

Report from the Magazine Rack: What are the Rabbis Reading?

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Is the American Jewish community assimilating (melting pot) or acculturating (cultural pluralism)? This question is one of the major conceptual issues in writing American Jewish history. Many studies have shown a great decline in traditional Jewish practices from first to third generations. On the other hand, Jewish life continually shows signs of amazing vitality, especially if judged (not against an ideal standard of 100% but) against a comparative standard of other organizations, groups and institutions in American society. Part of the problem exists because sociologists have measured the decline of traditional forms without measuring the rise of new forms of Jewish expression. Another part of the problem came from measuring the Jewish community as a whole. It is entirely possible that some segments of the community will indeed assimilate over time, while other segments will become more Jewish from generation to generation. One can then look, for instance, at the lower level of traditional observance and values among Reform Jews in three ways:

1. Reform Jews are somewhat more third and fourth generation and therefore are a harbinger of what Conservative Jews will be in another generation and Orthodox Jews will be in two generations (melting pot model).

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2. The less Jewish members of the community tend to identify with Reform Jews (and vice-versa), so this group is transitory to assimilation, but the more Jewish Jews will come to dominate that part of the Jewish community that is still Jewish in another generation or two (the saving remnant model).
3. New modes of Jewishness are arising to replace the traditional forms and Reform Jews participate in these new forms as much as other Jews (cultural pluralism model).

Due to cross currents and to different rates of change in different areas of the Jewish community, it will probably take another two generations to see clearly the dominant direction of American Jewry. We will need numerous studies over the course of time which will attempt to measure the assimilation/acclaculturation rate for different elements in the community. The study reported on below is one step in that direction. The periodical reading habits of Reform and Conservative Rabbis will give us some clues about the assimilation/acclaculturation process.

Rabbis are the teacher transmitters and judge interpreters of a traditional sacred literature. The sacred texts, such as the Talmud, the Codes, the Zohar, the Midrash and the Bible, with their associated commentaries, are the source of the traditional Rabbinical worldview. What about modern Rabbis? To what extent do they read or study traditional texts or problems? What are their current sources of information and how do these sources reflect the worldview of Reform and Conservative Rabbis? To begin forming an answer to these questions, a questionnaire was mailed in February of 1978 to the 1,200 members of the C.C.A.R. [Central Conference of American Rabbis]* asking them to list the magazines, Jewish and general, they were currently reading. They were asked to include scholarly, hobby and technical, as well as any Hebrew or Yiddish magazines they receive. A total of 283 valid replies were received by the end of June.

Shortly after I had finished my analysis of the responses of CCAR members, I had the opportunity to send the same questionnaire to the 980 members of the RA. [Rabbinical Assembly]* This was done in August of 1978. By the end of November I had received 133 replies of which 121 were usable.¹ Since the RA sample

* The association of Reform Rabbis

* The association of Conservative Rabbis

¹ This is a 23% reply rate. Younger Reform Rabbis were more likely to reply than older

was smaller and the respondents were older than the CCAR sample, an exact comparison of the two groups would be misleading. (see Table 1).

Table 1
Age Distribution

<i>Age</i>	<i>CCAR</i>	<i>RA</i>
50+	30.4	34.7
37-49	23.3	24.8
- 37	46.3	40.5
	100.0	100.0

However, we will be able to see if the same trends hold across the three age groups.

An Analysis of the Findings

Before turning to the questionnaires we must note that periodical reading patterns are not typical of book reading patterns. By their nature, periodicals are current and therefore people will read them to keep up with what is developing. Thus, people read periodicals in fields they are already familiar with just to keep current. They will also read current event periodicals disproportionately since books rarely relate "news."

The first observation derived from the questionnaires is that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Reform Rabbis do not read periodicals in any language other than English. Even more interesting is the generation difference. Of those 50 years and older, 29% receive a Hebrew magazine. In the 37-49 age group the figure is 21%. Only 15% of those under 37 read a Hebrew periodical. In spite of the fact that almost all of those ordained since 1967 have spent a year studying in Israel, the proportion reading a Hebrew magazine is only half of the oldest group. The impact of Israel is evident, however, in the fact

Rabbis. Those ordained in the 10 years between 1967 and 1977 (90% of whom are in the 37 group) made up 46% of the Reform respondents while they comprise only 39% of the CCAR. The RA sample is a little older than the CCAR sample. The RA response rate was only 13%.

that those under 37 who read Hebrew frequently read the weekly edition of an Israeli newspaper, while the older men are much more likely to read *Hadoar* (an American Hebrew periodical.) This suggests that the older generation acquired its Hebrew fluency in traditional Yeshivas or Hebrew day schools. Since very few of the recently ordained Reform Rabbis come from such a background², the 15% who are Hebrew readers must be largely the product of study in Israel³.

Conservative Rabbis read more Hebrew periodicals than Reform Rabbis ($\frac{3}{4}$ of Reform Rabbis do not read a Hebrew periodical compared to $\frac{1}{2}$ of the Conservative Rabbis). However, the trend already noted for Hebrew reading to decline with age group is just as true of RA members as CCAR members.

Table II
Percentage of readers of Hebrew periodicals

Age	CCAR	RA
50+	29	62
37-49	21	53
- 37	15	40

While both groups of Rabbis are increasingly becoming "English only" readers, the decline, in percentages, is more rapid in the CCAR. As previously noted for the CCAR, the impact of study in Israel on younger RA members is clear from the large numbers of younger members who read Israeli newspapers, while the older generation mostly reads *Hadoar*. Nevertheless, although Israel's impact may retard, it does not reverse, the decline in Hebrew periodical reading. If the trend continues, Hebrew periodicals will have little if any influence on American non-Orthodox Rabbis in the 21st century. However, the rapid rise in non-Orthodox day schools should reverse this trend before the end of

² A 1967 survey of first and third year rabbinical students at the Reform and Conservative rabbinical schools found that 74% of the Conservative students had fathers who were born in the U.S. or came here by age 13, compared to 88% of the Reform students. "The Training of American Rabbis" by Charles Liebman, *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 69, p. 12 (1968).

³ By 1968 no fewer than 80% of those who entered HUC-JIR came from Reform backgrounds. *HUC-JIR: At One Hundred Years*, ed. by S. Karff, HUC Press, 1976, p. 225.

the century. A replication of this survey in another 2 decades would indicate if this prognosis is correct.

When we turn to periodical reading in general we find a similar pattern of decline by age groups. Rabbis are extensive readers. The average number of periodicals read is 13.5 for Reform Rabbis and 13.7 for Conservative Rabbis. Impressive as this is, the fears expressed by some that television will have a negative effect on reading gains support even within such a highly educated and literate group as Rabbis. The decline in the average number of periodicals read from the oldest to the youngest groups is 10% for the CCAR and 7% for the RA. This decline applies with even greater force for Jewish periodicals where the decline is 11% for the CCAR and 18% for the RA. (See Tables III & IV)

Tables III & IV
Average number of periodicals read

<i>Age</i>	<i>Jewish</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>CCAR</i>	<i>RA</i>	<i>CCAR</i>	<i>RA</i>
50+	9.6	11.4	14	14.3
37-49	9.0	10.2	13.5	13.7
under 37	8.5	9.3	12.5	13.3

The younger RA members read 18% fewer Jewish periodicals than the older members. Their reading of non-Jewish periodicals has not declined. Thus the percentage of Jewish periodicals read has declined from 80 to 71. This brings the younger RA members close to the CCAR percentage which seems to have stabilized at about 2/3 Jewish periodicals.

Table V
Percentage of Jewish periodicals within all periodicals read

<i>Age</i>	<i>CCAR</i>	<i>RA</i>
50+	68	80
37-49	65	75
- 37	67	71

The decline in periodical reading is probably a general cultural phenomenon that affects everyone. It is not therefore a sign of assimilation. The decline in percentage of Jewish periodicals read by

the younger RA members is an indication of assimilation. The stability of the CCAR percentage indicates the establishment of an acculturation norm. If this is true, we would expect the RA percentage of Jewish periodicals read to stabilize very soon at the current level of the younger Rabbis.

Zionism and the Arab/Israeli conflict are two of the most potent influences working against Jewish assimilation in America today. Conservative Rabbis have been overwhelming supporters of Zionism. Reform Rabbis were sharply divided during the first half of the twentieth century. The post-Six Day War period saw a much stronger Zionist tendency within the Reform movement. Nevertheless, criticism of Israeli political policies is still much more open in the CCAR than in the RA. The same tilt is evident in non-political areas. For example, in the autumn of 1975 427 Conservative congregations had High Holiday Israel Bond appeals compared to only 130 Reform congregations. Thus we would expect that RA members would read a higher percentage of Israel-oriented magazines, and that CCAR members would have a higher percentage of Rabbis who do not read any Zionist or Israel-oriented magazines at all. Also, if assimilation is taking place we would expect a decrease by age groups in the number of readers and the proportions read in both groups. Both of these hypotheses turn out to be false. (see Table VI)

Table VI
Israel Centered % of Jewish periodicals read and % none

<i>Age</i>	CCAR		RA	
	<i>% Israel</i>	<i>% None</i>	<i>% Israel</i>	<i>% None</i>
50+	16.9	21	15	24
37-49	15.7	27	14.3	20
-37	16.3	26	15.6	24

The greater saliency of the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1967 probably accounts for the upturn in the under 37 group. CCAR members read a slightly higher percentage of Israeli-centered periodicals but the difference is not significant. 25% of CCAR members do not read any Israeli-centered periodicals at all, vs. 23% for RA members, also an insignificant difference. A solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict will probably result in a slow but steady decrease in the readership of Israeli-centered periodicals.

All members of the CCAR and the RA receive the professional journals published by their respective organizations. The majority of Rabbis read only their own denominational journal. The younger Rabbis in both groups are more likely to read other rabbinical journals than the older men. Although most Rabbis are directly involved in Jewish education, very few read the professional journals published for Jewish educators. An equally small number subscribe to journals of pastoral psychology or to sermonic services. Taken all together, less than 10% of rabbinic reading is professionally- or trade-oriented.

46% of Reform Rabbis and 54% of Conservative Rabbis read periodicals that I shall call scholarly.⁴ By this I mean either academic journals or semi-popular periodicals in specialized fields (*The Biblical Archeologist* or *The Ecumenical Review*, for example.) The journal read by the greatest number of Reform Rabbis is the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* [now known as *American Jewish History*]. Actually the *American Jewish Archives* was listed even more frequently by Reform Rabbis, but since it is received by all Rabbis in the Reform movement it is not fair to rate it with other periodicals that must be paid for. A much smaller percentage of RA members read the *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*. The field with the greatest appeal is Bible and Archeology. Almost a third of those who read scholarly periodicals read one of the following: *Biblical Archeology Review*, *The Biblical Archeologist*, *The Israel Exploration Journal* or *Dor Ledor*. The field with the smallest following is the area of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the subjects that formed the core of scholarship in rabbinical school. Only a handful of Reform and Conservative Rabbis read such journal as *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Zion*, *Bitzaron*, or *Molad*.

There is a noticeable decline in the percentage in each age group of Reform Rabbis who read scholarly periodicals. Only 41% of the "under 37" Rabbis read scholarly periodicals, compared to 44% of those age 37-49 and 55% of those age 50 and over. This decline is not found among RA members. 55% of the "under 37" Rabbis read scholarly periodicals, compared to 50% of those ages

⁴ I excluded members of the CCAR who are also full time faculty members of HUC-JIR from the data, but I have included CCAR members who teach at any other colleges or universities. I did the same for the RA sample.

37-49 and 57% of those age 50 and over. This is our first finding of divergent trends. The insignificant gap of two points between Reform and Conservative Rabbis in the oldest group expands to 14 points in the youngest group. I cannot account for this divergence especially since a survey of the two upper classes of three rabbinical schools in New York in 1974 found that the Reform students ranked the role of scholar higher than Conservative students did. See Table VII.⁵

Table VII
Rank Order of Religious Activities and Interests

<i>Orthodox</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Reform</i>
Spiritual Guide	Teacher	Counselor
Teacher	Spiritual Guide	Teacher
Scholar	Priest	Spiritual Guide
Priest	Counselor	Scholar
Counselor	Scholar	Priest
Administrator	Reformer	Reformer
Preacher	Administrator	Administrator
Reformer	Preacher	Preacher

The larger percentage of Reform Rabbis who read the *A.J.H.Q.* is the result of the greater emphasis HUC-JIR [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion]* places on American Jewish history (which is virtually ignored at the JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary]**). It also results from Reform Judaism's traditional "American" view. The low level of readership of *Wissenschaft* journals by RA members probably is due to the lack of connection between their subject matter and issues of concern to Rabbis in today's world.

One of the most interesting findings in the survey is the correlation of age of readers and age of magazine. The older magazines that have been published for 30-40 years or more are read by a higher portion of older Rabbis. The more recent magazines are read by a higher proportion of recently ordained Rabbis. See Table VIII.

⁵ Jerome H. Bass, "Role Preferences Among Jewish Seminarians," *Sociological Analysis* 1977, 38, I 59-64.

* Seminary for Reform Rabbis

** Seminary for Conservative Rabbis

Table VIII

Magazine	Years First Published	CCAR% of Readers under		RA% of Readers under	
		37	46%	37	40.5%
<i>Moment</i>	1975	58%	(+12)	47%	(+7)
<i>Sh'ma</i>	1970	53%	(+7)	45%	(+5)
<i>Midstream</i>	1955	50%	(+4)	40%	(norm)
<i>Judaism</i>	1951	46%	(norm)	50%	(+10)
<i>Commentary</i>	1945 (1938)	35%	(-11)	37%	(-3)
<i>Jewish Spectator</i>	1935	39%	(-7)	22%	(-18)
<i>Reconstructionist</i>	1934	28%	(-18)	18%	(-22)

The different reading pattern in the area of general Jewish magazines probably reflects habit more than style or content. Rabbis who already subscribe to several Jewish magazines are less likely to start subscribing to a new one than younger Rabbis who haven't started subscribing yet. The publishers of the older Jewish magazines would do well to give a free subscription to all newly ordained Rabbis.

The most popular magazine among Reform and Conservative Rabbis is *Judaism* (169 readers). Closely bunched up about 12-15% behind *Judaism* are *Commentary* (148), *Sh'ma* (146), *Moment* (140) and *Midstream* (139). If present trends continue, *Commentary* will drop considerably (it is already below the *Jewish Spectator* in percentage of young Reform readers even though the *Jewish Spectator* is several years older) while *Moment* and *Sh'ma* will rise to the top. The correlation of age of reader and age of publication is clearly seen in non-Jewish magazines also. Many younger Reform Rabbis read *Rolling Stone* or *Mother Jones* while only a handful over 37 do so. Very few Conservative Rabbis read these "leftish" periodicals; also almost a dozen Reform Rabbis read *Playboy* (clergy subscription rate is only \$3.00) while only one Conservative Rabbi did.

Summary:

Rabbis are not average Jews. They are both leaders as well as models of Jewishness. They influence other Jews. The Rabbinic world view is molded largely by the sources of information they use. Our examination of the periodical reading patterns of Reform and Conservative Rabbis has uncovered the following:

1. Hebrew-language periodicals are a declining source of input for both Reform and Conservative Rabbis. The decline is more rapid for Reform Rabbis but is greater numerically for Conservative Rabbis since they initially had a higher percentage of Hebrew readers.

2. General periodical reading has declined slightly. Jewish periodical reading has also declined. The decline is greater for Conservative Rabbis than Reform Rabbis. The youngest Conservative Rabbis are close to the norm for all Reform Rabbis in proportion of Jewish periodicals read.

3. There is no difference in the percentage of Reform and Conservative Rabbis who read Israel-oriented periodicals, or in the amount they read.

4. There is a difference in the percentage of Rabbis who read scholarly periodicals. Younger Reform Rabbis read less than their elders. This is not true for the RA.

5. There is no significant difference by denomination in Jewish periodical reading, but there is a difference by age. Younger Rabbis read more magazines that started publishing recently.

6. There is a sub-group of younger CCAR members that read magazines like *Mother Jones*, *Runners World*, *Ms*, or *Playboy*, etc.. There is no RA sub-group like this.

The decline in reading seems to be the result of assimilation into contemporary American culture. The decline is greatest in Hebrew, less in Jewish, and least in non-Jewish. But the direction is the same for all of them. Without knowing how many periodicals are read by other similarly educated professionals I cannot prove anything⁶ but I think the decline in periodical reading is moving Rabbis closer to the lower level of periodical reading of other professionals. The stability of Israel-centered reading provides support for cultural pluralism. It is related to the Israel/Arab conflict orientated activities which occupy a significant place in

⁶ The only other study I could find reference to was "Reading and Library Habits of Connecticut Pastors," by Duncan Brockway, reported in the *American Theological Library Association Proceedings* Vol. 28, pp. 125-27, 1974. Unfortunately, this issue was not held by the U.C.L.A., U.S.C., Loyola, L.A. County or City Libraries. Actually, surprisingly little research is available on periodical reading patterns; "We need to know more about why people read magazines," by D. Arnold in *Media Decisions* (Fall 1977), 12:92.

current Jewishness. Scholarly reading is a divergent trend; the only one. It illustrates the possibility of a "saving remnant" development. The younger generation's preference for newer Jewish magazines shows the importance of tracing not only the decline of the old, but the rise of the new.

The American Jewish Archives announces the addition of two posters to its multicolor series on the American Jewish experience. Both posters deal with American Jewish philanthropists.

The subject of the first poster is Judah Touro (1775-1854), who was the first notable American Jewish philanthropist. Touro is best remembered for the sum he donated for the completion of the Bunker Hill monument.

Jacob H. Schiff (1847-1920), the subject of the second poster, was an international financier who gave large amounts of money for the care of newly-arrived Jewish immigrants, for the advancement of Jewish scholarship and for the care of Polish and Russian Jews living under Czarist rule.

The above two posters are available without charge for display by all schools, libraries, congregations and organizations interested in American Jewish history. Requests from these groups must be made on official stationery bearing the organization's name and address. Individuals may request these posters at the cost of \$2.00 each.

Inquiries concerning the entire poster series should be addressed to Ms. Wanda Reis, American Jewish Archives, 3101 Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.