

# The Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

## The Birth of Conservative Judaism

### I. American Judaism

1. Synagogue-communities, as they developed in the major cities of colonial America, bespoke the growing compartmentalization of eighteenth-century American Jewish life into Jewish and worldly domains. This distinction was unknown to medieval Jewish or for that matter to most European Jews of the day, but it was characteristic of American Judaism almost from the beginning...like neighboring churches, they confined their activities to their own sphere, disciplining some religiously wayward congregants with fines and loss of religious privileges but leaving commercial and civil disputes, even those that pitted one Jew against another, to their municipal authorities (Sarna, 20-21).

2. The majority of American Jews resided in religiously pluralistic communities with people of diverse backgrounds and faiths, including many who had themselves experienced religious persecution. Perhaps for this reason, these Jews, like the port Jews of Europe, felt more comfortable interaction with Christians than most other Jews did – so much so that we know of Jews and Christians who joined forces in business, witnessed each other's documents, and socialized in each other's homes (Sarna, 27).

3. Isaac Leeser (1806-1868), the foremost Jewish traditionalist leader in America for over three decades, was a primary proponent of Jewish "regeneration"...his obligations [as Hazzan of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel] were "to read the prayers in the original Hebrew according to the custom of the Portuguese Jews...to attend all funerals and subsequent mourning services," and, with the permission of the congregational officers, to perform other life-cycle rituals. Within a year, in an effort to strengthen Jewish life through education and exhortation, he began preaching English-language sermons on selected Sabbath mornings...he borrowed selectively from a wide range of sources, Jewish and Christian, in an effort to educate and reinvigorate his community, but he carefully reshaped and adapted his innovations so as to keep within the parameters of traditional Jewish practice and law..

He blamed Jews for their "accursed love of money, of pleasure, and of power," and warned that the "whole regeneration of Israel rests on the basis of the precepts and commandments which we have received as the will of our Father in heaven."

Yet even as he railed against sin and promoted a return to traditional beliefs and practices, Leeser advocated the Americanization of Judaism. He insisted, for example, that sermons be delivered in English, not in the immigrant vernacular...Most important of all, Leeser reshaped the office of the hazzan in America so that it more closely resembled that of the American Protestant minister. "There is hardly any Christian society which does not strain every nerve to have an intelligent and virtuous ministry, composed of men who would honour any calling by their acquisition and general conduct," he wrote in 1844...In his own public conduct, in everything from his clothing and demeanor to his writings, speeches and pastoral work, he modeled himself on the practices of his high church Protestant counterparts (Sarna, 76-79).

4. Between 1820 and 1840, according to inexact estimates, America's Jewish population increased fivefold, from 3,000 to 15,000. Between 1840 and 1860 it increased another tenfold, to 150,000. By the time the first "official" census of the American Jewish community took place, in 1877, the American Jewish community's numbers had ballooned to about 250,000. Overall, during these years, the American Jewish population increased at a rate that was almost fifteen times greater than that of the nation as a whole (Sarna, 63)

## II. "Orthodox" Immigrant Situation

5. In trying to strike this fine balance, East European Jews had to contend with a religious world radically different from the one they had known across the ocean...The situation in the United States was entirely different. Indeed, what made immigration so dangerous, from the perspective of traditional European Judaism, was that religion in America was a purely private and voluntary affair, totally outside of the state's purview. Nobody forced Jews to specify their religion; they were taxed and drafted as human being only. When a Jew married or divorced in America, it was state law, not Jewish law, that governed that procedure; rabbinic involvement was optional.

Partially because of this situation, rabbis could provide immigrants with very little guidance in making the transition from old world to new. In fact, very few East European rabbis even immigrated to America in the 1880's and 1890's...Rabbi Moses Weinberger, one of these few, claimed in 1887 that in all of New York City there were no more than "three or four" rabbis with the highest level of ordination, allowing them to issue rabbinic decisions based on Jewish law – this in what was already the largest Jewish community in the world. (Sarna 159-160)

## III. Reform in America

6. Leeser's strategy for saving American Judaism did not go far enough for some Jews. They insisted that Judaism itself needed to change in order to survive...they urged Jews to abandon rituals that seemed incompatible with modernity and to adopt innovations that promised to make Judaism more appealing and spiritually uplifting...Isaac Cardozo, in his address to fellow reformers at the 1827 dinner warned that "if we do not adapt things to the existing state of human feelings" then "our religion [will] suffer in the permanency of its sacred character, and future usefulness and renown." "Such rabbinical interpolations as have no support in reason or truth," he predicted, would in the long run "fall of themselves" while the Reformed Society would "acquire power and durability." In 1833, [the Reformed Society] abandoned efforts to construct a building of its own, and around 1838 it disappeared completely (Sarna 82-83).

7. In Baltimore...a group of German Jews broke away in 1842 from Baltimore Hebrew Congregation to protest its traditionalist policies and what members as the "establishment of a Jewish hierarchy" – a reference to the policies of the congregation's defender-of-the-faith rabbi, Abraham Rice (1800/1802-1862). (Sarna 87).

## 8. Pittsburgh Platform of 1885

[http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge\\_id=1606](http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge_id=1606)

3. We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

4. We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

5. We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

## IV. Creation of JTS

9. On 31 January 1886, twelve Jewish men, laypeople and clergy...met in the vestry room of New York's Shearith Israel...to constitute themselves as the Jewish Theological Seminary Association. The training of American Rabbis was the sole purpose of this body...Despite the fact that the delegates themselves and their congregations represented a broad spectrum of Jewish practice, they consistently called themselves "orthodox," "traditional," and indeed some referred to their school as an "Orthodox seminary." They banded together to create a Seminary that would keep "alive the true Judaic spirit;...where the Bible shall be impartially taught, and Rabbinical literature faithfully expounded." (Deiner 3)

10. Clearly, the founders of the Jewish Theological seminary...envisioned that their experiment in the education of American rabbis would offer an alternative to the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College founded in 1875 by Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati. The Seminary's vision over the course of the sixteen years that spanned its founding in 1886 until its reorganization in 1902 bore witness to the assiduous efforts of deeply committed *American* Jews to steer a course between "stupid Orthodoxy and insane Reform." Both tendencies, according to the Seminary founders and supporters...threatened Judaism in America, because both staked out extreme positions and forced Jews to choose sides. Neither one could meet the challenge that America – with its separation of church and state, democracy and secularism – offered to Judaism. (Deiner, 6). [Emphasis original]

11. Rabbis, they believed who felt equally at home in the world of western scholarship in the Jewish texts would spearhead the fusion of traditionalism and Americanism. Those rabbis, the products of the Seminary, would be agents in remaking the Eastern European newcomers and guiding them into becoming respectable bourgeois Americans, who would remain, or would actually first become, reasonably observant Jews. Neither Reform rabbis, products of Hebrew Union College, nor Eastern European orthodox rabbis, trained abroad, could handle this task of bridging the seemingly unbridgeable. Seminary activists prided themselves on walking the line between, as Cyrus Adler, a future president of the Seminary, noted in 1907, "those who had set the idol of modernity upon their alters...and those who held to the model of the Ghetto in its worst

period." American Judaism had more to gain, he asserted by the actions of "common sense" people "satisfied to work together without each one agreeing with everyone iota of every other man's opinion" (Deiner 7)

12. The founding of the Seminary, committed to this "new spirit" draped in moderation and claiming that rationalism could be blended with tradition, immediately caught the attention of both the Reform and orthodox camps. Both chided it for its lack of willingness to state clearly what it stood for, its silence on how the blending would be accomplished. Isaac Mayer Wise, understandably nervous about a competing seminary that might challenge the primacy of his institution sneered at those who participated in the initial meeting. He labeled them "supposed orthodox" rather than being truly observant. "The genuinely orthodox congregations...will certainly have nothing to do with men who are engaged, and under salaries, in so-called reform congregations and maintain they are building up an orthodox seminary." On the other hand, Judah David Eisenstein, a figure in New York's Eastern European orthodox community, in an 1886 Hebrew article...lambasted the founders of the Seminary, those who "seek to strike a balance. Actually, they are like the antelope and the badger which the rabbis could not decide whether to categorize as wild or as domesticated beasts." To Eisenstein the lack of a firm commitment to real traditionalism or a frank admission of reformist impulses constituted hypocrisy. (Deiner 6)

### Sources

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