

1982

**"WHAT IS LIBERAL
(REFORM)
JUDIASM?"**

a series of four lectures

given by

RABBI HERBERT M. BAUMGARD, DHL, DD

TEMPLE BETH AM

MIAMI, FLA.

Part One — *The Biblical Period*

Part Two — *The Talmudic Period*

Part Three — *The European Period*

Part Four — *The Modern Period*

FORWARD

No matter how many times we have defined Liberal Judaism we find that the definition alone is not enough for our people. They have the need to understand current developments on the Jewish scene in the perspective of Jewish history. Only when we know what Judaism has been can we hope to understand what it must become. Consequently, the author prepared for his congregants a series of lectures on the broad theme, "What is Liberal Judaism?" The lectures are really a survey of Jewish history from the point of view of the struggle between conservative and liberal forces throughout our history. The response to the lectures was so gratifying and the request for copies of the lectures so numerous, that the author consented to have them printed.

This pamphlet was first prepared for Temple B'nai Israel, Elmont, New York, in 1952. Melvin Dykes was responsible for two printings totalling ten thousand copies. Since then there have been four more printings, the largest of which was run of ten thousand copies by the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods. The current edition (1982) is made possible by the Brotherhood of Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida. All told thirty-five thousand copies of this pamphlet have been distributed.

—HERBERT M. BAUMGARD

"WHAT IS LIBERAL JUDAISM?"

Introduction

There have always been at least three opinions about the nature of events in our world. There are those who maintain, "Ayn Kol Chadash Tachat Ha-shemesh," "There is nothing new under the sun." This type of thinker holds that everything is repetition, and nothing really changes, for it cannot change in the nature of things. On the other hand, there have been those thinkers who maintained that there is never anything old under the sun. The Greek Philosopher Heraclitus is known for the statement, "The world is like a river which flows on and on. Man never steps into the same stream twice." According to this type of thinking, still prevalent today, the world is in constant turmoil and effervescence, constantly changing its form and rearranging itself. Finally, there are those who say that there is a half truth in each of the other positions which together make the whole truth. This last type of thinker maintains that the world has certain eternal laws which never change, but the concrete expressions of these laws are always changing. The American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, has written, "Nature is never and always the same." According to Emerson, Nature wears a thousand different masks which make her seem always to be different, and yet, behind the changing mask are the same unchanging laws and truths.

The first viewpoint, namely, that the world is static and unchanging is the philosophy of the die-hard conservative. Since the world is not supposed to change, since it cannot change, therefore, he says, it is wrong to try to change it. The second viewpoint, that the world is always changing and must be changed, is the philosophy of the radical who insists that change has a value for its own sake. The third viewpoint, that the world has certain fundamental truths which never change, but that the forms and institutions which express these truths may be changed and should be changed when necessary, is the philosophy of the liberal. It is the claim of the liberal that the best way to preserve the fundamental truths is to channel them through forms and institutions which meet the need of each new succeeding generation.

(A)—Judaism IS Liberal

It shall be the theme of this series of discussions that Judaism has historically taken the latter viewpoint, that Judaism is a part of the liberal outlook on life. My first point, then, is that it is redundant to use

the phrase "Liberal Judaism,"* for Judaism is in origin and in development a liberal analysis of life. We find the phrase Liberal Judaism necessary because many people have defined Judaism in terms which are not liberal and which are alien to its nature. I believe, for example, that the phrase "Orthodox Judaism" is a misnomer. The birth and history of Judaism, as we shall see in our discussion, have been opposed to the rigidity which Orthodox Judaism professes and, by name, implies. The phrase "Reform Judaism" is a misnomer also, because it implies that Judaism has not always been an instrument for reform and change. Judaism is and has always been a liberal religious civilization, except for brief episodes, and we propose to make this clear by a brief survey of Jewish history and development. When the day has come in our modern world when Judaism has been returned to its normal path of development, it is hoped that we shall be able to drop the adjectives we have prefixed to it.

It is the claim of the adherents of Orthodox Judaism today that they represent historic Judaism. This is a false claim. Orthodox Judaism represents the content and the method of the Judaism of Europe from perhaps 1500-1800 C.E. (It's vogue in Eastern Europe runs into the 20th century).** We are concerned in our study, however, not with a type of Judaism which reigned for a brief moment in the lengthy history of our people, but with the entire course of our history and the full impact of our faith.

We do not have the right to discuss Judaism today until and unless we have studied the origins and the history of Judaism. We might divide such a study into four main parts: 1) BIBLICAL PERIOD; 2) TALMUDIC PERIOD; 3) EUROPEAN PERIOD; 4) MODERN PERIOD. It is my belief that as we study these periods of Jewish history, we shall see two things: A) First we shall see that in each period an attempt was made to preserve certain fundamental values; and B) We shall see that in each period many of the forms and institutions advocated by the leaders of the people were distinctive to the age. We shall see that if we consider Biblical Judaism as "Orthodox" or "Regular", that Talmudic Judaism must be considered as "Reform" Judaism, and European Judaism as Super-Reform. We shall see that the

Notes: * The author numbers himself among the Reform Rabbis and his congregation is affiliated with Reform Judaism.

**—Rabbi Max D. Davidson, President of the Rabbinical Assembly of America (Conservative), has said that Orthodoxy is only 150 years old, that "it pretends to be Judaism, but the word is not Jewish, and the idea is not Jewish . . ." (Commencement Address, Jewish Theological Seminary, quoted in the *National Jewish Post*, article dated June 8, 1951.)

(2)

so-called Orthodox Judaism, as we know it, is difficult to compare in its outer form with Biblical Judaism. We shall see, nevertheless, that in spite of the tremendous differences in each age, Jews have succeeded amazingly well in preserving the fundamental values of their faith. It is my hope that once we come to understand the method by which Judaism has been preserved, that we will then be able to use this method in developing a Judaism adequate for our present needs and which is yet based upon the faith of Abraham. It is my conviction that this method must be a liberal one, just as historically Judaism is a liberal faith.

PART ONE

THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

How did Judaism begin? What were the conditions out of which it evolved? What were its fundamental tenets? What was the method and the purpose of Biblical Judaism? The answers to these first questions we must learn especially well, for the yardstick that we now develop is the one we shall use in comparing all other periods of Jewish history. The first important thing to understand is that Abraham was not born of a Jewish father and mother.

(A)—Abraham's Environment

Abraham is claimed by the Jews not because of his blood or his racial background, but because he thought and acted in a certain way. The way that Abraham acted upon his particular environment marks him as a Jew. The method of his actions is the method of Judaism. Abraham lived at some time between the period 1700-2000 BCE.* As a Babylonian resident, Abraham partook of the culture of that area. The people believed in many gods, each of whom was considered a ruler over one particular city-state. Each god was represented on earth by a human steward who ruled over the god's city. Whenever a certain steward wished to justify his conquest of another city, he would proclaim that his god had become ruler of the Heavenly Council, and that he, the steward, was merely following divine orders. The religion of Babylonia made possible and justified continuous war among the city-states, and the governing ethic was "might makes right."**

Just as the politics of the Babylonians of Abraham's day was geared to the religious belief in

Notes: *—See "The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible," Wright and Filson, p. 23 ff.

**—See "The Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man," Frankfort, Wilson, Jacobsen, and Irvin, p. 125 ff.

(3)

many gods; competing for power, so their economic life was geared to the religious belief that the purpose of each city-state was to provide food for the god. The steward who represented the god was thus, to all intents and purposes, the owner of all the land. The great mass of human beings existed only as slaves on a vast estate.

A third feature of the environment of Abraham was the fear and uncertainty in which the individual lived. There was a multiplicity of gods. These were not identified with definite moral standards: There were a chain of gods intermediate in command and power between the individual and the great gods. In the midst of this divine confusion, the individual Babylonian found it necessary to develop all sorts of superstitious practices in an attempt to appease all the demons and spirits he imagined to be plaguing him.

(B)—Break With The Past

To understand Abraham's role in the fashioning of Judaism, one has to understand what Abraham was trying to change. Abraham could see that a belief in many gods led to superstition and uncertainty. He could see that such a belief led to an ethic of might makes right. He could see that the religious belief was the basis for the political and economic suppression of human beings. Against all of these things, Abraham revolted. In its beginnings, Judaism appears as an immensely radical revolution. To say that there are not many gods, but one; to say that god is not visible, but unseen; to say that god is moral and seeks justice; to say that no single human ruler is the lone agent of god; to say that the purpose of man is not to obtain food for the gods or for the nobility—these are heresies which are not equalled in our own day. The revolution that Abraham engineered was not only religious, it was political and economic. In the process of time, Judaism developed political and economic institutions which in many important respects resembled only slightly the institutions of Babylonia, cradle of Abraham.

The Torah section known as "Lech L'cha" (Go! Get thee out) captures the spirit of Abraham's break with his past. In this Parasha God commands Abraham to leave behind the land and the institutions of his fathers, and to travel to a new land where he was to plant the seed of a new and daring idea. These two words, "Lech L'cha!," have always been one of the central commands of Judaism. Leave and abandon the old, we are told. Leave the unwieldy and the false, and strike out for the new country, the higher truth.

(C)—Blending the Old and the New

While the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) made the initial break with the past, it remained for Moses and his contemporaries to develop a system of institutions and laws which could provide the basis for an established civilization. We know of Moses also as a revolutionary, a man who broke with the inbred custom of slavery in Egypt to lead his people to freedom. Moses, however, found it practical to compromise with the past in drawing up plans for the new state of Israel. We know today, thanks to archaeological discoveries, that much of the Mosaic Code was originally part of the Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon.* We know that the system of sacrificial worship employed by the Hebrews was taken over largely from the Canaanites. Upon the foundation of these institutions built by other peoples, Moses and his contemporaries were able to graft new ideas which largely changed the character and the quality of the old institutions.

Moses is thought to have lived in the 13th century BCE.** From his day to the time of the Literary Prophets, 500 years later, the emphasis of Hebrew legislation changed drastically. The fifth book of the Torah, attributed to Moses from ancient times, is actually thought of today, as a second law (Greek-Deuteronomy) prepared in the time of the Prophets.*** Whereas the Mosaic Code (like the Code of Hammurabi) emphasizes "Ayin Tachat Ayin," "An eye for an eye," the Prophets speak of a God who forgives even the undeserving. Where the Mosaic legislation speaks of a God "terrible in anger, punishing the 3rd and 4th generation of those who sin," the Prophets speak of a God who punishes only the individual who sins and not his descendants. The difference is more than a mere change in detail. The earlier law reflects a nomadic society, and the later law reflects a more settled economy, more agricultural and commercial in tone.****

(D)—The Prophets—A New Liberalizing Movement

It is idle to compare these teachings and say that one is higher than the other. In the time of Moses, when a new nation was being formed from a mass

Notes: *—See "The Westminster Historical Atlas" cited previously, p. 24.

**—See prev. citation, pp. 87 ff.

***—Parts of the book compare in language with prophetic teachings and writings. Contrast Deut. 19:21 with Deut. 24:16. Compare the latter with Ezekiel 18:20.

****—See the author's thesis "The Covenant Society of the Old Testament," Chapter 7, for a full discussion of this point. Available in the Library of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, N. Y. or in the library of Temple B'nai Israel, Elmont, N. Y.

of slaves accustomed to idolatry, the stern code may well have been necessary and effective. In the time of the Prophets, when Israel and Judah were declining in power, and when the character of the economy had changed, the needs of the people demanded different solutions. There are those scholars who say that the prophets sought to tear down the entire Mosaic structure, but the facts tend to show that they sought rather to present the higher qualities of the Mosaic heritage in new forms fitting to their own day. We could say, they stressed the spirit rather than the letter of the law, but it seems clear that they used the spirit also to create new law.

Moses had set up an elaborate system of sacrificial worship. The Prophet Amos cried in the name of God, "I hate, I despise your feasts, And I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies; Yea, though ye offer me burnt-offerings and your meal-offerings, I will not accept them; . . . But let justice well up as waters, And righteousness as a mighty stream."* If the Prophets did not completely reject the sacrificial system, they, at least, indicated that the system was a meaningless form unless it was accompanied by deeds of justice. Isaiah also decried the popular belief that fasting was sufficient to gain atonement and forgiveness. Isaiah declared as the agent of God, ". . . Is it not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the fetters of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And to let the oppressed go free, . . ."**

However else we may analyze the Prophetic movement which began in the 9th century BCE and continued until the end of the 6th century (or the middle of that century), we must say that it was the second great liberalizing movement in the history of Judaism. Between the time of Moses and Isaiah, the institutions of Judaism, which had originally been radical and revolutionary, had become conservative reactionary. The kings who ruled from 1000 BCE had used the words of Moses but had acted against his purpose. They had used the forms of Judaism to destroy it. In the name of justice and God, the kings and the rich landowners had slowly and steadily enslaved the mass of the Jews.*** In the name of religion and worship the priesthood had added on so many forms to the religion of Moses that the people either came to worship the forms or were repulsed by the odious character of the religion. The time was ripe for a revival of the original Hebrew spirit which had inspired Abraham. The Prophets were the agents of that spirit.

Notes: *—See the Book of Amos in the O. T. Chapter 5:21-24.

**—See Bk. of Isaiah, Ch. 58:3-7.

***—See Amos 2:6; Ezekiel 22:6-12; Isaiah 3:13-15; 5:8.

(E)—The Exile

The victory of the Prophets was short-lived, however. The oppression of the kings and the nobility had left the people of Israel and Judah (Northern and Southern parts of the kingdom which had split after the death of Solomon) unable to defend themselves against the invasion of foreign powers. The political intrigues of the Hebrew kings who allied themselves with the military at home and with alien political systems abroad, resulted in a decline of Jewish democracy and religion. By 586 BCE the peoples of both Israel and Judah had been carried into captivity. The Hebrews, for the first time since Joshua, were now landless.

The religion of the Hebrew people up to this point had included a complete economic and political system. The laws of the Bible dictated exactly how a king was to be chosen and how land was to be divided. Now in the absence of a land, and in the absence of an independent government, the character of the Hebrew people and its institutions had to undergo drastic changes. They did. It is to the everlasting credit of the Jewish people that under differing conditions they are able to create new vessels in which their eternal faith might be retained. It is necessary, however, that the vessel change. It is good that the vessel change, for new lands have differing climates and differing eroding powers which the Jews must always be prepared to meet.

PART TWO

THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

(A)—The Second Commonwealth

It is perhaps unfair to say that the Biblical Period ends with the Exile. Certainly, the Biblical Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of events which occurred after the Exile. Several of the prophetic books were undoubtedly written in Exile, and the Book of Ecclesiastes has a mood foreign to the period before the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. We choose the latter date arbitrarily, however, for we believe that following the Exile the conditions which gave birth to the Biblical mental climate no longer existed. Let us understand, then, that when we refer to the Biblical Period, we mean the period beginning with Abraham and ending with the destruction of the First Temple.

The period of the Second Commonwealth, which is described as roughly between 500 BCE and 70 CE, when the Temple was again destroyed, could occupy a great deal of our time and study. We arbitrarily

choose for our purposes to describe it as a period of transition between two constructive periods in Jewish history. We do not treat the Second Commonwealth on a par with the Biblical Period or the Talmudic Period because it is not primarily a period of Jewish creativity. In this period the institutions which held up the ancient Jewish state gradually deteriorated, and in this period the factors which dominated the Talmudic society were in process of birth. The Second Commonwealth produced no literature among the Jews which ranks in stature with the Bible or the Talmud. It was the period in which the Jewish community in Palestine was hit hard by one invader after another. It was the period in which alien cultures were thrust upon the Jews by the Greeks and Romans. It was a period of change and syncretism for all peoples in the Middle East. The Jews, like all other small peoples in the area, suffered from their military ineptitude, but alone amongst all the peoples, they were able to salvage something of their cultural heritage untarnished by Hellenism.

In the period of the Second Commonwealth, the Jews were a Shrine People; that is to say, the leader of the Temple was also the leader of the government, but government affairs were not based on the religious principals of the Temple. Here we have official sanction given to a split which was developing in Israel and in Judah prior to the Exile. It was an essential part of the Mosaic and Prophetic culture that Secular and Religious Government follow one set of rules. In this partnership, the religious element was, of course, to dominate. The Greek influence brought an emphasis on the dominance of the secular as against the religious, and the splitting of the two.

Under Greek or Roman overlordship, the High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem was often a mere agent of the foreign power. There quickly developed a class of nobles and landowners around the High Priest who were perfectly willing to adopt the Hellenistic civilization with its mores and its gods so long as they were able to lead secure and elegant lives. Even the Hasmoneans, descendants of the brave Maccabees who drove out the Greco-Syrian overlord for a brief period, acted in a manner foreign to the Jewish spirit.

The party which consisted of the Hellenistically minded aristocrats allied with the High Priest came to be known as the Sadducees. Oddly enough, they posed as the "Orthodox" Jews, those who wished to stick closely to the Biblical law without any alterations. They were opposed by the Scribes and Pharisees. The Scribes sought to expand the law giving validity to customs of the people which had existed for many years. The Scribes sought to allocate to themselves

the prerogative of forming and interpreting this law. The Sadducees thus championed the Written Law (Torah She B' Kasav) while the Scribes championed the Oral Law (Torah She B'al Peh). The orthodox position which opposed changes in the law favored the economic interests of the nobility while the Scribes as the "reformers" supported the interests of the middle class. The Scribes insisted that the people and their needs were the authoritative source of the law. In this manner the Scribes ultimately led the way to liberal changes on a vast scale.*

Where liberal changes are not authorized, revolution ultimately comes. The Maccabean revolt of the early second century BCE is not to be viewed merely as a revolt against the enforced Hellenistic worship and culture. The revolt was in large part, at least, a revolt against the Jewish aristocracy which held both land and law in firm check.**

(B)—The Babylonian Talmud

Even while the battles between the Sadducees and the Pharisees was going on in Palestine, a great new civilization was growing in Babylonia. The exiled Jews were taking root in an environment very much different from their old Palestinian background. The Jews of Babylonia were touched, perhaps even less than their Palestinian brethren, by the customs of the Hellenes. Living rather much to the east of Palestine, they were outside of the constant push and pull between the Egyptian and Syrian sections of the Greek Empire. The pessimism which came to dominate Jewish thinking in Palestine dominated much less Jewish thinking in Babylonia. The air was freer in Babylonia for the Jew. He was less a victim of the overlord there, and more able to act upon his environment. It is no wonder, then, that the great law book which became the basis for the continuing Jewish civilization emerged not from Palestine but from Babylonia.

After the failure of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans in the early part of the second century of this era (135 CE), the world became aware of the fact that Babylonia was a greater Jewish center than Palestine. The million or more Babylonian Jews had been there all the time, however, and they were

Note: *—The historian Sachar in his "History of the Jews," pp. 106 ff. explodes the myth that the Pharisees were always as reactionary as Jesus seeks to make them.

**—The Maccabean Revolt is the subject of a paper by Dr. Harry Orlinsky, Professor of Bible of the HUC—JIR. The paper is available in the library of the school in New York.

(C)—The Talmudic Society

not without their learning and creativity. It is true that the code of Jewish law which Judah Ha-Nasi compiled in Palestine became the basis of both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud. The Gemara (The Commentary or Expansion) of the Babylonian Talmud, however, is far superior, and is recognized as such by all Jews today. It was the Babylonian Talmud (The Mishna plus the Gemara, the code and its commentary) which has been the accepted authority in Jewish life down through the centuries.

Perhaps the Babylonian Talmud was more acceptable because it was tied to a living, growing, and changing situation. The Babylonian Jews were actually able to operate upon their economy. The Palestinian Jews were, unfortunately, more victims of their environment than actors upon it. Consequently, the primary Palestinian achievement of this period was not a legal book dealing with the practical problems of the people in facing their daily problems, but the Midrashic literature which was speculative and fanciful thought.

The Talmud which has been the source of Jewish law for about 1500 years, at least, reflects, particularly in the Gemara, the economic and political conditions of Babylonia. There are tremendous differences between the Talmudic law and the law of the Bible. These changes reflect the needs of the Jews in their new environment. As such, they may be termed a liberal adjustment to life. The Talmud came in time to be used as an instrument of reaction by some Jews in Europe, but, in its origins, the Talmud appears as a liberalizing force.

The great teacher Hillel, whose school of thought dominates large sections of the Talmud, openly suggested several ways of amending and expanding the law. While the Biblical law was always the point of initial reference, the demands of the new society was the immediate determining factor. Opposed to the school of Hillel in many cases was the school of Shammai which resisted change. Nonetheless, it is the more liberal school which triumphed. Any student of American law who wishes to discover the democratic tempo of Talmudic law might easily do so by comparing existing American law to the ancient Jewish law. He will find that in many cases the ancient law is as advanced and as liberal as the American law.* There is no question but that the Talmud must be considered among the great law works of mankind, especially in its treatment of Torts and Damages.

Note: *—See particularly the sections on Bailments in *Hamaftid* (in the order *Nezikin*). Translations available in the *Sancino Talmud*.

We might say that the Talmudic period began with the fall of the Temple in 70 CE and ended about 1000 CE when the Jewish community in Babylonia deteriorated. For the most part of the intervening 900 years there was a thriving Jewish community in Babylonia. Except for independence in foreign affairs, this community was free. It had its own ruler known as the Rash Galutha, Prince of the Exile.

The Babylonian Jews engaged largely in agriculture and in commerce. They lived in some of the best irrigated territory of the country. They were in the center of trade routes coming from India and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. They were a prosperous people unmolested by their Persian or Parthian overlords because of their healthy tax contributions. The reasoned law of many sections of the Talmud reflects the optimism and the security of life in Babylonia.

(D)—The New Testament

The New Testament was written in the same period as the Mishna, and the gospels governed early Christian living much as the Talmud governed the life of the Jews. The New Testament is, for the most part, not a law book. Its philosophy abandons this world and speaks of the glories of the world to come. The New Testament thus reflects the pessimism of its age and despairs of man's ability to build the good society on earth. It is apocalyptic as are many Jewish works of the same period. It speaks of sudden and miraculous salvation. The Talmud, on the other hand, outlines paths whereby man, largely through his own efforts, may build the good society on earth. The New Testament emphasizes the saving power of faith alone. The Talmud emphasizes the saving power of reasoned law and obedience to it.

(E)—The Synagogue

The exact origin of the Synagogue is not clearly known to us yet. We do know that Jews were organizing local meeting places and houses of study and prayer in the period of the Second Commonwealth. The Synagogue grew in importance as the Temple became a center of Hellenistic and aristocratic power. The Synagogue thus became a symbol of the Scribal revolt against the Sadducees and the High-Priest. Since each local community soon developed its own Synagogue, the House of Prayer became the focal point for a developing democracy.

No change contemplated in modern Jewish life could equal in severity the change from sacrifice to prayer as a means of worshipping God. While it is true that the Pharisees always paid lip service to the Temple practice, there is good reason to believe that they saw in the Synagogue and in the Prayer Service a more liberal religious procedure. The Talmud has great sections dealing with the proper techniques of sacrifice, but these were largely inherited from the Bible. On the other hand, there are in the Talmud large new sections dealing with the proper method of prayer.

The Pharisees sought to substitute for the observance of Temple sacrifices the observance of the Mitzvoth, the precepts of daily living. The Talmud contains much material prescribing rules for the conduct of almost every human function. In time, these detailed Mitzvoth (duties, commands) were to become snares unto the Jewish people.

(F)—The Midrash

The Midrash, like sections of the New Testament, is filled with allegory, parable, narrative, and discourse. Largely a product of Palestinian Jewry, the Midrash reflects the disassociation of Jewish intellectual pursuits from the practical problems of daily living, which apparently were not in their province and power. The Talmud is remarkably free of theological discussions and apocalyptic thinking. The Midrash includes more theological speculation and some philosophy. In the Hellenized Jewish community of Alexandria (Egypt), the Jews, like Philo, were among the outstanding philosophers. In Palestine and in Babylonia, the Jews delved little into philosophy save for the thinking which is revealed in the Midrash.

Much of the Midrash is narrow and unimaginative, but there are sections which are magnificent. It is interesting that in the midst of orthodox Jewish views, there are found interspersed occasional heresies which demonstrate that even in Palestine the Rabbis were able to deviate from the norm. If some of the dicta expressed in the Midrash by the Rabbis were to be accepted, the entire orthodox structure of Jewish theology would crumble. It is plain to see that the Rabbis were not afraid to add or subtract or omit. Out of such daring, the continued vitality of a religion emerges.

(G)—Alexandria

A word, at least, must be said about the large Jewish community which thrived in Egypt for long

centuries after the destruction of the First Temple (586 BCE). Since Alexandria became the center of the Hellenic world, the hundreds of thousands of Jews in that community were hard put to it to justify their ancient faith. Where the Babylonian community was able to operate without too much competition from the ruling power or culture, the Alexandrian community of Jews had to make many compromises. Where the Babylonian Jews built a great law system, the Alexandrian Jews built a noteworthy philosophic system. Philo attempted to glorify the history of the Jews in terms of the Platonic philosophy.

It is important to note that the Jews of Europe followed closest the Babylonian law system while minimizing the significance of the Alexandrian philosophic contribution and the Palestinian midrashic achievement. The former, no doubt, was tied more closely to the real problems of life. In making their choice, the later Jewish generations emphasized what they needed most, irrespective of its origin.

PART THREE

THE EUROPEAN PERIOD

In our previous two chapters we discussed the two greatest periods in Jewish history. We pointed out that in the Biblical Period there were two important liberalizing movements. The first movement began with Abraham and ended with Moses. The second source of creative action was the Literary Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, etc.). In the period of the Second Commonwealth, intermediate between the Biblical and Talmudic Periods, the Scribes began the process of liberalizing Jewish written law through the medium of the oral law. Many of the laws of the Talmud stand out as reform legislation designed to meet the needs of a new generation living in a new environment.

In trying to understand the vast changes in Jewish life down through the ages, we must first understand the changes in their environment. The original laws of the Hebrews were designed for a nomadic society (Blood revenge, etc.). Later on, when the Hebrews became farmers, a different type of law was needed. Still later when they lived in large towns, a third type of law was needed and instituted. The Talmudic law is prepared for a mixed agricultural and mercantile society.

In both the Biblical and Talmudic periods, the Hebrews were able to act upon their environment and change it to meet their needs. In the Biblical period

the Hebrews lived upon the land and were independent. In the Talmudic period, the Jews also lived upon the land, although their independence was not absolutely complete. In the third major period of Jewish history that we shall consider, we find tremendous differences in background and freedom. In the European period of Jewish history (1500-1900 CE) the Jews were neither independent as a community, nor were they living on the land. It is understandable, then, that Jewish culture in Europe underwent serious change. In the new environment, the old solutions were far from adequate.

(A)—The Grandeur of Spain

About 1000 of this era, the Jewish community in Babylonia disintegrated along with the Babylonian society. The rise of Islam, and then, the inroads of the Turks, mitigated against a secure and prosperous community. When the Persian (Babylonian) Empire was conquered by the Arabs, the Jewish community lost much of its freedom. There began a steady decline in learning and creativity.

"Almost at the moment that the light of learning went out in Sura and Pumbedita, new lights were kindled in the most populous centers of the Mediterranean world, the brightest of which shone in the capital of Moslem Spain."* Jews had come to the chief Mediterranean cities long before the decline of the Babylonian center. They had lived in Spain for centuries, yet we call the period 1000-1350 CE "The Golden Age of Spanish Jewish Life." The Jews had so much freedom in Spain that they became high officials in the Spanish government. Many of Spain's finest poets and physicians were Jewish. The Jews of Spain were as much Spanish provincials as they were Jews. By 1492, however, the glory of Spanish Jewish living had come to an end, and the sadder tale of European Jewry begins.

The Spanish period did not produce any great work corresponding to the Bible or to the Talmud. It did produce the famous code of Maimonides, *The Mishneh Torah*, and his significant philosophical works; the *Zohar*, a mystical approach to God and the universe, and the *Shulchan Aruch*, a detailed code for daily Jewish living based on the Talmud.** The period is thus seen in perspective as one in which the Jew expressed himself freely on worldly subjects in the Arabic idiom, and also in Hebrew, and in Spanish. In this sense, the period is one of poetic and philosophic release for the Jew. On the other hand, there

Notes: *—Sachar, "A History of the Jews," p. 170.

**—Joseph Caro. the author. was born in Spain, but prepared the work in Palestine.

was no new creation of Jewish law. The better Jewish thinkers were quite content to codify the Talmudic laws without attempting to expand them or to change them.*

(B)—Ghetto Judaism

With the Spanish Inquisition in 1490-1492, there began the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and, what we choose to call the European Period of Jewish History. The Jews of Spain went east to Turkey and to the Crimea. There they met other Jews who had been established for centuries. Other Jewish communities existed as far north as Lithuania. Some of the Spanish Jews went to Holland and there founded a significant Jewish colony. Others went into France and Germany and joined the march of Jews eastward, for the Christian Crusades had left their bloody mark upon the original Jewish settlements of these countries.

The years 1500-1800 were what we might call the period of Ghetto Judaism. This was a period when Jews were confined not only within cramped and inadequate quarters, but they were also confined in their economic and political pursuits. Jews in this period could not choose the place in which they wished to live. They could not choose their vocation, and they could not choose to participate in the government of the nation in which they lived. The Jewish community was forced back upon itself. It was deprived of the means and the right to economic and political progress. It was left with its old books and the occupations that no one else wanted, like lending money and selling rags. The great factor of this period of Jewish history is that the Jews were deprived of land upon which to work. Their hands were idled. In the absence of healthy agricultural and mercantile relations with the world outside of them, the Jews began to suffer from the diseases well known to all in-bred groups. It is one of the wonders of history that the Jews were able to salvage anything at all from these long centuries.

To be sure, there was a beauty and a warmth to many aspects of Jewish living. The Jew was able to make his daily routine interesting and enriching by following the precepts or Mitzvoth. In fact, the local Rabbis added new rules to those already found in the codes and in the Talmud. The Jews made of the Sabbath a day of escape from the drudgery and the poverty of his everyday existence. Unfortunately, however, the intellectual pursuits of the Jews were

Note: *—Other noteworthy Jewish works of the period include ibn Gabirol's "Fons Vitae" and Judah Halevi's "The Cuzari." Nahmanides and Crescas were philisophic opponents of Maimonides who was of the school of Aristotle.

not largely constructive. The study of the Talmud, separated as it was from the direct approach to life as had been the case in Babylonia, now degenerated to pilpulism.* The teachers and the students in the Yeshivoth (schools) penetrated deeper and deeper into the laws in search of intellectual stimulation. The result was too often harmful and destructive of real creative study.

As was to be expected, there came a revolt against pilpulism. Unfortunately, the propertied men of the Jewish communities had been designated as community leaders by the national governments, and too often the supervisors of the Yeshivoth served the interests of the men of property. The law was interpreted in such a way as to exact the most from the common people and to return the most to the coffers of the community leaders. Presumably this money was turned over to the government as taxes. Ultimately the Jewish peasants revolted against their super-legalistic leaders with their fine show of learning and wealth. This revolution we know as Hasidism. Its theme was that God sought only good deeds from men and not necessarily learning or wealth. The simplest and most ignorant man, said the Hasidim, might be the nearest one to God. Prayer, not study, became the channel to God for these people. The way to God was not through the law but through joy and mystic identity. There is no question but that Hasidism helped to temper the climate of the Jewish community. It brought warmth and a welcome relief from pedantic legalism. The influence of Hasidism was wide and was especially successful among the common people. All of southern Russia, for example, became Hasidic.

Hasidism must be viewed as a liberalizing movement. Had it not gone so far, it might have taken a firmer hold upon all of Jewry. Its extreme disregard for the law led, however, to a degenerate mysticism in time. The Hasidim were forced to re-fashion their outlook, and they returned to the study of the law. They brought with them, however, a fresh spirit of joy. The law became for them, not an intellectual pursuit, but a mystical experience.

There was a second type of revolt against the Talmudists known as the Haskalah or Enlightenment. These were Jews who had grown weary of ghetto restrictions and were anxious to participate in the science and the culture of their Christian contemporaries. When the ghetto walls began to be removed by a more humane Christian community, the Jews of the Haskalah sought to secularize their own community and to free it from the shackles of its ancient religion.

Note: *—See the discussion of pilpulism in Grayzel, "A History of the Jews," pp. 453 ff.

We should understand that one of the many reasons for the relative sterility of this period of Jewish history was that Europe itself was sterile. Except for the short period of the Renaissance, when Europe sought again to find the creative spirit of ancient Greece, Europe was really only semi-civilized. While the Jewish standards were low compared to their own standards in other ages amidst other civilizations, the Jews were still in many ways superior to their Christian and pagan contemporaries. Only with the Emancipation in the late 18th century do both Europe and its Jews begin to show real creativity.

Even those Jews who defended so-called "Orthodox," or Ghetto-Judaism, now taught with greater intelligence and scholarship. It is not intended to say that European Jewry from 1500 to 1800 did not have its great moments, but these were neither consistent nor sustained. There are no great Jewish works of this period to compare with the Bible or the Talmud or even with the contributions of the Spanish Jews. There is no commentator of this period to compare with Rashi who lived earlier in France. It is a tribute to the Jews that their lust for knowledge was not completely smothered in these dark centuries. For the survival of Judaism in any form, we are indebted to the strong souls who made the best of their environment and left their heritage relatively untarnished in view of the circumstances.

(C)—The Emancipation

Under the stimulus of the French Revolution and the moral and political revolution which accompanied it in the late eighteenth century, the Jew was introduced to the life about him with the opportunity to mould his environment once again. We shall see in our study of the Modern Period of Jewish History that the same Jews who held so tightly to every little rule in the European Period, now turned to creating new Jewish forms as had their ancestors in Israel and in Babylonia.

PART FOUR

THE MODERN PERIOD

We have seen that the least productive era of Jewish history was a feature of the non-productive era of European history. The historian Grayzel comments in his "A History of the Jews," "The Jews . . . erected about themselves a mental ghetto to balance the physical ghetto about them."* In response to the

Note: *—Page 543.

harsh attitude of the Christian world about them, the European Jews from the 16th century onward became so reactionary in their Judaism that they almost destroyed the very essence of Judaism themselves.

The 17th century was Europe's dark century. In the 18th century there was a slow and painful groping towards emancipation. Within the Christian and Jewish communities a great struggle was in process. Just as some Jews were beginning to question the highly authoritarian Judaism of their day, so the Christians were beginning to question the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church. The rise of Protestantism and the rise of Reform Judaism were not two distinct and unrelated phenomena. Each movement was part of the "Zeitgeist," the spirit of the age.

The modern period of Jewish development begins with the great revolutions of America and France, in 1776 and 1789, respectively. These revolutions were actually the result of a gradual growth of the free spirit among Europe's people. As America was the arena in which most of Europe's political and economic institutions were defeated, so America also was the arena in which the religious institutions of Europe were displaced. America was, in its origins, primarily a Protestant nation in spirit, and certainly a non-orthodox nation. Similarly, the early Jews who found their way here were non-orthodox or Reform. America was to remain primarily a Protestant nation with respect to Christians, but the character of its Jewish population was to change vastly with the influx of hundreds of thousands of East European Jews in the late 19th century.

For a while, the freedom that America gave to the Jews, Napoleon's armies gave to the Jews of Europe. Originally, Napoleon appeared as the savior of the Jews. Wherever his armies went, they carried the new liberties of the French Revolution with them. Even Germany and Austria were affected by the new liberalism.

(A)—Reform Judaism

When the Christian world offered the Jews equality, the Jew came out of his ghetto, slowly but surely. Some of the Jews were frightened and feared the results of their newly found freedom. Like birds which have been sheltered from a storm by a dark cave, they left their shelter cautiously. The Jews were not certain that the sunlight was a friend. While some Jews preferred to retain their culture unchanged, other Jews boldly tried to demonstrate that they were not at all unlike their Christian neighbors. The tide of idealism which engulfed America and France invested

all of Europe with concepts of universal brotherhood. The religions of the day which were attractive to men were the simple religions which emphasized ethics above, and even without, ceremonials. New sects of Christians grew up which deplored the formalism and superstition of Medieval Christianity. New sects of Judaism grew up which deplored the formalism and superstition of Medieval Judaism. Christians became either Protestants or Deists or Theists.* Jews became Reform Jews or rational philosophers.

It is a mistake to think of Reform Judaism in its origins as something well defined. There were many Reform thinkers in the Europe of the 19th century. There were many synagogues which experimented along new lines. There were those Jews like Samuel Holdheim who thought that Orthodox Judaism (European Judaism) should be completely rejected. There were those like Abraham Geiger who held that Judaism was a living instrument which might be changed, but he thought that new changes were to be made slowly and within the true nature of the Jewish spirit. Geiger has been cited as the father of American Reform Judaism. Zechariah Frankel, on the other hand, while agreeing with Geiger that Judaism was changeable, opposed planned and directed change. Change, said Frankel, will arise naturally among the people and might then be recognized. Frankel is held by many to be the father of Conservative Judaism.

(B)—Jews in America

What these men tried to do in Europe, other men tried to do in America. Isaac M. Wise followed the teachings of Geiger and tried to introduce planned changes, based on the tradition, into Jewish life. The tremendous difference between the European and the American scene, however, prompted Wise and his followers, in time, to make more and more changes. The absence of trained Rabbis in this country, the scattering of Jewish communities, and the difficulty of maintaining traditional Judaism under such circumstances prompted Wise to make a more complete break with the orthodoxy of Europe, even as the Declaration of Independence had been a bold step away from Europe's political institutions.

Basically, Wise advocated one union of all Hebrew congregations in America, and he founded the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to train Rabbis for all Jews. The impetus of American radicalism carried Reform Judaism with it, and American Reform went much farther away from traditionalism than did

Note: *—The Deists believed in a personal god but not in organized religion. The Theists believed God was more transcendent.

European Reform. Although Wise hoped to unify all American Jews, the institutions he founded became the source of Reform doctrine only.

Similarly, Solomon Schechter sought in later years to avoid a severing of the American Jewish community without success. Schechter, like Frankel in Europe, hesitated in encouraging changes although he thought they were needed. He emphasized the tradition more than Wise and founded the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City which has become the citadel of Conservative Judaism.

(C)—New Immigration and New Emphasis

The Jewish Theological Seminary was founded substantially after the Hebrew Union College. It was founded when America had already lost much of its radicalism. The high spirit of change and revolution which had marked early American life in every phase did not dominate the Jews of Schechter's period, as it had dominated the Jews of an earlier period.* Further, the earlier American Jews came primarily from central and western Europe where ghetto walls had been torn down and where orthodoxy had been most seriously challenged. The Jews who swarmed into America in the late 19th century and in the early 20th century were Eastern European Jews who knew not emancipation. They did know the oppression of the Czars, however, and they knew what it was to be forced to fight for their religion. They had never been engulfed in the wave of universal idealism which had borne the idea of Reform Judaism to these shores.

The mass of new immigrants would have nothing to do with Schechter and his seminary. To them, he was Reform. The immigrants set up a tiny congregation on every corner. Each congregation was a law unto itself. Grayzel writes that the preparation of kosher food was most ineffectively supervised as were most rabbinical functions.** The basic claim of the new immigrants was that Judaism must not be changed from the form they knew in the Ghetto. As a result they did not engage in the type of scholarship which Wise and Schechter both considered necessary to the continued vitality of Judaism in its new environment.

(D)—The Secularists

Not all of the new immigrants were Orthodox Jews. Many of them were in revolt against their

Notes: *—The HUC was founded in 1875.

**—"A History of the Jews," p. 608.

religion. Some of them were areligious, not at all concerned with the survival even of a reformed Judaism. In their efforts to oppose the tyranny of the Czars, and influenced by the dynamics of Marxism, some of these Jews created a new salvation for themselves, the heaven of Socialism. Still other Jews were neither religious nor socialist but fanatically Zionist. They were concerned with the survival of the Jews as a people, although the religious character of the people was not their chief concern. Of course, there were all sorts of mixed breeds bridging these categories. There were religious Zionists and socialist Zionists and religious Socialists. Each of these groupings were in search of a new salvation, and as such, they indicated a growing dissatisfaction with the efficacy of Orthodoxy to solve the problems Jews met in their everyday routine. Strangely, almost all of these viewpoints were nurtured by the environment of Europe. Almost without exception none of them was generated by Jewish experience in America. A truly American type of Jewish salvation could only be generated after several generations of Jewish experience on the American scene.

(E)—What Type of Judaism in America?

The type of Judaism which would best apply to the American environment is only now beginning to emerge. Its leaders are Rabbis who feel that while the traditions must be respected, some planned changes must be made in Jewish life. The flavor of the new liberalism is not that of old-line Reform which broke completely with traditionalism, nor is the new liberalism consonant with the stand-pat-ism of old-line Conservative Judaism. It is a matter of historical fact that neither Orthodox, Conservative, nor Reform Judaism have made Judaism a challenging and a dynamic experience for young American Jews. Here and there, at isolated points individual Rabbis by the force of their personality have been able to stimulate and inspire their congregations. No organized presentation of Judaism, however, has succeeded in building loyal hasidim joyfully immersed in their faith. The Orthodox Jews continue their wholesale flight into Conservative and Reform categories while the Conservative and Reform Jews slip into the twilight zone of no-man's land.

The great question before American Jewry today is not for or against reform, but what direction shall the reform take? Even the orthodox groups are beginning to take the very steps that original reformers took in Europe in the 19th century. They are beginning to read prayers in the language of the land, and they are permitting women to sit alongside men. The Reform Movement, itself, is in the midst of a great reform.

Having realized the failure of high ideals alone to captivate the heart of Jews, the Reform Movement is slowly adding a minimum code of ritual to its observance by deliberate choice. The Conservative Movement, on the other hand, is splitting into three camps. There are the right wing Conservatives who are closely identified with the Modern-Orthodox. There is the Conservative Center which stands pat with Frankel and waits for the changes to be imposed upon the legislators. In its call for an active program of studied change, the left-wing of the Conservative Movement led by Dr. Mordecai Kaplan is closely identified with the liberal wing of the Reform Movement. The great difference between the Reform and Conservative movements today is that the former is moving as a body towards a planned liberalism while the latter has not yet brought itself to collective action. Many Rabbis believe that, in the years to come, there will be only two types of Judaism in America, Liberal and Traditional.*

One of the best indications of the mellowing of the Reform Movement in America is the consolidation of the Hebrew Union College with the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. The latter school was founded by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise to train men to enter any type of pulpit. Unlike the College or the Seminary, the Institute did not bind its faculty or its student body to support any particular branch of Judaism. In this free atmosphere men were trained to meet the needs of the Jewish community. True, most of the Institute graduates chose Reform pulpits, but they were not doctrinaire teachers. The Institute's graduates and faculty have been advance agents of the new liberalism. In identifying itself with the philosophy of Rabbi Wise, the Reform Movement has indicated the direction in which it will move, in all probability, within the next decade. Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of the combined Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, seems determined to make the schools a reservoir of a dynamic, liberal Judaism. Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform-Liberal) also seems to be a spokesman for the new reform.**

The position of Liberal Judaism is fashioned out of experience on the American scene. It frankly faces the cold facts of our time; it minces no words; it

Notes: * The author believes that the great hope of American Judaism lies in the Reform Movement, because it is involved, as a movement, in a broad program of experimentation.

**The Union deserves great credit for establishing the only cantorial school in America. The school has for its professors the finest scholars in the field.

asserts the need for new definitions, the discarding of some old forms, and the creation of new forms. Liberal Judaism is traditional in the sense that it does not advocate a hasty and wholesale departure from traditional observance. It is radical, in its willingness to make a change when intense study reveals the need for a change and the positive value of the change.

(F)—What is Torah?

Our ancient Rabbis have said that the world stands on three things, Torah, Temple Worship, and Righteous Action. Liberal Judaism holds that Torah includes not only the five books of Moses but all the wisdom of Jews in every age and all the wisdom of great men everywhere. Thus, Liberal Judaism represents a broad extension of the concept of Torah. In taking this stand, Liberal Judaism still retains the Torah of the Jews as the integral part of its faith, but does not limit its vision to the wisdom of the Jewish Torah alone. Unlike the Orthodox Jew, the Liberal Jew does not consider the Torah as infallible or unchangeable. He brings the critical, scholarship approach to his own religion as well as to all other fields of study.

In the case of Ahvudah or Worship, the Liberal stands for certain reforms in the method of prayer. He includes as many features of the orthodox service as possible, yet he does not hesitate to exclude those features which tend to confuse or which are not understandable to the great majority of American Jews.

With respect to Righteous Action, the Liberal Jew stresses duty towards all men. He emphasizes the obligation of gamiloth hasidim beyond the realm of the tribe (a great goal of Judaism which was submerged by the ghetto reaction to Christian cruelty). The Liberal Jew emphasizes the universalistic aspects of his faith. In this respect he reveals the influence of his American heritage.

The Liberal credo walks on two legs. It says first, the tradition is to be respected where possible; secondly, it asserts that the tradition must be changed when the needs of the people dictate that change.

(G)—The Age-old Struggle

The great question in American Jewish circles today is really not "Should the tradition be modified?" but "How is it to be modified?" The Conservative-Orthodox position is that changing needs must be met through changes in the law made only by the proper authorities (themselves). The more liberal

Rabbis in the Conservative movement testify that Conservative Judaism has introduced no changes of consequence into Jewish life in decades.* Conservative Judaism has asserted the right to change, but has not had the courage and the vision to make those changes.

The Liberal Rabbis propose to make the needed changes by joint consultation and through their national bodies. At the present time, through-out our nation, individual Rabbis are experimenting with new procedures which they hope will re-vitalize their communities and form a pattern for American Jewry. In the next decade, we shall see the fruits of these labors. Within ten years the experiments will offer practical results for consolidation and summation. Within that time, or perhaps a little longer, we may hope for a new code for American Jews. When it is developed it shall reflect the needs of our unique environment, and it shall offer Judaism's greatest hope for survival on this continent. Perhaps the results will constitute one of the major steps in the history of Judaism.**

Meanwhile the contest goes on between the Torah she b'ksav and the Torah she b'al peh, between the written law and the needs and customs of the people. In every age under normal conditions the solution has been a blending of the two. There is every reason to believe that we shall not fail in the 20th century.

(H)—Zion

America is now the center of the greatest Jewish population in the world. It must be considered as the most important Jewish center. What happens in America may well determine the character of Judaism throughout the world. On the other hand, the influence of the smaller Jewish community in Israel cannot be discounted. Here, a million Jews, a strange mixture of Jews completely westernized and Jews completely immersed in the ancient semitic culture, are trying to work out a new salvation.

The Jewish state is not founded on the laws of the Torah or the Talmud. It is founded on the model of the western European democracies. It's political leaders hope to build a new religion of cooperative socialism. The nation is engaged in one of the most touching humanitarian tasks of all history. What will

Note: *—Rabbi Eisenstein, vice-president of the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) said at the 1951 Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform-Liberal), "At our convention last week we took up the problem of the *agunah*. We left it where we had taken it up twenty years ago!"

**The Commission on Synagogue Activities of the UAHC is involved in adapting traditional ceremonies to the modern environment.

emerge from the conflict of advance political and retarded religious thinking we can not predict. Perhaps, the new synthesis will be a brilliant synthesis. Jews have demonstrated time and again through the ages the capacity to blend seeming opposites. The original Torah burst upon the ancient world as a miraculous fountain in the hot desert. Perhaps the new Torah which shall come forth from Zion shall be of equal value to the old. If the Torah really lives, that is to say, if it grows and changes, it shall be a Tree of Life to those who cleave unto it forever!

REFERENCES LISTED IN THESE LECTURES

"The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible"—WRIGHT and FILSON, Philadelphia, 1946.

"The Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man"
FRANKFORT, WILSON, JACOBSEN, and IRVIN,
Chicago, 1946.

"The Covenant Society of the Old Testament"
a thesis, 1950, RABBI HERBERT BAUMGARD,
available in the library of the Jewish Institute
of Religion, New York.

"A History of the Jews"—A. SACHAR, New
York, 1946.

"The Maccabean Revolt"—a paper by DR.
HARRY ORLINSKY, available from the author
or in the library of the Jewish Institute of
Religion, New York.

"A History of the Jews"—S. GRAYZEL, Phila-
delphia, 1950.

POSTSCRIPT (1982)

It has been thirty years since this pamphlet was written. During these years, the American Jewish Community has been in great crisis. The problems of the American middle-class have been clearly evident amongst many Jews. The open sex scene, accelerated intermarriage, and the declining birth rate have severely affected Jews as well as the general American community. While an alarming number of Jews have been assimilated into the general American Community, others have faced the crisis of moving closer to the Jewish tradition.

In these years, the Orthodox Jewish Community has shown surprising strength and significantly has maintained a healthy birth rate. Conservative and Reform Jews have moved closer together in many ways, but their liberal constituency has been the most buffeted by the prevailing winds of social change. It is these groups that have the larger congregations and the biggest problems with respect to assimilation and the declining birth rate. There is a growing feeling amongst more Jews that this is a time for moving closer to the Jewish center, in terms of ritual observances, for the sake of survival.

Never has the Jewish community built more synagogues, never has its seminaries raised more money, but the problems of survival are increasing. Even as more institutional buildings rise, the registration in Jewish religious schools is sharply decreasing. It would seem that some Jews are trying to save the world from overpopulation all by themselves.

In these thirty years, women have come to play an increasingly significant role in the American synagogue. The example set by Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century involving women on an equal basis with men in the synagogue has been followed by many Conservative congregations. The Reform seminary for the training of Rabbis (The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion) reports that over one-third of its students are women. While an increasing number of Jewish women are moving into positions of Jewish leadership, so an increasing number are choosing to be a careerist rather than a mother of Jewish children.

The needs of the future are clear for American Jews. They must choose a mate committed to help them raise Jewish children; they must increase their birth-rate, and they must train their children Jewishly in such a way that they will be able to resist the lure of assimilation. Study of Torah must be intensified in all Jewish homes. The home once again has to become the focus of ritualistic observance. The changes that the leaders of the Babylonian Jewish community introduced to help the exiles survive must have their counterpart in the American crisis. Judaism in America will survive if each family understands its responsibility in the battle. Traditional Jews will say that the new move to home ritualistic observance must follow Orthodox patterns. Reform Jews continue to believe that there is room for selectivity and creativity where ritual is concerned.

Distributed by

THE BROTHERHOOD OF
TEMPLE BETH AM

5950 No. Kendall Drive
Miami, Florida 33156

Fifth Printing, 1982, 5742