

## Archives of a Past Battle

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I know that many of you have, over the years, done renovations in your home. You have added on a bathroom, or a family room, or a master bedroom—or, if you're really crazy, you renovated your kitchen. (I did it three times.) You therefore know that when you do a renovation of your home, you end up going through old drawers and old cabinets and finding things that you had put away and long forgotten. You can't figure out why you kept them; and then you can't figure out what to do with them.

And so it is that we've just completed a renovation of the synagogue, and the same thing holds true. The renovation is wonderful and beautiful, and I hope you will join us on September 28<sup>th</sup> to dedicate this extraordinary sacred space. But a few weeks ago Andy came into my office with an old box, some files, archives, press clippings—old things that I haven't seen in a long time.

He presented me with a copy of the Jewish Forward, in larger format than it is today, from May 14, 1999. Let me read from the front page: “To get a glimpse of what the Jewish future in America might be like, if advocates of outreach get their way, come visit Sukkat Shalom, a synagogue in Wilmette that was recently admitted to the Reform movement.” This was an article about Sukkat Shalom, back then in 1999. It also quoted Conservative and Orthodox rabbis who warned that such congregations were, in their words, “eroding the stigma against intermarriage.” The head of the Conservative movement at the time, Rabbi Jerome Epstein, was quoted as saying, “There are lines. I didn't create the lines. It is counter-productive to have Jewish congregations made up of non-Jews. They cannot be part of the congregation.”

Thankfully, in the very same article, the late sociologist Egon Mayer defended Sukkat Shalom, and me. But I have to be honest with you, I had thought that putting this article away in the archives would have taken care of this issue—that this fight was ancient history, relegated to old boxes and dusty drawers. After all, look around—Sukkat Shalom no longer seems so radical. In many ways we are a mainstream congregation. Most Reform congregations by now welcome the intermarried. You no longer hear High Holiday sermons devoted to the

condemnation of intermarriage. Most Reform congregations allow for much more participation of non-Jewish spouses and families. Even in the Conservative movement there is a change that is slowly taking place, certainly within more liberal congregations. It used to be that letters from religious school were addressed only to the Jewish parent. Today some Conservative rabbis are beginning to push back against rules forbidding a Rabbi from even attending an interfaith wedding, let alone officiating at the wedding of their own child—or a brother, sister, nephew, or niece. Slow to change, but it's beginning to happen.

So I had really thought that I had exhausted the subject, or at least exhausted you. But suddenly that whole issue has again become relevant and current, surprisingly as a result of #MeToo. You will have to pay close attention and follow me as I explain the intersection of these two seemingly different issues. It starts with the sociologist Stephen Cohen, who has been the latest powerful man brought down by the #MeToo movement. You've all heard of Harvey Weinstein and Les Moonves, Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer, and all of the others—but most of you probably don't know who Stephen Cohen is. He, along with Jack Wertheimer, Steve Bayme, Sylvia Barack Fishman, along with some others, built their careers on parsing out statistics from various Jewish population studies—particularly the 1990 Jewish population study that showed that more than 50% of every marriage involving a Jew was to a non-Jewish partner. They were the scholars who assured us, because they were great sociologists, that intermarriage was equated with assimilation. They said that the American Jewish community would rapidly decline in another generation or two. They presented their extrapolations of that data as if it were absolute fact, and they terrorized the American liberal Jewish community. They declared a crisis; that those who intermarried were abandoning, rejecting, and escaping from Jewish life. And they said that the grandchildren of the intermarried would cease to be Jewish by the second generation. Stephen Cohen especially wrote, not that long ago, that if it were not for the Orthodox, Judaism in America would soon disappear.

They created what I call the “Continuity Industry,” and if there was a Continuity Industry, then Stephen Cohen was the CEO. They defined the agenda of the organized American Jewish community and its legacy institutions. They also influenced and controlled the funding and programming of those institutions.

So now, what does #MeToo have to do with the sociological studies of intermarriage? Stephen Cohen has been exposed as a sexual predator. Professor Keren McGinty of Brandeis University first wrote an article that did not name him, but then it became very clear that he was the one involved. Then, after that article, a large group of other women published articles that detailed forcible touching, kissing, sexual assault and harassment. You should understand that Stephen Cohen was the gatekeeper of the Jewish academic world. He controlled promotions and job opportunities, fellowships and conference panels and papers.

And then, in the last couple of weeks, particularly women scholars, as well as others, have drawn a connection from his behavior to his research and his conclusions from that research. They explained that we cannot separate the disrespect he showed women from the disrespect his sociological conclusions showed women in the Jewish community. Even Ross Douthat, New York Times Op-Ed writer and a conservative Catholic, wrote that this exposed the troubling gender and sexual politics long embedded in discussions of continuity and survival.

Cohen was obsessed with how many Jews married Jews and how many children they had. He was simplistically reducing continuity to a biological exercise. This agenda also rendered gay and trans Jews, single Jews, and childless Jews inconsequential and problematic. He took great prurient interest in the private romantic, childbearing, and sexual lives of the women around him. And so now, his academic conclusions are being questioned. Even the continuity issue is being seen as a way to get Jewish women to have more babies. These academics cared about the statistical numbers of Jews, but had little interest in the depth and meaning of Jewish life.

I have to tell you that I completed writing this sermon last week. But then last Thursday, Michael Steinhardt, one of the Jewish mega donors, a founder of Birthright, along with Charles Bronfman, was outed for his offensive treatment of women. He was a serial harasser; coarse, uncouth, obscene. I know many of you—some of you here, as well as some of your children—have had wonderful experiences with Birthright. But Steinhardt always gave a wink and a nod to the image of Birthrights as a Spring Break, all-expense paid trip with plenty of

opportunities to “hook up.” Steinhardt encouraged that. He was also known to embarrass professional women at serious conferences, asking everyone to vote if they thought this woman or that woman should have a baby. He felt entitled to delve into the personal lives of others. Steinhardt funded Cohen, and often collaborated with Cohen in the studies. Cohen then studied Steinhardt funded programs and lavishly praised them.

I want to say that the exposure of Steinhardt’s offensive behavior happened through an internal investigation within the Hillel foundation by its CEO, Eric Fingerhut, who is a member of our extended congregational family. He should be honored for the courage to stand up to Steinhardt, and to protect the young people within Hillel. Eric also did something unheard of in the Jewish nonprofit world—he returned Steinhardt’s donation, and gave up his financial support.

Now why should any of this matter to you? Because Stephen Cohen’s biased, predetermined extrapolations of the various population studies defined the organized American Jewish agenda for decades. More importantly, people were deeply hurt and alienated. The sermons condemning intermarriage as the next Holocaust were offensive. We were told that those Jews who intermarried were abandoning, rejecting, and escaping from Judaism. Parents who raised children who intermarried were told that they were failures. If only they had inoculated their children from the evils of intermarriage through day school, or more weeks at Jewish camps, or trips to Israel! And as many of you know, intermarrying Jews frustratingly searched for Rabbi’s to officiate, or at least not sit in judgement, of their wedding.

Let me offer an even stronger argument. I could tie the decline in the American synagogue, especially the decline in certain denominations, to the mistakes they made because they listened to Stephen Cohen and the others. They missed a major trend—Jews were not marrying out, non-Jews were marrying in. Jewish life was actually attractive to many. The new diversity in the Jewish community was actually adding to growth, even more it was adding to the vibrancy, creativity, and dynamism of American Jewish life. And they missed all of that.

I wonder what Jerome Epstein, of the United Synagogue, who condemned us in the pages of the Forward in 1999, would say today. How did his position about firm walls and boundaries work out for the movement he headed? To Cohen, Steinhardt and the others, when a Jew fell in love with a non-Jew, the Jewish community suffered a loss. But their statistics, and their extrapolations, were wrong. The Pew study of 2013 said that 60% of the children being raised in intermarriage are being raised as Jews. We can look at the Hebrew Union College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, even the Jewish Theological Seminary of the Conservative movement, and see that many of the new young rabbis and other Jewish professionals are themselves children of intermarriage. They have parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts who are not Jews. They are the current and next generation of Jewish leaders. But I have an even better example that disproves their conclusion.

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, sadly, Rabbi Rachel Cowan passed away. Rabbi Cowan was a descendant of the Mayflower, a Bryn Mawr graduate, raised Unitarian. She met her future husband, Paul Cowan, when they were tutoring black children in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1965, they married. It was an intermarriage. Many of you know the story, and some of you even know the family. Paul Cowan was raised a completely assimilated Jew. His father Ben was president of CBS, and gave him no sense of his Jewish background. He was the grandson of Modie Spiegel, who lived in Kenilworth, was a member of the Christian Science church—Modie's only Jewish connection was Lake Shore Country Club. As a journalist with the Village Voice, he began to explore his own Judaism in his mid 30's. Paul wrote An Orphan in History, a very important book about retrieving his Jewish legacy.

Rachel accompanied him on that spiritual journey, and she converted to Judaism in 1980. The two of them began working with interfaith couples, creating workshops and support groups for the intermarried. They then wrote Mixed Blessings: Marriage between Jews and Christians. Many of you turned to that book for support and understanding during the early days of your own intermarriage. Tragically Paul died of leukemia in 1988, but Rachel completed her studies for ordination as a Rabbi at HUC.

She became a transformative figure in modern American Jewish life. First, she was the program director of Jewish life at the Nathan Cummings foundation. She supported creative initiatives and responses to a changing American Jewish world.. We never sought funding from the Cummings Foundation but Rachel and the key force behind the foundation—Buddy Mayer, who sadly passed away this past weekend—were incredibly supportive and encouraging of us as Sukkat Shalom. They rejected the condemnation and negativity of the Continuity Industry experts. She supported outreach efforts that were inclusive of both families and individuals. She then went on to work with the Jewish Healing Network, and that changed everything.

We are using the new Reform prayer book, Mishkan HaNefesh, this year. In the old prayer book, Gates of Repentance, there is not a Mi Shebeirach, a healing prayer. And in this prayer book, the healing prayers are so important. Certainly they were important to Rachel, as a result of Paul's untimely death. She pushed the idea that healing was a vital part of our prayers. Today, all Rabbinic students must study pastoral counseling, something that was not required when I was a student. It was through her efforts that healing retreats took place, that people wrote prayers and meditations. Debbie Friedman's "Mi Shebeirach" melody gathered wide acceptance in part due to Rachel's support. And then she went on to found the Institute for Jewish spirituality. When we understand the emergent synagogue movement that is happening in America today, much of that is because of her. The whole return to the issue of spirituality, of meditation and mindfulness, was part of her efforts.

In contrast to Steven Cohen and his associates, I offer the example of Rachel Cowan. Rachel Cowan is the one who will have lasting impact on the depth of the Jewish experience. Institutions were not built by her, but they were inspired by her work. I am optimistic about the future of American Jewish life. It will be radically different from the suburban Judaism of the 50's and 60's. It contains a great deal of diversity., and that is a very good thing. There are new entries, new voices and new ideas. There are new creative works of music, literature, and poetry. The new Judaism often takes place in informal settings as well as in synagogues. American Judaism will survive and prosper, not because of birthrates but because there is a compelling story of meaning and significance, embracing others, exploring and discovering within, Jewish life and thought, something of inspiration, purpose, and depth.

So I look back at that Forward article from 1999, and remarkably I think it could still describe us. There is a consistency of mission and culture. In the early days of planning Sukkat Shalom, we were creating an open, expansive, welcoming, and embracing congregation. Those words from 1999 are still true, I hope. And I hope that we will continue to live up to the prediction the Forward made in 1999—that the future of the American synagogue, and the American Jewish community, is here. So may we continue to work together to build a community that is open, embracing, diverse, enjoyable, fun, and inspiring. And so may it be a blessing for this year and the years to come.

Amen.