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The Influence of Abba Hillel Silver on the Evolution of Reform  
Judaism, by Leon I. Feuer, 1977.

THE INFLUENCE OF ABBA HILLEL SILVER ON THE  
EVOLUTION OF REFORM JUDAISM

BY

LEON I. FEUER

Abba Hillel Silver, 1893-1963, was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in 1915. In 1917 he was elected to the pulpit of The Temple, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Cleveland, Ohio, which he served to the end of his life. He held the posts of President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Zionist Organization of America, Chairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council and Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, in which capacity he successfully argued for the Jewish Commonwealth before the Assembly of the United Nations.

From its very inception in Germany as a movement within Jewish life, Reform Judaism, true to its essential genius, has been changing and developing while endeavoring to remain faithful to the fundamental spirit of the historic faith. American Reform is quite different from its German ancestor, although not as radically so as might be imagined. The handful of rabbis who wrote the Pittsburgh Platform in 1883 and even the much larger group who half a century later adopted the Columbus platform would not be hard put to reconcile their view of Jewish doctrine and practice with those of the majority of contemporary Reform rabbis, for there are indissoluble links between them, one being the subject of this essay. Current Reform seems to be placing greater and greater



stress upon the peoplehood of Israel, upon the ethnic aspects of the ties between the various Jewish communities in the world and upon an increasing quota of ceremony and ritual. We hear demands for the formulation of an official Reform Halacha, in the hope probably vain of putting the movement more in line with Rabbinic tradition and thus becoming less anathema to the official Orthodoxies. There is even <sup>a</sup> trend toward accepting the claim to centrality and therefore to primacy in the Jewish world of the reborn State of Israel. Abba Hillel Silver would heartily endorse some of these changes, indeed as we shall see he was a significant force in effecting them. Others he would vigorously oppose, for believing as he did that there were certain vitally basic themes running through Jewish thought and experience, he would regard them as we shall see as somewhat of a departure from the mainstream.

From a detached, objective historical perspective, no single cause and certainly no one person can be credited with bringing about the transformations which have been and are taking place within American Reform. The influx of East European immigrants from the 1880's on produced in its second and third generation wake an



infusion into the primarily German Jewish composition of our Reform congregation a type of membership and lay leadership nostalgically conditioned toward the introduction of traditional practices in public worship such as Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and into home family observance of the Sabbath Eve Kiddush and the kindling of Sabbath and Chanukah lights. On the Eastern seaboard, where the impact was more immediate, it was the rule rather than the exception for Reform congregations to employ cantors and it was not uncommon for the worshippers to wear hats and talithim. In fact, some congregations had never departed from these more traditional usages. In the Midwest where German influence remained stronger for some time, Reform went to greater lengths in eliminating vestiges of Orthodox practice, in some instances going to such extremes - one such congregation ironically being Tifereth Israel of Cleveland which was to be Silver's pulpit - as ending the regular Sabbath cycle of Torah readings. These congregations have been rapidly catching up with the procession of change. The process has of course been intensively accelerated by such epoch shaking events as the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, which has pushed to the foreground of Jewish consciousness



the desire for demonstrating in every possible form, including religious symbolism, the closing of ranks and the cohesiveness of Jewish brotherhood the world over.

While giving due consideration to the influence of these historic causes in producing change in American Reform, one would be less than faithful to a spiritual heritage which gave us an Abraham, a Moses, a David, the prophets and some of the eminent rabbinic personalities, if one did not make due allowance for the contributions of individual personalities. After all, Reform did and still does bear the indelible stamp of the results of the labors of Isaac Mayer Wise, without whose vision and far ranging organizational capacities the movement and its subsidiary institutions, the College, the Union and the Central Conference might not as soon or perhaps never come into being. It is the thesis of this study that perhaps equal with and certainly second only to Wise, American Reform thought and practice owes much of its configuration to another powerful personality, the late Abba Hillel Silver. The influence of Silver, as we shall note was both diffuse and intensely concentrated. He entered the Hebrew Union College in 1911 and graduated



in 1915. He came from a background of rabbinic ancestry. He received a thorough training in Biblical and Rabbinic lore. Apt quotations from the sources sprang readily to his lips. In a period which was witnessing the revival of Hebrew as a living tongue, he was fluent in its usage. In New York's lower East Side, he had been an active leader in the strongly Zionist and Hebrew oriented Herzl Zion Club, which gave to both the rabbinate and to Zionist leadership a number of noted personalities. In 1917 he became the rabbi of The Temple, Congregation Tifereth Israel, then one of the most prominent and radically reform congregations in the United States. Under his leadership it became not only one of the largest congregations in the country, but a pioneer in the Jewish and Hebrew education of its children. He is said to have inspired, helped to train and sponsor more candidates for the rabbinate than any other alumnus of the Hebrew Union College, including his own son and the present writer. The chief source of his influence, however, is to be found in the innumerable addresses and learned papers he was called upon to deliver at the College and before gatherings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union of American Hebrew



Congregations. His published works, usually popular in presentation although authoritative in learning, enjoyed wide readership. On the occasion of the celebration by his congregation of his sixtieth birthday and the thirty-fifth anniversary of his incumbency, the writer, representing the Central Conference of American Rabbis said: "So highlighted with drama has been Dr. Silver's leadership in the rescue and national renaissance of our people, that it is easy to overlook his equally significant leadership of the religious life of American Jewry. During these past thirty-five years profound changes have been taking place in our Reform movement. Demonstrating once again Judaism's amazing capacity for adjustment, Reform has been evolving into a logical and coherent synthesis of the best of our traditional ideas and practices with the American way of life, and thus becoming the pattern of the future for the whole of American Jewry. My use of the figure thirty five is not fortuitous. It parallels the period of Dr. Silver's rabbinate in this congregation. For he has emerged during this period as the single most potent force in shaping the form and guiding the direction which Judaism is likely to take in this country. Retrospectively analyzed, his books, his papers and addresses



before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, at the College and before other groups will be seen to constitute the text and guidebook of that development. At the same time, The Temple, its school and its organizational program have been the laboratory in which his ideas have been tested and found valid. With an uncanny instinct for what is basically and integrally Jewish, his thinking has represented that balance and fusion of the universal and the particular, the Messianic and the nationalist, the prophetic and priestly strains which constitute historic Judaism correctly understood. An uncompromising fighter for the political independence of Israel, he continued to insist that religion is the primary vocation and function of the Jewish people." That judgment seems to be as accurate today as when it was first pronounced.

The first and of course the most obvious impact which Silver made upon Reform ideology was to wean it away from its anti-Zionist, anti-nationalist stance. This was an effort which began very early in his rabbinical career. This he helped to effect not only by his own activism in the Zionist move-



ment and leadership in the effort to bring about the establishment of the Jewish State, but by his creative and successful synthesis of Reform Theology with the nationalist philosophy of Jewish life. It was, by all odds as we shall see, a master stroke. It now seems passing strange, with the preponderant majority of rabbis enthused pro-Israel, sponsoring pilgrimages to Eretz of adults and children; with the Central Conference of American Rabbis holding conventions there; with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations sponsoring the growth of liberal congregations and schools there; with the World Union of Progressive Judaism establishing its headquarters in Jerusalem; with Reform laymen in the vanguard of financial support for the state, to think of the movement as having been adamantly and often bitterly opposed to the Zionist idea. Just a half century or so ago, although not in itself an official document, the Pittsburg Platform voiced the more or less generally accepted position of Reform Zionism. The phrasing is worth recalling.—"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 sacrificial mission under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish State." Central to Reform doctrine of the time was the idea of the Mission of Israel, that is, the divinely appointed assignment to the Jewish people to work for the realization of a Messianic Age upon earth. In his introductory essay to "Reform Judaism" a Book of Essays by Alumni of the Hebrew Union College, Dr. Bernard J. Bamberger wrote: "Stress was laid (by the early Reformers) on the prophetic doctrine that Israel was God's Messenger, bringing the doctrine of righteousness to mankind, so the Messianic hope of universal brotherhood and the Mission of Israel emerged as Reform's major concepts next to its doctrine about the Oneness of God." Silver not only accepted the idea of the Mission as central not only to Reform but to historic Jewish thought. It will be fascinating to see how he employs it to reorient Reform's posture toward Zionism.

Although it is clear that from the beginning<sup>of</sup> his rabbinate he made it a primary aim to effect a shift in Reform Judaism's posture from anti- to pro-Zionism, he



felt that the groundwork for such an effort had to be carefully and cautiously laid. He clearly did not believe in sledge hammer methods. There is a fascinating set of correspondence in the Silver Memorial Archives\* which documents his strategy. Although the subject was to agitate its discussions again and again, the Central Conference of American Rabbis had adopted a resolution which seemed to express the majority view. The first sentence read: We totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish State." This was in reaction to the Basle program adopted by the World Zionist Organization under the leadership of Theodore Herzl. In 1916, one year after he entered its ranks, Silver participated in a symposium in which he said rather mildly that the rabbis must come to understand that ----"Nationalism, Political or Cultural Zionism, the renaissance of Hebrew or Yiddish literature, the asthetic revival---valuable in so far as they intensify Jewish communal life--- as so many more dikes against the onrushing tides of assimilation---." In 1917 Great Britain issued the Balfour Declaration and received the mandate for Palestine, thus setting in motion greatly increased activity in the Jewish world toward the colonization

\*The Temple, Cleveland, Ohio



and economic development of the country. In 1920 Silver joined with Max Heller, Martin Meyer and Stephen Wise in requesting the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in view of the Mandate, to discuss the role it could play in the upbuilding of Jewish Palestine. In a letter to Wise, he expressed skepticism about the results to be achieved by it, fearing at that point that Conference action would either be negative or so tame as to defeat the purpose. Nothing tangible apparently came of it. In 1921 he wrote to the then President of the Conference, Dr. Edward N. Calisch, requesting cooperation with the non-political Palestine Development Council. Dr. Calisch replied indicating approval of the Executive Board with the proviso that there be equal representation of Zionists and non-Zionists in the Council. Obviously there was still considerable hesitancy about the possible political implications of CCAR involvement even in non-political activity. Later, replying to a letter from Rabbi James G. Heller suggesting an organization of Reform and Conservative Zionist rabbis to work for common objectives, Silver responded significantly, "I am not in favor of organizing Zionist members in the Conservative and Reform Wings as a unit. I believe it is poor tactics

to say the least. Our objectives should be not to divide the American rabbinate into two sharply distinguished and opposite groups but in winning control over all existing rabbinical organizations for Zionist purposes." Written in 1930, this letter expresses confidence that such control can be won. Prophetic in view of the later appearance upon the scene of the troublesome American Council for Judaism, he feared that organizing Zionist rabbis would provoke the organization of anti-Zionist rabbis and mean an embitterment of the Zionist controversy. A few years later, when he was in the President's chair, Heller assented to the introduction and passage of a resolution favoring the establishment of a Jewish Army to participate in World War II. Arguing that this violated the posture of neutrality <sup>on</sup> the Zionist issue upon which the Conference had by this time agreed, and that the resolution was therefore out of order, the anti-Zionists did precisely what Silver had warned might happen. They tried to split the Conference and Reform Judaism by convoking a meeting in Atlantic City with their lay followers to organize the American Council on



Judaism. By 1937 the Pittsburgh Platform was considered both inadequate and outdated, and was replaced by the "Guiding Principles" adopted by the Conference in Columbus, Ohio (popularly known as the Columbus Platform) with Silver, a member of the committee which formulated them, arguing persuasively in their favor. In this document greater weight is given to ceremonial observance. The major changes, however, were the emphasis upon the tie between Reform and World Jewry, and upon the redevelopment of Palestine. "In the rehabilitation of Palestine the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life." By this time both the Conference and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations had revoked their anti-Zionist resolutions and become officially neutral on the subject of Political Zionism. Silver was satisfied with this measure of progress, eminently confident that history would take care of the rest, at least as far as practical steps were concerned toward winning



Reform Judaism over to a favorable, even a supportive stance toward a political solution of the Jewish problem. In this somewhat uncharacteristic go-slow approach and by his refusal in the early stages to support measures which might rend apart the institutions of Reform, he demonstrated not only his own statesmanship and keen political sense of what was possible, but his earnest view that while perhaps not as urgently immediate a cause as Zionism, of which he became the undisputed leader in the United States, Reform as an idea and a movement was important and precious to him.

He had a larger goal to which he was committed and to which he devoted much of his thinking and writing. His aim was to demonstrate doctrinally that Zionism and Reform not only were not incompatible but that they were complementary and essential one to the other. Many of his major papers and addresses delivered before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, at the Hebrew Union College and elsewhere are devoted to establishing this synthesis. Since no one was in greater demand as a speaker before audiences of laymen, many thousands of whom must have



listened to him over and over; and since his presentations were characterized not only by his matchlessly persuasive oratory and analytical power, but by his mastery both of the sources and of Jewish historical knowledge, taken together these facts fully justify the description of him as a major influence in the shaping of contemporary Reform thought. It is fascinating to study the design of the ideological structure which Dr. Silver was rearing.

He begins with a critique of the anti-Zionist orientation of the early reformers while at the same time accepting the basic assumptions which they postulated for the movement. His criticism - and it is never the carping or sneering kind which one finds so frequently not only among the opponents of Reform but within our own ranks - takes several forms. He points out that the Founders of the movement, products of the buoyant and often uncritical liberalism of the nineteenth century, regarded progress as a steady uninterrupted advance, instead of a cyclical movement which each time results only in a slight gain for mankind. It is a recurring note in Silver's thinking that while the Messianic hope remains constant, one must be realistic



in the expectation, the timetable of its coming. He also makes an interesting distinction between "reform" and "modernize." The Reformers were too eager to modernize whereas true Reform, he maintains, breaks with the present as well as with the past, attempting to restore religion to its timeless spiritual essence. Prophetic and later Pharisaic Judaism, he points out, never wanted Israel to be like but unlike the other nations. They opposed conformity to the pagan and heathen world of their time. He was, of course, severely critical of the Reformers' attempt to separate Judaism from the sense of peoplehood and nationalism which had always been indispensable elements in Jewish survival. Judaism tried to maintain a sensible balance between nationalism and internationalism. In "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival" he argues that the anti-national pronouncements of the American Reformers were an import from German Reform, made not out of any great prophetic universal impulse but to protect Jewish rights of citizenship by making the proper impression on the civil authorities. They seemed to believe that the solution for anti-Semitism was to eradicate all manifestations of separatism. For some this meant total assimilation, for other Jews the purging of Jewish thought from all nationalist elements. The

result, as in the case of the Mendelsohn family was conversion to Christianity. Assimilationist tendencies neither in Germany nor in France averted anti-Semitism. The same tendencies operated in Russia but there the Jews with Leo Pinsker and his "Autoemancipation" as forerunner set about solving their problems through self-help and more especially through national concentration and cultural survival. The appeasing patriotism of the anti-nationalists was useless because it completely ignored the lessons, the bitterly learned lessons of our history. Jewish political emancipation, where it grudgingly occurred in Western Europe, and anti-Semitism were parallel movements, just as the Inquisition and Ghetto paralleled the Renaissance and Reformation. Whenever gains seemed to be made toward granting Jews civil rights, the forces of bigotry returned to the attack again and again. The basic problem of homelessness which made the Jew vulnerable remained unsolved. To drive home this point, Silver uses a striking figure of speech - "Our virtuosity is wasted on a stringless fiddle."

Silver did not hesitate to attack the position of the early Reformers at their strongest point, the keystone of Reform thought, the Mission idea, not as others



have done by denying its validity, but by affirming it, making it the heart of his own system and insisting that it was entirely compatible with nationalism. His most important statement on this subject is to be found in that remarkable symposium on "Israel" before the 1935 meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It was this address which may be said to have made the greatest intellectual impact in effecting the shift of Reform Judaism from an anti- to a pro-Zionist position. In it he reminds us that the idea of a universal mission for Israel is exilic. It does not appear in pre-exilic Scripture. It was meant to give the dispersed nation a sense of dignity and worth. It was not meant as a substitute for national existence, but as an addition, a bulwark. The prophets who preached mission, like Second Isaiah, also proclaimed restoration. He quotes from Isaiah 43 (5-6): "I will bring thy seed from the east and will gather thee from the west. I will say to the North: 'Give up' and to the South, 'Keep not back; bring thy sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth.'" Centuries later the same note is struck by Judah Ha Levi who closes his Cuzari by comparing Israel to the heart among the nations which must return to its own



land, revive its language, if the gift of prophecy is to live. Judaism always tried to maintain this balance between nationalism and internationalism, between preserving its identity and devoting itself to universal goals. It had room for all sects and points of view except Christianity which under the leadership of Paul became anti-national. Paul saw all nations, including Israel, vanishing into universal anonymity. The early American Reform rabbis saved this fate only for Israel. Thus Silver saw Reform opposition to nationalism as more Paulinian Christian than Jewish. But even the Reformers had to resort to the term "people" because they could not find a more suitable or accurate definition. Indeed, Kaufman Kohler, who convoked the meeting which produced the Pittsburg Platform used a racial definition of Judaism. Jews, he declared, are born into the status of being Jewish. Silver concludes his trenchant analysis of the meaning of Israel by suggesting that although Judaism is the crowning achievement of the Jewish people, the people is transcendent to it as is the artist to his creation.

Thus Silver saw no conflict between his Zionism and Reform Judaism's insistence on the Covenant - Mission with its Messianic expectations as being the very heart of Jewish thought. Throughout his active career he constantly strove - and one may say successfully -



for a synthesis between them. He contended that the establishment of the Jewish State would more effectively serve the aims of the Mission, because it would help safeguard the integrity of a people contending everywhere in the Diaspora with the forces of assimilation. There could be no Mission without a strong secure people to exemplify, to practice and to teach it. "Liberal Judaism has slowly disentangled itself from the meshes of an anti-nationalist dogma in which it was caught in the early years of its development and which was never an essential part of its teaching." Perhaps his best formulation of the synthesis of the Mission ideal with the Peoplehood of Israel and the national aspirations of the Jewish people occurs in that remarkable essay, "The Democratic Impulse in Jewish History," based on his conference lecture before the 1928 convention of the rabbis. The date is significant. It comes relatively early in his rabbinical career, and demonstrates that he was in the process of formulating a clear, consistent philosophy of Jewish life which would combine his Zionist convictions with his interpretation of Liberal Judaism. In it he stresses the universalism of the Pharisees - he tends to see all of



Jewish history as a kind of tension and struggle between Pharisaic and Sadducean attitudes - who were devotees of the Covenant-Mission and at the same time fervent nationalists. They sought to preserve both the Covenant and the people of the Covenant, both the soul of the race and its body. "Liberal Judaism placed itself in direct line of descent from this prophetic-Pharisaic tradition where it accepted as focal in its ideology the Mission of Israel." He goes on to assert that Reform, in correctly holding fast to the Covenant and to the Mission ideal, erred in assuming that it was no longer necessary to stress the national ideal and to maintain strong group discipline. Anticipating the line of argument he was later to pursue in the symposium on "Israel," he suggests that like early Christianity Reform imagined that the Messianic Age was at hand. He describes this as the religious romanticism of the early reformers and their prime error. They were correct about the Mission but they failed to evolve a program by which the people would be constantly reminded that they are a "peculiar, covenanted and consecrated people" and through which they would be saved from assimilation. Although politically a Herzlian Zionist, he interprets the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha-Am as a



form of the Mission concept. The Exile may have temporarily discredited the Mission because Israel appeared in the world's eyes as the defeated people of a defeated God. Therefore it is only the national restoration which will provide the dignity and spiritual renewal which can provide a needed impetus to the Mission, and then he quotes Ezekiel: "It is not for your sake that I am about to act, O household of Israel, but for my holy name. When I restore My holiness in their sight through my dealings with you, the nations shall know that I am the Lord."

With the Zionist objective attained through the establishment of Israel, Dr. Silver turned his attention to the problems of the future, especially those relating to the relationship between the new Jewish state and the Diaspora; the prospects of Jewish communities living outside of Israel, and especially of American Jewry. He approached his discussion of these matters with his usual realism, logic and common sense. Perhaps the best place to begin is with the address he delivered in 1948 before the Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, shortly after the founding of the state. In it he declares his hope that the establishment of Israel will put an end to the concepts of Galut and of the Wandering Jew. The Jew will fight



for his rights with more confidence and resolution. How accurate that prediction turned out is well attested to by the recent events in the Soviet Union, where many Jews are indeed demonstrating a remarkable kind of Jewish pride and courage. He believed that the Jewish population of Israel would reach three to four million, making it the largest center of Jewish life outside of the United States. That now seems readily attainable. "Life in Israel will be characterized, I believe, by that same energy, initiative and inventiveness which have characterized American life." The Diaspora will continue as there was a Diaspora prior to 70 C.E. and will, as then, have a majority of Jews. There was no question of dual allegiance then and there is none now. Jerusalem was their religious center. They made pilgrimages there and contributed to the support of the Temple. In our time Israel will be the non-political center of the nation and Jews will support and aid in its development. A by product of the establishment of Israel will be the end of the Zionist, anti-Zionist debate. He goes on to discuss the effects of the establishment of the state on the Diaspora and the prediction of rapid assimilation.



He denied that this will be or need be the outcome, pointing to the ancient Diaspora where there were assimilationist tendencies, but yet the great majority remained loyal. They carried on widespread proselytizing activity. The Jews of Babylon produced the Babylon Talmud. Silver was never one, however, to engage in overoptimistic or wishful thinking. He warned that we cannot be certain of Diaspora survival anymore than we can be certain of democracy. Everything depends upon the means we employ to strengthen it. American Jewry he hoped would ultimately be able to divert its resources to its own strengthening. Indeed we now find increasing demands upon Jewish Federations to devote larger proportions of their funds for Jewish Education. In this connection, his comment is significant. "We are constrained to acknowledge that the thin wafer, the melba toast type of Jewish education which our children receive in our Sunday Schools is not the kind of a spiritual and cultural diet which can nourish and sustain a vigorous Jewish life, and one which does not promise well for the future."

Silver did not claim for himself any expertise in the field of Jewish education and only rarely



wrote on or addressed himself to the subject. Nevertheless, he was deeply interested in its progress and scrupulously followed the developments in his own school at The Temple in Cleveland, frequently visiting its classrooms and making suggestions and critical comments to its supervisors and teachers. He had however a definite philosophy of and ideas about Jewish education. He was skeptical about new-fangled methods and too frequent experimentation, believing that the basic goals would be lost sight of. He was contemptuous of theories which would make the Jewish classroom a place of entertainment, designed to help children to grow up into "happy Jews." For him, Judaism was a serious business and he wanted children to be inculcated with the seriousness of it. He advocated the tried and tested techniques of Jewish religious life - learning, study, contemplation, prayer and observance. Few or many does not matter - old or new - what matters is Kavanah - Intent. He contended that Torah is the basis of all Jewish education. Jews were not great philosophers. For them Chochmah (wisdom) is derived from Torah. "Jewish Education," he said in an address before the Jewish Education Committee, "was an experience in and



and preparation for modern living in the sight of God. Its basis is the Bible and its rabbinic derivatives and its locale is "The-Synagog". While it was impossible to trace a direct opinion on the subject, one may infer from that last phrase and from his well known strong views on the separation of Church and State that he would not have been favorably disposed to, although he might not have opposed, the present trend towards the growth of Jewish parochial schools. He often indicated that it was not the amount of time spent in Jewish education which mattered as much as the manner in which the time was utilized.

In one area of Jewish education, however, he had, and frequently expressed, emphatically positive views, the study of the Hebrew language. Himself intimate with the Hebrew sources and eloquent in spoken Hebrew, he insisted that the language was the vital core of the curriculum of every Jewish school. The Temple was among, if not the very first, of the large Reform congregations to make Hebrew a compulsory subject of instruction. Speaking in 1950 to the Central Conference on "The Future of the American Jewish Community, he said this: "No Jewish community ever contributed culturally or scholastically to Jewish life which did not favor the



Hebrew language and literature. No Jewish community ever survived for long which ignored Hebrew. This is an ineluctable fact of our existence -- we have armor against everything except "Am Hara'at." He goes on to point to the great creative Jewish communities of the past and to the fact of their deliberate and extensive cultivation of Hebrew language and literature. As in the case of other classical languages, the rediscovery of Hebrew affected the progress of Jewish life. This was evident both in the Haskalah movement and in the birth of modern Zionism. Hebrew has been second only to the Torah. Hebrew will always be the basic bond between Israel and the communities outside. Here he employs one of his characteristically trenchant phrases. "If American Jewry are not careful they are likely to lie down with integration and rise up with assimilation," and concludes his discussion with the rabbinic dictum, "As soon as a child can speak, his father should teach him the Shma, Torah, and the sacred tongue." It is not to be doubted that Silver's reiterated advocacy must be counted a significant factor in the now widespread study of the language in Reform congregations, a tendency, of course latterly accelerated by the rebirth of Israel and the visits



there of thousands of Young people.

Despite the enormous investment of time and energy, a lifetime singularly devoted to Zionist activity and leadership and the achievement of national independence for the Jewish people, it nevertheless remains the fact that Abba Hillel Silver did not regard Israel as the be-all and end-all of Jewish destiny, a view now becoming quite fashionable among Sammy-come-latelies to the Zionist movement, bandwagon hoppers, many of whom were at one time not only indifferent but bitterly hostile opponents of Zionism. Here again his finely balanced view of history asserted itself. The establishment of Israel was for him not the final act in the drama of universal salvation, but an essential step. Zionism was more, much more than a secular political movement, although it had to use secular tools for its realization. He contended that the foundations of the state were laid long ago in the persevering Messianic hopes, the longing and prayers of one people "which enswathed its life as an element." To put it differently, his was a larger view which saw Zionism as one of the instrumentalities which the Jewish people would utilize in order to carry forward its universal mission. He was critical of



what he calls "Pinsker Canaanites" who think that nationalism is the culmination of Jewish existence and striving, and who therefore negate the Diaspora. He foresaw the disappearance of this attitude. He probably would have regarded the current discussion about whether Israel should be regarded as central and primary in the Jewish world as largely academic. While Israel can be a source of support to the Diaspora, we in the Jewish communities outside of the land will have to supply our own nourishment. "We cannot survive on borrowed rations." He believed firmly in the unity and integrity of the Jewish people, of the solidarity of Israel both in and out of the land, both Israel and the Diaspora being equally essential to the future, both the Mission and the national life which helped to secure the survival of the people of the Mission. More of this later. It is interesting to note that he approvingly quoted Ahad Ha Am's statement: "The salvation of Israel will come to pass through prophets and not through diplomats." Also worth noting is that he warned against the development in Israel of a fanatical clericalism which resists cooperation with other Jewish religious bodies. He admonished Orthodox groups to learn that in a free country religion cannot be enforced by fiat. He



was also convinced that Liberal Judaism will be needed in Israel. Young people in Israel now get their spiritual discipline from the motivations of building and of defending the state. When that period is over they will need spiritual motivation and it can only come from Judaism. Reform Judaism, however, cannot be imported into Israel. A liberal Judaism can and will evolve which will be responsive to its own special environment.

It is the view of this writer, easily substantiated by a survey of his views, that Silver must be placed not only in the mainstream of classic Reform thought, but that along with Isaac M. Wise he was a truly major factor in shaping the thinking of American Reform. This may be surprising to those who were aware of his zealous Zionism and who have thought of him primarily as a Zionist leader and spokesman. It is nevertheless true. Primarily he thought of himself as a Reform rabbi. In his last public appearance before the Central Conference in 1963 shortly before his death, he said this in a Dialogue with his classmate and friend, Dr. Solomon B. Freehof: "Zionism has always been a part of my conception of historic Judaism, and I came to it not as



a secular nationalist, but as a devout Jew, and I never permitted my Zionist activities to push aside or to overshadow my activities and duties as a rabbi." In his introduction to "Reform Judaism" (Essays by Alumni, H.U.C. 1949), previously adverted to, Dr. Bernard J. Bamberger says that Wise made a movement out of American Reform, a distinct movement in which he tried to combine American and Jewish values. In this sense Silver may be said to have followed the Wise tradition. One cannot be familiar with his many sermons and addresses on public themes without realizing that he was deeply immersed both in Jewish historic values and in the American democratic spirit, bolstering his view on the latter out of the immense store of his knowledge of the former. He clearly understood the essence of Reform, once defining its contributions as the substitution of scholarship for scholasticism, of liberty for authority and the reinterpretation in modern terms of the ancient doctrine of the Mission of Israel. It is fascinating to note his apologia for Wise in his Founder's Day address delivered in 1950 at the Hebrew Union College. He points to Wise's insistence upon an informed and



learned rabbinate and laity. While expressing regret that so much of the energies of the early Reformers, believing that the universal age was at hand, was spent in opposing Zionism, he went on to point out that when Isaac M. Wise spoke of universal religion, he did <sup>not</sup> mean a general fusion of faiths, he meant Judaism and the conversion of the world to Jewish ideals. He then spoke approvingly of Wise's vision of the United States as a perfectly Jewish State and under a Jewish government in the strictest sense of Moses. Homelitical hyperbole! Perhaps. One can imagine that he would not have found himself in disagreement with one of the very radical German Reformers, Samuel Holdheim: "Judaism wants to purify the language of the nations, but to leave to each people its own tongue. It wishes for one heart and one soul, but not for one sound and one tone. It does not wish to destroy the particular characteristics of the nations. It does not wish to stultify the direction of spirit and sentiment which their history has brought forth. It does not wish that all should be absorbed and encompassed by the characteristics of the Jewish people. Least of all does it wish to extinguish the characteristics of the Jewish people and to eliminate



those expressions of the living spirit which were created through the union and spirit of the Jewish faith. "(Quoted from Plaut's, The Rise of Reform Judaism.")

More significantly, what puts Silver in the direct line of Reform ideology was his insistence that religion, Judaism - note, not nationalism - is and must be the central factor in Jewish existence. There can, of course, be no effective religion without peoplehood integrated by racial, religious and historical ties and possessing common memories, traditions, loyalties, aspirations and holding one language, Hebrew, sacred, but of all these elements religion remains the most important. In a very significant paper, "Religion in Present Day Jewish Life" read in 1939 at the Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, he pointed to the disasters of the 20th Century including those which overtook Jewish life and goes on to say, "What has been tragically missing in our civilization has been the compelling and coordinating belief in the great human goals which religion and religion alone, has set for mankind." He argued that there are no substitutes in Jewish life for religion, neither philanthropy nor culture nor nationalism. How strange for such an ardent



Zionist! "---The pattern must be Judaism, the Judaism of the Torah, the Synagogue and the prayer book," He goes on to suggest that while Jewish education should be nationalist in sympathy and linguistic, it should be primarily religious and ethical in content and direction. The upbuilding of Palestine (this is of course prior to the event of the Restoration) and the maintenance of Jewish religious life in America and elsewhere are not opposing goals or substitutes for each other.

Silver supported his view of religion as primary in Judaism with his uncompromising theism. He once counselled newly ordained rabbis not to be ashamed to speak about God. He reminded us that 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 - in his words - 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 hauled rider, horse and chariot alike into one bloody and ruinous tangle. Here he employed one of those remarkably terse statements charged with meaning.



"There is never any forward movement in Society without an inward movement in man." Elsewhere he pointed to the fact that when God is dethroned, a false god takes his place and when men reject the sanctification of life, it becomes cheapened and the individual is reduced to a statistic. Prophetic, is this not? Generally rationalist in his approach to questions, he was not above adding a touch of mysticism to his discussions of God and religion. As the result of the modern Jewish tragedy, he foresaw a new surge of mysticism in Jewish thought.

The resurgence of interest in Hasidism and the popularity of the writings of Elie Wiesel would certainly seem to bear this out. He himself spoke of Messianism as the redemption of Israel leading to the redemption of the world, this being one of his earlier contributions to Reform thought in which he interwove his nationalism with his view of the Mission.

As we might expect, he was contemptuous of Jewish secularists. Carrying out his Pharisee-Saducee analogy, to which we have already referred, he denounced Jewish Jewish secularists as "modern Saducees" and referred to himself as a modern Pharisee. "The modern Pharisees will proceed to enrich and beautify and vitalize Jewish



group life. They will hold fast to all the agencies which in the past preserved the integrity of the people - Israel's language, Israel's love and Israel's hope of national rehabilitation, Israel's memory laden customs and habits of life adjusted to modern needs." He is critical not only of the secularists who have abandoned the centrality of religion, but of the so-called Jewish culturalists. "But one wonders what the distinctiveness of Jewish culture is if it is not in the dynamics of prophecy, the passionate outreading for Malchut Shamayim (The Kingdom of God)." If the Jew decides to assimilate, it will be because he is ready to abandon his faith and "no quantum of Jewish music and Jewish art or books on Jewish literature and philosophy will be potent enough to save him". Taking into account his view of the centrality of the Mission concept, which they have officially abandoned although close scrutiny will reveal that this is really so, this may be taken as a clear attack on Reconstructionist movement. It may be assumed that he would have taken the same position toward those Jewish survivalists today who believe that an attachment to the purely ethnic elements in Jewish life is sufficient.



about

It is interesting to speculate/what Silver's attitude would have been toward the recent trend in Reform toward more ceremonialism; what he would have made of Reform rabbis wearing talethim and kipahs, of bearded and hatted students at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion who daven in the mornings and insist upon kosher food for their meals; what his judgment would have been of Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in Reform congregations so numerous that they have become more of a fad than anything else, with parents less concerned with their offspring's mastery of Torah than with the social success of the events. The answer is clear. He would have been very skeptical, although it is unlikely that he would have actively opposed any usage that might meaningfully enrich Jewish family or congregational observance. Although The Temple in Cleveland conducted both early Sabbath Eve and regular Saturday morning services, he continued the Sunday morning service which provided his best means of reaching a large audience. He reminded us that Jews can pray on any day of the week. We know he was opposed to the introduction of Bar Mitzvah on the



dual grounds that it would detract from the Confirmation Service and would provide youngsters with a tempting excuse for terminating their Jewish religious education. He apparently had little faith in the multiplication of ritual practices per se. "Today it is no longer a question of more ceremonies or of fewer ceremonies, or of going backward or going forward in things external, but of going inward." He urged increased study and learning, emphasis upon the disciplines of the devotional and ethical life, in this connection calling attention to the contributions of Hasidism in its mystical concepts - hithlahavut, enthusiasm - hishtapchut ha-nefesh, out-pouring of one's soul - the Tzadik as an inspired spiritual leader. Nor did he care much for the theological novelties, Existentialism, Buberism and such, believing that whatever insights they offered were already inherent in Biblical and historic Jewish concepts - God, Covenant, Prophecy, Mission, Messianism and Israel as an eternal people. These were the material of his convictions and preaching, with especial emphasis upon prophecy, an emphasis which makes ever clearer the depth of his position as a Reform rabbi. In a prefatory note which serves quite properly as an introduction to the second volume of his



published addresses, he offered this superb tribute to Israel's prophetic message: "The good way is not through the courts of a Temple and bringing a multitude of vain offerings to God. It is not to listen to the voice of priest or prophet as if he were bringing a love song with a beautiful voice, playing well on an instrument, listening to what he says but doing nothing about it. The good way leads directly and humbly to where men persistently and prayerfully wash the blood of sin, cruelty and oppression from their hands, search, and make themselves inwardly clean, cease to do evil and learn to do good. The good way leads to where men, in struggle and in joy, build the good Society through unity, freedom and compassion. The good way is the way of the unvaried moral effort and unremitting action. At the heart of the message of Hebrew prophecy and subsequently of Judaism itself, is a summons to men not to rest content with the evils of Society or with their own personal shortcomings, but to set to work to correct them."

Abba Hillel Silver was a giant in his generation, in this age of changing congregational and community relationships, the greatest and perhaps the last of a species. It is quite possible that we shall not see



his like again. A political leader with an uncanny sense of tactics and iron nerve, a peerless orator, an overshadowing and awesome personality, a learned Jew, he was at the same time unquestionably the most brilliant advocate, the ablest spokesman which the American Reform movement has produced in the more than a century of its history in this country.

NOTE: The material upon which this essay is based was drawn from Dr. Silver's various published works; from the Yearbooks of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; Reform Judaism, Essays by HUC Alumni; Plaut's, The History of Reform Judaism; and the Silver Memorial Archives, The Temple, Cleveland, Ohio. The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Miss Miriam Leikind, Librarian, of The Temple, for her invaluable assistance.



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# THE INFLUENCE OF ABBA HILLEL SILVER ON THE EVOLUTION OF REFORM JUDAISM

LEON I. FEUER

*Abba Hillel Silver, 1893-1963, was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in 1915. In 1917 he was elected to the pulpit of The Temple, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Cleveland, Ohio, which he served to the end of his life. He held the posts of President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and of the Zionist Organization of America, Chairman of the American Zionist Emergency Council and of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, American section, in which capacity he successfully argued for the Jewish Commonwealth before the Assembly of the United Nations.*

FROM its very inception in Germany as a movement within Jewish life, Reform Judaism, true to its essential genius, has been changing and developing while endeavoring to remain faithful to the fundamental spirit of the historic faith. American Reform is quite different from its German ancestor, although not as radically so as might be imagined. The handful of rabbis who wrote the Pittsburgh Platform in 1883, and even the much larger group who half a century later adopted the Columbus Platform, would not be hard put to reconcile their view of Jewish doctrine



and practice with those of the majority of contemporary Reform rabbis, for there are indissoluble links between them, one being the subject of this essay. Current Reform seems to be placing greater and greater stress upon the peoplehood of Israel, upon the ethnic aspects of the ties between the various Jewish communities in the world, and upon an increasing quota of ceremony and ritual. We hear demands for the formulation of an official Reform Halacha, in the hope, probably vain, of putting the movement more in line with rabbinic tradition and thus becoming less anathema to the official Orthodoxies. There is even a trend toward accepting the claim to centrality, and therefore to primacy in the Jewish world, of the reborn State of Israel. Abba Hillel Silver would have heartily endorsed some of these changes; indeed, as we shall see, he was a significant force in effecting them. Others he would have vigorously opposed, for, believing as he did that there were certain vitally basic themes running through Jewish thought and experience, he would regard them, as we shall see, as somewhat of a departure from the mainstream.

From a detached, objective historical perspective, no single cause, and certainly no one person, can be credited with bringing about the transformations which have been and are taking place within American Reform. The influx of East European immigrants from the 1880s on produced, in its second- and third-generation wake, an infusion into the primarily German Jewish composition of our Reform congregations, a type of membership and lay leadership nostalgically conditioned toward the introduction of traditional practices in public worship, such as Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and into home family observance of the Sabbath Eve Kiddush and the kindling of Sabbath and Chanukah lights. On the Eastern seaboard, where the impact was more immediate, it was the rule rather than the exception for Reform congregations to employ cantors, and it was not uncommon for the worshippers to wear hats and talethim. In fact, some congregations had never departed from these more traditional usages. In the Midwest, where German influence remained stronger for some time, Reform went to



greater lengths in eliminating vestiges of Orthodox practice, in some instances going to such extremes—one such congregation ironically being Tifereth Israel of Cleveland, which was to be Silver's pulpit—as ending the regular Sabbath cycle of Torah readings. These congregations have been rapidly catching up with the procession of change. The process has, of course, been intensively accelerated by such epoch-shaking events as the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel, which have pushed to the foreground of Jewish consciousness the desire for demonstrating in every possible form, including religious symbolism, the closing of ranks and the cohesiveness of Jewish brotherhood the world over.

While giving due consideration to the influence of these historic causes in producing change in American Reform, one would be less than faithful to a spiritual heritage which gave us an Abraham, a Moses, a David, the prophets, and some of the eminent rabbinic personalities, if one did not make due allowance for the contributions of individual personalities. After all, Reform did and still does bear the indelible stamp of the results of the labors of Isaac Mayer Wise, without whose vision and far-ranging organizational capacities the movement, and its subsidiary institutions, the College, the Union, and the Central Conference, might not as soon or perhaps ever have come into being. It is the thesis of this study that perhaps equal with Wise, and certainly second only to him, American Reform thought and practice owe much of their configuration to another powerful personality, the late Abba Hillel Silver. The influence of Silver, as we shall note, was both diffuse and intensely concentrated. He entered the Hebrew Union College in 1911 and graduated in 1915. He came from a background of rabbinic ancestry. He received a thorough training in biblical and rabbinic lore. Apt quotations from the sources sprang readily to his lips. In a period which was witnessing the revival of Hebrew as a living tongue, he was fluent in its usage. In New York's Lower East Side, he had been an active leader in the strongly Zionist- and Hebrew-oriented Herzl Zion Club, which gave both to the rabbinate and to Zionist leadership a number of noted per-



sonalities. In 1917 he became the rabbi of The Temple, Cleveland, Ohio-Congregation Tifereth Israel, then one of the most prominent and radically Reform congregations in the United States. Under his leadership it became not only one of the largest congregations in the country, but a pioneer in the Jewish and Hebrew education of its children. He is said to have inspired, helped to train and sponsor more candidates for the rabbinate, including his own son and the present writer, than any other alumnus of the Hebrew Union College. The chief source of his influence, however, is to be found in the innumerable addresses and learned papers he was called upon to deliver at the College and before gatherings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. His published works, usually popular in presentation although authoritative in learning, enjoyed wide readership. On the occasion of the celebration by his congregation of his sixtieth birthday and the thirty-fifth anniversary of his incumbency, the writer, representing the Central Conference of American Rabbis, said:

So highlighted with drama has been Dr. Silver's leadership in the rescue and national renaissance of our people, that it is easy to overlook his equally significant leadership of the religious life of American Jewry. During these past thirty-five years profound changes have been taking place in our Reform movement. Demonstrating once again Judaism's amazing capacity for adjustment, Reform has been evolving into a logical and coherent synthesis of the best of our traditional ideas and practices with the American way of life, and thus becoming the pattern of the future for the whole of American Jewry. My use of the figure thirty-five is not fortuitous. It parallels the period of Dr. Silver's rabbinate in this congregation. For he has emerged during this period as the single most potent force in shaping the form and guiding the direction which Judaism is likely to take in this country. Retrospectively analyzed, his books, his papers and addresses before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, at the College and before other groups will be seen to constitute the text and guidebook of that development. At the same time, The Temple, its school and its organizational program have been the laboratory in which his ideas have been tested and found valid. With an



uncanny instinct for what is basically and integrally Jewish, his thinking has represented that balance and fusion of the universal and the particular, the Messianic and the nationalist, the prophetic and priestly strains which constitute historic Judaism correctly understood. An uncompromising fighter for the political independence of Israel, he continued to insist that religion is the primary vocation and function of the Jewish people.

That judgment seems to be as accurate today as when it was first pronounced.

The first and, of course, the most obvious impact which Silver made upon Reform ideology was to wean it away from its anti-Zionist, anti-nationalist stance. This was an effort which began very early in his rabbinical career. This he helped to effect not only by his own activism in the Zionist movement and leadership in the effort to bring about the establishment of the Jewish State, but by his creative and successful synthesis of Reform theology with the nationalist philosophy of Jewish life. It was by all odds, as we shall see, a master stroke. It now seems passing strange, with the preponderant majority of rabbis enthusiastically pro-Israel, sponsoring pilgrimages to Eretz of adults and children; with the Central Conference of American Rabbis holding conventions there; with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations sponsoring the growth of liberal congregations and schools there; with the World Union of Progressive Judaism establishing its headquarters in Jerusalem; with Reform laymen in the vanguard of financial support for the state: to think of the movement as having been adamantly and often bitterly opposed to the Zionist idea. Just a half century or so ago, although not in itself an official document, the Pittsburgh Platform voiced the more or less generally accepted position of Reform Zionism. The phrasing is worth recalling.

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 sacrificial mission under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish State.

Central to Reform doctrine of the time was the idea of the Mission of Israel, that is, the divinely appointed assignment to the Jewish people to work for the realization of a Messianic Age upon earth. In his introductory essay to *Reform Judaism: A Book of Essays by Alumni of the Hebrew Union College*, Dr. Bernard J. Bamberger wrote: "Stress was laid [by the early reformers] on the prophetic doctrine that Israel was God's Messenger, bringing the doctrine of righteousness to mankind, so the Messianic hope of universal brotherhood and the Mission of Israel emerged as Reform's major concepts next to its doctrine about the Oneness of God." Silver accepted the idea of the Mission as central not only to Reform but to historic Jewish thought. It will be fascinating to see how he employs it to reorient Reform's posture toward Zionism.

Although it is clear that from the beginning of his rabbinate he made it a primary aim to effect a shift in Reform Judaism's posture from anti- to pro-Zionism, he felt that the groundwork for such an effort had to be carefully and cautiously laid. He clearly did not believe in sledgehammer methods. There is a fascinating set of correspondence in the Silver Memorial Archives (located in The Temple, Cleveland, Ohio) which documents his strategy. Although the subject was to agitate its discussions again and again, the Central Conference of American Rabbis had adopted a resolution which seemed to express the majority view. The first sentence read: "We totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish State." This was in reaction to the Basle Program adopted by the World Zionist Organization under the leadership of Theodor Herzl. In 1916, one year after he entered the CCAR, Silver participated in a symposium in which he said rather mildly that the rabbis must come to understand "Nationalism, Political or Cultural Zionism, the renaissance of Hebrew or Yiddish literature, the aesthetic revival—valuable in so far as they intensify Jewish communal



life—as so many more dikes against the onrushing tides of assimilation—.” In 1917 Great Britain issued the Balfour Declaration and received the mandate for Palestine, thus setting in motion greatly increased activity in the Jewish world toward the colonization and economic development of the country. In 1920 Silver joined with Max Heller, Martin Meyer, and Stephen Wise in requesting the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in view of the mandate, to discuss the role it could play in the upbuilding of Jewish Palestine. In a letter to Wise, he expressed skepticism about the results to be achieved by it, fearing at that point that Conference action would either be negative or so tame as to defeat the purpose. Nothing tangible apparently came of it. In 1921 he wrote to the then President of the Conference, Dr. Edward N. Calisch, requesting cooperation with the nonpolitical Palestine Development Council. Dr. Calisch replied indicating approval of the Executive Board with the proviso that there be equal representation of Zionists and non-Zionists in the Council. Obviously there was still considerable hesitancy about the possible political implications of CCAR involvement even in nonpolitical activity. Later, replying to a letter from Rabbi James G. Heller suggesting an organization of Reform and Conservative Zionist rabbis to work for common objectives, Silver responded significantly, “I am not in favor of organizing Zionist members in the Conservative and Reform Wings as a unit. I believe it is poor tactics to say the least. Our objectives should be not to divide the American rabbinate into two sharply distinguished and opposite groups but *in winning control* over all existing rabbinical organizations for Zionist purposes.” Written in 1930, this letter expresses confidence that such control can be won. Prophetic in view of the later appearance upon the scene of the troublesome American Council for Judaism, he feared that organizing Zionist rabbis would provoke the organization of anti-Zionist rabbis and mean an embitterment of the Zionist controversy. A few years later, when he was in the President’s chair, Heller assented to the introduction and passage of a resolution favoring the establishment of a Jewish army to participate in World War II. Arguing that this violated the



posture of neutrality on the Zionist issue upon which the Conference had by this time agreed, and that the resolution was therefore out of order, the anti-Zionists did precisely what Silver warned might happen. They tried to split the Conference and Reform Judaism by convoking a meeting in Atlantic City with their lay followers to organize the American Council on Judaism. By 1937 the Pittsburgh Platform was considered both inadequate and outdated, and was replaced by the "Guiding Principles" adopted by the Conference in Columbus, Ohio (popularly known as the Columbus Platform), with Silver, a member of the committee which formulated them, arguing persuasively in their favor. In this document, greater weight is given to ceremonial observance. The major changes, however, were the emphasis upon the tie between Reform and world Jewry, and upon the redevelopment of Palestine. "In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life." By this time both the Conference and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations had revoked their anti-Zionist resolutions and become officially neutral on the subject of Political Zionism. Silver was satisfied with this measure of progress, eminently confident that history would take care of the rest, at least as far as practical steps were concerned, toward winning Reform Judaism over to a favorable, even a supportive, stance toward a political solution of the Jewish problem. In this somewhat uncharacteristic go-slow approach, and by his refusal in the early stages to support measures which might rend apart the institutions of Reform, he demonstrated not only his own statesmanship and keen political sense of what was possible, but his earnest view that while perhaps not as urgently immediate a cause as Zionism, of which he became the undisputed leader in the United States, Reform as an idea and a movement was important and precious to him.

He had a larger goal to which he was committed and to which



he devoted much of his thinking and writing. His aim was to demonstrate doctrinally that Zionism and Reform not only were not incompatible but that they were complementary and essential one to the other. Many of his major papers and addresses delivered before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, at the Hebrew Union College, and elsewhere are devoted to establishing this synthesis. Since no one was in greater demand as a speaker before audiences of laymen, many thousands of whom must have listened to him over and over; and since his presentations were characterized not only by his matchlessly persuasive oratory and analytical power, but by his mastery both of the sources and of Jewish historical knowledge, taken together these facts fully justify the description of him as a major influence in the shaping of contemporary Reform thought. It is fascinating to study the design of the ideological structure which Dr. Silver was rearing.

He begins with a critique of the anti-Zionist orientation of the early reformers while at the same time accepting the basic assumptions which they postulated for the movement. His criticism—and it is never the carping or sneering kind which one finds so frequently not only among the opponents of Reform but within our own ranks—takes several forms. He points out that the founders of the movement, products of the buoyant and often uncritical liberalism of the nineteenth century, regarded progress as a steady, uninterrupted advance, instead of a cyclical movement which each time results only in a slight gain for mankind. It is a recurring note in Silver's thinking that while the Messianic hope remains constant, one must be realistic in the expectation, the timetable of its coming. He also makes an interesting distinction between "reform" and "modernize." The reformers were too eager to modernize, whereas true Reform, he maintains, breaks with the present as well as with the past, attempting to restore religion to its timeless spiritual essence. Prophetic and later Pharisaic Judaism, he points out, never wanted Israel to be like but unlike the other nations. They opposed conformity to the pagan and heathen world of their



time. He was, of course, severely critical of the reformers' attempt to separate Judaism from the sense of peoplehood and nationalism which had always been indispensable elements in Jewish survival. Judaism tried to maintain a sensible balance between nationalism and internationalism. In "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival" he argues that the anti-national pronouncements of the American reformers were an import from German Reform, made not out of any great prophetic universal impulse but to protect Jewish rights of citizenship by making the proper impression on the civil authorities. They seemed to believe that the solution for anti-Semitism was to eradicate all manifestations of separatism. For some Jews this meant total assimilation, for others the purging of all nationalist elements from Jewish thought. The result, as in the case of the Mendelssohn family, was conversion to Christianity. Neither in Germany nor in France did assimilationist tendencies avert anti-Semitism. The same tendencies operated in Russia, but there the Jews, with Leo Pinsker and his *Autoemancipation* as forerunner, set about solving their problems through self-help and more especially through national concentration and cultural survival. The appeasing patriotism of the anti-nationalists was useless because it completely ignored the lessons, the bitterly learned lessons, of our history. Jewish political emancipation, where it grudgingly occurred in Western Europe, and anti-Semitism were parallel movements, just as the Inquisition and Ghetto paralleled the Renaissance and Reformation. Whenever gains seemed to be made toward granting Jews civil rights, the forces of bigotry returned to the attack again and again. The basic problem of homelessness, which made the Jew vulnerable, remained unsolved. To drive home this point, Silver uses a striking figure of speech: "Our virtuosity is wasted on a stringless fiddle."

Silver did not hesitate to attack the position of the early reformers at their strongest point, the keystone of Reform thought, the Mission idea, not as others have done by denying its validity, but by affirming it, making it the heart of his own system, and insisting that it was entirely compatible with



nationalism. His most important statement on this subject is to be found in that remarkable symposium on "Israel" before the 1935 meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It was this address which may be said to have made the greatest intellectual impact in effecting the shift of Reform Judaism from an anti- to a pro-Zionist position. In it he reminds us that the idea of a universal mission for Israel is exilic. It does not appear in pre-exilic Scripture. It was meant to give the dispersed nation a sense of dignity and worth. It was not meant as a substitute for national existence, but as an addition, a bulwark. The prophets who preached mission, like Second Isaiah, also proclaimed restoration. He quotes from Isaiah 43 (5-6): "I will bring thy seed from the east and will gather thee from the west. I will say to the North: 'Give up' and to the South, 'Keep not back; bring thy sons from afar and My daughters from the ends of the earth.'" Centuries later the same note is struck by Judah Ha-Levi, who closes his *Cuzari* by comparing Israel to the heart among the nations, which must return to its own land and revive its language if the gift of prophecy is to live. Judaism always tried to maintain this balance between nationalism and internationalism, between preserving its identity and devoting itself to universal goals. It had room for all sects and points of view except Christianity, which under the leadership of Paul became anti-national. Paul saw all nations, including Israel, vanishing into universal anonymity. The early American Reform rabbis saved this fate only for Israel. Thus Silver saw Reform opposition to nationalism as more Paulinian Christian than Jewish. But even the reformers had to resort to the term "people" because they could not find a more suitable or accurate definition. Indeed, Kaufmann Kohler, who convoked the meeting which produced the Pittsburgh Platform, used a racial definition of Judaism. Jews, he declared, are born into the status of being Jewish. Silver concludes his trenchant analysis of the meaning of Israel by suggesting that although Judaism is the crowning achievement of the Jewish people, the people is transcendent to it as is the artist to his creation.

Thus Silver saw no conflict between his Zionism and Reform



Judaism's insistence on the Covenant-Mission with its Messianic expectations as being the very heart of Jewish thought. Throughout his active career he constantly strove—and one may say successfully—for a synthesis between them. He contended that the establishment of the Jewish State would more effectively serve the aims of the Mission, because it would help safeguard the integrity of a people contending everywhere in the Diaspora with the forces of assimilation. There could be no Mission without a strong, secure people to exemplify, to practice, and to teach it. "Liberal Judaism has slowly disentangled itself from the meshes of an anti-nationalist dogma in which it was caught in the early years of its development and which was never an essential part of its teaching." Perhaps his best formulation of the synthesis of the Mission ideal with the Peoplehood of Israel and the national aspirations of the Jewish people occurs in that remarkable essay, "The Democratic Impulse in Jewish History," based on his conference lecture before the 1928 convention of the rabbis. The date is significant. It comes relatively early in his rabbinical career, and demonstrates that he was in the process of formulating a clear, consistent philosophy of Jewish life which would combine his Zionist convictions with his interpretation of Liberal Judaism. In it he stresses the universalism of the Pharisees—he tends to see all of Jewish history as a kind of tension and struggle between Pharisaic and Sadducean attitudes—who were devotees of the Covenant-Mission and at the same time fervent nationalists. They sought to preserve both the Covenant and the people of the Covenant, both the soul of the race and its body. "Liberal Judaism placed itself in direct line of descent from this prophetic-Pharisaic tradition where it accepted as focal in its ideology the Mission of Israel." He goes on to assert that Reform, in correctly holding fast to the Covenant and to the Mission ideal, erred in assuming that it was no longer necessary to stress the national ideal and to maintain strong group discipline. Anticipating the line of argument he was later to pursue in the symposium on "Israel," he suggests that Reform, like early Christianity, imagined the Messianic Age was at hand.



He describes this as the religious romanticism of the early reformers and their prime error. They were correct about the Mission, but they failed to evolve a program by which the people would be constantly reminded that they are a "peculiar, covenanted and consecrated people" and through which they would be saved from assimilation. Although politically a Herzlian Zionist, he interprets the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha-Am as a form of the Mission concept. The Exile may have temporarily discredited the Mission because Israel appeared in the world's eyes as the defeated people of a defeated God. Therefore it is only the national restoration which will provide the dignity and spiritual renewal which can provide a needed impetus to the Mission, and then he quotes Ezekiel: "It is not for your sake that I am about to act, O household of Israel, but for My holy name. When I restore My holiness in their sight through My dealings with you, the nations shall know that I am the Lord."

With the Zionist objective attained through the establishment of Israel, Dr. Silver turned his attention to the problems of the future, especially those relating to the relationship between the new Jewish State and the Diaspora; the prospects of Jewish communities living outside Israel, and especially of American Jewry. He approached his discussion of these matters with his usual realism, logic, and common sense. Perhaps the best place to begin is with the address he delivered in 1948 before the Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, shortly after the founding of the state. In it he declares his hope that the establishment of Israel will put an end to the concepts of Galut and of the Wandering Jew. The Jew will fight for his rights with more confidence and resolution. How accurate that prediction turned out is well attested by the recent events in the Soviet Union, where many Jews are indeed demonstrating a remarkable kind of Jewish pride and courage. He believed that the Jewish population of Israel would reach three to four million, making it the largest center of Jewish life outside the United States. That now seems readily attainable. "Life in Israel will be characterized, I believe, by that same energy, initiative and



inventiveness which have characterized American life." The Diaspora will continue, just as there was a Diaspora prior to 70 C.E., and will, as then, have the majority of Jews. There was no question of dual allegiance then, and there is none now. Jerusalem was their religious center. They made pilgrimages there and contributed to the support of the Temple. In our time Israel will be the nonpolitical center of the nation, and Jews will support and aid in its development. A by-product of the establishment of Israel will be the end of the Zionist, anti-Zionist debate. He goes on to discuss the effects of the establishment of the state on the Diaspora and the prediction of rapid assimilation. He denied that this will be or need be the outcome, pointing to the ancient Diaspora, where there were assimilationist tendencies, but yet the great majority remained loyal. They carried on widespread proselytizing activity. The Jews of Babylon produced the Babylonian Talmud. Silver was never one, however, to engage in overoptimistic or wishful thinking. He warned that we cannot be certain of Diaspora survival any more than we can be certain of democracy. Everything depends upon the means we employ to strengthen it. American Jewry, he hoped, would ultimately be able to divert its resources to its own strengthening. Indeed, we now find increasing demands upon Jewish Federations to devote larger proportions of their funds for Jewish education. In this connection, his comment is significant. "We are constrained to acknowledge that the thin wafer, the melba toast type of Jewish education which our children receive in our Sunday Schools, is not the kind of a spiritual and cultural diet which can nourish and sustain a vigorous Jewish life, and one which does not promise well for the future."

Silver did not claim for himself any expertise in the field of Jewish education and only rarely wrote on or addressed himself to the subject. Nevertheless, he was deeply interested in its progress and scrupulously followed the developments in his own school at The Temple in Cleveland, frequently visiting its classrooms and making suggestions and critical comments to its supervisors and teachers. He had, however, a definite



philosophy of and ideas about Jewish education. He was skeptical about newfangled methods and too frequent experimentation, believing that the basic goals would be lost sight of. He was contemptuous of theories which would make the Jewish classroom a place of entertainment, designed to help children to grow up into "happy Jews." For him, Judaism was a serious business, and he wanted children to be inculcated with the seriousness of it. He advocated the tried and tested techniques of Jewish religious life—learning, study, contemplation, prayer, and observance. Few or many does not matter—old or new—what matters is *Kavanah*—Intent. He contended that Torah is the basis of all Jewish education. Jews were not great philosophers. For them *Chochmah* (wisdom) is derived from Torah. "Jewish Education," he said in an address before the Jewish Education Committee, "was an experience in and preparation for modern living in the sight of God. Its basis is the Bible and its rabbinic derivatives and its locale is the Synagog." While it was impossible to trace a direct opinion on the subject, one may infer from that last phrase and from his well-known strong views on the separation of Church and State that he would not have been favorably disposed to, although he might not have opposed, the present trend toward the growth of Jewish parochial schools. He often indicated that it was not the amount of time spent in Jewish education which mattered as much as the manner in which the time was utilized.

In one area of Jewish education, however, he had, and frequently expressed, emphatically positive views, the study of the Hebrew language. Himself intimate with the Hebrew sources and eloquent in spoken Hebrew, he insisted that the language was the vital core of the curriculum of every Jewish school. The Temple was among the earliest of the large Reform congregations, if not the very first, to make Hebrew a compulsory subject of instruction. Speaking in 1950 to the Central Conference on "The Future of the American Jewish Community," he said this: "No Jewish community ever contributed culturally or scholastically to Jewish life which did not favor the Hebrew language and literature. No Jewish community ever



survived for long which ignored Hebrew. This is an ineluctable fact of our existence—we have armor against everything except 'Am Harazut.' " He goes on to point to the great creative Jewish communities of the past and to the fact of their deliberate and extensive cultivation of the Hebrew language and literature. As in the case of other classical languages, the rediscovery of Hebrew affected the progress of Jewish life. This was evident both in the Haskalah movement and in the birth of modern Zionism. Hebrew has been second only to the Torah. Hebrew will always be the basic bond between Israel and the communities outside. Here he employs one of his characteristically trenchant phrases. "If American Jewry are not careful they are likely to lie down with integration and rise up with assimilation," and concludes his discussion with the rabbinic dictum, "As soon as a child can speak, his father should teach him the Shema, Torah, and the sacred tongue." It is not to be doubted that Silver's reiterated advocacy must be counted a significant factor in the now widespread study of the language in Reform congregations, a tendency, of course, latterly accelerated by the rebirth of Israel and the visits there of thousands of young people.

Despite the enormous investment of time and energy, a lifetime singularly devoted to Zionist activity and leadership, and the achievement of national independence for the Jewish people, it nevertheless remains the fact that Abba Hillel Silver did not regard Israel as the be-all and end-all of Jewish destiny, a view now becoming quite fashionable among Sammy-come-latelies to the Zionist movement, bandwagon hoppers, many of whom were at one time not only indifferent but bitterly hostile opponents of Zionism. Here again his finely balanced view of history asserted itself. The establishment of Israel was for him not the final act in the drama of universal salvation, but an essential step. Zionism was more, much more, than a secular political movement, although it had to use secular tools for its realization. He contended that the foundations of the state were laid long ago in the persevering Messianic hopes, the longing and prayers of one people "which enswathed its life as an



element." To put it differently, his was a larger view which saw Zionism as one of the instrumentalities which the Jewish people would utilize in order to carry forward its universal mission. He was critical of what he called "Pinsker Canaanites," who think that nationalism is the culmination of Jewish existence and striving, and who therefore negate the Diaspora. He foresaw the disappearance of this attitude. He probably would have regarded the current discussion about whether Israel should be regarded as central and primary in the Jewish world as largely academic. While Israel can be a source of support to the Diaspora, we in the Jewish communities outside the land will have to supply our own nourishment. "We cannot survive on borrowed rations." He believed firmly in the unity and integrity of the Jewish people, the solidarity of Israel both in and out of the land, both Israel and the Diaspora being equally essential to the future, both the Mission and the national life which helped to secure the survival of the people of the Mission. More of this later. It is interesting to note that he approvingly quoted Ahad Ha-Am's statement: "The salvation of Israel will come to pass through prophets and not through diplomats." Also worth noting is that he warned against the development in Israel of a fanatical clericalism which resists cooperation with other Jewish religious bodies. He admonished Orthodox groups to learn that in a free country religion cannot be enforced by fiat. He was also convinced that liberal Judaism will be needed in Israel. Young people in Israel now get their spiritual discipline from the motivations of building and defending the state. When that period is over they will need spiritual motivation, and it can only come from Judaism. Reform Judaism, however, cannot be imported into Israel. A liberal Judaism can and will evolve there which will be responsive to its own special environment.

It is the view of this writer, easily substantiated by a survey of Silver's ideas, not only that Silver must be placed in the mainstream of classic Reform thought, but that, along with Isaac M. Wise, he was a truly major factor in shaping the thinking of American Reform. This may be surprising to those who were aware of his zealous Zionism and who have thought of him



primarily as a Zionist leader and spokesman. It is nevertheless true. Primarily he thought of himself as a Reform rabbi. In his last public appearance before the Central Conference in 1963 shortly before his death, he said this in a dialogue with his classmate and friend, Dr. Solomon B. Freehof: "Zionism has always been a part of my conception of historic Judaism, and I came to it not as a secular nationalist, but as a devout Jew, and I never permitted my Zionist activities to push aside or to overshadow my activities and duties as a rabbi." In his introduction to *Reform Judaism*, previously adverted to, Dr. Bernard J. Bamberger says that Wise made a movement out of American Reform, a distinct movement in which he tried to combine American and Jewish values. In this sense Silver may be said to have followed the Wise tradition. One cannot be familiar with his many sermons and addresses on public themes without realizing that he was deeply immersed both in Jewish historic values and in the American democratic spirit, bolstering his view on the latter out of the immense store of his knowledge of the former. He clearly understood the essence of Reform, once defining its contributions as the substitution of scholarship for scholasticism, of liberty for authority, and the reinterpretation in modern terms of the ancient doctrine of the Mission of Israel. It is fascinating to note his apologia for Wise in his Founder's Day address delivered in 1950 at the Hebrew Union College. He points to Wise's insistence upon an informed and learned rabbinate and laity. While expressing regret that so much of the energies of the early reformers, believing that the universal age was at hand, was spent in opposing Zionism, he went on to point out that when Isaac M. Wise spoke of universal religion, he did not mean a general fusion of faiths, he meant Judaism and the conversion of the world to Jewish ideals. He then spoke approvingly of Wise's vision of the United States as a perfectly Jewish state and under a Jewish government in the strictest sense of Moses. Homiletical hyperbole! Perhaps. One can imagine that he would not have found himself in disagreement with one of the very radical German reformers, Samuel Holdheim:



Judaism wants to purify the language of the nations, but to leave to each people its own tongue. It wishes for one heart and one soul, but not for one sound and one tone. It does not wish to destroy the particular characteristics of the nations. It does not wish to stultify the direction of spirit and sentiment which their history has brought forth. It does not wish that all should be absorbed and encompassed by the characteristics of the Jewish people. Least of all does it wish to extinguish the characteristics of the Jewish people and to eliminate those expressions of the living spirit which were created through the union and spirit of the Jewish faith. (Quoted from Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism*.)

More significantly, what puts Silver in the direct line of Reform ideology was his insistence that religion, Judaism—note, not nationalism—is and must be the central factor in Jewish existence. There can, of course, be no effective religion without peoplehood integrated by racial, religious, and historical ties and possessing common memories, traditions, loyalties, aspirations, and holding one language, Hebrew, sacred, but of all these elements religion remains the most important. In a very significant paper, "Religion in Present Day Jewish Life," read in 1939 at the Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, he pointed to the disasters of the twentieth century, including those which overtook Jewish life, and goes on to say, "What has been tragically missing in our civilization has been the compelling and coordinating belief in the great human goals which religion and religion alone, has set for mankind." He argued that there are no substitutes in Jewish life for religion, neither philanthropy nor culture nor nationalism. (How strange for such an ardent Zionist!) ". . . The pattern must be Judaism, the Judaism of the Torah, the Synagogue and the prayer book." He goes on to suggest that while Jewish education should be nationalist in sympathy and linguistic, it should be primarily religious and ethical in content and direction. The upbuilding of Palestine (this is, of course, prior to the event of the Restoration) and the maintenance of Jewish religious life in America and elsewhere are not opposing goals or substitutes for each other.

Silver supported his view of religion as primary in Judaism



with his uncompromising theism. He once counseled newly ordained rabbis not to be ashamed to speak about God. He reminded us that many believed 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—in his words—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 hauled rider, horse, and chariot alike into one bloody and ruinous tangle. Here he employed one of those remarkably terse statements charged with meaning. "There is never any forward movement in Society without an inward movement in man." Elsewhere he pointed to the fact that when God is dethroned, a false god takes his place, and when men reject the sanctification of life, it becomes cheapened and the individual is reduced to a statistic. Prophetic, is this not? Generally rationalist in his approach to questions, he was not above adding a touch of mysticism to his discussions of God and religion. As the result of the modern Jewish tragedy, he foresaw a new surge of mysticism in Jewish thought. The resurgence of interest in Hasidism and the popularity of the writings of Elie Wiesel would certainly seem to bear this out. He himself spoke of Messianism as the redemption of Israel, leading to the redemption of the world, this being one of his earlier contributions to Reform thought, in which he interwove his nationalism with his view of the Mission.

As we might expect, he was contemptuous of Jewish secularists. Carrying out his Pharisee-Sadducee analogy, to which we have already referred, he denounced Jewish secularists as "modern Sadducees" and referred to himself as a modern Pharisee. "The modern Pharisees will proceed to enrich and beautify and vitalize Jewish group life. They will hold fast to all the agencies which in the past preserved the integrity of the people—Israel's language, Israel's love and Israel's hope of national rehabilitation, Israel's memory laden customs and habits of life adjusted to modern needs." He is critical not only of



the secularists, who have abandoned the centrality of religion, but of the so-called Jewish culturalists. "But one wonders what the distinctiveness of Jewish culture is if it is not in the dynamics of prophecy, the passionate outreaching for *Malchut Shamayim* (The Kingdom of God)." If the Jew decides to assimilate, it will be because he is ready to abandon his faith, and "no quantum of Jewish music and Jewish art or books on Jewish literature and philosophy will be potent enough to save him." Taking into account his view of the centrality of the Mission concept, which they have officially abandoned, although close scrutiny will reveal that this is really not so, this may be taken as a clear attack on the Reconstructionist movement. It may be assumed that he would have taken the same position toward those Jewish survivalists today who believe that an attachment to the purely ethnic elements in Jewish life is sufficient.

It is interesting to speculate about what Silver's attitude would have been toward the recent trend in Reform toward more ceremonialism; what he would have made of Reform rabbis wearing *talithim* and *kipahs*, of bearded and hatted students at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion who daven in the mornings and insist upon kosher food for their meals; what his judgment would have been of Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in Reform congregations so numerous that they have become more of a fad than anything else, with parents less concerned with their offspring's mastery of Torah than with the social success of the events. The answer is clear. He would have been very skeptical, although it is unlikely that he would have actively opposed any usage that might meaningfully enrich Jewish family or congregational observance. Although The Temple in Cleveland conducted both early Sabbath Eve and regular Saturday morning services, he continued the Sunday morning service, which provided his best means of reaching a large audience. He reminded us that Jews can pray on any day of the week. We know he was opposed to the introduction of Bar Mitzvah on the dual grounds that it would detract from the Confirmation Service and would provide youngsters with a tempting excuse for terminating their



Jewish religious education. He apparently had little faith in the multiplication of ritual practices per se. "Today it is no longer a question of more ceremonies or of fewer ceremonies, or of going backward or going forward in things external, but of going inward." He urged increased study and learning, emphasis upon the disciplines of the devotional and ethical life, in this connection calling attention to the contributions of Hasidism in its mystical concepts—*hithlahavut*, enthusiasm—*hishtapchut ha-nefesh*, outpouring of one's soul—the Tzadik as an inspired spiritual leader. Nor did he care much for the theological novelties, Existentialism, Buberism, and such, believing that whatever insights they offered were already inherent in biblical and historic Jewish concepts—God, Covenant, Prophecy, Mission, Messianism, and Israel as an eternal people. These were the material of his convictions and preaching, with especial emphasis upon prophecy, an emphasis which makes ever clearer the depth of his position as a Reform rabbi. In a prefatory note which serves quite properly as an introduction to the second volume of his published addresses, he offered this superb tribute to Israel's prophetic message:

The good way is not through the courts of a Temple and bringing a multitude of vain offerings to God. It is not to listen to the voice of priest or prophet as if he were bringing a love song with a beautiful voice, playing well on an instrument, listening to what he says but doing nothing about it. The good way leads directly and humbly to where men persistently and prayerfully wash the blood of sin, cruelty and oppression from their hands, search, and make themselves inwardly clean, cease to do evil and learn to do good. The good way leads to where men, in struggle and in joy, build the good Society through unity, freedom and compassion. The good way is the way of the unvaried moral effort and unremitting action. At the heart of the message of Hebrew prophecy and subsequently of Judaism itself, is a summons to men not to rest content with the evils of Society or with their own personal shortcomings, but to set to work to correct them.

Abba Hillel Silver was a giant in his generation, and in this age



of changing congregational and community relationships, the greatest and perhaps the last of a species. It is quite possible that we shall not see his like again. A political leader with an uncanny sense of tactics and iron nerve, a peerless orator, an overshadowing and awesome personality, a learned Jew, he was at the same time unquestionably the most brilliant advocate, the ablest spokesman, which the American Reform movement has produced in the more than a century of its history in this country.

### NOTE

The material upon which this essay is based was drawn from Dr. Silver's various published works; from the *Yearbooks* of the Central Conference of American Rabbis; *Reform Judaism: Essays by HUC Alumni*; Plaut's *The History of Reform Judaism*; and the Silver Memorial Archives, The Temple, Cleveland, Ohio. The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Miss Miriam Leikind, Librarian of The Temple, for her invaluable assistance.