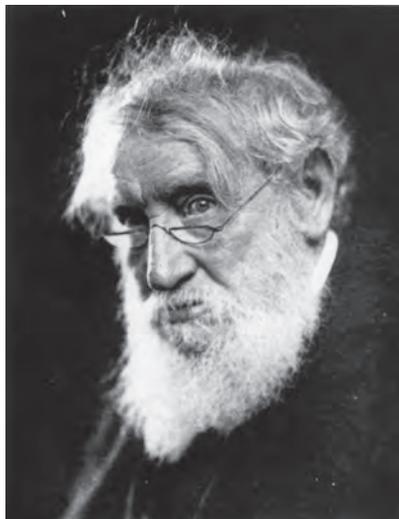


The Travails of Early Jewish Theological Seminary Graduates: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Challenges of the Emergent Conservative Movement, 1902–1913

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Solomon Schechter

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

No single date or event marked the birth of the Conservative movement. Rather, the movement emerged slowly over the course of the twentieth century, differentiating itself from the other American Jewish movements as it transitioned from an inclusive “big tent” to a movement with clearer boundaries. While several historians, including myself, have engaged the question of how exactly this process took place,¹ my goal here is somewhat different. In this essay, I will examine what the Conservative movement looked like in the years before it coalesced. I will do this by analyzing the experiences of its first generation of rabbis—the foot soldiers who labored to spread a message

that American Jewry was not quite ready to hear. I hope, more broadly, that an understanding of their experiences will ultimately shed light on the challenges faced by new and emergent American religious movements, including the factors that determine whether their first-generation clergy will succeed or fail.

The period of this study is a brief yet critical era—the formative years between Solomon Schechter’s arrival in 1902 to lead the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the creation of the United Synagogue of America in 1913. First, the period is important from an institutional perspective, as it begins with the reorganization of JTS under Schechter and ends with the creation of United Synagogue of America, which would in time become, respectively, the Seminary and the congregational arm of the Conservative movement. Second, because the United Synagogue had not yet formed prior to 1913, the era represents one of relatively haphazard growth—there were few if any guidelines as to the type of congregation that might be part of the emerging movement. And finally, Schechter was a charismatic leader who inspired a cadre of JTS graduates to spread his message throughout America. The period under

study represents the prime years of Schechter's involvement in their lives and the bulk of the years in which the disciples worked closely with their mentor.

To understand the state of the Conservative movement in this era, I will analyze the experiences of four JTS graduates, who together reflect the range of experiences that their peers faced as they entered the field.² Understanding their experiences reveals two critically important conclusions about the Conservative movement in the earliest years of the twentieth century. First, their experiences indicate that there was no clear congregational constituency that was prepared for the specific religious program that they advocated, so each rabbi generally struggled to transform his particular congregation into one that was receptive to his message. Though a handful of congregations were ready-made for Seminary graduates, they were few in number, and most of them were limited to large, urban areas. In the vast majority of cases, however, a rabbi faced a significant amount of congregational resistance, as lay control, generational conflict, and congregational ambivalence made it particularly difficult for him to shape the congregation as he might have liked.

Second, and closely related to the first, the experiences of these rabbis demonstrate that in this era there was not yet a clear definition or boundaries for the emerging movement. Different rabbis interpreted the term "Conservative" in different ways, and so too did their congregations. As a result, each rabbi was forced to tailor his own personal program to differing congregational realities, and thus Conservative Judaism could take wildly different forms from one place to the next—there was no one model, but rather the emerging movement was characterized by frequent experimentation. This, understandably, created fluid and porous boundaries that prevented the movement from articulating a unified message that would easily distinguish it from the other movements in American Judaism. These porous boundaries, coupled with the lack of a congregational constituency, posed significant challenges to the early JTS graduates, and their ultimate success was far from guaranteed.

Solomon Schechter and His Disciples

Solomon Schechter came to JTS in 1902 with the aim of both revitalizing and Americanizing traditional Judaism. Schechter, the world-renowned scholar who had gained fame by his discovery of the Cairo Genizah, was concerned with what he saw in both the Reform and Orthodox camps. On the left, he believed that Reform Jews had deviated too far from tradition, and on the right he maintained that a large number of Orthodox Jews had failed to adapt to America by clinging to Yiddish as the vernacular, by failing to adopt modern educational methods, and by lacking the decorum that he believed was consistent with American religious sensibilities. Schechter had no plans to create a new, third movement, but he wanted to unite American Jewry behind a platform of traditional Judaism infused with decorum, English, and modern education.



Herman Abramowitz of the Shaar Hashomayim Congregation, Montreal, Canada. The Jew in Canada, ed. Arthur Daniel Hart (Toronto and Montreal: Jewish Publications Ltd., 1926), 92.

Only by doing this, he maintained, could the next generation of American Jews remain committed to Judaism.

To implement his vision, Schechter trained a cadre of JTS students—his disciples—to carry this vision of Judaism to congregations across America.³ These disciples were a diverse group. Some were trained at the finest east European yeshivot, some were American-born with little traditional Jewish training, some received their training in central Europe, and one was from Palestine. Just as diverse as their backgrounds were their particular religious beliefs. Some advocated mixed seating and organs, while others believed that such innovations moved beyond the acceptable bounds of traditional Judaism. While they differed markedly on the particulars, they agreed on what they called the “essentials”—traditional Judaism with

English, modern education, and decorum—and they would devote their careers to implementing this message.

As these disciples left JTS to advocate for Schechter’s vision, they knew that most of their congregations would not quite be ready for what they had to offer. Schechter “would warn the students and remind them that they must not expect a bed of roses when they would graduate; that their work would be difficult, that it will not be as easy as other callings...”⁴ One disciple recalled that “the number of congregations in the entire country available for Seminary graduates was very few,” and salaries were “pitifully low.”⁵ Moreover, many turn-of-the-century synagogues had a vague desire for a “modern rabbi” but no clear understanding of how a “modern rabbi” could also be traditional, often putting the JTS graduate in the middle of congregational disputes. Whether the disciples truly understood just how difficult their task would be is not clear, but those who failed to heed these warnings would soon discover the harsh reality.

Herman Abramowitz: Success with Little Controversy

Though quick success was more the exception than the rule, there were some Schechter disciples who succeeded fairly easily in their early careers. One such rabbi was Herman Abramowitz, a 1902 JTS graduate, who found immediate success while encountering little conflict. Abramowitz began his career in 1902 at Shaar Hashomayim of Montreal. The Shaar, as it is frequently called, was a

traditional congregation that was well established when he arrived. Searching for a rabbi to fill a vacancy created when their spiritual leader abruptly left the synagogue, its leaders asked Schechter to recommend someone, and he suggested Abramowitz—then a twenty-two-year-old rabbinical student.⁶ After a successful High Holiday season, members of the Shaar were particularly impressed by his speaking ability and decided to hire him full-time upon his graduation.

Abramowitz was successful in large part because he was offered a position at a stable congregation that was well aligned with his vision—a lucky break that was all too rare among his colleagues. Abramowitz was a staunch supporter of traditional Judaism, and when he arrived at the Shaar in 1902, he found a synagogue that had already committed itself to this way of life. The traditionalism at the Shaar could have been due to its Canadian context, as congregations in Canada were frequently more traditional than those in the United States. However, there were other congregations in the United States led by JTS graduates that looked very similar. Nevertheless, congregational minutes from before Abramowitz's tenure show frequent concern that changes to ritual conform to traditional Jewish law, and thus the Shaar was already firmly committed to traditional Judaism.⁷

In addition to its emphasis on tradition, the Shaar was also deeply committed to more progressive elements of worship—the use of English and the incorporation of decorum, for example—even prior to the new rabbi's arrival.⁸ The congregation had issued rules to foster a more orderly and decorous service, informing the congregants that “walking or whispering is strictly forbidden,” that “chanting or humming” to the cantor was not acceptable, and that members were to immediately take their seats upon entering the synagogue.⁹ Yet there were limits to the Shaar's progressiveness—the congregation rejected innovations such as the organ, preferring instead a choir whose members wore ornate gowns to make the service more reverential.¹⁰ Abramowitz's balance between traditionalism and progressiveness aligned well with his new congregation's practices, and when he arrived, he and the Shaar were in general agreement on the congregation's outlook.

When they differed, however, Abramowitz seemed willing to compromise, and he maintained a nonconfrontational attitude with synagogue leadership. After watching Abramowitz's performance as their interim High Holiday rabbi, leaders of the Shaar were delighted to see his positive interaction with the younger generation. Yet the older members of the synagogue were still concerned with his youth and his level of traditional observance—for example, many members of the congregation had long, traditional beards, but Abramowitz did not. The young rabbi nevertheless demonstrated his willingness to adapt and avoid confrontation, agreeing to grow a beard. Throughout his life, Abramowitz wore a trademark goatee, perhaps a compromise between the traditional beards



Herman H. Rubenovitz and his wife, Mignon
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

characteristic of the older generation and the clean-shaven face with which he first arrived.¹¹

While Abramowitz was able to adapt to the desires of the older generation, his congregational program also seems to have been non-confrontational and mostly acceptable to the congregation. While there was no doubt friction at times between rabbi and congregation, it did not reach the boiling point where either rabbi or congregation severed their relationship. Much of the young rabbi's early work was aimed at providing the youth with educational opportunities. After a short time on the job, he instituted a Young People's Society, with the purpose of preparing the near-mature generation for synagogue

leadership positions.¹² He also emphasized education, serving as the principal of the religious school, and his work seems to have paid off. In 1915, 133 of the 190 children in the congregation attended the Sunday school, and 75 children received private Hebrew instruction.¹³

Abramowitz, then, offers a fairly rare example of success with very little conflict. He arrived at a congregation in a large city that was already committed to the broad form of Judaism that Schechter advocated, and Abramowitz's understanding of tradition, decorum, and progressiveness matched nicely with that of his congregation. Once at the Shaar, he avoided conflict by instituting a nonconfrontational program and by compromising when necessary. He remained there for his entire career until his death in 1947.¹⁴

Herman Rubenovitz: Success with Major Controversy

The second rabbi I will analyze is one who was also successful, but in a very different way. Herman Rubenovitz arrived at a congregation in another large city, Boston, which did not completely align with his balance of traditional Judaism and progressiveness—for example, Rubenovitz would advocate for an organ, though his congregation was initially far more traditional. He was successful, however, because he challenged his congregation to adopt his vision, endured a major schism, and eventually created the type of congregation in which he would be comfortable.

Before arriving in Boston, Rubenovitz, a 1908 JTS graduate, first accepted a position at Congregation Adath Jeshurun in Louisville. Adath Jeshurun had been founded in 1851 and was, according to a congregational historian, “one

of the pioneers in adjusting to the American environment while remaining loyal to Jewish traditions.”¹⁵ Once in Louisville, Rubenovitz’s work won the glowing praise of his teacher. “If all our alumni would do their duty to their Congregations and to their alma mater as you are doing,” Schechter told him, then the “Seminary will certainly accomplish its mission to American Jewry and to Israel in general.”¹⁶

Rubenovitz’s time in Louisville was short, and he arrived in 1910 at Congregation Mishkan Tefila in suburban Boston, where he remained for the rest of his career. There he did not find a situation that brought him great success, but he did create such a situation. Mishkan Tefila was founded in 1858 by Jews from Prussia and Posen, and they used German as the vernacular. In 1907, the congregation moved into a former church, which already “had comfortably cushioned pews,” and mixed seating became the norm. In addition, the congregation’s vernacular changed from German to English, and a confirmation ceremony for girls was introduced.¹⁷

Despite the progressive changes, Mishkan Tefila was not yet a place where a Seminary graduate could find easy success. One JTS rabbi who served before Rubenovitz described Mishkan Tefila as “absolutely without prestige or future.” He believed that “its glory is all in the past”; moreover, he did not believe that, for JTS-trained rabbis, “the position of Rabbi can ever be a happy one in that congregation.” None of his colleagues, he believed, should accept a position there, “except as a last resort.”¹⁸

When Rubenovitz arrived in Boston to lead this “old re-organized temple,”¹⁹ it was clear that his new congregation did not match his religious views as closely as Abramowitz’s views matched Shaar Hashomayim. Rubenovitz was one of the more progressive early graduates of the Seminary, and while there were some signs of progressiveness in his new congregation, it was still too traditional for his liking. “When I stepped into the pulpit of Mishkan Tefila,” he later wrote, “I found to my dismay that the old ways and methods were still observed there.”²⁰ He was concerned that “the sons and daughters of Orthodox Jewish parents” were forsaking tradition by attending Sunday services at Reform congregations. “These young people were dazzled by this radical reform which they mistook for progress and true Americanism,” he maintained.²¹ Rubenovitz was particularly concerned that:

The religious situation in our midst is one which must fill every thinking Jew with fear and apprehension for the future. The neglect of religious observance, the emptiness of our synagogues, the indifference of our young people and their ignorance of things Jewish, all these are so many danger signals warning us of the decline of religious enthusiasm, and of the decay of religious life. How to rekindle the waning enthusiasm and check this process of decay is the problem now confronting the synagogue of today.²²

Rubenovitz believed that the congregation needed to change, so he set out to shape it in a way that was more in accordance with his own views. His success would thus be far more difficult to achieve than the success Abramowitz found.

Some of the changes Rubenovitz advocated were not overly controversial. One of his first orders of business, for example, was to introduce modestly greater levels of decorum, as he believed that “in the first place a more aesthetic and dignified setting had to be given to the traditional synagogue service if the loyalty and support of our young people were to be won for it.”²³ During the High Holiday service, “the choirboys invariably became restless” and often did not “observe their cues and had punishment administered by the cantor in view of the entire congregation.” Rubenovitz determined that “something more in keeping with good taste and proper decorum would have to be introduced.”²⁴ He also believed in strengthening Jewish education. He felt that for young people to remain loyal to Judaism, “an intensive Jewish education which began in early childhood,” including Hebrew language and Hebrew Bible as central components, was necessary. He also argued that study circles, discussion groups, and evening courses in Hebrew and Jewish history were essential for adults and young adults.²⁵

Some of his proposed changes, however, were much more controversial and would require Rubenovitz to confront his congregation and challenge them to adopt his views. The new synagogue building was a former church and already “contained a fine organ,” though it does not appear that the organ was used initially on Sabbaths and holidays.²⁶ However, during a trip to Europe in 1913, Rubenovitz found a “glorious musical setting in the leading temples of Paris, Berlin and Vienna,”²⁷ and when he returned, he tried to incorporate what he had seen into his own congregation. He thus began to advocate for a mixed choir and organ use on holidays and Sabbaths—both of which were in conflict with traditional Jewish law. This proposal was more radical than those that many of his fellow disciples may have advocated, but Rubenovitz nevertheless remained committed to other forms of tradition, insisting that the traditional Hebrew prayers “were to be maintained intact.”²⁸ What he was advocating was not to his mind Reform Judaism, but his interpretation of Conservative Judaism.

To make the changes he desired, Rubenovitz would need to confront his congregation and find a majority of members willing to support his proposal. At what he described as a “stormy Congregational meeting” in the fall of 1914, Rubenovitz won a major victory in his quest to remake his congregation, implementing the organ and choir.²⁹ The vote was close, however, with sixty-seven voting for Rubenovitz’s proposal and fifty-four against.³⁰ After Rubenovitz’s proposal was approved, he recalled that “our membership grew rapidly” and “for the first time, Boston Jewry witnessed a new type of religious service in which the hallowed, traditional ritual of the synagogue was invested with a beauty and dignity which won the hearts of young and old.” Others from

New England were so impressed with the service, he maintained, “that they adopted it as a pattern to be followed in their own congregations.”³¹

Therefore, while Rubenovitz was successful, his success came in a very different manner than that of Abramowitz. Rubenovitz found a congregation that did not match his religious views, and to succeed, he was forced to shape the congregation according to his own views. As we will see, not every rabbi could accomplish this feat. In addition, Rubenovitz differed from Abramowitz in that his “synthesis of tradition and modern spirit” was far more liberal.³²

As a sign of the great diversity within the emerging Conservative movement, Rubenovitz and Abramowitz were both successful in implementing radically different congregational programs.



Louis I. Egelson

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Louis Egelson: Failure and Departure

Louis Egelson, the third rabbi whom I will analyze, made a similarly bold attempt to institute change in a congregation in a major city, but unlike Rubenovitz, he was unable to convert his Washington, DC, congregation to his point of view. While his failure to implement change was not unique, what sets Egelson apart from most Seminary graduates was his willingness to leave the orbit of his colleagues and transfer his primary identification to the Reform movement, where he became a leader and remained for the rest of his career.

The American-born Egelson, also a 1908 JTS graduate, accepted his first pulpit at Congregation Adath Israel in Washington, DC, at age twenty-two.³³ At its heart, Adath Israel was very traditional—it had been founded in 1869, when a group of more traditionally minded German Jews broke away from the Washington Hebrew Congregation because it was adopting reforms with which they did not agree.³⁴ The new congregation’s constitution declared that all prayers, with the exception of the prayer for the government, “shall be read in the original Hebrew language, according to the custom of the Orthodox German Israelite Minhag Ashkenaz.” Moreover, “no alteration, amendment, or modification shall ever at any time be made to those articles of the constitution pertaining to the mode of worship.” Finally, its president was to “abstain from all secular pursuits on the Sabbath (Saturday)...”³⁵

While the congregation was very protective of traditional Judaism, it nonetheless incorporated some progressive elements, including an increased level of decorum. The president was not only to observe the Sabbath, he was also in charge of “preserving proper order and decorum, causing to be ejected any disorderly person.”³⁶

Though Aath Israel balanced traditional and progressive elements, it was not a ready-made congregation for a Seminary graduate. Shortly before Egelson’s arrival, the synagogue had been under the leadership of another JTS-trained rabbi, who felt that he had been unsuccessful in transforming the congregation according to his vision. That rabbi strengthened the school,³⁷ but he complained that his congregants did not “follow certain of the principles of our religion, without which they would not be Orthodox Hebrew.” Moreover, he tried to insist on Sabbath observance, but to no avail. “Various other matters of observance it is absolutely impossible to persuade them to observe,” he maintained, “and it seems that my labor [sic] are gone for nothing.” He was also disappointed that, despite his efforts, families did not send their children to the congregational school in the numbers that he had hoped.³⁸ This rabbi’s experience foreshadowed a major challenge for Orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth century: Would an Orthodox congregation be one that practiced Orthodoxy within its walls, or must its members also live Orthodox lifestyles?

Frustrated by members who did not incorporate traditional Jewish practices into their own lives, this rabbi left Aath Israel. He was followed for a brief time by an east-European-trained rabbi,³⁹ and then by Egelson, who arrived in 1908—shortly after the dedication of a new building.⁴⁰ Egelson also knew that he was in a situation that would require him to remake the congregation if he wanted to succeed. He compared his new synagogue to a “field large in area, that had been lying fallow for a number of years” and claimed that the field had “neither been plowed nor furrowed.”⁴¹

Like the congregation’s previous rabbis, and also much like Abramowitz and Rubenovitz, Egelson chose to emphasize education, but he was frustrated by the tepid response to his initiatives. He sought “to train the young that they may be able properly to take the places of their elders in the Jewish ranks, and in the councils and administration of the synagogue” by teaching an afternoon Hebrew school class, and he offered a Hebrew course for adults and high school students. However, he disappointedly observed that “there was little response to this effort.”⁴² Moreover, during his tenure, financial difficulties and a drop in registration forced a citywide Talmud Torah to close.⁴³

Ignoring Egelson’s efforts to strengthen education was not the only way the laity stood in his way; they were also skeptical of his plans to modernize the congregation in other ways. Egelson was concerned about “consigning the women to the gallery during service,”⁴⁴ so he advocated mixed seating as a way to put “men and women on an equal footing.”⁴⁵ Like many of his colleagues, he

also “instituted late Friday evening services” with lectures that would educate his congregants, “but there was little response on the part of members.”⁴⁶ Egelson advocated the “introduction of more modern ideas into the worship”⁴⁷ and felt that a ceremony was less important than the motivation behind it, implying that further changes to ritual may have been permissible.⁴⁸ Those members of his congregation who viewed him as “Reform” for advocating these positions were given more fodder when it was rumored that the young and (apparently) unmarried rabbi was dating a member of the local Reform congregation.⁴⁹

The most important disagreement, however, between Egelson and the congregation was over the use of English in the synagogue. Egelson believed that the disinterest from members of the younger generation stemmed from their inability to understand Hebrew, which prevented them from gaining anything substantive from the services.⁵⁰ Understanding that his efforts to teach Hebrew were mostly for naught, he then “decided that the only way to prevent the younger element from going to the radical reform Temple, was to introduce some English into the service.”⁵¹ Egelson believed that when combined with decorum, the English sermon “will do more to retain the allegiance of the younger generation to Orthodoxy than any other agency.”⁵² Accordingly, he tried to add in English “a scriptural reading, a prayer, and the benediction,” but a “mild protest” came from the older generation. When he proposed a prayer book that contained both English and Hebrew, he also heard opposition from the older generation. “They must yield to the English in order that their children may become better Jews,” Egelson maintained.⁵³

Unable to shape the congregation as he wished by introducing English, he polarized the congregation and forced a referendum on his program. He delivered a sermon titled “Some Weeds of Orthodox Judaism,” in which he called certain practices “little more than the superstitious baggage of an outmoded past.” In the speech, he specifically criticized the practice of selling honors for the High Holidays within the synagogue itself.⁵⁴ Additionally, he “denounced the congregation on Kol Nidre night rather severely and pleaded for the inclusion of some English in the service on the High Holidays so that the younger people could recite some prayers.”⁵⁵ In response to his Kol Nidre admonition, “the older people, many of whom have long since given up Sabbath observance, raised their voice in holy horror...” He was frustrated that there was “still great objection on the part of some to reciting their prayers in a language they understand.”⁵⁶

Though he knew that his actions had the potential to “bring about a rupture in the congregation itself,” Egelson nevertheless continued his attempts to shape the congregation according to his views.⁵⁷ It did not take long, however, for this rupture to occur, and the split would be along generational lines: The elders of the congregation (“Jews from the Old World”) opposed him, and the younger, more upwardly mobile and wealthy members supported him.⁵⁸ The young rabbi knew that navigating these two factions, which seemed to be equally divided,

would be challenging. He knew that “if some of my suggestions are not adopted by the majority of the congregation, my position becomes an untenable one.”⁵⁹

That is exactly what happened. While Rubenovitz survived his congregational referendum by thirteen votes, Egelson lost his by a mere two votes, and in late 1910, his contract was not renewed. Initially, Egelson and his supporters fought for their position. Two trustees announced their resignations immediately after the vote, and others threatened to do the same.⁶⁰ Some members of the congregation circulated a petition asking the board to reconsider its position, but Egelson refused to defuse the situation by compromising. The *Washington Post* reported Egelson’s friends as saying that “Mr. Egelson will not capitulate from his stand in favor of church progressiveness, and the partial use of the English language in services, even though his failure to do so should cost him the reelection.”⁶¹ It did.

While the congregation battled internally, Egelson decided that he wanted no part of the squabble, and regardless of the outcome, he would “seek another field which is more in harmony with my religious views.”⁶² He first considered working with the progressive faction to create a new congregation “that shall be conservative rather than either orthodox or reform,”⁶³ though as we have seen, it is unclear just what “Conservative” meant from one rabbi or congregation to the next. Nevertheless, this plan never came to fruition; instead, the progressives remained at Adath Israel, which suffered through a tumultuous era filled with ambivalence and financial uncertainty. Over the next approximately ten years, the congregation was led by no fewer than three additional JTS graduates and at least one European-trained hazzan.⁶⁴ This reflects the congregation’s difficulty in choosing a clear direction, and the congregational uncertainty both before and after Egelson’s tenure speaks to the difficult conditions for Seminary rabbis in congregations that were not quite ready for their messages.

Egelson, meanwhile, left the Seminary orbit and accepted a position at the Reform Temple Emanuel in Greensboro, North Carolina—though during the controversy he had called the notion that was embracing Reform “absurd.”⁶⁵ This action highlights the porous boundary between Reform and Conservative Judaism during this era. The Greensboro congregation had been founded in 1907 as an informal worship group,⁶⁶ and Egelson apparently served it from 1911–1914.⁶⁷

Egelson was not the only Seminary-trained rabbi to officiate at Reform congregations or join the organizations of the Reform movement. But while some who were affiliated with the Reform movement remained part of the Seminary orbit, in close contact with Schechter and their fellow JTS graduates on matters such as job placement, Egelson apparently did not. Ultimately, he became the assistant director of the Department of Synagogue and School Extension of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform movement’s congregational arm, where he remained until his death in 1957.⁶⁸

Egelson, then, shares much in common with Rubenovitz—save for the outcome. Both rabbis inherited congregations that were not in line with their religious views, and both challenged their congregations to adopt their outlooks. But while Rubenovitz was able to overcome the more traditional elements in his congregation by thirteen votes, Egelson lost his by two—strengthening the notion that the laity was the engine driving the train of American Judaism and highlighting the fine line between success and failure. But the experiences of these two rabbis also speak directly to the undefined boundaries between Conservative and Reform Judaism. Rubenovitz advocated a program with an organ—far more progressive than the incorporation of English that Egelson demanded of his congregants. Yet Rubenovitz was to become a Conservative leader, while Egelson was to become a leader in the Reform movement.

Moses J. Abels: Repeated Failure

The fourth and final rabbi I will examine is Moses J. Abels, whose early career was characterized by repeated failure—not a singular experience among Schechter’s disciples. Abels represents the type of rabbi who would struggle to implement Schechter’s vision in one congregation, generally fail, and then move on to the next congregation, where he would usually fail as well. Abels also frequently served smaller communities, and he preferred working in Reform congregations to Orthodox ones, viewing it as his mission to push Reform congregations toward greater traditionalism. Though he joined some Reform organizations, he nevertheless remained committed to Schechter and to spreading his own interpretation of Conservative Judaism within the congregations he served.

Abels also graduated from JTS in 1908, and his early career strongly supports the notion that most congregations—especially those in smaller cities and towns—were not ready-made for JTS graduates. His first pulpit was at Congregation Beth Ha-Shalom in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, a position that he was none too excited to accept. Beth Ha-Shalom was founded by German Jews in 1866,⁶⁹ and by the time Abels arrived, there were signs that the congregation was somewhat divided religiously. First, with regard to practice, the congregation was progressive—it featured an organ and mixed choir by the late nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Yet there were also traditionalist tendencies. An 1891 resolution, for example, guaranteed those over age sixty the right to wear head coverings, if doing so was “in accordance with their personal beliefs.”⁷¹ Moreover, east European Jews were beginning to come to Williamsport in the early twentieth century,⁷² potentially providing a pool for those who might want to turn to traditionalism. Second, and more importantly, with regard to affiliation and leadership, the congregation was aligned with the Reform movement in the late nineteenth century,⁷³ yet it also employed JTS rabbis—at least two had preceded Abels and at least one succeeded him.⁷⁴

Despite the potential to capitalize on these traditionalist sentiments, Abels was less than enthusiastic about taking the position. He told Schechter that he would go there “half-heartedly,” because “the position is far from desirable.”⁷⁵ Moreover, he said that “there is in this place absolutely no Jewish community at all, in the true sense of the term.” To prove his point, he told of a conversation in which he asked a member of the community if the community practiced circumcision. “His astonishing answer,” wrote Abels, “was that as far as he knows—and he is an old resident—there are no children born in the Jewish community of Williamsport.”⁷⁶

By 1909, Abels had already left Williamsport for a position at Temple of Truth in Wilmington, Delaware. Temple of Truth was founded in 1906 as a Reform congregation,⁷⁷ but it was somewhat ambivalent about its religious identity. First, the congregation wavered as to just how many reforms it would adopt. It decided to “teach in English, and [that] the Hebrew language would be eliminated,” but it still observed the second day of holidays.⁷⁸ Second, Temple of Truth was indecisive of its rabbis’ affiliations, turning to both Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform movement’s seminary, and to JTS for its spiritual leadership. Reflective of its ambivalence, the congregation employed four different rabbis in its first four years. After Abels left the congregation, he was followed by a German-trained Reform rabbi, who was then succeeded by a JTS-trained rabbi.⁷⁹

Abels viewed Temple of Truth in much the same negative way that he viewed his Williamsport congregation. He wrote that Temple of Truth was “virtually no congregation at all, because its membership is so small.”⁸⁰ The Jews of Wilmington as a whole hardly appealed to him, either. He wrote that they were “a cheap, uncultured lot” and “from the standpoint of Jewish activity, Wilmington is a barren field or to be more exact a field of thorns.”⁸¹

Unhappy with his position, Abels claimed that he would “take anything rather than remain here,”⁸² and in 1911 began to search in earnest for what he saw as a more desirable position. When asking Schechter for a better post, he pointed to those of three rabbis as examples—one in New York, one in Philadelphia, and another in Newark⁸³—suggesting that Abels was more hopeful about his chances for success in a larger city. Though he sensed that he was becoming “a perfect nuisance” to Schechter,⁸⁴ he nevertheless asked his teacher for help, because, he told him, “I am *sans* prestige, *sans* physically impressive appearance and *sans* [traditional attributes] such as beard, silk-hat, Episcopal gown and the other paraphernalia which I thoroughly detest.”⁸⁵ Abels was frustrated that in at least one job search, he was “utterly ignored.”⁸⁶

Seeking to better his lot, Abels inquired about Congregation Shaari Zedek in Brooklyn. Like Williamsport and Wilmington, this congregation was also ambivalent about its religious orientation, and reflects the porous boundaries between American Jewish movements in this era. Shaari Zedek had been

founded in 1902, and though most of its rabbis came from HUC during this period, its members claimed that the services were conducted “on the conservative basis.” The congregation featured an organ, mixed seating, and mixed choir. Men wore head coverings, but prayer shawls were optional, and the congregation used the Jastrow prayer book.⁸⁷ Abels believed that this congregation offered some prospect of success, but he nevertheless remained in Wilmington.

Still intent on securing a new position, Abels turned his attention to the United Hebrew Congregation in St. Louis.⁸⁸ Like the aforementioned congregations—and many others during this era—this congregation was also ambivalent about its religious orientation. United Hebrew Congregation identified as “Moderate Reform” but also featured a group of members who hoped to swing the congregation back to traditionalism.⁸⁹ Abels believed that he could help this process along, as he maintained that the congregation was “of a strong conservative tendency”⁹⁰ and could “be saved to Conservative Judaism having as it does a large membership of wealthy Russians.”⁹¹ He asked for Schechter’s attention before “the position slips into the hands of some [Hebrew] Union College man.”⁹²

Unsuccessful in his attempt to secure the St. Louis congregation, Abels soon turned his attention to Sir Moses Montefiore Congregation in Richmond, Virginia.⁹³ Unlike many of the other congregations in which he was interested, this congregation was founded in 1886 by Russian Jews as a more traditional option to those available in the city.⁹⁴ Though Richmond offered more money than his post in Wilmington, his opinion of the congregants at both synagogues sounded similar. From his first impression, he believed that the congregation was composed of the “cheapest sort of Jews—pawnbrokers, barbers, shoemakers and even some ex-jailbirds (several of the leading members have served terms in the penitentiary for selling ‘dope’ to the negroes.)” He ultimately decided against Sir Montefiore Congregation because “by changing from Wilmington to Richmond I would simply be jumping from the frying pan to the fire.”⁹⁵

In 1912, Abels finally found the position he was looking for in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and he seemed generally happy. Altoona’s Temple Beth Israel was founded in 1874 and had joined the Reform movement in 1907.⁹⁶ Despite its Reform affiliation, the congregation hired the JTS-trained Abels as its rabbi, and in 1914 he wrote to Schechter that his life in Altoona “is quite a happy one. My Congregation has been congenial and considerate and my work has been unusually successful.” He wrote that he had organized schools in the surrounding smaller Jewish communities and had delivered lectures for the Menorah Society at Penn State. He was elected for a third term, in part because the members had “raised their own assessments in order to make my stay possible.”⁹⁷

Yet despite his apparent success, all was not well, and by 1914 Abels was looking for yet another post, having come to feel that his “position offer[ed] no prospects for the future.”⁹⁸ He focused again on larger cities, expressing

interest in a pulpit in New York City, which he refused to consider because the congregation's president would not provide him with basic membership and salary information before he visited.⁹⁹ He also inquired about Anshe Chesed in Scranton, Pennsylvania—a community, he explained, with a Jewish population nearly ten times that of Altoona and offering “at least some material with which to build.” Abels told Schechter that Anshe Chesed was a “regular Reform congregation;”¹⁰⁰ it featured an organ and English prayers, and men did not wear head coverings.¹⁰¹ Abels, however, sensed ambivalence within the congregation, and he thought it had the potential to incorporate more traditional elements. While they had a Reform rabbi, Abels believed that “they have been so shocked by the sensationalism and unwarranted attack on the Bible by their rabbi” that they might be willing to try a JTS graduate.¹⁰² Shortly thereafter, Abels asked about a position in Seattle but received a disheartening response.¹⁰³ Although he was dissatisfied with his position in Altoona and believed that it offered “no prospects for the future,”¹⁰⁴ he ultimately he remained there until 1924.

Though Abels bounced from congregation to congregation, he nevertheless hoped for a measure of stability. “Repeated changes do no good,” he told Schechter; a “rolling stone gathers no moss.” What Abels desired was something that was all too rare for rabbis in this period—a so-called “desirable” post. “What I want is a future, and I can only have a future if I identify myself with a congregation composed of intelligent, more or less Americanized, Jews,” he maintained. “I hope you will forgive me,” he wrote to Schechter, “but I feel somehow,” because of a “lack of opportunities, that my life is a failure.”¹⁰⁵

The early career of Moses Abels thus demonstrates that for rabbis on the outside looking in, the prospect of success seemed particularly dim. His experiences also point to significant congregational ambivalence and show how daunting it was to shape a congregation according to a rabbi's particular beliefs. Moreover, Abels's experiences highlight the difficulty in defining the term “Conservative” and point to the undefined boundary between Reform Judaism and the emerging Conservative movement during this era.

Conclusion

The experiences of Abramowitz, Rubenovitz, Egelson, and Abels help us to understand the Conservative movement in the years before it coalesced and highlight challenges faced by first-generation clergy of new American religious movements. First, their travails demonstrate that their emerging movement had no clear congregational constituency that was prepared for the religious program that they advocated. According to one rabbi, there were still “few communities that desire to maintain the principles of Traditional Judaism, and at the same time, realize the value of decorum and the English sermon in the service, and of modern methods in inculcating the principles of our faith in the hearts of the coming generation.”¹⁰⁶ As we have seen, particularly with Abels's experiences, this was very much the case.

Faced with this bleak landscape, most rabbis sought to shape congregations so that they would be receptive to their messages. “Conservative congregations in America are not born, but have to be made by the graduates of the Seminary,” observed one JTS graduate. “The congregations are either orthodox or reform, and the rabbi has either to bring them back or to advance them to conservatism.”¹⁰⁷ Again, as we have seen, this was often easier said than done.

Rabbis struggled to shape their congregations according to their beliefs because of several factors. To begin with, each rabbi served at the whim of lay leaders who would ultimately decide his fate. Rabbis were beholden to the laity’s vision for each congregation, a reality that the early JTS graduates shared with clergy from other Jewish and non-Jewish religious movements. For example, one Reform rabbi complained in 1904 that his colleagues remained at the whim of “rich vulgarians and upstart parvenus.”¹⁰⁸ Because each rabbi was beholden to his lay leadership’s vision for his congregation (including its vision for a healthy bottom line), the rabbi had to be flexible and politically astute—creating alliances with factions within the synagogue to maintain his job.

Transforming a congregation was also exceptionally difficult because synagogues were frequently divided along shifting generational lines, and it was up to the rabbi to build a coalition that would support his policies by a majority vote. Generally, members of the younger generation were prepared for the changes sought by the JTS rabbi, as they hoped to Americanize Judaism to make it more relevant to their lives. Members of the elder generation, however, often feared that these changes were simply a conduit to further reforms, and they frequently stood opposed. Abramowitz was able to navigate those generational differences fairly easily, growing a goatee, for example. For Rubenovitz and Egelson, however, this was much more challenging. Rubenovitz divided his congregation between young and old, eventually prevailing by a narrow margin. Egelson similarly polarized his congregation along generational lines but lost by an even slimmer margin.

Their experiences show that it was often impossible for a rabbi in this era to concurrently satisfy the needs of the multiple factions within his congregation. As generational conflicts flared within congregations, rabbis were faced with the often-impossible situation of trying to satisfy both elements. According to one disciple:

There are congregations, the leading members of which, have reform tendencies but to ‘Satisfy the Orthodox’ are willing to accept what they believe to be a compromise. They expect a rabbi to satisfy both parties. As each side refuses to think clearly on the problem the result is usually that the rabbi fails to satisfy either party. Naturally, each side strives for leadership in the management of the congregations, and their political differences very often make the position of the rabbi impossible.¹⁰⁹

Despite the discouraging environment, by 1913 a handful of congregations were ready to be shaped by Seminary rabbis. Most of these positions, including that of Abramowitz, were in large cities. Charles Kauvar, for example, found success in Denver, Max Klein in Philadelphia, Jacob Kohn in New York, and Abraham Hershman in Detroit. Why did most of the success stories from this era take place in cities? Cyrus Adler offered one answer, agreeing with a disciple who suggested that smaller communities were more difficult because “in the small town you get every kind of Jew, from the one who keeps his talith over his head for the Amidah to the atheist. Whereas in a large city where people reasonably divide up you are sure of getting a fairly homogenous congregation.”¹¹⁰ Yet simply being in a city was no guarantee for easy success—just ask Herman Rubenovitz or Louis Egelson.

Thus, the early JTS graduates were frequently forced to transform congregations to align with their visions, and the factors that determined whether an individual rabbi could succeed in this task were varied. Some elements—such as tact, patience, political savvy, perseverance in the face of failure, willingness to compromise, and readiness to take on risk—were within his control. Other factors—such as demographics, geography, and, of course, sheer luck—were not. While these factors can certainly be applied to first-generation clergy in other movements, it was never truer than with Schechter’s disciples, who had to shape their own congregations and whose ability to do so was directly tied to their own success or failure.

In addition to the struggle to create a congregational constituency, the second conclusion that we can draw about the state of the movement in this era is that there was no clear model for a “Conservative” congregation, but rather the defining characteristic was frequent experimentation. To begin with, the disciples themselves had no clear, unified message. They could all agree on a broad platform of traditional Judaism infused with English, decorum, and modern education, but beyond that, all bets were off. Rubenovitz, for example, advocated a mixed choir and organ, and Abels saw no difficulty in officiating in Reform congregations that employed these practices. Yet Abramowitz did not seek to incorporate these innovations into his own congregation, and Egelson, though he later joined the Reform movement, did not try to incorporate organ music into his congregation in Washington, DC. Other disciples were adamantly opposed to such innovations, arguing vociferously that they violated the tenets of traditional Judaism.¹¹¹ As a result, each rabbi had a different message and was forced to tailor that message to his particular congregational reality. The emerging Conservative movement did not yet have a clear program—a reality similar to that of the emerging Reform movement in the midnineteenth century.

Because there was no clear message or platform for the emergent movement, the boundaries between it and the other American Jewish movements were fluid and porous.¹¹² The delineation between Conservative and modern

Orthodox Judaism, for example, was not well defined, and in 1913 Henry Pereira Mendes offered definitions of modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism that hardly suggested a precise difference. Mendes, a leader of JTS prior to Schechter's arrival and also a leader in the Orthodox Union, claimed that modern Orthodoxy "resists innovations such as organs, pews, disuse of Ta'leth, female voices in the choir, Christians in the choir, etc.," and termed Conservative Judaism "the Judaism which permits some of the innovations named" [*italics mine*].¹¹³ Exactly what he meant by "some" is unclear. The boundaries between the emergent Conservative and Orthodox movements have been the subject of several recent studies.¹¹⁴

A similarly undefined boundary existed between the Conservative and Reform movements. One disciple maintained that opportunities were available in Reform congregations that had "rebelled at the extremes to which Reform was going."¹¹⁵ In a similar vein, Abels maintained that "had it not been for the radical Rabbis the Jewish congregations would never have drifted to radical reform." Therefore, he believed, it was "the duty and function of those who are opposed to radicalism and who are inclined to battle against its pernicious influence to go to places where they can be of some account by acting as a bulwark against further reforms."¹¹⁶

Abels was not alone in gravitating toward Reform congregations and the Reform movement. Another Schechter disciple agreed with Abels, suggesting that in his experience, "a reform congregation, possessing more intelligence and culture is [more] amenable to change, especially in spirit, to conservatism than the orthodox ones."¹¹⁷ Yet while "a person encounters almost insurmountable obstacles in winning back the congregation to religious observance," he nevertheless believed that the influence of a traditional rabbi could influence the congregation to "check the advance of radicalism" and create the possibility of more "constructive work" in advancing their cause.¹¹⁸ One of Schechter's disciples, who served a Reform congregation for fifty years, successfully reintroduced Hebrew and head coverings, and the congregation ultimately became a pillar of the Conservative movement.¹¹⁹

Taken together, the experiences of these rabbis demonstrate that while its seeds may have been planted, the Conservative movement had in no way reached maturity by 1913. There was no congregational constituency, so rabbis struggled through entrenched lay control, shifting generational alliances, and congregational ambivalence in an attempt to shape congregations that would be receptive to their messages. Moreover, because there was no clear definition of a "Conservative" congregation, the boundaries with Orthodoxy and Reform were undefined. All of this meant that it was far from certain that the seeds planted by Schechter's disciples would grow into what would become, by the postwar years, the largest movement in American Judaism.

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Notes

¹My forthcoming work, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press), engages this question fully and argues that during the first half of the twentieth century, Solomon Schechter's disciples created a movement based on inclusivity that eschewed unique boundaries. Previous scholarship frequently suggested that the movement was defined by a distinct ideology that always separated it from both Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Another early approach maintained that the movement emerged as a series of disconnected synagogues that began to appear in the American suburbs before the midtwentieth century. More recent works have suggested that the Conservative movement slowly differentiated itself from Orthodoxy over the course of the twentieth century, and my forthcoming work has grown out of this new scholarship.

²Very little work examines the experiences of these rabbis in the early years of the twentieth century. For more, see Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism*, and Jack Wertheimer, "Pioneers of the Conservative Rabbinate—Reports from the Field by Graduates of 'Schechter's Seminary,'" *Conservative Judaism* (Summer, 1995): 53-70.

³For more on the relationship between Schechter and his students, see Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism*.

⁴*United Synagogue of America Annual Report* (1916): 28–29.

⁵Israel H. Levinthal, *The Message of Israel: Sermons, Addresses, Memoirs* (New York: Lex Printing Co., 1973), 205–206.

⁶Wilfred Shuchat, *The Gate of Heaven: The Story of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim of Montreal, 1846–1996* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2000), 51.

⁷*Ibid.*, 53–56.

⁸In an interview with Shuchat, Abramowitz said that "English was pretty entrenched at that point [when he arrived at the congregation]." Shuchat, interview by author, 14 March 2007.

⁹Shuchat, 53.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹Bernard Figler, *Canadian Jewish Profiles: Rabbi Dr. Herman Abramowitz, Lazarus Cohen, Lyon Cohen* (Gardenvale, Quebec: Harpell's Press Co-Operative, 1968), 8–10. His willingness to adapt may also have been related to the fact that he had family in Montreal—and seems to have wanted to stay with the congregation for the long term.

¹²Shuchat, 60.

¹³*Ibid.*, 72; Figler, 10.

¹⁴Pamela S. Nadell, *Conservative Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 27.

¹⁵Herman Landau, *Adath Louisville: The Story of a Jewish Community* (Louisville, KY: H. Landau and Associates, 1981), 43.

¹⁶Schechter to Rubenovitz, 11 December 1908, ARC 101, Archives of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York; Herman H. Rubenovitz and Mignon L. Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, MA: Nathaniel Dame & Co., 1967), 28–30, 35.

¹⁷A.G. Daniels, “From Ghetto to Temple: Excerpts from a History of Temple Mishkan Tefila, Written on the Occasion of the Golden Anniversary Celebration in 1908,” *Temple Mishkan Tefila: A History, 1858–1958* (Newton, MA: Temple Mishkan Tefila, 1958), 15. This piece was likely written after 1908, or it was amended to include information about Rubenovitz, who was not at the congregation until 1910.

¹⁸Nathan Blechman to Israel Friedlander, 9 August 1910, RG 15A, Box 2, Folder 31, Joseph and Miriam Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, Records of the Jewish Theological Seminary (hereafter Ratner Center), New York.

¹⁹Daniels, 17.

²⁰Herman Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 31.

²¹*Ibid.*, 27–29.

²²*Ibid.*, 29.

²³Herman H. Rubenovitz, “My Rabbinat at Temple Mishkan Tefila: A History from 1910 to 1946,” in *Temple Mishkan Tefila*, 20.

²⁴Herman Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 31–34. According to Rubenovitz, Schechter suggested that he observe the methods that were used there. During a trip to Vienna in 1913 as a delegate to the Eleventh Zionist Congress, Rubenovitz had the opportunity to tour several European cities and their synagogues.

²⁵Rubenovitz, “My Rabbinat,” 20.

²⁶Daniels, 15.

²⁷Rubenovitz, “My Rabbinat,” 21.

²⁸Herman Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 31–34.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Rubenovitz, “My Rabbinat,” 22.

³¹Herman Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 34.

³²*Ibid.*, 30.

³³“Rabbi’s Plan Decried,” *Washington Post* (27 December 1910): 2; “Biography Sheet,” 6 May 1934, RG15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.

³⁴Stanley Rabinowitz, *The Assembly: A Century in the Life of The Adas Israel Hebrew Congregation of Washington, D.C.* (New York: Ktav, 1993), 74–77.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 103–105.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 105.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 231, 245, 248.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 259–260.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 265–273.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 149. Much like Rubenovitz, Egelson had the privilege of coming to the congregation at a time of transition—as it moved into a new building. This seemingly offered more opportunities for change.

⁴¹“Rabbi Blames Flock,” *Washington Post* (29 December 1910): 9.

⁴²“Rabbi’s Plan Decried,” 2; “Biography Sheet,” 6 May 1934, RG15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.

⁴³Rabinowitz, 307.

- ⁴⁴Egelson to Joseph Jacobs, 21 November 1910, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁴⁵“Rabbi Egelson Quits,” *Washington Post* (19 January 1911): 2.
- ⁴⁶“Rabbi Blames Flock,” 9.
- ⁴⁷“Still Split on Rabbi,” *Washington Post* (27 February 1911): 2.
- ⁴⁸“Rabbi’s Plan Decried,” 2.
- ⁴⁹Rabinowitz, 308.
- ⁵⁰“Wage Fight for Rabbi,” *Washington Post* (12 January 1911): 14.
- ⁵¹Egelson to Friedlander, 6 January 1911, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁵²Egelson to Schechter, 11 March 1913, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁵³“Rabbi’s Plan Decried,” 2.
- ⁵⁴Rabinowitz, 308, 310.
- ⁵⁵Egelson to Joseph Jacobs, 21 November 1910, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁵⁶“Rabbi’s Plan Decried,” 2.
- ⁵⁷Egelson to Jacobs, 21 November 1910, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁵⁸“Church War at Height,” *Washington Post* (10 January 1911): 16.
- ⁵⁹Egelson to Jacobs, 21 November 1910, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁶⁰Rabinowitz, 308.
- ⁶¹“Wage Fight for Rabbi,” 14.
- ⁶²Egelson to Friedlander, 6 January 1911, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁶³Egelson to Friedlander, 31 January 1911, RG 15A, Box 6, Folder 18, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁶⁴Rabinowitz, 316–319. Initially the congregation hired a hazzan to replace Egelson. It later hired JTS graduate Benjamin Grossman. Not surprisingly, the relationship between this new rabbi and his congregation deteriorated, and he was replaced in 1920 by another Seminary graduate. This relationship, too, ended quickly, and the congregation chose to let his contract expire without renewal. He was followed by another Seminary graduate whose tenure lasted about a year. See Rabinowitz, 321–327.
- ⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 310.
- ⁶⁶*Temple Emanuel, Greensboro, Carolina, To Honor the 75th Anniversary* (1982), 4.
- ⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁶⁸Rabinowitz, 312.
- ⁶⁹*Temple Beth Ha-Shalom, Williamsport, Pennsylvania: 125th Anniversary Journal, 1866–1991*, 14.
- ⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁷¹*Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁷²Benjamin Hirsh, “Ninety-Five Years of Beth Ha-Shalom (continuation),” *Journal of the Lycoming County Historical Society* 12, no. 2 (Fall, 1976): 22.
- ⁷³*Temple Beth Ha-Shalom*, 17.
- ⁷⁴Hirsh, 21.
- ⁷⁵Abels to Schechter, 23 July 1908, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁷⁶Abels to Schechter, 7 August 1908, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁷⁷Toni Young, *Becoming American, Remaining Jewish: The Story of Wilmington, Delaware’s First Jewish Community, 1879–1924* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 155.
- ⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 157.

- ⁷⁹Ibid., 199, 200. Abels was followed by Emanuel Schreiber, who was followed by JTS graduate Samuel Rabinowitz in 1915.
- ⁸⁰Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸¹Abels to Friedlander, 26 September 1910, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸²Abels to Schechter, 18 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸³Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸⁴Abels to Schechter, 26 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸⁵Abels to Schechter, 18 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸⁶Abels to Schechter, 26 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸⁷Samuel P. Abelow, *History of Brooklyn Jewry* (Brooklyn: Scheba Publishing, 1937), 34–35.
- ⁸⁸Abels to Schechter, 26 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁸⁹Jane Priwer, *The United Hebrew Congregation: St. Louis, MO* (St. Louis: United Hebrew Congregation, 1963), 11.
- ⁹⁰Abels to Schechter, 26 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹¹Abels to Schechter, 18 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹²Abels to Schechter, 26 June 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹³Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A Box 1, Folder 1, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹⁴Myron Berman, *Richmond's Jewry, 1769–1976: Shabbat in Shockoe* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 225.
- ⁹⁵Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1, Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹⁶*Temple Beth Israel, Altoona, Pennsylvania, 100th Anniversary, 1874–1974* (Altoona, PA, 1974), 4.
- ⁹⁷Abels to Schechter, 14 May 1914, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹⁸Abels to Schechter, 27 April 1915, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ⁹⁹Abels to Schechter, 9 February 1914, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰⁰Abels to Schechter, 14 May 1914, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰¹Michael Brown, “Toward a History of Scranton Jewry,” *Life* (13 June 1955): 13.
- ¹⁰²Abels to Schechter, 14 May 1914, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York. Abels claimed that this rabbi was Mortimer Bloom, a 1913 HUC graduate.
- ¹⁰³Abels to Schechter, 2 June 1915, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York. In response to the Seattle request, Abels told Schechter in the postscript that “Charles Hoffman answered me that Sioux City was taken!”
- ¹⁰⁴Abels to Schechter, 27 April 1915, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a, Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰⁵Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1, Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰⁶Samuel M. Cohen to Cyrus Adler, 23 November 1917, RG 15A, Box 5, Folder 9, Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰⁷Samuel Rosenger to colleague, 9 September 1920, RG 15A, Box 23, Folder 10, Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹⁰⁸Naomi Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830–1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 192.
- ¹⁰⁹S. Cohen to Adler, 23 November 1917, RG 15A, Box 5, Folder 9, Ratner Center, New York.
- ¹¹⁰Adler to Louis Finkelstein, 20 October 1925, RG 15A, Box 2, Folder 31, Ratner Center, New York. This refers to Nathan Blechman.

¹¹¹See Cohen, *Birth of Conservative Judaism*, for more information on the disciples' various positions on the organ and other such innovations that conflicted with traditional Jewish law.

¹¹²The experiences of these rabbis can illuminate what Jeffrey Gurock has called the "fluidity" between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism that, he argues, existed for much of the twentieth century. See Gurock, *From Fluidity to Rigidity: The Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in Twentieth-Century America* (Ann Arbor, MI: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, 1998).

¹¹³Henry P. Mendes to Cyrus Adler, 14 February 1913, MS39, Box 1, Folder 3, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

¹¹⁴For more on this boundary with Orthodoxy, see Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), and Gurock, *Fluidity*.

¹¹⁵Levinthal, *The Message of Israel*, 205–206.

¹¹⁶Abels to Schechter, 5 September 1911, RG 15A, Box 1, Folder 1a (1 of 2), Ratner Center, New York.

¹¹⁷Rosinger to colleague, 9 September 1920, RG 15A, Box 23, Folder 10, Ratner Center, New York.

¹¹⁸Rosinger to Schechter, 11 August 1911, RG 15A, Box 23, Folder 10, Ratner Center, New York.

¹¹⁹Jonathan D. Sarna, "How Adath Jeshurun (Philadelphia) Fits into the History of American Jewry," unpublished lecture, 7 September 2008. This disciple was Max Klein at Philadelphia's Adath Jeshurun.