

# Reflections on Neo-Reform in the Central Conference of American Rabbis

LAWRENCE SIEGEL

## A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

The era following the Great Depression of the 1930's was succeeded by a world-wide political struggle which would decide the future course of Western civilization. By 1941, the major European nations had been overrun by Nazi Germany, and the great centers of European Jewry had been emasculated. Even English Jewry was incapacitated by the strenuous demands of the war, and the destruction of the Jewish colonies in Palestine, together with some 3,000,000 Jews living in the Soviet Union, seemed on the verge of reality.<sup>1</sup> In this chaotic atmosphere, American Jewry was the "voice crying in the wilderness: What do you do unto my people!" For the first time in the history of American Israel, the burden of responsibility for the leadership and care of world Jewry fell almost exclusively on the American Jews.

In order to aid world Jewry as well as "win over the mass of Jews in America" to Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, at its fifty-third annual convention in February, 1942, undertook a program to revise its former stands on crucial ideological and political issues.<sup>2</sup> In this moment of truth, the Reform movement confronted itself with the fact that the dream of Isaac Mayer Wise — that in a short time all Jews in these United States would become adherents of what he called "American Judaism" — had failed of achievement. The Conference now had to make an attempt to capture and hold the mass of unaffiliated American Jews.

---

Rabbi Siegel serves as Chaplain for the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> James G. Heller, "President's Message," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* [C. C. A. R.-YB], LII (1942), 218.

Most Jews in the United States were by 1942 of East European descent; they were strongly Zionist in their views, and their religious life was characterized by traditional ceremonies and observances.<sup>3</sup> If Reform Judaism was to add this mass to its ranks, it had to abandon its role as a movement self-contained within the older "German" Jewish group and representing the socio-economic upper class of Jewish society with its antipathy to "Jewish Nationalism." Such an expansion of Reform Jewry could not fail to introduce a new interpretation of Reform Judaism. Thus the Zionist question again became one of major import for the Conference.

Well aware of the Zionist sympathies of most American Jews and influenced by its own aspiration to augment Reform Jewish ranks, a segment of the C. C. A. R. undertook passage of the so-called "Jewish Army Resolution" at the convention in 1942:

Be it resolved, that the Central Conference of American Rabbis adds its voice to the demand that the Jewish population of Palestine be given the privilege of establishing a military force which will *fight under its own banner* on the side of the democracies, under allied command, to *defend its own land* and the near East to the end that the victory of democracy may be hastened everywhere. [Italics added.]<sup>4</sup>

The resolution was adroitly brought to the floor of the Conference for consideration when only 102 of the 236 men who had registered at the Cincinnati convention were present.<sup>5</sup> The resolution was adopted by a vote of 64 to 38,<sup>6</sup> which did not represent anything like a majority of the C. C. A. R.'s membership — or even of the 236 members who attended the 1942 convention.<sup>7</sup> The direct outcome of this action was not only a positive identification of Reform Judaism with the Zionist cause célèbre, but also the birth of the American Council for Judaism, founded by Dr. Louis Wolsey, of

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Weinman, "The Attitude of Isaac Mayer Wise Toward Zionism and Palestine," *American Jewish Archives*, III (1951), 14.

<sup>4</sup> "Report of Committee on Resolutions," *C. C. A. R.-YB*, LII (1942), 169-70.

<sup>5</sup> Frank N. Sundheim, "The Beginnings and Early History of the American Council for Judaism" (Term Paper for American Jewish History, Hebrew Union College, deposited in the American Jewish Archives, 1957), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> "Report of Committee on Resolutions," *C. C. A. R.-YB*, LII (1942), 170.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia,<sup>8</sup> to represent the anti-Nationalist segment of the C. C. A. R.

Attempting an even closer identity between Reform Judaism and Zionism in the public eye, the C. C. A. R.'s 1943 convention at New York held a round-table discussion entitled "Compatibility of Zionism with Reform Judaism,"<sup>9</sup> and a committee was appointed "to formulate and to present to the Conference a resolution on Zionism and Reform Judaism." Several resolutions were reported out of this committee. The first denied that there was any "essential incompatibility between Reform Judaism and Zionism."<sup>10</sup> The second majority resolution requested that the Conference call upon "our colleagues of the American Council for Judaism to terminate this organization" because "its continued existence would become a growing threat to our fellowship."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the Conference was determined to crush the anti-Nationalistic forces within its ranks and silence their voices.

The C. C. A. R.'s effort to join forces with the Zionists of America proved remarkably successful. Between 1945 and 1952, the presidency of the Conference devolved upon such noted Zionists as Abba Hillel Silver (1945-1947), Abraham J. Feldman (1947-1949), and Philip S. Bernstein (1950-1952).<sup>12</sup>

#### FROM ZION SHALL GO FORTH THE LAW

Orienting the Reform movement — directing it towards a political identification with Zionism — did prove successful in removing Reform's anti-Nationalist reputation and winning for it thereby the favorable opinion of American Jewry; but this would not suffice to attract new members into Reform ranks. The synagogue was, and is, the primary place for formal religious expression in Reform Judaism. If the criticism to which President James G. Heller's Conference message gave voice in 1942 was justifiable and Reform

<sup>8</sup> Sundheim, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> *C. C. A. R.-YB*, LIII (1943), 91 ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> "Past President's Message," *ibid.*, LXIII (1953), 553.

synagogues were indeed characterized by "condign exclusiveness," by "excessive rationalism of liturgy," by "prejudice against the use of Hebrew," and by "antipathy toward Zionism," the situation would have to be rectified from within. Otherwise Reform could not hope to attract American Jews of East European heritage.<sup>13</sup> In fact, a program was offered by the Conference's Commission on Synagogue Activities in 1942 to stimulate "observances of meaningful ceremonies and customs in synagogue and home."<sup>14</sup> Congregations were urged to employ

more ceremonies . . . Friday evening . . . the wearing of the robe and atoro [*sic*] by rabbi and cantor . . . revival of interest in the teaching of Hebrew as shown by the reintroduction or extension of Hebrew in many Religious Schools and the organization of Hebrew classes for adults . . . changing the age of Confirmation.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, by introducing rituals and customs formerly absent from most Reform congregations, the synagogue itself was enlisted in the campaign to increase Reform membership. The emphasis on Hebrew, the use of clerical attire, and new home and Temple ceremonies were initiated, it is certain, not principally for old-line Reform members, but rather to bridge the gap between temple and *shul*. In this way, it was hoped, the mass of unaffiliated Jews with East European backgrounds would feel more of an emotional attachment to the Reform synagogue than had formerly been possible. There was, indeed, no other way for Reform to become a mass movement.

To encourage attachment to Reform's newly emergent synagogal and home ritualism, the C. C. A. R.'s committee on ceremonies was responsible in 1942 for ordering a new Hanukkah lamp designed for use in synagogues. The lamp was created by Ruben Leaf, formerly a teacher of applied design at the Bezalel Art School in Palestine.<sup>16</sup> The committee also originated a Hanukkah

<sup>13</sup> Heller, "President's Message," *ibid.*, LII (1942), 218.

<sup>14</sup> "Report of Commission on Synagogue Activities," *ibid.*, LII (1942), 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Report of Committee on Ceremonies," *ibid.*, p. 78.

service pageant as well as a new Purim *megillah* (the story of Queen Esther) in English. The holidays of Hanukkah and Purim, of course, both recall occasions on which, in ancient times, the Jewish people was rescued from defeat despite overwhelming odds. It seemed fitting, in the face of the catastrophe which was threatening European Jewry in 1942, that the rituals associated with Hanukkah and Purim should be re-emphasized, for they embodied in cogent fashion "the idea of Jewish survival."<sup>17</sup> Thus, in the darkest years of World War II, the Reform movement looked to the historic past for strength and encouragement to face the perils of contemporary Jewish experience.

The revival of Hanukkah and Purim, which are the most particularistic of the Jewish holidays, was a far cry from the universal and messianic emphasis hitherto given the Jewish experience by Reform. The early Reformers had been made acutely uncomfortable by liturgical phrases like the Passover *Haggadah's* "Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations. . . ." The Reformers of the 1940's experienced no such discomfort.

The committee on ceremonies further introduced a number of special Sabbath services: Sabbath "Sh'kolim," which was a revival of the ancient free will offering; Sabbath "Sholom" (Peace); and Sabbath "Todo" (Thanksgiving). The committee also urged the adoption of rabbinical robe and attire and originated the use of a *shofar* (ram's horn) fitted with a mouthpiece.<sup>18</sup> Along with ceremonial innovations and additions, the liturgical committee of the Conference had for some time been editing and revising the Reform *siddur* — the *Union Prayer Book* — for worship services. The revision of the daily prayer book appeared in 1940. It featured more Hebrew text than its predecessor had contained, and also included a prayer which expressed the Zionist hope in the

hearts of Israel . . . that Zion might be restored . . . that we may share joyously in the work of redemption so that from Zion shall go forth the law and the word of God from Jerusalem.

The Deity was besought, moreover, to "uphold . . . the hands of our

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

brothers who toil to rebuild Zion.”<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of such a service in the *Union Prayer Book* was, of course, a major departure from the position of the early Reformers — in particular, Isaac M. Wise, who “considered it un-Jewish to pray for, or work toward, the restoration of a Jewish State.”<sup>20</sup>

The second work to issue from the deliberations of the liturgical committee was a revision of the Reform *mahzor* — the *Union Prayer Book II* — for the New Year and Day of Atonement. In this volume, too, the liturgy committee added more Hebrew text and returned to the “tradition of varying the standard blessings.” For the Day of Atonement liturgy, “the picturesque traditional ceremony . . . *Kol Nidre* . . . [was] reworded.” In the former — 1922 — edition of the *Union Prayer Book*’s High Holy Day volume, the text of the *Kol Nidre* had been omitted, and even the phrase “Kol Nidre” had not appeared in the book, the *venislah* prayer being recited in its place. The “newly revised” edition of the High Holy Day liturgy restored to Reform worship other long neglected passages as well. For example, “greater use was made of the treasures of medieval poetry.” About a dozen of the medieval *piutim* and *selichot*, traditional liturgical compositions which had been omitted from the former edition, were introduced into the revised High Holy Day prayer book.<sup>21</sup>

The discussion which followed the presentation of the liturgical committee’s report afforded the editors of the new prayer book editions an opportunity to clarify their intentions and objectives:

Some believe in drastic revisions; others believe that the liturgy should conform very closely to the traditional pattern. The committee has tried to sail a middle course between these extremes and to provide new material and greater variety. *Traditional material was introduced wherever possible and you will find that it is a well-rounded compromise.*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship [UPB]* (Newly Revised; Cincinnati, 1940), I, 68–69.

<sup>20</sup> Weinman, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> “Report of Liturgical Committee,” *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LIII (1943), 57; *UPB* (revised; Cincinnati, 1922), II, 97; *UPB* (Newly Revised; Cincinnati, 1945), II, 129–31.

<sup>22</sup> “Report of Liturgical Committee,” *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LIII (1943), 58–59. [Italics added.]

The attractions had been created; the question was now to dangle these innovations before those for whom they had been created. A "nation-wide Enrollment Campaign" had been endorsed by the Conference in cooperation with its lay partner, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The goal set by this initial campaign was to "mobilize an additional twenty-five thousand members for our Reform congregations."<sup>23</sup> The leaders of Reform were anxious that an emotional identification be made by its new enrollees; they were not to be disappointed. By 1945, the new *megillah* ritual, introduced in 1939, had sold 30,720 copies and was in use in 184 congregations.<sup>24</sup> The *atarah*, or prayer shawl, for rabbinical robes had been adopted by ninety-nine congregations.<sup>25</sup> The Hanukkah service pageant was now employed by eighty-two congregations,<sup>26</sup> while the Sabbath "Sh'kolim" liturgy had sold 2,261 copies and was used by twenty congregations.<sup>27</sup> Encouraged by its initial success in introducing these new ritual features, the committee on ceremonies prepared, in 1945, a ritual for a family *Yahrzeit* service and urged that *kiddush* be celebrated at the Friday evening service in the synagogue with accompanying music.<sup>28</sup> The revised *Union Prayer Book* of 1924 had omitted the traditional *kiddush* text from the regular Friday evening service and had provided only a translated version in the section entitled "Services in the Home."<sup>29</sup> In the "Newly Revised" edition of the *Union Prayer Book* (Vol. I), the text of the traditional *kiddush* now appeared, with the exclusion of the particularistic phrase *mik-kol ha-ammim*.<sup>30</sup> In

<sup>23</sup> "Report of Committee on Resolutions," *ibid.*, LII (1942), 165.

<sup>24</sup> "Report of Joint Committee on Ceremonies," *ibid.*, LV (1945), 144.

<sup>25</sup> "Report of Committee on Synagogue Activities," *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *UPB* (Cincinnati, 1924), I, 345.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* (Newly Revised; Cincinnati, 1940), I, 93. The same volume also admits the particularist phrases *mik-kol am* (p. 207) and *mik-kol ha-ammim* (p. 209) in the "Sanctification [*kiddush*] for the Festivals [of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot]." The English version, however, does not reflect these phrases: see pp. 206, 208.

the *Newly Revised Union Prayer Book II*, however, the words *mik-kol ha-ammim* are included in the *kiddush* text for the New Year.<sup>31</sup>

#### A STEP BACKWARD

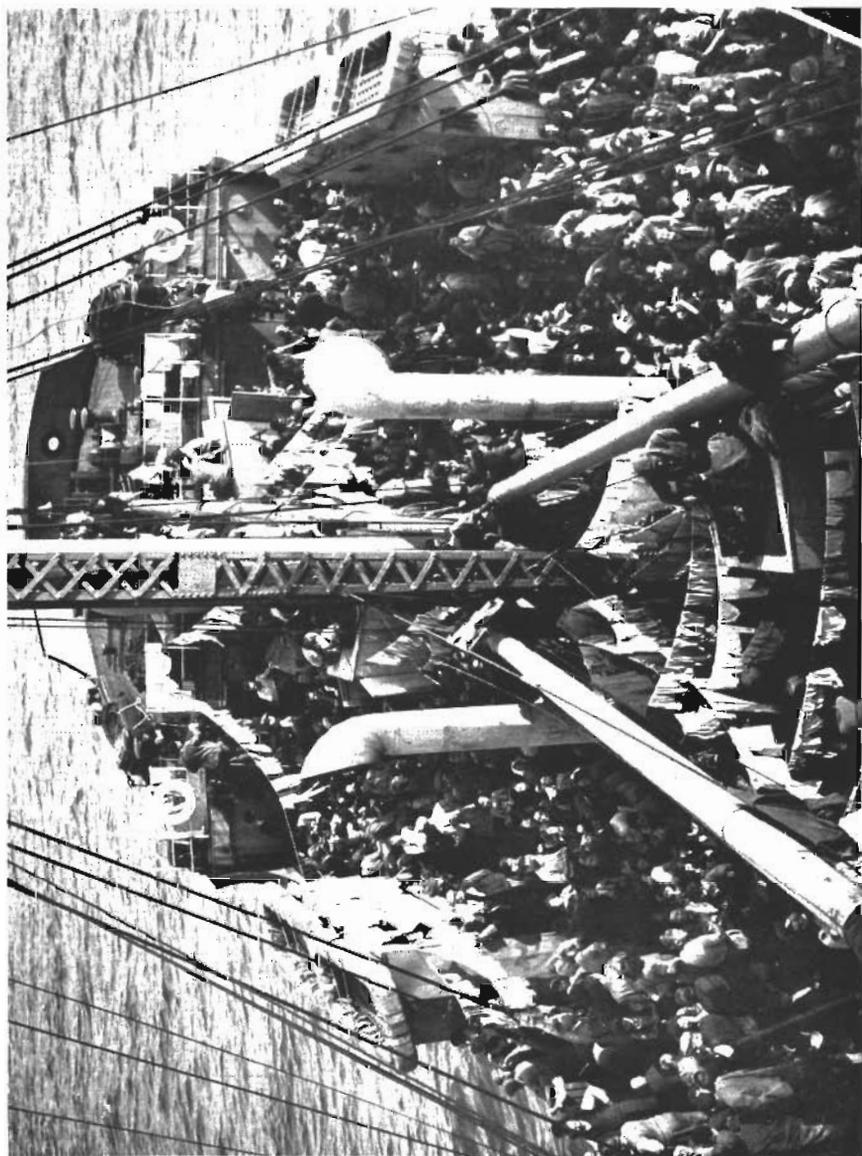
The years immediately following the conclusion of hostilities in Europe and Asia were a period of religious transformation in America. Church and synagogue attendance was on the upsurge, but at the same time the war appeared to have caused a spiritual vacuum in the United States. The destruction of millions of innocents, as well as the physical ruin in which a great section of the globe had been left, seemed to undermine the moral and religious authority on which people had come to rely. The faith in the unity of purpose for which the great war had been fought was undergoing attacks of doubt and skepticism.<sup>32</sup> The century-old faith of Reform Judaism and its justification of the ultimate triumph of the "Messianic Prophecy" were now to come under severe attack from many quarters of American life. Nationalism, particularism, and antiuniversalistic ideologies were to reassert themselves in these United States. The former era of so-called American liberalism was slowly evolving into political conservatism. The Government of the United States introduced loyalty oaths; the Congress furthered restricted immigration and expanded its un-American activities investigations; legislation unfavorable to union labor was passed; and permanent peace-time military conscription was made the law of the land for the first time in the nation's history.

Two addresses, presented to the Conference in 1946, were significantly indicative of the secular atmosphere of the times and also reflected the tone prevalent in the American Jewish community: "The Guiding Principles in a Defeatist World," by Rabbi Morton M. Berman, and "Reform Judaism and the Halacha," by Solomon B. Freehof.

Like many a colleague, Rabbi Berman had recently returned from chaplaincy duty in the war. He candidly stated his analysis of

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Winston Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953), Chapter X.



*Courtesy, Mrs. Adolph S. Oko, Jr., Point Reyes, California*

**Jewish refugees come to Israel**  
(see p. 76)



American life as he found it when he was discharged from his military service.

Distance had lent enchantment. I had visualized the community back home more inwardly sure of itself, stronger in its faith in Jewish values, and more hopeful of a better future for itself and the world. I have returned to find that it had only been a dream, for I have discovered that Jewry is filled with a mood of defeat rather than of victory. It is not a mood peculiar to Jews alone, for it is shared by many non-Jews.

The temper of the post-war years was disenchantment with the condition of the world and also of religion, which seemed to have failed in saving mankind from its destructive impulses, and yet man knew "no other shrine at which to worship."<sup>33</sup> The immediate problem confronting the American rabbinate as well as its Christian counterpart was how to regain the faith of its people in the value of religion. Berman's recommendation to capture the people of Israel once again for the synagogue was "the formulation of a code and the authorization of its use by this body."<sup>34</sup> This code was to incorporate the ideology that "God, Torah and Israel were one. . . . While the Jew believed in the God of Israel, he could not doubt the ultimate triumph of justice. While he studied his Torah and practiced its mitzwoth, his faith in God and himself were daily renewed."<sup>35</sup>

Appealing to a code of religious practice and behavior for American Jews hardly seemed a likely means for creating a dynamic faith in man during a transition era. It seemed rather an attempt on the part of some to insure their individual security — and promised, in fact, to destroy the creative spirit and individual authority of the rabbis by surrendering it to a collective body which would decide just what their religious spirit should and should not do. Not that this desire for a code of religious practice was a new question for the Conference. Calls for synods and codes of authorized Jewish theology could be traced back to the C. C. A. R.'s founder, Isaac

<sup>33</sup> Morton M. Berman, "The Guiding Principles in a Defeatist World," *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LVI (1946), 231.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244 ff.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

M. Wise,<sup>36</sup> who had seen his suggestions that the Conference approve an authorized theology for Reform Jews go down to defeat.<sup>37</sup> Two different concepts of how Reform Judaism should develop have always been present in the Conference, as evidenced by Wise's early experience and by the differently oriented appeals made in the late 1940's. There were those who thought that Reform would develop its greatest potential by an internal growth which could not be adjusted by law,<sup>38</sup> and others who pleaded for a code that would rebuild the morale and will of their congregants so that they would live as Jews.<sup>39</sup>

The attempts made in the Conference to formulate a code were not an isolated phenomenon, for increased moves toward centralization of authority and control over the beliefs of individuals were reflected also in secular American life. Opposing the growing climate of reaction in America, Abba Hillel Silver denounced President Harry S. Truman's executive order, formulated apparently in order that "communists and communist sympathizers should be screened out of their jobs. . . ." Silver, standing in the tradition of nineteenth-century liberalism where freedom of thought was a primary consideration, observed: ". . . when a country gets launched on an anti-Communist campaign it quickly passes over to an anti-liberal and anti-democratic campaign. . . ."<sup>40</sup> The correctness of Silver's assumption was borne out by subsequent developments in American political life when the smear technique and guilt by association became common vehicles for the public defaming of innocents. An age of reaction began to grip the American political scene, and the Conference's concern with ways of gaining authority over the beliefs and practices of its members' congregants was no

<sup>36</sup> *C.C.A.R.-YB*, III (1893), 27-29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, VII (1896), 18. See also Mordecai Podet, "The Impact of Historical Forces on the Intellectual Outlook of the C.C.A.R. from 1889 to 1910" (Unpublished M.H.L. thesis, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1951), pp. 52-65.

<sup>38</sup> Solomon B. Freehof, "Reform Judaism and the Halacha," *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LVI (1946), 282.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>40</sup> Abba Hillel Silver, "President's Message," *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LVII (1947), 254.

less than a reflection of the secular atmosphere of fearful reaction to the free thought of individuals in a period of transition.

The attempt to curb individual rabbinic authority continued at the next session of the Conference. A heated discussion followed a report to the Conference entitled "Mixed Marriage and Inter-marriage."<sup>41</sup> The discussion hinged on the C. C. A. R.'s 1909 resolution which had stated that mixed marriage was to be "discouraged." Those who pressed for centralization wished to return to the orthodox position and to reword the 1909 resolution by substituting "forbid" for "discouraged."<sup>42</sup> Among the arguments presented, the statement of Rabbi William F. Rosenblum gave evidence of the air which had permeated the thinking of a large number of the C. C. A. R. members:

I probably do not represent at the moment what seems to be the popular point of view. We should not legislate in the spirit of reaction that is showing itself in many quarters. . . . Nothing is as sublime as is the love of a man for a woman and no legislation and no resolution that you will pass here is going to stop it. . . . To use the word "forbid," or the word "sanction," is a step backward.<sup>43</sup>

Though the attempt to pass this restrictive motion was defeated, it was indicative of the resurgence of particularism which smacked of orthodoxy and of its authoritarian nature; it also reflected the desire of a number of men in the Conference for authority and authorization independent of the strength which they were able to exert in their local communities. Finally, it constituted an attempt to preserve the racial integrity of persons professing to be Jews.<sup>44</sup> The proponents of this restrictive measure appeared not to understand that its passage would frequently have placed them in the invidious position of endorsing marriages between agnostic Jews, while restricting marriage between an agnostic Jew and an agnostic Christian.

<sup>41</sup> "Report on Mixed Marriage and Inter-marriage," *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

## THE NEW ISRAEL

In the intervening years from 1942 to 1947, Reform Judaism slowly changed its character. It became less universal in its orientation and more ethnocentric and particularistic. It had also abandoned the anti-Nationalistic policies which were formulated at the genesis of its German and American inception. In 1948, the question of the Jewish National State could no longer be an academic one. It was a political reality, and the Government of Israel was recognized by the major and most of the minor powers, and by the United Nations, which admitted Israel as a member state. Between 1946 and 1948, the Conference had committed itself to do all it could to support the Palestinian Jews and marshal all Jews to aid them in every way possible. This support was not limited to financial assistance, but involved approving and condemning the foreign policy of various governments as well as urging that, in any future peace negotiations which might take place, no nation should be "allowed to handicap Israel and that no decision should be reached that shall compromise the independence of Israel or its territorial integrity and the free immigration of Jews into the new State. . . ." <sup>45</sup>

The emotional involvement with a political ideal is significantly altered when the ideal becomes a reality. The reality exerts influences on the seeker which he did not contemplate when anticipating the fruition of his ideal. Questions pertaining to "the new Israel and American Jewry" <sup>46</sup> were discussed in the Conference. Would Jews be accused of divided political loyalties? Would American Jews migrate to Israel? What would be the future of the Zionist Organization of America? <sup>47</sup> Was the new State going to have a strong cultural impact upon American Jews? <sup>48</sup> American Jews did become keenly interested in Hebrew-Israeli songs and folk dances, as well as in attuning their ears to the Israeli pronuncia-

<sup>45</sup> Edward E. Klein, "Report of Committee on Palestine," *ibid.*, LVIII (1948), 94-95. See also Abraham J. Feldman, "President's Message," pp. 196 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Philip S. Bernstein, "The New Israel and American Jewry," *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

tion of Hebrew. Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein envisaged this new interest in Hebraism as a "return . . . toward tradition," with American Jewry demanding more Jewish education and the development of a parochial school system.<sup>49</sup>

The hopes of Reform Jewry, disavowing its own claims to the spiritual leadership of American Jewry, were startlingly put forth in 1948 by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver: "I am thinking of Jerusalem as a sort of spiritual and cultural center of world Jewry, and the beginnings are there . . . a great university . . . many schools . . . so that Jerusalem will become for world Jewry in generations to come a real powerhouse, a real dynamo of spiritual and cultural influence . . . in Jewish life and Jewish thought."<sup>50</sup> If Rabbi Silver's opinion was common to many members of the Conference, Reform had completed an about-face, and a total immersion with the secularists of Zionism had taken place. The early Reformers had seen the United States as the new spiritual birthplace of Judaism:

Judaism in this land has, in the beautiful words of our American poetess, Emma Lazarus, "burst her cob-webbed sheath and flown forth attired in the winged beauty of immortality. Here indeed the Jew has once again arisen to the height of man; here Israel has come to a new Sinai, where God has revealed Himself anew. . . ."<sup>51</sup>

#### AS A SIGN OF GOOD FAITH

Some sixty years after the C. C. A. R. was organized, it still had not realized the goals of its founders by becoming the majority Jewish religious group in America. We have cited reasons for this failure, and though the increased amount of tradition and gravitation to the support of Zionism gave a broader base for the attraction of nonaffiliated Jews, Reform still seemed to be without "appeal to the laboring Jew. . . ."<sup>52</sup> Constituting a majority of the Jewish

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>50</sup> "Fifty-Ninth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis" (typescript, American Jewish Archives, Box 1429), p. 185.

<sup>51</sup> David Philipson, *My Life as an American Jew* (Cincinnati, 1941), p. 233.

<sup>52</sup> Sylvan D. Schwartzman, "The Union and the Future Pattern of Liberal American Judaism," *C.C.A.R.-YB*, LVIII (1948), 299.

laboring class in the United States were those Jews "who yearned for the type of ritualism they knew when they were children in an orthodox environment."<sup>53</sup> The Conference, taking into consideration their emotional tie to ritualism, issued between 1945 and 1949 four new experimental publications: a "ceremonial for lighting the festival candles in the synagogue," a "revised edition of the ceremony for the installation of congregational officers and board members," a "new edition of the Megillah ritual," and a "supplement to the Haggadah."<sup>54</sup> The Joint Committee on Ceremonies had to its "credit nineteen experimental ceremonies and related materials and six ceremonial objects," in addition to which plans were formulated to publish "seven certificates for important occasions in Jewish life" as well as Jewish book plates, birthday cards, get-well cards, music for kiddush, other ceremonial art objects, a ceremony in connection with the naming of a child, a Purim song, and a Hanukkah home service.<sup>55</sup>

This manufacturing of ceremonies and incorporating of what some at least looked on as medieval rites into the Reform Temple did not pass without notice from those Conference members who feared the new direction upon which the movement was embarking. One wonders at the reason for such sudden caution on the part of the Reform leadership. For the first time one could feel that Reform was being pressured into this activity by a power which had not formerly been there, a threatening power that was going to snare unaffiliated Jews into its own ranks. Rabbi Karl Rosenthal's views concerning the circumstances surrounding the ceremonial creativity of the Conference informs us of this new threatening power:

Now I quite agree that we need ceremonials but it seems to me there is a certain trend in our reform movement today to over-emphasize the value of ceremonials. . . . I'm afraid that there is a certain fear among some of us that we are losing the race with the conservative movement.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Harry H. Mayer's response to Leon I. Feuer's "The Union — An Evaluation and a Hope," *ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>54</sup> "Report of the Joint Committee on Ceremonies," *ibid.*, LIX (1949), 111-12.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13, 139.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, LVIII (1948), 335.

The increased amount of ceremony and ritual introduced into Reform Judaism, together with Reform's alignment with the Zionist cause, did bring a notable measure of success to those who wished to augment Reform ranks in the United States,<sup>57</sup> but voices in the C. C. A. R. were now to be heard asking the question how the spiritual dilemma of the American Jew would be solved by "growing nostalgic tendencies," or "the fetish of ceremonialism," or attempts to establish a "minimum code of behavior."<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Harry Essrig attacked the Reform movement as being "spiritually unproductive"<sup>59</sup> and "still too much tradition-bound. . . . We must always cite chapter and verse for every step we take towards the amelioration of human suffering and for every attempt to see the phenomena of life in new, striking relationships."<sup>60</sup>

In mid-century, Reform Judaism was concerned with its ontological status. After a decade of planned membership growth, the rabbis of the Conference were experiencing concern over their apparent inadequacy in not having formulated a clear ideological or theological religious program and conveying it to their adherents in lucid, cogent language. The Conference as a whole was not ready at that time to thrash out the question of Reform Jewish theology or practice. A suggestion by the president of the Conference, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, that a conference on Jewish theology be held was referred to the C. C. A. R. executive board, where it languished.<sup>61</sup>

In 1950, the State of Israel was two years old, and a number of resolutions were passed by the C. C. A. R. pertaining to its relationship with the State of Israel. A summer institute was established in the Holy Land as a "cultural bridge between the United States and Israel."<sup>62</sup> The United States Government was requested to use

<sup>57</sup> "Report of Committee on Contemporaneous History," *ibid.*, LIX (1949), 71.

<sup>58</sup> Harry Essrig, "Jewish Religious Liberalism in the World of Tomorrow," *ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>61</sup> "Report of Committee on President's Message," *ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>62</sup> "Report of Placement Committee," *ibid.*, p. 95.

its "good offices to support vigorously" the payment of reparations to Israel by West Germany,<sup>63</sup> as well as the "immediate implementation of the Huleh reclamation project,"<sup>64</sup> and the granting "of 150 million dollars in 1951 to assist the people and government of Israel."<sup>65</sup> The Conference, as a sign of good faith in the new State, invested \$5,000 of its "limited funds" in Israeli Government bonds.<sup>66</sup> The one area of contention between the Conference and the State of Israel involved the "status of Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel. . . ."<sup>67</sup> The Conference passed a resolution which expressed its "desire for equal rights for all religious groups of Israel."<sup>68</sup> As matters stood then — and still stand today — Orthodoxy was, and is, the only form of Judaism to be officially recognized by the Israeli authorities. Anyone who inadvertently wandered into the halls of a session of the Conference might well have thought that he was attending a convention of the Zionist Organization of America rather than one comprised of Jewish clergymen.

#### SHADES OF BRESLAU

A decade after the conclusion of the Second World War, religious affiliation had become de rigueur in America, and America's churches as well as her synagogues had experienced enormous growth. Both American Judaism and American Christianity were "going through one of the greatest periods of expansion in congregational history."<sup>69</sup> In 1956, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations claimed a membership of 530 Temples and the loyalty of two million congregants. This represented a "tripling of their forces in ten years."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>63</sup> "Report of Committee on Resolutions," *ibid.*, LXI (1951), 202.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>67</sup> Bernstein, "President's Message," *ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>68</sup> "Report of Committee on President's Message," *ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>69</sup> Barnett R. Brickner, "President's Message," *ibid.*, LXVI (1956), 4.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

During these years since the Conference had become a backer of the Jewish State, the American Council for Judaism continued to oppose all efforts to identify American Jews with any political area other than that of the United States. How successful the Council was in its activities is a moot subject; nevertheless, it continued to be a matter of concern for the Conference, whose president in 1956 felt that the Council had been

engaged in malicious propaganda . . . [for] they have illogically charged those of us who are concerned with Israel as being faithless to America. They have carried their posturing so far as to go to top Government authorities, warning them that we fail America when we support Israel — shades of what was done by the opponents of Reform in Breslau and Berlin in the 1840's and 1850's.<sup>71</sup>

Such charges made by the American Council for Judaism against the Conference were not only a threat to the free exercise of a Jew's political liberty, but were also directed at stopping one of the principal sources of economic aid to the Jewish State, without which it is questionable if the State could have survived and continued to accept Jewish immigrants. It was not only a question of Jews being unpatriotic Americans which the Council raised, but also a question of whether or not almost 2,000,000 Jews would continue to exist in Palestine.

In the face of increasing agitation on the part of the American Council for Judaism, the Conference passed a resolution which declared that the Council did not "represent liberal, Reform Judaism, or any other valid interpretation of Judaism."<sup>72</sup> This action on the part of the Conference was, in effect, a type of liberal excommunication of those individuals who belonged to the American Council for Judaism. By what authority could a movement founded on revolutionary and radical principles claim that another radical movement was not just as legitimate an interpretation of Judaism as its own interpretation? The Conference was, however, in no mood for rational arguments at that date, for it feared that the foreign policy of the United States was "becoming increasingly neutralistic

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> "Report of the Committee on President's Message," *ibid.*, p. 133.

in its approach to the problems of the Middle East.”<sup>73</sup> The action taken by the Conference against the Council can be seen as an effort to push that group outside of the Jewish community and to cast doubt and suspicion on its activities by declaring that it lacked “any . . . valid interpretation of Judaism.”

#### THE REAL PROBLEM

In 1958, the Conference again took under advisement the “consideration . . . of a formal presentation of the question of a Code of Practice or Ritual Guide for Reform Judaism at a CCAR convention in the near future.”<sup>74</sup> The following year, the whole question of a guide for Reform Judaism was taken up by the Conference, and the often repeated argument was advanced that a guide for Reform Judaism was needed because of

chaos in the ranks of Reform Judaism . . . [from] the tremendous influx of Jews coming from the Orthodox and the Conservative congregations in the new suburban congregations . . . are they to be allowed to give the direction to Reform Judaism, or are we going to give that direction by means of a guide . . . ?<sup>75</sup>

The pendulum had completed its swing, and the seeds of expansion had come home as full-grown fruits to be tasted. The seeds sown in the 1940's had borne a rich harvest. The Reform movement had grown greatly by incorporating into its ranks congregants from traditional backgrounds, congregants who were now seeking to take over and direct the customs and ceremonies of Reform Judaism. The theology of these new Reform Jews might have changed, but their love of the ceremonies and practices of a more traditional Judaism had not been satisfied by a change of theology. The early experiences and emotional attachments of childhood are not easily given up, or modified.

The logical argument was advanced by Rabbi Selwyn D. Ruslander that the C. C. A. R. had no authority to write a code of practice for all Reform Jewry, and that there was “no normative

<sup>73</sup> Brickner, *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Jacob P. Rudin, “President’s Message,” *ibid.*, LXVIII (1958), 13.

<sup>75</sup> “A Guide for Reform Judaism,” *ibid.*, LXIX (1959), 264.

philosophical and theological climate in the present Reform movement. . . This membership is composed of Institutionalists, Reconstructionists, Zionists, non-Zionists and Anti-Zionists.”<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Ruslander’s assertion was indeed true. Reform Judaism, in rejecting the binding authority of the Hebrew Bible and the continuation of this authority in the Talmud, had itself no authority to write a code of practices which would be binding on all Jews. In the same manner that Martin Luther had questioned the authority of the Holy Roman Catholic Church to be the ultimate interpreter of what Scripture meant, and had thus opened the door for every man to be his own pope, so did Reform Judaism give authority to every Jew to interpret Scripture and to observe whatever he found meaningful. But also, as with Luther, once Reform Judaism had enunciated this principle of individual authority, it wanted to compromise the principle by formulating its own binding ecclesiastical codes.

We are living today in an age far different in orientation from the age that faced the early men of the C. C. A. R. or the age of liberalism which pervaded the 1930’s. In the past twenty-five years catastrophic events have befallen the household of Israel, as well as the rest of mankind. Because of these world-historic conditions, the climate of the C. C. A. R. changed from one of liberalism to one where differences of opinion concerning the interpretation of Reform were not so easily tolerated. But the old spirit of individual authority for the rabbi and all that it implies in the human personality structure are far from gone within the ranks of the Conference. This spirit may at times appear to have abated, but the heart of Reform Judaism is freedom of thought and practice. Though it be in the face of ever increasing attacks which seek to put that freedom to an end, Reform tenaciously clings to its heritage of liberty.

The remarks of Rabbi Joseph P. Narot against the formulation of codes of practice give hope and encouragement for the future of American Judaism:

. . . I would like to suggest that the real problem is not in our laity, but in us, the Reform rabbinate. We are losing the courage to explore, to experiment, to pioneer, and to engender enthusiasm for these things. It

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

has been said that laymen come to us for interpretation of problems. Of course they do. They should. . . . For this we were ordained. We are supposed to be teachers in Reform Judaism. If we will do as our forebears did so well, there will be no chaos. We shall only enhance the brightness. . . .<sup>77</sup>

With such champions of religious freedom fighting for the precious right of individual religious commitment, Reform Judaism can be certain — though the path will not be straight — of a future of creativity based on respect for individual differences and commitments. Only out of forces free to combat with one another will new and novel religious developments be created in the ranks of American Reform Judaism.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 277-78.

A POSTER SERIES ON THE 1700'S

THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

announces the publication of its third series of three posters — 18" by 24" — featuring episodes in eighteenth-century American Jewish life.

These new posters, and the two earlier series — Jewish participation in the Civil War and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe — are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations, and organizations or agencies interested in American Jewish history.

Inquiries should be addressed to the Director of the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.