

Sari Feldman
President-Elect, American Library Association

Sari Feldman is Executive Director of Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL), a position she has held since 2003. Under her leadership, CCPL has become one of the nation's best and busiest public library systems, earning the *Library Journal* 5-Star recognition for five consecutive years (2010-2014). She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from State University of New York at Binghamton and a Master's in Library Science degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She previously served as an adjunct faculty member at the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University, teaching graduate courses in library management, reference services, policy and grant writing for more than 20 years. In May 2014, Sari was elected president of the American Library Association for the 2015-2016 term. She is a past president of the Public Library Association (2009-2010).

Thank you very much for having me here today. I want to thank Elliot Gertel for the lovely introductory remarks. I am honored to be among such esteemed colleagues and leaders in Jewish Libraries and Librarianship, including Dr. Yaffa Weisman, and award winning writer and publisher, Merrill Leffler. I also want to thank Aaron Taub for his organization and communication leading to this event.

Like Merrill Leffler, I would also describe myself as “warmly” Jewish or more aggadah and less halakhah.

Please indulge me as I tell you something about my Jewish life and connection to librarianship; then continue with a bit about the American Library Association, ALA, and our collective professional future; and provide a perspective on the opportunity for ALA and AJL to connect and collaborate.

I was born and raised in South Fallsburg, New York. Many of you may know the Catskill Mountain resort area or “Borscht Belt” as it is often called. The big hotels like Grossingers and The Concord hosted Jewish singles weekends (the precursor to JDate) and Jewish comedians like Jerry Lewis or Alan King, credit the hotels, the bungalows and the Jewish culture for giving them a jump start on their careers. But for me, it was home, a beautiful place to live and actually a very innocent place for a Jewish child. It was a place where religion and culture came together. The dense population of Jews and the roles Jewish people played as business owners, politicians, teachers, and community leaders was unusual and a kind of ethnic bubble. I attended public school and then Hebrew school four days a week. My love of books and my love of learning came from my parents, my community and my synagogue. My parents would be awestruck, or “kvelling”, to know that I am speaking at such an important cultural occasion to such an illustrious audience.

My small town did not have a public library and the purchase of books was a luxury for my parents. Books were given as Hanukkah or birthday presents. I scoured my school library for stories about girls like me, stories of ordinary life with Jewish

themes and characters. The books were hard to find but fortunately my Hebrew School and synagogue added the *All of a Kind Family* books and others to the scholarly collections. I know first hand the value of Jewish libraries and Jewish librarians. I also know first hand the value of reading and education in Jewish culture. There was never a doubt that I would go to college, although I was reminded constantly that I would need a scholarship to achieve this goal, and reading was both the key to learning and the major recreation of my family.

As I grew older, history, current events and listening to adult conversations between my parents and their friends changed my innocent and secure world. I discovered the complexity of being Jewish in the United States and, later, the global perspective of Jews on the world stage. Again, I searched for books and information to help me understand and learn about the history of Jews, but my childhood access was limited in a pre-Internet world, without a public library, and with just a small synagogue library without a professional librarian to guide me. It was not until I moved to larger cities and had university and public library book collections at my disposal that I could finally discover a body of fiction and non-fiction Jewish literature. The writer Irving Stone said, **“If it is noticed that much of my outside work concerns itself with libraries, there is an extremely good reason for this. I think that the better part of my education, almost as important as that secured in the schools and the universities, came from libraries.”** And this is true for me as well. Although I have had wonderful academic experiences, it is reading that enables the learning; the information and stories from books that have stuck with me and shaped me as an adult. And it is not surprising that I came to librarianship and dedicated myself to the principals of free access, diverse collections reflecting the needs and interests of the community, and professional development that ensures the future of our profession.

Aaron Taub has suggested that I would be remiss if I did not comment about the anti-Israel resolutions that may come before ALA Council. I am not here to talk about these resolutions at length, but I will say that ALA’s principles of free speech are often in conflict with the overwhelming majority opinion. Of course it is very challenging for me to sit on the dais facing Council members as they bring forward resolutions that I personally oppose, but I do not feel it is appropriate for me to share my personal feelings. That being said, I urge you to come forward and speak on this issue at the Council meeting. Elliot Gertel will be there. When the resolutions were brought forward at ALA Midwinter, Executive Board Member Gail Schlachter spoke eloquently in opposition of the resolutions. Sadly, Gail passed away suddenly this spring, but I know she would want her voice to be heard should the resolutions be brought before ALA Council again.

The Jubilee co-chair Aaron Taub also shared with me that a prominent temple in NYC has recently announced it will eliminate its librarian position. Judaica librarians have felt a need to take action, to advocate for their unique and essential place in the learning hierarchy and for the future of professional librarians everywhere. In Cleveland, OH where I reside, Case Western Reserve University has absorbed the Siegel College into the Laura and Alvin Siegal Lifelong Learning Program to ensure its sustainability and a path to continue the “intellectual and educational needs of Jewish Clevelanders.” This evolution provides a future direction for what once was the Cleveland College of

Jewish Studies but enhances Case Western, a secular university with a deeper path to Jewish learning. Cuyahoga County Public Library, where I serve as executive director, is a partner, bringing Siegal College lifelong learning from the campus to the community. The Library partners with the Cleveland Jewish Community Center to promote the Festival of Jewish Books & Authors and the Jewish Film Festival. It's not a passive sponsorship but active engagement around book discussions and ideas. Last year we showed the film "50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. and Mrs. Kraus," in a branch as part of the film festival activities bringing a community of Jews and non-Jews together to view the film and discuss individual courage and the Holocaust.

As President-Elect of the American Library Association, I recognize that we are waging a battle to be viewed as critical leaders in learning and information. ALA has developed its strategic plan to address advocacy, information policy and professional leadership as the three essential components of its future. In each of these areas, collaboration and partnerships strengthen our collective ability to be seen, heard and valued for our contributions. The three areas also depend on the library professional as the talent that recognizes the trends and brings professional expertise to ensure opportunity for our patrons and progress for our nation. As President of the ALA I will be particularly focused on the theme of *Libraries Transform*, a focus on the ALA strategic plan with an emphasis on trends and talent.

Libraries Transform to deliver convenient, equitable and needed service to our communities. Our spaces have transformed to be inclusive of technology, collaborative work, and deeper customer relationships. Our profession has transformed to ensure the talent and skills needed to facilitate learning, build active engagement with information, collections, and resources, and to learn new digital skills that enable us to present collections in a variety of formats. Change has been challenging but as we return to the phrase, *Libraries Transform*, we recognize that we transform our patrons.

As our school libraries transform children from *learning* to read to *reading* to learn; as our academic libraries transform faculty and students of higher education from learners to researchers; as our Temple libraries transform our communities to engaged learners; we recognize that the talent or the library profession is not "nice to have" it is essential.

As I read about and learned more about the Association of Jewish Libraries, I recognized how closely aligned your mission is to the work of the broader profession. Key to your organization is access, a fundamental value of libraries and librarianship. Literacy and its ever expanding dimensions are prominent in your mission. And, peer support and professional development are also called out to achieve a strong and sustainable future for libraries.

Of course all of our work continues to be about the content while recognizing that "relevance and effectiveness" are an essential state of our future. Today's libraries are places where people come for content and collections but places where we assist in discovery and creation. The overwhelming volume of information on the web, its accuracy and verifiable content, requires the expertise of Jewish librarians to support Jewish readers, scholars, and those discovering the story of Jewish life. We are also the platform both in our library spaces and on the web, where Jewish writers are discovered by a reading public. And new tools may be provided through libraries to foster writers, musicians and film makers to create on a digital platform. At Cuyahoga County Public

Library we have made the Self-E digital self-publishing platform available to our customers. It is a powerful discovery tool for both writers and readers. Through Self-E, local indie writers are able to share their content with readers throughout our community. We can begin to collect oral histories and photographs that might otherwise be lost were it not for both digital expertise and organizational skills of library professionals.

The future of libraries and librarianship depends on our collective will to answer the call and need of our patrons even before our patrons can articulate their needs; to be advocates and leaders in information and learning; and to be less defined by the differences between librarians and library specialties and to be more connected by our common goal and common good.

How will ALA and AJL work together to secure our future? First we must recognize the common goal to serve on behalf of readers and learners.

We must not be caretakers of collections that are inaccessible or unavailable. We must strive to increase access through digitization and open platforms for discovery and contribution. We must collaborate with other libraries and content communities. The Jewish Virtual Library could become a collaborator with the Digital Public Library of America to enhance access for educators and learners of all types.

Second, we must accept and embrace change. Change is constant and accelerating in our profession but also impacting the lives of all our patrons.

We must be aware of relevant policy decisions, local and national, that will impact the lives of patrons and then take part in active coalitions around responsible legislation and funding. Bringing our unique perspective to the conversation of K-12 and university education, privacy, big data, and e-government for example, will increase our prestige with stakeholders and elected or appointed officials.

By looking forward and recognizing unmet needs and anticipating and exceeding patron expectations for information, we will be better positioned to call on patrons as advocates and investors in libraries.

Third, we must enhance the professional development and leadership of library professionals. Advocacy, fund raising, and facilitating have not been part of the traditional tool kit of library education but are all as essential as the ability to use new technologies.

Let us each take individual and collective responsibility to be in service to readers and learners, to embrace change and to enhance our profession. Each day, you make a difference in the lives of readers, learners, and scholars. Together we can make a difference in the future of libraries and librarians.