

A Call to Detroit—1869

No one within the ranks of American Reform Judaism has ever enjoyed a more distinguished reputation than Kaufmann Kohler (1843–1926), but Kohler, a native of Fürth, Bavaria, did not begin his life as a Reform Jew. He grew up in an Orthodox family and, for a time, even studied under Samson Raphael Hirsch, the leading figure of mid-nineteenth-century German Orthodoxy. Ultimately, however, it was the Reform scholar and spokesman Abraham Geiger who influenced Kohler most, and the Ph.D. dissertation which the young Bavarian completed for the University of Erlangen in 1867 left no doubt, in its espousal of biblical criticism, that he had put Orthodox Judaism far behind him. At Berlin, in 1869, Kohler further documented his attachment to liberalism by securing his semikah, his rabbinical ordination, from the notable Reformer, Dr. Joseph Aub. That same year, the twenty-six-year-old Herr Doktor received an interesting letter from the Beth El Congregation of Detroit, Michigan. He had been recommended to the Detroiters by two of America's outstanding Reform rabbis, Max Lilienthal, of Cincinnati, and Bernhard Felsenthal, of Chicago. Kohler accepted the call to Detroit, but he did not remain very long at Beth El. In 1871, he departed Detroit for Chicago and, in 1879, succeeded his famous father-in-law David Einhorn as rabbi of Temple Beth El in New York City. The years which followed saw Kohler become something of a spiritus rector for American Reform Judaism, and he was named in 1903 president of Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College, the intellectual and scholastic arm of the Reform movement. His *Jewish Theology* appeared in 1918 and crystallized Kohler's reputation as the Abraham Geiger of American Reform.

The invitation extended to Kohler by the Detroiters in 1869 appears below. It was translated from German by Dr. Abraham I. Shinedling, now of Albuquerque, New Mexico, but once a student of Kohler's at the Hebrew Union College.



Courtesy, Miss Lilly Kohler

Kaufmann Kohler
Distinguished leader of American Reform Judaism
1843–1926

Detroit, Mich.

June 9, 1869

To the
 Reverend Doctor K. Kohler in Fürth
 Honored Doctor:

Your letter of May 7th to Dr. [Max] Lilienthal in C.[incinnati] was submitted to the undersigned, with the practical advice to write to you directly, honored *Herr Doktor*, which we are doing herewith, both in a semiofficial manner as the committee of the Jewish congregation of Detroit, and also, with especial personal respect, in consideration of the recommendations of Drs. Lilienthal and [Bernhard] Felsenthal. This by way of introduction and of clarification of several frank explanations which we feel that we must make, the more so as we would want to assume the responsibility for calling such a well-recommended man across the wide ocean only if the effort has been made in advance to come to a mutual understanding of the details, as far as is feasible.

Our congregation "Beth El" (there are several other Jewish congregations here) has been in existence for approximately nineteen years. Like most of the older American Jewish congregations, it started with very small means, as a continuation of the Orthodox Jewish synagogal worship, as far as the members, who came from all parts of Germany (extending as far [east] as the Vistula), could agree on the "tradition." These conditions, as well as those individuals who are accustomed to making mutual concessions, gave the functioning rabbis the opportunity to introduce "Reform." As a result, our congregation, which is a Reform congregation, nevertheless includes among its individual members all shades of ritual opinions, ranging from Orthodoxy, on the one hand, to religious indifferentism, on the other, and still, as a *congregation*, it favors *Reform*.

The older members, who are Orthodox, are constantly getting fewer, or else they passively submit to the innovations, so that you would not find here "a *young*, aspiring congregation which would naturally come to an *easy* understanding with a young forceful

person inspired by fresh earnestness," but you would nevertheless find here a field which, although not as yet entirely cultivated, would be capable of such cultivation for the exalted views which you, *Herr Doktor*, express.

As regards our religious services of nineteen years ago, we have made tremendous progress, and we should like to give you the following information about the manner of their conduct which is usual with us at present:

We have introduced the so-called *Minhag America* of Dr. I[saac]. M. Wise. This minhag [synagogal ritual] is a *compromise* between the Sulzbacher thefilla [Orthodox daily prayer book, published at Sulzbach, Bavaria, in 1828] and the [liberal] requirements of the most recent past: the prayers are considerably shortened, many have been omitted entirely, but all are recited in Hebrew. The *borchu*, the *shema*, the *mi komocho*, and the *kedushah* are recited by the choir to organ accompaniment. The beginning and the conclusion of the religious service are introduced by a Jewish hymn, and the sermon is preceded and followed by a German or an English song, according as the language in which the sermon is given is German or English. The haftarah [reading from the Prophets] is always recited in German or in English. The reading of the Torah is in Hebrew, the three-year cycle being used. There is *no* calling up to the Torah, nor is any "mishaberach" [benediction associated with money offerings] made. The president and the vice president stand at the rabbi's side. For special occasions (the first visit paid to the temple by new mothers, by newlyweds, and on the New Moon, etc.) suitable German or English prayers are traditional, this matter being left up to the rabbi. For Rosh Hashanah and for Yom Kippur, the Heidenheim machzor [High Holy Day prayerbook, published at Rödelheim, Prussia, in 1800 by Wolf Heidenheim] was always used up to now, with the omission of long piyutim [liturgical poems]. There are still a few people in our congregation who "recite" [the daily liturgy:] shachrith, musaf, etc. The above-mentioned order of the prayers has reference to yom tov [holidays] and the Sabbath. For yom tov only, some unimportant additions are inserted into the *Minhag America* thefilla, and all Hebrew prayers are recited, more in a declamatory tone than in the old

singsong manner (Niegan [chant]), *by the rabbi*. The hat is still worn, but not the tallis [prayer shawl]. Men and women sit together.

Until about six months ago our congregation maintained a German-English-Hebrew elementary school which was conducted by the rabbi with the aid of assistant teachers, and in which religious instruction also was given. The congregation dropped the elementary school because no such results were achieved as those which the public schools secured. The *religious instruction* of the young is now entirely entrusted to the rabbi, who is expected to devote Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings to this duty. The children, with very few exceptions, understand German, although many of them speak English exclusively in conversation. Should this be a burden to the religious teacher at the beginning, nonetheless the fact that the children speak English would furnish him the opportunity to get used to the vernacular himself in a short time. One thing you may depend on, and that is, that every member of the congregation, which consists of approximately seventy members, is very much interested in providing the young with a religious and moral education, and that the majority of the congregation will gladly give their support for a free and humane development of Judaism under the scholarly leadership of a man who will know how to furnish scientific and theological bases for still further progress in the field of the improvement of Jewish conditions. At any rate, a majority of those members who bear the *burdens* of the congregation are animated by such sentiments.

The *financial* situation of the congregation does not permit the payment to the rabbi of a salary in excess of two thousand dollars (\$2,000). A three-year appointment as well as a moderate reimbursement of traveling expenses would be approved.

Detroit is a pretty city of about 80,000 inhabitants. Our temple is new, and is situated on one of the most beautiful streets. In every respect it is a worthy and dignified house of worship.

A *single* man can get room and board in the best Christian* [non-kosher] hotels for about \$45 per month. At any rate, it would

* The cost of room and board in the best Christian hotels was given only for the reason that this is the highest that is charged here. Please do not misinterpret this.

not cost more, indeed, considerably less, with a decent Jewish family. Less than the above salary was sufficient to maintain our rabbi decently during the war years, when prices were high, although he had a rather large family. Besides, an able man could earn quite a lot of extra money by giving private instruction, and weddings yield decent honoraria, also.

We felt obliged, most honored *Herr Doktor*, to acquaint you with the above. If the conditions which have been laid down appeal to you, please let us know your views, or inform us of your consent, *as soon as possible*. In the case of an affirmative reply from you, a call to you to assume the rabbinical position in Detroit should follow. Since this is written more in your interests than in those of the congregation, and since the position will become vacant on September 1st, and we should like very much to have a rabbi for the holidays, we request an early reply.

Respectfully,

Martin Butzel	}	Committee
M. Cohen		
Herman Trueman		

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