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THE TRICENTENARY AND AFTER

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**CHAPTER EIGHT:
AMERICAN INFLUENCES ON JEWISH RELIGION**

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IT IS COMMON sociological theory that minorities tend to adopt the standards of behavior and the values of the majority group and, in time, to be completely absorbed by it. With respect to Jews in America, it would appear that a great many of them are already far advanced along the stages of this process. Fortunately, however, an important focal point of Jewish life, the synagogue, seems to be averting final disintegration by an active, if struggling, accommodation and adjustment to the democratic environment.

For this adjustment to be possible requires, of course, that the minority 'be flexible enough to countenance change; but it also requires that the general environment be so constituted as to allow vigorous diversity. The American democratic way of life, in both its political and social expressions, contains elements favoring this diversity. It has unquestionably come to have a tremendous impact on Jewish religious life.

The American Brand of Democracy

Such factors, characteristic of our particular brand of democracy, as the separation of church and state, religious freedom, the spirit of voluntarism, social mobility, fluid class lines, and pragmatic outlook, among others, may either help or hinder our survival, depending on how we cope with them. The changes in synagogue patterns already made by American Jews have been partly conscious and partly unconscious accommodations. But, however they occur, it may be said that, in some important ways, Jewish religious organization has taken on the coloration of the dominant Protestant group. To understand what this has meant, we can turn to the early experience of religionists here and the resolution of their conflicts.

At the time of the establishment of the Republic, multiplicity of religious splinter groups, largely Protestant, posed a serious problem: how to achieve harmonious co-existence under a common form of government. Neither the Protestant ethic, extolling the inviolability of the individual conscience, nor the painful experiences of religious refugees from England and the Continent, were enough to guarantee the complete sanctioning of denominational pluralism. Two alternatives were possible: either the establishment, in the new government, of the European pattern of a state church which disciplines -deviant denominations; or else a compromise involving separation of church and state, which grants religious liberty to all, and relegates religious belief or disbelief to the privacy of the individual conscience.

No group was strong enough to achieve the former without a bitter struggle. The acquiescence in the latter was, therefore, dictated by the obdurate clashes of diverse groups who wished, above all, to see the nation survive united. Sanctioned religious sectarianism, hitherto inconceivable to Protestants and Catholics of the Old World, was the "residuary legatee of ecclesiastical animosities." It was another link in the chain of historical evidence that minorities seem naturally disposed to more tolerant, freer systems.

The shift from "church type" to "sect type" religious organization in the United States encouraged that voluntaristic attitude which is characteristically associated with the American brand of democracy. Conscious choice of religious affiliation was valued as a true religious expression; and "heresies" grew bountifully, blessed with success. Being born into a religious group offered no guarantee of continued loyalty. Further, non-affiliation with any group became a real alternative.

The Emergence of Divisions in Jewish Life

To the Jewish immigrants, especially the great mass from East Europe, this presented a new pattern in religious living. The church-type organization had been the only model for the European Jewish ghetto. Its sole expression was orthodoxy, and, in that, it resembled the authoritarian complex of the Catholic Church. To ensure authority, a state-recognized kehillah was entrusted with powerful coercive weapons; and in the hands of the rabbinate was the ultimate instrument of social control—the herein (religious excommunication).

In the ghetto, the problem had largely been how to survive the onslaughts of persecution and pogroms, dangers which actually encouraged social cohesiveness. So long as the ghetto continued as a closed community, it did not have to fear the temptations of secularism, heterodoxy or assimilation. While the mass emigrations of the 1900's had witnessed cracks in the ghetto wall, still the suddenness and extent of the new freedom in America assaulted the viability of religious Judaism on an unparalleled scale. The final implication of the American spirit of voluntarism for the Jews led Milton Steinberg to articulate rejection of the traditional maxim, "Yisrael, af al pi shehata, yisrael hu" (roughly equivalent to: "once a Jew, always a Jew"). He replaced it with the revolutionary defense of the "freedom of all individuals, including my fellows, to leave my company and abandon an enterprise that means so much to me."

And in a society swarming with deviants, there were alternatives open to the "un-synagogued" Jew. Many of those chosen, though outside the ken of the Orthodox synagogue, still enabled individuals to identify as Jews to their own satisfaction. Aside from the various cultural, philanthropic and benevolent Jewish organizations, many Jews were still attached to some forms of religious observance, some of these being members of early Reform synagogues. Such variants of every hue and color were active here from the time of our arrival.

The Impact of American Democracy on Reform

Out of this chaos, the present-day picture of the separate co-existence of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform groups gradually emerged. The combination of similar circumstances reinforced by the success of the Protestant model had provided fertile ground for the expansion and development of a type of Jewish sectarianism. The first non-orthodox group to establish a seminary in America to train its own rabbis for its own congregations was the Reform movement. A successful transplant, it was at first tied in form and content to the efforts of the German Reform movement, which developed in the early nineteenth century.

The basic philosophy of German Reform, couched in the idiom of philosophic idealism (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel), had been an attempt to make Judaism catch up with what was considered the scientific progress and philosophic refinement of the Germanic Christian society. The "Germanization" of Jewish religion was not, however, motivated by an unheroic desire merely to conform to the majority culture, though many may have seized upon it for assimilationist reasons. It was quite the contrary, a major effort to stem the tide of total assimilation by offering a new rationale for Jewish identification in consonance with the contemporary Zeitgeist. On the one hand, the Reformers felt the need for Judaism to slough off those theological beliefs and rituals not esthetically acceptable to them and not compatible with modern scientific data. And on the other hand, they sought to re-evaluate and emphasize those elements in Jewish tradition which would enable it to compete successfully with the Germanic philosophers who viewed the development of the Prussian-Christian state as the concrete manifestation of the God spirit through history, the final end to the historic dialectic.

The answer to this lay in a reinvigorated *raison d'être* for modern Jewry articulated by the Reformers. Complete attention converged on the universal character of Jewish religion, with all Israel elected to the unique and special mission of its propagation. Two long sustained characteristics of Jewish life had to be discarded: the legalism of Orthodoxy and those particularistic rituals, like kashrut, which related to Jews only.

However, contrary to the intent of the Reformers, the road to conversion actually became smoother. Since, unfortunately, Christianity had also laid claim to a supra-ethnic universalism, what was to prevent apostasy, once the stripping of distinctively Jewish customs, ceremonies and rituals had taken place? It was not sufficient for Kaufmann Kohler to urge that "because of this universalistic Messianic hope of Judaism, it is still imperative, as it has been throughout the past, that the Jewish people must continue its separateness as a 'Kingdom of priests and a holy nation,' and, for the sake of its world mission, avoid intermarrying with members of the other sects, unless they espouse the Jewish faith."

The somewhat more pointed attempt to stem Jewish dereliction was the Reformers' actual repudiation of Christian theology as pagan, and their condemnation of the Trinitarian concept of God as a reversion to primitive polytheism. German Reform pursued an anti-Christianity theme, and eventually was marked by intense racial chauvinism.

This was, in broad terms, the inheritance of the American Reform movement. But as time passed, it, in turn, began to react to its own milieu and status in American society. And the salient and most interesting characteristic of this particular reaction has been the gradual re-introduction of specifically Jewish ritual to its religious life. The impact of democracy was to temper much of classical Reform's theory and practice.

For one thing, the hostile religious competition so keenly sensed in Germany was considerably mitigated here. For another; the shibboleth of the "melting pot," so popular at the turn of the century, implied the ability of each minority to give something distinctive of itself for the enhancement of the general American culture. The eventual refinement of the "melting pot" ideal to eliminate the implications of minority dissolution was another help in creating a generally favorable climate which allowed for a more tolerant and natural retention of Jewish practices.

The anti-Christianity motif was replaced, here in America, by an intense inter-faith interest. The emphasis, once again in keeping with the tone of social democracy, was on reducing the barriers to harmonious relations with Gentiles. As a result, the mission ideal of a chosen

people was toned down considerably. It was retained less as a serious goal for Judaism than as a psychological crutch for Jewish loyalty.

In line with this, the Reform Union Prayer Book (revised in 1940) eliminates entirely that part of the Alenu prayer which praises God, who "hath not made us like the nations of other lands and hath not placed us like other families of the earth." In addition, it renders the English translation of the Hebrew text, which is literally "who lovest Thy people Israel," as "who hast revealed Thy love through Israel."

Classical German Reform, had accommodated itself to certain dominant Germanic Christian strains mainly through a theological and philosophic rationale for Jewish existence. Its American analogue, while not eliminating reference to that rationale, was more articulate in dealing with the practical problems of Jewish unity and Jewish religious expression.

The Impact of American Democracy on Conservatism

Of the two major deviant movements, Reform and Conservative, it is the latter which has had the more complex adjustment to make to the American environment. While the theoretical antecedent of Conservatism lay in the German Positive Historical school of Zachariah Frankel, its organization as a movement was primarily undertaken here. Robert Gordis, one of its most articulate spokesmen, has called it "an American philosophy." ". . . in its pragmatic approach and its distrust of abstract theory," it is "characteristically American in spirit." This proudly held pragmatism has meant an avoidance of an unambiguous programmatic presentation, a refusal to define its position on controversial ritual and theological issues.

On the whole, while the movement as a body seems rarely to initiate or anticipate ritual change, it appears willing to sanction innovations by congregations, once they are faits accomplis. Naturally, the absence of central direction would allow for a great amount of congregational autonomy. Except for the insistence upon worshiping with covered heads within its synagogues, Conservatism has not taken a completely unequivocal stand on any specific ritual.

A rationale accepted by many for the movement's rearguard attitude towards congregational Reform has been Solomon Schechter's principle of the selective capacity of "Catholic Israel." This democratic faith in the wisdom of the people's religious choice has, however, been so qualified by some as to render it inefficacious. The voice of "Catholic Israel" is not to include that of any who do not observe the rituals of traditional Judaism, or who reject the process and validity of halakab, the Rabbinic legal code. However, in actual practice, it is dubious whether the choir of mixed male and female voices, organ music, Confirmation, and the seating together of men and women, accepted in most Conservative congregations, were instituted with the consent of "Catholic Israel" so defined.

While it has been maintained that the movement will not surrender values and practices "for the sake of convenience, conformity, or national advantage masquerading as love of progress," it will "in line with the modern trend towards equality of women . . . accept the practice of having family pews . . . not hesitate to supplement the basically Hebrew service with English prayers. Some Conservative synagogues have introduced the organ in order to beautify the service in terms of modern esthetic tastes." Further, it will sanction "the eating of dairy dishes or fish in non-kosher eating places" motivated by "conditions of modern life." The reasoning behind the latter is specifically seen as a response to a democratic value: "Equally important is the maintenance of free social intercourse between Christians and Jews, which is one of its glories as it is one of the safeguards of a democratic society."

All these acknowledged changes have taken place, not as a result of Rabbinical Assembly discussion and decision, but as a consequence of widely practiced behavior which initially was frowned upon by right wing elements. On which side of the ledger one places these modifications, whether on that of balanced adjustment and reasoned adaptation, or on that of sheer surrender or of compromise, is a matter left to the congregation and its rabbi.

The critics of the movement accuse it of deliberately dodging problems of crucial contemporary concern. Its apologists consider such pluralism a fundamental democratic value, consciously allowing for diversity of opinion and fostering a generous catholicity of attitude.

The Problem for Conservative Judaism

This much is certain, however, that with respect to change, Conservative Judaism as a body is in a most difficult position, Orthodoxy in America has proved to be rigid and only cries out against deflection. Reform Judaism may drop or initiate practices with no regard for the chain of rabbinic legal principles, or halakah, which it has long since discarded. Conservative Judaism is constituted of elements ranging all the way from those only slightly removed from Orthodoxy to those only slightly removed from Reform. Many of its scholars and rabbis would like to see changes, but changes legally sanctioned through the instrumentality of halakah in order to preserve the continuity of the tradition.

However, several things impede the widespread acceptance of this principle; its slowness in dealing with pressing problems, the lack of even rudimentary knowledge of and respect for the principles of halakah on the part of the laity, and the bona fide membership in the movement of congregations and rabbis already practicing a wide variety of forms.

Conservative Judaism is uncomfortably caught between its two goals: maintaining continuity through traditional instruments, and accepting changes wrought by the force of the environment. To call for a programmatic philosophy embodying the strict use of halakab means to run the risk of further sectarian splits, since the only way to enforce it would be to read dissidents out of the movement, a catastrophic end to Conservatism. On the other hand, the movement is unwilling to come right out and reject balakab. Lately, the promulgation of both majority and minority rabbinic opinion on ritual questions, each actually accorded equal weight, has been attempted. De facto, of course, this emasculates the legal code. Therefore, whether Conservatism's non-directive attitude on many ritual issues is making a virtue out of a necessity or is a planned decision meant to discourage Orthodox authoritarianism still remains a matter for partisan judgment. The movement's method with respect to practice is truly a pragmatic mending of ritual fences, rather than a comprehensive philosophic program in response to the total picture of Jewish patterns in America.

Very much the same thing may be said to hold true of the movement's attitude towards theological divergences. But, interestingly enough, while varieties of belief exist, they have not become major irritants to the movement. This appears to be a historically characteristic Jewish solution to theological differences: the stress on the primacy of conformity in practice with a concomitant lack of stress on conformity in theological doctrine.

To the more persistent "left wing" members who question the belief in divine revelation understood literally, is offered the very flexible formula of "divine inspiration." This phraseology is sufficiently loose to adjust itself to almost any position.

Another doctrine under question is the belief 3n Israel as a chosen people. Reaction to the democratic outlook has made the movement as a whole sensitive to its original implication of ethnic superiority. A new interpretation is that chosenness represents a "form of noblesse

oblige, imposing upon the House of Israel the responsibility to lead a life of holiness and righteousness." Israel's chosenness is further considered contingent upon its obedience to God.

Those who would reject the doctrine entirely, find even this qualified interpretation unacceptable to their democratic persuasion. To them, noblesse oblige patently presupposes superiority. And the divine choice not simply of a doctrine or system of beliefs (equally debatable) but of an ethnic group, is seen to lead rationally (and, under certain conditions, actually) to an undesirable chauvinism reminiscent of classic Reform Judaism. Since the people's chosenness has never been considered forfeited by disobedience to God's will, it is maintained that, in the eyes of the traditionalist, Israel will unalterably be the chosen of God.

The prayer book, recently revised for Conservative congregations, reflects quite clearly some difficulties involved in an ingathering of a variety of attitudes into the traditional worship. Its foreword explains the revisions as an attempt to "perpetuate traditional Judaism in the modern spirit" which would "express the viewpoint of Conservative Judaism." But sometimes these liturgical accommodations have not been altogether consistent. In certain instances, the original Hebrew on the right side of the siddur page is retained while its English translation on the left side is rendered in an idiom more palatable to modernists. This takes advantage of the fact • that most traditionalist congregants rarely read the

English and that lay modernists rarely understand the Hebrew.

A) For instance, in the Prayer of Adoration (Aleynu), the Hebrew text remains intact, reading literally: ". . . Thou hast not made us like the nations of the lands or placed us like the families of the earth . . . nor placed our lot with theirs." The English translation, however, shows an embarrassment at this chauvinistic strain through its more acceptable rendition as "Thou hast not made us like the pagans of other lands nor placed us like the heathen of other tribes." It is claimed that "pagan" and "heathen" and not "nation" and "family" were the original contextual meanings of the Hebrew anyway. But since exceedingly few congregants say the Hebrew prayers with such philosophical and historical knowledge, it would seem that to eliminate the doubt about any undesirable meaning, the Hebrew would have to be changed as well, using terms which have traditionally been employed to designate "pagan" and "heathen."

Similarly in the Havdalah service, the Hebrew text, literally translated as ". . . who has distinguished between Israel and the nations" reads more innocuously in English ". . . who didst make distinction between Israel and the heathen."

B) In the case of the prayers describing the sacrificial offering of two he-lambs in the ancient Temple at Jerusalem, a less subtle technique is used. It is retained in tow in Hebrew. But the left-hand page for English translation is left blank with only the Biblical reference: Numbers 28:9-10."

C) More unanimous agreement evidently operated in the revisions of the preliminary benedictions of the Orthodox siddur, which orders blessings of God "for not making me a non-Jew (gay) . . . for not making me a slave . . . for not making me a woman." Both the Hebrew and the English were changed in the Conservative prayer book to read in a somewhat altered and positive form: "Who hast made me in Thine image . . . hast made me free . . . hast made me an Israelite." The reasons offered for the changes, however, resist the interpretation that they have been undertaken because the Orthodox version expresses ideas essentially undemocratic. Rather, it is said, the switch from the negative to the positive

forms has taken place "in order to avoid any misconceptions of Jewish attitude towards these categories."

Such liberal retranslations and omissions are the products of the attempts to bridge the gap between those parts of tradition and of modern Jewish attitudes which are incompatible. Consciously or not, they are the transitional techniques of religion in search of intellectual and ethical contemporaneity.

Reconstructionism's Response to Democracy

However, while this is true of the Conservative movement as a whole, there originated within it, forming the core of its left wing, the Reconstructionist group. This group eventually extended beyond the Conservative movement and includes many Reform Jews and Jews without denominational commitment. It is the sole body to have done more than merely react to the unconscious spiritual influence of democratic values on the part of the laity. Reconstructionism looked at democracy and saw that, in many ways, it was good. In its philosophy, therefore, it has called for a conscious and programmatic democratization of Jewish life, a democratization which is often far in advance of lay thinking.

It was the scientific method, quite apart from the democratic philosophy, which was the primary influence in Re-constructionism's outright rejection of supernaturalism. This was accompanied by changes in belief in divine revelation, the status of the Pentateuch, the concept of reward and punishment, and of the world to come. That orientation was, however, replaced by a religious philosophy formulated very definitely in the idiom of American naturalism and humanism, at whose center is the study of the individual, his needs and his world. Reconstructionism considers this study the proper starting point of religious expression. Individual conscience however, though it is highly recognized as the irreducible sanction in matters of religious commitment, belief and practice.

Entailed in this is a thorough reconsideration of the religious type it seeks' to create and of the role of the rabbinate. Leadership based on democratic principles is to be substituted for reliance upon the interpretation of ritual and ethical codes considered to be of supernatural origin. Humanistic religion announces man's capacity to know what is good or bad and refuses to rely upon the awe of authority whose source is deemed transcendent, sacrosanct and inerrant.

The pragmatism which characterizes the Reconstructionist wing of the Conservative movement is somewhat different from that of the right and center wings in that it encourages experimentation and innovation in ritual practice. This is not only to prevent the dulling effect of religious habituation on the conscience of the individual, but to allow for religious expression to keep pace with the ethical and moral advances of the group. In synagogues where it has received a sympathetic ear, its most conspicuous ritual innovation has been a consistent equalization of the role of women in worship, counting them in the minyan and calling them to the Torah.

Because the clearly defined position of Reconstructionists has made the equivocal portions of the Conservative Prayer book unacceptable, a new siddur was drawn up by the group, completely consistent with its point of view. Thus, in place of: "Who didst choose us from among all the peoples," is introduced the formula: "Who hast brought us nigh to Thy service." Prayers referring to the ancient sacrificial system, to the coming of a personal messiah to physical resurrection, are eliminated altogether. In addition, Reconstructionist rejection of belief in the power of prayer to alter the course of natural law has effected the abandonment of such prayers as "Thou causest the wind to blow and the rain to

The Reconstructionist movement represents almost the only Jewish religious group to have taken on parts of democratic patterns and philosophy as the values and goals of organized religion. Curiously, compatible with the mainstream of American thought, there appears no inherent guarantee of its widespread acceptance by those most integrated within this mainstream.

Protestant influences and Their Limits

Consciously or not, the American synagogue has, in a significant sense, become considerably protestantized in form and spirit. Not only has American Jewry responded favorably to the pattern of pluralism, but we have also seen the ministerial black robe draped upon rabbinic shoulders; the sermon raised to new importance in the service, with homiletics based on the spirit of the Bible substituted for pi/put based on Talmudic legalism and rabbinic responsa; the mixed choir, and the family pew replacing the segregation of the sexes by a curtain or mehitzah (partition); the organ music and Confirmation ceremony finding favor in the synagogue; the rabbi's role augmented by pastoral demands; and individual conscience entered as a new ingredient in Jewish religious life.

But it is equally significant to note that the synagogue has not adopted what is so distinctively characteristic of Protestantism, namely, its emphasis on matters of creed and faith. Even the trend of Classical Reform, influenced by German Protestantism, which had minimized ritual to the advantage of theology, could not be maintained here.

It is true, of course, that centuries of Rabbinic Judaism had never witnessed a codification or systematization of theological positions. This traditional factor doubtless made contemporary Judaism less likely to yield to this Protestant pre-occupation with creed. But certainly resistance was strongly fortified by the overwhelming immediacy of the practical problems of unity and collective self-preservation which confronted Jewry in America. Rabbinic thought could hardly be expected to concentrate on the nature of God, theodicy and sin, which so concerned the dominant religions.

It had to concern itself primarily with the deflection from religious life and the need to reconcile the integration into American life with the maintenance of the Jewish identity. With anti-Semitism and Zionism preoccupying the attention of American Jews, theology, creed and dogma seemed, perhaps, inopportune luxuries.

As a consequence of this situation, the rituals and ceremonies of Jewish observance have come to be considered less than ever as referents of accepted religious truths and more as overt manifestations of Jewish identification and loyalty. The theologic rationales of ritual observances may show all manner of gradations among Jews, but the dramatic enactment of those observances is significantly the same. The ceremony is public; the rationale private. Brought to the fore with new strength in America was the traditional expectation that, if a man develops the habit of observing ritual ceremony, even though his mind may not comprehend or agree, nor his heart at first respond, ultimately the habit will win out (Mitokh shello lishmah, ha lishmab). The contemporary call for renewed observance, over against renewed faith, is grounded in the conviction that here is the most reliable instrument for achieving loyal Jewish adherence within the framework of the American community.

Overlooked, however, is the fact that the pre-emancipation tolerance toward theological diversity as long as ritual observance was adhered to, took place in an era when theo-logic variations were sustained by uniform supernaturalist premises. Theological differences in the modern epoch have been too radical to be simply dismissed as of no consequence to ritual practice. Once fundamental theologic props are significantly altered or removed, the effect upon ritual practice is more crucial than traditionalists appreciate or dare to acknowledge.

The genetic and psychological priority of ritual to theology is inapplicable to the religious practice of the growing number of Jews who, unhappy with revelation as a rationale for observance, and lacking nostalgia for traditional forms, need yet to be convinced that practice is important.

Democracy Adds a New Dimension to Religion.

To speak, as we have, of the impact of democracy upon Jewish religion implies a recognition of their separate and, for the most part, independent developments. Democracy, its political, social and ethical patterns, cannot, therefore, be viewed simply as an inevitable historical or logical outcome of the Old Testament or traditional Judaism.

To be sure, both biblical and post-biblical. Judaism possessed several strong and vital democratic strains. The Jews in America, for example, had no occasion to give vent -to some of the bitter anticlericalism associated with the emergent democratic ideals in early America. The rabbi was never considered a priest or mediator between man and God, but a teacher of tradition and law, and the laity always had considerable power in synagogue matters.

Nevertheless, we ought not be blind to the fact that many facets of both the Bible and Rabbinic Judaism were not entirely compatible with political and social democracy as we know it today. Historically, the Bible, rich in a variety of social expressions, has proved flexible enough to provide rationales for absolute monarchies and theocracies as well as for forms of democracy.

The thesis prevalent in many theological circles to the effect that democratic ideals are sheer reflections of religion, logically dependent upon its theological formulations, overstates the case. It supports an illicit leap from descriptive statements such as "the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" to normative statements like, "all men should be equal before the law."

But even if we grant the contention of the theologians, the interpretations of the theological propositions in their application to specific empirical cases are so vague and varied as to render the ethical directives of theology pragmatically meaningless. Such patent questions as, for example, How should the concern of brothers for each other express itself? What are its bounds and limitations? remain unanswered and uninterpreted.

The recognition of these facts is vital for a proper assessment of the significant impact of democracy upon our religious forms. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the leaders of organized religion to accept and reckon with the fact that the democratic way of life can and does add new dimensions to traditional Jewish patterns. To ignore the depths of this impact is to forfeit the opportunity to exploit fully the positive contribution of democracy and to suffer such undesirable consequences as may result from it. It is the proper chameleonization of democratic values which forms the major challenge facing Jewish religious life in America today.