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Series V: Writings, 1909-1963, undated.

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Shadow of a century, several articles based on a talk about  
American Jews, 1942.

# Shadow of A Century

*Baltimore Jewish Times*  
4-3-42

## American Jewry One Hundred Years After

By DR. ABBA HILLEL SILVER

*Cincinnati is now celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its congregation, keystone of Reform Judaism in America. Dr. Abba Hillel Silver reviews the changes in the social, political and religious history of the Jewish people in the period from 1842 to 1942. This article is an adaptation of the address which he delivered in Cincinnati for the centennial ceremonies.—The Editor.*

IN 1842 there were less than 2,000 Jews in Cincinnati, less than 50,000 in the United States. The last one hundred years have multiplied these figures tenfold, a hundredfold. Great Jewish communities, the greatest in our history, have sprung up. Thousands of temples, synagogues, schools and social agencies now dot our land. In 1842 their number was very small and the houses of worship were, with few exceptions, improvised meeting places in halls, stores or private dwelling places. Not one of the great Reform leaders who were to establish Reform Judaism in the United States had yet arrived in this country. Only one Reform congregation was in existence.

Surely much has changed since those days, and yet much has remained unchanged—the loyalty which prompted Jews to band themselves together in their new homes and quickly to build houses of worship where they might worship God and where their children might be taught the word of God, the generosity with which they provided for the needy and the distressed in their midst, the quick adjustments which they made and the eagerness with which they responded to the challenge and the opportunity of American citizenship. These are the constant factors in Jewish experience throughout the ages. Unchanged, too, are the spiritual problems which soon came to agitate the men of a hundred years ago.

The great battle to reform Judaism broke in its full force in the Jewish communities of Western Europe during the very decade in which this great congregation was founded. In 1842 the Verein der Reformfreunde was organized in Frankfurt. That same year the first Reform congregation was established in London. It was in the fifth decade, too, that the

three historic Rabbinical conferences in Germany were held. The great figures of the movement now appear on the scene and enter the lists—Geiger, Holdheim, Einhorn, Philippson, Hirsch, Stein and Adler. All the issues over which the religious household of Israel was to be divided during the ensuing years were then raised. Within a few years they were also raised by immigrant reformers in this country—the authority of tradition, the value of ceremonies, the revision of the prayer book, the use of Hebrew, the role of Israel in the world, Jewish nationalism and the restoration to Palestine. Those same issues are still on the agenda today. On the agenda, too, unfortunately still remains the problem of Jewish national homelessness and anti-Semitism which those hopeful men of a hundred years ago believed to be on the way of imminent solution.

The reformers of Germany confidently announced that Germany was their Fatherland—a rather one-sided announcement. They and their people needed no other homeland, they declared. They were riding the high tide of nineteenth-century liberalism, but they failed to note the dangerous shoals of nineteenth-century nationalism, the trends toward the centralizing state and the implications for the Jewish minority of the fast-developing class struggles and economic warfare. Especially dangerous was this oversight in a land like Germany, which was only just then recovering, after two centuries, from the physical and spiritual devastations of the wars of religion, among a people notoriously and periodically swayed by waves of hysterical religiosity, hysterical metaphysics and hysterical politics, whose foremost religious leader in the sixteenth century could indulge in an anti-Semitism so filthy, vile and scatological as to be matched only by the anti-Semitism of the foremost political leader of Germany in the twentieth century.

These reformers were thinking of progress as most men of their day did, in terms of a steady, horizontal advance, an unbroken march forward, rather than in terms of a succession of cyclical movements which, over and again, come full again and which result only in a slight net advance for mankind. There were ample warnings all around them, portents which less romantic eyes did appraise more realistically—signs of an irreconcilable opposition, an indurate racial, cultural, economic and religious hostility which had not and would not accept the humanistic and democratic synthesis which a revolutionary middle-class capitalism had popularized in the nineteenth century, and which was destined sooner or later to disintegrate.

This many-sided and variously motivated anti-Semitism gained momentum at the same time and almost at the same pace as Jewish political emancipation. It was not a reaction. It was a parallel development just as the Inquisition and the Ghetto paral-



in new settings but which remain fundamentally the same—the basic and perennial conflicts and adjustments in individual and collective lives. From Abraham and Moses to the last of the great and the wise teachers of our faith there stretches an unbroken chain of spiritual continuity, changeless principles in mutable forms which were the fixed points of reference for each generation. Each generation faced the same problems: how to achieve freedom under the sovereignty of God, justice under the mandate of His law and dignity in kinship with Him; how knowledge was to be made whole through the fear of God, and courage heightened through trust in Him; how brotherhood and peace could be covenanted in the sight of Him Who is Father of all men and all nations.

Judaism has offered men the faith and the code sufficient and adequate to every age. Men have not heeded it. Jews have not heeded it. Theirs was the inadequacy, theirs the insufficiency. Many believed that mankind could dispense with Israel's faith and code and could achieve freedom, justice, dignity, courage, brotherhood and peace without reference to God and the techniques of religion. But they achieved only dictatorship, slavery, littleness of stature, fear, hate, and war. They put their hope not in spiritual conversion, not in moral regeneration but in a precipitous scientific and intellectual progress which has now hurled rider, horse and chariot alike into one bloody and ruinous tangle.

The leaders of Reform Judaism, too, were encouraged to expect the quick advent of a universal religion of peace and good will, not because of any religious revivalism which was transpiring in the world in their day—there was none—but because of that same breath-taking scientific advance. They drew unwarranted conclusions from irrelevant premises. There is never any forward movement in society without an inward movement in man.

The pioneer reformers and their disciples after them were good and loyal Jews but they were too zealous to "modernize" Judaism, and too self-conscious about modernity. There was too much emphasis in their thought and speech upon "reform," "change," "progress," too little upon "rebirth," "return," "tracing back to God." Nothing is so shallow and ephemeral as modernity. The very word suggests a mode, a fashion, an improvised and passing version which has its practical utility, to be sure, but which must not be confused with that which is of the essence and of the eternal. They were too eager to accommodate, to facilitate, and, strange as it may seem, to conform—not to tradition, of course, but to the most recent thought and practice of their day, the tradition of recency. They were sufficiently intellectual in their critique, but religious reformation is achieved only by mystics who are concerned not with the recency of their doctrines but with the immediacy of their religious experience.

Great spiritual movements break not only with the past but with the present as well. They never attempt to "modernize" religion but to restore it to its timeless spiritual essence, to its enduring distinctiveness through all times and ages, to that which like the flowing current moves and changes and yet remains the same. Quite consciously they are movements of "return" to marvelous and decisive beginnings so as to recapture an ageless truth. They never set out to adjust men to their social, political or economic environment. They aim to tear them free from their environment. They demand of them surrender, self-denial, renunciation of worldly comforts and interests, and they offer them the compensations of spiritual blessings and peace. The greatest religions were those which made the greatest demands upon their followers and which called for the most rigorous disciplines.



# SHADOW OF A CENTURY



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This is the tragic fact which seems to escape so many students of anti-Semitism. The story of Jewish emancipation in Europe from the day after the French Revolution to the day before the Nazi Revolution is the story of political positions captured in the face of stubborn and sullen opposition, which left the emancipated minority encamped within an unbeaten and unreconciled opposition. At the slightest provocation, and as soon as things got out of order, the opposition returned to the attack and inflicted grievous wounds. In our day, stirred by the great politico-economic struggles which were tearing nations apart, this never-failing, never-reconciled opposition swept over the Jewish political and economic positions in Europe and completely demolished them. There is an electric chord which connects





# Shadow Of A Century 42-29

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Congress Weekly 340 42

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**T**HE LEADERS OF REFORM JUDAISM, too, were encouraged to expect the quick advent of a universal religion of peace and good will, not because of any religious revivalism which was transpiring in the world in their day—there was none—but because of that same breath-taking scientific advance. They drew unwarranted conclusions from irrelevant premises. There is never any forward movement in society without an inward movement in man.

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The First World War, which made the world "safe for democracy" and granted the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe not only the rights of citizenship but even minority rights, brought also in its wake the most thorough-going, brutal and annihilationist anti-Semitism that Israel has ever experienced. And now again, in the Second World War, many Jews are hoping to achieve through an Allied victory what an Allied victory failed to give them after the last war, what a whole century of enlightenment, liberalism and intellectual progress failed to give them — peace and security. They are again confusing formal political equality with immunity from economic and social pressures. Yes, much has changed in the last one hundred years, but much more has resisted change. The immemorial problem of our national homelessness, the principle source of our millennial tragedy, remains as stark and as menacing as ever. Yet Jews, especially those of our persuasion, are again trying to circumvent it with wishful thinking, with day-dreaming about an Atlantic Charter or the Four Freedoms, with clever homiletics, or are hoping to lay it to rest with patriotic charms and incantations — just as they did a hundred years ago, and through all the intervening years.

Why should we celebrate centennials of religious institutions? What seek we among the forms and faces of things long since dead? What shall we bring back from the frontiers of distant years? Not the evidences of change. They are of little moment and there is little consolation in them. But rather the evidences of changelessness and continuity. In that knowledge there is both pride and humility and the strength which belongs to mature men.

Judaism is concerned with the unchanging needs of man and of society, the needs which take on new forms in new settings but which remain fundamentally the same — the basic and perennial conflicts and adjustments in individual and collective lives. From Abraham and Moses to the last of the great and the wise teachers of our faith there stretches an unbroken chain of spiritual con-

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# SHADOW OF A CENTURY

(Continued from page 3)

the era of Fichte in Germany with its feral cry of "hep-hep," and the era of Hitler and its cry "Jude verrecke." And so for the rest of Europe. The Damascus affair of 1840 links up with the widespread reaction after the Revolution of 1848, the Mortara Affair in Italy, the Christian-Socialist movement in the era of Bismarck, the Tisza-Ezlar Affair in Hungary, the revival of the blood accusation in Bohemia, the pogroms in the eighties in Russia, La France Juive and the Dreyfus Affair in France.

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