To Our Readers

Dana Herman

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ARTICLES

Two Anomalous Reform Rabbis: The Brothers Jacob and Max Raisin

Michael A. Meyer

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At the turn of the twentieth century, American Reform rabbis and congregants were dominantly of German-Jewish origin. Overwhelmingly, they opposed Zionism, which was seen as calling into question the Americanism to which they aspired. Yet there were exceptions. Among them were two brothers, Rabbis Jacob and Max Raisin. Born in Eastern Europe and raised in a New York Yiddish-speaking environment, they entered the very different milieu of the Reform movement. There both of them established lengthy careers even as they remained exceptional. Not only did they actively espouse Zionism, but they wrote for Hebrew periodicals both in Europe and America. For the first time, their lives here receive the detailed attention they have long deserved.

Jacob Billikopf: A Jewish Social Worker in America, 1900–1950

Mark Cowett

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Jacob Billikopf (1883–1950), a Vilna-born Jew, helped develop the profession of social work in the United States. In his many roles—as a charity worker, settlement worker, fundraiser, and co-architect of publicly funded and administered laws to help the needy, to name a few—he moved his profession from simple solutions to multifaceted approaches. Simultaneously, he worked in other arenas, including
civil rights and labor mediation, to further social justice for Jews and Christians, whites and African Americans, business owners and labor. Through the example of Billikopf’s far-ranging and sometimes turbulent career, a snapshot emerges of both the progress and the conflict American society experienced as it stretched and matured in the first half of the twentieth century.

A “Jewish Monkey Trial”:
The Cleveland Jewish Center and the Emerging Borderline between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in 1920s North America
Ira Robinson

In the 1920s, the world of Orthodox Judaism was shaken by a movement that challenged traditional synagogues to “modernize” themselves by abolishing the separate seating of men and women. This article will analyze one of the most prominent cases—that of the Jewish Center of Cleveland, Ohio, which adopted mixed seating in 1925. A dissenting minority within the congregation refused to concede and brought the case to court. This article brings to bear extensive archival documentation preserved by the family of Abraham A. Katz, one of the prime instigators of the lawsuit. It also contains the complete transcript of the expert testimony of some of the most prominent American Orthodox leaders of the era, whose testimony and cross-examination yields much information of importance.

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Travels in American Jewish History: San Francisco

A Journey of Jewish Identity and Discovery

JUNE 7-11, 2017

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By all accounts, the 1920s was a turbulent decade, one that saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, Prohibition, xenophobia, the Red Scare, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, the Scopes trial, the appearance of Henry Ford’s anti-semitic Dearborn Independent, numerus clausus at universities, as well as other organs, policies, and events that made Jews feel less than welcome in America.¹ With the passing of the National Origins Act of 1924 and the official closing of America’s gates, the American Jewish community was no longer being shaped by large-scale migration as it had been for the previous four decades; as a result, the community’s attention was turned inward with a focus on native-born Jews—the second generation, the sons and daughters of immigrant parents. As Henry Feingold has argued, “After the restrictive immigration laws went into effect, the influence of the immigrant generation diminished. Their children, the second generation … now set the pace and determined the direction of change.”²

With minor variations, American Jewish historians have generally kept to this 1920s periodization—what Jacob Rader Marcus called the “rise of the American Jew”—from Deborah Dash Moore’s seminal 1981 work At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews through to Eli Lederhendler’s most recent book, American Jewry: A New History.³ The critique proffered on this historiographical model—using the paradigm of generations—has been that there is more continuity between the generations with regard to culture and Americanizing influences than is generally recognized.⁴

Rather than emphasizing the second generation of American Jews in this period, the three articles in this issue of the journal focus instead on first-generation figures outside of New York who played leadership roles in their respective communities through much of the first half of the twentieth century. They offer us prime examples of how negotiation, acculturation, and adaptation played out in the immigrant generation and how their continued leadership affected subsequent generations through the 1920s and beyond. For example, the two main protagonists of Michael A. Meyer’s article—the brothers Jacob and Max Raisin—were,
by the mid-1920s, rabbis of prominent Reform congregations: Jacob at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, and Max at B’nai Jeshurun in Paterson, New Jersey. East European immigrants from Nesvizh (Belarus), the Raisin brothers settled first in New York but soon left for Cincinnati to attend the Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College, prompted by a “longing to get out of the tight ghetto atmosphere of New York’s Lower East Side and into the heartland of America, to become fully Americanized in the Midwest.”5 As Meyer shows, the brothers were ardent Zionists and Hebraists—anomalies in the movement of the period—yet, from a young age, were committed to the “essentials” of Reform Judaism. Throughout their careers, they negotiated their East European backgrounds and proclivities with the social, religious, and civic life that they carved for themselves in America.

In the second article, Mark Cowett profiles the prominent social worker Jacob Billikopf, who by the 1920s was serving as a Jewish Federation executive in Philadelphia. Billikopf arrived on these shores from Vilna and over a fifty-year career—which took him from Richmond to Philadelphia via Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Kansas City—he became a central figure in the development and professionalization of social work, philanthropy, and labor arbitration in the Jewish and the larger American world. As Cowett shows us, Billikopf’s biography sheds light on the history of social welfare efforts during the first half of the twentieth century, and how he served as a bridge—in much of his work—between the Jewish world and the emerging American welfare system. For example, regarding Billikopf’s work in Philadelphia, Cowett argues that “by bringing an Eastern European background as well as interest in newly emerging social work techniques, Billikopf helped speed the Philadelphia Federation toward a more inclusive concept of itself.”6

The court case at the center of Ira Robinson’s article took place in Cleveland, Ohio, between 1925 and 1929, over the issue of mixed seating at the Jewish Center (JC), a historically Orthodox congregation. Tensions arose between a minority group led by Abraham A. Katz, who wanted the synagogue’s Orthodox constitution and traditions upheld, and the Eastern European–born, Conservative-trained rabbi Solomon Goldman, who implemented certain synagogue liberalizations. The new
evidence that Robinson brings to bear on this episode are the transcripts of expert testimony provided by seven of the leading Orthodox figures of the day, only two of whom—Rabbis Bernard Drachman and Herbert S. Goldstein—were native born. Robinson argues that this court case, which ultimately went to the Supreme Court of Ohio, marked a “fault line” in American Judaism at a time when the definitions of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism were still not strictly defined. More than that, though, Robinson contends that the protagonists in the case were really “fighting for their vision of the future of Cleveland Jewry.”

Returning to Feingold’s earlier assertion that it was the second-generation American Jews who “set the pace and determined the direction of change” during the 1920s, the three studies in this issue of our journal prompt us to pause and reflect on the influence that immigrants and their evolving American identities had on the Jewish community of the 1920s and beyond. The tradition/assimilation spectrum of ethnic leadership that Jonathan D. Sarna articulates in his 1982 article is a useful model for thinking about leaders and those they lead and should be applied to all periods of American Jewish history.8 While the first decades of the twentieth century may well be some of the most heavily researched in the field of American Jewish history, there is still work to be done to develop a more nuanced and complete understanding of the American Jewish community in small towns and larger cities across the United States. Such understanding would push the boundaries of established paradigms and encourage us to consider the multigenerational continuum of accommodation and assimilation within the American Jewish experience.

Dana Herman, Ph.D.
Managing Editor

Notes


5 Meyer, p. 6.

6 Cowett, p. 56.

7 Robinson, p. 96.

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives looks forward to hosting the 42nd Annual Southern Jewish Historical Society Conference Cincinnati, Ohio November 3-5, 2017 followed by a conference on synagogue archiving November 5-6, 2017.
Two Anomalous Reform Rabbis: The Brothers Jacob and Max Raisin

Jacob Raisin
(Courtesy Special Collections, College of Charleston Libraries)

Max Raisin
(Courtesy Barnert Temple)
Two Anomalous Reform Rabbis: The Brothers Jacob and Max Raisin

Michael A. Meyer

At the turn of the twentieth century it was widely believed that Reform Judaism and Zionism represented two contradictory forms of Jewish identity. Moving from one to the other was a form of internal Jewish conversion; claiming to be both was a long stretch if not an impossibility. The new Hebrew literature was deemed to be Zionism’s concomitant. Kaufmann Kohler, president of the Hebrew Union College (HUC) beginning in 1903, banished it from the school’s curriculum. Reform rabbis were expected to be universalists, not Jewish nationalists; their familiarity with Hebrew was to extend only to the traditional sources, especially liturgy and midrash. The great majority of rabbinical students at that time came from American homes of German-Jewish background; they lacked personal connection with Eastern European Jewry, the most widespread locus for both Zionism and modern Hebrew. And yet what was true for most was not true for all. Among the rabbinical students in Cincinnati and then within the Reform rabbinate during its classical period and beyond were two brothers who did not fit the pattern. They were Eastern European Jews, Zionists and Hebraists, and at the same time fully committed to what they regarded as the essentials of Reform Judaism. In a sense they lived in two worlds—a feat that required frequent justification before multiple doubters on both sides of the divide. At times they despaired, but they persisted nonetheless, each enjoying a long career in the Reform rabbinate. Jacob Raisin (1878–1953), the older brother, served for decades in Charleston, South Carolina; the younger, Max Raisin (1881–1957), in Paterson, New Jersey. Throughout their lives they were, as Max once put it, brothers in spirit as well as in
flesh. They both wanted to be remembered, Jacob by keeping a diary that he did not want destroyed, and Max by writing memoirs in Hebrew and English. Yet their legacy has been largely forgotten. Based on their copious writings in three languages, published and unpublished, this essay for the first time explores their careers in conjunction with each other and within the context of their times.¹

The Early Years

The small town of Nesvizh, not far from Minsk in what is today Belarus, had long embraced a Jewish community that was in most respects traditional in character. But by the last decades of the nineteenth century the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, was beginning to challenge the accepted pattern of intellectual life. Aaron Raisin, a Hebrew teacher in homes of the relatively well off, was among the few in Nesvizh influenced by the new trends. He taught his sons modern Hebrew in addition to the traditional Jewish subjects and looked for an opportunity to migrate to America, with its uncharted possibilities but also its challenges to the traditional life. His sons would later fondly recall their early years in Nesvizh, where Jacob, born in 1878, remained until 1892 and Max, born in 1881, until 1893.² Max later claimed that it was the pervasive Jewish atmosphere of this town that inclined him always to look sympathetically upon Jewish traditions and to eschew iconoclasm.³ He was also convinced that it gave him initial preparation for his later role as a Reform rabbi.⁴ It was Jacob, however, whom Max believed to be the more serious brother, who seemed the more likely candidate for the rabbinate. He was also the mentor to whom Max looked up and who he believed was his intellectual superior.⁵ Throughout their lives the two brothers remained close, writing frequent letters and getting together in New York when an occasion presented itself.

As was common at that time, the father came to New York first, followed, as finances allowed, by the rest of the family. Jacob arrived in 1892 at the age of thirteen or fourteen, Max at eleven a year later. They moved into a dismal tenement on the Lower East Side. Their home was observant, their synagogue Orthodox, their language Yiddish.⁶ Max was forced to work at odd jobs to bring a bit of added income into the family, although Jacob was able to spend two years at City College. Much of
whatever spare time the boys had was devoted to the cultivation of modern Hebrew. Within a few years they had joined others in founding Hovevei Sefat Ever, a club of young people devoted to the Hebrew language. Its participants included some who would later become prominent in Jewish intellectual life, including the scholar of Hebrew poetry Israel Davidson and the philosopher Mordecai Kaplan. Gathering in the Educational Alliance with its rich library, they read Hebrew periodicals from Eastern Europe. At that time only one Hebrew paper was, as yet, published in the United States—Ha-Ivri. In it both boys published simple poems, Max’s written in memory of the beloved Jewish educator Louis Schnabel, who had been an inspiration to the Hebraic circle, and Jacob’s conveying the message that Hebrew writers deserved better financial support. More significant than the poems was a serialized essay that Jacob published in 1896. It dealt with the subject of Jewish customs, pointing out their variety and change in the course of history. Jacob, who had visited at least one Reform temple, also used the article to reflect on Reform customs. He described being aghast at the temple’s atmosphere, noting that it resembled a theater more than a house of worship. And yet, despite these perceived shortcomings and although he thought some Reformers had gone too far (“to a place from which they could not return”), he discerned potential for the future. The essay concluded on a remarkably positive note: “I rejoice in this [Reform] movement even as I have rejoiced in the settlement of the Land of Israel.”

Before he decided to become a rabbi, Max sought to become a Hebrew writer. While still in New York, he began to send contributions to the leading European Hebrew periodicals. To his amazement and joy, not only were his less-than-elegant submissions accepted, but prominent editors such as Nahum Sokolov of Ha-Tzefirah and Aleksander Zederbaum of Ha-Melitz went out of their way to encourage his work. In return for his essays, Sokolov sent him locally published Hebrew books and gave him pointers on Hebrew style. Readers in Russia had no idea that the author, who signed “Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin,” was little more than a boy growing up in New York. However, Max knew that if he were to further what was his ambition at that stage of his life he would have to gain entry into what was far and away the most prestigious of the Hebrew periodicals, Ha-Shiloah, edited by Asher Ginsberg, better
known by his pen name as Ahad Ha-Am. But on what subject could he contribute that others were not more capable of discussing than he was? It is not known whether the editor sent him a request for an article or, more likely, he wrote to the editor, but in the spring of 1898 the young Raisin’s lengthy essay appeared in *Ha-Shiloah*. It presented the journal’s distant readers with a piece entitled, “Jews and Judaism in America,” a subject about which they knew very little and a niche that, with his access to relevant sources, Max was one of few contributors to *Ha-Shiloah* capable of filling.\(^{11}\) He chose a very narrow focus: the situation of the Russian Jewish immigrants, especially the poor in New York, as he himself had experienced it. His sympathetic account of their economic circumstances culminates with the particular travails of Jewish women forced to toil under unconscionable conditions in the factories. Continuing with a description of the various Jewish societies and synagogues, his incipient Reform identity suddenly asserts itself as he concludes: “The younger generation of the Russian Jews in America will surely \(^*\) not desire Orthodoxy, and if they will still desire Judaism at all, that Judaism will be reformed.”\(^{12}\)

Three years later, Max followed up with an article devoted to a history of Hebrew writing in America. It began by calling the effort to implant Hebrew into American Jewish culture a dreadful failure. Regrettably, it had remained “an alien sapling in the soil of the new land.”\(^{13}\) In the United States one could not yet find a Hebrew literature fully worthy of its name. Nor was there a proper readership. The German Jews in America lacked Hebrew knowledge and so had little choice but to remove much of it even from the prayer book. There could be no significant Hebraism until the arrival of the Eastern Europeans. Of course, some Hebrew works appeared, but not of a strictly literary nature, and a few Hebrew periodicals were by then published in America. In the article Max discusses, mostly in critical fashion, as many of these publications as he can obtain. His essay concludes with little more than a listing of works that he does not have room to discuss and with mention of the libraries that possess the richest collections of Hebraica. Though these two contributions, as Max himself recognized, were by no means brilliant, simply being among the contributors to *Ha-Shiloah* was an honor that brought great joy to his early life. Moreover, unlike the other
Hebrew periodicals for which he wrote, *Ha-Shiloah* was even able to pay him a much-needed and generous ruble and a half per page for his work. He would continue to write for the periodical after the scholar of Hebrew literature Joseph Klausner and the poet Chayim Nahman Bialik took over as editors. Later, after the journal had failed, his brother would urge the Zionist movement to bring it back to life.

The early relationship with Ahad Ha-Am that was created by Max’s work for *Ha-Shiloah*, still before he came to Cincinnati, continued sporadically until the end of Ahad Ha-Am’s life. It was Ginsberg who warned Raisin to avoid the cloying *militzah* style then still dominant. After he was accepted to HUC, Max told his fellow students that Ahad Ha-Am “is considered the greatest Jew in Russia” and *Ha-Shiloah* was “the best publication of its kind that ever appeared in Hebrew.” Occasionally the two would exchange letters, and later they spent time together both in London during Max’s honeymoon and then in Haifa shortly before Ginsberg’s death. At Ahad Ha-Am’s home in Great Britain Max could enjoy a meal with a few other guests, in Haifa sit for days comforting an already deathly ill man. For Raisin Ahad Ha-Am was not just a person of cold logic, as others described him, but a man who possessed an underlying warmth. He was, in Raisin’s eyes, a symbol of the good and the elevated in his generation. Among Ginsberg’s last letters, written by his secretary since he could no longer write himself, were two addressed to the American Reform rabbi, Max Raisin.

**Entering the Rabbinate**

While Max was devoting as much time as he could to Hebrew literature, his brother, though likewise part of the Hebrew circle, was attending college classes. Then surprisingly, in 1897 at the age of eighteen, Jacob decided to give up his studies in New York and embark on what must initially have been most unexpected: to leave New York, travel to Cincinnati, and become a student at the seminary of the Reform movement. Max would join him there a year later. Although their tradition-inclined mother opposed this career choice, their *maskilic* father favored it. He might have preferred that his sons go to the more traditional Jewish Theological Seminary, but at this stage of its history, before the arrival of Solomon Schechter, HUC looked like the
more viable institution. Moreover, at least Max had by then ceased to be fully observant. He later noted that, curiously enough, his family had first learned of HUC from an article in the *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, an Orthodox paper that, uncharacteristically, had written favorably of the Cincinnati institution. An important role seems also to have been played by Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of New York’s Temple Emanu-El. Aside from being the rabbi of the most prestigious congregation in New York, Gottheil was an early Zionist and his son, Richard, a leader of the Zionist movement in America. Gottheil may well have served the brothers as a model. Moreover, thanks to a special fund for rabbinical students under his control, Gottheil provided stipends that made the venture to Cincinnati feasible for Jacob and then for Max.19 Beyond such considerations lay a longing to get out of the tight ghetto atmosphere of New York’s Lower East Side and into the heartland of America, to become fully Americanized in the Midwest.20

For the Raisin brothers the Cincinnati experience was, on the whole, a positive one.21 They enjoyed their studies at the University of Cincinnati, which occupied the mornings. The afternoon classes at HUC were less valuable, as the academic level and the pedagogical skill of the faculty left much to be desired. They did think highly of its president, Isaac Mayer Wise, then in the last years of his life, and they established close relations with some of their teachers—especially the historian Gotthard Deutsch and the Talmudist Moses Mielziner—who appreciated the extraordinary background in Jewish sources that they brought with them.22 They did not, however, establish close friendships with fellow students. The gap between the brothers and the practically oriented young men who came to HUC with virtually no Jewish knowledge was simply too great. As a result, Jacob and Max frequently felt lonely. In a Hebrew letter to his father Jacob wrote, “Lonesome and abandoned am I here among people whose ways are not my ways and whose thoughts are not my thoughts.”23 Moreover, their American-born fellow students, with few exceptions, lacked the intense interest in everything to do with modern Hebrew and Zionism that continued to characterize the brothers from Eastern Europe.

Given that their studies at HUC required little effort or preparation compared to fellow students, the Raisins had ample time left over for
their continuing efforts in the fields of literature and history. Perhaps as a way to ground themselves better in their broader intellectual environment but also no doubt out of genuine love, both brothers developed an attachment to British authors. Seeking to contribute to this literature, they determined to present it in Hebrew guise. After two years at HUC, Jacob persuaded a publisher in Warsaw to print his biography of the English writer George Eliot, who was of special interest because of her struggles with religious faith and her high moral character, and because her novel *Daniel Deronda* had espoused the Zionist cause. It was, according to Jacob, “a Jewish story in the full sense of the word,” one that had enhanced the honor of the Jewish people among the nations.24

Later, in life Max would pick one of the most classical British authors John Milton, for a similar biographical study in the Hebrew language. He would stress Milton’s positive relation to Torah and his prophet-like championship of social causes, and he would conclude that Milton belonged not to England alone but also, and especially, to the people of the Bible.25 However, during his time as a rabbinical student, Max had turned more toward history than literature. And what field of history was less plowed in the Hebrew language and less known among Hebrew readers in Eastern Europe than the history of the Jews in America, that portion of the Jewish people that would, in time, become the largest?26 And who was better trained and located to bring this phase of Jewish history into the mainstream than himself, a “Hebrew writer dwelling in America”? Thus “a holy obligation is placed upon me,” he wrote, “to gather all this material and to set it before our brethren who read Hebrew.”27 Not that Max had any special skill as a historian, but he felt himself capable of compiling a history from secondary sources that were scarcely to be found in Eastern Europe but readily available to him in Cincinnati from Gotthard Deutsch’s personal library or, during summer visits home and with the assistance of its librarian Abraham Freidus, at the Jewish Division of the Public Library in New York.

In the manner of a dissertation, Raisin began by surveying previous literature on the subject, beginning with the Christian writer Hannah Adams and coming down to articles in the recently established *Proceedings* of the American Jewish Historical Society. As yet there was no *Jewish Encyclopedia* upon which he could draw. Raisin cast his net widely,
beginning with Columbus and including chapters on Canada and the West Indies. He divided the narrative initially by waves of immigration, then by location. He left multiple holes, and the final text was scarred by numerous typographical errors. Yet the two-hundred-page Hebrew volume, done in a rabbinical student’s spare time, was no mean accomplishment. Max petitioned the HUC faculty that the work, published a year before his ordination, be accepted as the required graduation thesis. Faculty members Deutsch and David Philipson were assigned to read it and gave it their approval. It was totally unprecedented that a published work—and in the Hebrew language at that—was submitted to and accepted by the faculty.

Jacob, ordained three years earlier, had not written his thesis in Hebrew, but he had chosen a topic that enabled him to dwell upon his own background in Eastern Europe as well as on his love of modern Hebrew literature. The thesis, entitled “The Renaissance or the Rise and Spread of Hascala among the Russian Jews,” was an opportunity to show that the Russian Jews were not at all benighted, but regrettably all too often misunderstood. They were not as the German-Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz had depicted them but had produced literature of high quality. His thesis became the basis for what a decade later, after much revision, reached the point of publication and gave him standing in the world of Jewish scholarship.

Despite these accomplishments, the Raisin brothers could not, upon ordination, hope for one of the more desirable pulpits. They lacked the rhetorical skill of their classmates, spoke with an accent, and were of unimpressive diminutive stature. For some time, the positions open to them lay in small congregations in the West and the South. From 1901 to 1910 Jacob went successively to Port Gibson, Mississippi; Butte, Montana; and Las Vegas, New Mexico. His brother began in Stockton, California in 1903, endured a brief stint in St. Francisville, Louisiana, and then a longer period, until 1913, in Meridian, Mississippi, where he was treated with respect and well paid but was put off by the philistinism of his congregants.

For Max, the far West was initially an adventure, but one that soon turned sour. Elected “unseen and unheard,” a young man of twenty-two without rabbinical experience and practical talents, he was not exactly what the congregational leaders wanted and expected from Cincinnati.
Max did try. He performed pastoral duties in Stockton, carefully prepared his sermons, and organized study groups. But there was a yawning gap between the public figure that the congregation desired and the scholar/teacher model of the rabbi that Raisin sought to embody. When he insisted on traveling twice weekly to attend biblical scholar Max Margolis’s lectures at the University of California, the congregation decided to let him go.31 Perhaps also his pessimistic attitude toward human existence played a role. In a sermon calling upon the congregation to build a “lofty new temple unto God,” he asked rhetorically, “What is our life if not one great conglomeration of troubles, one long series of sacrifices?”32 Such an attitude flouted the upbeat spirit of the West.

Also, Max had rather quickly become homesick for the East Coast and for his family there. Surprisingly, an unusual opportunity opened up for him not so far away from New York, in Philadelphia. While he was still a rabbinical student in Cincinnati, spending the summer of 1900 with his parents, Max had written a letter to the American Hebrew in praise of “The People’s Synagogue,” which had been established on the East Side of New York for the benefit of Russian immigrants. According to Raisin, its orderly services were intended to train those who attended to “behave” during worship and also “to be decent in their actions, in their manners and in their attire.” He was asked to deliver a sermon in this synagogue while spending a summer in the city and was pleased to note that those attending comported themselves as well as the worshipers at Reform’s Temple Emanu-El. “And how glad were they to hear me, the goy from the Cincinnati College, quote some passages from the Midrash in the original Hebrew, which they understood very well; and how delighted were they when I recited before them a Hebrew stanza from a poem of their greatly beloved Hebrew poet [Yehuda Leib] Gordon!” According to Raisin, here was uncultivated ground that simply required the proper gardener to make flowers bloom. “Only the man who can understand the Russian Jews, who is able to sympathize with them, only he can succeed in doing good work among them.”33

It may have been the success of this New York congregation that prompted the Union of American Congregations to support a similar project in downtown Philadelphia in 1904, an area inhabited especially by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Although the Orthodox
residents railed against this Reform intrusion, the new Congregation Israel, initially presided over by the Union’s Rabbi George Zepin, was full to overflowing at the High Holidays that year. What was still missing, however, was a permanent rabbi, and who could fill the bill better than the recently unemployed Max Raisin, himself an Eastern European, more knowledgeable in Jewish sources than most younger Reform rabbis, and looking to find a position in the East? Max moved from St. Francisville to Philadelphia, and initially all seemed to go well. The congregation grew rapidly and was raising money for its own building. Raisin’s installation in February 1905, conducted with organ, choir, and Reform Union Prayer Book, drew a large crowd as well as participation by the leading Reform rabbis of Philadelphia. Pictured in the press with short beard, pince-nez, and a confident if not proud look on his face, Max pretentiously compared his coming to the congregation, after the seclusion of rabbinical training, to the descent of Moses from Mount Sinai. The arrangement would last a bare six months, with Raisin attributing his resignation to unmentioned differences with two leading members of his flock. Years later he blamed his failure on the mistaken notion that Reform could missionize among the Orthodox; in due course, he now judged, they would come to Reform Judaism on their own; many of their grandchildren would cross over, thereby saving themselves from total assimilation.

Work Inside and Outside the Congregation

If his foray into Philadelphia was a failure, Max Raisin could find at least some comfort in his continuing work as a Hebrew writer. Having published his history of American Jewry while still a student, he used spare time in Stockton and during a summer in New York to probe more deeply into the life of one particular American Jew: Mordecai Manuel Noah, the American diplomat, playwright, utopian dreamer, and founder of a Jewish collective settlement on Grand Island in the Niagara River. Noah fit well into Max’s own identity: a man fully committed to the United States while at the same time a fervent advocate of a Jewish national identity. In November of 1904, during his very brief, apparently unsuccessful rabbinate in St. Francisville, Louisiana, Max completed a pioneering Hebrew biography of Noah. Appearing while he
was in Philadelphia, this work, published in Warsaw, had been available a year earlier in *Ha-Shiloah*. Raisin believed that his study of Noah, a personality hitherto not generally numbered within Zionist ranks, could serve the Jewish national cause by bringing a prominent American “who raised the flag of Hebrew nationality in a new land” to broader attention. The small volume received praise both from the influential Yiddish orator Zvi Hirsch Masliansky, who claimed that therewith Raisin had made a lasting name for himself in Hebrew literature, as well as from an anonymous writer in Philadelphia’s *Jewish Exponent*, who praised its “clear and entertaining manner” and claimed that the young Raisin had already acquired fame as a fluent and interesting Hebrew writer. However, he also added, “But will your rabbinical colleagues understand and recognize your literary skill? Only the God of Reform knows!” In fact, few other Reform rabbis of that day had the ability to read and appreciate Max’s Hebrew writings.

His brother Jacob, too, had found ample time for literary work while serving his small congregations. When still at rabbinical school, he had published a small volume on modern Jewish scholarship in Russia, once again an attempt to show that Eastern European Jews did not lag behind the West. It was dedicated to Professor Daniel Chwolson, the noted Orientalist of the Royal Academy of St. Petersburg, who had gained his university position only by conversion to Christianity but whose heart, according to Raisin, remained with his brethren. The little book argued that the Eastern Europeans “now work on the same basis, though in a more improved and methodical way,” as did Leopold Zunz, Solomon Rapoport, and the other leading figures of Central and Western European *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Once in Port Gibson, where he remained from 1901 to 1905, Jacob turned his attention to the United States in a guest sermon in New Orleans, instilling pride in the congregants by naming them the “coreligionists of Moses and compatriots of Washington.” During the same period he also extended his interest in the Haskalah to its spread in America. Knowing the subject from the inside, he published a four-installment article on the first local attempts to create a modern literature both in Yiddish and Hebrew, culminating, according to Raisin, in the figure of Zvi Gershuni (Henry Gersoni), a talented but controversial Hebraist and journalist.
However, Jacob’s most important early accomplishment as a writer came with a volume on Jewish customs that he published in 1907. Here, as in the earlier Hebrew essay in *Ha-Ivri*, he wanted to illustrate the precedent of Jewish variety, arguing that “the teachers of Judaism have never sacrificed unity for the sake of uniformity; that to maintain the whole firm and unshaken, the people were allowed to have their usages and customs ‘altered, abridged, enlarged, amended or otherwise disposed of,’ to suit their condition and convenience.” Utilizing his access to sources in multiple languages, Raisin focused upon a Judaism constructed of minhagim rather than halakhah, wherein custom more than law represented the choice of the people. Customs, in their variety, were thus more in keeping with democracy, and, of course, basing Judaism upon their looser structure made more room for religious reform. His model for such flexibility was the tanna Hillel, whom Jacob identifies with American Reform Judaism, and whose rival, Shammai, he classifies—surprisingly—more with a dogmatic German Reform Judaism that imposed the dominant zeitgeist on the people than with Orthodoxy, whose difference from Reform Raisin seeks to minimize. The book received mixed reviews. Multiple reviewers complained of the graceless style and the lack of full mastery of the English language. The most critical review deemed it “a polemical pamphlet adorned with a show of pseudo-scholarship.” However, it drew a positive review in a Yiddish periodical, and his mentor Gotthard Deutsch declared that “the work is a healthy sign of the ambition and the possibilities of the young element in the American rabbinate.” One review, in particular, gave Jacob immense pleasure. The well-known British scholar of Judaism, Israel Abrahams, had devoted lengthy attention to it in the *Jewish Chronicle*. Not only was the book, in Abrahams’ opinion, rare in forcing one to consider fundamental problems, it was “a book which ought to make its mark on contemporary Jewish theology.” The knowledge the book displayed seems also to have convinced Judah David Eisenstein, editor of a contemporary Hebrew encyclopedia, to have Raisin contribute a lengthy article on Jewish folktales. For the rabbi in Butte, Montana, it was another opportunity to demonstrate his scholarship as well as the historical prevalence of a popular, flexible Judaism.
During these same years Jacob was also revising and re-revising the one historical work that would gain lasting attention: his rabbinical thesis on the Haskalah in Russia. Not long after ordination he had sent the manuscript to the Jewish Publication Society, whose initial readers were unhappy with its style but favorably inclined as to its content. Despite their qualms the editors did not reject it. And thus began a lengthy process of back-and-forth between Raisin and multiple sequences of evaluators, no less than nine over the course of a dozen years. Among them was Solomon Schechter, who, along with the Society’s secretary Henrietta Szold, encouraged Raisin and who agreed to meet with him during a summer in New York in order to discuss re-editing and condensation. Raisin claimed that Schechter had always treated him with “extreme friendship” and once even told him “that had I not been an HUC man he might have given me a place at the Seminary.” After abbreviation and a thorough final editing, *The Haskalah Movement in Russia*, with the JPS imprint, appeared in 1913. It was more than a literary history. Broadly encompassing, his work was an erudite but also heroic and florid history of Russian Jewry as a whole, set within the national history of Russia from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the twentieth century. Only one-third of the way through does the author get to the Haskalah itself and to its major literary figures. Throughout, Raisin is intent on burnishing the image of Russian Jewry and, toward the end, on arguing for a smooth transition from the Haskalah to the Jewish national renaissance. Although upon publication it still lacked focus, Raisin’s book long remained the standard work on the subject in America.

For the brothers, of course, writing had to be limited to time stolen from the rabbinical duties that each of them performed faithfully in one small town after another. Not only did they do the expected preaching and educational work, but they also involved themselves in controversial public matters in their communities. In Meridian, Mississippi, where he served for eight years, Max openly sided with African Americans in their disputes, on one occasion traveling to the state capital in Jackson to plead their cause. Similarly inclined, his brother Jacob, then in Port Gibson, Mississippi, wrote in his diary that he would not support placing the portrait of the Jewish Confederate politician Judah P. Benjamin

Michael A. Meyer
in the new state capital. “That he is a Jew is of little consideration when the horrible effect of the cause he upheld will be deplored by millions of people to the thousandth generation.”53 Both brothers also devoted themselves to social and economic issues. In Mississippi Max helped to bring about legislation that would improve the conditions of women and children who labored in cotton mills.54 Jacob took the side of the workers in a bloody streetcar employees’ strike in New Orleans, opposed capital punishment, and at various times spoke out forcefully against child labor.55 Privately, he expressed his detestation of “the industrial tyranny of the capitalistic system, which rules in every sphere.” That he could not do more for the “poor and wretched” was a source of melancholy.56

Living in fervently Christian environments, the Raisin brothers could not avoid dealing with the faith of their neighbors. As Max once put it when his congregation in Meridian briefly held services in a church: “I felt myself drowning in a sea of ‘Goyishkeit.’”57 Well aware of the medieval Church’s anti-Judaism, the brothers were severely critical of a Catholicism that continued to display prejudice against Jews. They did what they could to prevent Christmas programs in the schools, and both opposed the transfer of the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday as a deplorable imitation of Christianity. Despite the popular notion of the Jews’ mission to the gentiles, Jacob argued that their mission was, first of all, to fellow Jews.58 Max severely condemned those rabbis who sought to return Jesus to Jewish history and those congregants who believed that they could adopt the healing prescriptions of Christian Science without thereby ceasing to be Jews. Like his brother, he urged Jews to pray for an increase of Jesus’s influence within Christianity, as opposed to the later Pauline doctrine.59 And he justified the use of Christian singers in Jewish worship only as a regrettable necessity in a small Jewish community.60 But Max went further than most Reform rabbis at the time when he argued, both in Hebrew and in English, for allowing rabbinical officiation at mixed marriages. Although opposed to intermarriage as such, he felt it necessary to consider the “human side” of the issue. Occasionally he performed such marriages himself, provided that the couple promised in writing and before witnesses to raise their children as Jews.61 His brother, according to one source, at least in his later years in Charleston
and despite his Zionism, had no problem whatever with intermarriage, believing that all were children of God. 62 During his tenure in Brooklyn, Max had attended courses at Union Theological Seminary out of a desire to get the Christian perspectives on moral and theological problems that troubled him. 63 Both brothers spoke frequently from Christian pulpits, especially in Unitarian churches.

Given their shared interest in scholarship and their extraordinary ability to use sources in multiple languages, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) soon called upon each of them for an academic presentation at one of its annual conventions. In view of his conversance with modern Hebrew literature, Max was appropriately assigned to deliver a lecture on references to the Reform movement in that literature. To the assembled Reform rabbis he argued in 1906 that the Reform movement was a direct outgrowth of the Haskalah and that leading early Maskilim such as Moses Mendelssohn and Naphtali Hertz Wessely, especially in their Hebrew writings, should be seen to occupy prominent places in the history of a Jewish Reform broadly conceived as both cultural and religious. Likewise, Hebrew writers in the East—Nahman Krochmal and Judah Loeb Mieses, for example—belonged in this broadly understood history of the Reform movement. Even the German Reformers of the nineteenth century, Max noted, did some of their writing in Hebrew. It was a mistake therefore, he implied, to cut the tie of language that linked Reform to the broader world of Hebrew literature. 64

Four years later, when topics were parceled out for a convention at Charlevoix, Michigan, marking the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Geiger, Jacob was the one called upon to address his colleagues on the subject of Jewish religious reform before the great nineteenth-century reformer’s appearance. In a lengthy disquisition, which could not have been delivered orally in full, Jacob sought to root Reform Judaism in Jewish history by equating it with an ancient and medieval Jewish rationalism that had accepted tradition only when it passed through its filter. 65 According to the lengthy usable past he fashioned for it, Reform Judaism had not begun with Israel Jacobson in the early nineteenth century, but in biblical times with the author of Deuteronomy. Thus it was not a parasitic growth or a new graft on an
ancient tree; it was itself rooted in ancient holy ground. Jacob’s breadth of erudition was astonishing and of a measure possessed by few of his colleagues. His lecture was the more remarkable since at the time he was living in Las Vegas, New Mexico, hardly a place of Jewish intellectual stimulation. A colleague wrote of his talk in the *American Hebrew* that it was a distinct contribution to Jewish scholarship and asked rhetorically, “Who was it who slandered the graduates of the Hebrew Union College as lacking in learning?”

### Alienation and Doubt

Within the CCAR the Raisin brothers were in the vanguard of an expanding Zionism among Reform rabbis that was originally limited to a small minority but by the mid-thirties had reached majority status. Jacob wrote of its “irresistible power” and looked toward the day when the expunged prayer for the restoration of Zion would enter the Reform liturgy. While on a visit to Palestine in 1931 he wrote to his wife that had he come earlier he might well have stayed and thus “have obtained genuine happiness in the calm and contentment which so many seem to experience in their daily contact with Mother Zion.” It was, however, his younger brother who became the more active Zionist, and it was he who repeatedly, in three languages and against opposition from both camps, argued for the compatibility of Zionism and Reform Judaism. One of Max’s earliest statements appeared in Yiddish, occasioned by a CCAR convention in 1909 in New York. At a time when anti-Zionism still reigned in Reform, he counterposed the official opposition to Jewish nationalism to “our” unofficial view. He gave rabbis like himself the label “Zionist Reformer,” thereby inserting the two movements into a single identity. Drawing the two together in a Jewish future, he looked to the day when Reform Judaism would be the dominant religion in Palestine.

Dissent soon hailed down upon Max Raisin and like-minded fellow Reform Zionists from both camps. In a sermon at Temple Beth-El, Samuel Schulman, the prominent New York Reform rabbi who had succeeded Kaufmann Kohler in that pulpit, declared unequivocally that there could never be any harmony between Reform Judaism and such a
conception as Zionism. They were simply contradictory. Max replied that Reform required Zionism. For him personally it had furnished “that positiveness which is so woefully lacking in our Reform movement.”

Undeterred by critique, Raisin used the occasion of an American Zionist convention in Rochester, New York, in 1914 to preach a sermon on Zionism and Liberal Judaism from the pulpit of the city’s Reform congregation. Here he famously declared that Reform and Zionism were alike in that both were movements of liberation, the former from oppressive legalism and the latter from civil and social disabilities. Rather than constituting antitheses, they fused into a synthesis. Many, however, believed that Raisin’s synthesis was a chimera. The *New York Tageblatt* printed an open letter to the men it regarded as the three most prominent Zionist Reform rabbis—Stephen S. Wise, Max Heller, and Max Raisin—pointing out that, as an organization, the CCAR continued to be anti-Zionist and that the only course open to them was to resign from the rabbinical organization since “in reality you are not Reform rabbis; you have little in common with them.”

If it was difficult to justify a mostly anti-Zionist Reform to Zionists, it was no less difficult for Max to explain a Reform Judaism so removed from religious tradition to the more traditional Jews in the Hebraic circles with which he so strongly identified. In a lengthy, restrained article in *Ha-Toren*, he declared that he was not an enemy of Orthodoxy; on the contrary, he respected it and appreciated the positive role it had played for him in his childhood. But as an adult he required a more universal and rational faith, more active in the world, more progressive, and more in keeping with both his intellect and with classical Judaism. Emphatically he wrote, “I am a Reform Jew because I am a Jew.” In printing Raisin’s piece, however, the editor had found it necessary to assure his readers that a response would soon be forthcoming. It came in a sarcastic piece by an Orthodox natural scientist who declared that Reform Judaism was no longer Judaism, that it was nothing more than a low materialism. Cleverly reversing Raisin’s formulation, the author concluded: “I am not a Reform Jew because I am a Jew.”

Although both brothers were fervent and consistent in their Zionism and their love of Hebrew, and although they remained loyal to the
Reform movement, they were ambivalent about their choice of the rabbinate and sometimes lost faith in its future. Multiple considerations were responsible for questioning their chosen vocation. There were salary issues, a lack of stimulation in the small towns where they spent their early rabbinates, and a lack of common interests with the laity. “They pet us and are nice to us as they are to their favorite dogs or horses,” Jacob complained. Beginning with his position in Port Gibson, he kept a diary of his thoughts, which he emphatically insisted not be destroyed and which incorporated copies of candid letters to his brother. Its first volume he entitled “My Life’s Tragi-Comedy,” the second “Light and Shadow.” In explaining this venture, Jacob wrote:

Having nothing to be ashamed of or anything to be proud over, though much to be sorry for, I, in my foolish and idle moments, penned this down, for no particular reason save that being alone and finding no one to sympathize with me or to make a confidant of, I communicated with myself and found such consolation in my inner self pictured on paper.

At various times one or the other brother planned for an alternate profession in law or real estate or some form of business in which the brothers could be together and not, as in the rabbinate, “suffer from the ever gnawing care of a possible failure of re-election.” They each gathered academic degrees to raise their status: Upon the governor’s recommendation, Max received an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University of Mississippi in return for lectures he gave there as well as an honorary degree from HUC; Jacob obtained, first, an apparently earned doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Denver, then a doctor of divinity degree from HUC, and finally an earned bachelor of law degree from the Albany School of Law.

Jacob’s candid diary indicates that, aside from material and communication problems, he was deeply troubled by sexual frustration and philosophical doubts. He was obsessed with keeping his body pure until marriage, as was indeed expected from a rabbi at that time. But he writes, apparently referring to masturbation: “Last Thursday and tonight I relapsed again…. I have polluted myself too long and too often to deserve to live long, be well, to enjoy the paradisiacal bliss of family happiness.” Jacob’s sense of personal guilt extended, as well, to
his increasing doubts about the existence of a personal God, which, at least for a time, he believed made his continuing as a rabbi into an act of hypocrisy. “What embitters my life more than anything else,” he wrote, “is that I find myself less justified in being a rabbi. The older I grow the more of an unbeliever I seem to become.”81 Like Mordecai Kaplan, Jacob was drawn to the theology of Matthew Arnold, believing, like the English poet and essayist, that God was “the power that maketh for righteousness.”82 Although early in his career he had publicly addressed God as “Thou who rulest the destinies of the universe and the affairs of men,”83 he later explicitly denied the existence of a transcendent God and doubted that the soul lived on after death. What remained was largely an ethnic attachment along with a love of Jewish ritual. He confided to his diary:

And so I can at best be only a Jew, a racial Jew but not a rabbi. I am extremely interested in my poor people’s present and fond of its past and long and hope for a glorious future. I grieve over its faults and rejoice at its greatness. But while I never speak about God or reward and punishment I feel like a hypocrite because people take it for granted that as a rabbi my faith in these dogmas is unshakable, while in reality it is less firm than that of the least of my constituents.84

Shortly thereafter he wrote, “I deny God but delight in the customs of His people.”85 Among philosophers, Jacob was powerfully drawn to the famous seventeenth-century Dutch thinker of Jewish origin—to the point that he later gave his only son the middle name “Spinoza.”86 And yet, despite their early frustrations and doubts, the brothers persisted in their rabbinical careers, becoming increasingly successful as they found permanent positions, Jacob in the South, Max within striking distance of New York.87

**Zionist Reform Rabbis**

Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim, in Charleston, South Carolina, was, on the surface, not the ideal location for a Zionist/Hebraist of Eastern European origin. At least initially, Jacob’s Zionism may have been a factor in opposition that arose annually when his contract came up for renewal.88 But he soon managed to fit in. He married a woman
who was fifth-generation Charlestonian and extraordinary in being a Jewish member of the Daughters of the American Revolution.89 The readily acceptable Judaism Jacob expounded there was both friendly to Christianity and accepting of religiously mixed couples. Though an unexciting speaker whose learned sermons rarely made contact with the congregation, his personal thoughtfulness and kindness endeared him to the congregation.90 He overcame his doubts about the efficacy of the rabbinate to the point that he could assure a despairing rabbi that the picture of American Judaism was not so gloomy as to lack “a ray of optimism.”91 He became an advocate for the equality of women; in 1922 he spoke out at the CCAR in favor of ordaining women rabbis and, when the Equal Rights Amendment came up before Congress following World War II, he wrote a letter of endorsement to Senator Carl Hatch. He enthused about the British novelist and religious thinker Grace Aguilar, whom he called an “intoxicated daughter of Israel” because of her love of the Holy Land and the holy language of Hebrew.92 And he continued to write on a variety of subjects. After a number of failed efforts with suggested topics, he succeeded in publishing a satirical piece in the prestigious Menorah Journal. Its subject was the specious claims made by and regarding various groups and individuals, such as American Indians, that, despite contrary evidence, they were really the Jews’ long-lost brothers.93 Continuing his interest in English literature, he wrote in Hebrew on Sir Walter Scott.94 His most extensive work—a diffuse study of more than eight hundred pages—sought to show that throughout history, from biblical times to the present, Jewish ideals had held an attraction for non-Jews. Completed only shortly before his death, the massive volume appeared posthumously, seven years after his demise.95

In 1913 his brother Max finally escaped what he regarded as the provincialism of the South and regained the challenging life of the metropolis where he had grown up. He went first to Shaari Zedek in Brooklyn, where he remained for five years until, feeling he was being treated as a mere functionary, he departed. He then briefly co-edited the American Jewish Chronicle and served a Brooklyn congregation that he had established himself.96 During these years Max returned to his earlier love of historical studies, producing A History of the Jews in Modern
Times—nothing less than a broadly conceived volume of modern Jewish history that gave what was, to his mind, the proper emphasis both on Eastern Europe and America. Intended to carry the work of Heinrich Graetz up to the end of World War I, it was, following the devastation of the war, extraordinarily optimistic and sufficiently successful to deserve a second edition.\textsuperscript{97}

Then, at last, Max’s professional wanderings came to an end when in 1921 he found a permanent position at B’nai Jeshurun, the Barnert Temple, in Paterson, New Jersey, where he remained for twenty-five
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years. Like his brother, he was beloved by many congregants, but, also like him, he lacked dynamic appeal. His relations with the congregation's board were not smooth, and he could never get a multiyear contract. No doubt many congregants were not pleased when he called Sunday School, because of its minimal Jewish and Hebraic education, “the wound in the body of Jewish education in America.”98 In 1946 he was forced to retire in favor of a younger, taller rabbi, who, to Max's distress and with the approval of the board, immediately excluded him from any leadership role in the synagogue.99 Thus for Max, even more than for Jacob, it was the activity outside the congregation that provided a source of satisfaction. In the community he devoted himself to racial justice, serving in 1939 as president of the Paterson Interracial Commission.100 Beyond Paterson, he was one of fifty American delegates to the founding conference of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva in 1936.101

Within the Reform movement Max Raisin now played a larger role. He was thrilled when invited to give three lectures at the (anti-Zionist) Reformgemeinde in Berlin. Along with leading Reform rabbis, he was appointed a member of the committee that created Reform Judaism’s Columbus Platform in 1937, and for two years, from 1942 to 1943, he served as president of the Association of Reform Rabbis of New York City.102 Max was less troubled by theological doubt than his brother, although he followed the lead of the Reconstructionist movement in clearly giving up belief in the divine chosenness of the Jewish people.103 However, he felt that in the course of time, Reform Judaism had lost the vigor of its early American years. An unhealthy stillness had replaced the polemics that earlier held broad attention.104 Rabbis had become kuntzenmacher—that is, they were reverting to gimmicks to attract attendance.105 He remained loyal, but his enthusiasm waned. It was his relation to the great Hebraists and his attachment to the Zionist movement that gave him the greatest satisfaction. He published a volume, first in Yiddish and then in English, containing chapters on prominent Hebrew writers and leading Zionists—but also including Isaac Mayer Wise and Gotthard Deutsch.106 His career had brought him into touch with the major figures of modern Jewish history. Perhaps his most cherished moment came in 1927 on the first of his four trips to Palestine, when the leading Hebrew writers in Tel Aviv, headed by the
poet Chayim Nahman Bialik, held a reception in his honor, recognizing his role as a Hebrew writer and as a disseminator of Hebrew culture in the United States.107 On such occasions, which were repeated on two of his later trips, Raisin noted that he was often introduced—no doubt with some astonishment—as “the Reform rabbi who writes in Hebrew.”108 Whereas among his Reform colleagues he did not stand out for oratory or national leadership, in the circle of Hebrew writers in Palestine he seemed unique, and that was a great satisfaction.

Max Raisin’s Zionism grew increasingly political during the years of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. He eschewed Labor Zionism, choosing instead to serve as vice president of the American branch of the State Party, which broke off from Revisionist Zionism when Vladimir Jabotinsky left the World Zionist Organization in 1936.109 Raisin was convinced that the Jewish state should be established within its “historical boundaries.” He found the partition plan proposed by the Peel Commission “most distasteful” but did not reject the idea of two states, since it was the best that could be hoped for. Moreover, he added, “It will not do for us to ignore the presence of the Arab in the land, or the right of the Arab to the land which was his home for the past thirteen hundred years. Whether we like it or not, we are confronted with the fact that the Arabs are there and that they outnumber the Jews there two to one.”110 He was convinced that Jewish suffering was the result of severe economic inequality and that it was the lack of social justice that had enabled Hitler to cast blame for the regnant poverty upon the Jews. In the Land of Israel the Zionists would create a state where such inequalities would not exist. They would establish a more just and idealistic society even if on one of his visits to Palestine he found, to his distress, more Jews motivated by materialistic self-interest than he would have liked. He did not hesitate to preach Zionism from the pulpit, on one occasion expressing his hope that, once gathered in their own land, the Jews might yet bring redemption to a suffering humanity.111

Support for the Zionist effort was now coupled with a more severe critique of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. Back in Port Gibson in 1912, Max had written that there had never been a more powerful pulpit than the American one and that the pulpit was the saving grace
of the Jews and Judaism. And still in 1928, he had praised to his readers in Palestine the freedom from enslavement to tradition that characterized American Jewry, its mutual tolerance, and the value of Jews being spread among the nations. American Judaism is “close to my heart,” he confessed. America was not exile, not galut. But nine years later, in 1937, during a period of religious decline, he was far more critical, telling his rabbinical colleagues that the synagogue was weak because the rabbinate was weak, lacking the authority that he believed it should possess. It was not just the rabbinate that was at fault; the Jewish people, as a whole, was sick with the disease called galut, and the rabbinate was not able to stem its spread. Raisin continued to praise America, but he had lost faith in American Jews. They had sold out their Judaism for economic or political gain, bringing down on themselves a moral enslavement. With regard to the American Jews, Raisin thus echoed loudly what his idol Ahad Ha-Am had written years earlier in his famous essay, “Avdut Betokh Herut” (Slavery within Freedom). For all its wealth and liberty, American Jewry was not spiritually and morally free. To fellow rabbis he expressed his view that the only viable Jewish future lay in the Land of Israel, which he once again visited after attending the World Zionist Congress in 1935. Yet for Max personally, his final years during the 1950s brought a measure of contentment: Zionism had met with success, Hebrew had become a spoken language, Reform Judaism was expanding and returning to tradition. He came to feel that, even if his literary and professional ambitions had not been entirely fulfilled, his life, now drawing to a close, had not been wasted. His brother Jacob died in 1946, two years after retirement from Beth Elohim in Charleston; Max lived to 1957, serving small congregations after his own retirement, the last of them back in the South, where he passed away in Florence, Alabama.

Despite their theological doubts and professional travails, the Raisin brothers managed to be in the vanguard of what Max called an Eastern European “counter-reformation” that would bring Reform Judaism closer to traditional sources. And together with early Reform Zionist rabbis such as Bernhard Felsenthal, Max Heller, and Stephen Wise, Jacob and Max pointed the way to a Reform movement that would become increasingly committed to Zionism. As prolific pulpit scholars within
Reform Judaism, they can be seen as precursors to Rabbis Abba Hillel Silver, Solomon Freehof, and Gunther Plaut. Not as prominent as these men in their rabbinical roles nor as sophisticated in their scholarship, they were nonetheless outstanding in their time. In a movement for which the vernacular had triumphed over the Hebraic, in which the Eastern European heritage had been outside its bounds, and where Jewish nationalism was seen as a regression, the Raisins showed that a broadly based Reform Judaism could be harmonized not only with Zionism but also with the Hebrew renaissance.


Notes

Among those who facilitated my research, I would like especially to thank Dale Rosengarten in Charleston, South Carolina, Dorothy Starr in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, and Allan Satin and Kevin Proffitt in Cincinnati, Ohio.

1 The secondary literature on each of them tends toward the hagiographic. It is largely based on personal acquaintance and mostly focuses on the relation to Hebrew literature. Nissan Touroff wrote on both brothers: on Jacob, “A Tent Dweller” [Hebrew], Ha-Tekufah 34–35 (1949): 824–829; on Max, “The Sword and the Book” [Hebrew], Bitzaron 26 (1952): 43–48. An educator and author, Touroff was a childhood acquaintance of the brothers from Nesvizh. His biographical articles make Jacob out to have been an introvert and Max an energetic extrovert who at times despaired and at times thought he could be the leader of his generation. Also about Max is Shlomo Damesek, “Among the Pioneers” [Hebrew], Bitzaron 35 (1956): 15–25. Damesek cites the well-known American Hebraist Daniel Persky as having written to him regarding Max Raisin: “In truth it is he who is the father of the new Hebrew literature in America (and that is the way he is always considered in our eyes) since he was the first writer here in this country who wrote in the new style.” Ibid., 25.


3 Max Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” manuscript, SC-9966, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter AJA).
Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin, *Mi-Sefer Hayai, Zikhrnot u-Reshimot Otobiografi’ot* (New York: Bitzaron, 1956), 17. An English synopsis and brief evaluation of this work by Gary P. Zola is in SC-9979, AJA.

See Max’s essay on his brother in ibid., 117–120.

Despite their love of Hebrew and Max’s later critique of the Yiddish press as “decidedly detrimental to public morals,” they retained a positive if ambivalent attachment to Yiddish. Momentarily despairing of Hebrew, Jacob at one point wrote to his brother in a letter inserted into his diary: “Say what you will, Hebrew is dead and the stiffness and pallor of death is upon her. Unlanguage-like as Yiddish may appear, it is yet alive, is expressive, and like an ugly child is yet not devoid of many a charming trait.” Max Raisin, “Our Yiddish Journals,” *American Israelite* (5 April 1917): 1; Jacob Raisin diary, 3 May 1908, Jacob Salmon Raisin papers, College of Charleston Libraries, Charleston, SC, MSS 1075, 13/5. In 1914 Jacob gave a series of Yiddish lectures on U.S. history sponsored by New York City’s Department of Education.

For this period in the lives of the brothers see especially “Forty Years Ago in New York” [Hebrew], in Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin, *Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi* (Brooklyn, NY: Shulsinger Brothers, 1941), 165–190.

The title of Max’s poem was “Al Mot,” and it included a line noting Schnabel’s love for the “refugees” from Europe.

Ibid., 14 and 21 August 1896.

Jacob Zausmer, *Be-Ikvei ha-Dor. Reshimot, Masot ve-Zikhrnot* (Philadelphia: Ogen, 1957), 4; Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin, *Igrot Sofrim Ivrim* (Brooklyn, New York: Israel Matz, 1947), 256. None of these letters, many of them to Max Raisin himself, had previously been published. Regrettably, they almost completely lack explanatory notes. In one of them (p. 43) the Hebrew writer and publisher Avraham Leib Shalkovich (pen name Ben-Avigdor) responded positively to Max Raisin’s proposal to translate Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* into Hebrew and provide additional biographical information on him, but nothing came of this project.

“Jews and Judaism in America” [Hebrew], *Ha-Shiloah* 4 (1898): 169–180, 468–472, 566–570. The task of writing about American Judaism had been given to the journalist Zvi Gershuni, a pioneer of modern Hebrew in America. But after writing only one installment he fell ill and died suddenly, thus opening the way for Max. Ibid., 169, note.

The final word is *metukenet*. The intent is clearly to a non-Orthodox form of religious Judaism.

Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin, “The Hebrew Language and Its Literature in America” [Hebrew], *Ha-Shiloah* 8 (1901): 175.

Raisin, *Mi-Sefer Hayai*, 96.

The *New Palestine* (8 April 1927): 350. Max’s appearance in *Ha-Shiloah* persuaded Alter Druyanov, editor of the Zionist periodical *Ha-Olam* in Vilna, to request in 1909 that Raisin...
likewise contribute to it articles on American Jewry, and in particular on the development of “the seminary in Cincinnati.” However, there is no evidence of such articles. See Raisin, *Igrot Sofrim Ivrim*, 180–182.


18 Ahad Ha-Am, *Pirkei Zikhreron ve-Igarot* (Tel Aviv: Bet Ahad Ha-Am, 1931), 163, 172–173. The letter of 11 November 1926, written less than two months before Ha-Am’s death, is the last in this volume.

19 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 10–11. However, Jacob did not regard the funding that he received as sufficient; he wrote to Isaac Mayer Wise during a summer in New York that he required a High Holiday congregation that would provide added funds. Jacob S. Raisin to the Rev. Dr. Wise, 16 August 1898, Isaac Mayer Wise Papers, MS-436, AJA.

20 Raisin, *Mi-Sefer Hayai*, 40–41.

21 Max recollects it in two essays in his *Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi*, 191–228.

22 Jacob wrote a Hebrew eulogy for Mielziner—“truly a man of God”—in the *HUC Journal* 7, no. 5 (February 1903).


24 Ya’akov Z. Raisin, *George Eliot, Hayehah, Ketavehah ve-Halakh Ruhab* (Warsaw, 1899), 96–97, 118. Six years later he began working on “a sort of Hebrew Shakespeare boiled down,” but the publisher lost the manuscript. Jacob Raisin diary, 29 January 1905, 12/15.


26 Idem., *Toldot ha-Yehudim be-Amerikah* (Warsaw: Tushiyah, 1902). Max was modest enough to describe the volume as *ne’erakh* (compiled) rather than written by him.

27 Ibid., 8.

28 The copy in the HUC library is full of handwritten corrections.

29 Hebrew Union College Faculty Minutes, October 1902, MS-5, Box B3, AJA. Apparently Philipson did not find the time to read the book, as the minutes of 7 April 1903 list Louis Grossman as the second reader.


31 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 15–16.

32 Clipping from a Stockton newspaper, 31 October 1903, furnished to me by Max Raisin’s granddaughter, Joan Rosenthal.


36 *Jewish Exponent* (17 February 1905): 2.

37 *American Israelite*, 31 August 1905. It is not stated what the differences were. They may have concerned the nature of the service, but they may also have been personal.


40 Ibid., Introduction, unpaginated; “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 14.


46 The reviews are collected in Jacob’s scrapbook in the Jacob Raisin papers, MS 1075, 1/2.

47 This review was reprinted in the *Reform Advocate* (9 November 1907): 391–392. The editor, Emil G. Hirsch, had written his own review two weeks earlier in which he commended Raisin for placing authority in the people “where it belongs.” Ibid., 26 October 1907.


49 The appointed readers were Bernhard Felsenthal, Marcus Jastrow, Louis Ginzberg, Judah Magnes, David Philipson, Solomon Schechter, Israel Friedlaender, Samuel Schulman, and Henry Berkowitz.

50 Jacob Raisin to Max Heller, who read the manuscript informally, 1 September 1909, Heller Collection, MS 33, Box 4, Folder 22, AJA. Schechter also proposed that Jacob’s brother Max be asked to compose for the Society a book of passages dealing with Jews and Judaism in classical writers. However, we hear nothing further of this project. Publication Committee Minutes, 13 October 1907, 3 May 1908, 10 October 1909, 6 June 1910, and 8 December 1912, Jewish Publication Society papers, Temple University.


52 Zausmer, *Be-Ikvei ha-Dor*, 18; Max Raisin to Max Heller, 10 September 1905, Heller Collection, MS 33, Box 4, Folder 33, AJA.

53 Jacob Raisin diary, 5 February 1903, 12/5.
54 Undated newspaper article in Max Raisin scrapbook, Barnert Temple Archives, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey.

55 Jacob Raisin diary, 27 January 1907, 13/5. His sermon, “The Cry of the Children,” was partially reprinted in the Butte Miner (the clipping in the Jacob Raisin papers does not indicate a date).

56 Jacob Raisin diary, 9 October and 24 November 1902, 12/5; 10 March 1907, 13/5. In 1911 the governor of Mississippi appointed Max Raisin to the Southern Conference on Child Labor, where he was chosen to be vice president. Max Raisin, Rabbi’s Message (Meridian, MS: Congregation Beth Israel, 1912), 8.

57 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 17–18.


59 See the two essays on Jesus in Raisin, Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi, 84–97; 98–107.

60 American Israelite, 30 March and 14 July 1911.


62 Arthur V. Williams, Tales of Charleston 1930s (Charleston, SC: College of Charleston Libraries, 1999), 58.

63 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 19.


65 Jacob S. Raisin, “Reform Judaism Prior to Abraham Geiger, or the Conflict between Rationalism and Traditionalism in Ancient Judaism,” CCARY 20 (1910): 197–245. Jacob, however, wrote to his brother that the subject was not of great interest to him and that he would have preferred to speak on “Socialism and Judaism.” Jacob to Max, 14 January 1910, Jacob Raisin papers, 13/5.

66 Maurice H. Harris, “It Was a ‘Montefiore Conference,’” American Hebrew 87, no. 10 (8 July 1910): 241; See also reports in the American Israelite, 7 and 14 July 1910.


68 Jacob Raisin from Tel Aviv to his wife Jane in Charleston, 24 July 1931, Jacob Raisin papers, MSS 1075, 9/5.


74 M.Z. Raisin, “Mipnei Ma Ani Reformi?” *Ha-Toren* (June–November 1913): 255. The piece was initially delivered orally before the “Ahiever” Hebrew circle in New York, where it provoked a lively discussion among those present. Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 22.


76 Jacob Raisin diary, 25 October 1903, 12/5.

77 Jacob Raisin papers, MSS 1075, 12/5. At one point he wrote: “I see that my diary is in many respects like [Moshe Leib] Lilienblum’s *Hat’ot Ne’urim* and that my lot in life is not unlike his.” He thus saw his own plight as analogous to that described in one of the classical works of the Haskalah. Ibid., 13/5, 3 August 1906.

78 Max Raisin to Max Heller, 30 October 1907, Heller Collection, 4/33. Yearly re-election of rabbis was standard practice at the time. On 3 September 1907 Max had written to Jacob: “You, and I with you, must utilize the present for a better future in dear old New York. My mind, as you know, is made up. I shall do my best to leave the ministry after this year. And I shall also try to save up no less than a thousand dollars this year with which I might start a business or become a commission merchant. The future may yet be ours.” Jacob Raisin diary, 3 September 1907, 13/5.

79 There is no evidence that Jacob ever studied at the University of Denver, yet the commencement program for 25 May 1911 lists him as the sole recipient of the doctor of philosophy degree, unlike other degrees given on that occasion not specified as honoris causa. It is likely that Jacob sent to the university one of his books or manuscripts on the basis of which it was decided to give him the degree. This was common practice at the time in Germany and may have been, as well, in the United States.

80 Jacob Raisin diary, 25 January 1903, 12/5.

81 Jacob Raisin diary, 2 March 1910, 13/5.

82 Ibid., 15 February 1910.


84 Jacob Raisin diary, 26 March 1910, 13/5.

85 Ibid., 13 April 1910. Shortly thereafter he wrote in his diary that Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture movement, was right in objecting to the recital of liturgical passages in which he did not believe and to the very notion that God answers prayer. It was, moreover, disconcerting to Jacob that many rabbis, when not conducting services, would not attend them. Ibid., 26 April 1910.
According to a diary entry for 14 September 1902 (ibid, 12/5), he had begun to read Spinoza early, and the influence seems only to have grown. He later spoke to the CCAR in praise of Spinoza as a champion of religious tolerance and referred to him on other occasions, as well. CCARY 36 (1926): 208–209; Raisin, “Confessions,” 74. It appears that at this time Max was not as troubled by theological doubt. In a critical response to the antireligious philosopher Horace Kallen, he based the Jewish faith, and presumably his own, on the universal “God-idea,” a concept centrally expressed in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Max Raisin, “On ‘Universal Judaism,’” American Hebrew, 11 February 1910. However, with the onset of the Holocaust he felt he could no longer recite the prayer acknowledging God’s love and based his faith not on Providence but upon divinely given moral choice. CCARY 51 (1941): 274–275.

Unlike Max, Jacob was not eager to return to the traditional ambience of New York, from which he had become estranged: “Alas, my own people are disagreeable to me and I see to my horror that we have little in common.” Jacob Raisin diary, 29 June 1905, 12/5.


In his diary Jacob had earlier confessed that he was looking for “a loving girl with plenty of money to enable me to lead my own life.” He wanted a marriage partner not only rich but also from “a prominent family.” However, he also noted that “fond of money as I am, I am fond of affection and kindliness infinitely more.” Jacob Raisin diary, 1 September 1, 1909, 13/5. His bride—whom he married eight years later—apparently fulfilled the conditions.

Williams, Tales of Charleston, 58–60.


His Hebrew essay on Scott, which dealt more with the writer’s character than his writing, appeared posthumously in Ha-Tekufah 34–35 (1949): 800–811.

Jacob S. Raisin, Gentile Reactions to Jewish Ideals. With Special Reference to Proselytes, ed. Herman Hailperin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953).

Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 18. See his installation address in which he argues against a solely ethnic Judaism in the American Israelite (16 October 1913): 5. Max claimed to be willing to take a lower salary in return for the more active life of an urban rabbinate. Max Raisin to Hyman Enelow, undated letter, MS 11, Box 19, Folder 2, AJA. Ahad Ha-Am saw Max’s return to the New York area as an opportunity for him to transcend Reform Judaism. In a letter to Max he wrote: “Your dwelling in the midst of your people will pull you out of the confines of being a Reform rabbi and allow you to deal with more general matters and the more important questions concerning our people.” Letter of 30 January 1910.
1917, in *Igrot Ahad Ha-Am* 5 (Jerusalem/Tel Aviv: Moriah, 1924), 287–288. Jacob, too, served briefly in Brooklyn, from 1911 to 1912. A Yiddish newspaper pointed out that he was ideal for filling the vacant rabbinate at Temple Emanuel in Boro Park, since he spoke English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, and people would have a hard time believing that he was a graduate of the Cincinnati rabbinical school. Clipping from an unidentified and undated Yiddish newspaper in Jacob Raisin papers, 2/4.

97 Max Raisin, *A History of the Jews in Modern Times* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1919). The second edition appeared in 1923. An English translation of Graetz’s *Volkstümliche Geschichte der Juden*, which this volume was intended to bring up to date, had been published in 1888. Much later, in 1944, the historian Ismar Elbogen would publish a similar supplementary volume to the Jewish Publication Society’s translation of Graetz’s more extensive *Geschichte der Juden*.


99 The vitriolic correspondence is in Ahron Opher papers, MS 694, AJA. See also board minutes of Temple B’nai Jeshurun for 17 December 1946 and 21 January 1947, housed at the temple. Raisin had spoken earlier against the custom of exchanging aging rabbis for younger ones. Cf. Mordechai Ze’ev Raisin, *Yisra’el be-Amerikah. Ma’amarim u-Fulitonim* (Jerusalem/Tel-Aviv: Ahiever, 1928), 223.

100 Max Raisin scrapbook.

101 Ibid.

102 The association refused to give the presidency, as had been the custom, to the vice president, Hyman Schachtel, since he was a declared anti-Zionist. “Rabbi Who Came Out against Eretz Israel Loses in Elections of ‘Jewish Ministers’” [Yiddish], *Der Tog*, 31 December 1942.

103 “You Have Chosen Us” [Hebrew], in *Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi*, 67–75.

104 Ibid., “Reform Judaism” [Hebrew], 28–34.


106 Max Raisin, *Groise Yidn vas ikh hob gekent* (New York: Cyco Bicher Farlag, 1950); idem, *Great Jews I Have Known* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952). The essays initially appeared individually in the Yiddish monthly *Zukunft* and in the *National Jewish Monthly* of B’nai B’rith. Raisin (*Great Jews*, 140) was convinced that had Wise been alive after World War II, he too would have “looked Zionward for a solution of the Jewish problem.” The volume enjoyed a very favorable review in *Jewish Social Studies* 17 (1955): 349–351, where Max Zeldner praised it for having delineated its subject “so vividly, so sympathetically and so interestingly.”

108 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 23.
109 “Declaration of the Jewish State Party of America” [Yiddish], 28 November 1936, Max Raisin scrapbook.
111 Ibid., article in The Call, 11 September 1937; Raisin, Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi, 317–322.
112 “Not the Fault of the Jewish Pulpit,” American Israelite (23 May 1912): 5.
113 Raisin, Yisra‘el be-Amerikah, 5–8, 92–95.
115 “The Moral State of Jewry,” Hebrew Union College Monthly (January 1937): 5–6. This was the opposite of African Americans, whom Raisin described as living, even in his time, in a state of inner freedom and outer slavery. Max equated their outer situation in the South with the situation of Jews in 1930s Nazi Germany. Raisin, Dapim mi-Pinkaso shel Rabbi, 152, 155.
117 Raisin, “My Fifty Years as a Rabbi,” 25.
Jacob Billikopf: A Jewish Social Worker in America, 1900–1950

by Mark Cowett

Between 1901 and 1950, Jacob Billikopf, a transplanted Lithuanian Jew, developed a noteworthy career as a social worker and social welfare reformer in the United States. Utilizing a keen intelligence and acute set of political skills, he helped develop the profession of social work from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century to its multifaceted approaches in mid-twentieth-century America. Referring to himself often as a “generalist” in the field of social work, he performed different roles in his career: from 1903 to 1917 he served as a charity worker, settlement leader, prison reformer, civil rights supporter, and co-architect of publicly financed and administered laws to help the needy; from 1917 to 1934 he became a national fundraiser for the American Jewish Relief Committee, a Jewish Federation executive in Philadelphia, and a labor mediator in the garment trades in New York; and from 1934 to 1950 he continued his work as a labor mediator, champion of civil rights, and supporter of publicly financed and administered laws.¹

In his unceasing efforts on multiple levels to advance the cause of social welfare reform on local, state, and national levels, Billikopf’s career can shed light on the development of professional social work from 1901 to 1950, on newly emerging trends in Jewish social work after World War I, on the turn toward more publicly administered programs on state and national levels in the 1930s, and on the difficulties of straddling so many disparate positions simultaneously in a career. It can provide insight into the varied nature of Jewish philanthropy, greater awareness of the relationships between Jewish welfare efforts and those in the greater American community, and new thoughts about the simultaneous but
often conflicting strategies that professional social workers employed to ameliorate and eradicate social problems between 1900 and 1950.

But Billikopf’s facility as a politician and social activist speaks to the complexity of his career. Trained at the University of Chicago by leaders of the National Conference of Jewish Charities (NCJC) and supported by some of the wealthiest people in America—Jews and gentiles alike—he moved easily between local, state, and national levels and among many groups over the next fifty years: Jews and non-Jews, caseworkers and community organizers, German and Eastern European Jews, business owners and labor, and African Americans and whites. This fluidity allowed him to rise from lowly beginnings in Richmond, Virginia, in 1896 to the pinnacle of various American Jewish, social work, and social welfare communities by the early 1930s. Billikopf believed that the foundation of his success lay in his desire to effect a “mediating” position among those with whom he worked; it allowed him to speak with everyone. But doing so may have ultimately caused his undoing. Being an occasional participant in many arenas, he was never fully welcomed into any. This became all too clear in his later years.

Vilna Roots

Billikopf’s family had renowned roots. When he left Vilna and arrived in Richmond as a twelve-year-old in 1896, Yakov Bielikov (as he was then known) carried a legacy of a long line of Talmudic scholars and humanitarians on his mother’s side. The earliest known member was Meir ben Isaac (1480 to 1565), who became chief rabbi in the Venetian Republic in 1525. His son, Samuel Judah, succeeded him in 1565. Legends exist about Samuel Judah. On the recommendation of Prince Nicholas Radziwill, he was elected king of Poland for a few days when Polish electors could not agree on a king. Also known as “Saul Wahl,” he gained notice among Polish Jews for his founding of many charitable institutions for poor Jews.2

Young Billikopf’s family legacy of charity was in keeping with institutions in his hometown of Vilna, where, like other Lithuanian communities, there was a long tradition of supporting the needy, residents and travelers alike. This support included assisting the sick, homeless, invalids, and people with disabilities; providing quality
education; and even offering loan societies (gemilut chesed) to fund free loans for the needy.

Social welfare institutions were supported by two different means. Sometimes well-to-do individuals contributed funds to help the needy, foreshadowing Jewish welfare fund drives in America in the twentieth century. But the story in Lithuania was more extensive than that. Communities took on the responsibilities of public relief as a constant component of their mission. In comparing their efforts with those in nineteenth-century America, some differences are clear. Although Jews in Vilna and other parts of the Pale favored raising private funds to provide institutional relief, they also offered publicly sponsored cash relief when necessary, all without attendant moral strictures. In America, cash relief was frowned upon, and aid was heavily laced with moral imposition.

Billikopf’s mother, Glika Katzenellenbogen Bielikov, passed on to Jacob and his five brothers and sisters the legacies of intelligence and community responsibility to help the less fortunate. Billikopf remembered his mother as a strong and resourceful woman who, as breadwinner, operated a family grocery or spice store. The store played an important part in the social life of the Vilna community, as Glika was something of a gossip who made it her business to know many important people. Apparently she not only helped struggling students but married off indigent brides. She furnished provisions for weddings from a personal jewelry collection, persuaded well-known musicians to play for such ceremonies, helped Abraham Cahan, the best friend of Jacob’s brother, Grisha, attain admission into The Teacher’s Institute of Vilna, and even hid Cahan in their basement for three days when he, as a member of a secret and revolutionary movement, was fleeing from the police.

Nevertheless, owing to the poverty of the family and the resourcefulness of Jacob’s older brother, Abe, the family left for America in 1896 and moved to Richmond to live with Abe and his family. The virulent antisemitism present in Russia at the time also played a significant role in the family’s desire to leave.3

**Education and Early Career**

In the seven years between 1896, when he first arrived in America, and 1903, when he graduated from the University of Chicago and pursued
practical training in New York City, Billikopf not only acquired his first tastes of American society but joined the newly emerging professional social work community in the United States. His fantastic pace of acclimation speaks to three ideas: an extraordinary mind and eagerness to seek out encouraging supporters and opportunities; a clear picture of the intentions of the newly emerging American Jewish social work community that sometimes employed newcomers; and the necessity of viewing Jewish activities in the larger lens of the greater American community because of the overlapping networks that existed among various groups of welfare workers and reformers.

From the time of his first language deficits as a first grader at age twelve at the John Marshall Elementary School in Richmond, Billikopf evidenced a desire to learn, an ability to assimilate new ideas quickly, and an intensity for making his way. By the end of his first year, he was promoted to eighth grade with children of his own age. By age fourteen a Richmond judge, William Turpin, hired him to accompany him home each day; this turned into a sponsorship from Turpin as well as a lifelong friendship, which indicates Billikopf’s charm as well as the Baptist humanitarian’s sense of noblesse oblige. After Turpin recommended him to Richmond College in 1900, Billikopf earned the admiration of Dr. Samuel Chiles Mitchell, a language and history professor and, later, president of the University of South Carolina, University of Virginia Medical School, and the University of Delaware. Mitchell knew that the leading Jewish social workers of the time—Max Senior, Solomon Lowenstein, and Judah L. Magnes of the NCJC—were looking for qualified young people to take up social work as a profession, and he was happy to recommend the seventeen-year-old Billikopf to them.4

Much has previously been written about the founding and development of the NCJC in its early years, but Billikopf’s career allows students to explore two other thoughts: the field of Jewish social work did not develop solely within the confines of the Jewish community, but its leaders, many of them German Jews, viewed their efforts as part of a larger relationship with the greater social welfare communities; and the reports of this conference reflected ideological, methodological, and motivational disparities that have not been captured heretofore.
The NCJC was founded in 1899, only two years before it met up with the young Billikopf. It was created through the efforts of Senior, a Cincinnati business leader, who, together with other business leaders and professionals—Juvenile Court Judge Julian W. Mack, Lee K. Frankel, Cyrus L. Sulzberger, and Jacob H. Schiff, to name a few—hoped to establish a set of professional standards for relief-giving, including the care and treatment of transients; hire a next generation of social workers, who could be counted on to work in cities throughout the country; and find ways to move the hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants out of New York City and into the hinterlands of the country. This organization was an outgrowth of the many developing Jewish Federation efforts throughout the country funded by German Jews who, it seems, were motivated by both fear and responsibility. In the tradition of Jewish communities throughout Europe, they wanted to help the poor and displaced Eastern European masses, but they also feared that these Jews would reflect badly on them and hinder their ability to assimilate fully into American society. Their work resulted in the alliance of local philanthropic agencies throughout the country. Beginning in Boston, and then, Cincinnati, the movement spread to Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cleveland, New York City, as well as other cities.

The Chicago Jewish community into which Billikopf entered was led by individuals such as the aforementioned Mack; Reform Rabbis Emil G. Hirsch of Sinai Temple and Dr. Joseph Stolz; Minnie F. Low, head of the Bureau of Personal Service, a charity organization society; and, perhaps the most influential Jewish man of his time, Julius Rosenwald,
president of Sears, Roebuck, and Co. These leaders provided financial as well as emotional support for Billikopf as he learned the newly emerging craft of professional social work at the University of Chicago between 1901 and 1903. From the very beginning, the extraordinarily bright and personable Billikopf provided these NCJC leaders a vision of what an Eastern European Jewish immigrant could become with proper training and encouragement. He may have offered, too, a bridge, as would be his wont, between German and Eastern European co-religionists. Comfortable with both, he could talk easily to anyone and help translate the ways and manners between the two groups of Jews.

At the turn of the century, Jewish social work overlapped greatly with larger efforts in America. Among the most significant of these efforts was the development of university programs to professionally train social workers and bring standards to the field. As Richard Morris and Michael Freund have suggested, leaders of the NCJC turned, like their non-Jewish brethren in the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, to academicians to create training programs. Professors such as Franklin H. Giddings of Columbia University, Charles H. Cooley of University of Michigan, Vida D. Scudder of Wellesley College, and Charles R. Henderson at the University of Chicago—who was Billikopf’s mentor—explored relationships between sociology and economics and encouraged students to make investments in “social settlement work.” But the actual professional training for social workers arose from the promptings of Mary Richmond, who, in 1897, urged the National Conference of Charities and Corrections to promote standardized training. A year later, a summer training session was offered at Columbia, and one of the instructors was Frankel, a leader of the United Hebrew Charities of New York City and one of the founders of NCJC. Within the next decade, the efforts of Columbia’s New York School of Social Work were parroted by not only the University of Chicago, but also by Simmons College, Washington University of St. Louis, and others.

Billikopf’s training testifies to the overlapping networks among Jewish efforts and the greater social work and social welfare communities in Chicago and New York. In the former city, ministers and rabbis, including Hirsch, worked with University of Chicago professors such as Thorstein Veblen, Albion G. Small, and the enormously influential
Henderson to develop welfare programs and institutions in the slums. Their efforts were funded by the University of Chicago and by monies supplied by German Jewish business leaders such as Leon Mandel and Rosenwald. The University of Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy, founded by Henderson, Graham Taylor, Jane Addams, and Sophonisba Breckenridge, developed close ties with the Jewish financiers who backed Addams’s projects at Hull House as well as students like Billikopf, who did their supervised practica there. Henderson and Taylor offered twelve-week classes on dependency and the preventative agencies. Henderson, who was also a frequent speaker at the National Conferences of Charities and Corrections, was, by 1906, one of the early proponents of social insurance laws for workers. To Billikopf, Henderson was “a saint and communicated a spirit which was infinitely more important than all of the then existing textbooks.”

In the latter half of 1903, Senior, along with the NCJC, directed Billikopf to leave Chicago to do a practicum as a charity worker-trainee at the Industrial Removal Office (IRO) in New York. Schiff, who was coordinator at IRO, hired Billikopf to help move throngs of Jewish immigrants away from New York to avoid threats of immigration restriction and burgeoning antisemitic feelings among non-Jews in that region. In addition, Billikopf worked at two settlement houses, the Educational Alliance and the University Settlement, where he learned from his Jewish supervisor, David Blaustein, how to help immigrant Russian Jews become accustomed to their new world. Billikopf handed out free milk to immigrant mothers and
offered free lectures at the Educational Alliance. But he also worked side by side with Charles Horton Cooley, James G. Stokes, and Robert Hunter—some of the great non-Jewish social welfare reformers of the time. The latter would pen a seminal book, Poverty, in 1904, about progressive welfare efforts. Cooley, of the University of Michigan, used Billikopf as an interpreter with Russian Jews at the University Settlement. And William English Walling, a student at the University of Chicago at the same time as Billikopf, founded the New York State Child Labor Committee in 1903 and helped develop the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, which Billikopf promptly joined.10

Development of a Jewish Social Worker

Billikopf’s career helps students of the early years of the social work profession as well as the social welfare efforts understand the tremendous disparities that characterized the type of work that social workers pursued. There are vast amounts of literature detailing the efforts of generalists such as Billikopf as well as the types of social welfare efforts they and others followed. Scholars have characterized welfare efforts during the Progressive Era—between about 1900 and 1918—in different ways. Work that attempted to change individuals to make them less dependent was “charity” and, later, “casework”; while efforts to create laws to aid workers in often-unhealthy surroundings and change the environment to aid men, women, and children and to restore families were referred to as “progressive” or “community organization.” This latter category included proposals often thought of as radical, such as those to develop social insurances to promote individual security to a far greater extent than was ever imagined before. More specifically, progressive activities ranged from creating milk stations, settlement houses, tubercular sanitariums, parks, and playgrounds to laws establishing mothers’ pensions, juvenile courts, ten-hour workdays for women, child labor prohibition, tenement house regulation, promotion of labor unions, and vocational and agricultural opportunities for workers and farmers. They also included ideas thought to be the most radical—social programs such as workers’ compensation, unemployment, health, and old age insurance.11
Efforts to place reformers or their reforms in well-defined categories of analysis have simplified the many welfare activities. For example, some treatments separate charity proponents who emphasized moral explanations of cause and cure from progressive supporters who favored environmental causes and cures. Others offer bifurcated analyses when these groups sparred to win their point of view within reform efforts and organizations.12

Billikopf’s work in these years affords historians opportunities to move beyond simple categorizations to view the work of a self-proclaimed generalist who eluded those categories. Between 1904 and 1916, Billikopf relocated to Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Kansas City; and in each place he worked to develop ideas and institutions that bespoke charity propositions but also progressive ones. And, more significantly, Billikopf’s ideas may be viewed in the context of the efforts of other reformers, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

From 1904 to 1914, Billikopf’s career continued to be carefully orchestrated by patrons such as Senior and Schiff at the NCJC. In 1904, he was brought to Cincinnati to serve as head resident worker or superintendent of the Jewish settlement house in the West End. Cincinnati was probably an important entry-level job because of its significance in the newly emerging Jewish social work field. The NCJC was centered there. Cincinnati maintained a preeminent position as one of the major centers of Reform Jewry, as Isaac M. Wise Temple and Hebrew Union College were located there. It was also the birthplace or home of many of the Jewish leaders of the national social work community. Mack had spent time there before becoming a leader in Chicago. Lillian D. Wald, a native

Lillian D. Wald
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)
of Cincinnati, had gone on to found the Henry Street Settlement in New York in 1895. Boris D. Bogen was Billikopf’s boss as director of the United Hebrew Charities of Cincinnati; he was later field head of the American Jewish Relief Committee. And Lowenstein, who later became director of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropic Society in New York City, had worked in Cincinnati as head resident worker at the Jewish settlement house from 1898 to 1900 and had been director of the United Hebrew Charities from 1901 to 1904 before moving to New York to assist Frankel at the United Hebrew Charities.

In his capacity as head worker, Billikopf got his feet wet as a charity worker: He taught Americanization classes, handed out loans to needy individuals, investigated wife desertion cases, and helped Eastern European Jews find housing, employment, and cultural opportunities. But as historians have pointed out, by working in a social settlement, he was also pursuing environmental reform for his clients by promoting Americanization activities to ensure better employment opportunities for them.13

His time in Cincinnati was notable for another reason, too: Billikopf tussled with his boss, Bogen, and some of the German Jewish leadership over the right to hire teachers who could teach both English and Hebrew. Many of the leaders had little interest in supporting Hebrew education because it detracted from the Americanization efforts that they were intensely pursuing. Many Conservative and Orthodox Eastern European Jews, therefore, were forced to learn Hebrew in dingy, ill-ventilated chederim from melamdim, who were poor English speakers. The young social worker’s solution was to ask the United Hebrew Charities and Bogen for moneys to teach Hebrew at the Jewish settlement, which would kill two birds with one stone: Wealthier members of the community would come to see Hebrew education as attendant to the Americanization process, while more religious members of the community would commit themselves more fully to Americanization efforts because they knew their children would be receiving a traditional education as well as assimilating the new mores of the country. This is not only an early example of Billikopf’s pursuing a middle ground among the two groups of Jews, but also among various social work ideas of the time.14
But the compromise also demonstrated that Billikopf had an ability to offend people who possessed more doctrinaire positions. Bogen thought Billikopf too radical and accused him of needlessly offending both German and Eastern European Jews. Some melamdim were upset because they were losing jobs. A friend of Billikopf’s, George Fox, remarked later, “Sometimes [Billikopf] found his work irksome because his work was hampered … and he opposed a namby-pamby policy of cringing and kowtowing” to the Charities’ wealthy patrons. Nevertheless, in this case the young social worker won out, as he was supported by Magnes, who, in addition to being a leader at NCJC, was an instructor and librarian at Hebrew Union College and, later, rabbi at Temple Emanu-El and president of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Magnes’s support won the day with Senior and Sidney Pritz, two of the leaders in the Cincinnati United Hebrew Charities.15

In October 1904, Billikopf became superintendent of the Hebrew Relief Association (HRA) and the Jewish settlement house in Milwaukee. It was the first paid Jewish social work position in Milwaukee, a community that numbered 1,500 Jews. The two years that he spent there suggest an ever-increasing list of both charity and progressive activities—as well as more conflict with Jewish business leaders who disagreed with the extent of his work. As head of the HRA, Billikopf’s primary responsibility was to dispense relief to the “worthy” poor, in keeping with charity standards, and run the settlement and its attendant programs. There, he found jobs for immigrants and taught English and Americanization classes. Working long hours, he also investigated wife desertion cases, served as a counselor in a fresh air camp for poor Jewish children, and supported efforts to help tubercular patients at the National Consumptives Hospital in Denver. He also continued to serve as an agent of the IRO in Milwaukee.

As Billikopf said later, he did a “little bit of everything…. Social Work was not fractionalized then.” Working on larger community levels, he served as the Jewish representative of the Milwaukee Juvenile Court to provide healthier environments for Jewish children, promoted tenement house reform in the area around the settlement house, and developed a camp in Thiensville, Wisconsin, for poor children that included “Jews, Gentiles, and even Negroes.” Brooking the displeasure of Jewish landlords, he worked closely with noted socialists Victor Berger
and Eugene V. Debs, as well as a Milwaukee Journal feature writer, Edna Ferber, to secure more stringent housing regulations. Some Jewish landlords threatened to cancel their support for the United Hebrew Charities, but he did not lose his job.¹⁶

Progressivism in Kansas City

Billikopf did not stay long in Milwaukee. By the spring of 1906, he went to New York looking for another job because he was overwhelmed with the demands of the Milwaukee job. The Jewish community offered him an assistant, but he wanted out. In early 1907, he cast his lot with the immensely powerful Schiff, who sent him to Kansas City so that it could serve as a trunk line for the newly established Galveston Movement. In this position he worked closely with two of his best friends, David Bressler and Morris “Muts” Waldman, with whom he had trained in New York four years earlier. Billikopf’s three jobs in less than three years suggests that he had ambition, and his work for Schiff—one of the leading Jewish financiers—would offer him notice as a major player in Jewish welfare efforts in the country. But his Kansas City experience over the next ten years also saw him working in many different types of social work and social welfare efforts, both inside and outside of the Jewish community. It provided outlets for his ambition in the ever-expanding fields of social work and progressive reform.

Within the field of Jewish social work, Billikopf offered management experience to Schiff’s Galveston Movement in the latter’s attempt to divert immigrants away from the established cities of the Eastern Seaboard to counteract what Schiff perceived was the threat of immigration restriction filling the air in Washington at that time. Billikopf met the first boatload of immigrants in Galveston on 1 July 1907 and took nine men immediately back with him to Kansas City. In the first three months, the Kansas City Federation leader took about one hundred men, or three times as many as any other city involved in the dispersal of immigrants through Galveston.

Billikopf understood the trials and tribulations of the immigrants and wanted to help them become useful American citizens. In doing so, he served quietly as a moderating force between them and the United States, as well as between German and Eastern European Jews:
To thoroughly grasp the significance of our aims, one must understand the psychology of the Russian Jew, his characteristics, and habits of thought. From the moment the immigrant lands on the shores he is thrown in contact with a set of influences so out of harmony with his previous environment, that his nature undergoes many sudden and abrupt modifications.... It is our duty, both to ourselves and our co-religionists to educate him.

The work was very difficult and presented many problems. Displaced immigrants struggled with their new surroundings; many complained that the salaries were not high enough; and immigration inspectors from the Bureau of Immigration were eager to minimize Billikopf's work by suggesting that the United Hebrew Charities was circumventing the immigration laws to “bring great numbers of unwanted Jews to the country.”

But, as an agent of the successful German Jewish business leaders of Kansas City, Billikopf, again, performed a variety of other social work and social welfare functions within the Jewish community. As superintendent of the United Jewish Charities (UJC), he supervised a relief program that provided temporary cash assistance, transportation, groceries, coal, and clothing, as well as free medical and dental assistance to needy Jews. But more preventative activities, such as educational programs, became another major focus of the UJC. There was a settlement house whose rooms featured a daycare nursery, kindergarten, night school, industrial training school, Hebrew free school, and summer playground for children. Moreover, the UJC and its juvenile court committee investigated cases of Jewish children to secure more favorable living and working opportunities for them. In supervising these activities, Billikopf, like other Progressive Era reformers, continued to insist that institutions had to promote the aforementioned longer-term solutions through structural change than simple short-term charity ventures could provide.

With the help of Alfred Benjamin, then-president of the UJC, whose financial support brought Billikopf to Kansas City, the social worker again fought for greater sensitivity to the needs of Eastern European immigrants. Benjamin urged that German Jews support more Hebrew
programs at the Jewish Educational Institute and support a relief loan society, organized and run by Eastern European Jews. Thanks to Benjamin’s extensive influence, programs had to be cleared through Billikopf before being institutionalized.19

By 1910, Kansas City had provided opportunities for Billikopf to cross community lines and grow into a full-fledged city leader. He understood that his effectiveness as a leader of Jews as well as a Jewish leader in Kansas City depended on his ability to operate much like an ambassador to the gentiles, akin to that of many classical Reform rabbis after the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885.20 His welfare work with Jews provided a political base from which he secured standing in the larger community, while his expanded status in the larger community enhanced his stature in the Jewish community. His friend Fox put it well:

The men and women of the Jewish social welfare organizations had the good sense to give Billikopf a chance…. He reorganized their institutions. Non-Jews began to take note…. They needed a constructive force in Kansas City, and Billikopf was called in…. In a short time a complete system of municipal welfare work was organized, and the KC Board of Public Welfare became the model for other cities…. Billikopf was generally conceded to be the man behind the gun.

Less than a year after his entrée into Kansas City, Billikopf became roommates with Oberlin College graduate Henry J. Haskell, who was editor of the Kansas City Star and a friend of the paper’s publisher, William Rockhill Nelson. The latter introduced Billikopf to some of the leading political lights of the community, including business leader William Volcker and influential Democratic Party politician Frank P. Walsh. Nelson was a representative progressive reformer, exposing elections frauds of the Pendergast Machine. He fought to limit utility franchises to private interests and supported workers’ compensation, initiative and referendum, and the commission form of city government in Kansas City.21

Billikopf’s ever-expanding network of friends helped him to become a major player in Kansas City welfare efforts. In 1907, he was named to an august board with Walsh and Volcker to study unemployment
problems and jail overcrowding. The group recommended a Board of Prisons and Paroles. Their ideas were somewhat conservative for the time; while they recommended more humane treatment for prisoners, they did not make larger recommendations for restoring families or offering public aid to surviving women and children. A resulting Board of Public Welfare (BPW) was organized in 1910 to offer preventative rather than curative services, including a Municipal Farm that housed more than 200 inmates. However, the farm was still privately financed by Volcker and other charities.

In 1910, Billikopf still sounded like a somewhat conservative charity reformer when he crowed, “We allotted … an opportunity of building up whatever qualities or moral or intellectual strength he [an inmate] had left … to withstand the temptations of life.” His attitudes about supplying outdoor relief or cash subsidies to men who could not take care of their families did not include public assistance at that time. But his simultaneous support for other forms of relief suggests a more extensive commitment to publicly sponsored and administered efforts. He worked with the BPW to sponsor a tax-supported legal aid bureau, a free loan society, and an employment bureau for families who hoped to be self-sustaining. They also financed a research bureau to compile complete and continuing sociological analysis for the city, to serve as a foundation for future legislation. Billikopf and the BPW claimed it was the first county department to disburse public relief moneys. The BPW encouraged representatives to originate a state law that provided county funds for women—a mothers’ or widows’ pension—to maintain their children in the home rather than give them up; their lobbying paid off, because after 1911, Jackson County (Kansas City) was legally empowered by the state legislature to offer $10,000 to the care of widows and children.

Following the path of other Jewish leaders throughout the country—such as Schiff, Rosenwald, and Louis Marshall—Billikopf also took an interest in helping African Americans pursue civil rights. His college advisor, Samuel Mitchell of Richmond College, had opened his eyes to “the delight in differences of race.” In his two years at the University of Chicago, he and Monroe Trotter, an African American who would later become a noted sociologist, developed a particularly close friendship,
to the consternation of fellow white students. In 1909, he joined the 
NAACP at its outset and welcomed the conference in Kansas City at the 
request of the mayor. He joined its executive board in 1914. Influenced 
by the ideas of W.E.B. DuBois and others, this group wanted legal 
equality for blacks throughout the country. But Billikopf also supported 
the work of Booker T. Washington, who, in his primary work in the 
South at Tuskegee Institute, favored social and economic opportuni-
ties for blacks at the expense of legal equality. In 1915, at the request 
of Rosenwald, Billikopf journeyed to Tuskegee Institute to meet with 
Washington. Rosenwald was very interested in spending millions to 
advance the cause of black education in the South. Billikopf made the 
trip with a group from the University of Chicago School of Civics and 
Philanthropy, including Henderson, Addams, Breckinridge, and Grace 
and Edith Abbot. Meanwhile, halfway across the country, New York 
financiers Schiff and Felix Warburg, as well as Billikopf’s future father-
in-law, Louis Marshall, were working on legal efforts against segregated 
schools in New York and supported African American education in the 
South, too. All represented a vein of progressive social reformers who 
wanted to promote black equality in America.24 

Jewish Social Work 1900 to 1915

Like Billikopf, many denizens worked in Jewish charity organizations to 
disseminate various types of relief in the first fifteen years of the twen-
tieth century. It may be helpful to contrast Billikopf’s ideas of charity 
work, as well as more enlightened progressive views of social reform, 
with those of other Jewish social workers who labored on behalf of 
various Jewish Federations and expressed their ideas in the reports of 
the NCJC.

Charity advocates, hypnotized by concepts of laissez-faire govern-
ment, voluntarism, and scientific charity, opined that Jews should take 
care of their own and that the modern state did not owe people a liv-
ing. Solomon Lowenstein, in 1902, while working in Cincinnati, sug-
gested that “the real causes of poverty were able-bodied but not able-
minded applicants who would rather peddle than work.” Real relief 
was “not mere alms-giving, but character building.” Minnie F. Low, 
one of Billikopf’s mentors at the University of Chicago, organized the
Bureau of Personal Service to investigate relief applications and offer “a judicious mixture of moral exhortation.” At a meeting in Chicago of the NCJC, she proclaimed, “the very first duty of the friendly visitor is to place the greatest possible distance between her family and the relief societies.” But, as was the case for Billikopf, her views broadened in 1907 when she and some of her visitors joined Jane Addams, head of Hull House, to organize the Chicago Juvenile Protective League, which investigated abuses of child labor. Similarly, Low came to support other environmental and long-terms efforts, such as parks and playgrounds, publicly financed milk stations, and compulsory education. And her close friendship with theorist and advocate Isaac Max Rubinow led to her providing statistics for his groundbreaking study, *Social Insurance*, in 1913.25

Other Jewish social welfare advocates favored more preventative activities, such as social settlement houses to create healthier environments and vocational training and other schools that would foster development for children. Some, such as Senior, believed scientific training for workers would engender movements for the education of an entire generation of immigrants. Mack echoed Senior’s sentiments: “The work of Jewish charity must become more preventative than palliative, to strike at the roots of an evil. Only trained experts can do this thoroughly.”26

Lowenstein, Waldman, and Rabbi Henry Berkowitz were enthusiastic advocates of social settlements, including the Henry Street Settlement on New York’s Lower East Side; the Educational Alliance in New York; the Chicago Hebrew Institute; the Jewish settlement in Cincinnati; the Abraham Lincoln House in Milwaukee; and the Jewish Educational Institute in Kansas City. The last three of those were, at one time or another, led by Billikopf.27

As a group, Jewish social workers were hardly monolithic. Some, like Billikopf, were committed to more public solutions to help cure issues surrounding poverty. Others had disparate opinions about publicly funded mothers’ or widows’ pensions. For example, Hirsch thundered against them in 1911, while Hannah Einstein of the United Hebrew Charities of Philadelphia worked valiantly for years to secure them. Moreover, the matter of mothers’ pensions was the centerpiece of the 1912 NCJC Cleveland Conference, where three plans were put forward:
the Kansas City plan, which featured a public board that disseminated funds; a Chicago plan, which funneled moneys through the juvenile court and Low’s Juvenile Protective Association; and a New York idea, which called for equal contributions from public and private organizations, which, in turn, would distribute the funds. The New York plan won out because of the influence of Schiff and Frankel, as well as the distrust that many Jewish social workers and business leaders felt toward politically influenced public administration of funds.28

Jewish social workers also had varied opinions about efforts to secure legislation to help individuals gain justice in the often-bewildering and injurious industrial system. As early as 1900, Frankel served notice at the United Hebrew Charities’ meetings that fetid housing and working conditions were responsible for the high incidence of tuberculosis among Jewish workers. Eight years after Billikopf’s aforementioned work with Ferber in 1904 to secure tenement house legislation in Milwaukee, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise lashed out at professional social workers, whom he viewed as little more than hangers-on who did the bidding of the monied aristocracy. He felt the NCJC should “refer more to particulars, ill-lighted factories, unsanitary sweatshops, and death-dealing tenements.” At the same meeting, the ubiquitous Frankel remonstrated against Jewish landlords who fought tenement house legislation and Jewish employers who fought child factory labor legislation. Still others, including Oscar Leonard of St. Louis and Louis H. Levin of Baltimore, as well as Max Senior, advocated low-cost and no-cost housing projects funded, in part, by public funds. They were opposed by Rosenwald of Chicago and Cyrus L. Sulzberger of New York, who looked askance at any notion of publicly financed housing. Billikopf himself preferred a commitment to slum clearance rather than public outlays for housing. As for the prison system, Billikopf was not the only one who sought reform. Wise, too, agreed that prisoners should be paid wages so that their families would not become welfare recipients.29

The most radical of the progressive proposals included calls for social insurance plans to provide a safety net to the capitalist system through which ailing, elderly, or unemployed people could not fall. The plans were considered radical because they advocated tax-supported public outlays that were publicly administered. Rubinow, the renowned
theorist, first accepted the idea of insurance as early as 1903, when he was a student at Columbia studying under Professor Edwin Seligman. Ten years later, in his groundbreaking book *Social Insurance*, he warned that working-class victims would slip into permanent poverty without comprehensive social insurance. Mack, Frankel, and Senior agreed with him in the pages of *Jewish Charities* between 1912 and 1917. Mack argued for publicly funded insurance in 1912. Frankel, as editor of *Jewish Charities*, announced that “insurance against accident and old-age is a coming event.” At the 1916 Indianapolis meeting of the NCJC, Rubinow lectured on the importance of publicly funded health insurance for workers, and Senior emerged as a willing supporter. Senior was later appointed chair of the Committee on Social Insurance and Corrections for 1917. Interestingly, Billikopf during this period favored prison reform, tenement clearance laws, and publicly financed and administered mothers’ pensions, but, unlike his friends and mentors Senior, Frankel, and Rubinow, he made no calls for social insurance. It is unclear why he withheld that support.30

**Billikopf as Fundraiser**

Curiously, the thirty-two-year-old Billikopf’s career as a social work generalist took a different turn and reached more epic proportions in 1917, when his old sponsors Schiff, Magnes (now of Temple Emanu-El in New York), and Frankel (now vice-president of Metropolitan Life) asked him to lead a $10 million fundraising campaign as executive director of the American Jewish Relief Committee (AJRC). Their goal was to aid starving and war-plagued European Jews during World War I. Billikopf first gulped, “I am not a fund-raiser,” but he changed his mind when it became clear that the AJRC needed his leadership. The situation he faced initially was troubling: Schiff and Marshall disliked Zionist supporters like Magnes and Louis Brandeis; Eastern European Jews distrusted patronizing and elitist “Yehudim”; and the hoped-for Joint Distribution Committee, founded in 1914, had floundered with superfluous appeals.31

But Billikopf came to the table with a unique set of skills and experience. By that time, he had demonstrated organizational talents as a Federation professional and former Galveston Movement leader; could
bridge gaps between the warring German Jewish–led AJRC, the Eastern European Jewish–led American Jewish Congress, and the Socialist-led People’s Relief Committee; and knew first-hand the situation of ten million Eastern European Jews in Poland and Russia. Moreover, he was in the best position to convince his old mentor from Chicago, Rosenwald, of Sears, to contribute to Jewish causes when he had refused to do so previously.

Billikopf boasted for years that his greatest achievement as a fundraiser was to convince Rosenwald to spearhead a matching funds campaign, whereby the philanthropist would contribute $1 for every other $10 that other Jews raised throughout the country. For the 1917 relief campaign of the AJRC, Billikopf and others identified “matching angels” in every community in the country and organized, with the help of Dun & Bradstreet, 1,465 communities in that way. The matching fund idea was revolutionary for its time in suggesting to workers that they contribute at their jobs through deductions from their paychecks. The Red Cross adopted this and, in doing so, increased their war relief efforts from $10 million to $100 million. Also, the AJRC accepted non-Jewish moneys for the first time because Billikopf believed that nonsectarian goals could actualize disparate community groups into raising common funds. These efforts served as a harbinger of the community chest concept that developed among private charities in the 1920s. The AJRC raised $11 million in 1917 and $15 million in 1918.

Billikopf’s ability to move easily among both German and Eastern European Jews was evident not only professionally, but personally, too. Close relationships between German and Eastern European Jews were not common at this time. In 1916, he moved in with German Jewish friends Nathan Straus of R.H. Macy and his wife, Lena, on West 72nd Street in Manhattan; and he began courting and later married Ruth Marshall, the daughter of Louis Marshall. Straus was involved in dozens of philanthropic efforts, such as launching milk pasteurization for poor children, establishing a public health movement in Palestine, and supporting cure and prevention of tuberculosis. Marshall, one of the leading constitutional lawyers of his time, fought in the Supreme Court for workers’ compensation laws, for inheritance and special franchise taxes, for conservation of the nation’s forests and wildlife, and against racial
segregation. But the renowned lawyer did not approve of his daughter’s marriage to Billikopf because the fundraiser was fifteen years older than Ruth—and was a “Russian” Jew. Letters suggest that Billikopf was only tolerated because he was married to “Putey” (Marshall’s pet name for his daughter). 33

The Philadelphia Federation

After his 1917 fundraising efforts for the AJRC, Billikopf became one of the central figures in the national social work community for the next two decades. In his work as Jewish Federation executive in Philadelphia from 1919 to 1934 and in his unceasing efforts to advance the cause of social welfare reform on local, state, and national levels, his career can also shed light on the newly emerging trends in Jewish social work after World War I, on the turn toward more publicly administered programs on state and national levels in the 1930s, and on the difficulties of straddling so many disparate positions simultaneously in his career.

Historiographical differences exist among writers who chronicle the directions of professional social work in the 1920s. Some argue that earlier preoccupation with cause or issues of poverty—such as charity efforts, social settlements, and early attempts to create laws to help the poor—took a back seat to the evolving professionalization of social work through casework. They note that private agencies began to employ the scientific casework efforts of Mary Richmond, who, in her 1917 study Social Diagnosis, urged workers to examine individual and family needs on a sociological basis or catalog other efforts that drew heavily on Freudian principles of psychotherapy to establish social work in the image of American medicine. Jewish social workers, as part of these efforts, operated family service agencies in forty-two cities and had their own training school. Similarly, writers argue that Jewish Federations changed the direction of their work. Social settlement work dried up because immigration and Americanization gave way to education and character-building efforts. Leslie Leighninger, a noted historian of social work, writes of these efforts: “To some degree the decade saw a return to earlier notions of individual culpability for poverty and individualized responses to social problems. World War I and its aftermath encouraged a general discouragement with large-scale political solutions to societal ills.”
And social workers, then, like political and business leaders, emphasized scientific management and efficiency at the expense of environmental reform. But writers such as Clarke Chambers and Lehniger also point out that social workers did not abandon social reform ideas in the so-called prosperity decade; rather, it was a seedtime for new ideas that would culminate in the New Deal years of the 1930s.34

Although there is evidence that Billikopf wanted out of the social work profession in 1920, Rosenwald convinced him to stay with it. Schiff, in an attempt to keep him in Kansas City, offered to buy him a share of Stern Brothers Investment Brokers, but Billikopf accepted another job, as executive director of the Philadelphia Jewish Federation. It is fair to say that Billikopf’s professional successes and marriage to Ruth Marshall gave him the access to the wealthiest Philadelphia and New York German Jewish families that he needed to perform well as executive of the second-largest Federation in the country.35

The Philadelphia Jewish community into which Jacob Billikopf moved after World War I had seen an influx of 200,000 Eastern European Jews after 1875, but its leading citizens were still of mostly German Jewish background. Families such as the Gimbels, Binswangers, Lits, Loebbs, Solis-Cohens, Adlers, Wolfs, Fels, and Hackenburgs were extremely influential. The sources of their success were varied. The Gimbels ran a successful department store. Jacob Lit owned Lit’s Department Store, which was eventually bought out in 1928 by financier Albert Greenfield, an Eastern European Jew. Lit’s daughter, Etta, gave her father’s Rodin collection and $1 million to start the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1929. Samuel Fels produced world-famous Fels-Naptha detergents. Louis Wolf was a paper manufacturer and president of the Federation in 1919. Cyrus Adler, a renowned scholar, was president of Dropsie College from 1908 to 1940 and chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Solomon Solis-Cohen, from an established Sephardic Jewish family, was a medical clinician and researcher and one of the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary. And William B. Hackenburg, who helped hire Billikopf, was a real estate investment broker who served on many boards of the Federation.36

By bringing an Eastern European background as well as interest in newly emerging social work techniques, Billikopf helped speed the
Philadelphia Federation toward a more inclusive concept of itself. Initially, he had to fight Jewish business leaders on his board who rejected his calls for scientific charity or need-based surveys, but he engendered support from other German Jewish individuals, such as Fels, Jules Mastbaum, and William “Billy” Rosenwald, Julius’s son. He also successfully raised funds from Eastern European Jews, including real estate investors Albert Greenfield and Albert Lieberman, for his campaigns. As significantly, he facilitated opportunities for Jews of Eastern European background, such as Judge Louis Leventhal, to serve on boards and head some of the Federation agencies. Billikopf’s philosophy was based on his recognition that Jewish Federation work was taking on a different character: Jews were worrying less about becoming assimilated and more about proudly maintaining some traditional characteristics and institutions while still gaining inclusion into the wider Philadelphia society.\(^37\)

Billikopf’s Philadelphia Federation, to some extent, also changed direction from attempts to attack poverty toward support for education, organization-building, and casework. As an umbrella organization, it supported the Jewish Welfare Society (originally, the United Hebrew Charities), Jewish Hospital, Hebrew Sheltering Home, Eagleville Sanitarium, and Orphans’ Guardians, to name a few. It also preferred foster care instead of institutionalization for parentless children, believing that the former engendered healthier environments for them. The Federation supported educational organizations as well, including Associated Talmud Torahs for Orthodox Jewish education; and it developed a new YMHA/YWHA building in 1926 to promote community efforts that reflected a new generation’s priorities rather than the tired Americanization efforts of the previous generation.\(^38\)

Billikopf hired caseworkers who were training in newly developed methods based on Freudian theory to work at the Jewish Welfare Society. Harry Vitales was the first, in 1920, and he later hired two “superb” caseworkers, Dora Spiro and Dorothy Kahn. He also hired Dr. Rubinow, one of the great Jewish social workers and social welfare advocates of his time, as casework director. In a letter to Lessing Rosenwald, Julius’s older son who succeeded him as president of Sears, Billikopf wrote:

Mark Cowett
I present to you “The Psychiatric Social Worker’s Technique in Meeting Resistance.”… We have woefully neglected as a Jewish community the whole problem of mental disorders…. We are such a neurotic people and probably have as large, if not larger, a percentage of persons with psychopathic tendencies than any other group…. Psychiatry must play an important role in the scheme of family rehabilitations.39

But the Federation also continued to fund older types of social reform efforts that did not fit the mold of the emerging casework of the 1920s. Billikopf’s hiring of Rubinow suggested such, for Rubinow was not trained in those techniques but as a statistician and social insurance reformer. Just two years after his note to Rosenwald, Billikopf wrote a different kind of letter, to Rubinow, in the midst of the worsening economic crisis after 1929 that was taxing private charities: “I (now) attach little importance to technique, casework, or even psychiatry.” Billikopf also insisted on the development of a Bureau of Jewish Social Research, like the one in New York, to analyze Jewish needs and develop effective institutions. He worked tirelessly, too, to strengthen the mothers’ pension law in Pennsylvania between 1921 and 1926. In 1926, he served as publicity director of the Mothers’ Assistance Fund and encouraged his friend, Jules Mastbaum, to lobby Governor Fisher for increased aid. He himself lobbied Philadelphia Mayor Harry Mackey, who was chairing a legislative committee for the fund. Unfortunately, the group fell far short of the $4 million goal because Pennsylvanians were loath to tax too heavily for divorced or abused women.40

Labor Mediation and Public Pensions
Although America in the 1920s was a prosperous time for some, problems in other areas did not abate. The Philadelphia Federation faced growing relief requests as the decade wore on and laborers began to press for more rights in many industries, particularly auto, steel, and clothing. Billikopf used his evolving status in these years to become heavily involved in other social reform arenas. Before 1920, he had labored largely in private and public relief efforts to aid women and children. But after 1920 his concerns grew to include worker’s rights as well as more extensive civil rights for blacks in America.41
In 1924, Billikopf was asked to promote structural reform, albeit on a private level, as a labor mediator in the needle trades in New York City as this industry considered unemployment insurance. His prior relationships with Nathan Straus, Louis Marshall, and Frank P. Walsh, who had gone on to serve as chair of the ill-fated Industrial Commission of 1914—promoted that entrée. Mack, his old mentor from Chicago days, told Billikopf:

You have an extremely important public service in your job as arbitrator in this industry…. I know you will be much more of a conciliator and mediator…. Therein lies the real opportunity and the real power of a public-spirited citizen like you—to soften the conflict in industry … to get them to see what few in addition to Hillman do…. The welfare of both sides rests … upon harmonious relations between labor and capital.

The issues plaguing the needle trades were complex and many. Most workers were new immigrants, and long-term unemployment—resulting from the war as well as seasonal work and technological demands—was a particular worry. Factories often farmed out work to contract shops, which were independent of any owner or union. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union hoped to promote shorter hours and equal division of work in slack periods, and it also experimented with worker-financed employment benefit funds.42

Regarding unemployment insurance, three major ideas were present at that time. In the first, American economists John Andrews and John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin—always a hotbed of social reform—advocated a preventative solution that regularized employment in any given industry. The second idea followed European models that created private unemployment insurance funds that were subsidized by matching contributions of employees and employers. The third idea, considered more radical, was for publicly funded unemployment insurance; Rubinow was an advocate of this proposal.43

A letter Billikopf wrote in 1924 indicates some sympathy for Commons’s and Andrews’ ideas. In his mediation efforts, Billikopf worked to negotiate settlements that pleased both business and labor. With Sidney Hillman, head of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and his economist assistant, Leo Wolman, Billikopf developed a plan for a matching-fund
concept of 3 percent to regularize or prevent unemployment. In doing so, Billikopf was credited publicly as having an even-handed approach that brought people together. A newspaper article said of his work, “His penetrating yet conciliating gaze wanders [from labor to capital]. In the heat of the debate, he drops a few casual remarks ... his art not curt, aristocratic judgments. He reasons, outlines the effects of both courses and lets other parties [find solutions].” (sic) Ellis Gimbel, of Gimbels in Philadelphia, compared him to Judge Kenesaw “Mountain” Landis in his ability to organize labor as the latter did in baseball. And both Hillman and retail representatives from Macy’s, Bamberger’s, and Filene’s were tremendously congratulatory in a 1928 dinner honoring his work.44

Curiously, however, Billikopf moved beyond private solutions in other social reform matters in the 1920s. His letters of the period indicate his interest in the complex old-age pension movements that were in the air. Roy Lubove has noted that several plans described the movement in the 1920s. Commons and Andrews advocated state-funded pensions or supplementary income to needy seniors through their preventative “American Plan.” But their work was too constrained for the bombastic Abraham Epstein, who lobbied tirelessly for contributory and compulsory insurance plans, designed to promote income redistribution through a matching fund concept. The latter plan differentiated old-age insurance from the public dole to help the elderly maintain a sense of selfrespect.

Billikopf did not play a leading role in these efforts at this time, but letters suggest an intense interest. He was friendly with Epstein, who fought combatively for a plan that broke sharply with the “poor law” tradition. And Epstein liked Billikopf and found him supportive, although there is nothing in Billikopf’s writing that suggests a strong commitment to Epstein’s income-redistribution or tax-supportive old-age pension idea. Perhaps Epstein got that impression from his close friend and intellectual cohort, Rubinow, who worked with Billikopf. Nevertheless, as was his wont, Billikopf favored the more conservative plan that Commons and Andrews touted because he favored a middle ground between Epstein and employers, who argued for private pensions. He rationalized to real estate developer George Woodward, “the advocates of old-age pension legislation ... provide only for those actually in need who have no sufficient income of their own.”45
Billikopf’s support for limited pensions in the 1920s was a tough sell in Pennsylvania because business leaders pressed legislatures not to adopt even limited pensions for the elderly. As early as 1923, State Senator William S. Vare had pushed a bill through the legislature that established county old-age assistance financed by the state, but the legislature failed to authorize the necessary appropriations to secure meaningful legislation. A year later, the measure was declared unconstitutional on the grounds that the state constitution prohibited state assistance to private individuals. Clearly, the Pennsylvania experience, as Roy Lubove notes, illustrates the conflict between the pension ideal and a business community that worked tirelessly to defeat such proposals on grounds that it would sap the moral fiber of people as well as cost taxpayers millions of dollars.46

In 1927, Billikopf indicated his support for publicly funded legislation in this arena. He wrote to Vare: “The old age pension bill (is similar to the pension for widows and orphans) … in that old-age presents as much pathos and tragedy as indigent childhood.” And in referring to his mediating philosophy on this matter he quipped to Mathew Woll, a vice-president of the American Federation of Labor, “I attempted to prove to a friend of mine, a prominent manufacturer that the old age pension measure is a perfectly responsible one.”47

There is other evidence that Billikopf was in the vanguard of social workers who were beginning to think of the increasing necessity of public assistance to needy people. In 1927, he politicked openly to be named administrator of the Philadelphia Department of Public Welfare. He asked his friend Karl de Schweinitz, head of the Family Welfare Agency and a leading social worker in Philadelphia, as well as J. Prentice Murphy, head of the Child Labor Committee, to put in a good word with Mayor Mackey for him. Nothing came of it. Two years later, however, Governor Joseph Fisher named him to the Pennsylvania State Welfare Commission, a largely honorary post that would keep him busy with various relief concerns as conditions grew worse in the early 1930s.48

The Great Depression: A Push for Relief

According to Popple and Reid, the stock market crash in 1929 began a rapid and profound effect on social work. Billikopf’s work helps
illustrate some of the changes. Jewish social agencies, which had largely taken care of their own up to that point to maintain cultural integrity, had to join community chests and give over their relief efforts—first, to greater private sectarian efforts, and, then, to public programs. Most social workers felt that public agencies were corrupt and inefficient and, therefore, not conducive to professional practice. But private agencies, which they thought were vastly superior, could not care for the masses of poor and unemployed. As a result, for the first time in American history, the federal government offered a floor to the capitalist system, and the psychotherapeutic orientation that had begun in the 1920s was deemphasized in the 1930s.49

The Great Depression had devastated Philadelphia, and Billikopf, who, like other social workers, had largely believed that private efforts could sufficiently cope with relief needs, began to think otherwise. At a meeting of the All-Philadelphia Conference of Social Work on the subject of unemployment, he called for city appropriations for unemployment relief because private charities suffered from a lack of funds. After a “Committee of 100” was created to explore solutions to unemployment, Billikopf agreed to chair a subcommittee to develop alternative and private sources for unemployment relief. But the headlines in the Philadelphia papers were never enough to convince business leaders to commit to tax-supported public funding. Billikopf did convince important Jewish business owners such as Fels and Rosenwald to join a committee to raise private funds, but the work was not terribly successful. Private moneys of $3.8 million were administered through agencies such as the Red Cross and the Jewish welfare societies, but they could not help all who needed relief. The next city idea, in-kind relief, operated within the city’s Department of Public Welfare, but it was only a small advance in public relief development. No tax-supported income was raised to that point for relief.50

In 1931, Billikopf, as head of the Federation, moved Jewish social work agencies into a coordinated campaign to raise relief funds. As was the case in other cities, Jewish leaders like Billikopf did not take these matters lightly. They feared derisive Christian feelings if they could not take care of their own and worried, too, that Jewish communities would sacrifice their Jewishness if they failed to support institutions that cared
for Jewish poor. But contributions to the Philadelphia Federation had fallen from $1.54 million in 1929 to pledges of only $1.25 million in 1931. At the same time, the Jewish Welfare Society requests had increased 300 percent. The Federation agreed to merge with other relief-bearing agencies in a united campaign in 1931 to raise $9 million; they actually raised $10 million. However, successive campaigns in 1932 and 1933 raised less than $6 million, and $3.8 million respectively, and private efforts faced disastrous consequences.51

Clearly, the failed efforts were exhausting Billikopf, other Jewish agency leaders, and those who oversaw the combined efforts. Judge Horace Stern, as president of the board of the Jewish Federation, was not enamored of Billikopf’s efforts to join united campaigns and repeated often his fears of Jewish federation institutions losing their Jewish character. Billikopf and his staff were vilified, according to the social worker, when Jews could not raise the funds that they were assigned from the united campaigns.52

Billikopf’s disappointment at his failure to convince Jewish leaders to give to successful united campaigns was exacerbated by another problem that private social work agencies, both Jewish and non-Jewish, faced: the passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act in 1932, which created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to lend, but not give, public moneys to state governments. The passage of this act hurt private efforts because donors and recipients alike began to look to government agencies to disburse public assistance. In frank and telling letters to his friend Rubinow, Billikopf complained, “I have no intention of taking the lead in establishing a secondary Federation.” Clearly, he feared that privately funded relief work among Jews was doomed in the future; character-building agencies were no longer needed; and future support for Jewish Federations was in doubt. Not only was he discouraged about fundraising prospects, but he was alienating his bosses, who hoped he could raise those private funds.53

It is fair to say that Billikopf was moving in a different direction from more conservative members of the Jewish Federation as well as other Philadelphia business leaders, because he believed that only local, state, and national public relief efforts could meet the problems of the Depression. In 1931, he became one of the leading social work
voices for an extensive welfare state when he gave the opening address at the National Conference of Social Workers in Minneapolis. There, he delivered a scathing attack on President Hoover’s individualist and voluntarist doctrine and loudly reiterated the need for national government funds and administration of public relief. The main thrust of this speech rejected more private campaigns to alleviate suffering: “Private philanthropy is incapable of coping with the situation. It is virtually bankrupt in the face of great disaster.” Employing arguments from leading economists George Soule and Stewart Chase, he ripped supply-side business proponents who wished to cut taxes to free up moneys for capital investment in jobs, remonstrated against Hoover’s pursuit of balanced budgets and higher tariffs to promote further employment in American business, and proposed a full-blown program of national government action: a $3 billion public works program financed by Washington; compulsory unemployment insurance; lower tariffs to promote competition and lower prices; public employment agencies, as envisioned by the Wagner Bill of 1931, which Hoover had rejected previously; old-age pensions; and planned production to offset insecurities that individual employers felt. This was Billikopf’s advocacy of liberal and even radical government programs for its time and was a “far cry from his support for private unemployment insurance plans and Federation activities of the 1920s.”

Billikopf’s shift toward support for national programs to combat unemployment as well as old-age pensions reflected a similar pattern by other groups within the Jewish community. The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), composed of Reform rabbis, evidenced a move to the left between 1910 and 1935. Between 1910 and 1916, the first Committee on Synagogue and Labor found itself fraught with dissension between those who emphasized strictly religious objectives and those who wished broader objectives. In 1913 the CCAR adopted a more aggressive policy, hoping to explore industrial relations, but was bogged down and failed to produce a platform. By 1916, the Commission on Social Justice, led by Rabbis Max Heller and Moses J. Gries, committed itself to a living wage and collective bargaining. Two years later the Committee on Synagogue and Industrial Relations, led by Horace J. Wolf, adopted a platform that called for a minimum wage,
an eight-hour day, workers’ compensation, abolition of child labor, prison reform, and collective bargaining with arbitration. After 1929, the CCAR shifted to more radical positions in response to the Depression. In 1931, it convened a conference on unemployment in Washington and castigated the national government and business leaders for doing too little to bring relief. The CCAR stated, as Leonard Mervis reported, “this must not happen again.” Later, it recommended programs of national and local public relief, public works projects, higher wages and shorter hours, and old-age and unemployment insurance. In the mid-1930s, it supported congressional bills that called for collective bargaining.55

The Rabbinical Assembly (RA), the organized body of Conservative rabbis, also developed a social justice platform with the onset of the Depression. Initially concerned with furthering traditional Judaism, the RA weighed in on some of the major problems confronting the country. Stating, “We affirm that questions of politics and economics are legitimate and necessary subject matters for treatment from the pulpit,” it called for laws regarding minimum wage, the number of hours in a workday, child labor, collective bargaining, labor unions’ right to organize, and the protection of voting rights for African Americans.56

Fresh from his well-received speech in Minneapolis in 1931, Billikopf testified over the next two years on various issues. These included work relief before two Wagner committees in 1931 and 1932 and unemployment relief before two LaFollette-Costigan committees in 1932. It indicated that he was a trusted and now nationally known social worker who could be counted on to serve those on the cutting edge of social reform. In his testimony before the Wagner committee in early 1931, he testified on behalf of New York Senator Robert Wagner’s desire to create a board to supervise federal work projects. He also spoke on behalf of Wagner’s larger but reasonably conservative attempt to create publicly supported employment exchanges, which Hoover rejected out of hand.57

Billikopf was further pleased to be asked by Wisconsin Senator Robert LaFollette and Colorado Senator Edward Costigan to testify before Congress on other, more extensive proposals. Their bill was minimal, but it was progressive: only 40 percent of $375 million would go to states for direct relief. Relief funds were not tied to work relief, as public assistance workers were not permitted to judge the moral character of

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relief recipients; and national funds were outright gifts to states, and not loans as those offered by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Their measure did not make it out of committee.\textsuperscript{58}

In these subcommittees, Billikopf was grouped with some of the nation’s leading social workers and economists: American Federation of Labor economist Leo Wolman; labor leader Sidney Hillman; Joseph Chamberlain of Columbia University; Paul Douglas of the University of Chicago; Harold Groves of the University of Wisconsin; Frank Murphy, later governor of Michigan; social worker Rabbi Edward Israel, architect of the liberal social justice plank of the CCAR; and Helen Hall, wife of Paul Kellogg of \textit{Survey Magazine}, the leading social welfare journal of the time.

By the summer of 1932, Billikopf was one of the first witnesses to reappear before a resuscitated LaFollette-Costigan committee to oppose Wagner’s continued insistence on loans to states for work relief. He told the senators that the Emergency Relief and Construction Act was failing: “I urge that whatever funds are to be appropriated must be outright grants and not loans.” His friend Harry L. Lurie, one of the leading Jewish social workers in the country and head of the Bureau of Jewish Social Research, agreed in a letter to Billikopf: “Wagner’s proposals give an impression of timidity…. [We must] press forward to a more realistic and direct handling of the unemployment problem.” But it would only be with the coming of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his lieutenants, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and social worker and later Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins, that direct federal relief to states would find their champion. It resulted in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in May 1933.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Combatting Unemployment}

Billikopf’s involvement in another major social reform effort of the early 1930s—unemployment insurance—was less direct than some of his other work. He corresponded with the major actors—Abraham Epstein, Paul Douglas, and William “Billy” Leiserson, as well as Rubinow, who had moved from Philadelphia to Cincinnati—and read their treatises faithfully, testified before Congress on the issue of unemployment insurance, and raised moneys among Jews for some projects.
He had mixed results. In 1929, his efforts to raise funds for a research center on employment found support from Samuel Fels, while Julius Rosenwald hated it. There were, in fact, many ideas. The most conservative called for employee-developed plans; a slightly less conservative one matched contributions from employers and employees; a slightly more liberal one, advocated by Swarthmore economist Paul Douglas, proposed employer-funded state pools that were not based on individual or industry-wide records; and the most radical featured contributions from employers and employees, as well as tax-supported government endowments. Probably mindful of some of the feelings of Jewish business leaders, such as Julius and Lessing Rosenwald, Billikopf in the 1930s was far more cautious about supporting any public-sponsored unemployment plans. In 1930, he wrote his old friend Henry Haskell of Kansas City in support of a “scheme as exists in the Clothing industry.” He supported a Groves bill in Wisconsin that favored business-drawn plans in particular industries and a Wagner bill that proposed tax exemptions to employers who established individual reserve plans of their own. Billikopf also wrote to his friend Eddie Kaufmann, of Kaufmann’s Department Stores, that “the Wisconsin plan outflanks a lot of the trepidations people have about the dole, and is a very interesting experiment.” Needless to say, he angered his old friend Rubinow, who believed that Billikopf would have been “the one leader with the ability to accomplish a meaningful bill.” Clearly, Billikopf had not outlined directly to Rubinow why he had supported the stabilization bill. Billikopf’s careful stance continued to reflect his support for a mediating position among business and labor that helped the latter but did not severely penalize the former.

The unemployment insurance provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935, which Roosevelt favored, were not far off from some of the more conservative business proposals of the previous decade. Initially, it called for private expenditures to support the act, where employers would pay a 3 percent tax on their payrolls while employees paid on their salaries, too. States administered either state pools or a system of individual reserves, depending on their preference, and business owners received 90 percent reimbursements of their federal gross tax through tax credits. While overall conservative, the act did have progressive aspects:
the commitment was essentially a public one; state employment offices administered the act; it created a Social Security board within the Labor Department to oversee compliance; and, as time went on, the national government offered cost-of-living increases in job benefits, making it more of a relief than contributory act.\textsuperscript{62}

One major role that Billikopf played in early New Deal efforts to combat unemployment was by serving on behalf of cooperative efforts among labor and business through the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933, which legislated economic planning. Believing that overproduction and ruthless competition had contributed to the nation’s economic collapse, the National Recovery Administration of the NIRA brought business, labor, and government together to restrict production, fix prices through codes at an equitable level, and establish decent wages and hours for labor. Business leaders had favored some type of cooperative effort through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in the 1920s, but their agreement to government intervention was new. The act was reasonably conservative because it was based on agreed-upon, and not mandatory, codes, and voluntary conciliation boards. Major business leaders wrote employment, profit, and wage codes, and sat on boards with labor to settle industrial conflicts.\textsuperscript{63}

This type of business-labor cooperation was a perfect fit for a man of Billikopf’s political philosophy, economic interests, and temperament. He was acknowledged to be a natural mediator and conciliator and had been straddling fences for years between immigrants and wealthy, and between business and organized labor. Moreover, by 1933 he was itching to move away from the tedium of fundraising and join the government-sanctioned partnership of all that he held dear.

In February 1933 Billikopf asked a number of friends and professional acquaintances—including governor-to-be Herbert Lehman, Sidney Hillman, Felix Frankfurter, Louis Brandeis, LaFollette, Costigan, and Wagner—to help him secure a job as assistant secretary of labor, but this did not happen. Instead, Wagner helped him land a job in Philadelphia in October 1933 as impartial chair of the Philadelphia Regional Board of the National Recovery Administration, one of seventeen regional boards in the country. The board consisted of seventeen members, including Lessing Rosenwald, John G. Pew of Sun Oil, and other business
leaders, as well as representatives of labor unions representing hosiery workers, restaurant employees, and plasterers, to name a few.64

The regional boards did not have the power of binding arbitration, but powers of persuasion dictated what they could accomplish. In the course of two and a half years, from October 1933 to June 1935—when the NIRA was declared unconstitutional—this board adjudicated 75 percent of 847 cases around their conference table. The success of the operation, Billikopf believed, stemmed from his and the board’s close working relationships and, in some cases, friendships with the wealthiest and brightest of both sides. Working closely with Pew or organizers such as Hillman or Emil Rieve was no different from what he had done in the 1920s with Rosenwald, Schiff, or David Dubinsky.65

Interestingly, the one area of 1930s social reform in which Billikopf never ventured beyond the periphery was old-age insurance. His greatest involvement in this effort was to raise money for Abraham Epstein’s American Association for Old Age Security between 1931 and 1934. The old-age provisions of the Social Security Act of 1935 were somewhat conservative: Both business owners and workers contributed to the annuities. Nevertheless, it, too, had progressive elements: a national system of old-age insurance in which most employers were compelled to participate by paying taxes on their payrolls was put in place, and the national government shared the costs with states of those who needed added assistance. Billikopf claimed that he was interested in such efforts, but the omission of letters to Epstein, who was pushing for a bill that was less contributory on the workers’ part and supported by taxes on business, is glaring.66

**Disappointment and Fulfillment: A Shift to Civil Rights**

By 1934, the strain of his many activities over the previous fifteen years finally exacted a terrible cost on Billikopf and his family, and his doctor ordered him to leave his many jobs on 1 May 1934. It had been a long time coming. The year before, Ruth Marshall Billikopf had been diagnosed with breast cancer, from which her mother had died in 1916. Ruth, only thirty-five at the time, died three years after her diagnosis, in 1936. Her death left Billikopf with the sole responsibility of raising two young children, Florence, thirteen, and David, ten. Although he and

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both children were well taken care of in Ruth’s will, Billikopf mourned her death for years. He was quite depressed and often spoke of losing the love of his life.67

The pressures stemming from Billikopf’s professional life—organizing Jewish Federation campaigns since 1919, with recent ones becoming increasingly unsuccessful; running to New York weekly for ten years to serve the garment trade as an impartial umpire; and the more recent role as director of the Philadelphia regional board, with its demands to solve heated strikes—were immense as well. A year after his doctor had ordered him to slow down, in April 1935, he resigned his post at the Jewish Federation amid various conflicts and innuendo. He related that some of the city’s Jewish leaders were spreading rumors that he had stolen funds from the Federation—an accusation that was proven untrue. Additionally, board President Horace Stern and board member Edwin Wolf were aggrieved that he had accepted money from his labor position in the 1920s. Some, like Cyrus Adler, found him to be too self-serving. And probably most telling, some business leaders felt Billikopf was communistic because of his mediating stances between business and labor and because of his increasing support for New Deal programs. Clearly, Billikopf’s philosophical and political leanings did not play well with some.68

Although he did return to his volunteer job at the grateful Philadelphia Regional Labor Board in 1934, Billikopf’s aspirations of joining the brigade of social welfare workers who were moving from paid jobs in the private sector to the public spheres did not materialize. After failing to gain the assistant secretary of Labor position in 1933, he was turned down for a position in 1935 on the newly created National Labor Relations Board, formed under the National Labor Relations, or Wagner, Act. It replaced the above-mentioned NIRA that had been declared unconstitutional and left Billikopf without a position. After August 1935, when the new Social Security Act became law, he hoped, like his friend Rubinow, to gain a position with the Social Security Board; however, neither he or Rubinow were picked. Finally, he was not included in a new labor board in Philadelphia under city hall auspices. It’s unclear exactly why he was closed out of all of these opportunities. Perhaps word had gone out within the Philadelphia Jewish community.
that leaders had soured on him. Perhaps wealthy Jewish supporters on the East Coast had warned Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to beware of him. It is possible that Ruth's death had an impact on his reputation, as the remaining members of the Marshall family—James, Robert, and George—did not like him. Or perhaps, as Rubinow suggested, jobs were now going to younger and more credentialed professionals than the fifty-two-year-old Billikopf.69

The social worker’s last fifteen years of his life were, paradoxically, both frustrating and fulfilling. National Jewish organizations largely bypassed him and his expertise when they looked for leaders to cope with the needs of Jews during the Holocaust. In early 1937, Billikopf did take a largely thankless job as co-executive director of the National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrants. His task was to find American citizens who would be financially responsible for penniless refugees fleeing from Germany and place them throughout the country, much like the work of the old Industrial Removal Office. The committee, however, failed as it lacked organization and support from Jewish communities, and Billikopf chose to leave after a year. A few months later, in 1939, he agreed to serve on the board of a newly constituted National Refugee Service, which helped thirty thousand refugees over the next three years. He also accepted Eleanor Roosevelt’s request to serve on a nonsectarian committee to aid German refugee children in 1941. He was deeply disappointed because he did not think that American Jews did enough for German refugees.70

Unable to find work within private Jewish agencies or public welfare programs, Billikopf returned to one of his favorite interests: mediation in the garment trades. In February 1938, he accepted a position as impartial chair of the Philadelphia Waist and Dress Manufacturers’ Association. Some of the larger merchants in Philadelphia hired him to represent their interests with labor; Billikopf saw his job as an impartial mediator. The merchants paid his organization, the Labor Standards Association, a yearly salary of $15,000 for him to broker deals, although some manufacturers disagreed with his stance and disliked his impartiality. For seven years, Billikopf adjusted hundreds of major and minor disputes “at the conference table in my office.” By 1945, both sides began to question their gains in this arbitration mechanism, and he was asked to resign.71
Despite such frustrations, Billikopf maintained one area of interest from which he derived a great deal of satisfaction: his continued commitment to civil rights, including raising funds for the movement and supporting its leaders. Some of Billikopf’s most meaningful work was with Howard University, beginning in 1929 with his appointment to the board and extending to his role as board president from 1947 to 1950. His associations with Rosenwald, Marshall, and Mack encouraged Howard to seek him out. He was very anxious to be effective and visited Howard yearly to stay on top of their work. He served as a conduit between Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard, and Edwin Embree, president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund in the 1930s. He also chaired Howard’s board of trustees in multiple years, beginning in 1935.72

Billikopf also developed a close relationship with Walter White, secretary of the NAACP, and raised money for him from the Jewish community. A lengthy set of correspondence exists between the two men, in which White sought Billikopf’s aid for several causes, including help against Jewish department store owners who would not allow African Americans to use their dressing rooms. In turn, he helped Billikopf and other Jews by speaking out against antisemitism within the black community. Letters show Billikopf listening sympathetically to White’s anger at Roosevelt for his refusal to speak out against lynching and at University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins for not railing against racist clauses in property deeds around the university. On the other hand, there were times when each refused to support the other’s wishes. Billikopf would not play on his friendship with John Pew, president of Sun Oil, when he insisted that his shipyards stay segregated during World War II, and White would not intercede on behalf of John J. Parker, a friend of Billikopf’s and former Klan member, with Harry Truman over a position in the U.S. Supreme Court.73

Billikopf’s files illuminate the variety of his efforts. There are dozens of letters between him and Professor Alain Locke, who had been one of the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance. They demonstrate efforts to get articles on African Americans published in Paul Kellogg’s Survey Graphic, as well as Billikopf’s work as chair of the Interracial Committee in Philadelphia, which was re-created to investigate the problems of employment, health, and housing in the black community. Billikopf
wanted the committee to be much more than a paper committee or a response to the infamous Detroit riots of 1943, but he could not secure enough funds to operate it for two years when it folded.

Billikopf’s last years, from 1947 to 1950, were filled with responsibilities as president of the executive board of Howard. He secured the law books of Jewish lawyers such as Louis Marshall and Samuel Untermyer, for its library. He also got Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black to speak at the commencement in 1949. Such activities speak eloquently to the range of contacts that the social worker and racial justice advocate could call on by the end of his life. They also are consistent with his warm-hearted, liberal concern for those who needed help as well as his shrewd political interest in the leading causes of the day. Leaders like White, Locke, and Thurgood Marshall, who laid the foundations for more lasting achievements, all recognized his efforts as important to the African American community.74

Billikopf’s work was often fraught with disappointment over accomplishments that he could not achieve and ill will that he could not combat. His last substantive job included a nine-month appointment to the Clemency Board of the War Department, which was established to review courts-martial imposed during World War II. Billikopf loved the prestige of the post, as he served directly under the chair, Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts, a longtime acquaintance. But he also continued to funnel money from Jewish sources to dozens of beneficiaries. These included the Julian W. Mack Memorial Fund, the Horace Kallen Fund, Howard University, Hebrew Union College’s Jewish refugee scholars, Paul Kellogg’s Survey Magazine, Freda Kirchwey’s The Nation, and Henry F. Helmholz’s Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth. He also secured loans from Herbert Lehman and the Julius Rosenwald Foundation to help save the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, as well as dozens of individuals who needed help.75

Much of the progress realized during the 1940s sadly seems to have left Billikopf behind, feeling slighted by friends from the past. Not only did the Philadelphia Jewish Federation continue to ignore him, but he was turned down multiple times for public posts in Truman’s Fair Deal. It is possible that his carefully constructed middle-of-the-road stance that had served him well in the past now rendered him too conservative for New
Dealers and Fair Dealers in the era after passage of the National Labor Relations Act. Maybe he was seen as too friendly to large Philadelphia business leaders, who began to view organized labor in more critical terms after 1945. Or perhaps there was simply less need for private organizations in the midst of substantial government efforts on behalf of labor.

**Conclusion**

Jacob Billikopf’s work helps capture the complexity of social work and social welfare efforts in the first half of the twentieth century, when social work was grappling to professionalize. His career reflects the complicated and often conflicting nature of this work. He frequently served among Jews; but while Jewish social work must be seen, in some cases, as *sui generis*, it must also be seen, in others, as part of the greater American community—a community in which Jews led, followed, copied old ideas, and originated new ones, all within the spectrum of this evolving field called social work. Billikopf’s experience traces this evolution, which began as largely private but became more public as private efforts were found wanting in serious times of need. While the field began to define professional standards after 1915, generalists like Billikopf continued to make tremendous and varied contributions. Those contributions need further witness, and Jacob Billikopf’s life can serve as an exemplar of that complexity.

But Billikopf’s life and work also bear witness to the strengths and problems associated with leaders who seek middle grounds, between sometimes contrasting and often narrow paths. Individuals like Billikopf help others see solutions beyond those narrow paths and, therefore, accomplish great things as compromisers; but they are often not loved or appreciated beyond the compromise. In Billikopf’s case, he also limited himself socially because he did not seek to join others who were comfortable with doctrinaire positions. In the end, although he knew thousands and influenced many, he was primarily a solitary figure. As he himself stated many times, he had many acquaintances but few close friends.

*Mark Cowett has published previously on Rabbi Morris Newfield, Birmingham, Alabama, and Southern Jews. Now retired after forty years of teaching, he is currently researching Jewish social welfare in Cincinnati.*
Notes

1 For a starting point to viewing the life and work of Jacob Billikopf, see the Jacob Billikopf Papers, MS-13, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA), Cincinnati, Ohio. Unless otherwise noted, all archival sources come from the AJA’s collection. Billikopf referred to himself as a “generalist” to denote a social worker who was involved in the profession on many levels and in many ways. He also believed that a generalist was an early trained worker who had taken classes in sociology, economics, and political science before the advent of Mary Richmond’s *Social Diagnosis* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1917). This early era would have also predated the development of casework and the use of Freudian psychiatry in the diagnosis of problems in individuals and families. The latter would serve as the basis for the profession in the next generations of social work training.

2 In regard to the early childhood of Yakov Bielikov (later, Jacob Billikopf), there are four sources that shed a somewhat intense light: his brother Abe Billikopf’s unpublished autobiography; Jacob’s son David Billikopf’s unpublished manuscript and recollections of stories that his father shared; and memoirs of two childhood family friends, Abraham Cahan, who speaks of Billikopf’s family in his memoirs, and Mordecai Kaplan, who wrote a number of letters to Jacob Billikopf about their early years. David M. Billikopf, “Jacob Billikopf (1883–1950): Background Information and Recollections Furnished by His Son, David Marshall Billikopf,” unpublished manuscript, located in the author’s files, 1(hereafter “Reminiscences”). See also Abe Billikopf, “My Autobiography,” unpublished manuscript located in author’s possession. Another source is Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 25–26. See also letters between Billikopf and Kaplan. Billikopf to Kaplan, 19 July 1942; and Kaplan to Billikopf, 23 July 1942 in MS-13, Box 14, Folder 3; and Abraham Cahan file, MS-13, Box 4, Folder 2, for correspondence between the two men.

3 William M. Glicksman, *Jewish Social Welfare Institutions in Poland* (Philadelphia: M.E. Kalish Folkshul, 1976), 44–62; see Jacob Billikopf to Abraham Cahan in Abraham Cahan File, MS-13, Box 4, Folder 2; David Billikopf, “Reminiscences,” 8–9; and Abe Billikopf, “My Autobiography,” 1–2; Billikopf to Mordecai Kaplan, 13 July 1942, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 3; Kaplan to Billikopf, 23 July 1942, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 3. Billikopf to Diana Trad, 31 March 1944, MS-13, Box 30, Folder 8.


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7 Billikopf to Julian W. Mack, 24 June 1942, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 3; Billikopf to Harold H. Swift, 19 February 1944, MS-13, Box 29, Folder 6; Billikopf to James Henry Breasted, 3 January 1947, MS-13, Box 3, Folder 7.

8 Ibid., n6.


11 Clarke A. Chambers, “Toward a Redefinition of Welfare History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 2 (September 1986): 407–433. In 1986 Chambers, one of the deans of social welfare history, sounded the clarion call to students to consider the perspectives of many groups that were involved in the development of social welfare history in order to note the conflicts between, and the common assumptions shared by, varied individuals and groups in the twentieth century. Chambers and others reasoned that the views of those who gave aid as well as its recipients—rich and poor, white and black, men and women, and every type of religion—needed to be considered to promote a rounded view of this field. He shared concerns, in part, with Walter I. Trattner’s 1983 article, “The State of the Field and the Scope of this Work,” in Trattner and W. Andrew Aschenbaum’s *Social Welfare in America: An Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, rev. 2007), xvi–xxxiii. This article asked students to consider the ideas of many groups, haves and have-nots, and both the conflicts and consensus that their efforts engendered. Of the many reforms pushed during the Progressive Era, only workers’ compensation was actually accomplished before the era was over; other measures would have to wait until passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. Health insurance became law under the Obama Administration in 2012. Historians


13 Billikopf to E.M. Bluestone, 1 March 1950, MS-13, Box 2, Folder 19; Billikopf to Joseph Proskauer, 25 March 1942, MS-13, Box 23, Folder 22, 1–2.

14 Ibid.


16 “Annual Reports of the Federation of Jewish Charities of Milwaukee, 1905 and 1906,” 20–43 and 26–43, located in the Jewish Family and Children’s Services Collection, Box 2, Folder 8, in the Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Billikopf to Marvin Creager, MS 13, Box 5, Folder 5, 1–2; Billikopf to Edna Ferber, 7 February 1939, 1–2, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 6.


18 See Schultz, ad passim.

19 Minute Books of the UJC, 243, 260.
According to Jacob Rader Marcus, personal interview, December 1994, social workers and reformers like Billikopf worked with Reform rabbis to promote social justice and carry on the tradition of the Pittsburgh Platform. In some cases, they “replaced those rabbis with their fervor.”


Billikopf to Swift, 16 December 1946, 4, MS-13, Box 29, Folder 6; Billikopf to Mary Lou Fenberg, 14 March 1941, 1–6, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 6; Also, for the most comprehensive study of the Bureau of Public Welfare, see Mary Lou Fenberg, “A History of the Bureau of Public Welfare,” unpublished master’s thesis (Washington University, 1941), 9–12, located in Brown Social Work School Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

Representatives of Kansas City, New York, and Chicago claim credit for the first Department of Public Welfare. See Charles Merriam to Billikopf, 27 February 1943, MS-13, Box 19, Folder 8; also see Leroy Halbert to Billikopf, 17 December 1934, Box 10, Folder 13. In this letter, Halbert fanned the controversy by noting that Sophonisba Breckinridge had claimed that Chicago was the first department, in 1917; Billikopf was not pleased. For verification of his speech to the Chicago Chamber of Commerce, see Sherman C. Kingsley to Billikopf, 15 December 1913, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 11; and Billikopf to Mary McDowell, 25 April 1923, MS-13, Box 17, Folder 16. Billikopf admitted his talk with Porterfield for the first time in a letter to Abraham Cronbach of Hebrew Union College, 29 July 1938, MS-13, Box 5, Folder 3. In a letter to Martin Fellhauer, 15 December 1943, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 6, Billikopf allowed that the bill authorized $12,000 to Jackson County for mothers’ pensions and that a year later, a New York State delegation, authorized by Aaron Levy, came to study the bureau’s work. Fellhauer, not finding verification for any position, was inclined to suggest judiciously that the states were working on their activities “simultaneously.” Billikopf was not excited by Fellhauer’s decision and pointed to the work by Abraham Epstein, Insecurity: A Challenge to America (New York: Smith and Haas, 1933). In it, Epstein gave credit to Billikopf and Missouri for leadership in the field of mothers’ pensions.

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In the past three decades, much historiographical debate critiquing the contributions of Jews to the so-called Civil Rights movement has taken place. Black and white, and especially Jewish, writers argue that the presumed Jewish altruism and social activism in this movement between 1900 and 1970 had baser motives. To name a few, Hasia Diner, in her *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Westport, CT: Greenwich Press, 1977), argues that Jewish support for African American causes was a way for Jews to broaden their own rights without advocating their own interests. Jews, who had attained wealth but remained social outsiders, sought to gain respectability by joining progressive white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in efforts for racial equality. Although she admits that there was a spectrum of Jewish interests, Diner demonstrates that Jewish ends were secured by involvement with blacks. David L. Lewis, in his biography on W.E.B. Du Bois, agrees, believing that by establishing a presence at the center of the Civil Rights movement with further intelligence, money, and influence, Jews could fight antisemitism by “remote control.” B. Joyce Ross, in *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911–1939* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), suggests that Jews who helped blacks indulged in “non-economic liberalism”—i.e., they “shied away from appreciable change in the economic sphere largely because they, themselves, much like Joel Spingarn, had attained a measure of property and social status under the existing economic system.” In other words, they were interested in full political and civil rights for blacks but no real program of economic advancement. On the other hand, Murray Friedman with Peter Binzen, in *What Went Wrong: The Creation & Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), are more generous with Jews who aided blacks: “It is one thing to point out that not all Jews have always been friendly to blacks; it is another to imply by way of an unstated corollary that Jewish friendship to blacks has been a myth and an illusion fostered by Jews for political purposes.” Clearly, they are cognizant of Jews like Spingarn who sometimes patronized blacks and were concerned with their own needs, but they believe Jews did care about aiding others for benevolent purposes. While there is no question that Billikopf worked to advanced Jewish causes and probably had Jewish interests in mind when he helped blacks, to minimize his contributions as those of a noneconomic liberal would do a disservice to a man who helped African Americans achieve full political and civil rights and numbered many of them as his friends. His papers suggest many times a thoughtful and sensitive commitment to helping others simply because he could. M. Bruce Lustig, “The Life and Activity of Jacob Billikopf,” 4. See Samuel Chiles Mitchell to Billikopf, 11 February 1915 and 15 June 1924, MS-13, Box 20, Folder 3; Billikopf to Walter White, 25 November 1929, MS-13, Box 32, Folder 12. See also Billikopf, “Real Meaning of Hampton-Tuskegee Idea,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (19 March 1925), MS-13, Box 35, Folder 10; and Julius Rosenwald to Billikopf, 12 January 1915 and 2 February 1915, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 4. There is, too, some historiographical debate about the extent to which progressives observed the traditional color line in American society by 1915. Woodrow Wilson was a notorious racist. Theodore Roosevelt was not; he invited Booker T. Washington to the White House to further race relations. The noted reformer Ray Stannard Baker wrote *Following the Color Line* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1908), which detailed progressive efforts to help blacks.
Billikopf’s letters and example show that progressive social welfare reformers of all shapes and sizes, like Julius Rosenwald, Charles Henderson, Jane Addams, and the Abbott sisters, were part of an overlapping network of liberals who cared about many issues, including blacks’ rights.


31 Billikopf to Julius Rosenwald, 20 November 1913 and 23 April 1915, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 4; Lee Kohns to Billikopf, 15 March 1913, Billikopf to Kohns, 8 May 1913; Julian W. Mack to Billikopf, 3 December 1914; Frank P. Walsh to Billikopf, 1 December 1914 and

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Schachner, *Price of Liberty*, 61–62, 64–70; Handlin, *A Continuing Task*, 25–26; and Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, 90–98. In his personal correspondence, Billikopf wrote at least one hundred letters speaking to this period of his life. The origin of the ideas for organizing communities and for the matching fund is somewhat unclear. Robert Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), argues that Charles S. Ward of the YMCA conducted the Red Cross campaign of 1917 along those lines. But Henry Morgenthau of the AJRC was also treasurer of the Red Cross and worked with Cyrus Sulzberger, Jacob Schiff, Herbert H. and Arthur Lehman, Louis Marshall, Judah L. Magnes, David Bressler, and Lee Frankel, who Billikopf also claimed, initiated the plan of matching funds. Clearly, there was overlap between the AJRC and the Red Cross. See Billikopf to D. Hays Solis Cohen, 9 September 1941, MS-13, Box 10, Folder 9. Billikopf’s son, David, also recalled that, “My father possessed a lifelong habit of tooting his own horn. It is impossible to say how much of what he attributed to other people was actually said by them. He was not a conceited person but always impressed on people his achievements and the high opinion others had of him. My father ‘knew everyone worth knowing’ and he wanted others to know that.” David M. Billikopf, “Jacob Billikopf,” 43, in the author’s collection.


As noted previously, much has been written about those who contributed to the early development of the profession. See notes 11 and 12. However, they have not emphasized—or,
more important, analyzed—Jewish contributions. This refers not to how they fit into the larger secular and Protestant movements of the times, but in what ways they gave a pluralistic flavor to the early developments in social work. See Harry Lurie, *A Heritage Affirmed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961); Leighninger, *Social Work*; Lowe and Reid, *The Professionalization of Poverty*; and Morris and Freund, *Trends and Issues.*

35 “Enormous Testimonial Fund Presented to Jacob Billikopf,” *Jewish World* (17 March 1919). Billikopf managed to keep probably every newspaper clipping ever written about him. Many are contained in MS-13, Box 35, including “Jacob Billikopf Receives $50,000 Gift From Friends,” *Detroit Jewish Chronicle,* 14 March 1919; and “$50,000 Gift to Billikopf,” *Jewish World,* 17 March 1919.


37 Author received some information concerning the tasks of Jewish Federation executives and boards in various conversations with Allen A. Cowett, associate director of the Cincinnati Jewish Federation, 1959–1971. “Now My Idea Is this: Jules Mastbaum on Helping Unfortunate People in the Best Way,” reprint of *Evening Public Ledger,* 12 May 1923, in Jewish Federation of Philadelphia Collection, Balch Institute of Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia; “Jules E. Mastbaum on Interlocking Directorates in Communal Work,” *Jewish Exponent,* 19 March 1926, 1–2; Jules Mastbaum to Billikopf, 14 October 1922, 1–2, MS-13, Box 19, Folder 4; Billikopf to Kurt Peiser, 14 August 1947, 1–2, MS-13, Box 23, Folder 1; Billikopf to Samuel D. Lit, 15 June 1923, 1–2, MS-13, Box 16, Folder 11; Billikopf to Julius Rosenwald, 1 March 1929, 1, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 4; Billikopf to William Rosenwald, 23 October 1931, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 6; Billikopf to Joseph Greenberg, 26 June 1935, 1–13, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 21.

38 For a full discussion of the changing nature of Jewish Federations from 1920–1929, see Harry L. Lurie, *A Heritage Affirmed,* 88–109; and Morris and Freund, *Trends and Issues,* 159–278. Also see Billikopf to Frances Taussig, 17 May 1927, MS-13, Box 29, Folder 14; Billikopf to Sylvan H. Hirsch, 21 July 1941, MS-13, Box 12, Folder 1; Billikopf to Albert H. Lieberman, 27 September 1941, MS-13, Box 16, Folder 11; Billikopf to Leo H. Heimerdinger, 15 March 1938, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 6; and Billikopf to Joseph Greenberg, 26 June 1935, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 21; Billikopf to Sidney Hollander, 3 January 1928, MS-13, Box 12, Folder 6; Billikopf to Julius S. Weyl, 7 June 1929, MS-13, Box 32, Folder 4; and Billikopf to Leon J. Obermayer, 7 October 1927, MS-13, Box 22, Folder 7. See annual report of the Federation of Jewish Charities, 1929, located at the Philadelphia Jewish Federation.

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Billikopf to Lessing Rosenwald, n.d., 1–2, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 5.

See Clarke A. Chambers, _Seedtime of Reform_, xiii, 86, 93. Chambers made an enormous contribution to the field of social welfare history when he offered counterproposals to Arthur S. Link's provocative 1959 essay, “What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920s?” He suggested that the cause of social reform through voluntary associations did not die in the 1920s. These counterproposals contended that social workers did not necessarily return to individual soul-saving by practicing psychiatric or casework methods, but continued to reform the social environment. By offering these ideas, he partially rejected New York School of Social Work Dean Porter Lee's 1929 model that delineated between “cause” and “function” among social workers, claiming that social reform and bureaucratization of service were not mutually exclusive within the profession. In doing so, Chambers has forced many to investigate how diverse philosophical rationales might operate within any profession or reform movement. His assumption of mutual inclusivity challenges others to investigate complexity within the social work profession and welfare reform movements of the 1920s. See annual report of the Federation of Jewish Charities of Philadelphia, 1925, Philadelphia Jewish Federation. Billikopf to Mrs. Irving “Sissie” Lehman, n.d., 2, MS-13, Box 16, Folder 3; Billikopf to Felix Warburg, 21 January 1920, MS-13, Box 32, Folder 1; Billikopf to Sidney Hollander, 3 January 1928, MS-13, Box 12, Folder 6; Billikopf to Mary F. Bogue, 16 October 1924, MS-13, Box 3, Folder 1; Billikopf to Mrs. H Gordon McCouch, 19 and 26 November 1926, MS-13, Box 17, Folder 16; Billikopf to Harry L. Mackey, 15 April 1927, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 1; and Billikopf to Edmund Stirling, 1 February 1927, MS-13, Box 28, Folder 10. Also see Billikopf, unpublished form letter of the Mothers’ Assistance Fund League of Philadelphia, 20 January 1927; and Billikopf, untitled article in _Jewish Exponent_, 23 March 1923, nearprint file, MS-13, Box 35, Folder 7. Also see Roy Lubove, _The Struggle for Social Security, 1900–1935_ (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 108.

For further explication of Billikopf’s changing views, see Isaac M. Rubinow to Billikopf, 4 June 1928, and Billikopf to Rubinow, 14 June 1928, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 9.

See Billikopf to Sen. George Wharton Pepper, 6 October 1922, 1–2, MS-13, Box 23, Folder 4; Julian W. Mack to Billikopf, 22 October 1924, 1–2, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 2.

Joseph Brainin, “Humanizing Statistics: Some Marginal Notes on Jacob Billikopf and His Work,” 1–6, unpublished notes in MS-13, Box 3, Folder 7; David Brown, “Social Philosopher, Peacemaker, Humanitarian: An Intimate Close-Up of a Remarkable Personality in American Jewish Life,” MS-13, Box 35, Folder 3; Ellis A. Gimble to Billikopf, 27 May 1927, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 10; Billikopf to Arthur Brisbane, 19 November 1929, MS-13, Box 3, Folder 15; Billikopf to Felix Frankfurter, 16 December 1942, MS-13, Box 8, Folder 3; and Billikopf to Ben A. Lewissohn, 2 November 1923, MS-13, Box 15, Folder 11.

See Billikopf to George Woodward, 12 January 1928, MS-13, Box 33, Folder 8. Billikopf to Matthew Woll, 21 March 1927, MS-13, Box 33, Folder 9.


Billikopf to William Vare, 13 April 1927, MS-13, Box 30, Folder 18; and Billikopf to Matthew Woll, 21 March 1927, MS-13, Box 33, Folder 9.

Joseph Fisher to Billikopf, 11 June 1929, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 9. J. Prentice Murphy to Billikopf, 5 October 1927, MS-13, Box 20, Folder 14; and Billikopf to Fred Shedd of *The Evening Bulletin*, 2 November 1927, MS-13, Box 27, Folder 1.

Rubinow, *The Quest for Security* (New York: H. Holt, 1934). Of the above-mentioned lot, the most provocative—and influential to this author—were the works of Bremer, Chambers, Lubove, Nelson, Schwarz, and Trattner, all of whom delved into the many complex issues involved with the movements to develop social insurance between 1900 and 1930. A special thanks is owed to my teacher, William W. Bremer, whose especially critical insights, a few decades ago, caused a young student to grapple with the notion that conflict and complexity, and not evolutionary progress, characterized American social welfare efforts.


51 Billikopf to Rabbi Solomon Foster, 1 November 1921, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 17; Billikopf to Horace Stern, 21 March 1932 and 17 November 1932, MS-13, Box 28, Folder 6; Billikopf to Lessing Rosenwald, 28 April 1925 and 17 January 1931, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 5; Billikopf to Judah Magnes, 27 January 1930, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 4. Minutes of the board of directors of the Jewish Welfare Society, June, 1930, located in Philadelphia Jewish Federation; Billikopf to Ferdinand S. Bach, 29 September 1932, MS-13, Box 1, Folder 10; Billikopf to Samuel Goldsmith, 5 June 1933 and 16 March 1934; Goldsmith to Billikopf, 10 November 1933, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 17; Billikopf to Isaac Max Rubinow, 14 September 1932, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 9.

52 Billikopf to Samuel Goldsmith, 16 March 1934, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 17; Billikopf to Felix Frankfurter, 11 May 1934, MS-13, Box 8, Folder 2; Billikopf to Horace Stern, 21 March 1932, MS-13, Box 28, Folder 6.

53 Billikopf to Isaac Max Rubinow, 14 September 1932 and 6 December 6, 1932, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 9.

54 Billikopf to Samuel A. Goldsmith, 1 June 1933, 1–4, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 17.


57 See Schwarz, *Interregnum of Despair*, 23–44. See Billikopf correspondence with LaFollette, Wagner, and Costigan in MS-13, Box 15, Folder 5; Box 31, Folder 3; and Box 5, Folder 4.


59 Billikopf to Herbert H. Lehman, 5 January 1933, MS-13, Box 16, Folder 2; Harry L. Lurie to Billikopf, 9 January 1933, MS-13, Box 17, Folder 14.

60 See extensive correspondence between Isaac Max Rubinow and Billikopf in Isaac Max Rubinow file, MS-13, Box 13, Folder 9, and more particularly, correspondence on following
dates: 21 September 1934, 30 December 1935, and 7 January 1936. See also Billikopf to Henry J. Haskell, 8 October 1930, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 1.

61 See Nelson, *Unemployment Insurance*, 214–217, 219–22, and 237–240; and Lubove, *Struggle for Social Security*, 144–187. Billikopf to Henry J. Haskell, 8 October 1930, 2, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 2; Billikopf to Paul Douglas, 7 May 1930, 10 June 1930, 2 March 1949, 29 October 1930, MS-13, Box 5, Folder 20; Douglas to John Slawson, 12 June 1930, MS-13, Box 27, Folder 12; Billikopf to Mrs. Gerard Swope, 8 December 1930, MS-13, Box 29, Folder 8; Billikopf to Douglas, MS-13, Box 5, Folder 20, 10 June 1930 and 2 March 1949; Billikopf to Felix Hebert, 9 December 1931, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 4; Billikopf to Felix Frankfurter, 28 December 1931, MS-13, Box 8, Folder 2; Billikopf to William Hard, 23 December 1931, MS-13, Box 10, Folder 16; Paul U. Kellogg to Billikopf, 31 December 1931, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 9; and Billikopf to Julian W. Mack, 28 December 1931, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 3. Also, it should be noted that, as Nelson points out, the Groves Plan, which initially featured an employer-developed individual reserve plan, evolved by 1933 into a recommendation that voluntary employee contributions and pools of funds be utilized if so advocated.


64 Billikopf to Robert M. LaFollette, 14 December 1932, MS-13, Box 13, Folder 5; Billikopf to Paul Kellogg, “Letter to the Editor,” *Survey Magazine*, 28 March 1933, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 9; Billikopf to Samuel Fels, 18 January 1933; and Samuel Fels, “Some Discoveries in the Backward Field of Consumption,” unpublished manuscript, 1–10, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 7; telegram, Robert Wagner to Billikopf, 1 October 1933, MS-13, Box 31, Folder 5. Finally, see “Membership of the Philadelphia Regional Labor Board,” Billikopf nearprint file, AJA.

65 Billikopf to Benjamin Cardozo, 27 December 1934, MS-13, Box 4, Folder 4; Billikopf to Joseph Schlossburg, 12 August 1940, MS-13, Box 26, Folder 5; Billikopf to John G. Pew, 9 August 1935, MS-13, Box 23, Folder 8; see also “Edward Costigan,” http://spartacus-educational.com/USAcostigan.htm (accessed 30 December 2016).


67 David Billikopf’s “Reminiscences” speaks to his father’s later years, including letters and memories of his mother’s death, Florence and David’s youth in Philadelphia, as well as his recollections of his father’s personal habits. In personal interviews with this author, David provided additional thoughts about his father. He also shared notes that Florence had written to her stepmother, Esther Freeman Billikopf, the children’s caretaker whom Billikopf married in 1942, six years after Ruth’s passing. In 1993 Ulrich Schweitzer, Florence’s husband of many years, also shared thoughts about his father-in-law.

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Billickopf to Julian W. Mack, 24 April 1934, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 3; Billickopf to Judge Horace Stern, 23 July 1934, 1–4, MS-13, Box 28, Folder 6; Billickopf to Harry Lurie, September 1934, located in Billickopf File in Harry L. Lurie Papers, Social Welfare Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN; also see Billickopf to Arthur Loeb, president, Federation of Jewish Charities, 2 October 1934, 1–2 and 22 April 1935, MS-13, Box 17, Folder 7; and Billickopf to Gabriel Davidson, 20 August 1945, MS-13, Box 5, Folder 10. In this letter, which was written ten years after the fact, Billickopf details other considerations that went into his leaving: his being tired of fundraising and “some of the unspecified enemies” that he had developed over the years. Billickopf’s letter to Stern details the “rumors” surrounding his leave of absence. Horace Stern’s Papers at the Balch Institute, Philadelphia, contain nothing of this controversy. Also see Billickopf to Loeb, 3 October 1934, 1–2, MS-13, Box 16, Folder 2.

69 The combination of his “resignation” and his inability to gain another job with the New Deal suggests, however, that New Dealers may have wanted to believe the worst about Billickopf.

70 Billickopf to Fred Rodell of Yale University, 15 January 1942, Rodell to Billickopf, 28 December 1941 and 19 January 1942, MS-13, Box 24, Folder 12; Billickopf to George Messersmith, 22 September 1939, MS-13, Box 19, Folder 10; Horace Kallen to Billickopf, January 1939, MS-13, Box 13, Folder 12; Billickopf to Felix Frankfurter, 15 March 1939, MS-13, Box 8, Folder 3; Billickopf to Albert Einstein, 19 October 1936, MS-13, Box 6, Folder 11; Billickopf to William Thalheimer, 8 February 1938, 25 July 1938, and 20 September 1938, MS-13, Box 30, Folder 3; telegram, Eleanor Roosevelt to Billikopf, 11 July 1940, MS-13, Box 24, Folder 16; Billickopf to Edith R. Stern, 7 August 1940, MS-13, Box 28, Folder 4; Charles G. Ross to Billickopf, 1 May 1943, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 7.

71 Billickopf to George Deming of Philco, 1 November 1937, MS-13, Box 5, Folder 13; Billickopf to Louis Broido, 4 November 1937, MS-13, Box 3, Folder 7; Billickopf to Walter Grosscup of Lit Bros, 7 December 1945, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 21; Billickopf to Maurice Spector of Blum Stores, 26 November 1946, MS-13, Box 27, Folder 18; and Billickopf to Donald Richberg, 24 April 1942, MS-13, Box 24, Folder 8.

72 In What Went Wrong, Friedman with Binzen make the point that Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: Morrow Books, 1967) “sought to free black intellectuals from the domination of a white power structure, which he believed had diverted blacks from the path of black empowerment. A leading cause of the predicament was the subservience of blacks to Jews and the inordinate involvement of Jews in black affairs.” According to Friedman, Cruse assailed as a myth the idea of Jewish friendship for blacks: “American Negroes in deference to Jewish sensibilities tolerated Jewish ambivalence, Jewish liberalism, Jewish paternalism, Jewish exploitation … in the same way in which they have lived with similar attitudes in white Anglo-Saxons.” Walter White’s letter to Billickopf certainly offers a great deal of affection for Louis Marshall on both a personal and professional level. It does not necessarily contradict Cruse’s point but offers compelling evidence that true affection existed among blacks and Jews that did not smack of paternalism and
obsequiousness. See Edwin R. Embree, president of the Julius Rosenwald Fund, to Billikopf, 4 November 1930, Billikopf to Embree, 12 November 1930, Billikopf to Embree, 17 March 1931, Embree to Billikopf, 20 March 1931, Embree to Billikopf, 1 May 1931 and 29 January 1932, MS-13, Box 6, Folder 9; Billikopf to Dr. Mordecai Johnson, 21 April 1931, MS-13, Box 13, Folder 7; Walter White to Billikopf, 9 April 1934, 1–2, White to Billikopf, 26 October 1934, 3 January 1936, 3 February 1936, 5 January 1940, MS-13, Box 32, Folder 12.

73 Walter White to Billikopf, 2 August 1940, 9 October 1940, 16 October 1941; Billikopf to White, 5 July 1940; White to Billikopf, 9 July 1940 and 13 July 1940; White to Billikopf, 9 July 1942; all in MS-13, Box 32, Folder 12. John G. Pew to Billikopf, 14 March 1945 and 15 May 1945, MS-13, Box 23, Folder 8; Billikopf to Lloyd K. Garrison, 22 May 1942, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 6.

74 Alain Locke to Billikopf, 29 July 1942; Billikopf to Locke, 14 September 1942; Locke to Billikopf, 22 November 1946; Locke to Billikopf, 28 October 1948; all in MS-13, Box 17, Folder 8. Billikopf to Raymond Pace Alexander, 21 October 1943, MS-13, Box 1, Folder 1; William Hastie to Billikopf, 15 June 1943, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 3; Walter White to A. Philip Randolph, 15 July 1943, MS-13, Box 32, Folder 11; Thurgood Marshall to Billikopf, 29 May 1945, MS-13, Box 18, Folder 1; W.E.B. DuBois to Billikopf, 9 December 1948, MS-13, Box 6, Folder 4.

75 There are dozens of letters that detail his fundraising efforts. A few include, Billikopf to Henry J. Haskell, 24 February 1947, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 2; Billikopf to Paul Kellogg, 1930–1950 detailing Billikopf’s raising thousands for Survey Magazine, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 9; Maurice Karpf to Billikopf, 23 November 1939, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 4; Billikopf to Henry F. Helmholtz, 13 June 1950, MS-13, Box 11, Folder 4; and Stephen S. Wise to Billikopf, 17 May 1939, MS-13, Box 33, Folder 7. The following correspondence concerns Billikopf’s attempts to gain other employment at this time. It includes letters that he wrote as well as letters that friends wrote on his behalf. Billikopf to Lloyd Garrison, 21 June 1946, MS-13, Box 9, Folder 6; George Kirstein to Billikopf, 28 April 1942, MS-13, Box 14, Folder 11; Billikopf to S. Fels, 9 Dec. 1942 and 18 Sept. 1946, MS-13, Box 7, Folder 8; Billikopf to John Carmody, 10 May 1941, MS-13, Box 13, Folder 10; Morris Waldman to Billikopf, 12 May 1943, MS-13, Box 31, Folder 6; Billikopf to Abba H. Silver, 1947, MS-13, Box 27, Folder 8; Billikopf to Bernard Samuel, 13 March 1942, MS-13, Box 26, Folder 1; Billikopf to George Taylor of University of Pennsylvania, 1 October 1936, MS-13, Box 29, Folder 16; and Billikopf to Lessing Rosenwald, 5 October 1936, MS-13, Box 25, Folder 5.
A “Jewish Monkey Trial”
A “Jewish Monkey Trial”: the Cleveland Jewish Center and the Emerging Borderline between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in 1920s North America

by Ira Robinson

In the 1920s the world of Orthodox Judaism in North America felt itself besieged on many sides. In particular, it was shaken by a movement within the rank and file of many Orthodox synagogues, influenced by a growing cohort of English-speaking rabbis educated at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) in New York. This movement challenged traditional synagogues to “modernize” themselves by abolishing the separate seating of men and women in their sanctuaries. Proponents of such changes often argued forcefully that doing so would not necessarily mean relinquishing the definition of such a synagogue as “Orthodox.” The resulting conflict between supporters and opponents of this form of synagogue liberalization helped to define a growing divergence between “Conservative” and “Orthodox” Judaism in North America.

This article will analyze one of the most prominent cases of “Orthodox” synagogues’ adopting mixed seating—that of the Jewish Center (JC) of Cleveland, Ohio. Under the leadership of its JTS-trained Rabbi Solomon Goldman, JC adopted mixed seating in 1925. Goldman’s arguments for mixed seating, as we will see, succeeded in winning over a majority of the congregation to his views. However, as elsewhere, the dissenting minority within the congregation refused to
concede the principle that their synagogue, founded for the perpetuation of “Orthodox Judaism,” had the right to do this and brought their case to court. The case was before the courts for several years in Cleveland’s Court of Common Pleas, two courts of appeals, and the Supreme Court of Ohio. It attracted local, national, and international publicity and helped to define what Orthodox and Conservative Judaism in North America represented for an entire generation.

Historians of Orthodoxy and Conservatism in America are aware of this case and its importance and have cited it in their respective analyses. This article reviews sources available to previous researchers. However, it also brings to bear extensive archival documentation currently located in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, which had been preserved by the family of one of the prime instigators of the lawsuit, Abraham A. Katz. This material sheds new light on the case and its consequences, particularly from the perspective of the dissident Orthodox minority. It also, importantly, contains the complete transcript of the expert testimony of some of the most prominent American Orthodox leaders of the era, whose testimony and cross-examination by Goldman yields much information of importance.

The Jewish Community of Cleveland in the Early Twentieth Century

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Jewish community of Cleveland constituted one of the largest concentrations of Jewish population in the United States. Among the numerous synagogues that existed in Cleveland in this period were large and influential Reform temples, which had themselves begun as traditionalist congregations, as well as a number of generally smaller Eastern European congregations that identified themselves as “Orthodox.” However, the term “Orthodox” in North America in those decades was anything but sharply defined, other than in opposition to Reform. Orthodox congregations in early-twentieth-century Cleveland followed patterns common in most North American centers of Jewish population. Congregations tended to form on the basis of common place of origin or liturgy. Many if not most of these synagogues tolerated members who were no longer strict observers of the Sabbath because of the overwhelming economic realities they faced.
in North America. On the other hand, some Cleveland synagogues tried to resist these pressures. Members of Cleveland’s Synagogue of the Government of Grodno thus pledged to strictly refrain from labor on Saturdays and Jewish holidays, and the Hungarian Congregation Shomre Shabbos accepted only Sabbath-observant members. Yet another cause of the proliferation of synagogues was strife within congregations, one major cause of which was the issue of separate seating of men and women. This issue arose in Cleveland’s Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in 1904. The adoption of mixed seating by B’nai Jeshurun led to the founding of an Orthodox breakaway congregation, Oheb Zedek. A similar controversy, albeit much more consequential, was that of JC.

**The Jewish Center of Cleveland**

JC was formed as the result of a 1917 merger between congregations Anshe Emeth and Beth Tefilo. Anshe Emeth had been founded in 1869 by immigrants from Poland. Its leadership soon began to discuss issues that would in the end lead it away from Orthodoxy. Thus, members of Anshe Emeth debated the issue of mixed seating as early as the late

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1880s, undoubtedly under the influence of Cleveland’s dominant Reform temples. At that time, however, they did not make any changes. There were also congregational debates in the nineteenth century over the continuance of the priestly blessing (dukhaning) as well as on the elimination of public announcements of donations at the time of the Torah reading (shenodering); these changes were not made at that time, either. When the synagogue moved to new quarters in 1903, it did not maintain the traditional central platform (bimah) for Torah reading. This innovation caused the resignation of “some of the [synagogue’s] very pious members.”

Anshe Emeth accepted Samuel Margolies as its rabbi in 1904. Margolies came to Cleveland with a unique preparation for the American rabbinate. He was the son of one of the most prominent immigrant Orthodox rabbis in America, Moses Sebulun Margolies (Ramaz). Samuel’s family sent him to Eastern Europe for advanced rabbinic training at the Telz Yeshiva. When he returned to America, he entered Harvard College and graduated in 1902. He thus came to Cleveland with the ability to preach and interact with his congregants in English as well as Yiddish. As the first English-speaking Orthodox rabbinic spokesman in Cleveland, Margolies took on a leadership role in a number of initiatives designed to unite the Eastern European immigrant community in Cleveland. These included the Union of Jewish Organizations (1906–1909), an attempt to organize a Cleveland branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (1913), and the Cleveland Kehilla (1913–1914).

Margolies was different in several respects from his colleagues in the Orthodox rabbinate of Cleveland. He was, for instance, clean-shaven—an important sartorial statement in an era in which Orthodox rabbis were almost by definition bearded and in which achieving a clean-shaven look meant either utilizing a razor, forbidden by Judaic law (halakhah), or else applying a chemical depilatory powder. Margolies also introduced confirmation and late Friday night services to the congregation, in clear imitation of the practices of Reform temples. Confirmation at least was adopted by other Cleveland Orthodox congregations of this era as well. Margolies was also a founder of the Cleveland Hebrew School, which was ideologically opposed by some members of the Cleveland Orthodox rabbinate for its modernist tendencies.
One of Margolies’s initiatives was his encouragement of the founding of Congregation Beth Tefilo in the Glenville neighborhood in 1912 and its 1917 merger with Anshe Emeth. Shortly after the merger, Margolies died in an automobile accident, and the merged congregation did not acquire a new rabbi until 1919, when it hired Samuel Benjamin, a recent graduate of JTS. Benjamin presided over a congregation that continued Margolies’s innovations of late Friday night services and confirmation. Benjamin’s three-year tenure as rabbi was marked by the successful effort of newly merged Anshe Emeth–Beth Tefilo to build a magnificent Jewish Center with a large auditorium, spacious classrooms for the Hebrew school, and up-to-date sports facilities on East 105th Street, the emerging center of the Cleveland Jewish community. The construction reportedly cost the then-astronomical sum of $1 million. However, Benjamin, who worked very hard to make JC a reality, was not destined to dedicate it. In 1922 Benjamin was suddenly ousted from his position as rabbi and replaced by another JTS graduate, Solomon Goldman, who had served for the previous four years as rabbi of Cleveland’s B’nai Jeshurun congregation. The issue that got Benjamin fired, according to journalist Leon Wiesenfeld, was that Benjamin “stood with the Orthodox group in the synagogue and was ousted by those in the congregation who wanted liberal reforms...”

But what liberal reforms did Benjamin oppose? There is no record of his opposition to the congregation’s previous innovations of no central bimah, late Friday night services, and confirmation. The overriding issue that found him in opposition to the “liberal” elements of the congregation was that of mixed seating. In a letter to Abraham A. Katz, the leader of the congregation’s “Orthodox” faction, Benjamin stated that the question of mixed seating had been the subject of “serious discussion” in the congregation during his rabbinate. At the request of the JC board, Benjamin traveled to New York to consult the faculty of JTS, including Talmud Professor Louis Ginzberg and President Cyrus Adler, both of whom were opposed to mixed seating. Adler told him that that he was “bitterly opposed to mixed and promiscuous seating and would sooner consent to an organ in the synagogue.” Adler’s stance, which Benjamin evidently adopted as his own, sealed Benjamin’s fate at JC.
The Jewish Center and the Future of Cleveland Jewry

For both sides of the dispute over mixed seating at JC, the stakes were high. In a 1925 letter to Rabbi Herbert Goldstein, president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, Katz expressed what he felt was at stake:

The Jewish Center of Cleveland is the only institution in our city having facilities, drawing to itself the younger generation of Orthodox Jews. The other [Orthodox] congregations are small in comparison … and the young men and women have nowhere else to go.

Jacob D. Goldman, one of Katz’s liberal opponents, could not have agreed with him more on this point: “I do not know of any single institution in the country that can justly claim for itself the esteem, prestige, and influence that the Center holds in the Jewish community of Cleveland.” Both sides, then, were fighting for their vision of the future of Cleveland Jewry.

Katz recalled that, as a boy, he and his father “came together in a little Shul to pray and my friends attended temples decorated beautifully.” He asked his father, “Why can’t we have such beautiful temples to pray in?” JC was in so many ways the answer to his prayers. With it, Orthodox Jews in Cleveland would not have to feel inferior to Reform Jews.

Katz envisioned JC as “a modern Orthodox congregation, standing for traditional Judaism.” Its Orthodoxy, in his mind, was not affected by either the training of its rabbi at JTS or its affiliation with the JTS-oriented United Synagogue of America. For him the affiliation was “for the purpose of strengthening our traditional Judaism.” Like many other Orthodox Jews of this era, Katz was not really fazed by the label “Conservative.” He had thought of Conservative Judaism as “Orthodox Judaism slightly modernized.” Katz, in a 1927 letter to Goldstein, asserted that the contract consolidating the two congregations, Anshe Emeth and Beth Tefilo, which took effect on 1 January 1917, used the term “Traditional Judaism,” while the JC constitution, adopted shortly after the consolidation, used the term “Orthodox.” As Katz remarked, “To us the terms were similar.”
Katz’s detractors alleged that his motivation in his opposition was something other than altruistic zealously for Orthodox Judaism. Jacob Goldman expressed this view:

Mr. A.A. Katz has … occupied the office of secretary in the Cleveland Jewish Center under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Goldman and was known to be one of his staunchest admirers. It was only upon being defeated several years ago, and after losing his office as secretary, that Mr. Katz suddenly began to find fault with Rabbi Goldman’s conception of Judaism.35

This view of Katz was essentially reiterated by Jacob Heller, a staunchly Orthodox Jew:

Your Centre was (and is) a stalwart member of the “United Synagogue,” united to destroy Judaism. I fail to recall that you or anyone else protested at the time against these things. When Goldman was taken, you knew that he came from Bnai Jeshurun, you knew that he was openly a Reformer, yet I fail to recall that anyone protested.36

Indeed, there is no record of a protest by Katz in a JC board meeting either at the hiring of Goldman or even at the possibility, discussed by the board, of merging with Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, which already had mixed seating.37

The Transformation of the Jewish Center

Katz’s vision of a “Modern Orthodox” JC was to be thwarted by the accession of Solomon Goldman as the center’s rabbi. Goldman strongly believed in mixed seating as the best way to maintain the essential continuity of traditional Judaism in America. From 1918 to 1922, he had been the rabbi of B’nai Jeshurun in Cleveland, which had adopted mixed seating. Many of those who voted to hire Goldman saw an opportunity to make JC into a truly shining example of modern, traditional Judaism in Cleveland and beyond, and chose him clearly expecting that he would introduce mixed seating.

It was soon apparent, however, that Goldman would have opposition within the congregation for the changes he wished to make. On 24 August 1922, shortly after he had become JC’s rabbi and just a few
weeks before the High Holidays, a congregational board meeting was held at which Goldman spoke in favor of mixed seating. With the considerable eloquence and learning he possessed, Goldman attempted to reassure the board that the change he recommended was legitimate from a Jewish perspective. He contended that there was no law in the halakhic code specifically forbidding the practice. He also argued that there were many other laws that Orthodox Jews regularly violate as a matter of necessity under American conditions that are as important as or perhaps even more important than the issue of mixed seating in the synagogue.

At that meeting, seven people spoke in favor of mixed seating and thirteen—led by Katz, who was at that time the congregation’s secretary—spoke against it. Seeing that his mixed-seating proposal would not pass, Goldman suggested a compromise in which a section of the balcony be reserved for mixed seating. Katz claimed that had it not been for his opposition, Goldman would have had his way then and there and that he personally thwarted an attempt to sell mixed-seating tickets also in a lower level section.38 According to the account of Samuel J. Bialosky, a Goldman supporter and subsequently president of the congregation, during the High Holidays of 1922 the mixed-seating balcony was “packed to suffocation and the [men only] main floor two-thirds empty.”39

At this point Goldman still identified himself and was generally recognized in the community as Orthodox.40 Nonetheless, his liberal tendencies were becoming more and more apparent. At the formal dedication of the JC building, on 22 October 1922, it is significant that the Orthodox rabbis present—Benjamin Gittelsohn, Ozer Paley, and Zachariah Sachs—were given essentially ceremonial tasks, including reciting the opening prayer and placing the Torah scrolls in the ark. Meanwhile, the substantive rabbinical addresses, other than Goldman’s, were given by the two most prominent Reform rabbis in Cleveland, Louis Wolsey and Abba Hillel Silver.41

In response to the threat of momentous change at JC, Katz led the Orthodox elements in the congregation to fight what they regarded as a betrayal of Orthodox Judaism. One of the means they utilized in their fight was to convert the newspaper Der Yiddisher Waechter (Jewish
Guardian), under the editorial guidance of Benjamin, to an anti-Goldman organ. Thus, according to journalist Wiesenfeld, “the purpose of the new publication was … to fight Rabbi Solomon Goldman and the Jewish Center.”

In March 1923, Katz and his colleagues continued the protest against mixed seating by orchestrating a petition campaign by JC members against the innovation. Katz’s “Committee of 100” printed a poster consisting of a collection of photographs of the signed petitions of more than 160 people who claimed to be “members in good standing” of JC and who demanded “in accordance with our rights that the services in this congregation be held in accordance with the orthodox laws … we protest against the attempt to violate our constitution.”

The next stage of the conflict centered on the synagogue’s constitution. According to Katz’s narrative:

In 1923 they called a meeting suddenly…. Behind my back Rabbi Goldman sends a notice to adopt a constitution, because they said and thought that no one would find this constitution. They said that there was no such thing as a constitution…. On that very night, July 31, 1923 … the constitution came into our hands and when the meeting on Aug. 6 came into effect, we filed our protest immediately and told him it is illegal. After they refused to permit us to read our constitution we said, ‘Rabbi the only reason you want to adopt a new constitution tonight is because you know that our constitution contains a clause that you can never have men and women sit together in our congregation unless unanimously voted against.’

Katz was referring to a constitutional document he alleged had been adopted by the congregation on 18 March 1917, shortly after the formal merger of Anshe Emeth and Beth Tefilo. Katz’s opponents, including Goldman and President Bialosky, categorically denied that the congregation had adopted any constitution in 1917. Bialosky, to the contrary, asserted in a newspaper article that:

In 1917, a committee was appointed to draft a constitution. The document was so preposterous that the committee never had the courage to present it to the congregation and it was never presented to it.
Goldman’s partisans further asserted that in 1919 JC appointed a committee to draft a constitution, but that the committee never reported. According to this narrative, during the three years between 1919 and 1922, the congregation’s attention was so distracted by the major fundraising efforts necessary to pay for the new building that the constitutional issue was not raised. Furthermore, according to this narrative, it is only when Goldman was elected and discovered that JC did not possess a constitution that the effort to adopt one was revived.\textsuperscript{46} Katz, not surprisingly, categorized this narrative as a complete falsehood serving the purposes of the pro-mixed-seating faction. Katz and his supporters successfully thwarted the move for the adoption of a new constitution in 1923 and 1924. However, in the congregational election held after the High Holidays of 1924, the pro-mixed-seating faction seized a majority of the board. Under these changed circumstances, the new constitution was finally approved and ratified on 25 November 1924. Whereas the 1917 constitutional document spoke of “Orthodox Judaism,” it is no surprise that the constitution proposed by Goldman stated, in article II, that: “The object of this congregation is to maintain Conservative Judaism.” The way now seemed open to effect the change for the next major holiday, Passover of 1925.

The conflict within JC spawned several mediation efforts. Goldstein, testifying in 1927, recalled that in 1923 when he was in Cleveland, “I made it my special business to see [Goldman] twice in the hope that this case might not be brought to the courts.” In March 1925, Agudas HaRabonim, a body composed of European-trained Orthodox rabbis in North America, summoned Goldman to a rabbinical court hearing [\textit{din T\textsuperscript{\texttt{orah}}}.\textsuperscript{47} It was a summons that Goldman ostentatiously ignored.\textsuperscript{48} The Agudas HaRabonim further advised Katz to turn to Cyrus Adler, president of JTS, “whom we know to be an honest and honorable man who loves peace.”\textsuperscript{49} Katz went to New York to see Adler, who convinced him “that the Seminary was founded and at present stands for the preservation of traditional Judaism.”\textsuperscript{50} Adler wrote to Goldman on 27 March 1925:

My object in writing you now is to urge you not to put this proposed change into effect at the approaching Passover, as it is likely to create a
disturbance and a Hillul ha-Shem, of which the Center has already had enough. If the attitude of the Seminary means anything to you, it would be not at any time to force or even encourage changes in the ritual or the practice of a Congregation.51

Sam Rocker, in a *Jewish World* (*JW*) editorial of 22 May 1925, stated that he too had attempted to facilitate an out-of-court settlement. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in a 1927 press release also mentioned its attempts to effect reconciliation in 1925 at the Mizrachi convention in Cleveland as well as in November 1927, when the court case was pending.52

No persuasion could prevent Goldman and his partisans from going forward with mixed seating during Passover of 1925. At least initially, however, the results were not pretty. The Committee of 100 planned a demonstration in the synagogue on the first day of Passover, 9 April 1925.53 While apparently that demonstration was not held, according to Katz’s account, none of the regular Torah readers could be persuaded to perform in the synagogue that Passover, and Goldman had to do the job himself. Additionally, only a few women could be persuaded to come down from the balcony and sit among the men. On the Sabbath after Passover, however, the conflict grew intense, and there was an Orthodox protest that turned violent. As Katz described the incident:

> Mr. S. Weinzimmer … before the opening of the ark, stood in front of the ark … his intention … being to prevent the reading of the Torah as a protest…. Rabbi Goldman … forcibly attempted to shove him aside and take out the Torah. Mr. Aurbach … jumped up on the platform and grabbed hold of Mr. Weinzimmer; thereupon a dozen men jumped up upon the platform, and I regret to say blows were exchanged. Upon the platform … was also Mr. A. Jaffee who told the rabbi he was a “Messes Umodiach” [one who incites to sin].54

Because of these disturbances, several men were formally told that they were not welcome to worship in JC.55

During the High Holidays of 1925, the Orthodox dissidents were forced to continue their protest outside JC by holding separate services in the old Anshe Emeth building.56 During their absence, Goldman
took the opportunity to eliminate the priestly blessing from the liturgy. Katz recalls that:

During the absence of our protesting members during the high holidays, Rabbi Goldman took advantage and eliminated Duchan, kneeling even of the cantor, reciting of kaddish by individuals. On Sukkot two kohanim attempted to duchan. The rabbi ordered the congregation to be seated, the cantor to ignore the kohanim and he himself sat through it all with his head turned away.57

Going to Court
The conflict culminated in a 1925 civil suit in the Cleveland Court of Common Pleas, initiated by Katz and twelve co-plaintiffs against Goldman and the JC leadership. It alleged that the congregation’s constitution provided that the congregation had to remain Orthodox. The amended plaintiffs’ petition, filed in May 1926, accused Goldman of instituting mixed seating as well as other ritual changes, including forbidding the priestly blessing during the holidays, forbidding the ceremony of kneeling during Yom Kippur, and eliminating additional poetic hymns (piyyutim). The petition further accused Goldman of having stated publicly that God did not give the Torah at Mount Sinai and having belittled and ridiculed the great religious figures of Israel.

Goldman’s response to the charges against him and the JC leadership argued that JC was not incorporated to uphold “Orthodox” Judaism but rather “traditional” Judaism, a term used by Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews alike. Furthermore, he contended that there was no governing body of “Jewish churches” able to enforce “Orthodoxy.” Moreover, since Judaism never possessed a rigid definition of creed, the term “Orthodox” had no meaning other than in connection with “ritual and practice.”

Goldman maintained that the number of JC members who actually complained about the changes in the congregation was no more than twenty out of a membership of eleven hundred and that some of the plaintiffs were not in fact members in good standing. JC’s services on Sabbath morning, he contended, continued to be the most highly attended in Cleveland, with most of the attendants being “Orthodox Jews.”
Goldman tried to define an “Orthodox Jew” fairly narrowly, as someone insisting on the rigid observance of Jewish customs and practices both outside the synagogue as well as within. This definition would exclude almost all Cleveland Jews—for example, Orthodox law prohibits shaving, yet “the rabbis of this congregation are shaven as are the members and even the plaintiffs.” Goldman thus denied that the plaintiffs, all of whom shaved and some of whom were known to conduct business on the Sabbath, were in fact “actuated by a desire to uphold the doctrines of Orthodox Judaism.”

On the specific issue of mixed seating, Goldman pointed out that whereas the Orthodox practice was to seat women not merely separately in a gallery but also to have the gallery curtained off, JC prior to any changes had the women seated separately but in an uncurtained gallery; therefore, the innovation of mixed seating on the main floor had not taken the congregation away from a state of “Orthodox” practice.

It is also interesting to examine the congregation’s official response to the suit, for its self-justification illustrates the extent to which “Orthodox” congregations and individuals in Cleveland had been subject to “Reform” influences:

It is true that our congregation was founded sixty years ago, but for more than a quarter of a century it has been moving in the direction of what is generally known as Conservative Judaism…. Some twenty years ago we engaged as our spiritual leader the late Rabbi Samuel Margolies, who was known to shave, to eat without a hat, and seldom if ever attended daily services. Our congregation never pretended to be Orthodox. We have had late Friday evening service for more than a decade. We have had religious school and confirmation of boys and girls together for about fifteen years…. Ours was also one of the first congregations to join the United Synagogue of America. In 1921 prior to Rabbi Goldman’s coming to our congregation we considered a merger with a well-known Conservative congregation in Cleveland.

The suit against Goldman and JC, the putative issue of which had become a definition of Orthodoxy, attracted national and worldwide attention. In January 1928, however, Judge Homer Powell of the Court of Common Pleas dismissed the suit, ruling that the court had no jurisdiction over what amounted to a purely religious matter.
The Orthodox committee appealed the decision and initially seemed to have won when, in July 1929, the Court of Appeals reversed the decision of the Common Pleas Court and granted a temporary injunction for the Orthodox group against the board of trustees of JC and Goldman, enjoining them from using the synagogue as a Conservative house of worship pending a retrial. The decision was based on the appellate court’s acceptance of the plaintiffs’ contention that the issue was not a purely religious matter but that the synagogue was a trust, formed for Orthodox purposes, and that its trustees, without violating their trust, could not change the synagogue ritual from Orthodox to Conservative.62

However, the Orthodox victory was short-lived, because within a couple of months JC brought the issue before another appellate court, which concurred with the original decision that the case centered on “a strictly ecclesiastical question” and again dismissed the suit.63 The Orthodox side once again appealed to the Supreme Court of Ohio, which, in December 1929, upheld the previous appellate decision and thus ended several years of litigation.64 JC was to continue to be Conservative and not Orthodox,65 though Goldman left Cleveland for a congregation in Chicago before the legal issue had definitively closed. Goldman’s biographer is puzzled about the reason for his leaving,66 but it would seem that the Orthodox opposition to him personally had caused him a great deal of bitterness. Goldman seems to have reciprocated and harbored what Leon Wiesenfeld describes as a virulent hatred of the Orthodox, whom, “if he had the power, he would have exiled … to Siberia, as long as not to have them in Cleveland.”67

The Rabbinic Confrontation in New York, November 1927

Much of the attention paid to the JC case outside of Cleveland hinged on an event that occurred not in Cleveland, but in New York City at the beginning of November 1927. In preparation for the trial, depositions were taken from a series of Orthodox rabbis and leaders in connection with the case. These men directly confronted not merely Goldman’s lawyer but Goldman personally, who was, “given all the latitude he wanted in conducting examinations” and apparently conducted the cross examination himself.68
Giving depositions in support of the suit against Goldman and JC were seven Orthodox rabbis. They included Eliezer Silver, Bernard Revel, Gedaliah Bublick, Herbert Goldstein, Moses Sebulun Margolies, Bernard Drachman, and Leo Jung. As a group they included both the predominantly Yiddish-speaking, European-trained Orthodox rabbinate, organized in the Agudas HaRabonim, and the nascent English-speaking “Modern Orthodox” rabbinate. The first group included Rabbis Silver and Margolies as prominent members, and the latter was composed of Rabbis Goldstein, president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America; Jung, whose Jewish Center in Manhattan was a flagship institution of acculturated Orthodoxy; Drachman, former faculty member of JTS; and Revel, head of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, which was the predominant institution for the training of American Orthodox rabbis. Also included was Gedaliah Bublick, editor of Tageblatt, the New York Yiddish daily that catered to an Orthodox readership.

Rabbis favorable to the defendant did not come to give depositions, though lawyer R. Gomborow asserted that, “We have asked members of the JTS faculty to come and testify, but they declined.” Goldman and his lawyer were not alone, however. Gomborow further asserts that at Goldman’s side sat his brother-in-law, Mr. Lefkowitz, a Brooklyn attorney; Rabbi Elias Solomon, president of the United Synagogue of America; Rabbi Louis Finkelstein of JTS; Rabbi Jacob Kohn; and “several other Conservative rabbis.” Though none of the pro-Goldman rabbis spoke for the record, they apparently did intervene. For example, during the cross-examination of Jung, Goldman tried to refute the charge that he had excluded Orthodox rabbis from his JC Forum by stating that no rabbis spoke at the forum. However, Finkelstein presumably corrected him, for Goldman then stated: “I wish to make a correction. I have just been reminded that at one of the Forums Doctor Louis Finkelstein spoke.”

The Plaintiffs’ Issues

The rabbinical depositions were meant to bolster the Orthodox case, and the deponents certainly did their best to fulfill expectations. Jung was first. The first substantive question asked him was, “What do you
say is Orthodox Judaism?” Over Goldman’s objection, Jung replied that Orthodox Judaism was “based upon faith in the divine origin of the Torah and loyalty to din Torah as expressed in Talmud, Codes, and responsa.” He defined Reform Judaism, to the contrary, as not recognizing the divine origin of the law or its binding force and “represents a definite break with Jewish tradition and faith.” There were no really significant additions by the others to this definition.

When Jung was asked concerning Conservative Judaism he stated that it constituted a form of moderate Reform distinguished by an attitude of reasonable fidelity toward Jewish law but with a tendency toward compromise. He saw the salient differences of Conservative Judaism with Orthodoxy to be the sitting of men and women together and, less often, organs and mixed choirs. Drachman reiterated the identification of Conservative Judaism as one variety of Reform. He added that Conservatism was “the same as Reform in its principles but it has not carried out the logical conclusions of them to the same degree.” According to Drachman, while Conservative Jews have not necessarily rejected divine revelation, they did feel they had the right to modify “those things which are … or seem to be of Rabbinical origin,” and thus they shortened the ritual in a way contrary of Orthodox law. Drachman added that “Reform also claims the right to interpret Judaism according to its own view.” Goldstein in his deposition went somewhat further and was of the opinion that Conservative Judaism “in practice does not believe in the revealed religion.” For Bublick, Conservative Judaism was “Reform from beginning to end … sometimes it maintains it is Orthodoxy, whereas it is Reformed.” Revel felt that while he did not think that the Conservative Jews had one mode of worship or set of customs, “they arrogate to themselves the right to make changes and to modify rules and customs in accordance with time and place.” Silver thought of Conservative Judaism as “the first step of Reform.”

Jung did not see any difference between traditional and Orthodox Judaism. Bublick had a highly interesting take on traditional Judaism, much of which is crossed out in the transcript as follows:

Traditional Judaism is a new term that is not clear. It was never used until a few years ago. It can mean everything, it can mean nothing. To
me Traditional Judaism as to any Orthodox Jew, *is only one kind of traditional means Judaism—that is Orthodox Judaism, Judaism of tradition, but as I understand, there are some who deviate from Orthodoxy and they choose to call their kind under the name of Traditional Judaism—because it gives them a clear field to deviate from Orthodox Judaism, and still maintain that they are some kind of Orthodox.

The United Synagogue was an institution that all the deponents agreed was ambiguous in its ideology. For Jung, it was composed of some Orthodox synagogues along with a majority of congregations that permitted the moderate reforms he associated with Conservatism. Drachman concurred that it “represents the conservative and Orthodox views to a certain extent.” Bublick stated that it contained Conservative congregations “unless there are some Orthodox congregations … that didn’t learn yet the difference between Conservative and Orthodox Judaism.” For Silver, the United Synagogue was “partly Orthodox by mistake.”

One of the major points of the deponents was the nonlegitimacy of JTS with respect to Orthodoxy. Thus, Jung declared that JTS was “definitely not known as Orthodox,” and he did not believe that its graduates received formal rabbinic ordination (*semikha*). Drachman, who had been on the faculty of JTS in its earlier years, differentiated between the JTS of Sabato Morais, which was “strictly Orthodox,” and the later JTS. Goldstein, who was a 1914 graduate of JTS, stated that the seminary recommended its men to Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations alike, and condemned JTS faculty and students for ritual infractions such as not washing and saying the blessings before meals and not reciting the benediction after dining.

Mordecai Kaplan, a JTS faculty member who had publicly and ostentatiously abandoned Orthodoxy, was characterized by Drachman as “a scholar and an able man in many ways” who was nonetheless “fundamentally unorthodox, anti-religious.” Bublick thought Kaplan was “now the exponent of conservative Judaism, anti-Orthodox in every respect.” Margolies added an ironic comment on his experience with Kaplan as his former assistant rabbi: “He was at one time junior rabbi of my congregation—a junior rabbi gives sermons, but to decide questions they have senior rabbis.”
Goldman’s Cross-examination

Goldman had a strategy for his cross-examination, which was closely related to the strategy he took in his formal response to the charges against him. He did not appear interested in those rabbis he considered closest to Eastern European Orthodoxy and thus conducted no cross-examination of Margolies, Revel, or Silver. He concentrated his questions largely on those Orthodox rabbis with “modern” congregations. His goal was to show that they were no more “Orthodox” than he was, because all of them deviated from the strict rules of Orthodox halakhah. Thus, one of the key points he was anxious to make was to contextualize his own actions as rabbi with what he contended was the widespread violation of “Karo’s Code” (Shulhan Arukh) by congregations that claimed to be Orthodox. Thus, in his cross-examination of Jung, Goldman pointed out that Jung’s synagogue, the Jewish Center in New York, had an elevator that operated on the Sabbath. Jung admitted that this was so but countered that in the Orthodox rabbinical opinions he had sought, operating the elevator with a gentile operator was not contrary to halakhah.

Goldman also attempted to get Jung to admit that Orthodox halakhah “prohibits the reading of all literature which we would include in the category of belles lettres.” Jung in his response sought to limit this ban to “the reading of any literature that harps on ‘sex stuff’.”

Goldman raised the issue of the Shulhan Arukh’s prohibition of prayer in the presence of women with uncovered heads and dressed in décolleté fashions. He asked Jung: “Is it not true that in many Orthodox synagogues women come so dressed?” Jung was finally compelled to answer this question by admitting that, “Rabbis have no power to enforce Jewish law.” However, he added: “In my own [congregation] they would frown upon any woman who comes to a Jewish ceremony not properly dressed. It has happened more than once that a lady was asked to leave because not properly dressed.”

With Drachman, Goldman explored the widely practiced custom of shaving, which many members of Orthodox synagogues practiced despite its being contrary to halakhah. This forced Drachman to attempt to differentiate between “Orthodox” and “religious” where “Orthodoxy is an expression of a view concerning a certain concept of Jewish
authority,” and “religious” is the actual practice: “A man who wishes to be Orthodox in principle and religious in practice will not shave. While I uphold the principle of the authority of Jewish law, I am not going to interfere with people in their private affairs.”

Goldman queried Drachman on the prevalence of violators of the Sabbath being members of Orthodox congregations, to which Drachman replied: “I am acquainted with a large number of members who personally are not observant yet they would not permit the Orthodox rules and practices [of the synagogue] to be touched.”

Goldman’s cross-examination of Drachman also explored the issue of men and women shaking hands, which Drachman admitted to be prohibited by halakhah but added: “Other principles, however, make that [prohibition] a little less rigid and establish as good conduct the relations between men and women as they are customarily observed in various countries.” Goldman zeroed in on the key issue of mixed seating in the synagogue and asked where specifically was a prohibition of mixed seating as opposed to “social intercourse [between men and women] in general” to be found in halakhah. Jung responded that while “there has been throughout Jewish history the understanding and practice that men and women do not sit together at worship,” he was not prepared to comment on the question of the specific prohibition and finally admitted: “I will have to look it up. Not prepared to answer this.”

Goldman further queried Jung on the prevalence of mixed social dancing at Orthodox synagogue functions, the halakhic prohibition of which historian Jeffrey Gurock indicates was “widely honored in the abuse” in this era.79 Pressed on this issue, Jung admitted:

I would rather not see it—there is no definite law prohibiting dancing. It seems to me not in accord with Jewish practice. It is one of those cases where the rabbi cannot enforce his view.

Goldman concluded this line of questioning with this statement, which received an objection but not an answer from Jung: that the Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim 529:4 prohibits mingling of men and women on any occasion of social amusement.

In his cross-examination of Drachman, Goldman also focussed on the issue of rabbinic authority and got Drachman to admit that there

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was no person or group of rabbis in the United States that the Jews of the country recognize as a general authority. As Drachman put it: “The conditions in America are such that there is no official status of that kind,” though he added that “there is such a thing as personal recognition and recognition of organizations.” Drachman further explained:

We live in countries where rigid conformity is not possible. The Western Rabbi has to exercise good judgement. That does not mean that the law is abrogated but we must consider, in particular cases, whether it is better to carry it out or to deviate from it. People who think that because of this Orthodox Judaism is not in force do not appreciate its true spirit and are seeking an excuse for actually overthrowing it.

What the situation ultimately meant to Drachman is that one needs to differentiate between Judaic practice within the synagogue and outside it. Whereas it might be possible and even necessary to compromise in other areas of life, such compromises “certainly may not be extended to the synagogue.”

Goldman also brought up an issue dividing Orthodox rabbis—that is, whether the separate women’s seating in the synagogue, often in a balcony, had to be curtained off as well. Drachman admitted that there was indeed a difference in interpretation among Orthodox rabbis on that issue.

Goldman also responded to a charge that he had stated from the JC pulpit “that the story of the flood as given in the Pentateuch is a myth and that no boy of 12 years of age would believe it.” Goldman thus asked Bublick: “What is your basis for assuming that a Conservative Rabbi denied Torah min Hashomayim[?],” (divine origin of the Torah). Bublick answered that while “Conservative Judaism has no books or constitution…. I know that here and there rabbis say there is no Torah or Jewish law including yourself.” It is at that point that Goldman asked Bublick the most iconic question of the entire session, “Do you believe that Aton Balaam [Balaam’s ass] spoke?” Goldman asked a follow-up question: “Do you think there is no difference from the traditional point of view between the story of the flood and the story of Aton Balaam?” Bublick could only answer: “I say that a Rabbi who denies from the pulpit the story of the flood is reformed or conservative.”
A Jewish “Monkey Trial”

The story of the rabbinic depositions almost immediately was leaked to the press, which knew well how to sensationalize the story. The headline of an article in the Tog of 3 November 1927 says it all: “Balaam’s Ass, the Flood, and the question can a rabbi kiss a bride under the Wedding Canopy discussed in a hearing against Rabbi Solomon Goldman of Cleveland.” Connections were inevitably and widely made between this court case and the “Monkey Trial” of 1925, which was portrayed as a confrontation between science/progress and religion/traditionalism—to the decided detriment of the latter. Thus, an English language Jewish newspaper on 9 December 1927 spoke of:

another Monkey Trial to take place in Cleveland before a non-Jewish tribunal to determine whether a certain congregation of that city has violated the fundamentals of Orthodoxy … the old stand-patters say you are wrong, dear Rabbi, you have no right or authority to kiss the bride … men and women should not sit together in a truly Orthodox synagogue.

Katz could only bemoan the press coverage in general to Goldstein: “All so called facts which the other side … state in the press are downright falsehoods.” Katz asserted that his opponents had “spread the falsehood in various papers that we were going to have a ‘monkey trial’ when it is they who introduced the religious issue.”

A Clearer Drawing of the Battle Lines?

The JC case and the wide publicity it received ultimately served to more clearly demarcate the then-often-fuzzy line between “Orthodox” and “Conservative” in North American Judaism. This outcome was acutely sensed by Mordecai Kaplan in 1927, and it reinforced his feeling that the time had come to definitely sever ties with Orthodoxy. As he put it:

Thanks to the aggressiveness of Jewish fundamentalists those who belong to the large body of adjectiveless Jews are now realizing their mistake…. They are being forced to make their position clear. They must take a definite stand with regard to the traditional attitude toward the Torah. They must formulate the principle or the principles they intend
to follow in the changes which they want to introduce into their ceremonial practices as Jews. The bootlegging of innovations will have to be stopped. In other words, they will have to accept the logical and moral consequences that follow from being a distinct party in Judaism…. Both the orthodox and the Reformists are gradually forcing us to assume the name Conservative.84

Kaplan reiterated this conviction in his journal on 22 July 1929. Reacting to the first appellate court decision that upheld the Orthodox complaint, he stated:

I am very happy that the decision of the court made it clear that Conservatism cannot hide under the skirt of Orthodoxy. Perhaps this decision will have the effect of ultimately breaking up that unnatural alliance between reactionism and progressivism which has paralyzed the Rabbinical Assembly and placed it in a position where it can do absolutely nothing of any account.85

For the Orthodox leadership in Cleveland itself, the JC affair had taught it a somewhat different but no less cogent lesson: that of the weakness of Orthodoxy in its confrontation with its rivals. In 1945, contemplating the impending move of Cleveland’s Orthodox synagogues from East 105th Street to Cleveland Heights, Rabbi Israel Porath advised his readers that existing synagogues must combine to create fewer but larger synagogues in the new area. However, he further admonished:

I do not want to advise that we should contemplate a synagogue that is too large and powerful because the experience of the Jewish Center demonstrated that Orthodoxy is not strong enough to protect its interests in time of crisis.86

The “Jewish Monkey Trial” certainly did not in and of itself cause the definitive split between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. It was, however, one of the more important milestones in that process, and its examination allows us to see with greater clarity the fault lines in American Judaism as they were beginning to become more apparent in the early twentieth century.
Ira Robinson is chair in Canadian Jewish studies and director of the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. His latest book is A History of Antisemitism in Canada (2015).

Notes


6 On the history of the Jews of Cleveland, see Lloyd Gartner, History of the Jews of Cleveland (Cleveland: Western Reserve Historical Society and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978). Cf. also Sidney Z. Vincent and Judah Rubenstein, Merging


9 One of the key issues facing motivated Orthodox Jews was finding jobs that did not involve working on the Sabbath. Organizations such as Cleveland’s “Jewish Sabbath Association” were founded to help. Brudno’s cigar factory, which was owned by an Orthodox Jew and which did not require work on Sabbaths and holidays, thus attracted, among others, “a few young men who were ordained rabbis and some ‘gentee’ young men who in the old country had never done a lick of work.” These Orthodox men, “dignified, pious Jews with handsome beards,” in Joseph Morgenstern’s description, sat at one table and discussed Torah. This was a discussion in which Brudno, the owner, would “often’ take part. Brudno is described by Rose Pastor as “a picturesque patriarch with his long black beard and his tall black skull-cap…. In this godless America he would give them plenty of work in a shop where the Sabbath was kept holy. It was his strength, for they would work in no shop where the Sabbath was not kept holy.” Joseph Morgenstern, I Have Considered My Days (New York: Ykuf, 1964), 113–114; Wertheim and Bennett, eds., Remembering: Cleveland’s Jewish Voices, 87.

10 Gartner, History of the Jews of Cleveland, 133, 177.


12 Gartner, History of the Jews of Cleveland, 168–169.


16 Gartner, History of the Jews of Cleveland, 172.
18 *Jewish World*, 25 July 1913, 4.
20 For a picture of Margolies with the Anshe Emeth confirmation class of 1913, see Vincent and Rubenstein, *Merging Traditions*, 73. A program from the Oheb Zedek confirmation program of 1937 is preserved in the Abraham A. Katz Archive, Cleveland Heights, Ohio (hereafter AAKA). For confirmation ceremonies and late Friday night services in an Orthodox synagogue in Columbus, Ohio, see Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism*, 32.
21 On the tensions between American “Talmud Torahs” and Orthodoxy, see Bublick, *Der sakhakl in amerikaner yidntum*, 123ff.
23 Jacob Heller to Abraham Katz, 26 Elul 5689, 1 October 1929, 2, AAKA.
26 Samuel Benjamin to Abraham Katz, n.d. (marked received 1 December 1927), AAKA.
28 Abraham Katz to Herbert Goldstein, 27 April 1925, AAKA.
29 Jacob D. Goldman, letter to editor, *Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 22 December 1927, AAKA.
30 His father, Joseph Katz, who died in 1925 at age 75, was described in an obituary as immigrating to Cleveland in 1881 from Lithuania, having studied in “various European yeshivot.” He was described as “a Talmudist of note and a rigid adherent of Talmudical Judaism.” In the Orthodox community of Cleveland, “there was not a movement … pertaining to traditional Judaism and learning for the past forty years in which … [he] was not one of the leading workers or advisors.” “Joseph Katz Dies in Palestine,” undated clipping in AAKA.
31 Abraham A. Katz, draft speech to the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, p. 7, AAKA.
32 Abraham Katz to Elias Solomon, 15 September 1925, AAKA.
33 Abraham Katz to Leon Spitz, 3 August 1925, AAKA.
34 Abraham Katz to Goldstein, 17 May 1927, AAKA.

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35 Jacob D. Goldman, letter to editor, *Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 22 December 1927, AAKA.

36 Jacob Heller to Abraham Katz, 26 Elul 5689 (1 October 1929), 2, AAKA.

37 Jewish Center board of directors minutes, AAKA.

38 Abraham Katz to Leon Spitz, 3 August 1925, AAKA.

39 Samuel J. Bialosky, “The Cleveland Jewish Center,” clipping dated 23 December 1927, AAKA.

40 Goldman was vice-chair of the committee in charge of English press relations to greet a delegation of distinguished Orthodox rabbis, including Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who visited Cleveland in 1924. Committee stationery preserved in AAKA.


42 Wiesenfeld, *Jewish Life in Cleveland*, 67–68; this attempt to found a rival newspaper was predictably heavily disparaged in *Jewish World*. See *Jewish World*, 13 October 1922, AAKA.

43 Poster preserved in AAKA.

44 Abraham A. Katz, draft of speech to the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, p. 6, AAKA.

45 Clipping preserved in AAKA.

46 Samuel J. Bialosky, “The Cleveland Jewish Center,” 23 December 1927, AAKA.

47 Copy of the summons, dated 13 Adar 5685 (9 March 1925), is in AAKA.

48 Goldman’s reply, “Meshiv ke-Halakha,” was published in *Jewish World*, 21 August 1925, 8.

49 Agudas HaRabonim to Committee of 100, 28 Adar 5685 (24 March 1925), AAKA.

50 Abraham Katz to Herbert Goldstein, 27 April 1925, AAKA.

51 Ira Robinson, *Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), vol. 2, 113–114. Katz recalled what Adler said to him: “Such questions are not voted on by majorities…. I beg of you, if you have the Jewish Theological Seminary at heart, do not bring men and women together for services at least during the Passover.” Draft speech to the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 4, AAKA.

52 Cf. R G[omborow], letter to the editor of the *Jewish Times* (Baltimore), 30 November 1927, AAKA.

53 Committee of One Hundred to Members Who signed Protest Cards, 7 April 1925, AAKA.

54 Abraham Katz to Leon Spitz, 3 August 1925, AAKA.
55 M.D. Shanman, JC president, to S. Weinzimmer, 19 April 1925; G.L. Silberman, JC secretary, to E. Gerson, 23 April 1925; S. Bialosky, JC acting president, to S. Weinzimmer, 4 April 1926, AAKA.

56 Yiddish handbill of the administrative committee representing the Committee of 100, AAKA.

57 Abraham Katz to Herbert Goldstein, 19 October 1925, marked “draft,” AAKA.

58 Amended plaintiffs’ petition, filed in May 1926, AAKA.


65 The congregation is still a major Conservative congregation in Cleveland, now known as the Park Synagogue. http://www.parksynagogue.org/ (accessed 28 April 2015).

66 Weinstein, Solomon Goldman, 17.

67 Wiesenfeld, Jewish Life in Cleveland, 73–74.

68 R G[omborow], letter to the editor of the Jewish Times (Baltimore), 30 November 1927, AAKA.


72 On Jung, see Maxine Jacobson, Modern Orthodoxy in American Judaism: The Era of Rabbi Leo Jung (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016). Originally there were more witnesses considered for the depositions. Beside the men whose testimony has been preserved, we have the names of Rabbi Selzer of the Agudas HaRabonim, Dr. I.L. Bril, Mr. Sobel, Mr.
Lipkowitz, Mr. Scheinberg and Captain Naftali Taylor Phillips of New York’s Shearith Israel. The transcripts of the depositions are in AAKA.


75 R. G[omborow], letter to the editor of the Jewish Times (Baltimore), 30 November 1927, AAKA.

76 A motion was made by the defendant to exclude this answer.


78 This decision was rendered by Rabbi Moses Margolies. Ferziger, Beyond Sectarianism, 45.

79 Gurock, Orthodox Jews in America, 8.


81 “Another Monkey Trial—This Time It’s Jewish,” 9 December 1927, clipping in AAKA.

82 Abraham Katz to Herbert Goldstein, 3 January 1928, AAKA.

83 Abraham Katz to Herbert Goldstein, 8 August 1929, AAKA.

84 Cited from the Society for the Advancement of Judaism Review by I.L. Bril, “In the News,” Tageblatt [English section], 6 December 1927, AAKA.


Book Reviews


The period between the end of the War of 1812 and the drafting of the first Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 witnessed the expansion and transformation of synagogue life in the United States. While Philadelphia was the only city with two synagogues—or one-third of all synagogues in the United States—by the end of the eighteenth century, multiple synagogue communities in larger cities as well as the proliferation of solo synagogues in smaller communities became the new norm in the decades immediately prior to the Civil War. By 1860, there were approximately two hundred American synagogues; of these, one was East European, two were Sephardic, six were Reform or Reform-leaning, and the rest were various shades of German traditional. These synagogues were overwhelmingly serviced by minimally qualified religious functionaries, a handful of ordained rabbis of whom only a few had studied at European universities, and several energetic leaders with limited credentials but unwavering enthusiasm for their own personal brands of Judaism.

After the Civil War, the number of American Jews rose again, from 150,000 to 250,000. During this period, Reform Judaism grew exponentially and crystallized into a national denomination but remained a minority religious movement in the American Jewish community. The time between the Civil War and the first spike in East European Jewish immigration saw the first generation of the great American cathedral-sized synagogues. These impressive temples required capable service leaders and impressive rabbinic preachers—fine jewels, so to speak, like the stones on the breastplate of Ancient Israel’s High Priest. A new breed of rabbi, Eleff points out, were the emeralds and rubies of Gilded Age American Judaism.
In his well-written and heavily researched book, *Who Rules the Synagogue?*, Zev Eleff explores the rise of this new class of Jewish clergy in the United States—from the 1816 death of Gershom M. Seixas, American Judaism’s first notable religious leader, to the promulgation of the controversial radical Reform Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. During the span of these 69 years, Eleff argues, the emerging American rabbinate or, more accurately, Jewish clergy cohort, effectively challenged the prevailing trusteeism of the American synagogue and paradoxically created an American Jewish clericalism. Ironically, they did so just as the place of the synagogue weakened among American Jews. As in Protestant American churches, by the end of the nineteenth century many of America’s foremost synagogues increasingly sought so-called “princes of the pulpits” to represent and lead them into the Gilded Age.

In *Who Rules the Synagogue?* Eleff retells and refines the story of synagogue governance based on his study of select and often previously untapped primary sources. These texts richly illuminate the careers of several of the major religious figures in the history of nineteenth-century American Judaism. In particular, Eleff vigorously seeks to reframe the narrative of the synagogue in terms of the religious authority of America’s leading klay kodesh (Hebrew for “instruments of holiness”). The deficiencies in the religious training of both lay and clergy synagogue leadership, the complex role of economic class in synagogue governance, and long-term religious laxity among American Jews are all well-known realities of nineteenth-century Jewish religious life. But in *Who Rules the Synagogue?* Eleff recontextualizes them as the preexisting conditions that preceded the rise of an unprecedented and powerful American rabbinate.

Historiographically, Eleff consciously and accurately places himself between Moshe Davis’s transplantation Germany-to-America thesis and Leon Jick’s counter bottom-up adaptation thesis by arguing that the emerging American rabbinate was a mediating agency in the history of American Judaism. Less successfully, Eleff argues that the new doctor-rabbi tradition led to American Jewish clericalism, but he does so without fully referencing the shift in the basis of rabbinic authority from being founded in traditional ordination and talmudic study to university-based “science.” On the other hand, Eleff does a good job in
nuancing Jonathan D. Sarna’s game-changing “awakening” theory by demonstrating that the quickening of Jewish life in late nineteenth century included the general weakening of the American synagogue coupled with a rise in rabbinic authority, at least in the major congregations.

While Eleff provides new and important insights into the history of Jewish clergy in America, it is likely that organized, religious Judaism consistently was less than vigorous from the beginning of Jewish settlement in North America in the seventeenth century until recently, except among the most Orthodox Jews in America today. Jacob Rader Marcus, doyen of the field of America Jewish history, once described colonial Judaism as an “orthodoxy of salutary neglect.” Sadly, it may be an adequate label for the rest of the story as well. As Pew and other current surveys continue to indicate, little has changed over the centuries, and the synagogue remains the religious institution American Jews choose not to attend.

Furthermore, unlike the prevailing pattern among American Christians of clergy-founded churches, Jewish lay leaders overwhelmingly have been the creators of America’s synagogues. Typically, lay leaders employed various religious functionaries to lead services for them and eventually—and often begrudgingly—preach to them. Moreover, properly ordained rabbis did not even settle in the United States until the 1840s. Meanwhile, a proto-American rabbinate began to develop, particularly in the wake of the efforts of Isaac Leeser, Isaac M. Wise, and others. These “emergent” rabbis quickly came into conflict with synagogue officers and trustees who resisted any contraction of their well-established hegemony in the congregationalist polity of the American synagogue.

Furthermore, the emergence of a small coterie of princes of the pulpit in the closing decades of the nineteenth century is not necessarily an indication that lay leaders of the American synagogue were not still firmly in control of their congregations. The professionalization of the upper reaches of the American rabbinate late in the nineteenth century certainly says a great deal about profound social and cultural changes in American Judaism. Yet the emerging capacity of individual rabbis to write their own prayer books or self-chosen groups of rabbis to issue official statements after 1869 may or may not have anything to do with genuine executive rabbinic power in synagogue board rooms.
In *Who Rules the Synagogue?* Eleff successfully brings us to the edge of a still deeper set of issues faced by American Jews past and present. First, what has been the impact of the separation of church and state on the American synagogue with respect to religious authority within the synagogue? Curiously, the lack of rabbis in the colonial period allowed for lay hegemony in the early American *kehillot*. Is it possible “separation” then actually helped open a zone of influence for subsequent American Jewish clergy while at the same time limiting that influence? In this regard, Eleff’s work could have also been improved by a discussion of the ultimate supremacy of American secular law over Jewish law as articulated in Jerald Auerbach’s challenging 1990 book.

Second, to what extent does “church” polity play a role in the history of American Judaism? The work of Daniel Elazar is particularly important in this regard. In Eleff’s study of synagogue governance he references but does not apply a nuanced understanding of Christian polities, including clergy-centered episcopal traditions, the different shades of congregationalist systems both with and without clergy, and presbyter polities with power shared by the clergy and lay groups. Particularly important in this regard is the role of the synagogue constitution or bylaws, which codified lay power as established during the colonial period and then were rewritten in Americanistic terms following the ratification of the U.S. Constitution and, still later, reinforced by such American quasi-legal parliamentary practices as defined in *Robert’s Rules of Order*.

A third area indicated by Eleff but left largely unexplored is the sociology of synagogue trusteeism. Who are the officers and the trustees of American synagogues? How does class work, and is there a relationship between class and religious ideology? Why is the top economic tier of American Jewish society largely absent from synagogue governance and what is its relationship to the ruling lay oligarchies of the synagogue? In many ways, like those before him, Eleff mostly tells only half of the story of the American synagogue—that dealing with the clergy. Ironically, in an era of increasingly sophisticated social history, the socio-cultural dimension of “Jews in the pews” and “Jews in the board rooms” largely remains unexplored by historians of Judaism in America.
While women did not play a formal role in synagogue governance in the nineteenth century, female congregants such as Rebecca Gratz were instrumental in developing the Hebrew Sunday school, establishing Jewish women’s organizations, and introducing sermons into the American synagogue. Gender, then, also figures in the story of who rules the American synagogue of the nineteenth century. As with America’s churches, synagogues were heavily populated by women who, despite a lack of official roles as synagogue leaders, still helped shape the synagogue and the rabbinate of their time and place.

Finally, it is important to point out that Eleff’s book appears at a critical moment in Jewish and religious history: when communities firmly anchored in the authority of religious law such as sharia and halakhah are now in ascendance, and while religious polities based on trusteeism are largely declining. In a certain sense, then, Eleff is offering a critically important retrospective on a now-failing system of religious governance but without indicating the dangers of enhanced clergy authority or the possibilities of diminished or no religious authority at all. Ultimately, *Who Rules the Synagogue?* is itself an important prelude to an urgent conversation Eleff and others could inform with their erudition and analytical skills about the future of synagogue governance in America. Hopefully, more scholarship will also round out Eleff’s history of nineteenth-century American rabbis and illuminate more of the still largely unexplored interior landscape of the American synagogue, its many modes of leadership, and its complex systems of self-governance.

*Lance J. Sussman, Ph.D, is senior rabbi of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel and visiting professor of Jewish history at Gratz College, both in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Sussman is also a member of the Executive/Advisory Council of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. Currently, he is working on a documentary on the history of the Jewish community of Philadelphia.*

With *The Jews of Harlem*, Jeffrey S. Gurock has written a thoughtful and comprehensive history of Jewish Harlem. This book, mobilizing a wide array of historical evidence, surveys the religious, political, cultural, and economic history of Jews in this New York City neighborhood so heavily identified with the black experience in America. *The Jews of Harlem* treks novel terrain in the urban history of American Jews by underlining just how fertile the northern reaches of Manhattan proved to be for Jewish life, at least for the first half of the twentieth century. As this book makes clear, Harlem is an urban hub at the center of two historic Diasporas—the African Diaspora of migrants from the U.S. South and the Caribbean, and the Jewish Diaspora of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. While Gurock’s history certainly contributes to scholarship of the latter, perhaps the largest fault of *The Jews of Harlem* is the relatively short shrift given to the black settlement and development of Harlem, and what that meant for Jews who, consciously or not, weaved their way into the racial history of modern America’s black mecca. Nevertheless, *The Jews of Harlem* points to important historiographic questions that scholars across disciplines ought to explore further.

*The Jews of Harlem* will demand that scholars place Harlem more centrally in future histories of Jewish New York. As Gurock demonstrates, Harlem has lived unfairly in the historiographic shadow of what we now call the “Lower East Side” of Manhattan. In fact, Jewish Harlem of the early twentieth century was a “sibling community” to the East Side, one that also embodied the complexities of Jewish immigration to New York prior to 1924. As Jewish newcomers chain-migrated from the East Side to Harlem over the 1910s and 1920s, the neighborhoods complemented and transformed each other. This, in turn, strengthened the growing number of Jewish institutions as immigrants and their children moved into and throughout New York.

Like Jews throughout New York’s history, Harlem Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century struggled to maintain their institutions as internal divisions and population mobility challenged the
vitality of Jewish organizational life. In the realm of religious practice, Gurock artfully tells the story of several fledgling Harlem synagogues, perhaps most memorably Hand-in-Hand, that strained to maintain active congregations. But the struggles of synagogues such as Hand-in-Hand reflected the unfolding prospects opening for its leaders and members as they moved into Harlem but then left for more desirable parts of New York. The dynamism of religion in Harlem mirrored the economic opportunities available to Jews willing to relocate. Small shop owners and skilled workers found an untapped urban frontier in northern Manhattan, relying on the recently constructed mass transit lines built in the first decades of the twentieth century that linked the various parts of Gotham. Gurock shows that the character of Harlem differed from other Jewish outposts because it lacked local garment manufacturing. But this then kept Harlem’s Jews in contact with their former neighbors and friends as they commuted daily to immigrant Jewish enclaves for work in their newly interconnected metropolis. Politically, Harlem proved just as much a hotbed of radicalism and fervent debate as any of her “sibling communities.” With Morris Hillquit, Meyer London, and other notable “Yiddish socialists” vying for power, and rent and kosher meat boycotts occupying the neighborhood’s streets, Harlem helped serve as a crucial base for the growth of the Jewish labor movement. Gurock argues that these various facets of Jewish life thrived until roughly 1930 as new urban and social pressures pushed, but mainly pulled, Jews away from Harlem, an urban symbol they did much to develop.

For certain, Gurock is interested, and to a measure succeeds, in conveying the unique position of Harlem’s Jews who lived in the heart of black America. With the African American and nonwhite population surging after Harlem’s Jewish heyday in the 1920s, the shrinking number of Jewish denizens of the area had to negotiate the norms of American racism that were very much alive even in polyglot and immigrant New York. Gurock competently illustrates this tension as both an opportunity and a liability for Harlem’s Jews, especially as it related to Jewish engagement with black culture. Jews thrived in black Harlem’s interwar arts and music scene, perhaps best exemplified by musician George Gershwin. “It was in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s that uncommon confluence of musical traditions came together within the mind
and ear of the great musical talents of [Gershwin’s] time,” Gurock writes, as Jews adapted the sights and sounds of black Harlem into national art forms. Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher, the Jewish owners of the Apollo Theater, literally provided the stage for countless black performers to launch their careers in interwar Harlem. What’s more, Schiffman and Brecher challenged the segregationist policies prevailing in New York’s public entertainment. In Gurock’s telling, the Jews of Harlem served as sort of cultural intermediaries who interpreted the black culture of Harlem and relayed it to American society at large. But Gurock is also thoughtful in considering whether the Jewish appropriation of black culture amounted to collaboration or exploitation, with evidence suggesting some mixture of both. While Jewish involvement in Harlem’s black culture led to impressive intergroup artistic networks, tensions lay just under the surface. This was perhaps best demonstrated during the 1969 controversy surrounding the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Harlem on My Mind” Exhibit, when a Jewish museum curator, Allon Schoener, produced a condescending portrayal of black life in Harlem that spurred negative reactions in New York’s African American community. Throughout all these instances, Jews played noteworthy roles in dealing with Harlem’s cultural and racial issues, as well as in shaping American society’s perception of Harlem as a definitively black space in urban America.

However, scholars of African American history may find The Jews of Harlem of limited utility. A sustained presentation of African American history arrives only two-thirds of the way into the book. While Gurock does convey that Harlem in some sense molded black-Jewish encounters in the postwar period, the exact quality of that influence is a bit uncertain. A more thorough discussion of black history in New York would have been helpful. However, a large portion of Gurock’s narration of the African American experience in Harlem comes during the chapter on Harlem’s “nadir,” as the neighborhood became mired in economic decline and the Jewish population largely left. The major point Gurock makes about this moment is that, with Jews now gone, Jewish Harlem avoided the overt antisemitism of racial schisms in Brooklyn and elsewhere because—well—there really were not that many Jews in Harlem by the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, the Harlem riots of 1964 lacked
any potent antisemitic tinge. The collapse of Harlem, Gurock argues, lasted thirty years, during which there is very little Jewish-black interaction to speak of. Going their separate ways, New York’s Jews enjoyed an era of noncrisis, while nonwhite New Yorkers sank ever deeper into the nadir of crime and poverty. Even with a dearth of Jews on the scene, Gurock still could have assessed the ways black and brown denizens of Harlem thought of their neighborhood’s historic Jewish presence, or what impact Harlem’s Jewish legacy played for ordinary non-Jews still living there. To answer these questions, Gurock would have had to take the focus periodically off entirely Jewish narratives to ones involving particularly African American or Latino experiences.

This is not to say Gurock shies away from difficult historical issues. Indeed, he soberly details the ways Jews assisted Harlem’s postwar decline, most notably the Jewish real estate operators who discriminated against African American tenants or the Jewish employers who exploited black and female domestic workers by employing them in Harlem’s “slave markets.” Gurock provides a thoughtful discussion of Harlem’s African American Jews, who fit comfortably among neither white, European-descended Jews nor the African American Christian social circles that held sway in Harlem. But again, certain corners of Gurock’s narrative merited lengthier discussion. Certainly one of these areas was Jewish criminality in Harlem. Jewish gangsters do make an appearance, but a further examination of Jewish crime would have ameliorated a tendency in this and other books on New York City’s history that conflate race and crime while casting European immigrants and their children as innately non-dangerous and middle class. The contemporary Lower East Side was riddled with gangs and random street violence, though no historians portray the early-twentieth-century East Side of Manhattan as experiencing a nadir, whether Jewish or otherwise. The author’s overlooking of Jewish crime is strange, given that Gurock informs the reader that one of his own relatives from Harlem worked as a bootlegger for Waxey Gordon. Indeed, a further discussion of Jewish gangsters such as Gordon or Arthur Flegenheimer—widely known as “Dutch Schultz”—who managed some of the largest criminal enterprises in New York could have bolstered the link between Harlem’s Jewish heyday and black life during Harlem’s nadir.
This is all to reiterate that with *The Jews of Harlem*, Gurock has opened new avenues of exploration in American Jewish and American urban history for scholars to pick up and carry forward. In the final chapter, on revival, Gurock explores the relationship between Jews in New York and the gentrified urban remodeling of Gotham in the past several decades. This process has brought Jews back to Harlem and, yet again, to their struggle to rebuild and maintain Jewish institutions. With affordable housing and racial tensions still hot-button issues in New York, the place of Jews in a gentrifying Harlem means this history is far from over. But, as Gurock shows, the Jews of a transforming Harlem—which, for the first time in six decades, is not represented in Congress by an African American—are part of an over-century-long history of Jewish presence in the neighborhood. That history continues into the twenty-first century, though the Harlem of the future may be very different from the one that inspired George Gershwin to create art and music symbolizing Jewish life in the heart of black America.

*Aaron Welt is a doctoral candidate in the history department of New York University. He is currently completing his dissertation, “The Shtarkers of Progressive Era New York: Crime, Labor, and Capitalism in an Age of Mass Migration, 1890–1930.”*


The memoirs of Reb Alexander Gurwitz provide an exceptional reflection of Jewish life in Russia and in Texas. The text itself is an insightful description of events experienced in a life lived in great extremes.

As a well-educated Jew who could have easily been a rabbi or professor, Gurwitz brings an understanding of traditional teachings and modern Jewish ideas. At the age of seventy, he drew upon that acumen
to provide future generations with a record of events that are often overlooked. Gurwitz’s recollections of his days in Europe give the reader insight into a world lost to Nazi destruction. Thankfully, Bryan Stone’s commentary adds an explanatory background such that the reader gains an understanding of the interaction of ideas of the times.

In as much as Jewish life in Texas is still very much yet-to-be recorded history, these writings open new windows on traditional observance influenced by new Jewish movements, particularly in the United States. Though Gurwitz maintains a commitment to traditional Jewish ritual, he is not ignorant of the various alternative approaches around him. In fact, he follows very much in the line of “reformers” who were willing to reinterpret halakhah and observances.

Stone has taken the time to verify as much as he could concerning the validity of Gurwitz’s statements. This one intense effort alone enhances immeasurably the richness of these writings. Yet, he also notes that Gurwitz does not seem to be as accurate in his recollections of the later years in San Antonio as the earlier years in Europe.

Clearly, thanks to Prero and Stone, readers will find Gurwitz’s writings to be both useful and enjoyable. I believe that Gurwitz’s approach to Judaism was in keeping with the pattern manifest in modern Orthodoxy of today; its bent toward reformation clearly was one of the reasons it remained viable in central Texas.

Stone has the significant distinction of having written one of the first doctoral dissertations in Texas Jewish history. His research in this neoteric field—including his first book, *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas*—helped identify the early role of Jews in the growth of Texas. Stone’s treatment of Prero’s translation identifies and enhances the two worlds of Gurwitz. Stone clearly brings honor to the lives of Jews who found a home “deep in the heart.”

*Rabbi James Kessler, ’72 C holds the first doctorate in Texas Jewish history. He is the founder and first president of the Texas Jewish Historical Society.*

This is a well-crafted rabbinic memoir that contains two separate but inextricably linked strands.

One component is the oft-told but always compelling narrative of a German Jewish family narrowly escaping the Holocaust and arriving in the United States in the late 1930s as refugees—“strangers in a strange land”—and then quickly emerging as fully “American” within a single generation. Indeed, the author’s name change as a youngster succinctly conveys that remarkable transformation.

Four-year-old Nuremberg-born Rolf Kissinger, an only child (and distant cousin of the former U.S. secretary of state) and his parents arrived in New York City by ship from Europe on a “dark and drizzly” night on 6 January 1938, ten months before Kristallnacht. When he enrolled in a Manhattan elementary school, he was “Ralph Kingsley.”

The second thread in Kingsley’s book is how he evolved from a childhood devoid of intensive Jewish education and with minimal religious observance and became a prominent American rabbi who, among other achievements during his career, won an academic prize as a rabbinic student for Hebrew language proficiency, wrote a seminary thesis on the impact of the Martin Buber-Franz Rosenzweig German translation of the Bible, led a large Miami-area congregation for more than three decades, established a Jewish day school in Florida’s Dade county, and served as a national leader in the Soviet Jewry movement.

Although Kingsley served several Reform congregations for more than forty years before his retirement, *My Spiritual Journey* concludes with a poignant description of a theologically restless rabbi “shul shopping” in an unsuccessful effort to find a spiritually satisfying worship service within his own religious movement. Instead, Kingsley is sharply critical of the “Judaism lite” services found in many Reform synagogues today. He offers his greatest praise for a small congregation in his Florida neighborhood composed of “people who [like himself] gather to pray in that little do-it-yourself minyan … no bells and whistles, not even a rabbi or cantor.”
Kingsley describes some of the difficult issues and conflicts he faced that are common to many congregational rabbis—e.g., tensions with synagogue lay leaders, moving to a new congregation, rabbi-cantor friction, and guilt about the lack of quality family time with his wife and two sons during his active professional years.

However, for me, the most interesting sections of this memoir are the chapters describing Kingsley’s early years and the personal and societal influences that decisively shaped his choice to serve the Jewish people as a rabbi.

Like many other rabbis, including this reviewer, Kingsley credits National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), the Reform Jewish youth movement, for sparking his great interest in all things Jewish: “I returned home [from a youth group conclave] filled with a new found sense of my Jewish identity which I had not known.” And not surprisingly, Kingsley records how two talented rabbis, Herbert Baumgard and Saul Kraft, were his mentors and greatly influenced him, first as a high school teenager and later during his years as a Queens College student in the 1950s (when tuition was only $7 a semester).

In 1955 he entered the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, where he excelled academically. During his HUC-JIR years, Kingsley was a weekend student rabbi at one of the many new congregations in the New York City region that were established by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism) during the post–World War II boom years of synagogue growth.

Kingsley was also one of the four-hundred-plus rabbis who were “drafted” by the three major U.S. rabbinic schools into the American armed forces as military chaplains between 1950 and 1969. His book describes his two-year tour of duty—1960 to 1962—when he served as a United States Air Force chaplain in the Philippines and Taiwan immediately following his ordination.

He vividly details the extraordinary spiritual and emotional impact of his first visit to the State of Israel as well as his return visit to his German birthplace in 1978, forty years after Albert and Erna Kissinger and their young son fled Nazi Germany. That melancholy visit to Nuremberg is described in one of Kingsley’s six published articles written over several
decades that appear as a valuable appendix in his book, along with a series of photographs that mark Kingsley’s “journey.”

Finally, he offers a pragmatic definition of the eternal question, “Who is a Jew?” For Kingsley, it is a person with Jewish grandchildren. He concludes his memoir with a chapter addressed to his four Jewish grandchildren urging them to continue the journey that he and Brenda, his wife, have taken together for over fifty years.

Kingsley’s insightful book captures a unique moment in both American and Jewish history, and it can serve as a useful educational tool in synagogues, colleges, and rabbinical schools. But because Kingsley covers so many years and includes significant events and numerous people in his memoir, an annotated index would have enhanced the book’s appeal.

A. James Rudin, the American Jewish Committee’s senior interreligious advisor, is distinguished visiting professor of religion and Judaica at Saint Leo University. His book, Pillar of Fire: A Biography of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, was nominated for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize.


Beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Jews came to comprise a disproportionate number of American lawyers—their representation in the legal profession far exceeded their representation in the general population. Most turn-of-the-century American Jews lived in cities such as New York and Chicago, places in which new institutions of legal education, which offered night- and part-time programs, had just emerged. Geographic proximity to these schools facilitated the rapid growth of Jewish legal professionals, many of whom were working-class immigrants or the children of immigrants. The circumstances that enabled American Jewish men to enroll in law school at relatively high
rates also allowed American Jewish women to do so. Although few in terms of total numbers, beginning around the 1920s, Jewish women began entering the legal profession at higher rates than non-Jewish women and, as a result, Jewish women frequently became the first women to practice law in various contexts.

In *Fair Labor Lawyer: The Remarkable Life of New Deal Attorney and Supreme Court Advocate Bessie Margolin*, lawyer and author Marlene Trestman frames the life and career of one such woman, Bessie Margolin, an American Jewish lawyer whose career put her in the center of some of the twentieth century’s most important legal disputes, in just this way. When Margolin initially enrolled, she was Tulane Law School’s only female student. She was the first woman investigator at the New Haven Legal Aid Bureau. She was the Labor Department’s first female lawyer. She was one of twelve American women lawyers to oversee Nazi war crime trials in Nuremberg. She was only the twenty-fifth woman to present an oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court. Trestman’s book details Margolin’s journey from a Jewish orphanage in New Orleans to male-dominated spheres of power, highlighting Margolin’s accomplishments over the course of her four-decade-plus career. Margolin, simply stated, was “remarkable,” an assertion that constitutes Trestman’s main argument.

This book includes ten chapters, which progress chronologically, each illuminating Margolin’s many achievements. Chapters one and two recall her childhood, highlighting her enthusiasm for education, extraordinary discipline, and perfectionist tendencies. Margolin entered Newcomb College at sixteen years old. During her sophomore year, she enrolled in a program that permitted students to earn both their bachelor of arts and juris doctorates in six years; Margolin completed the program in five—while becoming fluent in French. At twenty-one, she graduated second in her class at Tulane Law School. From there, she went to work as a research assistant to a professor at Yale Law School, an institution from which she eventually earned a doctorate of law.

Chapters three and four highlight the challenges and feats of Margolin’s early career. It began in Washington, DC, during President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first administration, when she went to work at the Inter-American Commission of Women to research sexism in
Latin American law. From there she moved to the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal corporation established as a part of the New Deal and designed to provide public utilities to the region to encourage its economic development.

Chapter five explains Margolin’s decision to remain a “bachelor girl,” that is, unmarried. One reason, we learn, was because Margolin had a long-term relationship with Larry Fly, her former TVA boss and the first of a series of married men with whom she had romantic relationships. Chapter six recounts Margolin’s time in Francis Perkins’s Labor Department, where she served as a senior litigation attorney in the department’s Wage and Hour Division, implementing the newly passed Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. The law banned the transportation of goods made by children under sixteen years old, insured a minimal hourly wage, and established a maximum hourly workweek. Here Margolin’s career shines as Trestman showcases her involvement in cases that tested the legality of different aspects of New Deal legislation. In the Labor Department, Margolin would become a supervising attorney, the department’s chief trial counsel, and an assistant solicitor.

Chapter seven covers Margolin’s five-month stint in 1946 as a war crimes attorney in Nuremberg, where she was in charge of overseeing the creation of American military courts established to conduct Nazi war crimes trials. Upon returning from Germany, Margolin resumed her work at the Labor Department, which is the subject of chapter eight. Chapter nine recalls Margolin’s failed campaign to earn an appointment to a U.S. federal court. Although Margolin faced gender discrimination throughout her career—Trestman notes how she strategically used her femininity to ease potential discomfort in work environments—nowhere was this fact more evident than when Margolin’s seemingly endless list of accomplishments did not secure her a place on the federal bench. In the latter part of her career, Margolin became an outspoken advocate for fair treatment of women in the workplace. Even after retiring in 1972, she remained involved in Equal Pay Amendment litigation and served as a judge for the American Arbitration Association’s National Labor Panel. Bessie Margolin died in 1996.

This book will be of special interest to readers eager to learn more about the legal battles engendered by New Deal legislation. Trestman
skillfully and in great detail tracks Margolin from one case to the next, illuminating along the way the high-powered and influential men and women with whom she worked. Ultimately, one cannot help but agree with Trestman’s assessment that Margolin, by virtue of her raw intelligence, determination, and ambition, was exceptional.

Or was she? Trestman’s work can be added to a small but growing list of books that highlight the accomplishments of female lawyers, particularly Jewish female lawyers. In 1993 Ann Fagan Ginger, a Jewish American lawyer and civil liberties activist (whose own career merits an academic biography), published Carol Weiss King: Human Rights Lawyer, 1895–1922 (University Press of Colorado), detailing King’s career as a labor and immigration lawyer. In 2015, Irin Carmon and Shana Knizhnik released Notorious RBG: The Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Day Street Books), offering a tongue-in-cheek take on the many accomplishments of the second-ever female justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. (Although Notorious RBG is in many ways delightful, this writer hopes that a more scholarly book about Justice Ginsburg will be published soon.) And, in the near future, historian Leandra Zarnow will publish Passionate Politics: Bella Abzug and the Promise and Peril of the American Left (Harvard University Press). Alongside Fair Labor Lawyer, these works reveal that for over one hundred years, American Jewish female lawyers have succeeded in professional contexts in which they were unwelcomed outliers. In some respects, then, it appears that, although Margolin’s career was extraordinary, she also represented a larger phenomenon: Jewish American female legal pioneers. (Ginger, King, Margolin, Abzug, and Ginsburg were not alone. Other American Jewish female attorneys whose careers marked “firsts” for women include Anna M. Kross, the first woman judge in the New York City magistrates court; Justine W. Polier, the first woman justice in the State of New York; Jennie L. Barron, the first woman appointed to a superior court in Massachusetts; and Mary B. Grossman, the first female municipal judge in Cleveland.) Why so many Jewish women became the first to practice law in various forums is not the subject of Trestman’s book, but it is a question that merits investigation, if only because it bears on Trestman’s characterization of Margolin’s career.
Though the list of books on Jewish women attorneys is growing, such investigations remain rare—especially in contrast with biographies about individual American Jewish male lawyers. Why so little attention has been paid to individual female lawyers, especially individual Jewish female lawyers, can perhaps be explained by the perceived lack of a market for books on such a subject and to a dearth in archival sources. Given these circumstances, Trestman’s book, like Margolin’s career, is truly remarkable.

Britt P. Tevis, JD/PhD, is a Lecturer at Deakin Law School in Melbourne, Australia. She is currently working on a history of early twentieth-century American Jewish lawyers.


Pillar of Fire: A Biography of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise is A. James Rudin’s way of “repaying that debt” he feels he owes to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. When Rudin entered rabbinical school in 1955, it was at the newly merged Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR) on New York City’s Upper West Side—an institution Wise established (the Jewish Institute of Religion or JIR), built with faculty he had hand-picked. During Rudin’s time there, he regularly walked past a sculpted bust of Wise’s head that stood in the lobby, and he relished tales of Wise’s battles for a free pulpit, Zionism, social justice, and respect and understanding between people of different faiths. As Wise’s imagined friend and colleague, Rudin refers to Wise as “Stephen,” offering a grand tour of Wise’s public activities, with small glimpses into his private life.

Born into wealth and status in Hungary, Wise came to America before turning two years old. By the time he died in 1949 he was the best-known American Jew in the world. Rudin’s account of Wise’s early years retells the familiar story of his early support of the Zionist movement, his development and understanding of liberal Judaism, and his
marriage to Louise Waterman. Between 1900 and 1906, Wise served as rabbi at Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, where he demanded a free pulpit and established unorthodox synagogue practices. Portland was also the place where the young Wise welcomed the birth of his two children and began a long career as a social justice advocate. In Portland, he served on the State Child Labor Commission and as vice-president of the Oregon Conference of Charities and Corrections, and he worked with civic leaders to combat gambling and prostitution.

Moving back to New York City in 1906, Wise established the Free Synagogue, where he moved into battle establishing his brand of liberal Judaism, organizing an American Zionist movement, and speaking out against labor exploitation, capitalist greed, and intolerance. He publicly supported women’s suffrage, was among the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and rabidly opposed racial and religious bigotry and Tammany Hall influence in New York politics. Having been a strong pacifist, Wise shifted positions during World War I and became a close supporter and adviser to President Wilson, who publicly supported Zionism and, with Wise’s encouragement, the Balfour Declaration. Wise attended the Paris Peace Conference and established the American Jewish Congress and then his very own seminary (JIR). Through the 1920s he battled antisemites, immigration restriction legislation, and Tammany Hall. Within the Democratic Party, he pushed for religious tolerance and supported the campaign of Al Smith.

Wise and Franklin D. Roosevelt still held grudges toward one another over earlier political battles in New York State when Roosevelt assumed the office of the presidency in 1933. Patching over the wound by 1936, Wise became one of Roosevelt’s strongest public champions, praising New Deal policy, supporting Roosevelt’s court-packing plan, and stumping for his fourth term. In this period when Wise became a fierce supporter of Roosevelt, he was also struggling with how to face the rise of Hitler and antisemitism in Europe. Wise expended great effort on increasing Jewish refugee quotas, establishing political support for a Jewish state in Israel, supporting Jewish communities under assault in Europe, and building the World Jewish Congress. He believed that Roosevelt shared his commitments to
save Jews during the Holocaust and to open Palestine to Jewish refugees, but he was mistaken. The years of the war and its aftermath were frustrating and painful to Wise, who was unable to move presidents, the State Department, and the U.S. military. He was also unable to find allies in European governments.

Wise died in 1949. The last years of his life were emotionally difficult. He visited DP camps in Europe, battled new Zionist leaders who emerged in the postwar period, and mourned his wife of forty-seven years.

Pulling evidence from the extensive collection of Wise’s letters, speeches, sermons, publications, and media coverage, Rudin tells a personally conflicted story of the rabbi. Overall, Rudin is Wise’s admirer. Moving from episode to episode, Rudin introduces major figures and events that enter Wise’s life in an encyclopedic fashion. Rudin wants his readers to appreciate Wise’s packed schedule, his high-profile relationships and his social justice commitments. He is less interested in analyzing the content of Wise’s speeches, sermons, and activities and more interested in highlighting the multiple arenas in which Wise directed his energy and activism.

In the final chapters of his book, when Rudin considers Wise’s relationship to Roosevelt and wartime activity, his narrative becomes more circular, weaving back and forth between sympathetic and critical stances. Rudin lays out the scholarly controversy surrounding Wise, Roosevelt, and the Holocaust in two separate chapters. This is the only place in the biography where Rudin gives any hint that Wise’s story speaks to larger scholarly discussions.

After wavering, Rudin goes on the assault. He argues that throughout his career Wise operated strategically with a “top-down mentality” and worked within a broad coalition to fend off antisemitic backlash. The problem, according to Rudin, was that Wise “became trapped in his strategic stately role” and over time became more concerned with protecting his position and relationship with Roosevelt. Rudin accuses Wise of losing courage, of allowing himself to be “owned” by government officials, and of turning his back on Peter Bergson and Orthodox rabbis who took to the streets in protest of Roosevelt. Ultimately, Rudin argues that Wise did not give “his beloved Jewish people” the “selfless leadership” they deserved (410–411).
With the exception of his extended discussion of Wise’s efforts during World War II, Rudin’s biography is descriptive rather than analytical or critical, and it is characterized by a regular dose of undigested quotations from primary sources. When his final critique arrives, it is disconnected from the evidence it is based upon and reads more like response from the gut than one from the sources. Rudin’s preference for details and stories over themes and argument, and his frustration with Wise’s inability to leverage his pre-1930s success with conditions in the Roosevelt and Hitler era, miss the opportunity to reflect on Wise’s biography as a way to tell a larger story about the Jewish experience and the American state during the first half of the twentieth century. Still, Rudin deserves appreciation for reintroducing Wise’s story to a new generation of readers in a more comprehensive way than has been done before.

Randi Storch is professor of history at SUNY Cortland.
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