

JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

EST 1917

Abraham Foxman, transformative longtime director of the Anti-Defamation League, dies at 86

Over nearly three decades, the Holocaust survivor served as the world's arbiter on antisemitism.



Abe Foxman at an Anti-Defamation League event at The Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills, Calif., May 8, 2014. (Michael Kovac/WireImage/Getty Images)

By [Ron Kampeas](#) May 10, 2026

Abraham Foxman, the longtime leader of the Anti-Defamation League who for decades was the last word in post-Holocaust Jewish fury and forgiveness, has died at 86.

Foxman, a child survivor of the Holocaust, could be scathing and trenchant when he identified antisemitism infiltrating the public arena. But he was also an address for public figures who sought to divest themselves of a reputation of hostility toward Jews. And he did not spare himself, regretting crusades on behalf of Israel and Jewish communities he eventually admitted were wrongheaded.

“If you don’t believe you can change people’s hearts and minds, why bother?” [he told The New York Times in 2020](#), when a columnist sought insights from what she called the

“pardoner of sins” about the entrenchment of an unforgiving cancel culture. “If you are not going to try and change hearts and minds, why are you in this business at all?”

Under Foxman’s leadership, the ADL transformed from a division of the Jewish organization B’nai Brith into a muscular juggernaut running anti-bias educational and training programs, monitoring antisemitism in the United States and around the world and advocating for anti-discrimination legislation out of an array of regional offices. Foxman himself became a chief arbiter of what qualified as antisemitism — and the granter of absolution when he felt it was warranted. Some jokingly called him “the Jewish pope.”

He joined the ADL as an assistant director of legal affairs in 1965 and rose through a series of positions, including head of Middle Eastern affairs and head of international affairs, before becoming national director in 1987.

“We don’t have a slow season in our business,” he [told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency at the time](#). “What we deal with is words. We’ve learned that words have the power to kill, that words unchallenged, left in silence, words of bigotry, are part of our tradition.”

Foxman thrived for decades in a political culture where the establishment still mattered, and extremism was not considered a virtue. He granted absolution to figures as diverse as former President Jimmy Carter and right-wing broadcaster Glenn Beck and as surprising as the fashion designer John Galliano.

Foxman also knew when to despair of reforming repeat offenders.

“When you say Mr. X engaged in antisemitism, the first time that they do it you can say it’s ignorance, it’s insensitivity,” he [told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in 2007](#), asked about his refusal to exonerate Hollywood star and director Mel Gibson. “But when you say to them that they are engaging in antisemitism when they say the Jews control the media and the Jews control universities, and when they repeat it the second time, the third time and the fourth time, are you or are you not an antisemite?”

Foxman’s successor, ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, lamented in a statement the passing of an “iconic Jewish leader.”

“America and the Jewish people have lost a moral voice, a passionate advocate for the Jewish people and the state of Israel, and a remarkable leader,” Greenblatt said.

Greenblatt’s announcement was followed by an outpouring of memories and tributes from leaders throughout the Jewish world and in Israel. “Abe Foxman was a mentor, a guide, and a towering presence in Jewish communal life. He showed a generation of leaders that fighting antisemitism demands clarity, courage, and the willingness to stand firm under

pressure,” said William Daroff, CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, in one such statement.

Amid starkly growing polarization in the United States, Foxman was known for his willingness to call balls and strikes on all sides of the aisle, as well as hug across the chasm.

The complexity of individuals – the truth that heroes could commit bad acts and that villains could at times be redeemed – was seared into Foxman from childhood.

Foxman was born in Poland in 1940 and at 2 years old was left in the care of his Roman Catholic nanny in Vilnius, Lithuania, as his parents sought to escape the Germans. His nanny was his fierce protector and insulated him from the depredations of Nazis and their enablers, baptizing him and teaching him to handily hurl anti-Jewish epithets to fit in.

When his parents returned after the war, she would not give him up: It took bitter encounters in courtrooms to restore him to his family, and to the Jewish people.

Yet he could never hate her, he would often say later in life. “She risked her life,” [he told the New York Times in 1991](#). “She saved my life.”

In 1950, four years after besting his nanny in the courts, Foxman’s parents took him with them to New York. There he attended the Yeshiva of Flatbush followed by the City College of New York and New York University Law School.

Foxman applied his exacting standards to himself, telling JTA in the same 2007 interview that he was haunted by the mistakes he had made, in one case lacerating a “60 Minutes” segment on Jerusalem only to find out the report’s criticism of the [Israeli police’s use of excessive force](#) in confronting rioters in 1990 on the Temple Mount Israel was correct. (He apologized to producer Don Hewitt and reporter Mike Wallace, and Hewitt replied “Are you for real?”)

He also told JTA in the same interview that he anguished over one of his most controversial decisions — his refusal to describe the Ottoman massacre of Armenians in 1915 as a “genocide” — especially given the backlash his stance earned him from Jewish allies of the Armenian community.

Foxman’s reflex had been typical: defer to the Jewish community most vulnerable in a controversy, in this case the Turkish Jewish community, which feared retaliation. It was a decision that he also took at a time Turkey was one of Israel’s closest regional allies and heavily pressured Israel to oppose any U.S. efforts to recognize the killings as genocide. But Foxman acknowledged in retrospect that he had caused others pain.

“To me it was very clear, there are moral imperatives here — the moral imperative to feel somebody else’s pain, to recognize their anguish, and the moral imperative which is the safety and the security of the Jewish community,” he said.

Once Foxman had enough of someone, he truly had enough — and his sharp wit would emerge.

“My answer would be ‘Thanks but no thanks,’” [Foxman told Reuters in 2004](#) when Gibson said he was contemplating a film about the Maccabees, the Jewish warrior class whose stunning victory over Greek colonists is the basis of the Hanukkah holiday. “The last thing we need in Jewish history is to convert our history into a Western. In his hands we may wind up losing.”

He came across at times as a curmudgeon. “Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet,” a book he coauthored in 2013, tanked, and he told a JTA reporter he was not surprised: He was lambasting the social media machine that was shaping America, tilting at virtual windmills.

“The paradigms are changing,” he said multiple times in an interview about the book.

Thirteen years later, his distaste for the self-assuredness of tech leaders who reassured him all would be good seems prescient.

“We have been talking to the geniuses at Palo Alto,” Foxman said in the interview. “We have said to them, ‘thanks but no thanks. You developed a technology that has some wonderful things but also has unintended consequences.’”

When Foxman retired in 2015, antisemitism appeared by many measures to be at an all-time low in the United States. Foxman hesitated to take credit for any gains but said he had appreciated the chance to build a world animated by values very different from those that reigned during his childhood in Eastern Europe.

“I don’t take credit for it, but I’m part of the effort — not only of the American Jewish community, but of decent people in this country, to fight it,” Foxman [told JTA at the time](#).

“To what extent did my experiences in the Shoah, the D.P. camps, my Catholicism have to do with that, I don’t know,” Foxman added. “I have been very lucky. To get up every morning and to have an opportunity to try to make a difference in both fighting hate and building love — wow. I have been very privileged.”

At a retirement party at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan in 2015, Foxman received accolades from Obama administration officials as well as from Tom Friedman, The New York Times columnist with whom he had repeatedly clashed on Israel policy. (Friedman

revealed that Foxman had been his counselor at Herzl Camp in Wisconsin, where a highlight each year was reenacting the Dreyfus Affair.)

The party also drew an appearance by Roger Ailes, the Fox News Channel chief who had faced Foxman's wrath over the conspiracy musings of one-time Fox personality Beck. (Years later, Foxman would [defend having awarded an honor to Fox's owner](#), Rupert Murdoch, even after Greenblatt said Murdoch was stoking hate with the network.)

Foxman was gregarious, surprising interlocutors by ending official meetings with a hug, and referring to Jewish media reporters as "tattele," Yiddish for "good boy."

"Within minutes of our first phone call I felt like family," United Nations envoy Samantha Power said at the Waldorf-Astoria sendoff, describing their first interaction in Obama's first term, when she was on the National Security Council. "We were yelling, interrupting one another and swearing. I think I almost ended this first phone call saying 'Love you.'"

Nicole Mutchnik, chair of the ADL's board, referred to Foxman's famous warmth in a statement mourning his death.

"Abe Foxman helped build the modern liberal era of America. He was recognized across the globe as a great leader and passionate advocate for tolerance, a voice of the generation rebuilding in the shadow of the Shoah, and longtime advisor to American presidents and world leaders," she said. "To those of us who knew him, Abe was a warm friend, advisor, spirited antagonist and hugger – all over lunch."

In 2020, five years after retiring from the ADL, Foxman did what once was unthinkable to him. He endorsed a presidential candidate, Joe Biden. He was appalled by what he saw as President Donald Trump's flirtations with bigotry and broadsides against democracy, the system that kept the United States from living the nightmare his parents had endured.

He also did what he had for a lifetime been reluctant to do: invoke the Nazi era as a warning signal.

"Germany did have institutions and they did have democracy and it did fall apart so, yeah, it's not Germany, and it's not Nazism, but our antennas are quivering," [Foxman told JTA](#) weeks before the election.

Foxman is survived by his wife Golda; his daughter Michelle and his son Ariel; and four grandchildren.