

Exploring Judaism's Denominational Divide

20th Century and Beyond...

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1885 Pittsburgh Conference

Convening at the call of Kaufmann Kohler of New York, Reform rabbis from around the United States met from November 16 through November 19, 1885 with Isaac Mayer Wise presiding. The meeting was declared the continuation of the Philadelphia Conference of 1869, which was the continuation of the German Conference of 1841 to 1846. The rabbis adopted the following seminal text:

1. We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended midst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.

2. We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as the priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.

3. We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.

4. We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

5. We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.

6. We recognize in Judaism a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason. We are convinced of the utmost necessity of preserving the historical identity with our great past. Christianity and Islam, being daughter religions of Judaism, we appreciate their providential mission, to aid in the spreading of monotheistic and moral truth. We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission, and therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.

7. We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in Gehenna and Eden (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.

8. In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.

The Interwar Period

- As with the Civil War the Jewish Community was split over America's neutrality at the outset of WW1.
- There were those who felt that Germany and Russia needed a lesson and others who were still sympathetic to their homelands.
- However, once America entered the war Jews volunteered to serve in large numbers. About 250,000 joined the military.
- As the Military only recognized one Judaism, the denominations created a Jewish Welfare Board to supervise Chaplains and provide services for Jewish soldiers.
- Initially they issued a compromise prayer book but soon were providing services for Reform, Conservative and Orthodox as requested. Because of a shortage of Chaplains, soldiers often had to take what was offered, which exposed many of them to practices that were unfamiliar.
- The Jewish Community at large also felt responsible to assist those who were suffering overseas especially in Austro-Hungary and Russia and created three different organizations to raise funds in the Reform, Traditionalist and Socialist communities.
- To be more effective they formed the Joint Distribution Committee which determined how and where the funds were allocated.

- The postwar rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Bolshevik fervor was characterized by a concomitant rise in anti-Semitism. The State Department reported to the House Committee on Immigration that Jews wanting to migrate to America were “undesirable,” “of low physical and mental standards,” “filthy,” “un-American,” and “often dangerous in their habits.”
- The subsequent legislation introduced quotas aimed at restoring America to its ethnic makeup before the mass immigration occurred. (Limited to 2% of the groups’ contribution to 1890 population)
- With the support of respected Americans like Father Charles Coughlin and Henry Ford (Protocols of the Elders of Zion) anti-Semitism took on a veneer of respectability and became more and more rampant throughout America, exacerbated further by the economic depression of the 30’s.
- “Restricted” clubs, neighborhoods, universities, hotels and resorts proliferated. Certain institutions like hospitals also refused to hire Jewish medical staff.
- Jews responded by creating their own institutions but this had the effect of creating barriers between Jews and their neighbors.

- During the 20's and 30's cultural secular Jewishness (Yiddishkeit) predominated and religious Judaism withered dramatically.
- In the face of this onslaught, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886-1948), a Hungarian immigrant, became the principal of Brooklyn's Yeshivah Torah Vodaath.
- It soon became an Orthodox center, with Lithuanian-style learning and Hasidic devotion. Yiddish was the language of instruction and there was little secular study. He soon expanded the scope of the school into a High School and a Talmudic academy.
- It was primarily aimed at educating lay people as opposed to clergy.
- Post WW2 his vision spread across the States with the establishment of a web of traditional schools all with a common purpose.

- A small group of graduates, followers of Rabbi Chaim Avraham Dov Ber Levine HaCohen, (the Malach), formed a Hasidic sect which effectively withdrew from the world around them, creating a precedent for latter groups of ultra-Orthodox, both Mitnagdim and Hasidic to follow.
- In 1915 Rabbi Bernard (Dov) Revel (1885-1940) was invited to become the head of the newly joined Etz Chaim Yeshiva and RIETS. By 1928 he had expanded it into Yeshiva College, and fully fledged Seminary, with a strong secular as well as traditional base and an impressive building in Washington Heights.
- At Solomon Schechter's urging the United Synagogue was formed to support JTS as well as providing secure employment for its graduates. It grew from 22 member congregations in 1913 to 229 in 1929.
- Two major issues ultimately defined Conservative Judaism from Orthodoxy. The problem of *Agunot* and mixed seating.

Reconstructionism

- Conservative Judaism was pulled between those who wanted to “conserve” by adhering as closely to tradition as possible and those who felt that the only way to “conserve” was to harmonize Judaism and modernity, making it more attractive to young Jews.
- One of the foremost protagonists of the latter was Mordechai M. Kaplan (1881-1983). Born near Vilna his family migrated to America in 1889.
- His father was an Orthodox Rabbi and Kaplan was educated by him and sent to Etz Chaim Yeshiva. Later he studied at City College, Columbia University and received ordination at JTS in 1902.
- He received traditional ordination from Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, the founder of Religious Zionism in 1908 while on a visit to Europe.
- His first pulpit was in Yorkville but he was soon invited to head up the Teachers Institute at JTS where he remained for 54 years until retiring in 1963.

- In 1920 he published an article entitled “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism” setting forward his ideas on “revitalizing Judaism in America by making it function as a civilization in the everyday life of its adherents.”
- He formed a new congregation the Society for the Advancement of Judaism which became the vanguard of Reconstructionism.
- His seminal work “Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life” was published in 1934 and set out (along with numerous other works) his theological and programmatic approach.
- His was a naturalistic and dynamic faith, centering around the Jewish people rather than God. He focused on “Jewish civilization” which encompassed everything Jewish, including Israel, history, language, literature, religious folkways, mores, laws and art.
- Jews needed to “rediscover, reinterpret and reconstruct” their civilization.

- According to Jonathan Sarna in *American Judaism* what made Kaplan so controversial was:
 - His denial of supernaturalism and redefinition of God in terms of process (“the process that makes for salvation.”)
 - His negation of Jewish chosenness.
 - His doctrinal latitudinarianism (“ideas or beliefs in conflict with what have come to be regarded as true or right should be eliminated.”)
 - His willingness to alter or discard commanded Jewish practices that have “outlived their usefulness.”
- These as well as his emphasis on the whole life of the Jew, his push for synagogue-centers (a shul with a pool) and his “tradition has a vote but not a veto” sparked debate in all movements.
- The Agudath ha-Rabbanim publicly excommunicated him in 1945.

Hasidism and Ultra-Orthodoxy

- In the 30's and 40's, especially during and in the wake of the Holocaust, a core of Eastern European and German Rabbis immigrated to the US.
- Some of them, like W. Gunther Plaut, Alexander Schindler, Ismar Schorsch and Abraham Joshua Heschel, were brought over by the progressive movements and made significant contributions serving Reform and Conservative institutions.
- Several leading Hasidic leaders also arrived, many with a substantial number of followers who had arrived previously. Many of these Rabbis had discouraged their adherents from immigrating and the movement had suffered devastating losses during the Holocaust.
- Amongst these traditionalists there were three basic responses to the American milieu - Insulate, Outreach or Integrate.

- With the influx of Hasidic survivors, especially from Hungary, the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Crown Heights and Borough Park transformed into Eastern European like Hasidic enclaves, with the establishment of more than 25 Hasidic courts each headed by a Rebbe. These were often named for the area or town from which they had originally come.
- Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, (from Satu-Mare in Hungary) was 61 when he arrived in the US. He reinstituted the dress, language (Yiddish), institutions and customs of his homeland and was fiercely anti-modernism, anti-Zionist and strongly anti-acculturation.
- Satmars and others like them believed that they could build invisible barriers between themselves and the wider community, pursuing their own religious path regardless of what was occurring around them.
- In 1974, following the lead of the Skverer Rebbe, Yaakov Yosef Twersky, who had established New Square in 1954, they established Kiryas Joel in Monroe County, NY as a self-contained Satmar town.

- Chabad/Lubavitch tried a different tactic.
- Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn, the Lubavitcher Rebbe arrived in 1940, followed by his son-in-law, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, a year later.
- The elder Schneersohn settled in Crown Heights where he established the group's headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway.
- In 1951 the 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, succeeded his father-in-law. He had been educated at the University of Berlin and the Sorbonne and understood the advantages of adopting modernity into a traditional lifestyle.
- He soon built the movement into the fastest growing in the US and perhaps the world. Through the use of *Shluchim*, emissaries, he spread Hasidism into all the major cities as well as the most unlikely and remote places. Intensely Messianistic and tradition, Chabad has spread its message by meeting people where they are and accepting them for what they are.

- Rabbi Aaron Kotler (1892-1962) arrived in 1941. He had been the head of a yeshiva in Kletsk Poland and had strongly discouraged his students from settling in America. He was reverently Orthodox and both anti-Zionist and anti-haskalah.
- He was granted a special visa by President Roosevelt and within a few years established Beth Medrash Gevocha in Lakewood, NJ. Over the years it has grown to be the largest yeshiva of this kind in the world.
- Kotler believed in traditional isolationism, away from secular education and culture of any type. He banned any contact between Orthodox Rabbis and Reform and Conservative counterparts and refused to allow them to work with these Rabbis on boards and in organizations working for common Jewish good. He also encouraged parochial Jewish schools to accept Government funding.

- Rabbi Joseph D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) emigrated in 1931 having studied in both a yeshiva and at the University of Berlin. He had written his thesis on Hermann Cohen a liberal, neo-Kantian thinker. Throughout his life, Soloveitchik maintained a keen interest in mathematics, philosophy of science, literature and even Christian religious thought.
- After the death of his father he became the senior Talmudic scholar at Yeshiva College.
- While he vociferously defended Orthodoxy and discouraged his students from inter-denominational theological dialogues, he still allowed working with Reform and Conservative Rabbis in other circumstances.
- He was a mixture of very traditional Talmudist on the one hand and wrestler with modernity and its implications for Orthodoxy on the other.

Issues post WW2

- Suburbanization of the Jewish Community
 - Bar Mitzvah
- Zionism especially post 1967
- Involvement of women
 - Bat Mitzvah
 - Rabbinic Ordination
- Interfaith
- Homosexuality