

Reform Jewish Rabbis in the American South And the Civil Rights Movement: Intersecting Realities, Intersecting Myths

The 1928 Report of the Commission on Social Justice was the product of a predominantly European sensibility which idealized America --the religious freedom it saw in America: the separation of church and state as the promise of a better life for Jews. The signers of that document conceived of America as a homogeneous and abstract, and it was against that almost mythic setting that they defined a certain kind of future social policy as an ethical imperative based on prophetic Judaism. There was not the America of the Gold rush, the Wild West, the Revolutionary War, or the America of the farmers of the Connecticut valley, or the merchants of the coal towns of Appalachia, or New Orleans, or the South. However, many policy makers who were either new or first generation Americans either were unaware of or unwilling to take into account the actual complex and diverse historical experience of Jews and non-Jews whose tenure in different parts of the country exceeded theirs. This particular group of educated religious professionals determined and shaped a subsequent course of policy and action for both rabbis, congregations, and individuals which, while it did significantly change the American social landscape, contributed to trauma and division within the Reform and American Jewish community. The difference between how Southern Reform Jews and Northern Reform Jews reacted to the Civil Rights Movement should really be understood in the light of how regionalism and acculturation shaped Jewish identity as much as a flawed conception of America, and the abstract ideas of social justice of its early policy makers.

Over the course of the subsequent years, especially during the Civil Rights era, Reform Rabbis were encouraged to translate and expand on these concepts within their communities and

beyond. In "A Statement of Basic Principles on the Synagogue and Social Action"¹ they followed the recommendation of the Commission on Social Action laying out a program for a Reform Judaism in America with a proactive social agenda. In many ways, it was a call to action to a rabbinate that had become marginalized, similar to its European forbears at the time of Emancipation, and synagogues which were no longer the center of Jewish life. The rabbis who developed the platform and who occupied and assumed pulpits in Southern congregations faced different issues than their northern counterparts, in that an acculturation process among Southern Jews had been going on for a longer time. In many of these communities, Jews were perceived as a religious minority, and their proactive social justice agenda was accomplished through secular activities, not from the temple; they had prospered in the South by adopting attitudes and mores which made them less distinguishable from their Christian neighbors. They were a widely dispersed and minority population and unlike their Northern counterparts, their physical and economic existence was threatened by a change in the status quo. The attitudes of Jewish rabbis and communities in the South sometimes reflected where and how they formed their own Jewish identity, sometimes their understanding of religious obligation, sometimes their sense of obligation as community leader, and frequently those identities would, if not conflict, at least manifest tension and ambivalent responses.

In this paper, I will first briefly examine the documentary and theoretical bases and origins for the Reform stance on social justice prior to the civil rights movement, then, how those ideas influenced Rabbis who held leadership positions in the South in the stands that they took on segregation, how their congregations were affected, and finally, the significance of

¹adopted by 43d General Assembly , of the UAHC in LA on February 15, 1955

regionalism in a conception of Jewish identity, despite the myth of a unified Reform identity and agenda--when it matters, and when it does not.

Part I-The Documentary and Theoretical Basis for the Reform Stand on Social Justice

The Report of Commission on Social Justice was concerned, in 1928, with correlating prophetic teachings with social values for a modern industrialized and capitalistic society. The first eleven provisions addressed themselves to investors, employees, employers: in opposition to exploitation and inequality, on issues such as "the distribution and the responsibilities of wealth,"² while citing an argument in favor of organized labor and collective bargaining, arbitration, unemployment compensation, and social security. Women and children's identities as employees was recognized first; equality in pay, but unequal consideration in social relations -- women were to be "protected" (Ibid. 258) "from the nerve-wracking and debilitating effects of industrial excesses" ...and the work place was to be safe and sanitary.³ Child labor was to be eliminated, so children could be educated and develop to their capacities. Criminals were to be rehabilitated and the situations which bred them eliminated. Economic imperialism was deplored on an international front; as was any means of augmenting the power of the military.

On three other points, the platform moves from the economic to political injustice, and not just the political, but allusively to events familiar to the document's signatories and audiences. The year 1915 saw an increase in the spread of intolerance⁴ and the founding of the

²Vorspan and Lipman, 1928 Report of Commission on Social Justice, appendix p.255

³Was this a reverberation of public cries for reform following the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in 1911?

⁴The national origin quota system established by Congress in 1921, the founding of the Brotherhood of sleeping Car Porters in 1925, the Sacco-Vanzetti case in 1927, West Virginia

Ku Klux Klan. Article XV of the Reform document, entitled "Lynching" condemns both the activity and the mindset. It is significant that the topic merits a section of its own, and is not included in the section on Civil Liberties, (which emphasizes rights guaranteed by the American Constitution, and critiques the use of Federal injunctions to limit it.) Most probably, the lynching of Leo Frank in 1913⁵ and the subsequent spread of the racial and ethnic hatred and lynchings by the Klan influenced the commission's decision to spotlight their position. In its strong socialist trends, the document seems to both reflect revolutionary Europe and anticipate the New Deal, yet its updated language is also the language of Isaiah. "Learn to do well; Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. " (Isaiah I:11 ff)⁶ Among the signers of the document were rabbis who were lifelong, well-known social activists. The chairman of the commission, Rabbi Edward L. Israel, would be known for his support of the sit-down strikes of the thirties-- the right of the employee to work was an ethical issue.⁷ His understanding of social justice can be understood from a quote from an article in *Birth Control Review*.⁸ Rabbi Israel said , " ...Social justice of any sort is not an end in itself. It is a means, through which human life will be made richer and happier and more capable of achieving a sense of truly spiritual values..." Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, son of German immigrants, who had studied at Hebrew Union College, but also in Berlin at the Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des

coal wars in the early 1920's in the United States are the landscape against which this between the wars document can be viewed.

⁵Webb, Fight Against Fear p. 17

⁶Vorspan and Lipman, p. 13

⁷from a review of Sit Down, by Joel Seidman, looking at the campaign of the Congress of Industrial Organizations(CIO) to organize labor, "The problem, Rabbi Israel asserts, is one of the comparative emphasis of human rights over/against property rights. The entire struggle of the human race from bondage toward freedom, he points out, has been a constant battling against vested interests." <http://spot.colorado.edu/~wehr/491R8.txt>

⁸"A Divine Mandate." *Birth Control Review*, Volume XIV, Number 5 (May 1930)page 144 Quotable Quotes from *the Birth Control Review*, a journal (1917-1940 of the American Birth Control League founded by Margaret Sanger, a forerunner of Planned Parenthood.

Judentums,⁹ was known as a peace activist. He was a man who would establish and raise money for Jewish Pacifist organizations, coordinate with the American Friends Service Committee, as well as attempt to arrange pardons for the Rosenbergs from President Eisenhower, and to secure justice for Martin Sobell. Rabbi Samuel Spier Mayerberg was probably better known in Kansas than on the national scene. At great physical risk to himself, he tackled corruption in government, especially in Kansas City, Kansas, going up against the Prendergast racketeers. Kansas City, which hosted the Republican Convention that nominated Hoover in the year the Social Justice Report was issued, was also the site of the national convention of the Ku Klux Klan, held in 1924. In 1932 he would launch an anti-machine gun crusade, and would help to launch a reform slate in local government in 1940. Rabbi Mayerberg understood social justice as a spiritual imperative.

"The spirituality of the Rabbi must be so much a part of his personality that he may never be disassociated from it. It must be so intimately and vividly his personal characteristic, that when people think of him, they automatically think of a man whose whole life at all times is encompassed by the glow of God-consciousness. If the Rabbi is of such spiritual texture, his influence will normally and naturally affect the attitudes and the overt expressions of his people."¹⁰

Among the proactive spiritual disciples of this group were the first director of the Commission on Social Action for Reform Judaism Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, who was joined by Albert Vorspan in 1953. Together, they would study and write about social issues in American Jewish life, oversee the development and evolution of organizations which would significantly affect the social landscape of America.¹¹ and provide leadership and influence over a group of rabbis, a minority of whom would assume Southern pulpits. Vorspan would be further involved

⁹Abraham Cronbach Papers, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College

¹⁰speech to students and faculty and Hebrew Union College, from the records of Congregation Temple B'nai Jehudah

¹¹The Religious Action Center is overseen by the Commission on Social Action for Reform Judaism . Vorspan directed it until he became Vice-President of UAHC in 1974.

with some of these rabbis during the Civil Rights movement. In the list of forty-two members of the commission published in the index of Lipman and Vorspan's Justice and Judaism in 1959, there are few representatives from Southern congregation --many, if not most, are northerners. Rabbi Charles Mantinband, Hattiesburg, Mississippi; Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild, Atlanta; Louis Sternheimer, Richmond, Virginia; Rabbi William B. Silverman, Nashville; Rabbi David Lefkowitz, Jr. Shreveport; Myer Siegel, Macon, Georgia; Joseph Rauh, Jr, Washington. D. C.; Louis Sternheimer, Richmond, Va; Marvin Braiterman, Baltimore--of these, only a few would become well known outside of the Jewish community.

By the time of the Civil Rights Movement, member synagogues in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations would have been encouraged to form social action committees of their own which would operate locally and nationally, but in the nineteenth century social action was not the dominant concern. In the twentieth century, Isaiah and the US Supreme Court were linked, when, in the statement of principles on "the Synagogue and Social Action"¹² adopted by the HUAC in 1955, the outlawing of segregation, as an achievement of democracy, would beat the sword of tyranny into plowshares.

While many of the rabbis associated with the early documents were American born and educated, many were European born, some European educated with the experience of Emancipation and European conceptions of Liberal Judaism in their family histories. For example, Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, a signer of the 1928 document, was born in Belgium and had already had some schooling in Antwerp before arriving in the United States. He received his Bachelor of Hebrew Letters degree at Hebrew Union College in 1917 and was ordained in 1922. He was very active with CCAR's Commission on Peace and Justice, organized their Institute on Judaism and Race Relations, and reflected those concerns in his sermons, four years

¹² *Justice and Judaism* p. 244

at Holy Blossom, in Toronto, and in St. Louis at Temple Israel. Hebrew Union College in Rabbi Isserman's time bore the imprint of Isaac Mayer Wise, whose educational model embraced American possibility rather than European tradition and Kaufman Kohler, his heir, whose thinking and orientation was German and Wissenschaft derived, a transplant of German Liberal Judaism. Nevertheless, Kohler's advocacy for an "explicit commitment to economic justice"¹³ became a part of the Pittsburgh Platform in 1885, which "Wise called a 'Declaration of Independence,'"¹⁴ illustrating how abstract and theoretical a conception of American religious freedom was held by the early rabbis. Interestingly, of the "American" reformers, Kohler's father-in-law, David Einhorn, was on record for his denunciation of slavery in 1861, for which he lost his Maryland pulpit and had barely escaped getting tarred and feathered.¹⁵

Theory and Practice in the Historical South

Widespread experimentation with changes in liturgy and ritual by reformers in America indicates that the rabbis' gaze was focused especially within the Jewish community which finally could function without external political restrictions and oppression. The pluralistic American religious landscape initially held little interest for them. Certainly the maintenance of cultural and linguistic boundaries in many northern urban areas attested to the comparative isolation of first and second generation European Jewish immigrants from other groups of immigrants. However, settlements of Jews in America preceded the Civil Rights Reformers, frequently by several generations, in many of the states, including the South; not only were there isolated and distinct groups of Jews who varied in their relationship to Jewish tradition, there were Jews who had been working out entirely original, independent adaptations to life in very different kinds of Americas.

¹³Meyer p. 269

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵David Einhorn, *Jewish Virtual Library*

The first southern Reform congregations were Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina in 1841, Har Sinari in Baltimore in 1842.¹⁶ Morris Newfield came to quarter- of- a- century-old Birmingham, Alabama in 1897. He had spent twenty-one years as a Hungarian named Mór Neufeld, and five in taking advantage of the free tuition offered by Wise at Hebrew Union College and had come to the South to minister to an existing and growing congregation of Orthodox Jews primarily from Germany and Eastern Europe. Like many southern cities, an ecumenical attitude to religion (mostly Protestant) dominated the social, political, and economic scene in Birmingham. In cities lacking an indigenous mercantile caste, but in a state of rapid growth, Jewish merchants were in an advantageous position which solidified their political and economic position.¹⁷ They also joined many civic, fraternal, and commercial organizations. In addressing himself to the Birmingham community, Newfield followed Wise in understanding the need for acculturation --the need to assimilate into society and maintain a Jewish identity. While Newfield himself developed many close working relationships with Birminham clergy for their collective version of Tikkun Olam, his major methodology was through social work and community outreach, rather than from the pulpit.¹⁸ Some of the relationships Newfield established and the issues he and his community addressed illustrate the historical basis for attitudes and actions of Southern Reform Jews during the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and later.

After the twenties, when Birmingham's economic base changed, relationships changed as well for the Jewish community. The rise of economic and racial tension and population (it was now five times as big as when Newfield came)-- resentment against modernization,

¹⁶Cowett, Birmingham's Rabbi p.61

¹⁷Cowett, Birmingham's Rabbi

¹⁸ He developed Associated Charities, which included many successful private relief organizations such as Community Chest, Red Cross, acting as a liaison between the business community, professional social workers; was involved in child welfare program development and the creation of ad hoc government agencies.

confrontations between capital and labor¹⁹, rising fundamentalism and the resurgence of the activity of the Ku Klux Klan-- seemed to compel Newfield and other Jewish leaders to move carefully.

The two- race division of the American cultural landscape of the South had no European equivalent-- Africans had been imported into the land solely for the purpose of their enslavement. A subsequent heritage of cultural stereotyping enabled many Southerners to rationalize the continued domination of blacks by whites (whose European imperialist orientation elevated "white" culture by denying the humanity of its slaves.) Rabbi Newfield and other clergy "continued to stress the idea of noblesse oblige and promoted ameliorative changes"²⁰ but in light of the Klan's activities, Newfield, not a native Southerner, became more "circumspect"²¹ in his public stance. As Jews were more used to being the oppressed minority, they were conflicted about both siding with the oppressors and with becoming identified with the oppressed; for the most part they were willing to pay for their social acceptance by the assumption of their Christian neighbors' practices as protective coloration.²² (The indictment for murder of a Jewish factory superintendent, Leo Frank, on flimsy evidence, his subsequent

¹⁹In 1914 Newfield was critical of the labor organization efforts by coal miners and steel workers, either out of ignorance of their working conditions or in support of business leaders: e.g., one of the members of his congregation, a coal and later power company manager, favored "company welfare." Cowett suggests that his ideas of social justice required a more moderate, conservative stance. (p.144 - 148) Following WW I, in 1917, viewing the greed of the coal operators who profited from the war, he changed his mind about the necessity for labor organizing, and, as "75% of the 12,000 striking miners were black" (Cowett, p.148) Cowett takes this as support for black equality. However, in view of his reluctance to serve on a CCAR committee to investigate the dismissal of Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein in Montgomery, Alabama, for support of the Scottsboro Boys, and Newfield's lack of public support of them, it seems clear that he was not willing to publicly take a stand that, in his eyes, would jeopardize the situation of the Birmingham Jewish community.

²⁰"Cowett, p. 121"

²¹Ibid.

²²Webb relates the following incident to describe the acculturation of the Birmingham Jews, who joined Klan members in membership in the American Legion in Fight Against Fear "... There was open communication primarily through Mr. Joe Denaburg who owned a downtown pawn shop and jewelry business, and who knew many members of the Klan. If there was a Jewish problem, they would consult with Joe, or if there was something that concerned Jewish people, he would consult with them. ' Denaburg even supplied Klansmen with pistols and sheets." p. 18

kidnapping and hanging was an example of simmering anti-Semitism and an indication of the precariousness of Jewish social status.)

Newfield himself, as a European, was personally conflicted by anti-Semitism directed at European Jews, the Nazi horrors, yet he had refused to publicly support Zionism or the establishment of a Jewish State, fearing questions of loyalty to America would be asked of his congregants. However, two years before he died, also two years after his election to the presidency of CCAR, he joined with a group of Christian ministers to advocate for a Jewish homeland with President Roosevelt.

Webb documents the pro-segregation stance of early Jewish settlers through Jewish newspapers that in 1896 celebrated the lynching of two "negroes who were hung"²³ and a man who celebrated his bar mitzvah in 1937 by inviting friends to "view a lynching in downtown Birmingham."²⁴ Sometimes Jews were perceived by African-Americans as being more compassionate,²⁵ but to others, were simply perceived as 'white.' However Webb's evidence also suggests that because of the character of African-American Old Testament-based Christianity, in the Biblical examples of oppression and suffering, there was a sense of empathy and expectation of Jewish support, and the leadership of the black community was dismayed by the alignment of so many Jews with the White community. Where Jews who had long resided in the South saw social justice issues as predominantly economic, and addressed them within the white community which generally supported racial segregation, the later European Jewish immigrants to the South, who had experienced persecution, were less willing to support it, and were

²³ Webb, from the *Jewish Sentiment* of June 1896, p 19-20

²⁴ Webb. p. 20

²⁵ Webb p. 29" ...In stark contrast to the typical white retailer, Jewish merchants willingly extended credit to African Americans, allowed them to sample goods, and addressed them as "Mr. and Mrs. As Aaron Henry recalled of the Jewish merchants in his childhood home of Clarksdale, Mississippi, "You would consider them the better of the white element that you had dealings with."

marginalized in Southern culture.²⁶ So even within the region, there was a spectrum of Jewish attitudes towards social justice. A small number of southern Reform rabbis were on record for speaking out against lynching and championing civil rights prior to the fifties.²⁷ Following the first World War there was a small group of southern Jewish liberals, and an outspoken group of rabbis, but by the end of the Second World War, most Jews had reverted the less vulnerable segregationist position.

Catalysts of Change: Challenges to Regional Isolationism

The enfranchisement of Jews under Roosevelt's New Deal enabled many Northern Jews to address social justice issues in major ways.²⁸ The Jewish community still experienced a split between the assimilationist German Jews and the proactive Eastern European immigrants (who in the 1930's outnumbered them.) The Eastern European group was able to correlate national economic programs with Jewish social services --the stock market crash had little effect on the Jewish Family Welfare agencies or Jewish Federation's fundraising efforts. Subsequent federal legislation addressed national needs in such a way as to take much of the burden of meeting social needs away from religious organizations, and Jewish agencies were beneficiaries of this relief.

The high visibility of Jews in the national political scene challenged the ability of Southern Jews to maintain a low local profile. "Tensions between American individualism and

²⁶Webb p.20

²⁷Rabbi Joseph Silverman, Richmond, Virginia, against lynching, called for a congressional investigation in May 1899 joined by David Marx, Atlanta, William Fineshriber, Memphis, Max Heller, New Orleans. Webb p. 171 Rabbi Stanley Brav gave public testimony against Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, for intimidating black voters in a 1946 primary.

²⁸Roosevelt was widely supported by Jews, and he, in turn, made many significant appointments: "Sidney Hillman, former head of the predominantly Jewish Amalgamated Clothing Workers union joined the National Recovery Administration as a labor adviser. Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas.....Agricultural Adjustment Administration...Frances Jurkowitz as...personal secretary to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins....Famed Jewish unionist and feminist Rose Schneiderman, gave advice.....Isador Luin...United States Commissioner of Labor Statistics.." Dollinger, The Politics of Acculturation: American Jewish Liberalism 1933-1975. p. 26

Jewish collectivism peaked when anti-assimilationist Eastern American Jews proposed overseas relief plans based on the special group needs of Jews."²⁹ ³⁰ In the post-war period, organizational American Jewish attention³¹ turned from global injustice to national injustice, and a new generation, second- generation American-born leaders arose. The expression of Jewish concerns was divided: the American Jewish Committee, assimilationist-minded, underwrote interfaith and interracial programs which promoted understanding; the American Jewish Congress, aggressively progressive, was a high-profile organization; the National Community Relations Advisory Council, an umbrella group mediated between the other positions, and sought political action.³² Dollinger itemizes the Jewish post-war focus: "anti-communism, employment discrimination, religious incursions in the public school, and reform of an antiquated and racist immigration system."³³ When Dollinger speaks of the activities of these groups, he is primarily documenting organizational efforts, predominantly accomplished by Northern Jewish activists rather than the rest of white America, including Southern Jewish America. Jewish organizations re-fought the civil war within their regional chapters. The northern groups began to collaborate with other civil rights organizations including the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.)

In the 1950's, the population of the South, according to the census, indicated forty million people, of which 265,000 were Jewish.³⁴ There was little religious observance, much intermarriage, and a continued policy of low visibility and few social justice initiatives. A kind

²⁹Dollinger P.59

³⁰Yet the Jewish community was silent on the interment of Japanese-Americans. Dollinger p. 132

³¹ agencies such as the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Conferences, the Synagogue Council of America, B'nai Brith, National Conference of Christians and Jews, etc. Dollinger.

³²Dollinger, pp. 159-161

³³Ibid.

³⁴Webb p.43

critic has interpreted the Southern Jewish reluctance to speak out against segregation as an attempt "to observe a strict *neutrality* [emphasis mine]"³⁵ in order to maintain fragile security. As the anti-segregation movement evolved on the national scene, it left an increase in anti-Semitism and a confrontation between non-Jewish and Jewish Southerners in its wake. The stance of segregationist rabbis and congregational leaders is consistent with the evolution of Jewish communities in the South; what was remarkable was the exceptional position taken by the other Southern rabbis.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown VS the Board of Education*, which ruled against segregation in the public schools, reverberated in Southern Jewish communities in the form of the White Citizens' Council members' knock at Jewish doors in every major southern city, demanding Jews join and see their names published as segregation supporters.³⁶

Webb believes that the inclusion of Jews caused a curious concern to Council members -- the perceived need to demonstrate White unity dominated over the anti-Semitic stance of the Councils. Southern newspapers had no such scruples and merely attacked the Jews as the instigators of integration. By the 1950's the attacks were not merely verbal; their violence took the form of synagogue bombings.

Southern Rabbis

In 1956, in Rabbi Newfield's hometown, UAHC delegates from the southeastern states assembled to hear a Boston rabbi's keynote address in support of the civil rights movement. Such a stand put all Jews at risk for accusations of conspiracy and, for the Jews in isolated, remote towns, the almost assured reprisals. Of the small group pro-civil rights rabbis, only

³⁵Webb p.44

³⁶"It was within most Councils' power to make life extremely unpleasant.... since their membership often included...mayors, chiefs of police and local business leaders. Some southern Jews, especially those isolated in small towns, found the \$3 or \$5 membership fee a small price to pay for safety from reprisal." Webb p. 47

three were Southerners: Julian Feibelman of Jackson, Mississippi who served in New Orleans; Emmet Frank, born in Houston, who led a congregation in Alexandria, Virginia; Charles Mantinband, who had spent his childhood in Norfolk and worked in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Mantinband was a member of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism.

Of the other rabbis who served Southern congregations, three were not American-born: Perry Nussbaum, who served in Jackson, Mississippi, and Elijah Palnick, of Little Rock, Arkansas, who had lost a number of relatives in the death camps,³⁷ were Canadians --David Ben-Ami, of Hattiesburg, was German. Ira Sanders, who worked in Little Rock, had grown up in St. Louis, and had previously worked in Allentown, Pennsylvania and New York City, and Jacob Rothschild, the son of a Pittsburgh industrialist, who served in Atlanta. What characterized the non-Southerners was an attitude that segregation was morally wrong; going into Southern cultures brought severe culture shock.³⁸

The response to the *Brown* decision varied.

The Southerners: Feibelman worried about the lack of preparation given to both black and white communities...he favored a gradual process. Yet he publicly fought against institutional racism when he sited an award ceremony for diplomat Dr. Ralph Bunche at Temple Sinai, when no integrated public facilities could be found and when Tulane University refused. When the schools first opened, he helped drive one of the black children to classes.³⁹ He received rotten eggs and tomatoes for his efforts, but no dynamite. Only one member of his synagogue resigned; his board supported him. Emmett Frank chose Yom Kippur eve of 1958 for an attack on Virginia Senator Harry Byrd, one of the main signers of an anti-segregation

³⁷Webb p.173

³⁸Webb, p. 171-172

³⁹Webb p. 181

document, the Southern Manifesto.⁴⁰ Excerpts from his sermons hit the wire services, and it didn't take long for the local responses. His board of trustees demanded an apology. His next sermon contained a response, "Any Jew who remains silent in the face of prejudice leveled at another group of God's children is traitorous to the basic principles of Judaism."⁴¹ Frank contended that Jews had a responsibility towards other oppressed minorities. He was fortunate in his support --the Temple president was also the mayor of Alexandria, and a group of eleven Protestant ministers joined him in protecting the "freedom of the pulpit." Perhaps this was an instance where the Southern practice of interfaith dialog and Jewish acculturation stood Jews in good stead. Mississippi was a different situation. Charles Mantinband hoped that article writing and speechmaking, educational advocacy, would be efficacious. But his comparatively low profile activities nevertheless attracted negative attention, as the social climate of Mississippi was equally and firmly gripped by anti-Semitism and anti-integration. His mail was opened, he was followed by outsiders, and was censored and criticized by his own congregation. Despite tenure, he left for a Texas pulpit, to be replaced by David Ben-Ami who would also be forced out, the both of them within a two- year period.

The non-Southern-born: Rabbi Nussbaum's experience of Mississippi was traumatic. During the fifties, he refused to align himself with the integrationists. Initially he was quite critical of the Freedom Riders and criticized them in a letter to Vorspan at UAHC. He didn't mind the support of Northern rabbis, but preferred that they stay home and offer encouragement instead of their presence in the South. However, when he heard Freedom Riders had been jailed, he visited weekly, held interracial services, contacted families and friends of the

⁴⁰Webb p. 180-183 One of the things Rabbi Frank said was "Let the segregationists froth and foam at the mouth. There is only one word to describe their madness--Godlessness, or to coin a new synonym --Byrdliness. Byrdliness has done more harm to the stability of our country than McCarthyism."

⁴¹Webb p. 197

temporarily jailed, and visited those remanded to the state penitentiary in the absence of other rabbis willing to undertake the project.⁴² For his efforts, his six months old temple was bombed (the bomb was close to his study) and eight weeks later his house was bombed as well.

Nussbaum continued to carry on, and he maintained his relationship with civil rights organization. The police protection after the first bombing was discontinued; after the second, he and his wife were removed from public view; locally, they lacked support; distant rabbis in similar predicaments provided sustenance, such as Mantinband, and Jacob Rothschild.

Two faint-hearted Alabama rabbis came in for serious criticism by the activists -- Eugene Blachschleger of Montgomery and Milton Grafman of Birmingham, Alabama. Brooklyn-born Grafman came to Alabama by way of Lexington, Kentucky. At the time of his arrival, there were four thousand Jews out of a population of six hundred thousand. He refused to involve himself in any action; fortunately for him, he was perfectly matched to a congregation that was equally reluctant to fight segregation.⁴³ But again, Webb is kind, and brands him as neither coward nor racist but as another victim of the civil rights struggle.

Rabbi Sanders, in Little Rock had been unsuccessfully trying to integrate the Little Rock School of Social work in the 1920's, had become a member of the local NAACP and an anti-lynching society, and helped found the Urban League of Little Rock. Thirty-odd years later, he also tackled the Arkansas legislature which had tried to circumvent implementation of the *Brown*

⁴²Webb, p. 187. Some of the refusers were Rabbi Allan Schwartzman of Greenville, who was joined in timidity and fear by Rabbi Moses Landau of Cleveland who wrote "Hundreds of our families live isolated, two or three in a community, in an emotionally charged atmosphere. It is your privilege to be a martyr ...you can pick yourself up within 24 hours and leave. Can you say the same thing of the about 1000 Jewish families in the state?"

⁴³His only public act was his signature on a document, called "Law and Order and common Sense" which took Martin Luther King ,Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to task for demonstrating in such a way as to interfere with a referendum vote. The document signed by eight local clergymen , suggested joint discussions, not demonstrations to be more effective. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was telling. " It was 'illegal' to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers." Webb p. 210

Grafman also attempted to redirect a group of Conservative rabbis away from joining a demonstration in Birmingham, sending them back the next day on the plane on which they had arrived.

decision, and which had resulted in the showdown between Governor Faubus, the national guard, and the attempt by black children to attend Central High in 1957. Sanders joined other clergymen in helping to mediate, which subsequently rallied more moderate opinion and support for integration. Later, in the early sixties, Rabbi Palnick, who had worked behind the scenes with others at Hillel and the University of Alabama to integrate the campus, went further, forging personal and professional alliances with African-American leader William "Sonny" Walker, who was directing anti-poverty and community action programs. Besides their interracial social gatherings, the two helped integrate the Rotary club and Kiwanis. When Palnick left, it was to take a new Southern pulpit in the 80's, in Albany, Georgia.

If you had asked Rabbi Jacob Rothschild what part he had played in the civil rights movement, he would have answered "an extremely minor one."⁴⁴ An outsider might have perceived it differently. One year after he arrived in Atlanta, in 1946, he had begun speaking on the Negro question. Over the next twelve years, he had interracial dinner guests, black speakers in his pulpit in Atlanta, and was an eloquent and active supporter of integration. And in 1958, his temple was bombed.^{45 46} Greene uses a telling quote (which didn't appear in the Hollywood version) to characterize the self-perception of Atlanta's acculturated Jews, from *Driving Miss Daisy*. "Told the Temple has been bombed, Miss Daisy, annoyed and bewildered snaps: 'Don't they know we're Reform?' " meaning Atlanta Reform lives were indistinguishable from Christian

⁴⁴Webb p.181

⁴⁵Melissa Fay Greene, The Temple Bombing p.6-9.

⁴⁶"I don't think he believed in a personal God' said Emanuel Feldman, rabbi emeritus of Atlanta's Orthodox Congregation Beth Jacob, the editor-in-chief of the scholarly quarterly *Tradition*, a former adjunct professor at Emory University Law School, and a senior lecturer at Israel's Bar Illan University.'He had a typical Reform view of God: from my viewpoint --muddled. I asked him once, 'When you say "Blessed art Thou,"who's the Thou?' He reflected what he'd been taught in that seminary he studied in, which was basically without religious passion..."from The Temple Bombing

ones.⁴⁷ Rothschild's speech in New York "There is a macabre and disgusting parallel between the South today and a totalitarian state."⁴⁸ attracted national attention. His accomplishments, character, and legacy of 28 years in Atlanta, were summarized in remarks at his funeral in the spring of 1973, at which Coretta Scott King was a speaker. "As I think of Jack Rothschild, I think of the civil rights movement, and I think of the prophets," said Rabbi Alvin Sugarman. "His was an absolute prophetic course. When he walked on that pulpit and he opened his mouth, it was as if Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, they were all right thereSo his source --his rabbinic authority --and his human authority merged"⁴⁹ Greene describes Rothschild's vision--the linkage between Jewish identity in the American South, and black civil rights. Where other rabbis may have assumed such a link, Rothschild was unusual in that he was very open about expressing it. She says, "For Jews who clung to the popular southern mid-century definition of humanity" (who discarded traditional practices, such as Yiddish, pretending to be Christian-like) he offered an enlargement, the opportunity to 'come out' as Jews...."the human dignity of self-acceptance but it was linked to understanding that *all* humans were equal in God's sight." For Jacob Rothschild, social justice was not a rhetorical element in an organizational platform, it was an intrinsic aspect of how he understood himself to be a Jew. Where rabbis in other communities frequently found supporters among other clergymen, Atlanta's clergy were supportive in rhetoric, but not in action, with the exception of Catholic archbishop Paul Hallinan.⁵⁰

Social Justice in the Southern Milieu

Clearly, some of the techniques that were most effective in ameliorating injustice in the South had to do with acknowledging the character of Southern White society-- how, in the

⁴⁷Greene, p.244

⁴⁸Webb p.182

⁴⁹Greene P. 436

⁵⁰Webb. p 208 Along with Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution, they were able to arrange an awards dinner to honor Nobel Prize Winner Martin Luther King, attended by 1300.

process of acculturation, alliances had been formed which emphasized similarity and minimized differences. and offered camouflage for the white outsiders and opportunities for social coalitions. Rabbinical leadership, and a national religious and political charge forced Jews, at the very least, to take a stand on injustice in the context of Jewish moral imperatives, even if for many individuals, rabbis, and congregations, it was ten steps backwards during the height of the civil rights movement. That this method was effective can be seen in the growth and distribution of contemporary Jews throughout the south, although it doesn't entirely explain it in relationship to a region which was undergoing massive changes in many other ways. Implementing integration in the Northeast-- although Jews were generally more similar in cultural makeup to others in their region-- was problematic, but not in the same ways. As other regional American cultures varied, so the Jewish communities reflected those regional differences as well.

It isn't possible to ascertain whether the Southern rabbis adopted a coherent civil rights strategy among themselves, Webb says, although discussions at many levels were known. Clearly, networking served many Reform rabbis well, supporting them when members of even their own congregations were critical. Within the next decade, ideological change within the black community would see all American Jews as targets of Black anti-Semitism and create a new set of problems for leaders and their communities. The influx of whites from the northern states, the Reform Jews (with their activist social justice agendas } among them, the black organizational movements, the biracial political groups accounted for many change in the South, but their impact on the South was less pervasive than the work of this small activist group and its grass-roots approach to Jewish social justice.

The concept of regionalism helps to clarify the range and breadth of the American Jewish experience. Far from speaking with a single voice, or in a single tongue, American Reform Jews are still a diverse group, varying in socio-economic status, religious and educational practice, congregational and political affiliation, etc. The South, like the rest of the American landscape, is dotted with de-commissioned temples, monuments to former Jewish communities which for whatever reason, failed to thrive, which testify to the migrations of Jews, like other Americans, in search of a better(more secure? less isolated? more economically promising? more spiritually fulfilling?) life. At the same time there are new communities in old places⁵¹ and while it is clear that some of the stylistic history of Reform Jews in the South persists, there are changes, though, looking at the involvement of some of the rabbis. Social justice (even in some of the Southern traditional ways) is part of Reform Jewish Southern life. In respect to contemporary life, it might be interesting for Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein to have the last word. In their book Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice, whose goal was the "Bringing together Jewish perspectives and moral policy analysis on scores of urgent issues" (recommended by the UAHC to youth groups and adult education classes) they debate:

"such newly emerging issues as the unraveling of Jewish unity; the transfer of political power from our national to our state capitals; the effect of welfare and immigration reform;..... Israel-Diaspora relations; the moral challenges of biomedical ethics; the deterioration of civility in American life; the conflicts inherent in the application of the First Amendment to the questions of pornography, bigotry, campaign finance

⁵¹There are now seven Reform temples in Atlanta; in Nashville, whose Temple Ohabi Sholom, now abandoned in downtown Nashville dates to 1851, the congregation has moved to a new building in the suburbs) Its website proudly lists Rabbi Randall Falk as one of the leaders of the civil rights movement in Nashville, whose congregants have "served the boards of education, the many universities, the symphony and every facet of Nashville's civic life. It is joined by Congregation Micah, founded in 1992. Its Rabbi, a Northerner and history graduate of Harvard, went from HUC to Texas, to Ohio, to Australia, and then to Chattanooga, where he chaired Chattanooga's Human Rights/Human Relations commission, Family and Children's Services, Country Music Foundation, Vice Presiden of the Covenant Association,(an inter-faith group). It has a woman as an assistant rabbi and educator, newly ordained; There are ten Reform temples in Alabama;

reform, and hate crimes; ... and the role of social action in assuring Jewish continuity."⁵²

If these reflect a novel level of awareness for Southern Reform Jews, it is certainly one they share with other Americans, e.g., ethical dilemmas brought about by science and technology, the impact of globalization on even the most local culture, and the interconnections both for good and ill that are a consequence of it. When the ideals of a what became Reform Judaism were first explored in Europe, America was conceived as a noble, isolated new wonderful mythic island, far from the entrenched injustices of the known historical world; its democratic possibilities and religious freedoms represented then, no less than now, the kingdom of God on earth. As that mythic vision of America, evolving conceptions of Judaism, and a certain kind of global awareness/planetary consciousness intersect, it becomes difficult to distinguish a fusion from a collision. Despite the flawed premise that formed their common base, Jewish social history of the American South has a form distinct from that of the Northeast, or any other region. It is possible, therefore, to conclude that regionalism is inherent in the character of American Judaism and that the only possible monolithic model of social justice in American Reform Judaism will always be the theoretical.

Lois Whitmore
2002

⁵²UAHC Press <http://uahc.org/cgi-bin/pressdisp.pl?list=167276>

Bibliography

Brodkin, Karen. How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 1998.

Cowett, Mark. Birmingham's Rabbi Morris Newfield and Alabama 1895-1949. University of Alabama Press 1986.

Dollinger, Marc Lindsey. PhD Dissertation: The Politics of Acculturation: American Jewish Liberalism, 1933-1975. University of California, Los Angeles 1993.

Forman, Seth." *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being Jewish: Desegregation in the South and the Crisis of Jewish Liberalism*" 1997 by the American Jewish Historical Society, American Jewish History 85.2 (1997) 121-142
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_jewish_history/v085/85.2forman.html.
March 29, 2002

Franklin, V.P. Grant, Nancy L., Kletnick, Harold M., McNeil, Genna Rae, ed. African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth century Studies in Convergence and Conflict. University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 1998.

Greene, Melissa Faye. The Temple Bombing. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Reading Massachusetts et al. 1996.

Bibliography: "Institute of Southern Jewish Life."
http://www.msjc.org/about_reading.html

Meyer, Michael A. Response to Modernity A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism. Wayne State University Press, Detroit. 1988.

Various Biographies and articles on Rabbis. *Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives*, Archival Manuscript Collection.
<http://huc.edu/aja/rabbi.htm>. March 29, 2002

Vorspan, Albert and Lipman, Eugene J. Justice and Judaism, the Work of Social Action UAHC, NY, NY 1956, revised 1959.
ed. A Tale of Ten Cities , The Triple Ghetto in American Religious Life , UAHC, New York.1962.

<http://uahc.org/cgi-bin/pressdisp.pl?list=167276>

Webb, Clive. Fight Against Fear Southern Jews and Black Civil Rights. University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 2001.