

June 2007

Rabbi Lance Sussman

Senior Rabbi, Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel

Author, [Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism](#)



Photo Courtesy of Jack Weinstein

A JEWISH HISTORIAN'S LOOK AT JEWISH GENEALOGY

Rabbi Sussman was ordained in 1980 at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and also went on to receive his Doctorate in Jewish History from the same institution in 1987. He has been the spiritual leader of Keneseth Israel since 2001. Rabbi Sussman has also been a Professor of American Jewish History at Binghamton University (New York), Gratz College, Hebrew Union College (New York) and Rutgers University.

Rabbi Sussman is the author of *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* and many other books and articles.

Rabbi Sussman who stated that he is not a Genealogist, but a Congregational Rabbi and a Historian, contends that all three undertakings intersect. As a Rabbi and a Historian, he needs to know genealogical information and know about genealogical research techniques.

Rabbi Sussman is a product of a mixed marriage -- his father's family from Czarist Russian and his mother's family from Central Germany. Rabbi Sussman's wife's family was from Ukraine (Russia) and Galicia. As a student at Franklin & Marshall College, he was asked to write a family history. That assignment was a challenge and it piqued his interest in his family's history. Now, as a professor, he assigned this same task to his students. By the way, Rabbi Sussman received an A- on his assignment.

His first book as a Historian was a biography of Isaac Leeser, the religious leader of Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia during the 1830s to 1850s. Mr. Leeser shaped American Jewish culture as the founder of the modern Jewish day school, as the founder of the first Rabbinic school in the US, and as the translator of the Hebrew Bible to English. Leeser was also the founder and publisher of *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, a monthly journal on Jewish subjects which was published from 1843-1852 and can be searched at <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/>.

Rabbi Sussman was Editor along with Kerry M. Olitzky and Rabbi Malcolm H. Stern (the dean of Jewish Genealogy) of *Reform Judaism in America: A Biological Dictionary and Sourcebook*. This book includes about 150 biographies of the most important leaders of the American Reform movement. All the biographical essays incorporated relevant family data. Genealogy and history are intertwined.

Rabbi Sussman is very proud of the Archives of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, which is an excellent source of genealogical information. JGSGP Members Joan Gross, Jean Korn, Lila London, Claire Schweriner, and Phyllis Sichel are KI Archive volunteers.

Genealogy is the oldest form of History. The first writings going back to 3000 B.C.E. were lists of families and ancestors. In Jewish culture, we have a deep impulse to know (find out) where we came from. Everyone wants to know where they fit in History. *Yicchus* (connections, family pedigree) drives the search for our history and genealogy. Nobody wants to be an orphan in History. Genealogy is historical geography and history. Modern genealogy involves the records of the modern nation/state and earlier genealogies involved family records or writings.