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## The Emergence of Reform Judaism IN THE UNITED STATES

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How did Reform Judaism develop in the United States? This question continues to occupy the attention of American Jewish historians. In the past, unfortunately, the problem has not always been attacked forthrightly. All too often, this subject has received more homiletical treatment than scientific investigation. Emphasis has been placed upon the personalities and lives of the leaders of Reform Judaism. There is scarcely a phase or an episode in the life of Isaac Mayer Wise that

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Rabbi Jerome W. Grollman of the United Hebrew Temple of St. Louis presented a rabbinical thesis, *The Emergence of Reform Judaism in the United States*, to the faculty of the Hebrew Union College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination. The present essay has been summarized by the Rabbi from the original 152 page monograph.

has not been thoroughly examined and recorded. Yet, this approach alone is not sufficient. The role of the congregation cannot be overlooked or minimized. It is essential to bear in mind that no matter how important were the contributions of a Wise, Kohler, Lilienthal, Einhorn, or Felsenthal, the final authority for the adoption of Reform Judaism rested in the hands of the congregations. Sometimes the congregations approved the reform measures recommended by their spiritual leaders; at other times they rejected them. Ofttimes, the congregations introduced reforms either against the wishes or without consulting the wishes of their spiritual leaders. Consequently, a valid area of investigation includes the analysis of congregational minute books in an effort to determine actual sequences of events in the development of Reform Judaism in the United States.

This task was undertaken by the author in his rabbinical thesis entitled *The Emergence of Reform Judaism in the United States*. By assuming this approach, the author did not wish to negate the value of scientific studies revolving about the lives and contributions of the Reform Jewish pioneers. He did contend, however, that there is another phase to the development of Reform Judaism in the United States. This phase is to be found primarily in the congregational minute books.

As far as the author knows, this is the first time that the history of Reform Judaism has been scrutinized on a broad, congregational level. Yet, before the entire saga of liberal Judaism is unfolded, there will have to be many more such investigations. This particular study may be regarded as an introduction and guide to the type of research required. Indeed, the most that can be claimed for this treatise is that it points out the problem. Whatever conclusions are indicated herein must be approached with caution in light of the scope and limitations mentioned below.

#### SCOPE

As already indicated, the concern of the author was to determine *within the congregations* themselves the forces at work leading to the emergence and development of Reform Judaism in the United States. The technique employed was to examine the various congregational minute books and to trace the sequence of events in the evolution of liberal Judaism. In pursuit of this goal, the following congregational minute books were consulted:

*The Midwest:* Congregation B'nai El, St. Louis, Missouri; Congregation Emanuel, Chicago, Illinois; Congregation Rodef Sholom, Youngstown, Ohio; Congregation Anshe Emeth, Piqua, Ohio; Congregation Sons of Israel, Bellaire, Ohio; Congregation B'nai Israel, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

*The South:* Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, Georgia; Congregation Kahl Montgomery, Montgomery, Alabama; Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, Atlanta, Georgia; Congregation B'nai Scholum, Huntsville, Alabama; Congregation Beth Sholem, Danville, Virginia.

*The West:* Congregation Sherith Israel, San Francisco, California; Congregation B'nai B'rith, Los Angeles, California; Congregation Beth El, San Antonio, Texas.

*The East:* Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, New York.

*Canada:* Congregation Holy Blossom, Toronto, Canada. (Although located in Canada, Congregation Holy Blossom was included for purposes of comparison.)

Because of time limitations, the author utilized only those congregational minute books in the possession of the American Jewish Archives on February 15th, 1948.

#### PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS

I. SAMPLING. The validity of any investigation of this nature is directly dependent upon the accuracy of the sampling. The accuracy of the sampling, in turn, is directly dependent upon the following criteria:

1. *Number of Sources.* Obviously, it is impossible to arrive at any mature conclusion on the basis of a few sources. Such conclusions are, indeed, spurious — they reflect results that can be understood on the basis of a chance rather than on the basis of a determined direction. Furthermore, without a sufficient number of sources, there will be no consistency of results, or what the statistician calls *reliability*.

2. *Representativeness.* An accurate sampling also depends upon the representativeness of the sources. We may have a sufficient number of sources, but if our data is concentrated in one area or in a few areas, we will not have a representative picture of the entire United States. Consequently, the attempt must be made to utilize sources from all sections of the United States.

3. *Weighted Proportions.* A sampling may be large and representative and still be inaccurate. This phenomenon arises from the fact that all the sources are not of equal importance. It is clearly observable that the congregational minutes of Temple Emanuel of New York are of greater significance than the minutes of a small congregation in Idaho. Consequently, an accurate sampling must contain the most significant sources; the less important sources must be viewed in their proper perspective.

The sampling requirements in such a study as the one under consideration cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the noted statistician Professor Alan E. Treloar of the University of Minnesota, states in his volume, *Elements of Statistical Reasoning*: "Limitations of the

sample have not infrequently been overlooked in published investigations, and accordingly some conclusions have been drawn which are obviously spurious. Great care should be exercised to make sure that statistical conclusions are drawn with reference only to the population of which the sample is truly representative in the sense just defined (p. 8ff)."

Recognizing the need for an accurate sampling, we are now constrained to examine the sampling of this study in the light of the aforementioned objective criteria. The comparison, unfortunately, leaves much to be desired:

a) The number of congregational minute books analyzed was not sufficient. Sixteen congregations cannot provide conclusions that will be decisive in any sense.

b) The sampling of this study is certainly not representative. The East is just barely represented.

c) The sampling of this study is not weighted proportionately. None of the really large Eastern congregations — New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore — are included in this study. Most of the midwestern communities are small or medium sized. Only one Chicago congregation is mentioned. Two of the western congregations are located in California; the remaining congregation is in San Antonio, Texas. Thus, even sectionally, the sampling difficulties remain.

As a result, the conclusions contained in this study must be further verified. Only after all the sampling requirements mentioned above are satisfied will we be in a position to draw general and universal conclusions. Meanwhile, this study will serve to give scope and direction to future research.

II. INFORMAL DECISIONS: Another diluting influence results from the informal decisions made without recourse to formal meeting. As a consequence, many reforms are initiated which are not recorded at their inception. It is not until after a substantial period of time has elapsed that the reform becomes noted. Usually mention is made only because some subsidiary problem has arisen in connection with it. Then the problem is to determine when the reform was actually instituted. In any event, it is clear that silence does not necessarily indicate the absence of reforms.

III. PASSIVE REFORM: In a similar fashion, congregations have abandoned various practices without specifically taking direct action. A congregation may have employed a *shochet* (slaughterer) for years. The *shochet* may then resign and not be replaced. No resolution is offered suggesting that the position be eliminated. The congregation merely makes a reform passively. Thus, the problem arises for the investigator: Has the congregation actually relinquished *kashruth* (dietary observance), or is it that the congregation has not found

a suitable candidate? This same situation has also been observed with reference to the *hazzan* (cantor), the *mohel* (circumciser), and the *mikveh* (ritual bath). In almost every congregational minute book, it seems as though religious institutions have fallen by the wayside. Yet, in many instances, it is difficult to determine when these institutions were discarded.

IV. ACCIDENTAL FACTORS: There are large gaps in many of the congregational minute books as a result of accidental factors. Fire has destroyed a great number of these record books. In other instances, important volumes have been lost or misplaced. Finally, indifference has prompted many an individual to discard or destroy such records in the belief that these records had outlived their usefulness. It is vitally important, therefore, that every precaution be taken henceforth against accidents of this nature. Congregations would be making noteworthy contributions to American Jewish historical scholarship were they to send their available minute books to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. There they could be photostated and would always be available for historical research.

V. DATES OF THE MINUTE BOOKS: The minute books examined in this investigation do not, unfortunately, cover the same periods. Thus, the minutes of Congregation B'nai El of St. Louis begin in 1855 and end in 1886. The minutes of Congregation B'nai B'rith of Los Angeles, on the other hand, begin in 1895 and continue until 1909. This differential in dating presents added difficulties of comparison. However, this difficulty will disappear as more and more minute books are added to the American Jewish Archives.<sup>1</sup>

#### PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The congregations investigated in this study fall into two general categories: the *Evolving Reform Congregations* and the *Predominantly Reform Congregations*. The *Evolving Reform Congregations* are those which exhibit reform tendencies but which adopt reforms in a gradual or developmental fashion. The *Predominantly Reform Congregations* are those which manifest a predominantly classical reform pattern from the very beginning. The *Predominantly Reform Congregations*, by and large, were organized (or reorganized) rather late. Hence, they mirror the influence of the older and larger congregations. Some are offshoots which broke away from traditional orthodox or conservative synagogues in order to establish a reform mode of worship (Congregation Har Sinai in Baltimore, Maryland, and Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, New York).

<sup>1</sup>Since the above study was made, the minute books of over twenty additional congregations have been deposited in the American Jewish Archives. See the Acquisitions listed in this issue. THE EDITORS.

Preliminary results fail to indicate any rigidly defined pattern of development in the emergence of Reform Judaism in the United States. It is impossible to speak of *the* sequence of events in this regard. This conclusion is illustrated rather effectively through a comparison of Kahl Montgomery (Montgomery, Alabama) and Congregation Mickve Israel (Savannah, Georgia). The author selects these two congregations for purposes of illustration because they are rather similar in nature. Both are *Evolving Reform Congregations*. Both are located relatively in the same geographic region. Both began as observant orthodox congregations—the available minutes begin when the congregations were strictly orthodox.

A comparison of these two congregations reveals the following patterns of development:

CONGREGATION MICKVE ISRAEL SAVANNAH, GA.	KAHL MONTGOMERY MONTGOMERY, ALA.
1. System of fines and penalties for violation of the Sabbath eliminated (1848).	1. System of fines and penalties for violation of holidays eliminated (1861).
2. Prayer for the government to be read in English (1854).	2. Cantor informed that he was not required to wear the <i>kittel</i> (white robe) on the Day of Atonement (1862).
3. Men and women permitted to sit together during the rabbi's discourse (1857). By 1875, men and women are sitting together throughout the entire service. However, there is no mention when the latter reform was first instituted.	3. Bidding for Torah blessings eliminated (1865).
4. The following reforms were adopted February 11th, 1868: a) Elimination of second-day holiday. b) Introduction of mixed choir and organ. c) Abbreviated prayer ritual. d) Elimination of the <i>haftarah</i> (lesson from the prophets).	4. Mixed choir (men and women) introduced between 1862 and 1867.
5. Monetary offerings prohibited during the service (1869).	5. Limitations placed upon number of offerings (1868).
6. Calling of individuals to the Torah ( <i>aliyah ha-torah</i> ) abolished except for <i>bar mitzvah</i> (confirmation) boys (1870).	6. Only one chapter read from the Torah <i>parashah</i> (weekly Pentateuchal portion). <i>Bar Mitzvah</i> boys, however, permitted to read entire <i>parashah</i> (1872).
7. <i>Minhag America</i> (Reform liturgy) and three year Torah cycle proposed in 1871 but no action taken.	7. Organ introduced by 1873.



BETH ELOHIM SYNAGOGUE, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA  
*Built in 1841, it is the oldest Reform synagogue in the United States.*

CONGREGATION MICKVE ISRAEL SAVANNAH, GA.	KAHL MONTGOMERY MONTGOMERY, ALA.
8. Marriage canopy ( <i>huppah</i> ) made optional (1879-1880).	8. Temple Emanuel prayer book adopted (1874).
9. Hats made optional 1892-1894.	9. Attempts to eliminate <i>haftarah</i> failed (1875).
10. Jastrow type prayer book adopted 1890-1895).	10. Hats made optional 1875-1883.
11. Union prayer book adopted (1901).	11. Confirmation (for boys and girls) instituted by 1880.
12. Late Friday evening service instituted (1904).	12. Late Friday evening service instituted by 1881.

The variations revealed in the chart above are significant. In each congregation there are innovations not observable in the other. The reforms of Congregation Mickve Israel without parallel in Kahl Montgomery are: (1) Early use of an English prayer; (2) Permission granted to men and women to sit together; (3) The elimination of the second-day holiday; (4) *Aliyath ha-torah*, calling of individuals to the Torah, abolished, except for the *bar mitzvah* boys; (5) *Haftarah* reading abolished (An attempt to abolish the reading of the *haftarah* in Kahl Montgomery failed); and (6) Optional rather than mandatory use of the *huppah*, the marriage canopy.

Reforms noted in Kahl Montgomery but absent in Congregation Mickve Israel are: (1) Optional rather than mandatory use of the *kittel* by the Reader on the Day of Atonement; (2) Recitation of Torah *parashah* limited to one chapter, although *bar mitzvah* boys are entitled to read the entire *parashah* (An attempt to introduce the three year Torah cycle in Congregation Mickve Israel failed); (3) The introduction of confirmation. Two of the reforms — the late Friday evening Sabbath service and the optional use of hats — occur late in both congregations but much later in Congregation Mickve Israel than in Kahl Montgomery.

This comparison demonstrates clearly that there is no clear-cut standard pattern of development for all congregations. To the contrary, each congregation has its own individualized sequence of events with its own *focal point of conflict*. A *focal point of conflict* signifies the reform measure which encountered the greatest degree of opposition in a particular congregation. Once this reform was adopted, subsequent reforms seemed to be accepted with a minimum of controversy. In Montgomery, the question of hats represented the point of crisis; in Toronto, non-segregation of men and women in services;

in Savannah, the adoption of a prayer book; in San Francisco, the introduction of an organ and a mixed choir.

Yet despite the absence of a *rigidly defined pattern* of development, there is an *approximate general pattern* of development observable when the specific reforms are grouped in broad categories. On the basis of the information compiled and analyzed in this study, the following pattern seems to characterize the development of Reform Judaism in the United States.

- I. Revision of prayer service — introduced in every congregation studied.
- II. Introduction of the organ — present in every congregation except Piqua, Ohio.
- III. The mixed choir of men and women.
- IV. The abolishment of the separation of sexes at services.
- V. The late Friday evening service.
- VI. The abandonment of the hat in the services.
- VII. Confirmation for boys and girls.

This pattern is representative not only of all the congregations (in this study) as a group, but is also representative of the various sections of the country. Possibly in one respect, the abandonment of the hat, is there any change sectionally. The South appears to have adopted this reform more completely than the other sections of the country.

The revision of the prayer service was the most widespread and most immediate of all the various innovations considered. At the same time, however, attention must be called to the following observation. Although the prayer service was changed by every congregation, there is strong evidence that only minor changes were introduced at first. The major changes took place rather late in the process of development. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the case of the *Evolving Reform Congregations*. Thus, Congregation B'nai El (St. Louis, Missouri) introduced minor changes in the prayers in 1865; the major changes occurred in 1872, after the organ had been introduced (1855) and after the system of the separation of sexes was abolished, at least in part (1869). Congregation Mickve Israel (Savannah, Georgia) introduced a few English prayers in 1854, but the major revisions took place in 1868 after the system of separation of sexes had been abolished (1857). Kahl Montgomery (Montgomery, Alabama) was using the organ in 1873; the major revisions in prayer took place in 1874. Congregation Sherith Israel (San Francisco, California) adopted minor changes in the prayer service in 1874. By that time the system of the separation of sexes had been abolished (1869). The major revisions in the prayer service took place in 1890. Holy Blossom Congregation (Toronto, Canada) adopted the organ and mixed choir

in 1890 as the first reforms; the major innovations in the prayer service took place in 1897 and 1898. The testimony of these congregations, therefore, suggests that prayer revision — though widespread and even immediate in most cases — is not the first major change introduced in the trend towards Reform.

These same congregations also indicate that non-separation of sexes during services is one of the first important changes common to the congregations of the *Evolving Reform* category (St. Louis, 1869; Savannah, 1857; and San Francisco, 1869). Another early reform of the *Evolving Reform Congregations* is the limitation upon *mitzvoth* (honors) and the *mi sheberach* (blessings) (Savannah, 1869; Montgomery, 1868; San Francisco, 1870). The other early innovations, of course, are the organ and the mixed choir.

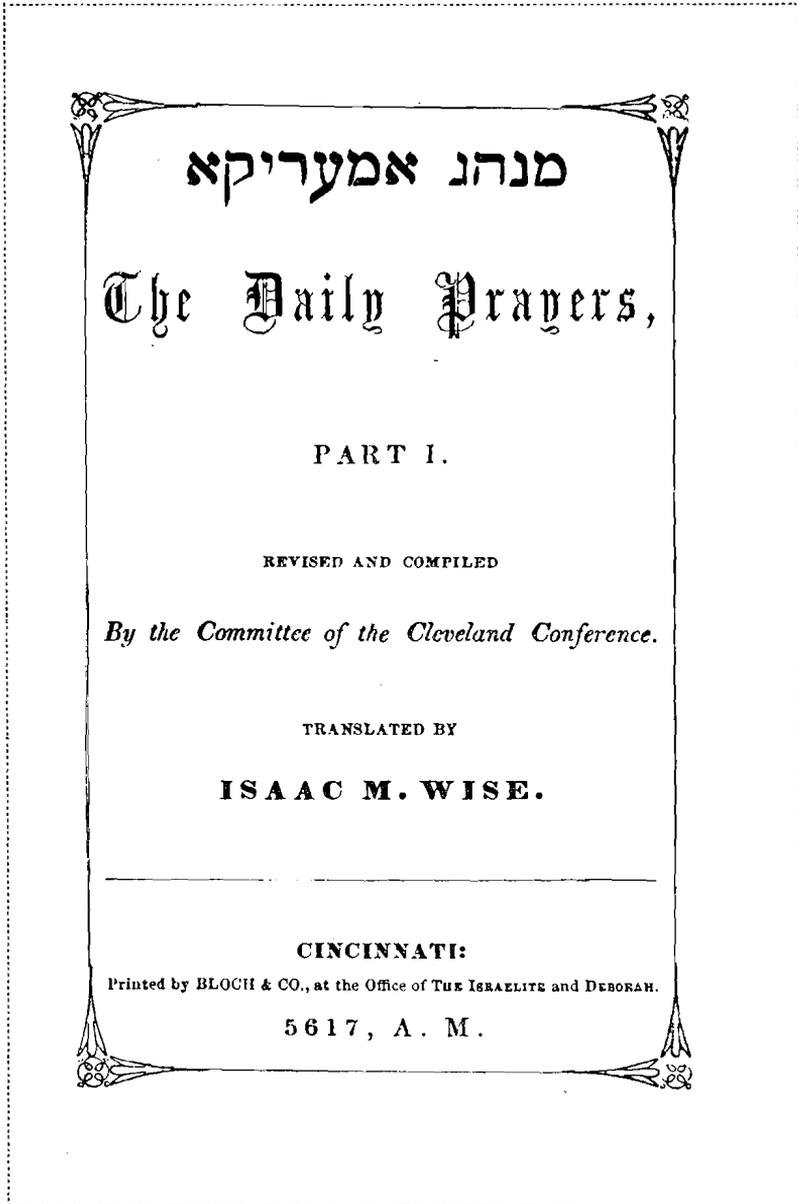
SUMMARY, PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS, AND SUGGESTED RESEARCH  
Before entering the final phase of this study, the author again directs attention to the scope and limitations delineated earlier. Consequently, the reader is warned against making any sweeping generalizations. The conclusions contained herein are limited exclusively to the selected group of congregations mentioned on a previous page. Only after careful sampling techniques have been employed will there be any justification for applying these conclusions universally.

In conclusion, this study has revealed the following:

1. There is no *single* pattern of development which will characterize all or even most of the congregations investigated. However, there is an approximate general pattern of development when the individual reforms are grouped in broad categories. This general pattern is somewhat modified when the *Evolving Reform Congregations* are considered apart from the *Predominantly Reform Congregations*. The primary difference concerns the revision of the prayer service. The general pattern indicates that prayer revision is the most widespread and immediate common denominator. The *Evolving Reform Congregations* suggest, on the other hand, that *major* revisions of the prayer service occur rather late — preceded in some instances by the abolishment of the separation of sexes at religious services, limitations placed upon *mitzvoth*, the introduction of the organ, and the institution of a mixed choir.

2. Within each congregation, there is an individualized sequence of events leading to Reform Judaism. Within this sequence there are *focal points of conflict*. To repeat, a *focal point of conflict* signifies the reform measure which encountered the greatest degree of opposition in a particular congregation. Once this reform was adopted, subsequent reforms seemed to be accepted with a minimum of controversy.

3. There is no straight line development. The appearance of reform tendencies did not result in an immediate abandonment of



*Courtesy of the Hebrew Union College Library*

TITLE PAGE OF ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *Minhag America*,  
EARLY REFORM PRAYER BOOK, 1857

all traditional observances. Traditional observances remain throughout even within the *Predominantly Reform Congregations*. Temple Beth Zion (Buffalo, New York) will serve as an excellent illustration of that point. Although Temple Beth Zion began as a Reform congregation, it retained the following traditional observances: (1) Circumcision — non-circumcised males were denied various privileges; (2) "Mosaic Marriage" — certain discriminations were enforced against those who were not married to Jews; (3) The "mourning *minyan*," religious service for mourners; *Kashruth at least until 1869*; (5) Supervision of the making of *matzoth* (unleavened bread) for Passover *at least until 1876*; (6) Refusal to substitute cornet for *shofar* (ram's horn); (7) Chanting of the service.

4. There may be sectional differences, although the data in this study cannot provide definite proof in this regard. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the optional use (or abandonment) of the hat was more characteristic of the South than of any other section.

5. Another possible approach to this subject would be the correlation of each reform with the calendar year. There is the possibility that certain reforms are associated with certain specific years. Thus, for example, three congregations — Temple Beth Zion of Buffalo, New York; Congregation Rodef Sholom of Youngstown, Ohio, and Congregation Mickve Israel of Savannah, Georgia — introduced the organ between 1866 and 1868. Of course, the evidence thus far does not permit us to reach any positive conclusion, but it does suggest a possible area of investigation.

6. Since many of the *Predominantly Reform Congregations* are offshoots of older congregations, it would be well to analyze the minute books of the parent congregations. This procedure would provide necessary background information.

The direction of future research is now clear. A proper sampling of congregational minutes, in the manner suggested above, represents the initial task. With such a sampling, we shall be enabled to reach definite, valid, and meaningful conclusions. Precisely because the field has never been explored, precisely because there are so many factors that must be considered, precisely because the results that will eventually accrue will be great — such an investigation would be very worthwhile.