

The Classical Reform Context

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, a mood of unbridled optimism prevailed in America. Peace and goodwill seemed secure, and the nation experienced unprecedented economic growth. The railroad system tripled in size, new inventions were introduced, and America's oil, coal, and steel industries prospered. Even in the face of growing social crisis and rising poverty in America's farms and cities, it was widely believed that the control of preventable diseases, the abolition of poverty, and the raising of the general standard of living would all come about.¹

By 1881, most of the approximately two hundred eighty thousand Jews living in the United States were upwardly mobile second and third generation immigrants from Germany and Central Europe.² They identified most strongly with the Reform Movement, which originated in Germany and perceived Judaism in light of eighteenth-century enlightenment and nineteenth-century emancipation. The liberal optimism and confidence of Reform resonated with the German immigrants' hopes for a better life in the United States. During the "Classical" period of American Reform Judaism, which essentially spanned the years 1869 to 1937,³

¹Free Synagogue Pulpit (1) 1908: 62-63.

²A nationwide demographic survey of 1890, cited in Nathan Glazer's American Judaism, p.44, found that forty percent of the German-Jewish population employed one servant, twenty percent had two, and ten percent employed three or more servants.

³The landmark meeting of Reform Rabbis in Philadelphia in 1869 and the passage of the Columbus Platform sixty-eight years later account for this periodization of Classical Reform.

Reform became the movement of choice for Americanized Jews of German descent and made its greatest separation from traditional Judaism.

The Progress of American Reform Judaism

Prior to 1869, American Reform Judaism operated almost entirely on the congregational level. The very first effort at reforms in America occurred in 1824 in Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston was America's largest Jewish community at the time, and members of the Sephardic Beth Elohim congregation petitioned their leaders for changes in ritual, which included the introduction of English prayers, a weekly sermon in English, and an abbreviated service.⁴ When these and other requests were rebuffed, a small group led by Isaac Harby (1788-1828) seceded and formed the short-lived "Reformed Society of Israelites."⁵ By the late 1830's, Beth Elohim had adopted some of the Society's reforms and was moving in the direction of Reform. The first congregation organized as a Reform congregation, Har Sinai of Baltimore, was founded by a group of young immigrants who had been influenced by the Hamburg Temple Prayer Book in Germany.⁶ Three years later, in 1845, New York's Emanuel congregation was founded, and Reform-minded congregations soon appeared in other Eastern and Midwestern cities. They included Albany's Anshe Emeth (1850), Cincinnati's Bene

⁴The forty-seven signatories of the petition were influenced by the stirrings of German Reform. See David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, pp.329-331.

⁵For an extensive discussion of the Society's history, membership, and religious reforms, see Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity, pp.228-235.

⁶David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, p.335.

Yeshurun (1854) and Bene Israel (1855), Philadelphia's Keneseth Israel (1856), and Chicago's Temple Sinai (1861).⁷

The greatest impetus to the growth of American Reform in the mid-nineteenth century was the arrival of German-trained rabbis, many of whom were influenced by Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), the ideological and spiritual leader of European Reform Judaism. Max Lilienthal (1814-1882), who arrived in New York in 1845, was active in the spreading of the teachings of the Reform Movement and led the Bene Israel Congregation in Cincinnati for twenty-seven years. Samuel Adler (1809-1891), a scholar and active participant in the German Reform rabbinical conferences, succeeded Dr. Leo Merzbacher as Rabbi of Temple Emanuel in New York. Bernard Felsenthal (1822-1908) activated Reform Jewish life in Chicago with his 1859 *Kol Kore Bamidbar* pamphlet, and Samuel Hirsch (1815-1889), a prolific German writer and philosopher of Reform, assumed the Philadelphia Keneseth Israel pulpit in 1866.

It was a Bohemian immigrant from Radnitz, however, who shaped the history and development of Reform Jewish life in America more than any other individual. Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) served as a rabbi in Albany before becoming spiritual leader of Temple Bene Jeshurun of Cincinnati. He sought to establish a congregational assembly representing all sectors of American Jewry, as well as a rabbinical seminary for the training of American rabbis. He partially succeeded in both undertakings when the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) was established in 1873.

⁷Marc L. Raphael, Profiles in American Judaism, p.11.

The Hebrew Union College (HUC) was founded two years later. The UAHC eventually grew to include all Reform congregations, but never won the affiliation of the traditional synagogues. HUC also prospered, but did not fulfill Wise's initial goal of serving all sectors of the American community. Wise's support of the radical 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, coupled with the massive immigration of Eastern Europeans who were conditioned by the *yeshivah* model of rabbinic education, limited HUC's appeal to mostly liberal reformers.

The moderate tendencies of Isaac Mayer Wise were not only unacceptable to the religious right, but led to contentious battles with the radical wing of the American Reform Movement. The radicals were led by David Einhorn (1809-1879), a seasoned German Reformer who had engaged in controversies with the Orthodox in Birkenfeld, Hoppstadten, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, and Budapest, before coming to America in 1855 to serve as rabbi of Baltimore's Har Sinai congregation. Einhorn stressed the moral mission of Israel and the universalist essence of Judaism throughout his rabbinate and was infuriated by Wise's capitulation to the Orthodox at the 1855 Cleveland Rabbinical Conference. Wise and his Reform colleagues, in an attempt to forge a compromise statement acceptable to the entire American rabbinate, voted in favor of a clause which endorsed the binding authority of the Talmud. Einhorn and his Eastern colleagues, including Samuel Adler of New York and Samuel Hirsch of Philadelphia, considered acceptance of this principle by any Reform rabbi to be an act of treachery. A schism ensued for fourteen years between the predominantly Eastern "radicals," led by Einhorn, and Wise's Western "moderates."

Wise publicized his more conciliatory and conservative approach to Reform Judaism in his *Israelite* and *Die Deborah* weeklies, and was countered in 1856 with the publication of Einhorn's *Sinai*, a German language monthly. Two years later, Einhorn published a prayerbook, *Olath Tamid*, in response to Wise's more traditional *Minhag America*. Its "abbreviated services, German translations, many original prayers, and crucial deletions, not only made it much more radical than Wise's *Minhag America*, but also probably gave it more enduring value."⁸ The legacy of Einhorn's *Olath Tamid* is evident to a degree in the *Union Prayer Book*, the first standard liturgy published by the Reform Movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).

In 1869, the fourteen-year rift between Einhorn's Eastern radicals and Wise's Western moderates was healed when both sides agreed to meet in Philadelphia. The thirteen rabbis who attended the conference reached agreement on a variety of issues. They voted to oppose Jewish nationalism, support the mission of Israel, abrogate priestly distinctions and rites, equalize the status of the woman at a marriage service, de-emphasize the importance of Hebrew in liturgy, and recognize the Jewishness of the uncircumcised son of a Jewish mother.⁹ More importantly, the Philadelphia Conference marked the beginning of American Reform's "Classical" phase. The seven principles adopted in Philadelphia served as the basis for the

⁸Ibid., p.15.

⁹David Polish, "The Changing and the Constant," in The American Jewish Archives, 35 (1983): p.270.

landmark Pittsburgh Conference of 1885, which became the centerpiece of Classical Reform.

The Pittsburgh Platform

Only fifteen rabbis were present when Kaufmann Kohler called the Pittsburgh Conference to order on November 16, 1885. Two days later, a set of principles were adopted which would shape the agenda of American Reform for the next fifty years. No previous conference, German or American, had as profound an effect on the development of Reform Judaism as this gathering in Pittsburgh.¹⁰ According to David Philipson, Secretary of the conference, it was "the most succinct expression of the theology of the Reform Movement that had ever been published to the world."¹¹ It may even be said that the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 articulated a set of beliefs to which many contemporary Reform Jews still subscribe. The platform emphasized a scientific, rational approach to religion, rejected the national existence of Israel, promoted universal brotherhood and the "mission" of Israel, and sought to distinguish between those ceremonies, rituals, and customs, which were compatible with the times, and those which were deemed unworthy of retention.

The conference opened with a call for unity by Kohler. Whereas Wise had convened the 1855 Cleveland Conference to develop a unifying program for all sectors of American Jewry, Kohler

¹⁰W. Gunther Plaut, The Growth of Reform Judaism, p.31.

¹¹David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, p.333.

concerned himself with the consolidation of Reform Jewish thought and practice.

"Looking at the various standpoints of progressive Jews individually or as represented in congregations, people only see that we have broken away from the old land-marks, but they fail to discern a common platform. Hence the confusion, the perplexity and the scare...It is high time to rally our forces to consolidate, to build."¹²

Isaac Mayer Wise was elected to serve as Chairman of the conference, though his influence was negligible when compared with the "commanding spirit" of David Einhorn.¹³ Einhorn had died in 1879, however, through the persuasive powers of his two sons-in-law, Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, his philosophy of Reform prevailed over Wise's more moderate leanings. In a paper presented on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Pittsburgh Platform and the Proceedings of 1885, Gunther Plaut labels Einhorn as the authentic "father" of Reform Judaism instead of Wise, as commonly assumed.¹⁴ Wise was unquestionably the institutional architect of American Reform by virtue of his role in founding the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873), the Hebrew Union College (1875), and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1889). However, the theology and ideology of the Platform were more reflective of Einhorn, and it was his chief disciple, Kohler, who shaped the tenor and substance of the Pittsburgh proceedings.¹⁵

¹²Walter Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, p.93.

¹³Plaut, op. cit., p.17.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵W. Gunther Plaut, "The Pittsburgh Platform in the Light of European Antecedents," in Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, p.22.

Utilizing the ten propositions laid out by Kohler in his opening paper, a committee consisting of Rabbis Emil G. Hirsch, Joseph Krauskopf, David Philipson, Solomon Sonneschein, and Kohler, reduced them to eight, in what became known as the Pittsburgh Platform.¹⁶ The Platform begins with a universalistic statement, "We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source, or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system, the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man."¹⁷ It is no accident that the Platform begins with an emphasis on the God-idea, especially in light of nineteenth-century rationalism and the threat posed by the Ethical Culture Movement. This New York-based movement, begun by Felix Adler in 1876, emphasized ethics and morality at the expense of theology. This first plank, therefore, is an unequivocal affirmation of Reform's dedication to the God-idea and excludes Adler's group from the outset.

The second plank says, in essence, that God did not write the Torah. In stating that the Bible is "the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the one God," the literal authority of the Torah was effectively dismissed. Instead, the Bible was revered for its use "as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction." Kohler later proposed to amend this section by including the words, "Divine Revelation." His motion, however, was defeated. The phrase "Divine Revelation" was simply

¹⁶While these statements incorporated most of the issues addressed in Kohler's remarks, a number of subjects, such as equality for women and home ritual, were not specifically mentioned in the final document.

¹⁷See appendix for full text of the Pittsburgh Platform.

too strong for most of the rabbis at Pittsburgh and did not comport with their scientific approach to Scripture. For them, the Bible was an historical record and reflected "the primitive ideas of its own age." Clearly, Darwin's On The Origin of Species in 1859, and the emerging field of Biblical criticism, had had an impact on the rabbis. By denying God's literal authorship of the Torah, the rabbis were able to see no conflict between the "doctrines of Judaism" and scientific discovery. The fundamental value of the Bible therefore lay in its moral and ethical teachings, and not in its scientific plausibility.

In an age when Christian Science, Ethical Culture, and intermarriage were attracting Jews away from their faith, this second plank also provided an answer to why Jews should remain Jewish. The architects of the Pittsburgh Platform took the notion of a Jewish mission very seriously. In their view, Jews were "heirs to, and custodians of, a most valid understanding of God, of God's relation to the world, and of God's goal for creation."¹⁸ Jewish survival therefore became a matter of transcendent significance, since God and the world needed Jewish witnesses to proclaim Judaism's message of ethical monotheism.

Paragraph three asserts that only those religious ceremonies which "elevate and sanctify" the lives of modern men should be maintained. Those which are not adaptable "to the views and habits of modern civilization" are to be rejected. One of the main principles of Reform Judaism, from its earliest beginnings in

¹⁸Samuel E. Karff, "The Theology of the Pittsburgh Platform," in Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, p.76.

Germany, was to evaluate the past and distinguish the fundamental and eternal characteristics in Judaism from the temporal and changing.¹⁹ David Philipson (1862-1949), one of the first graduates of the Hebrew Union College and an historian of the Reform Movement, emphasizes this point:

"...[Reform] discriminates between separate traditions as these have become actualized in forms, ceremonies, customs, and beliefs, accepting or rejecting them in accordance with the modern religious need and outlook, while rabbinical Judaism makes no such discrimination."²⁰

The third plank of the Pittsburgh Platform therefore reflects the Reformers' longstanding attempt to separate the binding moral law from the more transitory ceremonials.

The fourth plank is the only section stated completely in the negative. All laws governing "diet, priestly purity, and dress," are held to be influenced by ideas "altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state." This paragraph is an extension of the fourth resolution of the Philadelphia Conference in which the rabbis abolished all religious distinctions between priests, Levites, and Israelites. At Pittsburgh, however, it was added that the dietary laws and dress restrictions also failed "to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness." While the basis for the dismissal of these laws was that they were apt to "obstruct [rather] than to further" spirituality, even this negative pronouncement left open the

¹⁹Julian Mogenstern, "The Achievements of Reform Judaism," CCAR Yearbook, 34 (1924): 260.

²⁰Philipson, op. cit., p.9.

possibility of observing such practices when they were found to be spiritually enhancing.²¹

Paragraph five links the universal spirit of the modern era to "the realization of Israel's great messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men." It resembles the principles adopted at the Philadelphia and Frankfort Conferences in its affirmation of a Messianic age instead of a personal Messiah. The sense of imminence in the Pittsburgh statement, however, distinguishes the new formulation from earlier assemblies. This statement, more than any other, reveals the Pittsburgh rabbis' belief that the Messianic era was virtually within reach. The "modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect" suggested its arrival. The plank continues with the Pittsburgh Reformers' consideration of themselves as Jews in religion only. Consequently, all laws, prayers, and practices relating to a national return to Palestine were no longer relevant.

In the next paragraph, Judaism is said to be a "progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason." In many ways, this statement underscores the philosophy behind the entire document. Reason implied that religion, like every other human enterprise, was a consequence of gradual evolution. Judaism was not a static commodity fixed for all eternity but was rather a product of continuous growth and change. The Pittsburgh rabbis acknowledged the importance of preserving a historical identity with Judaism's great past. However, a progressive and reasonable

²¹See Philip Sigal, "Halakhic Reflections on the Pittsburgh Platform," in Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, pp.41-54.

Judaism meant that the test of truth had to depend on the laws of logic and rationality as well as Torah. With the postulates of reason as their inheritance, these Reformers felt impelled to re-examine traditional assumptions and to accept only those ideas that were compatible with the spirit of the times. One area in which traditional Jewish views were considered antiquated was in its deprecation of other monotheistic faiths. Kohler, in his opening address, had suggested that the times demanded a more positive theological appreciation of the "Gentile" world. His proposal is reflected in the second half of the sixth principle, which expresses appreciation to Christianity and Islam for their "providential mission to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth."

At Philadelphia, the rabbis had affirmed their belief in the immortality of the soul and denied the notion of a physical resurrection. The seventh plank of the Pittsburgh Platform reasserts this view and adds an additional rejection of the idea of punishment in the life after death. Rabbis Wise and Falk voiced their objection to the wording of this paragraph and expressed their wish to have reward and punishment accentuated as a Reform Jewish dogma. However, the counter-arguments of Kohler and Hirsch eventually prevailed. Hirsch noted the Parsee origin of burning in Gehenna and said, "We cannot urge too strongly that righteousness is its own reward, and wrong-doing carries with it its own punishment."²²

²²Jacob (ed.), op. cit., p.111.

The final paragraph introduces the notion that a Jew has a religious responsibility to participate in solving issues of social justice. "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation...we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society." This statement was a unique contribution of Reform to American Jewish life. The Prophets' emphasis on social justice and ethical behavior was reclaimed by the Pittsburgh Reformers and was considered to be of paramount importance. Though this statement was influenced by the American Progressive movement and the Christian Social Gospel,²³ the Reformers viewed the impulse for social action as Jewish in origin, and they even commended their Christian colleagues for "enlisting under the banner of prophetic Judaism."²⁴ In addition to the social action plank of the Pittsburgh Platform, the issue of a special mission to the Jewish poor was advocated during the proceedings "to bring these under the influence of moral and religious teaching."

The Pittsburgh Platform is generally considered to be the statement of Classical Reform Judaism in America. Its pronouncements bear a striking resemblance to the Philadelphia principles. Both cast aside Talmudic authority, both assert a

²³Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity, pp.287-288.

²⁴Rabbi Horace J. Wolf, reviewing Graham Taylor's Religion in Social Action, quoted in Meyer, Response to Modernity, p.288. The social action plank is not the only shared feature of Classical Reform and liberal Protestant Christianity. The liberal Protestant agenda that emerged after 1870, had counterparts with virtually every plank of the Pittsburgh Platform. See Robert W. Ross, "The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 One Hundred Years Old," in Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, pp.64-66.

positive view of the diaspora and reject a national homeland in Palestine, and both affirm belief in spiritual immortality while denying bodily resurrection. Aside from the new social action plank, the only noticeable differences are the Pittsburgh Platform's omission of the use of Hebrew in liturgy²⁵ and the term "chosen" found in the Philadelphia document. In the latter case, the Pittsburgh Platform declares the theological superiority of Judaism's God-idea but does not elevate the Jewish people per se to a higher plane. Instead, all who "operate with [Jews] in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men" are acknowledged to be interconnected and chosen to aid in Israel's mission. At the three German Reform Rabbinical Conferences and Synods,²⁶ the rabbis also affirmed the concepts of "historical evolution" and the obligation of Jews, in the words of Samuel Holdheim (1800-1860), to fulfill their mission "to make the pure knowledge of God, and the pure law of morality of Judaism, the common possession and blessing of all the people of the earth."²⁷

What set the Pittsburgh meeting apart from its ideological precursors at Philadelphia and in Germany, was the platform's undaunted willingness to break with tradition. The tone of the Pittsburgh proceedings is almost triumphant, ancient ideas are called "primitive," and the dawning of a new era is anticipated. Even the moderate Isaac Mayer Wise, on the occasion of his eightieth

²⁵It may have been the case that by 1885, Hebrew had become so insignificant that it did not even warrant separate attention.

²⁶Three rabbinical conferences were held at Brunswick (1844), Frankfurt-on-the-Main (1845), and Breslau (1846). Two synods took place in Leipzig (1869) and Augsburg (1871). See Meyer, Response to Modernity, pp.132-140.

²⁷W. Gunther Plaut, The Rise of Reform Judaism, pp.93-94, 138.

birthday, voiced his belief that Reform Judaism would become the religion of most enlightened Americans within twenty five years! The new reformers were intoxicated with the "spirit of broad humanity of [their] age," as demonstrated by the appreciation they extended to their Christian and Muslim co-religionists.

Reaction to the Pittsburgh Platform confirmed that it was a lightening rod for Reform support and opposition. The Southern rabbinical conference endorsed it immediately,²⁸ and the rift between Eastern and Western Reformers, dating back to Einhorn's 1855 attack on Wise for bowing to Talmudic legalists at the Cleveland Rabbinical Conference, healed quickly. Wise took great pride in the near unanimous approval of the Platform by all sectors of the American Reform rabbinate and reprinted the full text of the Platform in his *American Israelite* weekly. In the East, a new periodical entitled the *Jewish Reformer* was founded by Kohler, Hirsch, and Rabbi Adolph Moses of Louisville, which promulgated the "inner consolidation" of the Reform Movement represented by the proceedings at Pittsburgh.²⁹

The platform aroused a storm of opposition both from within and without the Reform camp. Felix Adler, who founded the universalist Ethical Culture Movement a decade earlier, wondered why the Pittsburgh rabbis did not go further and declare themselves to be Unitarians. Adler, the son of the distinguished German Reform

²⁸The conference of Southern Rabbis met in New Orleans in early 1866. James K. Gutheim presided over the assembly, which adopted the Pittsburgh Platform, but declared itself against Sunday Services. See James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise*, pp.466-467.

²⁹Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, pp.269-270.

rabbi, Samuel Adler, had lost all interest in Jewish ritual and theology, and invited the Pittsburgh Reformers to join his movement.³⁰ The platform aroused even greater opposition among the Orthodox and conservatives. Dr. Benjamin Szold, who had originally supported the Hebrew Union College and the UAHC, delivered a blistering denunciation of the Pittsburgh gathering. Dr. David Philipson, Szold's younger Baltimore colleague, records in his memoirs that Szold likened the rabbis assembled at Pittsburgh to pygmies attempting to pull down the Washington Monument!³¹ Neither HUC nor the UAHC officially endorsed the Pittsburgh Platform. Wise opened the 1886 academic year at HUC by asserting that the spirit of the College remained unchanged in spite of the passage of the Platform. He maintained that HUC stood firmly upon a belief in the revealed law and did not sanction an evolutionary approach to Judaism.³² Bowing to pressure from conservative member congregations of the UAHC, Bernhard Bettmann, President of the HUC Board of Governors, issued a letter rejecting any linkage between the tenets of the Pittsburgh Platform and the course of study taught at HUC.³³ Despite these public denunciations by Wise and others, moderates such as Marcus Jastrow of Philadelphia and Alexander Kohut of New York, joined Szold in severing their affiliation with the Reform Movement. They lent their support instead to the establishment of a rival to Wise's Hebrew Union

³⁰Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, p. 24. Meyer, op. cit., p.265-266, 271.

³¹Philipson, My Life As An American Jew, p.51.

³²Proceedings of the UAHC, 3 (1886-1891): 2053.

³³Ibid., pp.2005-2006.

College. In 1886, the Jewish Theological Seminary Association of America was founded in New York, marking the beginning of a new Conservative Jewish Movement in America.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis

The Central Conference of American Rabbis, the last of the three national institutions founded by Wise, was organized on July 9, 1889, in the city of Detroit. Although the third article of the CCAR constitution extends membership to "all active and retired rabbis of congregations, and professors of rabbinical seminaries," most of its members were liberals from the start.³⁴ It declared itself to be the historical successor of all modern rabbinical conferences and appended a summary of the resolutions made at various nineteenth-century rabbinical conferences and synods, from "The Responses of the French Sanhedrin, 1807," to the proceedings of the Pittsburgh Conference.³⁵

Isaac Mayer Wise became the first President of the Conference, a position he held until his death in 1900.³⁶ At the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the CCAR, Wise listed some of the notable achievements of the Conference during its first decade of activity. These included the CCAR's representation of Judaism at

³⁴Meyer, op. cit., p.276. See also Sidney L. Regner, "The History of the Conference," in Retrospect and Prospect, Bertram W. Korn (ed.), p.12.

³⁵An 1889 proposal to reassert the Pittsburgh Platform as the official expression of the Conference was defeated. However, the adoption of Maurice Faber's proposal to include it in the CCAR Yearbook together with the declarations of previous conferences, suggests its de facto acceptance and legitimate link in the historical chain of Reform Judaism.

³⁶Samuel Adler, sole survivor of the German conferences of the 1840's, was elected Honorary President of the Conference. See Plaut, The Growth of Reform Judaism, pp.42-43.

the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, the publication of a standard prayerbook, the *Union Prayer-Book for Jewish Worship* (UPB) in 1892, and the unification of Reform leaders of North America.³⁷ At its fourth annual convention in Chicago, the Conference discussed questions of personal status, and resolved to relax the Halakhic requirements for conversion. Circumcision and immersion were no longer mandatory for adult converts, who were now to be welcomed into the Jewish covenant on the basis of knowledge and commitment alone.³⁸ At the July, 1895, meeting in Rochester, Wise posed the question of Reform's relation "in all religious matters" to post-biblical literature.³⁹ A committee report the following year, which declared Talmudic and post-Talmudic Halakhic literature to be non-authoritative, was unanimously adopted. Political Zionism was officially rejected by the Conference at its first Canadian convention in Montreal in 1897, and anti-Zionist statements promoting the purely religious mission of Israel were reaffirmed at the 1906 and 1917 annual meetings.

The Sunday Service question had been introduced at the 1846 Breslau Conference. A statement made at the Pittsburgh Conference, however, which declared Sunday Services as compatible with "the spirit of Judaism," caused a storm of controversy and dominated the annual conventions of the CCAR between 1902 and 1905. Those in favor of Sunday services argued on pragmatic grounds, noting that a large number of Jews had to work on Saturday and that a Sunday

³⁷David Philipson, the Reform Movement in Judaism, p.358.

³⁸Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity, p.280.

³⁹CCAR Yearbook, (5) 1895: 63

service would greatly increase synagogue attendance. Some rabbis even went so far as to advocate the transfer of the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday. On the other side of the controversy were rabbis who bitterly opposed the idea of Sunday observance for fear that it might lead to Christian conversion and would diminish the significance of the divinely-ordained traditional Sabbath. Opponents pointed out that the institution of late Friday evening services made it possible for those who worked on Saturday to still worship on the historical Sabbath day. The Conference decided to recognize Sunday services on the same level as any other weekday service advocated by the Movement. However, with very few exceptions, members of the CCAR condemned any attempt to transfer the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday.⁴⁰

The Sunday Sabbath controversy was emblematic of a larger trend within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Reform Judaism known as "Radical" Reform. The Radicals were provoked by the intellectual challenges of Darwinian theory and biblical criticism, and went further than the liberal tenets of the Pittsburgh Platform. The Radicals' principal spokesman was Emil G. Hirsch (1851-1923), an active member of the CCAR, Rabbi of Temple Sinai in Chicago, and editor of a journal entitled *Reform Advocate*.⁴¹ Hirsch was the rabbi responsible for the social action plank of the Pittsburgh Platform, and like other radicals, stressed the ethical teachings of the prophets to the near exclusion of ritual and

⁴⁰Raphael, *op. cit.*, pp.32-34. For a complete discussion of the Sunday Sabbath controversy in Reform Judaism, see, Kerry M. Olitzky, "The Sunday Sabbath Controversy in Judaism" (HUC-JIR rabbinic thesis), 1983, pp.45-101.

⁴¹Meyer, *op. cit.*, pp.271-273.

ceremony.⁴² He was one of the few Reformers who advocated the transfer of the Jewish Sabbath to Sunday, and was influenced by the "religion of humanity" which "emerged in nearly every Protestant denomination in the late nineteenth century."⁴³ The Radical reformers often utilized non-Jewish authors as sources of inspiration and encouraged the participation of Gentiles in worship. At least one of them, Boston's Rabbi Charles Fleischer (1871-1942), left Judaism completely to "establish a nonsectarian religious congregation."⁴⁴

The CCAR expanded its role in standardizing the liturgy and ritual of Reform congregations with the publication of the *Union Hymnal* and *Union Haggadah* in 1897 and 1907, respectively. The *Union Prayer-Book* was still regarded by the CCAR as its chief accomplishment in unifying liberal Judaism in America. The first volume of the UPB was revised in 1918 and was used in over three hundred Reform congregations.⁴⁵ The social consciousness of the generation was recognized in the prayer for social vision in the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement, which was published in the second volume of the UPB in 1922.⁴⁶

The CCAR was surprisingly quiet on matters of social justice during its first eighteen years and issued only two statements of

⁴²Meyer compares and contrasts the life and thought of Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler in his text, Response to Modernity, pp.270-276.

⁴³Raphael, op. cit., p.35.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp.36-37.

⁴⁵Philipson, op. cit., p.369; Meyer, op. cit., p.277.

⁴⁶David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, p.369.

social concern in 1901 and 1908.⁴⁷ Since many of the CCAR's primary supporters were conservative businessmen and wealthy beneficiaries of the capitalist system, it is not surprising that there was a paucity of aggressive social action taken by the CCAR.⁴⁸ Despite the reticence of the Conference, individual rabbis, most notably Emil G. Hirsch, championed the cause of social justice in their local communities. Hirsch represented many of his colleagues when he intoned that "religion must be in all things or it is nothing...It must touch life at every point or it does not touch it at any point."⁴⁹ The cautious and conservative approach of the Conference was broken in 1918 when the CCAR's Committee on Synagogue and Industrial Relations, together with the Commission on Social Justice, submitted the first official platform on social justice. This bold proclamation called for an equitable distribution of profit, a minimum wage, the protection of women in industry and the elimination of child labor, workman's compensation, health insurance, and much more.⁵⁰

The increasing role of Protestant and Catholic religious organizations in matters of social justice, as well as the deteriorating condition of America's cities in the early decades of the twentieth century, were two additional factors which motivated

⁴⁷In 1901, the Conference agreed to cooperate with the Golden Rule Brotherhood, a peace organization, and in 1908 it issued its first call for the abolition of child labor. See Roland B. Gittelsohn, "The Conference Stance on Social Justice and Civil Rights," in Retrospect and Prospect, Betram W. Korn (ed.), pp.87-89.

⁴⁸Meyer, Response to Modernity, p.288.

⁴⁹Emil G. Hirsch, My Religion, p.131.

⁵⁰Gittelsohn, op. cit., p.88. Gittelsohn points out that the matter of Negro and minority rights was conspicuously absent from the 1918 Declaration of Principles.

the Conference to extend its involvement in programs of social justice.⁵¹ In the 1920's, the CCAR joined Catholic and Protestant religious bodies in repudiating the twelve-hour work day and other labor grievances. The Conference also committed itself to a defense of civil liberties and civil rights, and would later become the first national religious body to speak out for birth control.⁵² The prophetic faith and teachings of Israel underlaid much of the CCAR's efforts to correct societal inequity and injustice. As Hyman G. Enelow pointed out in 1916, "the synthesis of religion and human service is what Amos and Isaiah stood for."⁵³ The Union of American Hebrew Congregations established its own Committee of Social Justice in 1925. This lay committee was more reluctant to take controversial stands on specific economic, political, and financial issues. However, it did take vigorous positions on such domestic issues as child labor legislation, registration of aliens, release of political prisoners, and lynchings, as well as on "issues affecting the beleaguered Jews in Europe."⁵⁴

Another major concern of the CCAR was the separation of religion and state. As early as 1892, a resolution was passed which stated that CCAR members "do emphatically protest against all religious legislation as subversive of religious liberty."⁵⁵ A

⁵¹For a detailed discussion of the historical factors accounting for the rise of a genuine social program in the CCAR, see Leonard J. Mervis, "The Social Justice Movement and the American Reform Rabbi," in American Jewish Archives, (7) 1955: 171-178

⁵²*ibid.*, pp.98-102.

⁵³Hyman G. Enelow, Selected Works, vol. 3, pp.34, 127-128, cited in Raphael, Profiles in American Judaism, p.51.

⁵⁴Raphael, p.47.

⁵⁵CCAR Yearbook, (3) 1892: 42.

standing committee on Church-State relations was established and in 1906, the Conference was the "only national body which concerned itself with this problem."⁵⁶ The church-state issue remained high on the Conference's priority of concerns in the early decades of the twentieth century as shown by Conference papers and presidential addresses dealing with the issue in 1911, 1916, and 1924.⁵⁷

During the Classical period of American Reform, the make-up of American Jewry changed dramatically. Between 1870 and the outbreak of World War I alone, nearly two million Jews immigrated to America. The persecution of Jews in Russia by the Czar in the 1880's led to the mass emigration of East European Jews to America's shores. Many of the immigrants brought their traditionalism with them and did not share the ambivalence of most Reformers toward ritual and ceremony. During this period, the CCAR had to contend also with the paternalistic attitude of many German Reformers and find new ways to reach the East European immigrants. A 1904 Conference paper entitled "Reform Judaism and the Recent Immigrant" spoke of the "inundation of Russian Jews." The speaker's disparaging remarks toward the new immigrants irritated many of his colleagues. David Philipson expressed the sentiment of many CCAR members when he said in response to Hirschberg, "We can never come to a proper understanding of the problems of the ghetto until we remove entirely from ourselves the feeling that we are

⁵⁶Eugene Lipman, "The Conference Considers Relations Between Religion and the State," in Retrospect and Prospect, p.116.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp.117-119.

better than the Russian Jews."⁵⁸ Still, while the Reformers lent financial, moral, and organizational support to the Americanization of the East Europeans, the hierarchical structure and Protestant worship style typical of Reform temples during this era did not suit the religious preference of the East European immigrants.

David Philipson and Classical Reform

Any attempt to capture the spirit of American Reform during its Classical phase must take into account the life and thought of David Philipson. Philipson was one of the first of the American-born Reformers and a member of HUC's first ordination class. At the young age of twenty-three, he acted as Secretary of the Pittsburgh Conference and served on its Revising Committee. He defended the Pittsburgh platform against the attack of his Baltimore colleagues from his Har Sinai pulpit, utilizing each article as a basis for a separate sermon. He accepted a call from Cincinnati's Bene Israel congregation, then known as the "Mound Street Temple," taught homiletics and semitics at Hebrew Union College for forty-three years, and was appointed to the Board of Governors of the HUC. Philipson wielded enormous power over the affairs of HUC:

"...The most powerful influence on the Board of Governors seems to have been the rabbi of Bene Israel...David Philipson. He was the force behind Kohler, and according to one recollection, 'the uncrowned king of the college.'"⁵⁹

⁵⁸CCAR Yearbook, (14) 1904: 179, cited in Retrospect and Prospect, Bertram J. Korn (ed.), p.145

⁵⁹Michael A. Meyer, "A Centennial History," in Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: At One Hundred Years, Samuel E. Karff (ed.), p.82.

The death of Isaac Mayer Wise in 1900, and the ascendancy of Kaufmann Kohler to the presidency of HUC three years later, effectively made Philipson Cincinnati's senior rabbi. He worked diligently for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and was elected its President from 1907 to 1909. His sixty-six years in the rabbinate earned him the title, "Dean of American Reform Rabbis," and his writings on Reform Judaism, especially his text, The Reform Movement in Judaism (1907), made him the premier historian of the Movement during its "Classical" period.

Philipson credits Wise and Einhorn as the two dominant and contrasting influences in his early professional life. Philipson had the unusual distinction of following in the footsteps of Einhorn at Baltimore's Har Sinai congregation after receiving ordination from Wise's Hebrew Union College. For four years, he was the only graduate of the Hebrew Union College to serve a pulpit in the East. Philipson was first exposed to Einhorn's teachings at Har Sinai when a congregant offered to sell him his complete collection of *Sinai*, the magazine edited by Einhorn.⁶⁰ This periodical was Einhorn's answer to Wise's *American Israelite*, and it presented Philipson with an entirely new way of thinking about Reform. Einhorn, whose motto was "fealty to principle," was never willing to compromise. Wise, while no less dominant a personality, was much more pragmatic. Philipson would later reminisce that he had been "reared" in the Wise school, but had had his first graduate training in the "Einhorn environment."⁶¹

⁶⁰Philipson, My Life As An American Jew, p.55.

⁶¹Ibid.

The cornerstone of Philipson's message may be best summed up by the phrase, "American in nationality, Jewish in religion." He stressed both elements throughout his career:

"The two main articles of my life's creed have been liberal Judaism and Americanism. I have constantly defined myself as an American of the Jewish faith. I have given myself wholeheartedly to the carrying out of the fundamental principles of Americanism as subsumed in the Bill of Rights: free speech, free press, separation of Church and State, and the right of assembly. From this line I have never consciously departed."⁶²

Philipson's Americanism was manifest in the worship and activities of the pulpits he served. When he was at Bene Israel in Cincinnati, an American flag stood on his pulpit, patriotic themes were frequent sermon topics, and the temple's facilities were opened for patriotic organizations to hold their meetings.⁶³ His staunch Americanism reached a fever pitch during World War One. In an address before a Cincinnati businessman's club entitled, "Are the Germans the Chosen People?", Philipson proclaimed that history had revealed America as God's chosen nation.⁶⁴

Philipson's anti-Zionism was a corollary to his Americanism. "To my mind," he wrote in his autobiography, "political Zionism and true Americanism have always seemed mutually exclusive. No man can be a member of two nationalities, a Jewish and an American. *Aut-aut*. There is no middle way."⁶⁵ Philipson also felt that

⁶²Ibid., p.70.

⁶³Karla Goldman, "A History of K.K. Bene Israel Congregation" (mimeographed material), p.40., American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁶⁴For full text of the speech, see Philipson *op. cit.*, pp.270-275. Two hundred thousand copies of this lecture were printed and distributed nationwide.

⁶⁵Ibid., p.72.

Zionism would weaken the national standing of America's Jews.

"This latter-day nationalist movement," he wrote, "is fraught with danger to the welfare of Jews in this country."⁶⁶

Philipson's liberal religious outlook, which reflected the broad universalist conception of Reform Judaism during its Classical phase, could not tolerate Jewish nationalism in any form. "The mission of Judaism," he once wrote, "is spiritual, not political. Its aim is not to establish a State, but to spread the truths of religion and humanity throughout the world."⁶⁷ Zionism therefore violated the universal mission of Israel, which could only be achieved in the Diaspora. It also replaced the spiritual mission of Israel with a political objective, an idea anathema to Classical Reform ideology and to its conception of history. By declaring that Jews would always be homeless in the Diaspora, political Zionism contradicted Israel's prophetic summons to spread justice throughout the world. For Philipson and Classical Reformers like him, America provided the Jew with a sacred opportunity to achieve Israel's mission. The anti-Zionist sentiment among Reform Jewish leaders remained so strong in the early decades of the twentieth century that Philipson appeared before the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives on April 22, 1922, to argue against congressional support for the Balfour Declaration.⁶⁸ In his testimony, Philipson referred to the 1917 anti-Zionist resolution passed by the CCAR,

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p.277.

⁶⁷Philipson, *op. cit.*, p.137.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, pp.299-304.

which reaffirmed the fundamental principle of Reform as religious and non-political.

Despite their patriotic fervor and firm opposition to political Zionism, the proponents of Classical Reform still felt a religious kinship with Jews in other lands. Philipson expressed this in a 1909 address before the Union of American Hebrew Congregations:

"...We are an historic community, molded by historic forces. If solidarity there be among us, it is a religious solidarity, not a national or a racial. Nationally, I feel attached to my American brother of whatever faith or non-faith. Religiously I am bound to my Jewish brother, whether now he lives in the United States, in the pampas of South America, in Russian Pale, in Moroccan mellah, in Indian jungle, or in South African veldt."⁶⁹

The Classical Reformers viewed their Movement as an extension of Prophetic Judaism and stressed that their prophetic ancestors were the first protagonists of social justice. For Philipson and his Classical colleagues, the prophets were begging to be heard.

"It was an Amos who preached that unexampled bitter tirade against the unscrupulous profiteers who trampled upon the poor and sold the needy for a pair of shoes...It was an Isaiah who piled up the great series of woes upon the heartless speculators of his day...If we are indeed the spiritual sons of these prophets, we must help along where we can in every effort to improve the condition of those who have been the underdogs of the social order."⁷⁰

In a series of sermons preached in December 1885 and early 1886, Philipson defended the Pittsburgh Platform against its

⁶⁹Ibid., pp.203-204.

⁷⁰"The Labor Problem," a sermon delivered on March 6, 1937. David Philipson Papers. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

critics. He denied the traditional view which held that Moses was the author of the Torah, and in the spirit of the Pittsburgh Platform, treated the sacred text as a composite work. He argued that much of the "Mosaic legislation" was contextual and only binding upon the Jews when they lived as a nation in Palestine. Philipson had great respect for consistently observant Jews but labeled those who selectively choose which laws to observe and which to ignore as "would be reformers" and "half-hearted hypocrites."⁷¹ Like Kohler, Philipson viewed Reform as a positive constructive attempt to rescue the eternal and non-temporal truths of Judaism.

"Its name designates that it must reform not that it destroys; it must clothe the eternal truths of Judaism in a garb not imported from ancient and medieval times with a must smell and seeming strange and out of place, but in one adapted to the views of modern civilization."⁷²

Many of the classical Reformers associated traditional Judaism with the mass migration of East European Jews to the United States during the years 1881-1914. Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger, a contemporary of Philipson and a leading classical Reformer, preached that the rituals of Orthodoxy and Conservatism were "senseless," "irrational," and to be discarded.⁷³ Philipson was less radical and held that forms, ceremonies and customs must pass away only "when they are no longer expressive of the needs of its worshippers."⁷⁴ It is fair to say for all the Classical Reformers,

⁷¹Robert W. Ross, "The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885," in Jacob (ed.), The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect, p.68.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Marc L. Raphael, Profiles in American Judaism, p.26.

⁷⁴Ibid.

though, that the ultimate tests of truth were logic and rationality and not the dictates of Rabbinism. Many rituals and customs, such as the laying of phylacteries and the covering of heads in the synagogue, were dismissed as retrogressive vestiges of medievalism.

For the Classical Reformers, Judaism could no longer rely on a set of unexamined assumptions. It could rely only on a set of reasonable ideas that were compatible with the spirit of the new age. The mood of the times was forward and optimistic, and outmoded orthodox rituals were inimical to such a spirit.⁷⁵ Individualism, optimism, universalism, Americanism, and progress, characterized Philipson's Judaism, and led Classical Reformers like him to conclude that Judaism had "passed through various stages of growth and development to reach today's highest plane."⁷⁶ The principles of the Pittsburgh Platform had prevailed as the major voice of Reform, even if they did not command universal acceptance in the Movement. Nowhere was this more manifest than in the rabbinic careers of Moses J. Gries and William Rosenau.

⁷⁵The distancing of Classical Reform from many traditional ceremonies and customs did not mean the negation of all ritual. The age-old custom of circumcision and the ban on intermarriage with non-Jews, for instance, were overwhelmingly maintained by the American Reform Rabbinate.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, p.24.