

## TO OUR READERS...

More than sixty years have passed since Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. (1888–1965) published his penetrating analysis, “The American as Reformer.” Many scholars and social commentators have discussed and debated the validity of Schlesinger’s interesting thesis, wherein he argued that America possessed an ongoing and unparalleled commitment to the improvement of nearly all areas of life and culture. “The United States, . . .” Schlesinger wrote in 1950, “has nearly always set the pace for the Old World in reform zeal.”<sup>1</sup> He cited many examples of how the nation’s reformist legacy had manifested itself over the years: (a) the spread of democratic suffrage to those who had been deprived; (b) the ongoing commitment to a separation of church and state; (c) the enhancement of public education; (d) the belief in the value of personal reform, and so forth. Schlesinger published this thesis at a time of heightened concern about true Americanism, when many people wanted to root out all that was “un-American” in society. Schlesinger may very well have been motivated to advance his famous thesis to counter this reactionary trend and remind Americans of the nation’s venerable reformist heritage.<sup>2</sup>

According to Schlesinger, two key factors in American history made progressivism an important trend. First—in contrast to the Old World—the New World was a social *tabula rasa*. The nation’s newness significantly lessened the human tendency to be emotionally tied to the dictates of tradition. Second, the majority of those who immigrated to the United States did so because they were determined to improve their own economic, social, and political circumstances. These people possessed little desire to recreate in America the inhospitable conditions they had voluntarily abandoned in Europe. In addition to these important factors, Schlesinger pointed out that the reform impulse in America has consistently been animated by Enlightenment ideology, which was particularly influential during so many of the nation’s transformational crises (viz., the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, etc.).

The spirit of the Protestant dissenters also played a pivotal role in spurring America’s impulse to reform, wrote Schlesinger, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> The essay’s emphasis on the importance of “dissenting Protestantism” may have prompted twentieth-century scholars to consider the contributions that non-Protestant religions have made to the shaping of American culture. Histories of American Catholicism and American Judaism, for instance, inform us that these religions have also contributed to America’s legacy of reform—particularly in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Only a few years after Schlesinger published his ideas about the American as reformer, a brilliant sociologist, Will Herberg (1901–1977), published another influential thesis that sought to explain why religious affiliation

and identification were seemingly so important to materialistically inclined Americans. Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism were *all* “religions of democracy,” Herberg wrote in 1955, and each one served as an effective means of “self-identification and social location” in America’s cultural landscape. In America, he wrote, religious identification (as opposed to ethnic identification) helped citizens to find their place in the greater society. All three of these religions pushed adherents to work for universal justice and the betterment of humankind.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Andrew R. Heinze (b. 1955) argued that the American psyche or “soul” may have been overwhelmingly shaped by Protestant mores during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the ethical ideals of Judaism became a second powerful influence during the twentieth century. The prominent role that American Jews have played in a wide range of social reform initiatives during the last century lends testimony, Heinze wrote, to the validity of his thesis.<sup>5</sup>

This issue of the journal contains three illuminating examples of what may be called the “reform impulse” in American *Jewish* life. Although each essay focuses on a distinctly different topic, the influence of the American reformist tradition is evident in all three investigations. In the first, Greg Robinson examines the little-known contributions that Cyrus Adler (1863–1940) made to the study of the so-called “Jefferson Bible.” This essay sheds light on the interesting role that Adler—an American Jewish intellectual—played in preserving and promulgating this valuable byproduct of Thomas Jefferson’s commitment to religious reform.

No one in American history has been more prominently identified with the values of religious freedom and church/state separation than Jefferson, yet the nature of his personal religious convictions has long been a topic of keen interest. Jefferson repeatedly eschewed supernaturalism, and he took a dim view of mindless ritualism. Yet the framer of the Declaration of Independence was unquestionably a strong advocate of religious reform and, in his writings about Jews and Judaism, repeatedly emphasized his conviction that Jews, like other Americans, must immerse themselves in the world of secular learning if they hoped to be full participants in American society.<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson practiced what he preached. He unquestionably valued religious teachings, but he was concomitantly and profoundly interested in secular studies. These ideological convictions inclined him toward religious reform, and he insisted that there was one “moral basis on which all our religions rest.”<sup>7</sup> Determined to identify that “moral basis,” Jefferson sat down and, with scissors in hand, began to cut verses out of his own personal copies of the Bible. He selected verses that he believed contained the true essence of Jesus’s teachings and that were free from superstition and supernaturalism. In his effort to remove “the diamonds from the dung hill,” Jefferson assembled verses that he believed were

historically authentic and thoroughly rational. He pasted them in chronological order on blank pages of a book. The result of Jefferson's fascinating biblical redaction was a compilation he called "The Philosophy of Jesus"—though most who are familiar with the president's idiosyncratic creation refer to it by the nickname that Cyrus Adler invented: the Jefferson Bible.<sup>8</sup>

Adler, a prominent Jewish communal figure who ultimately became the president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, was the first Jewish scholar to work as a librarian at the Smithsonian Institute. Robinson explains how Adler came to play a central role in locating the Jefferson Bible during his tenure at the Smithsonian and how, in 1904, this Jewish scholar became the editor of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, the first critical edition of the Jefferson Bible. Readers will also discover that Adler faced an array of political obstacles in his effort to expose the American public to Jefferson's biblical innovation. The fact that Adler was a practicing Jew caused some to maintain that he was not the right man to edit the Jefferson Bible.

The spirit of religious reform that impelled Jefferson to redact his own version of the Bible intrigued Adler, who shared many of Jefferson's intellectual interests. Both of these men possessed a reforming impulse, and the story of Adler's interest in the Jefferson Bible sheds light on how Enlightenment thought influenced both Christians and Jews in their use of "higher criticism" as a key to understanding the essence of the Bible's moral teachings.

The second essay in this journal focuses on the life and career of an American Jewish religious reformer, William Sparger. Regular readers of the journal will recall that in the previous issue we published Judith S. Pinnolis's groundbreaking study on the life and career of Julie Rosewald, a talented vocalist who served as "cantor soprano" at San Francisco's Emanu-El Temple for more than a decade and may very well have been the first woman to function as a cantor in an American synagogue. In this issue, Howard Stahl's essay on William Sparger represents another contribution to the growing body of writing on the history of the American cantorate. Stahl resurrects the life of a pioneering religious leader, whose contributions to the liturgical and educational development of American Reform Judaism—along with his enigmatic character and disappearance—have been all but forgotten.

Sparger, born and educated in Hungary, immigrated to the United States in 1882. In 1884, he became the rabbi of Brooklyn's Beth Elohim Congregation. He quickly established himself as an impressive vocalist and a talented minister who knew how to sermonize in English and chant a beautiful worship service. In 1891, Sparger was called to Congregation Emanu-El of New York City to serve as its service reader and cantor.

Like many of his immigrant peers, Sparger quickly assessed the religious landscape and the aesthetic tastes of his American coreligionists. Convinced that the traditional Jewish worship service needed to be reformed, Sparger's

musical talent enabled him to become a liturgical innovator. As the cantor of Congregation Emanu-El, Sparger not only embraced the liberalizing trends of the Reform worship service but, together with several cantorial colleagues such as Alois Kaiser (1840–1908) and Max Spicker (1858–1912), he helped to lay the musical foundations for a new American Jewish liturgical rite. Stahl's essay informs our understanding of how cantorial reformers contributed to the Americanization of the Jewish worship service during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Finally, Jonathan D. Sarna and Dvora E. Weisberg remind us that the reformist inclination of American culture can paradoxically influence the pursuit of traditional Jewish practice. The authors provide a detailed examination of what seems to be the oldest surviving *shtar halitzah* (the traditional writ of release from levirate marriage) written in the United States. This curious document—written in Charleston in 1807—guaranteed Isaiah Moses's new bride, Rebecca Phillips, that should her new husband die without having sired any children of his own, her brother-in-law, Levy Moses, would agree to release her from her legal obligation to marry him in accordance with the custom of levirate marriage. If need be, this release would be actualized by means of a ceremony known as *halitzah*.

Sarna and Weisberg note that the *shtar halitzah* was rarely used in the colonial and early national period. Furthermore, they stress, Rebecca Phillips had no practical need for this legal document since her husband, Isaiah, was a widower who had four (!) sons from his first wife. If Isaiah died before Rebecca, one of his four sons would carry on his lineage, and there would be no need for her to marry her brother-in-law. The likelihood of Isaiah Moses and his four sons *all* predeceasing Rebecca would have been exceedingly remote. Although it is impossible to determine why, under these circumstances, Rebecca nevertheless wanted such a safeguard, it is evident that Isaiah was prepared to accept her terms. Regardless of whether the *shtar* was practicable or legally necessary, one can surmise that Rebecca and Isaiah did what they thought was best under the circumstances that prevailed.

This particular phenomenon—making an effort to sustain Jewish practice in the context of new and unfamiliar circumstances—is emblematic of the overall nature of Jewish religious practice in America. Even when American Jews were bereft of knowledge regarding traditional practice, they repeatedly attempted to sustain Jewish practice as best they could—even if their efforts were not in keeping with the strict protocols of tradition. Schlesinger's observation comes again to mind: The unconventional circumstances that prevailed in America gave Jews license to improve their own religion. In this sense, the reform impulse even affected the practice of traditional Judaism itself!

In an eloquent and moving tribute to her friend and compatriot, Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906)—who remained single all of her life—Elizabeth

Cady Stanton (1815–1902) noted, “To live for a principle, for the triumph of some reform by which all mankind are to be lifted up to be wedded to an idea may be, after all, the holiest and happiest of marriages.”<sup>9</sup> Like so many other Americans, Jews have been inclined to work for the advancement of causes and concerns that were aimed at improving the quality of their own lives as well as the lives of their fellow citizens. The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives preserves the records of these achievements, and this journal disseminates the history of American Jewry—a heritage that exemplifies the conviction that “every reform is a transition from the past into a regenerated future.”<sup>10</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The American as Reformer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 5.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Filler, “Arthur M. Schlesinger’s *The American as Reformer*,” *The New England Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1951): 113–115.

<sup>3</sup>Schlesinger, *The American as Reformer*, 12.

<sup>4</sup>Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1955). For the reference to “religions of democracy” see p. 247; for the reference to “self-identification and social location,” see p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004). See “Introduction,” 1–10.

<sup>6</sup>In his letter to Mordecai Manuel Noah, 28 May 1818, Jefferson urged Jews to pay “more careful attention to education...which [would place] its members on the equal and commanding benches of science, [and] will exhibit them as equal objects of respect and favor.” See <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib026629> (accessed 31 July 2011). Writing to Isaac Harby of Charleston, Jefferson asserted that “Nothing is wiser than that all our institutions should keep pace with the advance of time and be improved with the improvements of the human mind. I have thought it a cruel addition to the wrongs which that injured sect have suffered that their youths should be excluded from the instructions in science afforded to all others in our public seminaries...” 6 January 1826. See <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib025624> (accessed 31 July 2011).

<sup>7</sup>Jefferson to Noah, 28 May 1818.

<sup>8</sup>See <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/05/local/me-beliefs5> (accessed 31 July 2011).

<sup>9</sup>Ida Husted Harper, *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill Company, 1891), 951.

<sup>10</sup>See Abraham Geiger’s essay on religious reform titled *Unser Gottesdienst, Eine Frage, die Dringend Lösung Verlangt* (Breslau: Schletter Press, 1868) as quoted in David Philipson, *Centenary Papers and Others* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Company, 1919), 102.