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Press Coverage of Internal Divisions Over Reform Judaism, 1905-1920: A Classic Tale of the American Progressive Movement

Katherine Porter

In 2017, anti-Semitism is alive and well, as Jewish cemeteries are vandalized and Jewish community centers around the country are terrorized by an increasing number of bomb threats.¹ Over the course of history, Jews have been persecuted and discriminated against as “others” socially, economically, and politically. There is a distinct and enduring identity that comes with being Jewish, however in the last few centuries, Jews around the world have made a clear effort to prove that they are as much a citizen of their home country as they are Jewish, demonstrating their civic pride and inclusivity. Although modern, racial anti-Semitism was a generally new idea during the Progressive Era, Jews worldwide had already experienced different types of discrimination and knew of its damaging effects. Many Jews sought to prove their ability to adapt to a new society by showing the flexibility of their faith. In the new, quickly changing society, every aspect of life needed to be reconsidered and adjusted to maximize acculturation. Reformers sought a variety of ways to modify Judaism so that it fit better within American society and its ideals. Some modifications were simple, such as shortening a prayer, while others were much more complicated and controversial, such as dismantling kosher dietary laws. These efforts generated much debate among American Jews and rabbinical leaders, often making headlines. Dana Evan Kaplan, a Reform rabbi, has written extensively about Reform Judaism, focusing on the need for a central theological belief in order to sustain the reform movement. Another prominent scholar is Michael A. Meyer, who has dedicated his life’s work to Reform Judaism, writing *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, a comprehensive history demonstrating Judaism’s growth and detailing triumphs and failures within the context of the greater world. This paper focuses specifically on the disunity within American Reform Judaism during the Progressive Era through the lens of popular press coverage. Analysis of contemporary accounts in the *New York Times*, America’s newspaper of record, on

¹ Eric Levenson and Anne Claire Stapleton, "Fear Grows in Jewish Community after 100 Bomb Threats at Jewish Centers," *CNN*, 13 Mar. 2017.

the internal divisions over Reform Judaism reveals both the pervasiveness and the limits of progressive reform.

Reform Judaism, while strongly associated with the United States, actually has its origins in Europe. Many countries in Western and Central Europe during the late eighteenth century saw the emancipation of Jews.² With this new freedom, Reform Judaism originated as a German movement. Jews began focusing on establishing a national identity, as opposed to a religious one, throughout the next century. Jews saw some success as they attempted to integrate into society, although this came to an end by the early twentieth century when racial anti-Semitism took a strong hold across Europe.³ Reform Judaism made its way to America before this shift in Europe, and the first reform attempt was made in 1824 in Charleston, South Carolina.⁴ “Reform Judaism proved especially popular in the United States after the middle of the nineteenth century, and over 90 percent of Jewish congregations were Reformed by 1880.”⁵ Without the same religious persecution and age-old social structures that prevailed throughout Europe, America was the perfect place to take an untraditional stance on religion.⁶ In 1885, Jews composed the Pittsburgh Platform. This document outlined the eight principles of Reform Judaism, which stressed universalism and optimism.⁷ While other platforms would take shape up until the present day, this one served as the foundation for American Reform Judaism during the Progressive Era. With new reforms come disagreements and different perspectives, and Reform Judaism was no exception.

Supporters of Reform Judaism believed in the fluidity of their faith and the necessity of progressive change to match the progressive sentiment taking place within the United States. As society moved forward and evolved, so must religion, otherwise it would get left behind. Daniel P. Hays, a prominent figure among

² Ronnie Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴ Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 9.

⁵ William A. Link and Susannah J. Link, eds., *The Gilded Age and Progressive Era: A Documentary Reader* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 169.

⁶ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 226.

⁷ “Reform Judaism: History & Overview,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-reform-judaism>>.

Reform Judaism organizations in New York, noted, “As Jews we must revere and respect the ancient history of our race, but feel that Judaism, our religion, must be progressive, a religion that assists us in our daily life, not merely a religion of the synagogue, but of the home.”⁸ It was highly controversial for a religion so entrenched in tradition and history to make any changes to practices and values. However, reformers saw that the current customs within Judaism were not working for everyone. Jews either stood out too much because of traditional practice, or they viewed these practices as outdated and ineffective and gave them up altogether, allowing Judaism to be swept away with modernization. Reform Jews were willing to take a close look at Judaism and discover ways to make it more applicable to modern life, ways that would allow Jews to feel a more genuine connection to their faith. Similarly, Rabbi Samuel Schulman supported the tough decisions that needed to be made as he claimed, “In a reform...we must not stop at sentiment and sentimental indignation.”⁹ Simply because people had worshipped a certain way for a long time did not mean it would always be the best way. The act of reforming Judaism was recognized as a process. Reform Jews were aware the revisions would probably not be successful right away. Because of that, they would need additional reforms to help improve initial reforms in order to get it just right.¹⁰ Others, particularly Orthodox Jews, were against any kind of religious restructuring. They were not afraid to speak up against reform, as they saw certain customs to be so intrinsic to their faith that they could not be compromised. For example, two European rabbis traveled to Cincinnati, then seen as the heart of Reform Judaism, to begin an anti-reform crusade.¹¹ Orthodox Jews presented the biggest challenge, as they pushed for strict guidelines and the preservation of long-standing customs. Nevertheless, Reform Jews continued to emphasize personal spirituality over prescribed ceremonial displays of belief. They allowed for individuals to choose how to develop their faith, reflective of the individualistic spirit of many Americans.

White Anglo-Saxon Protestants made up the majority of Americans at this time and immigrants struggled to find their place within their new home. The Progressive Era was marked by intense discrimination towards immigrants,

⁸ “What America Means to Jews,” *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1911.

⁹ “How to Reform Cities,” *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1900.

¹⁰ “Reform Judaism a Process,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1910.

¹¹ “Rabbis to Start Crusade,” *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1914.

especially the large influx of people from Southern and Eastern Europe. Jewish Americans therefore sought to highlight their citizenship as Americans, not their immigrant status. Reformers believed that behaving and working like any other American, while adjusting their faith to fit more within religious norms, would only serve to benefit Jews: “They were not theologically motivated but rather saw the practical benefits of adapting religious practices to the American patterns of living.”¹² As a result, reformers were willing to keep their traditions open to Christian influence. “Reform was dynamic towards the Christian world, unafraid of its influence, confident of its inner strength, believing even that it will change the world in its ethical and spiritual life.”¹³ The sixth plank in the Pittsburgh Platform even acknowledged the positive impact that Christianity could have in promoting monotheism, truth, and morality. In this way, Judaism could hopefully become a more acceptable religion. In turn Jews would be able to maintain their faith in a way that was more manageable to practice in everyday Progressive Era America.

This amount of religious inclusivity was still controversial within the Jewish community. In an effort to demonstrate acceptance of Christianity’s impact and work together for the moral betterment of society, a joint service was held for Christians and Jews in New York City in 1910. Jacob H. Schiff, a prominent member of the Jewish community, protested. “He declared the union of Jew and Christian in worship was impossible so long as part of the Christian world persecuted Jews.”¹⁴ This statement reflects the tense relationship between Christians and Jews that still prevailed around the world. It was surely difficult for many Jews to accept influence from a religion that some felt had historically mistreated their people all over the world.¹⁵ For others, a joint service simply deviated too far from Judaism’s basic principles. These services also outraged Rev. Dr. Samuel Schulman, who stated, “It is too radical a movement...because it destroys the allegiance to the characteristic Jewish worship or Christian worship.” Despite support for reform, there was a fine line between valuable adaptation and

¹² Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ “Wise Calls Critics Foes to Progress,” *New York Times*, 5 Dec. 1910.

¹⁵ Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 49.

completely losing sight of the basic teachings of Judaism. He stated adamantly, “Watering away Judaism cannot make better Jews.”¹⁶

Supporters of Reform Judaism believed that this theological transition did not hurt their Jewish identity, but instead enhanced their American identity. Jewish reformers sought to affirm their status as American citizens and acculturate into conventional society. Abraham Cahan, a Russian immigrant, explained that Jewish Americans encountered many of the same obstacles as all other Americans and should do their part to join in uplifting society.¹⁷ Arguably the most influential American Reform Jew was Rabbi Isaac M. Wise. He “had the charisma and determination to develop into a national Jewish religious leader and to actively work to build American Jewish institutions and organizations.”¹⁸ Although an immigrant, he was American through and through, and many praised him for his eagerness and success in assimilation. According to one of his colleagues, “He fitted thoroughly into [the] American environment. Freedom was the breath of his nostrils.”¹⁹

Another significant player in this movement was Rev. Dr. Kaufmann Kohler. He too noted the advantageous qualities of collaboration between Judaism and American values. Kohler enthused, “American Judaism! What a power of inspiration lies in these two words! They spell the triumph of the world’s two greatest principles and ideals, the consummation of mankind’s choicest possessions, the one offered by the oldest, the other by the youngest of the great nations of history, the highest moral and spiritual and the highest political and social aim of humanity.”²⁰ While many agreed with Wise and Kohler’s pride in their adoptive country, others did not share this same sense of passionate nationalism. Zionism stood at the other end of the spectrum, centered on the creation of a Jewish state. L.J. Greenberg, a member of the Chief Executive Committee of the Zionist Organization, declared, “With the achievement of Zionism a Jewish culture would arise. We should as Jews, be proving ourselves of use to the world, becoming something the world wants. Hence anti-Semitism

¹⁶ “Rabbi Denounces Union Services,” *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1910.

¹⁷ Abraham Cahan, “The Russian Jew in America,” *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1898).

¹⁸ Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, 11.

¹⁹ “Extol Dr. I.M. Wise as a True American,” *New York Times*.

²⁰ “What America Means to Jews,” *New York Times*, 18 Jan. 1911.

would largely disappear.”²¹ Although this would change, many Reform Jews initially considered themselves anti-Zionists, giving rise to intense disagreements within the Jewish community. Some even went so far as to claim Zionism to be a worse evil than anti-Semitism.²² They chose to focus on assimilation instead and in that way Reform Jews felt that they could start fresh and move forward as true Americans.

The main tenets of Reform Judaism fit neatly within the prevailing progressive reform agenda. Prized qualities like morality, altruism, and efficiency were just as likely to be reflected in Reform Judaism as the day’s mainstream social reform. “Reform Judaism has historically emphasized what it interpreted as the central message of the prophets: the need to fight for social justice. The Reformers believed deeply in working with their Christian neighbors to help make the world a place of justice and peace.”²³ The eighth and final plank in the Pittsburgh Platform reflects this desire for increased social responsibility. Judaism provided moral guidelines that might otherwise be lost in the swiftly modernizing society. Dr. Wise expressed this need as he professed, “We need a reformation of the Jew not because he is orthodox, nor yet because he is reform, but because he is neither; because in large part he is unattached and drifting rudderless; because he is threatened with the gravest perils that can befall a people, the loss of religion and the loss of moral ideals.”²⁴ Industrialized society offered new opportunities and freedoms that many considered degenerative and dangerous. Reform was seen as the only way to preserve Judaism, thereby protecting morality. As other progressive reformers were concerned with uplifting society, proponents of Reform Judaism shared their concerns. In 1918, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted a social justice platform, advocating many of the same reforms other progressives were working for, such as an eight-hour workday and the right to bargain collectively.²⁵ Besides proving to be progressive in more ways than one, supporters of Reform Judaism believed this growing religious branch would continue to foster the right values within the Jewish population.

²¹ “Jewish National Idea,” *New York Times*, 13 Aug. 1902.

²² “The Evil of Zionism,” *New York Times*, 19 Jan. 1902.

²³ Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, 15.

²⁴ “Dr. Wise Regrets Jewish Discord,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1910.

²⁵ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 288.

One of the most controversial suggestions within the movement was celebrating the Sabbath on Sunday instead of Saturday. American life was heavily designed to accommodate a Christian lifestyle. Many businesses closed on Sunday, as that was the day of rest and worship for most Americans. However, Jews' day of worship, Shabbat, begins on Friday at sundown and ends after nightfall on Saturday. Despite Jewish efforts to fit into American life, weekends were a time in which Jews and Christians lived distinctly separate lives. Some reformers sought to allow for worship on Sunday instead of Saturday, and there were several reasons to push for this change. The biggest motivation was the economic disadvantage that the Saturday Sabbath placed on Jews. Jewish business owners who closed their shops while observing the Sabbath missed out on the week's biggest shopping day for Christian consumers. On Sunday, Jewish consumers were severely limited in what they could purchase or do when Christian business owners shut down their stores. Moreover, many synagogues were experiencing diminishing congregations. They hoped that by moving the Sabbath to Sunday more people would attend, even Christians who might be interested in hearing sermons. Moving the Sabbath would allow Jews to more smoothly integrate into mainstream society.

The Chicago Sinai Congregation was the leading force behind the Sunday-Sabbath movement. Rabbi Kohler pushed for this change in order to better serve his congregants. He was mainly concerned with lack of attendance, but was confident the change would attract non-Jews as well. He assured objectors that it would not damage the traditional Jewish Sabbath.²⁶ Kohler was ineffective in increasing attendance, however, his successor, Emil G. Hirsch, drew in much larger crowds.²⁷ Despite this indication of success, some reformers concluded this modification strayed too far from Jewish tradition and could not back it if it was solely for the sake of convenience.

Although a prominent figure in Reform Judaism, Rabbi Wise was against changing the Sabbath. He initially chose not to take too strong of a stance in order to avoid a large division within the movement, but eventually voiced a stronger opinion as support for the idea grew. He saw Sabbath reform as too significant of a change and was fairly consistent in his opposition to the issue. Wise was never

²⁶ Kerry M. Olizky, "Sundays at Chicago Sinai Congregation: Paradigm for a Movement," *American Jewish History* 74, no. 4 (June 1985): 359.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 361.

convinced by claims that it would support assimilation or aid the working class, going so far as to state that rabbis choosing to employ a Sunday-Sabbath were doing so at their own will and without the support of the Hebrew Union College.²⁸ Despite this disunity, Chicago Sinai Congregation eventually replaced Saturday services with Sunday-Sabbath entirely and a few other congregations eventually followed their example.²⁹ This controversy within Reform Judaism parallels the inconsistencies and internal divisions that afflicted just about every reform movement during the Progressive Era.

Contemporary articles from the *New York Times* reveal how clashes over Reform Judaism reflected the progressive ideals of the time. Reform Judaism proved successful in the United States, however it did not necessarily have a smooth transition when it was first brought over from Europe. Reformers believed in the necessity of progress and adaptation of religion. They emphasized collaboration with Christians, their shared American nationality, and strong morals. The proposed modification of the Sabbath day demonstrates how these qualities are reflected in Reform Judaism. It also exposes the divisions within the movement. While Reform Judaism was restricted to a religious denomination, its development clearly mirrors that of other types of reform during the Progressive Era. Be they social, economic, or political, all progressive reforms received pushback and raised questions. Reformers took note of modernizing society and saw the problems that could arise if certain aspects of life remained unchanged. They pushed for adjustments and transformations, emphasizing morality, efficiency, and truth. This analysis reveals how Reform Judaism pursued these same ideals as well.

Reform Judaism is still practiced today, and it has continued to evolve over the last hundred years. Whether practicing Reform Judaism, Orthodox Judaism, or a subdivision that falls somewhere in between, there are at least 5.3 million Jews in America.³⁰ Progressive ideals of social justice and unity are still apparent in American society today, unfortunately being applied to some of the same issues. Even now Jews are facing intense discrimination because of their faith despite

²⁸ Ibid., 365.

²⁹ Ibid., 366.

³⁰ Michael Lipka, "How Many Jews Are There in the United States?" *Pew Research Center*, 2 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/02/how-many-jews-are-there-in-the-united-states/>> (25 March 2017).

American citizenship and civic participation, suggesting that acculturation was not enough to truly curb bigotry. A study of Reform Judaism in the Progressive Era, however, shows that even more than one hundred years ago, Jewish immigrants were eagerly adapting to the ways of the dominant society by incorporating change and highlighting their commitment to the social justice so central to the prevailing progressive movement. Even the internal division over Reform Judaism is a hallmark of the progressive discourse. The history of Reform Jews in the Progressive Era disproves the charge of Jews as “other” and demonstrates their contribution to the depth and breadth of American reform.