

from Haven to Home

JEWISH LIFE IN AMERICA

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2009 Leonard N. Simons History Award to be Awarded to Mandell “Bill” Berman

On May 5, Mandell (“Bill”) Berman, 91, one of Michigan’s iconic philanthropists and Jewish leaders, will be honored with the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan’s 2009 Leonard N. Simons History Award. The award will be presented at a reception for the opening of the nationally acclaimed traveling exhibit, “From Haven to Home,” at the Detroit Historical Museum. The event, part of the JHS of Michigan’s 50th anniversary celebration, comes at a time when learning about Jewish history has never been more important.

Along with the likes of the late William Davidson, Max Fisher and other leaders of the Greatest Generation, Berman represents one in the line of 20th-century Jewish philanthropists who helped create the deep network of charitable and educational organizations that support not just the Jewish community, but the wider community locally, nationally and internationally.

Born in Detroit in 1917, Berman has devoted his lifetime to community service, and, in particular, to the development and promotion of Jewish education and Jewish history.

His accomplishments include serving as past president of the Council of Jewish Federations, the umbrella organization of 160 federations throughout the United States and Canada, and as past president and chair of the Executive Committee of the Metropolitan Detroit Jewish Welfare Federation and of United Hebrew Schools (1959 – 1962). In 1990 and in 2002, he chaired the two landmark Jewish Population Studies, which led, among other benefits, to the creation of the Mandell L. Berman Center at the North American Jewish Data Bank at the University of Connecticut and the Berman Policy Center at New York University.

It is Berman’s deep interest in Jewish history that led the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan to recognize Berman with this award on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. He stated, “All of us have reason to be immensely proud of the history of our Jewish community and we should continually be grateful to the Jewish Historical Society which preserves and commemorates that legacy for us.”

Berman’s devotion to the preservation of Jewish history dates back to the founding of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan in 1959. Then in his forties, he joined a group of other prominent Detroiters to create the organization that would be charged with the education, celebration and promotion of the contributions of the Jews of Michigan to the state, nation and world.

A highly regarded builder and developer, Berman was partner and later president of Bert L. Smokler & Company (1946 – 1975). His life of public service began at a young age when, as a teen, he took on leadership roles in the junior congregation at Congregation Shaarey Zedek. He received the Butzel Award as recognition for his leadership with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. He later would go on to serve in a broad range of capacities such as the first chairman of the Skillman Foundation, chairman of Michigan State Housing Development Authority, president of the Southeastern Michigan Builders Association and member of the board of the Dreyfus Corporation (a Mellon Bank subsidiary), Guardian Industries and Lennar Corporation.

The Jewish Historical Society’s Leonard N. Simons History Award honors an individual who has made outstanding contributions to the Jewish Historical Society’s mission. Past recipients include Philip Slomovitz, the publisher of the Jewish News, the Honorable Avern L. Cohn and Professor Sidney Bolkoski, author of several books on Jewish history.



Mandell “Bill” Berman 2009 Leonard N. Simons History Award Recipient
(photo JFMD 2008)

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Simons, who founded the advertising agency, Simons Michelson Zieve in 1929, was an active leader with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit and had a deep passion for the preservation of Jewish and communal history. His desire to ensure that the Jewish community of Detroit would retain a sense of pride in knowing who they are and where they came from was influential in the establishment of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan. Simons' collection of thousands of rare books, documents and artifacts was donated to Brandeis University, Wayne State University and Temple Beth El.

Bill Berman will receive the Leonard N. Simons History Award on Tuesday evening, May 5 at the gala opening of "From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America." Created by the American Jewish Historical Society from an original exhibit at the Library of Congress, "From Haven to Home" is a remarkable chronicle of the American Jewish experience, focusing on America as "Haven" — the Jewish immigrant's refuge — and eventually America as "Home." Documents from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, which led to the religious freedom and liberty that America promised for Jews and all peoples, are part of the exhibit, as are artifacts, documents and photos of Michigan's Jewish history. The exhibit will be on view at the Detroit Historical Museum through August.

Tickets for the evening of food, music and honors are \$75 and can be ordered through the JHS of Michigan. For more information call 248-432-5517 or go to www.michiganjewishhistory.org.

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Editors note: Bill Berman image and additional information is available by contacting
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