to the cause of American liberty.

Mordecai Sheftall became the highest-ranking Jewish officer in the Continental forces; he served as the Commissary General for the Southern Department, utilizing his own wealth to supply the troops.

Colonel Isaac Franks fought in the Battle of Long Island, was captured as a prisoner of war, escaped, and later served on General George Washington's personal staff.

Many Jews contributed to the growth of this country throughout the 1800s:

Levi Strauss arrived in San Francisco during the Gold Rush. Born in Bavaria, he founded his world-famous clothing brand after partnering with tailor Jacob Davis to patent the first riveted denim jeans.

Julius Rosenwald was born in Springfield, Ill. His parents were immigrants who established a small clothing business in town. At the age of 16, his parents sent him to New York to learn the clothing manufacturing business. He founded and grew a small company of his own, which became the industry giant Sears, Roebuck. Concerned about the plight of recently freed slaves, he funded the construction of almost 5,000 schools to give educational opportunities to Black Americans.

Henry Lehman founded a small drygoods store in Alabama in 1844, which eventually grew into the global powerhouse investment bank Lehman Brothers.

Lillian Wald was a nurse, humanitarian, and staunch advocate for human rights. She founded the Henry Street Settlement in New York in 1893, pioneering the field of public health nursing in the U.S.

In the 1900s, Jews continued to push America forward. In law and civil rights Louis Brandeis, known as the "People's Attorney," became the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice in 1916.

Stan Lee was born Stanley Martin Lieber. He rose to prominence at Marvel Comics, creating a massive universe of superheroes like Spider-Man and the X-Men. The world-renowned physicist, Dr. Albert Einstein, who reshaped modern science, spent the later years of his life in the United States and immigrated fully to the country in the 1930s. His name has become legendary when describing genius intellect.

Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, born in Poland, was a U.S. Navy Four-Star Admiral who directed the development of naval nuclear propulsion, earning the title "Father of the Nuclear Navy."

Dr. Jonas Salk was hailed as a "miracle worker" when the polio vaccine's success was first made public in April 1955. He chose to not patent the vaccine or seek any profit from it in order to maximize its global distribution.

The 21st century has brought a panoply of Jewish contributors.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a cultural and legal icon, served as an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, championing women's rights.

Justice Elena Kagan is a current associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, appointed in 2010.

Steven Spielberg is a legendary Academy Award-winning filmmaker, known for magnificent 21st-century movies like "Saving Private Ryan" and "Lincoln."

Dr. Jennifer Doudna is a biochemist and Nobel laureate recognized for her groundbreaking work in CRISPR gene-editing technology.

Judge Roy Altman, a U.S. district judge in Florida, is a rising star, using his copious skills to defend Israel and the Jewish people and to strengthen the values of justice and freedom characteristic of the American legal system. He continues in the path blazed by the incomparable attorney, Alan Dershowitz.

This list of Jews, who, over the last 250 years and more, have contributed mightily to the United States' success is only the beginning. Thousands more names could be added. Certainly, we have produced a few scoundrels and criminals over the years, but the overwhelming majority of Jews have been loyal, productive citizens, adding polish and glory to this country.

At a time when anti-Jewish feeling is at an all-time high, we Jews must remember who we are and what we have contributed. We owe allegiance and thanks to America for being a benevolent host country to our people. And, America, in turn, should recognize the outstanding and numerous contributions that we Jews have given to her.

As long as this beneficial relationship endures, we Jews will continue to push America forward to greater accomplishments. May that be the case for the next 250 years, so that our long-into-the-future descendants will be delighted to wish America a Happy 500th.