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# Rabbi Harry H. Epstein and the Adaptation of Second-Generation East European Jews in Atlanta

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Historians of the American ethnic past have begun to describe the varying experiences of different immigrant generations.<sup>1</sup> Such distinctions are most helpful for a comparative perspective. For example, while it is somewhat useful to compare German and East European Jews in 1890 to explain conflicts between the groups, it may be even more important for our understanding of the process of adaptation if we compare and contrast first-generation German Jews of the 1850s through the 1880s with their East European counterparts of the 1890s into the 1920s. Specifically, it says much about the desire for continuity when we understand the well-known desire of the East Europeans to preserve Yiddish through the theater, the ethnic press, and Arbeiter Ring/Workmen's Circle schools when this is related to the first-generation German Jews' use of their native language in their lodges, their ethnic presses, and the German-Hebrew-English academies in which they trained their children. German was the sacred language for German Jewish Reformers like David Einhorn as much as Yiddish was for their East European brethren of a later period.

My concern in this paper is with the adaptation of religious theory and practice. Again, if we compare German Jews of the 1890s and early 1900s we find them to be overwhelmingly Reform vis-à-vis the Orthodoxy of their first-generation East European contemporaries. Yet, if we trace the German experience back a few decades, what we find is a very similar Orthodoxy yielding during a transition period analogous to what the East Europeans experienced in the 1920s and 1930s. From roughly 1860 through the mid-1890s German Jewish congregations and individuals struggled with change. Congregations were ripped asunder over the gradual reforming tendencies—the mixed seating, the use of organs and choirs, the use of sermons and English, etc.<sup>2</sup> This was frequently reflected in rabbis being hired and



*Rabbi Harry H. Epstein*  
*(circa 1930)*

(Courtesy of the Jewish Heritage Center, Atlanta)

fired within a few years as first one faction and then another gained momentum. Leon Jick, in his excellent study of the nineteenth-century synagogue, correctly points to Reform as a natural outgrowth of Americanization that likely would have occurred even if it had not been partly imported from Germany. Charleston's Beth Elohim is an example of this, as is, to a lesser extent, Savannah's Mikve Israel.<sup>3</sup> While some attempted to maintain the Old World standards, they fought a losing battle against the freedom of America and the rise of the first generation economically and socially. Perhaps equally important was the desire to keep the second generation at least nominally within the fold. For those who had come to America at an early age and for those born in this country, maintaining Old World practices was usually problematic.

The East Europeans of the 1880s and 1890s started their own congregations partly because they were not accepted by their already Americanized brethren of German descent, and partly to maintain their own cultural baggage and identity. They were simply doing what made them feel comfortable. Nonetheless, within a few decades they, too, Americanized and slipped away from Old World practices. Kashrut rules went, as did the strict observance of the Sabbath. Conflicts arose when wealthy leaders of the congregations were allowed to be called up to the Torah even though their businesses remained open on Saturday. Congregations split and went into decline as the children grew up and away from religious observance.

A little-known movement today, but one very prominent at the time, emerged during the 1920s and 1930s which served to bridge the gap before the widespread acceptance of Conservatism in the 1940s and 1950s. It was called "Modern Orthodoxy," not to be confused with a similarly titled segment of today's American Orthodox community. A key exemplar of the movement in the South and a person whose story offers an excellent perspective for a case study of the transition from the first- to second-generation East European immigrant experience was Rabbi Harry H. Epstein.

### *Early Life and Training*

Harry Epstein was born into the proverbial long line of rabbis and talmudic scholars in Russian Lithuania in 1903.<sup>4</sup> His father, Ephraim,

moved first to New York and then to Chicago, where he rose to the deanship of the city's Orthodox rabbinate. The rest of the family joined the father in the "windy city" while Harry was still a young child. Harry received his religious education from his father and through private tutors until his early teen years. Then his father and a handful of other Orthodox rabbis started what became Chicago's Rabbinical College of America to provide the European yeshiva opportunity without the necessity of traveling to the home country or to New York.<sup>5</sup> Following the new model of the more advanced yeshivot (and incidentally, paralleling the pattern of Isaac Mayer Wise's earlier Hebrew Union College), the boys received their secular education from the public schools.

Harry excelled and his father sought greater opportunities for him at New York's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. RIETS, forerunner of Yeshiva University, was presided over by the dynamic and forward-looking Bernard Revel. Revel's goal was to establish a first-class yeshiva in America to train an American Orthodox rabbinate. Yet teachers and students recognized that this goal was not being fully achieved, so Harry was encouraged to return to his place of birth to attend his uncle Moshe Mordecai Epstein's Slobodka Yeshiva.

Although what we might regard as an overgrown shtetl in the Pale of Settlement, Slobodka was actually a major suburban center just outside Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania. It housed an outstanding yeshiva reflecting the major currents of contemporary Jewish thought. The brilliant students its excellent teachers attracted debated Zionism, musar (the study of ethics promoted by Rabbi Israel Salanter), and the talmud based upon reference to the Bible, history, and science as well as holistic textual analysis. Above all, through the "Slobodka method," they learned how to think critically and not to separate themselves from worldly experience. Unintentionally and in contrast to contemporary yeshivot, Slobodka's method and curriculum also prepared the students for more dramatic future changes.

### *Interludes in Hebron and Tulsa*

After two years of study, Harry was chosen one of ten exceptional students (and the only "American") to journey with his uncle to start a branch of the yeshiva in Hebron, Palestine. There was a strong sense

that, following a short period of relative toleration, the Jews of Eastern Europe were doomed to more persecution and even destruction. Harry Epstein graduated and obtained *smicha* (ordination) in Israel and returned to pursue his education at the University of Chicago. Yet the young man was floundering. He had wanted to be a physician, but chose rabbinical study upon the urging of his father. When his uncle came to America to raise money for the Hebron yeshiva, he was chosen to travel along as an English-speaking aide and interpreter. Harry immensely enjoyed this journey, which took him from Canada to California, Texas, and Washington, D.C., and his own reputation began to grow. He was asked to return to Oklahoma to serve a congregation where he had solicited funds.

This Orthodox congregation was well established. It had many members made wealthy by the oil business, including its president, David Travis, Bernard Revel's father in-law. Travis had the young rabbi pray for the success of new wells and help distribute his charitable donations. The year spent at Tulsa's B'nai Emunah taught Harry Epstein much about the world and about living Torah. When he was asked to give an "audition weekend" at Atlanta's Ahavath Achim, however, he welcomed the opportunity.

### *Ahavath Achim*

Atlanta was a vibrant city in 1928, boasting a plethora of Jewish associations and five congregations.<sup>6</sup> Of the latter, three had been founded by the East Europeans. Anshi S'fard was a small Hasidic shul. Shearith Israel was a traditional Orthodox congregation established in 1904 and led for the past twenty years by Rabbi Tobias Geffen. This congregation was an offshoot of the less traditional but still Orthodox Ahavath Achim, started in 1887. Geffen, an Old World scholar, maintained rigid control over practices in his shul, but by the time Epstein arrived he was having difficulty keeping up attendance and dues. Shearith Israel was undergoing a less dramatic transition than Ahavath Achim.

Ahavath Achim's membership included many who had come to Atlanta as early as fifty years before. They were well on the road to economic success, and their children were entering business and the

professions after schooling at the University of Georgia, the Georgia Institute of Technology, or the best northern universities. Their degree of acculturation was reflected in an unsuccessful attempt to organize Congregation Beth Israel in 1905 as a Conservative alternative. About the same time Ahavath Achim's spiritual leader, Rabbi Benjamin Meyerovitz, began to deliver some of his sermons in English. During the 1920s Rabbi Abraham P. Hirmes presided over Ahavath Achim. He was a kindly man who felt more comfortable with his native Yiddish than with his faltering English. He was dominated by the long-time president, Joel Dorfan. When Epstein was chosen as his successor, Hirmes left quietly, as if he realized that he was not capable of meeting the congregation's needs.

### *Innovations and Changes*

Epstein was welcomed as a breath of fresh air. As an outspoken supporter of Modern Orthodoxy, he came with the perfect credentials. He was a talmudic scholar from an unquestionably Orthodox background who could conduct Talmud classes in Yiddish for the remaining traditionalists. An outstanding speaker in English, young and handsome, he could keep the allegiance of the acculturating middle-aged group and attract their children to the synagogue. He would continue his education, obtaining degrees from Emory University, the University of Illinois School of Law, and the Central School of Religion, and be able to challenge them intellectually. He also served as a liaison to the Gentile community, giving speeches, participating in interfaith programs, and becoming active in community social service efforts. He thus came to symbolize the growing integration and rise of his congregants in a fashion analogous to that of the Reform rabbis who ministered to the second- and third-generation German Jews.

After an initial conflict with the traditionalists, Epstein learned to explain innovations to them and to introduce changes gradually. He gave sermons in English and Yiddish during the High Holidays for a number of years until the Yiddish could be phased out. Friday-night services were begun at an early hour so that participants could go to the movies afterward. Although the older members staged a lockout, they were quickly convinced that at least in this fashion their children would attend some services. A men's club, which sponsored the choir

and bulletin, encouraged communication, socializing, and participation. The Hebrew school and Sunday school programs were reinvigorated, better staffed, and organized with a well-defined curriculum. Services were better organized and shortened as decorum became the norm. Over a period of years the women's seating section was brought downstairs into the sanctuary and the boundaries between the sexes eventually disappeared. The bat mitzvah ceremony, a pioneer endeavor in the South, welcomed young ladies into adulthood during the Sabbath service. Adult education classes, classes for young women in Jewish cooking and how to practice holiday traditions, and book review sessions brought young members knowledge and a sense of intellectual stimulation and growth, as did Epstein's carefully developed and clearly delivered sermons.<sup>7</sup>

### *Modern Orthodoxy*

Epstein's ideas and practices closely resembled those of Mordecai Kaplan and of Orthodox thinkers like Joseph Lookstein and Leo Jung. The theories of Modern Orthodoxy which he espoused reflected the positive historicism of Zacharias Frankel and the foundations of Samson Raphael Hirsch. During the late nineteenth century the latter attempted to meet the challenge posed by Reform by emphasizing the distinctiveness of Judaism and the beauties of its tradition. His students were given a grounding in both secular and ecclesiastical studies to be better able to debate on an intellectual plane and thus to retain the increasingly well-educated and acculturating Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe. Hirsch's American counterparts, including Bernard Drachman and Henry Pereira Mendes, organized the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Association of American Orthodox Rabbis in response to Isaac Meyer Wise's organizational efforts. They modernized education, used English in prayers, and fostered dignified services. Their later followers looked to Bernard Revel to train American-born rabbis in Talmud, Bible, and secular studies.

Seeing certain rituals as nonessential, the advocates of Modern Orthodoxy were willing to make compromises in these areas in order to maintain the essence of the laws. They viewed Judaism as an evolving religion very much in the talmudic sense paralleling Frankel's view of history as continuing revelation and Kaplan's concept of Judaism as

an adapting culture. Yet Frankel and Kaplan can be seen as influential figures in the development of Conservative Judaism.

Herein lay one of the conundrums of the practitioners of Modern Orthodoxy. Once they started on the road to compromise and fought to maintain membership through adjustment, they blurred the distinction between Orthodoxy and the increasingly attractive Conservative alternative. In many ways, they laid the groundwork and eased the transition of their congregants to later affiliation with the Conservative movement.<sup>8</sup>

### *Ahavath Achim Joins the Conservative Movement*

From his arrival in Atlanta in 1928 through the 1940s Epstein was an exemplar of Modern Orthodoxy for the Southeast. He spoke at numerous congregations, launched fundraising campaigns, especially on behalf of Zionism, recommended, installed, and commemorated anniversaries for other rabbis, and was a major figure in the southern branch of the Rabbinical Council of America. When the congregations in Birmingham and New Orleans wanted a Modern Orthodox rabbi, it was to Harry Epstein that they looked for assistance.

Unlike his friend Abraham Mesch of Birmingham and others, Epstein held Ahavath Achim in the Orthodox camp until after World War II. In the 1940s and 1950s rabbis fleeing the Holocaust brought an unflinching brand of Orthodoxy to America. They proved to be a powerful force in the seminaries and national rabbinic organizations. There was less and less room for practitioners of Modern Orthodox innovation.<sup>9</sup> Against his father's strong objections, Harry Epstein led his congregation into the Conservative fold officially in 1954. The congregants were becoming affluent. They were taking leadership away from the German Jews in local Jewish affairs, and Epstein was encouraging them to become active in national Jewish circles. As Epstein explained in an interview for the *Southern Israelite*, he had really been guiding the congregation toward Conservatism since his arrival.

Affiliation brought with it very little change. The rabbi and his congregants gained posts in regional and national Conservative organizations as they had in Orthodox circles previously. Epstein led his congregation until receiving emeritus status in 1984. His replacement, Arnold Goodman, then president of the Rabbinical Assembly, al-

lowed women to read from the Torah and introduced other practices which his predecessor felt reflected too much Reform. In fact, Harry Epstein now questions the decision to affiliate with Conservative Judaism. He wonders whether he allowed the congregants to stray too far from the fold.

Yet it could be argued that he did not have an option. Decades passed between his Modern Orthodox initiative and the resurgence of a viable Orthodoxy. Without the necessary adaptation, a generation might have been lost altogether. Epstein's struggle thus resembled that of the German Jewish rabbinate of a previous time. The choice for them also had been between acculturation and total assimilation.

### *A Parallel Case in Minneapolis*

Did Harry Epstein's residence in the South have an impact on his decisions and on the adjustment of his second-generation congregants? It is argued here that the answers to these questions are qualified negatives. There would have very little difference had Epstein served a similar congregation in Columbus, Ohio, Portland, Oregon, or a host of other commercial cities elsewhere in the United States during the same era. In fact, the career of a colleague in Minneapolis, Minnesota, so closely parallels Epstein's that it largely confirms this point.<sup>10</sup>

Congregation Knesseth Israel of that city began as an old-time Orthodox shul in 1888, one year after Ahavath Achim was founded. It was the major sponsor of a chief rabbi for the entire city in 1902, and by 1914 emerged as a congregation whose young members supported the engagement of a rabbi who would conduct Friday-night services and give sermons in English. When Rabbi Hirsch Heiman was called to the pulpit in 1931, he had just completed his studies in Palestine. Born in Lithuania, Heiman had been trained at the Slobodka yeshiva and traveled to Hebron in the same group of students with Epstein. He received *smicha* from Moshe Mordecai Epstein, Epstein's brother-in-law Isser Zalman Meltzer, head of the Etz Chaim yeshiva in Palestine, and Rabbi Kook, Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine. Harry Epstein had received similar recognition from his uncle and from Rabbi Kook among others.

As leader of his Minnesota congregation, Heiman instigated the

organization of a men's club to meet the needs of the younger members, created study groups for boys of different ages, and worked actively for the city's Jewish federation, talmud torah, and Jewish Family Welfare and Children's Home. Typically, the men's club perpetuated tradition by addressing modern Jewish problems and by reaching out to the children of the old-time members by making the synagogue a center of Jewish life. Heiman was a member of the Rabbinical Council of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and served on the national boards of Mizrachi and the United Palestine Appeal. Virtually a brother in arms, Harry Epstein accepted Heiman's invitation to deliver the keynote speech at the congregation's fiftieth anniversary. Heiman, like Epstein, guided his congregants into the Conservative fold.<sup>11</sup>

### *Was Being in the South a Factor?*

Reform rabbis like Morris Newfield and David Marx in the South as elsewhere interacted closely with Christian clergy, served as ambassadors to the Gentiles, and were outspoken in varying degrees on social issues. The examples of their mid-nineteenth-century forebears and the Pittsburgh Platform had set the stage for these roles.<sup>12</sup> With an acculturating and increasingly affluent congregation, Epstein could emulate some of these tasks. He, too, interacted (albeit on a far more limited scale) with the Christian clergy in organizations like the National Council of Christians and Jews. As an emissary, he was the first rabbi to have a regular radio broadcast in Atlanta, and he wrote a column for the *Atlanta Constitution*. In these ways he explained Judaism to a community with little knowledge of the minority in its midst and facilitated the acceptance of his congregants into the community. Actually his symbolic coming out mirrored the actions of his membership.

Were these actions "southern"? Not necessarily. They actually reflected the functions of a rabbi in a city in which Jews were a relatively small group and in which economic and cultural interaction with the host society was becoming the desired norm. Like other Modern Orthodox and Conservative rabbis who were his contemporaries, these tasks never became the major concerns that they did for Reform rabbis. The latter tended to blur religious distinctions in their quest for universality. Epstein emphasized distinctiveness above similarities.

While Jacob Rothschild, the rabbi of Atlanta's Reform congregation, The Temple, devoted much of his effort to the civil rights movement, Harry Epstein worked quietly for the same results. Yet the issue was peripheral to him.<sup>13</sup> Epstein's mission was clearly within the Jewish milieu. He spent far more time and was more concerned with educating his congregants in Judaism and opposing a perceived persistent decline in observance. Christian counterparts had no noticeable impact on his thoughts or actions. Whereas Zionism was almost an afterthought for Rothschild, it was Epstein's life blood. Epstein was an immigrant rabbi, a rabbi to an ethnic community in transition. That is what he had been unintentionally prepared for at Slobodka and what he would have done in virtually any community like Atlanta throughout America.

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### Notes

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1. See, for example, Judith R. Kramer and Seymour Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto: Conflict Resolutions of Three Generations of American Jews* (New Haven, 1961); Annie Kriegel, "Generational Difference: The History of an Idea," *Daedalus*, Fall 1978, pp. 23-38; Vladimir C. Nahirny and Joshua A. Fishman, "American Immigrant Groups: Ethnic Identification and the Problem of Generations," *Sociological Review*, 1965, pp. 311-326; Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York, 1981); William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Community: Portland Jewry Over Four Generations* (Albany, N.Y., 1982); Louis Schmier, "Jews and Gentiles in a South Georgia Town," in *Jews of the South*, ed. Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier (Macon, 1984), pp. 1-16; Diane Matza, "Sephardic Jews Transmitting Culture in Three Generations," *American Jewish History* (in press).

2. These patterns can be seen in the histories of virtually every congregation established by northern European Jews during the nineteenth century in any American city. See, for example, Janice Rothschild, *As But a Day: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (Atlanta, 1967); Mark H. Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie: The Birmingham Experience* (University, Ala., 1974); Toll, *Making of an Ethnic Community*; Marc Lee Raphael, *Jews and Judaism in a Midwestern Community: Columbus, Ohio, 1840–1975* (Columbus, 1979); Max Vorspan and Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Los Angeles* (San Marino, Calif., 1970); Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland* (Cleveland, 1978); Judith E. Endelman, *The Jewish Community of Indianapolis, 1849 to the Present* (Bloomington, 1984).

3. Leon Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover, N.H., 1976); Charles Reznikoff, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia, 1950); Saul J. Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733–1983* (Savannah, 1983).

4. On Epstein, see the Harry H. Epstein Collection, Atlanta Jewish Community Archives, Jewish Heritage Center, Atlanta Jewish Federation; a series of interviews conducted by this author of Rabbi Epstein, April–June 1986; and Mark K. Bauman, *Harry H. Epstein and the Rabbinate as Conduit for Change* (Hoboken, N.J., 1990). All biographical information is from these sources unless otherwise noted. This article is mainly derived from the larger biography.

5. On the Rabbinical College of America, see Leonard C. Mishkin, “The Rabbi Ephraim Epstein Story,” Harold P. Smith, “Hebrew Theological Seminary: Its Impact on Chicago and World Jewry,” and “Hebrew Theological College, 1922–1982,” all in *Hebrew Theological Seminary Journal*. Copies of these articles were kindly provided by the college library. On M. M. Epstein, see Aaron Rothkoff, “Rabbi Mosheh Mordechai Epstein,” *Jewish Life*, February–March 1969, pp. 47–53.

6. On Atlanta Jewry during this era, see Rothschild, *As But a Day*; Solomon Sutker, “The Jews of Atlanta: Their Social Structure and Leadership Patterns” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1950); Arnold Shankman, “Atlanta Jewry, 1900–1930,” *American Jewish Archives*, November 1973, pp. 131–155; Kenneth W. Stein, *A History of Ahavath Achim Congregation, 1887–1977* (Atlanta, 1978); Doris Goldstein, *From Generation to Generation: A Centennial History of Congregation Ahavath Achim, 1887–1897* (Atlanta, 1987); Mark K. Bauman, “Centripetal and Centrifugal Forces Facing the People of Many Communities: Atlanta Jewry from the Leo Frank Case to the Great Depression,” *Atlanta Historical Journal*, Fall 1979, pp. 25–54.

7. Bauman, *Harry H. Epstein*; Stein, *History of Ahavath Achim*.

8. Bauman, *Harry H. Epstein*; Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators: Varieties of Orthodox Rabbis in America, 1886–1983,” *American Jewish Archives* 35, no. 2 (November 1983): 100–187; Abraham J. Karp, “The Conservative Rabbi—Dissatisfied But Not Unhappy,” *ibid.*, pp. 188–262; Marc Lee Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism: The Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Traditions in Historical Perspective* (San Francisco, 1984); Eugene Markovitz, “Henry Pereira Mendes: Builder of Traditional Judaism in America” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1961); Jeffrey S. Gurock, “From Exception to Role Model: Bernard Drachman and the Evolution of Jewish Religious Life in America, 1880–1920,” *American Jewish History* 76 (June 1987): 456–484.

There were substantial differences of thought and practice between Frankel and Hirsch, and Kaplan and Revel that are of interest to institutional and intellectual historians. Nonetheless, like many of his contemporaries, Epstein tended to gloss over these, choosing different elements from each and molding them into a workable, eclectic synthesis suitable to his style and to his audience.

9. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators”; Raphael, *Profiles in American Judaism*.

10. My argument against southern Jewish distinctiveness will be elaborated upon in later research. I intend to suggest that American Jewish history is remarkably uniform regionally and that the comparatively few differences are best explained in relation to local environments—colonial port cities, small towns, commercial and industrial cities, and suburbs.

11. Hirsch Heiman to Harry Epstein, 11 March 1938, 3 April 1938; Golden Anniversary, Knesset Israel, 1888–1938, Program, all in “Activities—Minneapolis, Minnesota” folder, Epstein Collection.

12. Mark Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi: Morris Newfield and Alabama, 1895–1940* (University, Ala., 1986); Mark K. Bauman and Arnold Shankman, “The Rabbi as Ethnic Broker: The Case of David Marx,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 2 (Spring 1983): 51–68; Malcolm H. Stern, “The Role of the Rabbi in the South,” in *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry*, ed. Nathan M. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky (Charlottesville, 1979), pp. 21–32.

13. Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (Macon, Ga., 1985). Upon Rothschild's death, Mayor Maynard Jackson asked Rabbi Epstein to accept the former's place on Atlanta's Community Relations Committee. A black mayor thus recognized the role of an immigrant rabbi as more than just a silent observer in the civil rights movement.