



JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Jewish American Heritage Month Reveres Contributions to Field of Medical Research

By **Rachel Kurland** - May 10, 2017

Organizers of Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM), which celebrates contributions American Jews have made to the nation, has chosen this year to honor the community's accomplishments in the medical research field.

Many of those being remembered, such as polio vaccine inventor Dr. Jonas Salk, are well known to Philadelphia, as they've been part of the Only in America exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH).

But according to Ivy Barsky, the museum's CEO, even lesser-known figures are getting their due. Biochemist and pharmacologist Gertrude Elion, for instance, won the Nobel Prize for work in the development of drugs used for organ transplants and childhood chemotherapy.

"She's hardly a household [name]," Barsky said of Elion, "so one of the things we're trying to do is really celebrate some of the unsung or less sung Jewish American heroes who've made great contributions to the world, and trying to educate others about this great work and how because of the freedoms they've been afforded in this country, they've been able to contribute mightily to medical science and curing disease."

The NMAJH is celebrating the heritage month with different events and speakers. It recently hosted guest speaker Kathy Fields, CEO of Proactiv, and a symposium surrounding its *1917: How One Year Changed the World* exhibit. David Ben-Gurion's grandson will speak May 11, and an upcoming cooking event on the evolution of Jewish cooking



Gertrude Elion, a biochemist and pharmacologist who developed drugs used for organ transplants and childhood chemotherapy, is one of several Jewish researchers being recognized by this year's Jewish American Heritage Month. | Wikimedia Commons

in America with Molly Yeh, Joan Nathan, Steven Cook and Michael Solomonov is scheduled for May 16.

The NMAJH has gradually taken over as the home base of JAHM over the past couple years. Prior to that, programs were planned at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

“One of the things that our museum does that’s so very interesting is it makes a connection from American Jewry to the State of Israel,” said Barsky. “I’m not even sure that all Americans, young Americans, understand the role that American Jewry played in the establishment and nurturance and sustenance of Israel.”

Called for in a joint resolution of Congress and first proclaimed by President George W. Bush in 2006, JAHM has occupied the month of May for 12 years.

Its goal is to communicate with Jews and non-Jews about Jewish contributions made to the country.

“We’ve been fairly successful thus far at celebrating this within the Jewish community, but we’re hoping in the next few years to make it something that is celebrated outside the Jewish community,” Barsky said. “We’re just trying to bring the thing up to scale; raise the visibility of Jewish American Heritage Month; make sure that it lives up to its promise and its purpose that [Rep.] Debbie Wasserman Schultz and [Sen.] Arlen Specter saw for it when they founded it.”

By celebrating researchers who are not as prominent — geneticist Baruch Samuel Blumberg, who discovered the first Hepatitis B virus vaccine; Mathilde Krim, who was committed to AIDS patients and research; neuroscientist Eric Richard Kandel, who researched the physiological basis of memory storage in neurons; and medical physicist Rosalyn Sussman Yalow, who became the second woman to win a Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine through her development of radioimmunoassay — the month promotes a deeper understanding of positive Jewish contributions, Barsky said. In its own way, that combats anti-Semitism.

“[Kids] know who Albert Einstein is, but they don’t necessarily know that he was Jewish,” Barsky explained. “They don’t necessarily know he came here as a refugee from Nazi Germany. So those are the kinds of things that are very important, an important role Jewish American Heritage Month can play in transmitting that information.”

For more information, visit JAHM.us.

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