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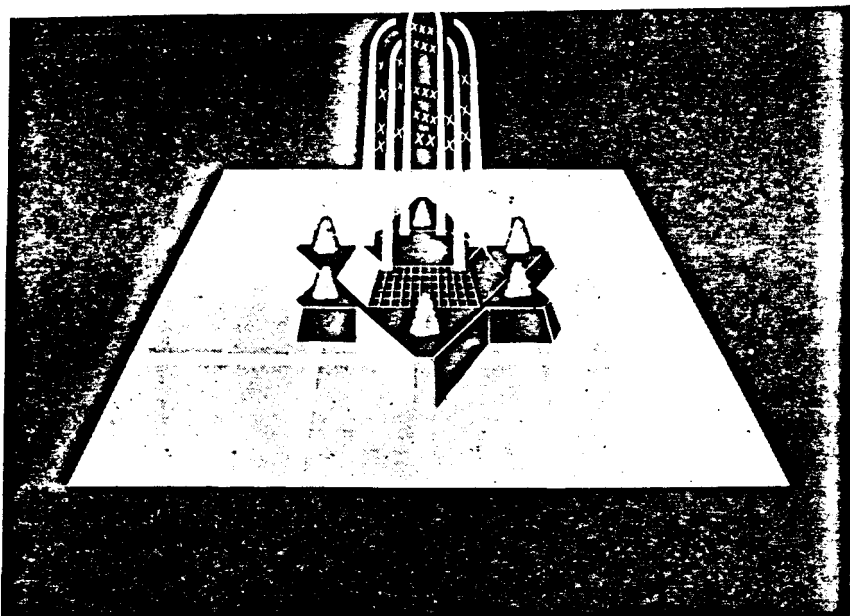
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INNOVATION AND CONSOLIDATION:

PHASES IN THE HISTORY OF TEMPLE MISHKAN ISRAEL

by: Jonathan D. Sarna



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JONATHAN D. SARNA

The history of Reform Judaism in America is a history of change and development. "Progress" has been a rallying cry of the movement; the aim, meanwhile, has been to establish "the kingdom of truth, justice and peace among all men."¹ Strangely, the road to this millennial kingdom has yet to be adequately charted. Is the road straight and direct, or does it curve and meander? Are there steep hills of rapid change followed by long stretches of stability, or is the road gradated so that changes develop slowly, almost imperceptibly? In short, is the history of Reform Judaism a history of periodic revolutions or is it a history of steady evolution?²

To answer this question properly, at least for the past, one would need to examine the histories of a great many Reform temples in all parts of the country. My aim, however, is much more modest. Having stated the question, I shall examine the development of Reform Judaism in only one Temple, Mishkan Israel of New Haven, and then only up to World War One. Mishkan Israel may prove to be a typical case--an example that proves the rule. Preliminary evidence indeed points in this direction. But we need much more data. Until then, conclusions will have to remain tentative at best.³

Temple Mishkan Israel was officially dedicated in 1843, though services had apparently been held there sporadically for several years earlier. Tensions between more and less traditional elements in the synagogue surfaced early, and these, along with intra-ethnic stresses, likely led to the formation of B'nai Sholom congregation in 1855. But Mishkan Israel's "spirit of unwise reform," which the Occident's editor, Isaac Leeser, lamented in 1857, probably involved nothing more than a synagogue choir, and an English language sermon. According to Rabbi David Levy, more radical changes only commenced just before the Civil War, in 1860, when "various changes were made in the mode of worship." The installation of an organ followed in 1863; a year later, during the ministry of Reverend Jonas

Gabriel, the temple dropped separate seating and instituted a system of family pews. After the Civil War, however, a period of consolidation ensued. No further changes took place for over a decade. ⁴

The tempo of reform hastened considerably under Mishkan Israel's first ordained rabbi, Judah Wechsler (1833-1907). Born in Bavaria, Wechsler was trained under Rabbi Seligman Baer Bamberger, a prominent Orthodox rabbi. But he soon rebelled, and joined the more radical ranks of American Reform. "Intellectually he was rigid; he had no understanding for traditional Judaism," Gunther Plaut observes. Certainly, Wechsler had no patience for such vestiges of traditional Judaism as he found at Mishkan Israel. "Reform and Progress" were his announced watchwords. His was a constant war against the forces of "darkness." Like Isaac Mayer Wise, his motto was "Let there be light."

In 1873, when he arrived at Mishkan Israel, Wechsler introduced into its service both Isaac Mayer Wise's Minhag America Reform liturgy, and the one day celebration of Jewish holidays. In 1876, he delivered a much publicized address at the George Street Methodist Church. The same year saw him inviting a Christian lady, one "Miss Sanford," to join his synagogue's choir. Apparently, however, his reforming spirit soon became too great for Mishkan Israel to bear. Wechsler resigned, therefore, in 1878, and removed to St. Paul, Minnesota. He sought a job where he could better serve "the cause of reform and progress within a pale of Judaism." ⁵

Wechsler's successor was a far less radical man, Rabbi Leopold (Levi) Kleeberg (1832-1906). Kleeberg was born in Hofgeismar, Germany, and had studied under the famous Rabbi Azriel (Israel) Hildesheimer, and at the University of Goettingen. He married a woman who became far more famous than himself, the distinguished German poetess, Minna Kleeberg. According to Simon Wolf, their relationship was a stormy one. The Kleebergs immigrated to Louisville, Kentucky in 1866, at the invitation of Congregation Adath Israel which asked Leopold Kleeberg to serve as its rabbi. In 1878, the couple moved on to New Haven, apparently after squabbles in Louisville had made their life there unpleasant. Only a few months later, on December 31, 1878, Minna Kleeberg passed away. The community mourned her passing, and in 1884, erected a monument to her memory in the Mishkan Israel Cemetery.

Kleeberg caused no upheavals in Mishkan Israel. His tenure saw the inauguration of a new organ, and the enlargement of the synagogue sanctuary, but no essential changes in ritual or liturgy. The arrival of Russian Jewish immigrants in New Haven probably disrupted congregants' lives; at least in their temple they found an outpost of stability. To be sure, some congregants did advocate a Sunday service. They found observance of the biblical Sabbath far too burdensome. But as long as Rabbi Kleeberg had any say in the matter, that proposal went nowhere. The rabbi was a decidedly conservative reformer; indeed, until he retired, at age sixty, he continued to lead his increasingly native-born congregation in a predominantly German-language ritual. A few years after he retired--probably when his pension ran out--Kleeberg assumed a rabbinical post in Easton, Pennsylvania which he held until his death at age seventy-four. 6

Rabbi David Levy (1854-1931), who succeeded Kleeberg in 1893, heralded a new era of change at Mishkan Israel. Symbolic of this change was the fact that he was the congregation's first American born rabbi. He was hired directly from a post at Charleston's prestigious Temple Beth Elohim, where he had served for eighteen years, beginning when he was only twenty-one years old. Though he studied at a traditionalist seminary, Isaac Leeser's short-lived Maimonides College, Levy had become "a thoroughgoing Reformer." In Beth Elohim, he opposed both separate seating and the observance of the second day of Jewish holidays. He also instituted his own prayerbook, Service of the Sanctuary, and he included in its pages several hymns of his own composing. Some of his hymns later found inclusion in the Union Hymnal. Levy was an amateur artist. After a disastrous fire at Beth Elohim destroyed the synagogue's ark, he designed a new one. In New Haven, however, he concentrated more on cult than on culture. First, he abandoned all vestiges of German. Henceforward, vernacular prayers and sermons were delivered in English. Synagogue minutes began to be recorded in English as well. Then he revised the ritual, instituted his own prayerbook, and modernized the Hebrew School. Perhaps to enshrine his spirit of innovation--but also for more practical reasons--he soon spearheaded a drive aimed at moving Mishkan Israel from Court Street to Orange Street. When the cornerstone of the new Orange Street Temple was laid, in January 1896, Levy delivered a famous historical oration, which forms

the basis for much of what is known about the history of Jews in New Haven in the nineteenth century (an abbreviated revision of this oration, which first appeared in the Jewish Encyclopedia, was reprinted in Jews in New Haven II). Finally, sometime around 1900, Mishkan Israel undertook a step that had been debated for years: it instituted a Sunday service. 7

After seven years of these innovations, Mishkan Israel was ready for a period of stability. The ensuing decade saw no new radical proposals. Beginning in 1911, however, stability came to an end. First, Rabbi Levy took ill. Then he stayed away without apparent warning--and, it appears from the minutes, without necessarily being sick (the minutes refer to the rabbi's "illness or absence"). Finally, in March, 1912, Rabbi Levy requested a three week vacation. The request was granted, but only "with the understanding that he furnish a substitute at his own expense." 8

In 1912, Rabbi Levy was 58 years old. His ailments may certainly have been real. But it seems unlikely that physical ailments were actually what lay behind his forced retirement at age 60. Congregational hostility seems a more likely explanation. The temple board offered comparatively liberal retirement terms--a \$1500 a year pension for five years, and a paid trip to the Cincinnati Central Conference of American Rabbis convention (presumably to search for a new job)--yet it encouraged Levy to resign as soon as possible. The board did not want him to fill out his term which officially ended in 1914. 9

Why was the congregation suddenly so disaffected with its rabbi of twenty years' standing? The subsequent minutes offer several hints. A few weeks after his fate was sealed, the board asked Rabbi Levy to read from the Torah scroll, in Hebrew, on Saturday morning. Apparently, the rabbi had unilaterally moved to do away with this rite, and congregants objected. Then, "Rev. Levy asked permission of the Board to unite in marriage Miss Frieds, daughter of one of our members, to Mr. Reed, son of Samuel Reed a gentile." Again, there were objections. The board refused to sanction the intermarriage, and instead decided "to confer with other leading Rabbis to get their opinion." The opinions, which took months to arrive, are for historical reasons worth quoting in full (see appendix). As a practical matter, however, the board's delay killed the issue. If the couple ever

married, they did so outside of Mishkan Israel. 10

Rabbi Levy and the board had apparently parted company over the issue of innovation. The rabbi considered new changes to be necessary; the board, supported by the congregation, wanted to maintain the status quo. No doubt, other issues too were involved. After two decades in the synagogue, the rabbi had made an unhealthy number of enemies. They were eager to pounce on his every miscue. In addition, a new generation of congregants had arisen at Mishkan Israel. It apparently felt a younger man was needed at the synagogue's helm. There is even the possibility that some congregants had lost faith in Rabbi Levy's honesty. After the "feeling" ceremony which accompanied his "voluntary retirement," in October 1913, ugly rumors spread that the rabbi had stolen a Torah scroll, a menorah, and some sheet music. A full scale investigation ensued before it was determined that the Torah had gone to Yale (for reasons that were disputed), and that the other items were arguably the rabbi's own property to begin with. Instead of pursuing the matter further, the board wisely decided to consider the subject closed. Levy, meanwhile, took on a variety of pulpits, finally ending up, as had his predecessor, in Easton, Pennsylvania. 11

The departure of David Levy, on the eve of World War One, is a convenient terminal date for a discussion of Reform Judaism's development at Mishkan Israel. The years from the Civil War until World War One form a distinct historical era in the synagogue, an era of progressive reform. Mishkan Israel, along with Reform Judaism in general, later moved in a different direction.

One would like to know more about this half-century of Reform at Mishkan Israel. Several important synagogue innovations cannot be dated. Others must have inspired more controversy than has been preserved in the available records. Even a brief sketch, however, has revealed one clear developmental pattern; at Mishkan Israel, periods of innovation and periods of consolidation followed one another in rhythmic succession. Reform came about through periodic revolution, not steady evolution.

Peak periods of change at Mishkan Israel took place in the early 1850s, the mid 1870s and the mid 1890s. Following these, congregants needed a chance to catch their breath, to accustom themselves to new practices. They required time to transform yesterday's radical innovations into the hallowed

traditions of tomorrow. If a rabbi sought to hasten the process of consolidation, or indeed, if he pushed too far ahead of his congregation, he suffered the consequences--as Judah Wechsler and David Levy discovered. Rabbis nevertheless played an instrumental role by setting reforms in motion. Officers and congregants simply reserved for themselves the right of approval or disapproval. Rabbis, in other words, were initiators. But they needed membership support to bring their ideas into fruition.



*Mishkan Israel Confirmation Class of 1902,
with Rabbi David Levy*



*Mishkan Israel High School and Normal School Class of 1922,
with Rabbi Louis L. Mann*

APPENDIX

MINUTES OF TEMPLE MISHKAN ISRAEL (JUNE, 1913)

In response to the letters sent to leading Rabbis* by our President in regard to intermarriage, the following replies were received.

Rev. Emil Hirsh's (sic) was very unsatisfactory having evaded the question absolutely.

Rev. David Philipson('s) custom is not to officiate at such marriages unless the non-Jewish party expresses willingness to accept Judaism.

Rabbi J. Leonard Levy('s) rule as well as practice is to require both parties to a marriage must be members of the Jewish faith.

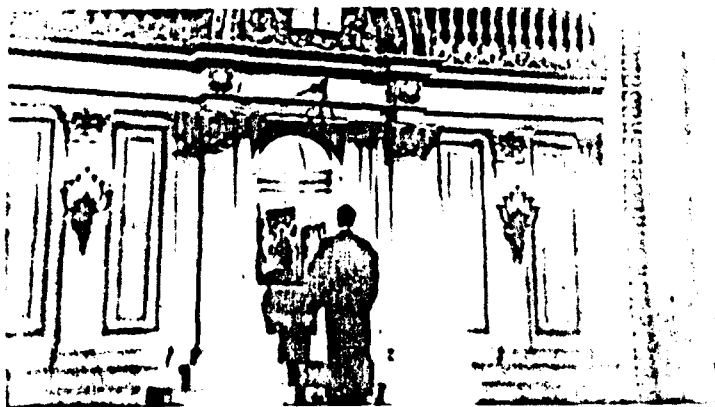
Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf is strongly opposed to intermarriage.

*Emil G. Hirsch (1851-1923) was rabbi of Chicago's Sinai Congregation.

David Philipson (1862-1949) was rabbi of Bene Israel Congregation in Cincinnati.

Joseph Leonard Levy (1865-1917) was rabbi of Temple Rodef Sholom in Pittsburgh.

Joseph Krauskopf (1858-1923) was rabbi of Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia.



*Mishkan Israel Interior, Orange and Audubon Streets,
with Rabbi Edgar Siskin*

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, I (1890), p. 121.
- 2 This whole question relates to theories of social change. See, especially, Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (2nd ed., Chicago, 1970).
- 3 Earlier studies include David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism (New York, 1931); Jerome W. Grollman, "The Emergence of Reform Judaism in the United States", American Jewish Archives, II (1950), pp. 3-14; Aryeh Rubenstein, "The Beginnings of the Reform Movement in American Judaism," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1973). See also, Leon A. Jick, The Americanization of the Synagogue (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1976).
- 4 On the early history of Mishkan Israel, see Rollin G. Osterweis's articles in the anniversary volumes of Mishkan Israel (1935, 1940, 1960); Arthur A. Chiel, Looking Back, I (July 6, 1972-July 27, 1972); Jews in New Haven, II (1979), pp. 15-24; David Levy, "Historical Address," unidentified newspaper clipping, January 30, 1896, nearprint file, American Jewish Archives; Occident 15 (July, 1857), pp. 200.
- 5 On Wechsler, see American Jewish Year Book 5 (1903-4), p. 104; Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, 18 (1908), p. 26; Ethel and David Rosenberg, To 120 Years: A Social History of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation (Indianapolis, 1979), pp. 17-33, 54; W. Gunther Plaut, The Jews in Minnesota (New York, 1959), pp. 56, 66, 75, 83, *passim*; American Israelite items cited in Jews in New Haven, I, pp. 129-30; and Judah Wechsler to S. Bergman (January 22, 1878), correspondence file, American Jewish Archives.
- 6 On Kleeberg, see History of Congregation Adath Israel, Louisville, Kentucky (Louisville, 1906), p. 21; L. Kleeberg, Eulogy in Commemoration of the Deceased Poetess Minna Kleeberg (New Haven, 1879);

Simon Wolf, The Presidents I Have Known from 1860-1918 (Washington, D.C., 1918), p. 459; Jews in New Haven, I (1978), pp. 130-131; Chiel, Looking Back (July 20, 27, 1972); Joshua Trachtenberg, Consider the Years (Easton, 1944), pp. 202, 325.

- 7 On David Levy, see Bertram W. Korn, Eventful Years and Experiences (Cincinnati, 1954), pp. 172-182, 196; Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Z. Engelman, The Jews of Charleston (Philadelphia, 1950), passim; Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, 41 (1931), pp. 241-2; Chiel, Looking Back, (July 27, 1972); idem in Jews in New Haven I, pp. 92-3; and Mishkan Israel Minutebooks, American Jewish Archives (photostat). Two of David Levy's prayerbooks are extant: Service of the Sanctuary... Arranged for the Use of Congregation Beth Elohim (New York, 1879), and Morning Services - Temple Mishkan Israel (New Haven, 1909). I am grateful to Rabbi Arthur A. Chiel for bringing the latter to my attention.
- 8 Mishkan Israel Minutes, 1900-1913; quotes are from meetings of November 7, 1911 and March 4, 1912 (pp. 142, 163).
- 9 Minutes, January 13-30, 1913 (pp. 195-197).
- 10 Minutes, February, 1913 (pp. 201, 202, 204, 207).
- 11 Minutes, October - December 1913 (pp. 219-238); see November 4, 8, 1918 (pp. 428, 435); and Trachtenberg, Consider the Years, pp. 203, 326.



Monument to Rabbi Leopold Kleeberg and his wife Minna, a distinguished German Poetess; Mishkan Israel Cemetery