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The American Rabbinate: A Centennial View

INTRODUCTION

BY

JONATHAN D. SARNA

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Jonathan D. Sarna

Scholars have, to date, written far more about the history of the rabbinate in ancient and medieval times than about the history of the rabbinate in the United States of America. There are, to be sure, important sociological studies of the American rabbinate, as well as several valuable biographies, sketches of rabbis in individual communities, books and articles written by rabbis based on their own experiences, and some good and bad novels.[1] But no full-scale work detailing the history of the American rabbinate as it changed over time exists. This special issue of *American Jewish Archives* devoted to the history of the American rabbinate thus represents an important first, a pioneering voyage through uncharted historical waters.

Just a century ago, Hebrew Union College began a process that would, in a short while, dramatically change the whole character of the American rabbinate. It made available for the first time a steady supply of American-trained, English-speaking rabbis to serve this country's growing number of pulpits. With this, the era of European-trained rabbis in America drew to a close. Just a few years later, indeed by the turn of the century, America was producing native-trained rabbis of every sort: some ordained at Hebrew Union College, some at the more traditional Jewish Theological Seminary, established in 1887, and some at the even more traditional Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (later merged into Yeshiva University), incorporated in 1897.

The essays contained in this volume describe the shape of the American rabbinate in the wake of this new era. Jeffrey S. Gurock, tracing the history of the Orthodox rabbinate in America, opens with two significant events of the late 1880's: the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, to train rabbis in "a spirit of fidelity and devotion to the Jewish law," and the almost simultaneous establishment of the Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, "to encourage, foster and promote the observance of the Orthodox Chief Rabbi." Both developments adumbrated Orthodoxy's increasing presence on the American scene, but as Gurock points out, there the similarity ends. For the Seminary, though Orthodox, was the institutional expression of Westernized Jews already familiar with secular culture, and concerned to steer a middle course between Radical Reform Judaism on the one hand, and East European Orthodox Judaism on the other. The association, by contrast, and more particularly the chief rabbi it selected, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna, sought to recreate East European Orthodox patterns in America by imposing a centralized rabbinic authority, and by strengthening immigrants' observance of ritual commandments. In a word, the chief rabbi represented *resistance* to America, an unwillingness to succumb to the secular tendencies and modern mores which the surrounding culture sought to impose. The Seminary, meanwhile, represented *accommodation* to America, a desire to be traditional and modern at the same time.

This tension between resisters and accommodators lies at the heart of Gurock's pathbreaking analysis. Stressing diversity within the Orthodox movement—a diversity he associates with different rabbis' divergent backgrounds, training, institutional affiliations, and personal attitudes—he limns the key figures and institutions within the Orthodox rabbinate. As he sees it, resisters have always aimed to reinvigorate rabbinic authority, to lead Jews back toward greater observance of traditional Jewish law, and to counter Americanization. Accommodators have at the same time sought what he describes as simulation of American religious norms, inclusion of as broad a range of Orthodox Jews as possible, and cooperation with non-Orthodox Jews on matters of general Jewish concern. Each side boasts leaders, institutions, and house organs, and each insists that Judaism generally and Orthodoxy in particular can best survive if its particular path is followed.

Gurock realizes that his two categories cover a broad range. One might indeed argue that he is really describing a spectrum of Orthodoxy, with full accommodation on the left, utter resistance on the right, and Orthodox rabbis of various shades ranged along different points of the intervening continuum. The same continuum, with only descriptions changed, could be used to describe the leadership of a great many ethnic and religious groups, for the tension between ac-

commodation and resistance—what in other contexts might be called assimilation and identity—is a pervasive one in America, leaders being no less divided on the subject than their followers.[2]

Abraham J. Karp seeks the roots of Conservative Judaism back before the rise of late-nineteenth-century rabbinical schools. Uncertainties regarding definition, however, emerged equally early. Some rabbis occasionally called "Conservative" in their lifetimes—including Isaac Mayer Wise—would hardly be seen as Conservative today. Others, including many of the founders of the Jewish Theological Seminary, shaped Conservative Judaism, but continued to call themselves Orthodox. In short, from the very beginning, Conservative rabbis suffered from the crisis of identity that Professor Karp finds characteristic of the Conservative rabbinate for the next hundred years: torn between "an ancient tradition and the modern world."

This split between "traditionalists" and "progressives" has a familiar ring given Professor Gurock's essay. But if the basic tension is similar, two critical differences must not be overlooked. First of all, Conservative rabbis were operating from a somewhat different premise than their Orthodox counterparts, for as Karp points out they were institutionally committed to a definition of Judaism that included the words "evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people"—words that rendered change legitimate, and frequently put tradition on the defensive. Second, Conservative rabbis were almost all bound by a common tie to the Jewish Theological Seminary. This gave them an institutional allegiance and a powerful unifying symbol that Orthodox rabbis could not duplicate. Perhaps because the Seminary sent its rabbis out into the world fitted, to use Karp's felicitous metaphor, both with roots and with wings, it was better able to contain within itself the tension which in Orthodoxy came so often into the open. In Conservative Judaism, both traditionalist and progressive rabbis could lay claim to harboring the true spirit of the movement, and Seminary professors would back them up.

Moving beyond ideology, Karp describes in his essay the burgeoning functional problems faced by Conservative rabbis. With increasing demands made upon them from all sources, unending conflicts arose between the various rabbinic roles of preacher, teacher, administrator, pastor, ecclesiastical functionary, participant in communal affairs, participant in national affairs, and sometime lecturer and writer. Additional problems arose when rabbis sought to pursue scholarship on the side, and when obligations due their congregants clashed with their familial obligations. Not that these problems were necessarily unique to rabbis from the Conservative movement, but as Karp points out, the movement's peculiar situation did accentuate them:

> The Orthodox rabbi preached on Saturday morning, the Reform on Friday, the Conservative on both. . . . The Orthodox dealt with *B'nai Mitzvah*, the Reform with Confirmants, the Conservative with both. The Conservative rabbi would meet his Orthodox colleague at meetings of the Day School and the *Vaad Ha-kashrut*, but not the Reform, whom he would see at meetings of the Ministerial Association and the Committee on Religion and Race, both of which were outside the realm of interest of the Orthodox.

At least in Karp's view, the Conservative rabbi has always had the hardest job of all.

Finally, Karp points in his essay to an ongoing dispute within the Conservative rabbinate (and not there alone!) between the demands of the "calling" and the demands of the "profession". This tension, similar to that described by Ahad Ha'am as between prophet and priest, underscores the dichotomy between the idealism of rabbis eager to strengthen Judaism and improve the spiritual condition of their flock, and the pragmatic demands of the laity who evaluate rabbis on the basis of how well they perform their various occupational functions. An aspiring sense of mission and an ardent desire to do what is Jewishly right pulls rabbis in one direction. A down-to-earth eagerness for job security and a practical need to keep their congregations happy pulls them in the other. Rabbis must try and steer a middle course, a route that can never quite be satisfying. And yet, as Karp concludes from his survey data and long personal association with his fellow Conservative rabbis, even the dissatisfied are not necessarily unhappy, for the rewards of the rabbinical profession remain great.

David Polish, looking at the history of Reform rabbis in America, finds that as was the case in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, so too in Reform the theme of tradition and change has loomed large, casting its shadow over many issues. But where in Orthodox and Conservative debates tradition always meant classical rabbinic tradition, Reform rabbis have seen tradition also in terms of a Reform Jewish tradition developed in Germany and expressed in nineteenth-century

Reform rabbinical conferences and writings. Both the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and the first annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis explicitly linked American developments to those in Germany. Many nineteenth-century Reform rabbis were German-trained, and looked to Germany for guidance much the way their Orthodox counterparts later looked to Eastern Europe.

The issue of Zionism, which Polish examines in detail, represented a deviation from classical Reform tradition. In that sense, it served as a functional equivalent of issues such as mixed seating, which precipitated Conservative and Orthodox debates over tradition and change. At the same time, as Polish realizes, the Zionism debate in the Reform rabbinate was as much a symbolic issue as a substantive one. Zionism, for many, had become a code word, representing far-reaching changes in Reform ideology and practice. The revitalization of various time-honored forms and ceremonies, advocated by some change-minded pro-Zionist rabbis, implied an abandonment of classical Reform traditions. This challenge pitted Reform Judaism's two lines of tradition against one another, creating strains in the Reform rabbinate and laity that continue to the present day.

In discussing how the Reform movement has changed since the Pittsburgh Platform, Polish discusses two themes in the history of the Reform rabbinate that merit special attention. First, he points to the ongoing dialectic between universalism and particularism that has characterized the Reform movement since its founding. Spurred by their reading of the prophets, their belief in Judaism's mission, and their assumption that any improvement in general society would redound to the benefit of the Jew, Reform rabbis have often played a vital role in general movements for social reform, good government, and civil rights. But support for these universalistic causes has never been unanimous; always, there have been those who insist that rabbis should concern themselves first and foremost with matters of Jewish concern, such as Israel and the plight of Jews in distress. In recent years, these latter voices have had a pronounced influence, but the debate continues, as Polish's analysis of Reform rabbinic resolutions amply demonstrates.

Second, Polish notes that Reform rabbis have always been torn between their desire for unity, if not authority, and their simultaneous insistence on rabbinic freedom. On the one hand, Reform rabbis have almost all shared both a common training ground (particularly since the merger of Hebrew Union College with the Jewish Institute of Religion) and a common rabbinic organization (the Central Conference of American Rabbis). On the other hand, as Polish's review of Reform rabbis and the intermarriage question makes clear, they have resolutely refused to accept the dictates of either, be it on matters of congregational policy or of conscience. As in the Conservative movement, shared institutions have by and large managed so far to contain fierce differences between Reform rabbis of divergent persuasions. Indeed, the Centenary Perspective of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, adopted in 1976, makes a virtue of diversity, resolutely declaring that:

> Reform Judaism does more than tolerate diversity; it engenders it. In our uncertain historical situation we must expect to have far greater diversity than previous generations knew. . . . While we may differ in our interpretation and application of the ideas enunciated here, we accept such differences as precious and see in them Judaism's best hope for confronting whatever the future holds for us. Yet in all our diversity we perceive a certain unity and we shall not allow our differences in some particulars to obscure what binds us together.[3]

Such diversity amidst overarching unity, familiar from the secular polity, may not engender harmony. But it does, according to Polish, reflect the needs of the hour, for "in a time of such Jewish upheaval . . . neat and orderly denominational structures are neither feasible nor desirable."

Many common themes run through all three of these essays. Regardless of whether one looks at the history of Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform rabbis, one finds traditionalists locking horns with modernists, rabbinic roles expanding, and everyone expressing great concern about Jewish youth and Judaism's future. Disputes over such things as rabbinic authority, professional standards, and relations with outsiders, Jews and non-Jews, as well as tensions between rabbis and laymen, and more recently between rabbis and Jewish community professionals also feature across the denominational spectrum, affiliational differences notwithstanding. And everywhere, of course, the tacit influence of American religious norms holds sway, and with it the knowledge that rabbis must, at least to some extent, be "Jewish ministers," for that is what their congregants have come to expect. Indeed,

for all of the many issues that divide them, practicing rabbis as a group do clearly form a single profession. Functionally speaking, they resemble one another far more than they resemble the traditional *rabbonim* of centuries past.

This fact—the emergence of an American rabbinic profile—is a development of enormous importance that proceeded along, hardly noticed, side by side with the denominational developments discussed in these essays. How this rabbinic profile took shape cannot be detailed here. Certainly, its roots reach far back, at least as far back as Gershom Seixas (1746–1816), who led New York's Congregation Shearith Israel for almost half a century, and Isaac Leeser (1806–1868), whose long rabbinic career in Philadelphia had a far-reaching influence. Both men assumed new and broader rabbinic roles, both introduced vernacular sermons into their synagogues, and both participated actively in their home communities, touching Jews and non-Jews alike.[4] Seixas and Leeser, however, were exceptions, men ahead of their time. The professionalization of the rabbinate in the form that we know it today, complete with selective training schools, formal organizations, standard uniforms, and bureaucratic rules took place later, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century—just at the time when so many other professions in America were first emerging.[5] As the American rabbinate became increasingly native-trained, the prototypical American rabbi began to be seen in more and more communities.

Related to professionalization, another momentous change also worked to transform the American rabbinate. This one took place at the community level, where rabbis began to be perceived in a new way, as men of status. In the nineteenth century, when most rabbis were immigrants and many neither acculturated nor learned English, American Jews grew accustomed, as Marcus Jastrow put it, "to look upon their ministers as those who are good for any service required but otherwise should be as much as possible excluded from active representation in public affairs."[6] Many Jews felt ashamed to display their rabbis in public, fearing that they would suffer by comparison with Christians. Anti-clericalism became quite common in Jewish circles.

With the development of American rabbinical schools (all of which functioned, to some extent, as finishing schools), and the increasing availability of native-trained rabbis, we have seen that a new era began. Rabbis increasingly became "representative Jews," visible symbols of those values which American Jews held dear.[7] Laymen now welcomed rabbinic participation in public affairs; indeed, they took pride in showing their rabbis off. As a result, as Gurock, Polish, and especially Karp describe, rabbis took on many new roles and responsibilities.

The sands of time have given rise to even more changes in the American rabbinate, many of them also described in these essays.[8] But questions still remain. What, for example, distinguished rabbis who emerged on the national scene from those who contented themselves to be active only in their own communities, or in some cases only in their own congregations? What factors made for success in these various rabbinates? How have congregations gone about choosing rabbis? What regional variations exist in the American rabbinate? And what can be learned from comparisons between American rabbis and their counterparts in Europe, or for that matter their counterparts among the Christian clergy?

Such questions could be multiplied indefinitely, for the more we learn about the history of the American rabbinate, the more we realize how little we really know. But an important start has now been made. While there is plenty of room for more research, all may build on the foundations laid here.

Notes

1. See the bibliographies in Norman Linzer ed., *Jewish Communal Services in the United States: 1960–1970* (New York, 1972), pp. 128–248; and Elliot L. Stevens ed., *Rabbinic Authority: Papers Presented Before the Ninety-First Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (New York, 1982), pp. 111–118.

2. I have expanded on this theme in my "The Spectrum of Jewish Leadership in Ante-Bellum America," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1 (1982): 59–67.

3. On the Centenary Perspective, see Eugene B. Borowitz, *Reform Judaism Today* (New York, 1983); quote is from p. xxi.

4. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Handsome Young Priest in the Black Gown: The Personal World of Gershom Seixas* (Cincinnnati, 1970); on Leeser see the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by Rabbi Lance J. Sussman, as well as Bertram W. Korn, "Isaac Leeser: Centennial Reflections," *American Jewish Archives* 19 (1967): 127–141; Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 48 (1959): 207–244; and Henry Englander, "Isaac Leeser," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 28 (1918): 213–252.

5. Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York, 1976); Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana, 1977); Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry 1750–1850* (Philadelphia, 1978).

6. "Organization of the American Jewish Historical Society . . . On Monday the Seventh Day of June 1892." (typescript, American Jewish Historical Society), p. 64; cf. *New Era* 3 (1873): 49.

7. Jacob Bloom, *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar* (New York, 1972); Charles S. Bernheimer, "The American Jewish Minister and His Work," *Godey's Magazine*, February 1898, pp. 211–214; Salo Baron, "The Image of a Rabbi Formerly and Today," *in Steeled by Adversity* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 147–157; cf. Milton C. Sernett, "Behold the American Cleric: The Protestant Minister as 'Pattern Man,' 1850–1900," *Winterthur Portfolio* 8 (1973): 1–18.

8. See also Jacob K. Shankman, "The Changing Role of the Rabbi," in Bertram W. Korn ed., *Retrospect and Prospect* (New York, 1965), pp. 230–251; and Arthur Hertzberg, *Being Jewish in America: The Modern Experience* (New York, 1979), pp. 95–124.

Jonathan D. Sarna is Assistant Professor of American Jewish History at the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. His latest book is *People Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York.*