

BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR

Essays in the
New Religious History

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Seating and the American Synagogue

One can learn much about the history of the American synagogue by looking at where members of the congregation sat.¹ Seating patterns mirror social patterns. In determining where to sit, people disclose a great deal about themselves, their beliefs, and their relationships to others. Outside of etiquette books, however, seating patterns are rarely written about, much less subjected to rigorous study. Although it is common knowledge that American synagogue-seating patterns have changed greatly over time—sometimes following acrimonious, even violent disputes—we still have no full-scale study of synagogue seating (or church seating, for that matter), certainly none that traces the subject over time. This is unfortunate, for behind wearisome debates over how sanctuary seats should be arranged and allocated lie fundamental disagreements over the kinds of social and religious values that a congregation should project and the proper relationship between a congregation and the larger society that surrounds it. As we shall see, changes in American synagogue-seating patterns reflect far-reaching changes in the nature of the American synagogue itself.

This study of seating patterns focuses on one ramified aspect of American synagogue seating: the allocation of seats and the resulting shift from stratified to free (unassigned) seating. Like the tumultuous debate over mixed seating, the controversy over free seating reflects the impact of American equality and democracy on synagogue life.² American society was conflicted with regard to its goals: some considered equality of opportunity the ideal, others looked for equality of condition. Furthermore, egalitarian ideals, however defined, clashed ever more forcefully with the reality of social inequality and the desire of the newly rich to engage in “conspicuous consumption.”³ These disputes—the one a conflict over ideals, the other a clash between ideals and realities—affected religious institutions no less than society at large. Changing synagogue-seating patterns reflected these disputes and provide an illuminating case study of how American religion and society have historically interacted.

THE EARLIEST SYNAGOGUES did not apparently face the problem of where people should sit. Most worshippers either stood wherever there was room or sat on an available floor rug. Some seats have turned up in archeological excavations of synagogues, but they are believed to have been reserved for officers, elders, and dignitaries; others could presumably sit where they pleased. To be sure, one rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud teaches the wisdom of setting aside a "fixed place" for one's prayers, but he does not spell out how these places ought to be arranged relative to one another. What we do know is that in order to promote business, the great Alexandrian synagogue, existing even in Second Temple times, arranged seating by occupation ("goldsmiths by themselves, silversmiths by themselves," etc.), making it easier for travelers to find their fellow craftsmen. Rabbi Judah's vivid description of this synagogue suggests that it was unique; the more common practice was for the elders to sit up front while the masses sat "all jumbled together."⁴

Stratified seating found recognition in Jewish legal codes, and in post-Temple times it became the norm in Jewish communities around the world. Sometimes, synagogue officials assigned seats and assessed their occupants depending on what they could pay. At other times, they sold seats for fixed prices or auctioned them off to the highest bidder. Either way, the "best people"—those with the greatest wealth, learning, age, or prestige—ended up occupying the best seats, those along the eastern wall and closest to the front. Those possessing lower status, including the young and the newly arrived in town, occupied seats that were somewhat less choice. The worst seats in the hall were reserved for those who could afford to sit nowhere else. Seating inside the synagogue thus mirrored social realities outside in the community. People worshipped alongside those of their own kind.⁵

WHEN JEWS CAME TO AMERICA, they found that very similar patterns prevailed among the local churches:

In the goodly house of worship,
where in order due and fit,
As by public vote directed,
classed and ranked the people sit,

Mistress first and good wife after,
clerkly squire before the clown,
From the brave coat, lace embroidered,
to the gray frock shading down.⁶

In colonial New England, most town churches assigned a "proper" place to every member of the community based on complicated, controversial, and at times capricious sets of standards that predictably aroused no end of squabbling. "The bulk of criticism . . .," Robert I. Dinkin observes, "was directed less at the system as a whole than at the specific arrangements made by the various seating committees. Most people did not seem to have disliked the idea of seating as long as they were able to obtain a coveted spot for themselves." Similar patterns of assigning seats appear to have been the rule in other colonies as well, although specific evidence is lacking.⁷

The practice of assigning seats declined only after the American Revolution, being gradually replaced by systems of pew rental and pew sale. This was a bow to republican ideology, for it did away with hereditary privileges and made seats equally available to all who could pay. The new procedure also bespeaks the development in America of a less rigidly defined social order: people no longer had a fixed position in a seating hierarchy. Yet relative stratification based on wealth continued. The house of worship, like the community at large, accepted social inequalities as inevitable, but believed that everyone should have an equal chance to move up.⁸

THE EARLIEST AMERICAN SYNAGOGUE, New York's congregation Shearith Israel, founded in the seventeenth century, mirrored this church pattern, which also happened to be the method of financing employed by the Sephardic synagogue (Bevis Marks) in London. The congregation carefully allocated a seat to each member, and each seat was assessed a certain membership tax in advance. What happened in 1750 was typical: The minutes recount an agreement "to appoint four proper persons to rate the seats for the year and appoint each person a proper place for which seat he shall now pay to the present parnas [president] the sum annexed to his seat." Members of the wealthy Gomez family enjoyed the most prestigious seats and paid the highest assessments. Others paid less and sat much further away from the holy ark. Considerable revenue was produced by this system, but it also

generated a great deal of bad feeling. The congregation's early minutes are strewn with complaints from those dissatisfied with their seats, some of whom, we learn, were "seating themselves in places other than those assigned."⁹

Seating in the women's gallery proved particularly troublesome, perhaps because the gallery held fewer places and the difference between a good and bad seat there was far more pronounced. Interestingly, women did not necessarily sit in the same rank order as their husbands, and sometimes acquired status on their own independent basis. In the minutes of Mickve Israel Congregation in Savannah, Georgia, for example, one woman lay claim to a high-status pew by virtue of being the eldest married woman among the congregants. Front-row seats in the women's gallery of Shearith Israel in New York were similarly reserved for married women, despite vociferous protests from members who were single.¹⁰

In its constitution of 1805, Shearith Israel, bowing to the demands of American religious voluntarism, abandoned its system of assigned seats and assessments, and committed itself to a system of pew rent. Under this procedure, the trustees assigned different values to different seats and then leased them on a first-come, first-served basis. This allowed for freedom of choice, since a wealthy person could opt to lease a poor seat and a poor person could save up to lease an expensive one. In practice, however, social stratification within the synagogue continued, albeit in less specific and more muted fashion. Where before seats reflected each individual's precise social ranking, now they only offered an approximate picture of the community's economic divisions.¹¹

We possess a detailed description from Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia of how this system of leased pews actually worked. Seats in the synagogue's women's gallery were divided into three categories (termed, quite appropriately, "classes,") from the front seats ("inner range") to the back. In 1851, a three-year lease to a "first class" seat went for sixty dollars with an additional annual assessment of eight dollars, while second- and third-class seats could be leased for thirty dollars and twenty dollars with annual assessments of four dollars and three dollars. Leftover seats could be rented on an annual basis for ten, six, or four dollars. Men's seats were divided into five categories, with a three-year lease costing one-hundred, sixty, forty, thirty, or twenty-five dollars, depending on the seat's "class," and additional annual assessments of fourteen, nine, seven, four, or three dollars. Leftover men's seats could be rented at twenty, twelve, nine, six, or five dollars. Seats in the back ("the sixth and seventh ranges") were neither leased nor rented "but reserved for strangers or persons unable to take seats." As non-

seatholders, those in the back were separated from everybody else and marked as outsiders.¹²

The difference here between the price of men's and women's seats is particularly fascinating. Not only were men more socially stratified than women (five classes as opposed to three), but men of every class level were superior (in terms of what they paid) to women of their class, and even men with seats in the lowly fifth class paid more overall than women of the third class. This may reflect real differences between what men and women earned, but is more likely an indication of women's inferior synagogue status. Since women had to sit upstairs and were denied synagogue honors, they were charged less than the men were.

Over time, some synagogues experimented with alternative means of allocating seats. The system pioneered by New York's Temple Emanu-El in 1847 whereby seats were sold in perpetuity—a practice well-known in Europe—proved particularly popular, for it raised a large fund of capital "up front" to pay off building debts. In 1854, when Emanu-El moved into its 12th Street Temple, the sale of seats at auction yielded \$31,000. A similar sale fourteen years later, when the temple moved up to Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street, yielded "100,000 over and above the cost of the building and the lots." While those with lesser means could still rent seats at Emanu-El and remain members, only pew owners could serve as officers. In some other synagogues that sold pews, renters could not be members at all but were classified as nonvoting seatholders.¹³

Regardless of whether synagogues sold seats or rented them, assigned seats or not, assessed members once or continually solicited them throughout the year, they all depended on seat revenues for a large percentage of their upkeep. Survival dictated that the best seats be given to those who supported the synagogue most liberally. What Edna Ferber found in Appleton, Wisconsin, at the beginning of the twentieth century was thus true of most synagogues:

Seating was pretty well regulated by the wealth and prominence of the congregation. In the rows nearest the pulpit sat the rich old members, their sons and daughters and grandchildren. Then came the next richest and most substantial. Then the middling well-to-do, then the poorest. The last rows were reserved for strangers and . . . "Russians."¹⁴

Some synagogues did set aside a few seats for prominent members (government officials, scholars, writers, etc.) who lacked means but were felt to merit front-rank status on account of their social prestige. Others,

however, found this to be undemocratic and divisive. One synagogue actually banned the practice in its constitution, declaring that every seat would henceforward be offered for sale, "in order to avoid unnecessary trouble to the Board of Directors and to give more satisfaction to *all* the members of the Congregation." Even here, those too poor to pay for a seat were not completely excluded from synagogue life. As secondary or nonmembers, however, they were expected to know their place. If they sought to occupy vacant pews owned by more affluent congregants, they ran the risk of being forcibly ejected.¹⁵

SYNAGOGUES AND CHURCHES were hardly to blame for the existence of inequalities in America. Nor were they to blame for the fact that, far too frequently, America's wealthy only made donations of urgently needed funds in return for conspicuous rewards in social status. Still, the intrusion of social and class distinctions into the hallowed domains of sacred institutions troubled many Americans, particularly those who interpreted the country's democratic ideals in egalitarian terms. "As Americans perceive it," James Oliver Robertson has pointed out, "the tendency of American history is toward classlessness. The Revolution was fought to destroy privilege. American reform, since the Jacksonian era, has been motivated by the desire to perfect equality and democracy. . . . In American myth, America *is* a classless society. If it can be shown not to be, then something is wrong and needs to be put right."¹⁶

Stratified seating so obviously contradicted the goals of egalitarian democracy that opposition to it should not prove surprising. Already in the immediate post-Revolutionary era, when "people on a number of fronts began to speak, write and organize against the authority of mediating elites, of social distinction and of any human tie that did not spring from volitional allegiance," free seating on a first-come, first-served basis became the general rule in many of the new and frontier churches, notably among the Methodists (except in New England) and the Disciples of Christ.¹⁷ Growing experience with "classlessness" both in the public schools, where rich and poor sat side by side, and on the railroads where, in the astonished words of one immigrant Jewish observer, "everyone sits together in one car—for there is only one car of one class for all—rich and poor, master and slave together in one body," made stratified seating in houses of worship seem even more incongruous. Yet at the same time, the realities of economic inequality in America were becoming increasingly profound. Urban geography, clubs, resorts, and

the entertainment world all reflected a heightened awareness and acceptance of social and class divisions. In spite of noble ideals and symbolic bows to classlessness, rich and poor in America were actually growing ever further apart.¹⁸

This paradox—the disjunction between ideal and reality—posed an obvious dilemma for churches and synagogues. Should they maintain the class and status distinctions that many congregants considered proper, or should they champion egalitarian ideals, even at the risk of imperiling their own financial security? The move from assigned seats to sale of seats salved some consciences by opening up pews to anyone with the means to pay for them, but it did nothing about the underlying problems of social inequality itself. Periodically, aggrieved members spoke up on this issue and called for reforms on the frontier church model.¹⁹ However, large-scale changes did not come about until the rise of the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth century. Then, concern about the "unchurched" poor, fear of the urban masses, renewed dedication to social justice, and a resulting surge of religious activism lent new weight to the free-pews movement. Free seating won adoption both in many liberal Protestant churches and in many Catholic churches.²⁰ For the first time, it also won adoption in an American synagogue.

CALLS FOR FREE SEATING in the synagogue first rang out early in the Social Gospel era in connection with appeals for more democracy in Jewish life and more aid to the poor and unaffiliated. In 1882, the year that William S. Rainsford originated his free "institutional church" at New York's St. George's Episcopal Church, Myer Stern, secretary of Temple Emanu-El in New York, advocated the creation of a totally free synagogue—all seats unassigned and available without charge—for "those of our faith who are eager to worship with us, but whose circumstances through misfortune and various causes are such as to prevent their hiring pews or seats either in our or any other temple or synagogue."²¹ Ray Frank, the remarkable woman preacher whose sermons pricked the consciences of Jews throughout the West, later assailed the whole system of making "stock" of synagogue seats. "If I were a rabbi," she declared in 1890, "I would not sell religion in the form of pews and benches to the highest bidder." She then documented some of the system's worst abuses.²² Rabbi Isaac Moses of Chicago had come to the same conclusion, and in 1896 attempted to found a congregation based upon this new plan. Attacking the "undemocratic" nature of the

synagogue—which, he felt, kept many Jews unaffiliated, and limited the rabbi's independence—he offered full membership to all, “regardless of their annual contributions,” with dues payments only “to be such as each individual member feels that he or she is justified in making.”²³ Nothing came of this effort, but in 1898 Rabbi William Rosenau of Baltimore, less radical than Moses but equally concerned about the large number of those too poor to afford seats, proposed a different solution: “Every congregation ought to set aside a certain number of pews, not in the rear of the temple, or in the galleries, but in all parts of the auditorium, so that no lines of distinction be drawn between the rich and the poor at least in the house of God.”²⁴

Since changes in the internal arrangement of a synagogue are easier to propose than to effect, particularly when they have economic implications, assigned seating of one sort or another remained the rule. At Temple Beth El in Detroit, Michigan, however, an unanticipated problem developed. Although a new temple had been erected on Woodward Street in a growing section of town, nobody envisaged that membership would grow as rapidly as it did, increasing at a rate of more than 25 percent a year. The task of assigning seats equitably to all members and their families under these conditions proved impossible. There were enough seats to accommodate those who actually came and worshipped on any given Sabbath, but not enough to accommodate those who had rights to particular seats and wanted them to remain unoccupied even when they themselves were not present. As a result, in September 1903, the congregation voted that seats in the new building would remain temporarily unassigned, available to all on a first-come, first-served basis, while the board of trustees decided what to do. Pragmatic rather than ideological considerations motivated this decision, and nobody expected it to have a lasting effect. But in fact, a historic change had taken place.²⁵

Formerly, Beth El had offered members the choice of buying seats, renting them, or having a seat assigned to them from the pool that remained. Those who chose either of the first two options paid both their annual assessment of dues, levied on every member by the board of trustees on a sliding scale based on ability to pay, and an additional sum representing their purchase or rental fee. Everyone else received seats commensurate with their dues assessment. This was a cumbersome and somewhat inequitable system that many members opposed. But the board of trustees finally recommended that it be reinstated in the new synagogue; otherwise, the board feared, the congregation's rapidly rising budget would not be met. The recommendation was greeted with a barrage of criticism and spawned a vigorous congregational debate. Some members wanted all seats sold. Some wanted all seats rented.

Some wanted an end to the system of assessments. All agreed to search for a compromise that would seat as many people as possible, as equitably as possible, without threatening the congregation's income. Meeting followed meeting while seats in the new temple remained open and unassigned. Finally, after every other proposal failed to win approval, the new status quo was made permanent. On 27 April 1904, “the unassigned pew system was unanimously concurred in by those present at a large and enthusiastic meeting of the congregation.” Higher assessments ensured that the lost revenue from seat income would be more than made up.²⁶

ALTHOUGH UNASSIGNED SEATING came to Beth El by accident (“sheer force of circumstances”), and the plan won permanent adoption largely by default, ideological considerations played a significant part both in the debate over the issue and in the justifications that followed it. What began as a practical measure ended up serving a symbolic purpose—a sequence that paralleled what had earlier happened in the movement from separate to mixed seating. In this case, proponents used free seating as evidence of Judaism's concern for “justice, equality and fraternity.”²⁷

Rabbi Leo Franklin of Beth El, casting himself as the Jewish apostle of free seating, took the lead in trumpeting the system's virtues and defending them against all critics. To him, the system came to be identified as something “essentially Jewish,” as “nearly ideal as human institutions can be.” “In God's house all must be equal,” he maintained, echoing Social Gospel rhetoric: “There must be no aristocracy and no snobocracy.” Franklin lambasted as “fundamentally wrong, unjust and unJewish” the contention that those who contributed more to a synagogue deserved disproportionate rewards. He insisted that the finances of the congregation could remain strong without special pews for the rich so long as a graduated dues-assessment system was in effect. He even assured frightened synagogue regulars that “practical experience” demonstrated that most people could “occupy the same seats the year round, even under the unassigned system.” As for free seating's benefits, he pointed out that besides equality of opportunity the system encouraged people to come to temple on time and to bring their families. It ended the “abomination of having rented seats unoccupied while perhaps dozens of poor men and women are compelled to stand in the aisles or lobbies.” And it made it easier to accommodate guests who no longer had to sit in specially set aside areas, apart from regular members.²⁸

Franklin was convinced that free seating's virtues would win it wide acceptance within the American Jewish community, bringing glory to all Jews and introducing a greater degree of "practical idealism" into the synagogue. Even in his own congregation, however, he met with repeated challenges. Various resignations attended the first acceptance of the free-seating plan, including that of Seligman Schloss, one of Beth El's most distinguished members and an ex-president (who later withdrew his resignation). According to one source, "a large percentage" of the other elderly members, including some of the congregation's leading benefactors, were no less adamant in seeking to prevent the plan from ever taking effect.²⁹ They insisted that status considerations played no part in their opposition, and that they simply wanted some guarantee that they would find a seat somewhere in the sanctuary, even if they came late. They also complained about being forced to scurry around the whole synagogue searching out members of their family who would no longer be found in one place. A proposal to set aside several rows for the elderly did not mollify the malcontents. Indeed, "nothing outside of the complete waiver of the principle involved would satisfy them." The fact that opponents used financial leverage to put pressure on the congregation added to the belief that their demands were motivated by more than just disinterested concern for those whom free seating inconvenienced.³⁰

Rhetoric aside, it seems apparent that the Beth El dispute actually saw two conflicting and widely accepted American principles colliding head on: belief in equality and recognition of natural inequalities.³¹ Rabbi Franklin's supporters recognized inequalities but sought to promote visible equality. They thus both encouraged "religious fellowship," believing that "every man . . . deserves an equal place with every other," and continued to recognize inequalities for purposes of dues assessment.³² By contrast, opponents of free seating sought one *or* the other. Either all should contribute equally and enjoy equal access to all seats, or all should contribute unequally and be rewarded in the same fashion. While to Rabbi Franklin unassigned seating represented a blow against class divisions and support for the highest values that America and Judaism had to offer, to his opponents the same system exuded injustice and violated the basic principles of equity. At a deep level, the dispute had as much to do with symbols as with substance.

In the end, the two sides compromised. In the congregation, as in the country at large, egalitarian ideas and natural inequalities both won recognition. Free seating thus remained the policy of the congregation alongside the system of dues assessments. At the same time, in return for their agreement to pay their substantial arrears and remain at Beth El, dissident members won the status concessions that they had sought. The three malcontented ex-presidents, for their "long and appreciated

services and contributions to the cause of the Temple," each had three seats assigned to them for as long as they lived. Seligman Schloss promptly selected a choice location: "in the easterly row of benches, in the seventh bench from the pulpit, on the western end." The other dissidents won the right to have up to four seats always reserved for them "in the center section of the auditorium" for "up to fifteen minutes after the time set for the commencement of services."³³

EVEN BEFORE THE DISPUTE at Beth El was settled, leading Reform rabbis from around the country had spoken out in favor of free seating as an expression of social justice. Rabbi Emil Hirsch of Chicago, the leading exponent of social justice within the Reform Movement, called it "the ideal plan" for synagogues to adopt. Rabbi Henry Berkowitz of Philadelphia recommended free seating to his own congregation. Others, according to Leo Franklin, wrote to him privately expressing admiration for what he had done. Many promised to watch the experiment carefully.³⁴

The rabbi who expressed the greatest immediate interest in free seating was young Stephen Wise, then still at Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon. Wise had taken over the Portland ministry in 1900, and had from the start firmly allied himself with the aims of the Social Gospel movement. He achieved spectacular success, tripled his congregation's membership, and brought the congregation into financial health for the first time, building a surplus of \$4,000. Given this financial cushion, he issued, in 1904, his first call for a "free synagogue" in which members could sit where they choose and pay what they choose. As opposed to Beth El, where free seating had come first and justifications later, Wise began with his principles: each man paying what he can afford, all equal in the eyes of the Lord. He also displayed a greater degree of consistency than Rabbi Franklin had, for he attacked both stratified pews and stratified dues at the same time.³⁵

Wise's free synagogue experiment, begun in 1905, achieved success. The experiment succeeded again when Wise moved back to New York and opened his Free Synagogue (now the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue) in 1907. There, free seating on a first-come, first-served basis represented a "token and symbol" of other freedoms: freedom from fixed dues, freedom of the pulpit, and freedom of opportunity for all—women included—to become Temple members and officeholders. Drawing (without credit) from the ideas of previous Jewish and Christian critics of stratified seating, Wise established the most compelling case yet for the relationship between free seating, Jewish ideals, and American ideals. He

made free seating part of his solution to the twin problems of the fast-waning influence of the synagogue, and the fast-growing number of urban Jews who belonged to no synagogue at all. The values he espoused through synagogue seating were the values he proclaimed to society at large: "freedom, hospitality, inclusiveness, brotherhood, [and] the leveling of the anti-religious bars of caste."³⁶

For all of its idealistic appeal, however, the free-synagogue idea failed to take hold nationwide; in the absence of a particularly charismatic rabbi it proved impractical. In Philadelphia, for example, the venerable Sephardic congregation Mikve Israel, after moving into a new synagogue building in 1909, decided to keep its old edifice in the poorer section of town "open all the year around absolutely free to worshippers." But it soon found the cost of this to be prohibitive. When free-will offerings did not reach expectations, the project had to be abandoned. Mickve Israel Congregation in Savannah faced the same problem in 1913: Although it tried to become a free synagogue, economic considerations forced it to abandon the experiment after only one year.³⁷

By contrast, free seating combined with some system of required dues posed far less of an economic threat, served as a visible symbol of social-justice ideals, and, in time, did succeed. To take just a few examples, Temple Israel in Memphis instituted free seating in 1918, Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh in 1920, Temple Israel in Boston in 1922, and Congregation Beth Israel of Houston in 1927. By 1940, nearly two hundred synagogues had adopted some form of free seating, and many more assigned seats only for the high holidays. The free-seating movement continued to spread, especially during the war years when it was associated with the effort to strengthen democracy at home. By the 1960s, even many old-line synagogues had abandoned assigned seating, replacing it with a new "fair share" system that, by assigning dues on the basis of income rather than seat location, ensured that "democratization" would not result in any loss of revenue from the wealthy. Although statistics are lacking, impressionistic evidence suggests that free seating, while not ubiquitous, is now predominant across the spectrum of American Jewish life, in Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues alike.³⁸

IF FREE SEATING produced more visible equality in the American synagogue, it failed to produce perfect equality. Wealthy congregants were still more likely than their poorer counterparts to be recognized

from the pulpit or to serve as synagogue officers, and they soon found alternative means to engage in conspicuous consumption: by leaving their names on synagogue plaques, for instance, or by staging lavish congregational parties to celebrate significant family milestones. Moreover, even with free seating rich and poor did not necessarily sit side by side. Instead, as Samuel Heilman found, synagogue goers naturally tended to sit by their friends, usually people similar in occupation, education, and religious outlook to themselves. As a result, congregational seating patterns often continued to mark status, power, and authority within the synagogue community, albeit far more subtly. "Seating patterns," Heilman concluded, "are not simply physical arrangements but reflect social belongingness."³⁹

The rise of free seating is nevertheless a revealing and significant development in American synagogue history. First of all, it sheds light on how, under American influence, the synagogue experienced change. Seating by social rank, and later any pattern of assigned seating that emphasized differences based on wealth, became in the eyes of many American Jews an affront to America's democratic ethos. Although stratified seating had characterized synagogues for centuries, American cultural values in this case exerted a much stronger pull. The reason, I think, is that free seating, unlike mixed seating of men and women, was not actually incompatible with Jewish tradition. Furthermore, free seating permitted the synagogue to display a measure of patriotic piety, and had the added advantage of using seats more efficiently. Most important of all, perhaps, experience suggested that the change could be implemented without serious financial loss. As a result, it was hard to oppose. Rabbis like Leo Franklin and Stephen Wise, by investing free seating with deeper Jewish significance, made the process of adjustment even easier. By implementing free seating, congregants could now view themselves not only as better Americans but as better Jews as well.

Second, free seating is significant as an illustration of a noteworthy and little-studied type of Jewish religious innovation that was debated largely on the local congregational level, rather than becoming a major point of contention between the different American Jewish religious movements. Although Reform Jews, who traditionally emphasized social justice, pioneered free seating, I have found no evidence that Orthodox and Conservative Jews were ideologically opposed to it. Moreover, within the Reform Movement itself some leading temples (like Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco and Isaac M. Wise Temple of Cincinnati) maintained traditional patterns of stratified seating long into the twentieth century. Free seating thus spread on a congregation-by-congregation basis, and was decided in each case by balancing egalitarian ideals

against pragmatic realities: Would loss of seat income be balanced by increasing dues? Would existing seatholders insist on their property rights? Would wealthy members transfer their membership elsewhere? The answers to such questions had far more to do with whether free seating would be adopted than denominational affiliation did—a reminder that the diversity of American synagogue life cannot be explained on the basis of intra-Jewish politics alone.⁴⁰

Third, free seating demonstrates the impact on American Jewish life of ideas generally associated with the Protestant Social Gospel. Nathan Glazer wrote in *American Judaism* about “the failure of a Jewish ‘social gospel’ to develop among Reform Jews,” and his words have been widely echoed. But in fact, Social Gospel concerns—translated into Jewish terms and stripped of their Christological rhetoric—received considerable attention in American Jewish circles, and influenced not only the Reform movement and synagogue life, but also the whole relationship between American Jews and East European Jewish immigrants. The subject as a whole requires further study and cannot be pursued here. What we do learn from free seating, however, is that even specific Social Gospel causes had their American Jewish analogues.⁴¹

Finally, free seating is significant for what it teaches us about the ongoing tension between realism and idealism in American Jewish life. Free seating, as its supporters plainly admitted, represented a kind of utopia, an exalted vision of classless democracy where people from different walks of life dwelt harmoniously side by side. Realistically speaking, however, the synagogue could not survive under such conditions; unless wealthier members contributed more than poorer ones, no synagogue could pay its bills. This was the synagogue’s version of what Murray Friedman calls the “utopian dilemma,” the clash between romantic idealism and pragmatic self-interest. The result, as we have seen, was a compromise.⁴²

NOTES

1. Samuel C. Heilman, *Synagogue Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 36.

2. Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Debate Over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 363–394.

3. The expression, of course, was popularized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1912; rpt. New York: Mentor, 1953), 60–80. For an

illuminating historical analysis of the idea of equality, see R. R. Palmer, “Equality,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 2:138–148.

4. Samuel Kraus, *Korot Bet HaTefilah BeYisrael* (New York: Ogen, 1955), 251; Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot, 6b; Tosefta Sukkah 4:6.

5. *Tur*; and see Isserles gloss on *Shulkhan Arukh* OH 150:5; Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945), 2, 130–131; Kraus, *Korot*, 252–256; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972) 15:593.

6. Quoted in Robert J. Dinkin, “Seating the Meeting House in Early Massachusetts,” *New England Quarterly* 43 (1970): 450.

7. *Ibid.*, 459.

8. On stratified seating, see also Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill, 1630–1783* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 142–149; Peter Benes and Philip D. Zimmerman, *New England Meeting House and Church, 1630–1850* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1979), 55–56; David H. Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 38–40; and for nineteenth-century Catholicism, Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 49–52.

9. *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 21 (1913), 62; see also 81–84, 154–155; 27 (1920): 28; David and Tamar de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 199, 270–273; and Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 12–13.

10. Saul J. Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry 1733–1983* (Savannah, Ga.: Congregation Miske Israel, 1983), 52; Pool, *An Old Faith*, 272.

11. Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654–1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945), 479–83; Pool, *An Old Faith*, 299.

12. *At a special meeting of the Board of Managers of K. K. M. I., held on Sunday June 8th, 1851 . . . the following Resolutions were adopted and ordered to be printed* [Broadside] (Philadelphia, 1851), copy in Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio. On the traditional position of women in the synagogue, see Carol H. Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe* (New York: MIT Press, 1985), 28–31.

13. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 482–483; *New Era* 4 (1874): 131.

14. Edna Ferber, *A Peculiar Treasure* (New York: Literary Guild, 1939), 74.

15. *Montefiore Congregation Constitution* (Las Vegas, N. Mex.: 1898), 11, copy in American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. For an example of a seating plan where social prestige played a role, see *Canadian Jewish Archives* 1 (August 1955), 16. On the poor, see Pool, *An Old Faith*, 273. Compare Krinsky’s description of the London Great Synagogue’s “large pew where the poor were kept to prevent their mingling with those who could pay for seats and for building maintenance,” *Synagogues of Europe*, 417.

16. James O. Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 259.
17. Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *Journal of American History* 67 (December 1980): 561; see also *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974) s.v. "pew rental"; "Pews," *American Quarterly Church Review* 13 (July 1860): 284-300; and Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Harper, 1957), 23-24, 164.
18. Leon Horowitz, "Tuv Artsot Habrit," *Rumania Ve'Amerika* (Berlin: 1874), 6; this work has been translated by Randi Musnitsky, "America's Goodness: An Edited Translation of Leon Horowitz's *Tuv Artsot Habrit* (Ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1983); for a cultural evaluation of social cleavage during this era, see Neil Harris, ed., *The Land of Contrasts* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), esp. pp. 16-19.
19. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York*, 538, n11. See also Solomon Jackson, "Address to Joseph Dreyfous. . . 1829," reprinted in Solomon Solis-Cohen, "A Unique Jewish Document of a Century Ago," *Jewish Exponent*, 25 (October 1929): 8.
20. Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Robert D. Cross, ed., *The Church and the City* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); and Ronald C. White and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), which provides valuable background and additional bibliography. For a typical free-seating debate, see *Congregationalist* 78 (1893): 245, 255-256, 848-849. On the Social Gospel and the Jews, see Egal Feldman, "The Social Gospel and the Jews," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 58 (March 1969): 308-322; Leonard J. Mervis, "The Social Justice and the American Reform Movement," *American Jewish Archives* 7 (June 1955): 171-230; Bernard Martin, "The Social Philosophy of Emil G. Hirsch," *American Jewish Archives* 6 (June 1954): 151-166; and John F. Sutherland, "Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Philadelphia: The Urban Reformer Returns to the Land," *American Jewish History* 67 (June 1978): 342-362.
21. Hopkins, *Rise of the Social Gospel*, 154-156; William S. Rainsford, *Let Us Anchor Our Churches and Make Them Free* (New York, 1890); and Myer Stern, *The Rise and Progress of Reform Judaism* (New York, 1895), 77-78.
22. Jacob R. Marcus, ed., *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav, 1981), 383; on Frank, see Simon Litman, *Ray Frank Litman: A Memoir* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1957); and Reva Clar and William M. Kramer, "The Girl Rabbi of the Golden West," *Western States Jewish History* 18 (1986): 99-111, 223-236, 336-351.
23. *Reform Advocate*, 20 June 1896, pp. 359-360; *American Hebrew*, 28 August 1896, p. 414.
24. William Rosenau, "The Attitude of the Congregation to the Non Member," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 8 (1898): 65.

25. *A History of Congregation Beth El, Detroit, Michigan, Volume 2, 1900-1910* (Detroit: Winn & Hammond, 1910), 35-40, 80; Minutes, 5 April 1904, Temple Beth El Minute Book, Box X-6, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. For other brief accounts, see Irving I. Katz, *The Beth El Story* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1955), 99-101; Robert Rockaway, "The Progress of Reform Judaism in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Detroit," *Michigan Jewish History* (January 1974), 17; and idem, *The Jews of Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 124.
26. *Constitution and By-Laws of Congregation Beth El* (Detroit: 1892), 7, 11-12; Minutes, 8 September 1903-27 April 1904, Beth El Minute Book; *History of Beth El* 2: 38.
27. Leo Franklin, "A New Congregational Policy," Beth El Scrapbook, Box X-201, American Jewish Archives. See also *American Israelite* 17 (November 1904): 4.
28. Franklin, "A New Congregational Policy"; Minutes, 11 May 1904, Beth El Minute Book.
29. Minutes 11 May 1904, 8 November 1904, Beth El Minute Book; newspaper clipping, 15 February 1905, Beth El Scrapbook.
30. Ibid. and Minutes, 18 September 1905, Beth El Minute Book.
31. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 70-75, traces the origin of this tension. See also Martin Diamond, "The American Idea of Equality: The View From the Founding," *Review of Politics* 38 (July 1976): 313-331; and David M. Potter, *People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 91-110.
32. Franklin, "A New Congregational Policy."
33. Minutes, 7 December 1905, Beth El Minute Book.
34. Ibid., 31 October 1904; and Franklin, "A New Congregational Policy," *History of Beth El* 2:39.
35. Franklin, "A New Congregational Policy"; Melvin Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany: State University of Albany Press, 1982), 34-38; Julius J. Nodel, *The Ties Between* (Portland: Temple Beth Israel, 1959), 89-98; and White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, 232. Leo Franklin subsequently proposed abolishing stratified dues, but his board ignored him; see Minutes, 18 September 1905, Beth El Minute Book.
36. Stephen S. Wise, "What Is A Free Synagogue?" in *Free Synagogue Pulpit* (New York: Bloch, 1908) 1:10-15.
37. Cyrus Adler to Solomon Schechter, 28 December 1910, Solomon Schechter Papers, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York; Rubin, *Third To None*, 253. Interestingly, Mordecai Kaplan, who also sought to "break down the social barriers which prevent Jews of different economic status from sharing their spiritual interests," did not advocate a free synagogue, but rather one maintained jointly by the Jewish community and the beneficiaries; see *Judaism As A Civilization* (1934, rpt. New York: Schocken, 1967) 427.
38. Louis Witt, "The Basis of Membership in the American Synagogue," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, 21 (1911), 195-212; Ernest Lee,

Temple Israel: Our First Century 1854–1954 (Memphis, Tenn: 1954), 38; Marcus L. Aaron, *One Hundred Twenty Years: Rodef Shalom Congregation* [pamphlet] (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Rodef Shalom, 1976), 8; Arthur Mann, ed., *Growth and Achievement: Temple Israel 1854–1954* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1954), 36; Anne Nathan Cohen, *The Centenary History: Congregation Beth Israel of Houston Texas, 1854–1954* (Houston, Tex.: The Congregation, 1954), 50; Leo M. Franklin, *An Outline History of Congregation Beth El* (Detroit: Beth El, 1940), 27; Frank J. Adler, *Roots in a Moving Stream* (Kansas City: Congregation B'nai Jehudah, 1972), 192; Marjorie Hornbein, *Temple Emanuel of Denver: A Centennial History* (Denver: Congregation Emanuel, 1974), 128–129; and Ethel and David Rosenberg, *To 120 Years!* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, 1979), 99. See also Leon Jick, "The Reform Synagogue," in Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue*, 99. The venerable Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco maintained "sixteen different categories of seats . . . which precisely reflected the socioeconomic stratification of the membership" into the late 1950s; democratization and the "fair share" plan were only fully implemented in the 1960s. See Fred Rosenbaum, *Architects of Reform* (Berkeley, Cal.: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1980), 91–92, 167.

39. Heilman, *Synagogue Life*, 36–39.

40. See also my introduction to Alexandra S. Korros and Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Synagogue History: A Bibliography and State-of-the-Field Survey* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1988). Discussions regarding whether to introduce a "democratized" synagogue polity and a "progressive" income-based dues structure seem to me to fall into the same structural category of reforms; the subject requires further investigation.

41. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 138; cf. White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, xii, 230, and items cited in note 20.

42. Murray Friedman, *The Utopian Dilemma* (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: Seth Press, 1985), 89–92.