

Forward 50, 2008

Lessons in Leadership

One of the benefits of the never-ending presidential campaign that Americans were treated to this year was a lesson in leadership. On stage before us were aspiring leaders of different races, genders, backgrounds, temperaments, debating skills and political persuasions. That the final winner was a man with an uncommon intellect and breathtaking rhetorical skills, unnerving calm and a bracing vision for the future says a lot about this nation. That Jewish voters supported Barack Obama's historic election in overwhelming numbers says a lot about this community at this time.

Searching for that breadth of leadership within the community is a more challenging task. Rather than parading before us, some of the American Jews highlighted in this year's Forward 50 earned their distinction quietly. Although theirs were not the loudest voices, nor the usual ones, by words and deeds they shaped American life as Jews, largely for the better, sadly sometimes for the worse.

The task of selecting these 50 names was aided by you, our readers. Every year there's a certain degree of input — shall we say lobbying? — on behalf of some candidates, which the journalists who choose these names take into account appropriately. But this year, for the first time, the Forward directly asked readers to submit nominations and, much to our delight, the process surfaced a number of strong candidates we might otherwise have overlooked. Thank you to all who participated. You can be sure we will ask you again next year.

Two narratives dominated the Jewish story this year, and, naturally, are reflected in the Forward 50. Jews played an outsized role in the presidential election campaign and, by the looks of it, will continue to do so in the new Obama administration. Some of the most intriguing developments came from unexpected places: a young lobbying group that shook up the Washington establishment; a brash video that was viewed by more than 1 million on YouTube alone and introduced new words into the mainstream political lexicon.

This was also the year the kosher meat industry faced its greatest legal, consumer and ethical challenges. Led by the courageous reporting of our

Nathaniel Popper, the saga of the now-bankrupt company that once was the country's largest producer of kosher beef and poultry exposed major lapses in the U.S. justice and immigration systems, and prompted rabbis of all denominations to examine the moral dimension of a central Jewish tenet.

The importance of this story is underscored by the inclusion — a rare one — of a non-Jew as the 51st name on this list. Father Paul Ouderkirk, the priest of the Catholic church in Postville, Iowa, displayed unusual leadership and compassion by helping displaced workers and their families to survive. Indeed, at times it has seemed as if Father Ouderkirk and the good members of St. Bridget's were among the few in this sad story willing to do the right thing.

The Forward 50 celebrates leadership, creativity, impact. It also reminds us how far we still have to go to truly repair the world.

Read more: <http://www.forward.com/forward-50-2008/#ixzz1MtLNkAo9>

Dayle Friedman The Jewish community in America is aging, and few have responded to this demographic challenge with the passion and creativity of Rabbi Dayle Friedman. As a Jewish nursing home chaplain for many years, Friedman pioneered spiritual work with the elderly. Now as director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pa., she is playing a prophetic role in awakening communal attention to the needs of this graying population. Hiddur's mission is to enable the elderly to engage in their own spiritual connections and contribute to the broader spiritual community. Friedman, 52, trains rabbis and other Jewish professionals to develop the skills needed to deal with the ever-growing number of bubbes and zaydes in synagogues, care facilities, hospitals and in their own homes. In 2008, she reached a broader audience with a new book, "Jewish Visions for Aging: A Professional Guide for Fostering Wholeness." With her ever-present smile and engaging manner, Friedman has also become a champion of pushing past the stereotypes that narrowly define the elderly. "My experience is that elders are often more open-minded than younger people," she wrote recently. Just as her older congregants were able to embrace her when she started out as a young female rabbi, Friedman, in her work, encourages all of us to respect the wisdom and potential of age.