



# The Academy and the Community: The Work of Ira M. Sheskin

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I want to extend my congratulations to both Ira Sheskin and Bethamie Horowitz on receiving this year’s Marshall Sklare Award. I am honored that Ira asked me to be a respondent to his presentation.

To begin, I want to tell a personal story. Ira may not remember the first time we met, but I do. I was fresh off a post-doc fellowship and had just been hired by United Jewish Communities (later renamed the Jewish Federations of North America) as a staff researcher on the 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Study (NJPS). In preparation for a meeting of the study’s advisory committee, I read through biographies of the advisors, including Ira’s, which even then included a long list of local Jewish community studies he had conducted. I had used the 1990 NJPS in my dissertation and was excited to be part of the 2000 study, but at the time I knew next to nothing about local Jewish community studies, and I was curious about this professor from Miami who seemed to do a lot of them. After the meeting, Ira and I spoke for a good 45 minutes or more back in my office about the work he did and the work I was hoping to do. It was the beginning of a collegueship and friendship that I have valued ever since.<sup>1</sup>

As Ira’s academic research has clearly shown, “where” matters. Place shapes communities and individuals. Along, most notably, with Harriet Hartman, Ira has produced a series of works over time that demonstrate the relationship, and variations in those relationships, between geographic and Jewish community contexts and major components of Jewish identity and behavior—religious and ethnic, and communal and private.

I want to focus my remarks on the way Ira has successfully, proudly, and generously located his work at the intersection of academic and communal

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<sup>1</sup> As a side note, this was about the same time I met this year’s other Sklare Award winner, Bethamie Horowitz, who was also on the NJPS 2000–2001 advisory committee. She and I had our first, lengthy conversation over an unplanned meal at a local diner after bumping into each other on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

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research. More than many fields, the academy and the community have an ongoing interaction in ours. Communal organizations often turn to the research skills and expertise of academics to investigate important contemporary communal issues. A small group of academic researchers has answered that call, born in equal parts of their intellectual interests and, I think it is fair to say, of their own backgrounds and personal commitments. The academy for them is not only a place to speak to other academics. It is also a platform on which to contribute to a community they personally feel a part of. We might say, in today's communal parlance, that their research for communal organizations is a significant part of their own Jewish engagement. Ira exemplifies this approach.

Proactively standing with one foot in the academy and one in the community is not always a popular or easy choice. Many academics in Jewish studies disavow connections between their professional work as scholars on the one hand and communal organizations and the issues that motivate them on the other, maintaining a more or less wall of separation between the two, if not always, then most of the time. I note this not to judge those who make this decision—each person has to come to their own resolution in this regard—but rather to observe that Ira is decidedly *not* in this category. And, I believe, we all are better off for that.

So let me detail five ways that Ira has successfully contributed to and navigated within the academic–communal partnership.

First, as he already noted, most planning—which we can usefully define as the determination of needs and the allocation of resources to meet those needs—takes place at the local level, and Ira's local studies have informed planning in dozens and dozens of Jewish communities. More specifically, his application of geographic concepts such as residential clustering, variations in Jewish behaviors by local residential areas, and net migration in and out of geographically defined areas has played an important role in local planning decisions. And as Ira also noted, his studies became increasingly customized over time to meet the needs of different constituents within communities, all while maintaining a fundamental comparative framework that facilitated understanding any one community by placing it in the context of many others. Many, many times I consulted his comparative tables and directed others to them as well; they have been a tremendously useful source of information.

Second, Ira was in the vanguard of making data from his local studies available to others, primarily by archiving them at the Berman Jewish DataBank and its predecessor, the North American Jewish Data Bank. When I was the director of the DataBank, I never had to ask Ira twice to send me studies he had conducted—in fact, he often sent them for archiving without my having to ask even once. Ira also worked with the DataBank to produce an extensive compendium of the comparative tables from his studies, bringing them into one place where both communal professionals and other researchers could easily access them.

Third, the datasets Ira has compiled from his local community studies—the Decade 2000 dataset and later the Century 21 dataset, and the Community-Level dataset—take a tremendous amount of work to produce. They have been the basis of his research with Harriet Hartman and others, including myself, and those of us who have had access to them have benefited greatly from Ira's efforts. If I may make

one plea to Ira as he continues with his research, it is to plan to eventually archive these pooled data files at the DataBank as well, leaving another contribution to the academy and the community.

Fourth, Ira's application of methods using Distinctive Jewish Names (DJNs) is quintessential applied research, where the data we use are often incomplete, or proxies for broader concepts, but they give us some insight into an issue we are exploring, a problem we are trying to solve, or a question that we are seeking to answer. In other words, the data we use in applied research are imperfect yet informative, which exactly describes DJNs. DJNs can also be effectively used in stratified sampling designs to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of finding Jews for probability surveys. In his work on DJNs, Ira has expanded the early DJN lists that contained almost exclusively Ashkenazi names to lists that now include Sephardic, Russian, Hispanic, and Israeli names as well, making DJNs substantially less imperfect and significantly more informative.

Fifth is the work Ira has done with Arnold Dashefsky to reshape and revitalize the *American Jewish Year Book*. When the American Jewish Committee decided to stop publishing the *Year Book*, Ira and Arnie stepped in because they understood the value this venerable annual had not just to the academy but perhaps even more importantly to the community. The sheer volume of analysis and information they bring together every year is astounding. But so too are the detailed innovations and improvements they have brought to the *Year Book*. To give just one example, the online spreadsheet that documents the more than 1200 local estimates they now present allows others to understand and assess how and when the estimates were derived. That Ira, together with Arnie, continues to expand the volume's content, providing new data and new presentations of those data, testifies to the fact that he does not rest on his laurels and seeks instead to add to his contributions to our field.

Lastly, I want to address the episode Ira mentioned in which he and Arnie cited estimates about the racial and ethnic composition of the US Jewish population from the Pew Research Center and questioned the results of another report on the subject. While Ira did not mention the name of the other report, I will: *Counting Inconsistencies*, authored by Ari Kelman, Aaron Hahn Tapper, Izabel Fonseca, and Aliya Saperstein. In my assessment, *Counting Inconsistencies* had both eye-opening new analyses of important lacunae in Jewish social research for which the authors deserve our gratitude *and* serious methodological flaws that the authors have never publicly acknowledged, and it was those methodological flaws that Ira and Arnie challenged. The controversy that ensued was a painful episode for many people—for Ira and Arnie, for Jews of Color, and for others watching from the sidelines as miscommunications and bruised feelings piled up. The scholars taking part in the argument were often talking past each other, coming from different disciplinary perspectives, asking different questions, and focusing on different parts of the research process. Many communal leaders, professionals, activists, and volunteers posting their criticisms on social media did not have the training or expertise to make social scientific assessments of data and methods, but nonetheless felt entitled to sit in judgement. What could have been—indeed should have been—an important conversation was often reduced to *ad hominem* attacks on personal motivations and commitments. Let's hope the communal-academic partnership does not experience

another similarly corrosive episode, and that critique—which is, after all, central to academic and Jewish communal norms—can be advanced and answered with respect and generosity.

And so, once again, I offer my congratulations to Ira Sheskin on receiving the 2023 Marshall Sklare Award from his colleagues and peers in the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ). May he have continued success in his work. And may we all—academic researchers, applied researchers, and communal organizations—continue to benefit from what he has brought to our field with both his head and his heart.

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