

The Wide World of Central Synagogue

Jeffrey S. Gurock











Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.



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Central Synagogue
New York, New York



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DEDICATION

This monograph is dedicated to two loving and generous supporters of Central Synagogue's Archives: Ronald E. Goldberger, husband of Amy, and David T. Mininberg, husband of Anne, who both sadly passed away during the research phase of this work.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rare among American congregations, Central Synagogue is deeply committed to its history and has made yeoman efforts to preserve its invaluable archives. This mission has been fostered by Rabbi Larry and Robin Rubinstein and encouraged by Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein. I feel blessed to have been asked to use the records that have been lovingly maintained by Anne Mininberg, Amy Goldberger, Phyllis Loeb, and Cathy Gollub. They share the joy of a completed project that brings to light Central Synagogue's history of service to its community, city and wide Jewish world. I also am grateful to Terry Jennings and to my colleagues, Anne and Amy, for their tireless efforts in editing and producing this monograph. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, of course, solely my own.

As with all of my endeavors, I am thankful for the love and support of Pamela, my children and six grandchildren.

Jeffrey S. Gurock





FOREWORD

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. Since the 1830s, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall function of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of the previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better we are able to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide for research in Central Synagogue's Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. The first award-winning monograph as a result of that fund was by Andrew Dolkart of Columbia University. It was entitled *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood* and won a Regional Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2002. The second monograph, entitled *Congregating and Consecrating at Central Synagogue: The Building of a Religious Fellowship and Public Ceremonies* by Elizabeth Blackmar and Arthur A. Goren, also of Columbia University, was awarded an Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2004. The third monograph, entitled *The Americanization of the Jewish Prayer Book and the Liturgical Development of Congregation Ahawath Chesed New York City*, was by Gary Phillip Zola of the American Jewish Archives. In 2008, it received an Award Towards Excellence from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network. In 2011, Central Synagogue published its fourth monograph, *Sounding Jewish Tradition: The Music of Central Synagogue*, by Judah M. Cohen, the Lou and Sybil Mervis Professor of Jewish Culture and Associate Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University. It received an Award of Excellence from Greater Hudson Heritage Network. This publication is the fifth in this series.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein





Prologue: A Dual Heritage and Commitment

From its inception in the nineteenth century, Reform Judaism has undertaken a dual mission. It seeks to engage and strengthen the religious group identity of Jews whose allegiances are challenged in the modern world, and it commits itself to addressing the great concerns of its people and humankind that transcend the precincts of synagogues. Indeed, the two components of liberal Judaism's interests have always been intertwined. In its vision, to be a good Jew has meant to subscribe both to the devotional aspects of the faith—particularly through participation in services and rituals—and to show sensitivity to the crises that have faced the world and the Jewish people. These issues may be local, succoring the Jewish and non-Jewish poor in their cities and towns; national, addressing social and political issues of their times; or worldwide, responding to the threats to Jews everywhere as citizens of an international community.

For close to two hundred years, Central Synagogue has exemplified that dual heritage and commitment with distinction. As Robin and Larry Rubinstein have noted, “From the 1830s on, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall functioning of the community.”¹ That double-faceted mission evolved over time as the synagogue's congregants and rabbis came to understand that their responsibilities as Jews often required them to take Central Synagogue's message out of the pulpit and pews into the streets within and beyond its New York base to Israel and to Jewish and non-Jewish communities in countries such as Argentina, Belarus, Cuba, and Rwanda.

This is the story of that journey, which began on the Lower East Side with two congregations, Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim. Composed of Jews from Central Europe, each looked primarily inward as they struggled to create a community of shared religious values while providing mutual aid as members coped with their new American



Rabbi Alexander Kohut



environment. Yet, even at their inception, both evidenced signs that they were concerned with the needs of the larger New York community that extended well beyond their walls.

A decade after Ahawath Chesed in 1872 relocated to its present home on Lexington Avenue and East 55th Street, its rabbi, Dr. Alexander Kohut, became a national religious figure as he engaged in the debates, discussions and institution-building that was part of the splintering of American Judaism into denominations in the mid-1880s. Among the congregation, however, his most important contribution was his reformation and Anglicization of the Temple's educational and liturgical systems. His goal was to motivate and excite the next generation of worshipers, invigorating these acculturating young people's allegiance to the faith. In 1898, Shaar Hashomayim also benefitted from Kohut's creativity when it amalgamated with Ahawath Chesed. During this same era (1880-1917), in following Reform Judaism's dual heritage, the ethos of service became a hallmark of congregational life and meaning. Its women's organization, which Rebekah Kohut initiated and supervised for two decades, extended hands-on charity among the immigrant Jewish poor who lived miles away from Central Synagogue's comfortable home on 55th Street and Lexington Avenue.

In the years immediately following World War I, the congregation redoubled its long-standing crucial efforts towards attracting the next generation of youngsters—both members of their own families and young people in the neighborhood—to greater engagement with synagogue life. The building of its first Community Center in 1926, which offered a plethora of ancillary activities and which was frequently staffed by the women of the synagogue, was the most creative initiative to recapture the estranged to regular synagogue attendance.

During the long and distinguished career of Rabbi Jonah Wise, who served from within and without the pulpit from 1926 to 1959, Central Synagogue became fully engaged in the cataclysmic and climatic



Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise



international challenges that confronted the Jewish people. As a key figure in the leadership of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Rabbi Wise was at the center of relief efforts for the Jews of Germany suffering under Hitler. He became a founder of the United Jewish Appeal, which raised invaluable funds both for Palestinian Jewish needs and those of Diaspora communities. During this period of the ascendancy of Zionism and the call for a Jewish commonwealth amid the destruction of European Jewry, Rabbi Wise moved away from his long-standing opposition to the now necessary goals of Jewish nationalism even as he maintained his reservations about that Movement's ideological base. His deeply nuanced approach separated him from many Classical Reform colleagues, but it brought him and the synagogue closer to the direction in which the Reform Movement was moving. Through the maelstroms of change within the Jewish world, the rabbi was also a significant advocate for, and expositor of, Judaism within American society. For a quarter century, his weekly radio show "The Message of Israel," which was in fact a national pulpit and which was continued by his son, explained to his largely Christian audience the Jewish views of history and theology, while preaching positively about the role religion might play in meeting the social and intellectual challenges of modern life that his listeners, of all faiths, faced.

Meanwhile, Central Synagogue's laity did much to uphold the Jewish home front. Despite the exigencies of the Great Depression, its men and women continued their tradition of benevolence towards the Jewish poor. In this case, their concerns were German Jewish refugees. The synagogue was also mindful of the spiritual needs of these newcomers and was instrumental in the founding of Congregation Habonim, a liberal German Jewish immigrant congregation that initially held its services in Central Synagogue's Community House.

Even when they were not supportive of Zionist political aims, the rabbis and laity of Central Synagogue continued to be deeply concerned



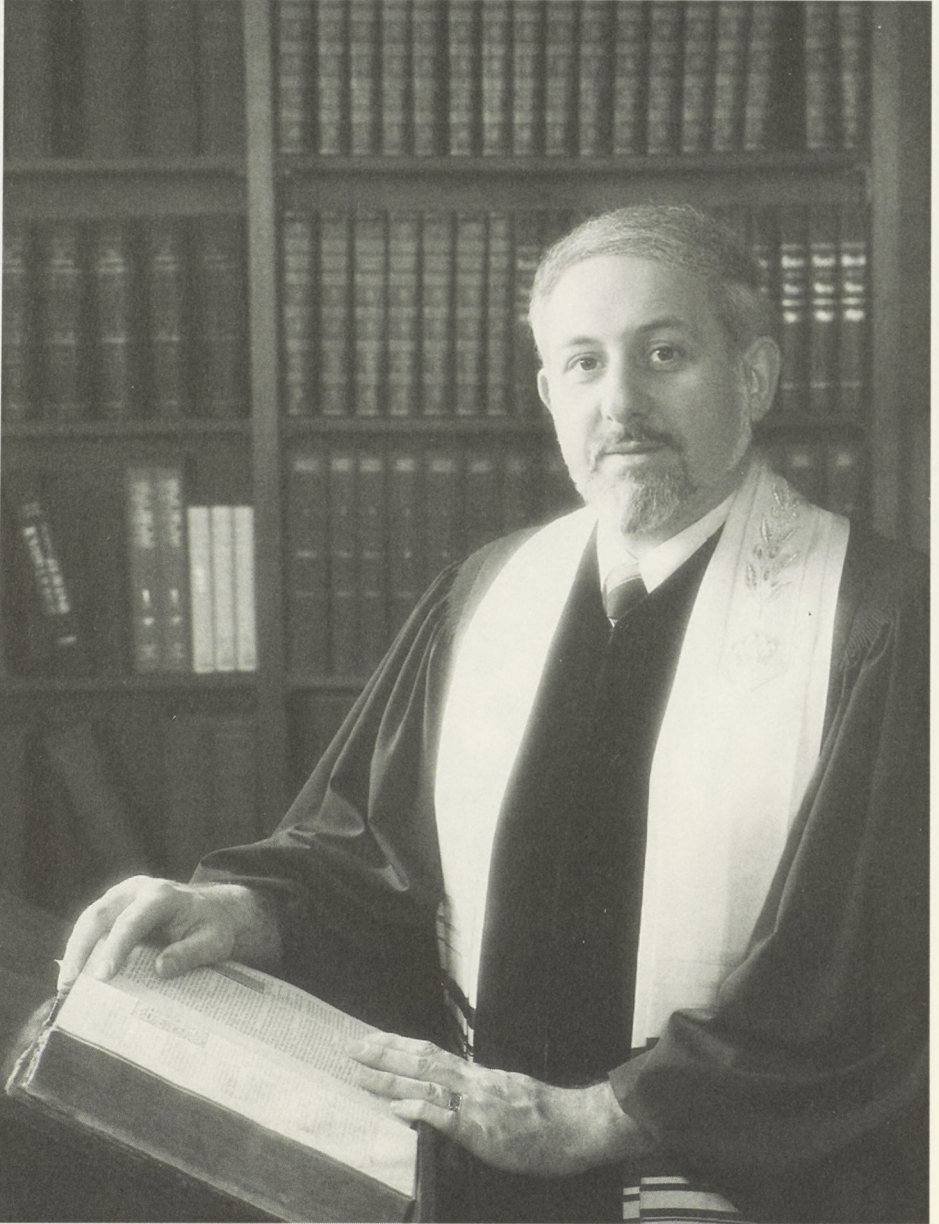
Rabbi David J. Seligson



with the survival of their co-religionists in Zion. Rabbi Wise and his successor Rabbi David J. Seligson (senior rabbi from 1950-1972) rejoiced with the congregation over the rise of the State of Israel. Both stood vocally on guard to defend its reputation within and without the Jewish community. However, it was not until the period that immediately followed the miraculous and victorious Six Day War that Israeli culture moved towards becoming an integral part of the synagogue's religious life. From that point on, programs were ever-increasingly infused with a new spirit and influence from childhood learning experiences to adult education to ceremonials on 55th Street and to missions to Israel. Concomitantly, particularly with Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman (1972-1986) at the helm as a budding national Reform leader, Central Synagogue took part in their Movement's staking a claim to have a say in the religious authority in the Jewish State that was, and continues to be, under Orthodox Jewish suzerainty.

Meanwhile, as early as 1959, responding to Rabbi Seligson's appeal—and in keeping with Central Synagogue's commitment to aiding overseas Jewry—the congregation was among the first to speak out on behalf of Soviet Jewry. These efforts were redoubled under Rabbi Zimmerman's and Rabbi Peter Rubinstein's watch (1991-2014) as the fate of those under Communist domination became a city-wide and national Jewish concern. Also in line with their time-tested tradition, Central Synagogue committed itself to helping those fortunate enough to escape the Soviet cage and make new lives in America.

In the 1970s-1980s, while the congregation's rabbis and laity kept close watch on the crises world Jewry faced, they likewise trained their eyes on the problems that Jews and all New Yorkers endured in a period of financial instability and civic unrest. At home on 55th Street, concerns that the lures of suburbia might undermine their own membership base were addressed through new institutional building and creative programming. Central Synagogue thus made the statement that it was inexorably tied to the city



Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman



that had been its home for more than a century and a quarter. Continuity was also aided by the allegiance of those who had moved away from the neighborhood but maintained their families' ties and traveled back for events and services. Meanwhile, in extending itself beyond the portals of its distinguished sanctuary and its multi-functional Community House across the street, to succor the displaced, troubled or forgotten of their people and metropolis, the congregation reified once again the ethos of service as a hallmark of congregational life.

Seven years into the tenure of Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein at Central Synagogue, the rabbi and his congregation were challenged mightily when a calamitous fire well-nigh destroyed their landmark building in 1998. Even as the rebuilding process, which was joyously completed three years later, called upon all the spiritual and financial resources that its men and women could muster, Central Synagogue sustained its commitments to serve its community and the wider Jewish community. At the same time, the leadership rethought and addressed creatively the enduring issues and dilemmas of Jewish religious affiliation within the city that for more than a century and a half had been their home.

This history of Central Synagogue's wide world of interests and concerns will not only intrigue the members of its congregation but will be of value and interest to scholars interested in how an American religious group has identified, refined and acted upon its mission.



Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein



Early Years: Two Immigrant Congregations

During the early decades of their existence, the two congregations that would eventually come together to form Central Synagogue focused primarily on the spiritual needs of its members. Initially, they attempted to create for newcomers to America a warm and welcoming sense of community rooted in the traditional European religious rituals that they had brought with them to the shores of New York. Both also desired to inculcate Jewish values within their youngsters growing up in a downtown district then known as *Kleindeutschland*. In behavior and attitude, Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, founded in 1839, and its sister congregation, Ahawath Chesed, organized in 1846, were essentially Orthodox. However, as these communities—especially the youngsters—Americanized, pristine past worship practices would lose their full currency. The road towards Reform Judaism began in their midst even while the congregations were still ensconced on the Lower East Side. Though they were “inward-looking associations...centered on worship and mutual care,” the congregations, particularly in the case of Shaar Hashomayim, showed significant incipient signs that larger Jewish communal concerns had to be their own.²

Jewish New York in the 1830s witnessed the proliferation of synagogues as varying groups of immigrants sought to congregate and to pray with those with whom they had the closest ethnic ties. In 1839, at least two handfuls of German immigrant men with their wives, who were not counted towards a minyan, separated from the German, Dutch and Polish Congregation Anshe Chesed and created Shaar Hashomayim on Attorney Street. Their departure caused no discernible stir in communal ranks as it seemed that yearly, if not monthly, a new synagogue dotted the downtown district. In 1835, Polish and German Jews had founded Ohabey Zedek on Pearl Street. Also in 1839, and just a few steps over on Pearl



Street, Shaarei Zedek, home to Jews from Posen, inaugurated their own cultural and linguistic style of Orthodox service. And in 1842, Rodeph Shalom joined Shaar Hashomayim on Attorney Street. The era of unity under Sephardic synagogue hegemony in New York was now long over. It had ended abruptly in 1825 when newly arrived Ashkenazic Jews who chafed at the protocols, expensiveness and perhaps lax personal observance of those who ran and attended Shearith Israel, the mother of American synagogues, today known as the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, established Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. Once the Jews in New York were served by not one overarching but by two competing congregations, it was an easy stretch for worshipers to opt for different houses of worship. By 1860, the city was home to 27 synagogues, each possessed of its own distinctive style. In 1846, a group of immigrants who hailed from the Czech region around Prague established their own *Boemische Verein*, the Bohemian Cultural Society, most likely on Lewis Street at the home of Leopold Schwarzkopf, a young man who had fled his homeland to America to avoid military service. Soon thereafter, under his leadership, 18 of them, seeking more than just social conviviality, began worshipping in a room in Coblenzer's Hotel on Ludlow Street, adopting the name Ahawath Chesed.³ The Schwarzkopf-Benjamin family would remain with the congregation for more than one hundred years.

Much like other immigrant congregations, Shaar Hashomayim had no rabbi during its first generation of existence. It relied on the more knowledgeable lay members to conduct the services and teach their sons and daughters the rudiments of the tradition from an Orthodox perspective.⁴ The most skillful performed circumcisions and the most devoted arranged for proper Jewish burials. In 1841, Shaar Hashomayim started to look briefly beyond its own precincts when it sought to lead its sister synagogues in jointly purchasing a potter's field for the interment of the indigent. Initially, they were unable to gain communal cooperation in



fulfilling a consummate mitzvah. It would take four years for Shaar Hashomayim, Anshe Chesed and Rodeph Shalom to agree to divide the cost of free burial three ways and to lay the poor to rest on a rotating basis among their individual burial sites. Generally, however, Shaar Hashomayim tended to its own charitable concerns led by its own *Hebrah Ahavat Ahayot*, a mutual aid society that its women conducted.⁵

For a brief period, 1845-1847, under the leadership of Rabbi Max Lilienthal, who ministered simultaneously to three "German congregations," Shaar Hashomayim participated in a Union School project that has been lauded as "the largest and best conducted...all day Jewish school of its day." First among the nine stipulations that appeared in his rabbinical contract was the requirement that "he was to be the teacher of the Jewish religion in the three congregations." Reportedly, the rabbi did well in his calling as in a year's time "two hundred and fifty children were in attendance and Lilienthal, the best educator of the age, was in full-charge." Attuned to the desire to educate both boys and girls and with the approval of lay leadership, Lilienthal instituted a confirmation ceremony, complementing but not superseding the bar mitzvahs that young men celebrated. The congregation, however, was still Orthodox. When this well-qualified instructor, who possessed a doctorate from the University of Munich, resigned his post over a personal dispute with a leader of Anshe Chesed, the Union School foundered. For a year, Lilienthal ran his own private school before departing to Cincinnati where he would become one of the most important Reform rabbis of the nineteenth century. Back in New York, from that time on, through the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish education devolved again upon Shaar Hashomayim to provide for its youngsters' religious training. With the development of a secularized public school system, members' children obtained their secular education either in public or private academies.⁶

In 1852, the congregation again showed signs that it was concerned



with issues beyond its own portals when it reached out to all New York Jews to join them in a mass meeting to implore the United States government to “intervene in the hope of stopping persecution of Jews in Europe.” But once again, no unity of purpose or strategy was achieved. While everyone in the community was worried about European anti-Semitism, Robert Lyons, the editor of the *Asmonean*, a newly established Jewish newspaper that was gaining traction and a readership within the community, argued convincingly that the best solution to the woes of overseas Jews was the migration of the oppressed to America. Plans for the unity rally were scrapped and no immigration initiatives were devised in its stead.⁷

Six years later, a more specific outrage perpetrated against an innocent Jewish boy brought Shaar Hashomayim together with close to a dozen other New York synagogues to plan and implement protest. The predicate for a unified effort was the kidnapping by Papal authorities and subsequent baptism in 1858 of Italian youngster Edgar Mortara. This grievous return to the atrocities of the Middle Ages in modern, mid-nineteenth century times roiled and called Jews to action all over the world. The Jews of New York were no exception. In December 1858, an Executive Committee of the Representatives of the United Congregations of the City of New York was empowered to coordinate deputations to the American government on behalf of Mortara and to plan future mass meetings. Unfortunately, the Buchanan Administration preempted these efforts when Washington made clear that it would not interfere in the Vatican’s affairs. It seems that the President did not want to alienate the Catholic vote in America. Ultimately, Mortara was not returned to his family and subsequently lived out his life both as a priest and as a missionary among Jews. Nonetheless, New York Jews and indeed Jews throughout the United States learned from this experience, and a year later, in 1859, representatives from 24 congregations joined together to establish the Board of Delegates of American Israelites. Shaar Hashomayim was among the 11 New York-based



charter synagogues of this first, fledgling Jewish defense organization in America.⁸

Communal cooperation was also called for and answered locally during the Passover season of 1858. In succoring the poor around them, Shaar Hashomayim demonstrated the type of commitment that would, in time, become a hallmark of Central Synagogue's mission. The economic Panic of 1857 had hit New York's Jewish community hard. Thousands of men, who worked as construction laborers, ship builders or peddlers, and the women who sat by their sides in the garment industry factories or stood at counters in small shops, lost their jobs or closed their stores. The working poor and unemployed, who wanted to observe the Passover holiday, which most Jews did, feared that they would be unable to afford matzot and the other requisite foods for proper observance. Responding to this very basic challenge, Shaar Hashomayim joined a coterie of 12 other congregations to create an umbrella organization called the Association for the Free Distribution of Matsot [sic] for the Poor. The vestry rooms at Shaar Hashomayim were the designated pick-up point for the 2,866 individuals, members of 640 families, who availed themselves of 14,300 pounds of matzot. Flushed with their success, Association leaders pledged to duplicate their efforts the following Passover. However, it would not be until 1873, in the wake of another severe economic panic, that a more enduring alliance of Jewish charitable forces, the United Hebrew Charities, would emerge. Shaar Hashomayim and its many sister congregations undoubtedly supported the new construct even though downtown activism to ameliorate poverty was moving out of synagogue hands.⁹

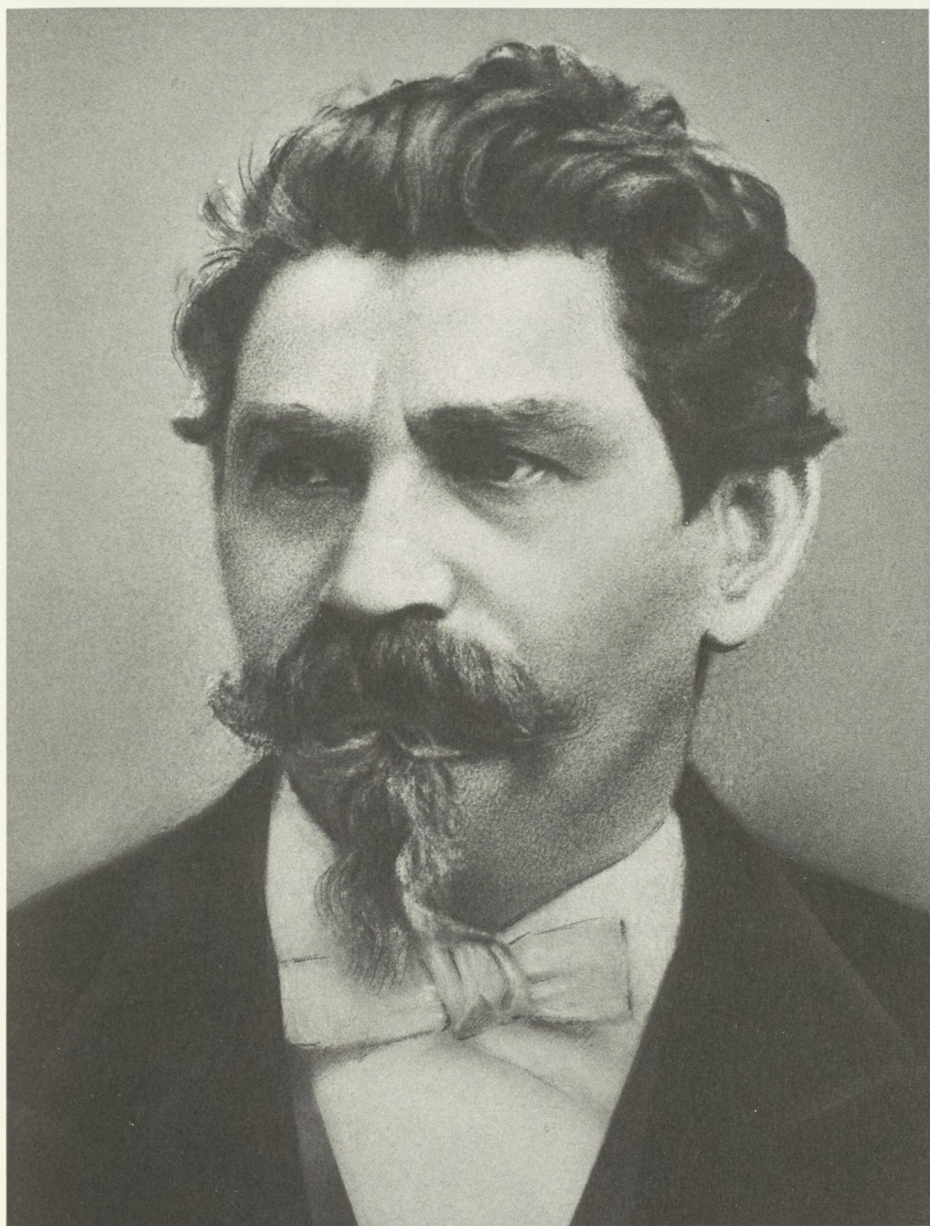
During its first generation of service, Ahawath Chesed kept a lower profile on larger communal concerns. Of course, it was not yet on the scene to be part of the potter's field initiative and it is not known whether its leaders or members supported the call for the 1852 rally. It is known that the congregation did not send a delegate to the founding of the Board



of Delegates.¹⁰ However, it did contribute to the 1858 matzot campaign. By the time the United Hebrew Charities was organized in 1873, the synagogue had moved uptown.¹¹

Essentially, for most of its twenty years downtown, it was a quintessential immigrant congregation; not so different in style and mission from Shaar Hashomayim. Worshipers used the standard Ashkenazic prayer book, and congregants offered prayers in an informal way, typical of those who were comfortable with old mannerisms and who were comforted by traditional rituals. However, by the mid-1860s, signs of disenchantment emerged throughout the congregation. Voices were heard that the Sabbath and holiday services ran too long. Perhaps those who were dissatisfied were among those who were bored during the service and thus started chatting as the devotions droned on. Some of the disaffected became inclined to leave the sanctuary before the *Mussaf* (the additional Sabbath and holiday prayer service) was recited. Evidently, the membership was Americanizing and had other things to do on these holy days. Old-time religious regimens were forestalling their need to work or their desire to recreate. The synagogue board was of several minds over whether to accommodate those who wanted change. Perhaps, most critically, they looked around and saw that the younger generation was decidedly uninspired by traditional practices. At that time, such was the situation among other synagogues both around them and throughout the United States. In response, in 1865, signs were posted admonishing everyone to be quiet during the services. But the issue of length of services remained. Leadership waffled; at one time agreeing to shorten the services and not long thereafter “prohibiting worshippers,” as if they really could force conformity, from leaving the synagogue before all the prayers were recited.¹²

In 1866, after twenty years of lay leadership, Dr. Adolph Huebsch was elected Ahawath Chesed’s first rabbi, and a more definitive stance on the need to accommodate was taken. During his eighteen-year tenure, Huebsch,



Rabbi Adolph Huebsch



who came to America after several years as spiritual leader of the liberal Neu Synagogue in Prague, strongly promoted a service that he believed was strong on spiritual sincerity but briefer than the Orthodox rituals of the past. Charged in 1867 to compile a modern prayer book/hymnal for his flock, he frontally addressed two major problems: The services were too long, and the *siddur* (the traditional prayer book) was unintelligible to the many who could not read Hebrew. Huebsch also became deeply immersed in the editing of the *Union Prayer Book*, which became standard for Reform congregations beginning in the 1890s. However, back home at Ahawath Chesed, what ultimately emerged from his labors was a two-volume *Seder Tefilah* that retained much of the old language and ancient rituals but bowed strongly towards the need for German translations and modern amendments of the worship service to make synagogue-going more attractive and inspirational for his congregants.¹³

Such would be the religious tradition that, in 1872, an upwardly mobile congregation would carry it to its new home in Midtown.¹⁴ Huebsch would remain at the helm until his death in 1885, as Ahawath Chesed became a “sizeable, middle class congregation with one of the most magnificent synagogue buildings in all of North America.” Under his successor, Alexander Kohut, Ahawath Chesed’s rabbi would become embroiled in one of the great debates that would define Jewish denominationalism in late nineteenth century America. But the calling card of the congregation, particularly the cachet of its activist women, would be the conscious extension of the synagogue’s gaze to embrace the needs of the poor of both their own surrounding neighborhood and among those living downtown.¹⁵



Moving Beyond the Synagogue's Gaze

Very early in his tenure at Ahawath Chesed, Rabbi Alexander Kohut became a central figure in an intellectual battle that would affect the course of American Judaism and define Jewish denominations nationally for several generations. However, within congregational life, and among the Jewish poor of New York City, it was the efforts of his wife, Rebekah, that carried with them even greater significance. Rabbi Kohut came to his new pulpit after a decade and a half of service to Hungarian Jewish communities. His bona fides, both in Central Europe and America, included a very strong background in traditional Jewish learning, as well as openness to finding the proper means of modernizing faith and practice. These elements were crucial to helping Jews find the means to live harmoniously in both Jewish and secular cultures. His curriculum vitae listed rabbinical ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau and a Ph.D. in Semitic languages from the University of Leipzig. He also was well-regarded for his strong oratorical skills, which he used to get his points across. The congregational board, which tendered to him a munificent annual salary of \$6,000, had every expectation that he would smoothly continue Rabbi Huebsch's efforts to advance a progressive religious agenda. But almost immediately upon his arrival, it became apparent both to the New York Jewish and general press reporters and to Reform leaders that he was at heart a staunch opponent of a very liberal definition of Judaism.¹⁶

In his inaugural address to the congregation on May 9, 1885, he argued that for Judaism to survive "within God's free air" in America, the authority of the Torah and the received wisdom of the rabbis had to be respected. Subsequently, he would reflect that he needed to bring "a new light to Israel" at a time when "a white heat" of unbridled change emanated from Reform ideologues. Mincing no words, he cried out that "a Reform which seeks to progress without the mosaic-rabbinical tradition is a deformity, a



skeleton without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart. It is suicide and suicide is not reform.” A historian sympathetic to the evolution of Conservative Judaism would later credit him with expressing “the point of view of the Historical School as a cohesive doctrine.” In other words, he articulated better than any of his contemporaries, the theology of the Breslau seminary that had trained him.¹⁷

Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, a major American Reform theologian and spiritual leader of neighboring Temple Beth El, was cut to the quick, intellectually and perhaps emotionally, by the stridency of Kohut’s stance. Ready and able to reply, in the summer of 1885, he took to the pages of the Anglo-Jewish press to defend his Movement’s position. He was determined that American Judaism not lose the momentum of thirty years of “progress” towards professing an all-embracing universalistic ideal. The *American Hebrew* (New York City) and the *American Israelite* (Cincinnati) kept close tabs on what became known as the “Kohler-Kohut controversy.” The public also followed the intellectual contretemps personally when they jammed into Ahawath Chesed or Temple Beth El to hear the antagonists reiterate their positions.

Most important, Kohut’s attacks convinced Kohler, his father-in-law, David Einhorn, and even the great conciliator Isaac Mayer Wise that the time had come for Reform Judaism in the United States to articulate, without equivocation, its fundamental theological visions. Distance had to be placed between themselves, the forward thinkers, and the hide-bound traditionalists. Such was the mandate of the rabbis who gathered in Pittsburgh in mid-November 1885 who drafted the Pittsburgh Platform. That resonate document, which Kohler praised as a “Jewish Declaration of Independence,” affirmed the divine election of Israel but denigrated all Biblical ordinances and rabbinic legalisms as possessing no value to a modern universalistic people. Determined to further remove all barriers between Jews and their Christian neighbors with whom, it was hoped, they



would improve the world, the platform rendered all aspects of a separate Jewish national consciousness as summarily outdated and inapplicable to the future.

Reaction to the Pittsburgh Platform was soon in coming, and Kohut was a central figure amid the opposition. Indeed, he was among the fourteen rabbis who in January 1886, less than two months after Kohler's conclave, met in the vestry rooms of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue to articulate an institutional response. Some of the rabbis—for instance, Henry Pereira Mendes and Bernard Drachman—adhered to Orthodox scruples and ritual requirements in the conduct of services. Others, such as Kohut or Baltimore's Aaron Bettleheim and Philadelphia's Marcus Jastrow, did not follow the Orthodox straight and narrow. Their synagogues' ritual reflected an affinity for heterodox activities. However, they were united in their abhorrence of the Pittsburg Platform's radicalism. Almost as important, the so-called 1883 *treif* (non-kosher) banquet, designed to commemorate the graduation of the first class of rabbis ordained at the Hebrew Union College, stuck in their craws. When kosher-observing guests were served shellfish, and meat and milk products were served together, in clear violation of Biblical and rabbinic traditions, it was evident that cooperation with a Reform seminary was impossible. Deeply chagrined, they conceived plans to create the Jewish Theological Seminary, a bulwark that would uphold "Historical and Traditional Judaism." Kohut's strident critiques of just a year or so earlier had contributed mightily to denominational splits within American Judaism.¹⁸

Although Kohut was lauded in many places and his name became one to be reckoned with nationally, he was unable to convince his congregation to support the Jewish Theological Seminary campaign. A terse entry in the congregational minute book from May 2, 1886, told it all: "Several local rabbis, including Dr. Alex Kohut, and many non-resident ones, are in the process of establishing a Jewish seminary, and it is up to the congregation,



and how you want to take part in it.” There was no further discussion of the New York initiative. Ahawath Chesed remained a member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, an organization which was rapidly becoming the synagogue association of Reform Judaism in the United States. Perhaps, many board members shared a fear that Temple Emanu-El’s rabbi, Gustav Gottheil, articulated provocatively to *The New York Times* some months earlier. Gottheil remonstrated that “now that Huebsch is dead, he is already forgotten and the congregation over which Dr. Kohut presides is depreciated.” In other words, the synagogue’s leaders likely resisted an institutional alliance that might augur a return back towards Ahawath Chesed’s Orthodox roots.¹⁹

Nonetheless, the congregation greatly respected Kohut’s erudition and intellectual acumen. One Central Synagogue chronicler would credit his community with “extraordinary generosity...to support pure scholarship” when it “appropriate[ed] a large sum of money to publish his great work, *Arukh Completum*,” a lexicon of Talmudic and Midrashic literature. But what they most wanted from their rabbi was his guidance in helping them keep their acculturating children close to the faith. A concern that arose out of the pews, which mostly the adults occupied, was that the service that Huebsch developed and the educational system that he put in place, so Germanic in language and tone, did not move and excite the younger generation of worshippers. Kohut accepted the challenge of Anglicizing synagogue education, discourse and ritual; quite a challenge for a man for whom English was a foreign tongue. The rabbi agreed to preach in English as well as in German and supervised a religious school that as of 1890 conducted all of its classes in English. Most significant, Kohut translated Huebsch’s prayer book into English. Whatever his theological reservations about his predecessor’s amendments of the *siddur*, Kohut did not alter the meanings of the original German text. While both Kohut’s admirers and detractors saw him as a Conservative ideologue, when it came to “develop[ing] a modern prayer



book, which should appeal to modern taste,” he was willing to relinquish “a number of pieces in the olden *siddur* for peace and unity,” certainly to the satisfaction of the board and membership of Ahawath Chesed.²⁰

Kohut’s liturgical efforts did not go unnoticed on the Lower East Side within a congregation that was moving away from its own Orthodox moorings. It had already permitted men and women to sit together during services. Shaar Hashomayim adopted the new English-Hebrew prayer book as its own at a moment when it was seriously contemplating relocation to the Upper East Side. As the many details of merger were hammered out over several years between Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim, at least when it came to ritual, the two congregations were on the same page. In 1898, eight years after Kohut’s untimely death at age of fifty-two, the two synagogues pooled their resources and memberships. In 1917, the consolidated congregations simply would become known as Central Synagogue.²¹ The informal name was quickly adopted by the combined congregation and was formalized in 1974.

It is not known whether Rebekah Kohut shared the intensity of her husband’s abhorrence of the Pittsburgh Platform’s rejection of rabbinic traditions and denigration of Biblical accounts as reflective of “the primitive ideas of its own age,” not to mention its rejection of Jewish nationality. However, it is certain that she affirmed in her words and actions the Reform document’s commitment to improving the world around her. She would make it her “duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.”²²

As a sign of those times, before embarking on her crusade, Rebekah first sought out her husband’s approbation. Initially Alexander Kohut was less than enthusiastic about her quest. Rebekah would recount many years later that given her responsibilities as mother and stepmother to eight children, the rabbi was “dubious of the wisdom of a public career for me. I



had much to do at home, and [he] was more or less jealous of any time I gave to others.” Still, Rebekah persevered at home, perhaps carrying the debate through noting how neighboring Temple Emanu-El under Rabbi Gustav Gottheil had initiated an organization giving “women opportunities for worthy service among the poor.” In an era during which women, even in the most liberal American congregations, were rarely accorded a substantial participatory religious role, these efforts took on transcendent meaning.²³

Under Rebekah Kohut’s leadership, what made the Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim Sisterhood special was that it extended itself beyond the needy of its congregation and neighborhood. Sure to thank “the Almighty for whatever good we have done,” for close to thirty years (1887-1917), during her husband’s tenure and also while Rabbis David Davidson (1896-1900) and Isaac S. Moses (1901-1918) occupied the pulpit, the Sisterhood made the synagogue’s greatest impact on communal life. The chosen venue of philanthropic activity was the old downtown neighborhood, south of Houston Street, in the midst of the East European enclave of the Lower East Side. By 1895, the activists could boast of a membership of 350. Belonging did not mean only contributing necessary financial assistance; this was a charitable society of *personal service*. Associates had to work among the disadvantaged. “Devotion and personal helpfulness,” asserted one Sisterhood leader, “is far nobler charity than that of the purse.” Committed to its pro-active approach, the women’s group proudly explained in 1896, that “we do not wait until the poor comes to our house but by means of our society we go out to meet the poor.” Thus, Kohut would later recall, they met those in need after trudging up “flight after flight...of creaking stairs” of tenement houses making their “friendly visits into rooms devoid of air or daylight.” That year, they gave 109 pairs of shoes to the needy. Much like their incipient congregation had done in 1858, when it was still situated in the immigrant quarter, during Passover, the uptown Sisterhood distributed 575 pounds of matzot. Their efforts were inter-generational as



View of pushcarts on the Lower East Side.



Interior of Lower East Side tenement typical of the type visited by Rebekah Kohut and the Sisterhood members.



they established their kindergarten and girls sewing circles. In 1900, Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim's ladies' group became part of a "corps of visiting Jewesses" city-wide when it was amalgamated within the New York Federation of Sisterhoods and allied with the United Hebrew Charities while maintaining their autonomy. Explicit also throughout their efforts, and those of their sister organizations, was a desire not only "to alleviate... misery and relieve the wants of ... destitute families" but to mitigate the cultural barriers and social gaps that separated uptown from downtown Jews. "These poor are in very truth our brothers and sisters," remarked a Sisterhood leader in 1913, "let us deal with them in brotherly and sisterly fashion."²⁴

Shadowing Rebekah Kohut's efforts within the congregation, Julia Richman, scion of a family of long-standing within Ahawath Chesed, dedicated herself to the city's Jewish and non-Jewish immigrant poor. Seemingly, she did so with less sensitivity to her charges than her sisters. She was also staunchly engaged specifically in Jewish communal work among the poor of downtown. (She helped found the Educational Alliance and the Young Women's Hebrew Association where she emphasized the rapid Americanization of the children of immigrants.) However, her *métier* was public school education. From the tender age of 17 when she was precociously graduated from the Female Normal College, today known as Hunter College, she pursued a career in the New York school system; first as a teacher and later as the first Jew appointed as a principal and then as a school district superintendent. Working on the Lower East Side, she forcefully immersed her charges in speaking only English. Under her directives, while at school children were forbidden to converse in a foreign tongue even in washrooms and on playgrounds. It was said that violators of the "No Yiddish" or for that matter "No Italian" rule had their mouths washed out with soap. Richman's approach did not sit well with many within the immigrant community. The language question was only



Rebekah Kohut



part of their complaints; after all, newcomers, too, wanted their children to fit well into America. But even more irksome to those who were ensconced downtown was her high-handed dismissal of their culture and struggles to survive in America. In 1908, labor leader Joseph Baroness drafted a petition on behalf of angered parents to the Board of Education demanding Richman's transfer out of their neighborhood because she was "entirely out of sympathy with the needs of this part of the community." She was then dubbed "the patron saint of ghetto seekers." The Yiddish daily *Forward* joined the chorus of critics when it declared that when she visited a school, "it was like Yom Kippur." Everyone around her felt that they were being judged. Richman, however, did have her supporters outside of the immigrant quarter. Prominent uptown Jews, such as famous attorney and philanthropist Louis Marshall, lauded her activities. *The New York Times* also came to her defense, albeit retrospectively, in an obituary when it criticized a "cabal" that had undermined her efforts "to reform and purify the district and free its children from degrading influences." What may not be questioned is that during Julia Richman's forty years of service in public education, she fulfilled the promise that she had made to herself and her parents when she was but a mere child: "I am not pretty...and I am not going to marry, but before I die, all New York will know my name!"²⁵

In the meantime, while no one questioned the dedication or sensitivity of Kohut's cadre of "friendly visitors," towards the end of its second decade of service to the New York Jewish poor, the Sisterhood and its sister Reform temple groups, which followed Central Synagogue's lead, absorbed hurtful criticism for their "quaint" ways. For example, while Lee K. Frankel and Morris Waldman, who headed the United Hebrew Charities, were sure to "extend our unbounded admiration...to those who have so willingly given their time and energy," in their view, their efforts were "untrained and unsystematic." As among the first "scientifically trained" Jewish social workers who had university degrees to prove their mettle, although not in



1916 Monday Sewing Group members who made garments as donations during World War I.



social work per se, these men and others argued that the volunteers had to step aside and let the “professionals” handle these difficult chores. These viewpoints became communal policy in 1917 when, in one of its first actions, the new Federation of Jewish Philanthropies discharged the temple Sisterhoods from their responsibilities for home relief. The only minor connection that would remain was a women’s sewing circle that functioned under the United Hebrew Charities’ Industrial Department. The Federation’s “memories” of the end of this era of female volunteerism has the Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim ladies “amicably” agreeing to step aside “without fanfare, without protestations of interference or complaints about the undermining of their long-standing ‘autonomy.’” But synagogue records suggest a different reaction among those who were told their services were no longer wanted. More than a decade after these women were disenfranchised, the president of the Women’s Organization of Central Synagogue would recall an unhappy moment when “our social service group [was] deprived of its settlement house work by the formation of large city groups.” By the late 1920s, the women of Central Synagogue were on to other worthy efforts, primarily looking inward to improve the textures of synagogue life. But some pain remained.²⁶



Foyer of Central Synagogue decorated for 75th Anniversary (1922).



A Community Center for the Next Generation

On the occasion of its 75th anniversary celebration in October 1922, Central Synagogue's lay leadership called upon its membership to participate in a new "undertaking" that "was a necessity to the progress of our congregational activity and imperative to the welfare and happiness of the social and family life of every member of the congregation and those who are near and dear to us." Mincing no words, Daniel Kops, chairman of the commemoration's arrangement committee, appealed to "the spirit of loyalty" of both the men and women in the pews and the officials who stood in the pulpit to complete the onerous task of raising \$100,000 to build a community center. Kops vigorously explained that he took "such an intense interest in raising this fund" because of "the urgent...present social and economic conditions."²⁷

In a letter to the congregational family, he explained that "the rabbis of this city... are losing the personal touch with individual members," especially the younger people. He lamented that with the exception of "occasional ceremonial functions in joy and sorrow in families" and attendance during the High Holidays, "they appeal to empty pews in the Temple."

Kops may have oversold his case somewhat. At that moment, the congregation was not really in full retreat. In the years following the death of Kohut, a number of energetic rabbis had ministered to the laity, and efforts had been expended to make the services more engaging. By the turn of the twentieth century, a more than a decade-long debate within congregational ranks over the "prime time" for Sabbath services and language of rabbinic homilies had been resolved in favor of those who sought to "attract young people, sons and daughters of the congregation's members." Upon assuming the pulpit in 1896, Rabbi David I. Davidson had pushed strongly for the inauguration of 8:00 P.M. Friday evening services. Some of the old timers objected since they felt that few of the



Central Synagogue's first Community House, 35 East 62nd Street.



night attendees would show up for the Saturday morning devotions, which they preferred. Davidson also wanted to preach to his flock exclusively in English. Many worshipers and board members of long-standing liked to hear a fine discourse in their native tongue of German. Eventually, the English language advocates and those who put their faith in Friday night services had their way.²⁸

Early on in his seventeen-year tenure at the synagogue, Rabbi Isaac I. Moses moved the congregation to adopt the Union Prayer Book, which was becoming the standardized liturgy for American Reform Jews. Moses's personal vested interest in these liturgical developments was clear. He was wont to refer to himself as "the father of the Union Prayer Book" and with good reason. A student of the development and widespread adoption of that text would credit "Moses more than anyone else" as "responsible for combining the best features of the existing prayer books...in a single union prayer book."²⁹ In all events, in 1904, Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim accepted their rabbi's deep conviction that Moses had first expressed years earlier that "if our public worship is not to lose every hold on the affection of the Jewish people and especially the younger generation," services had "to awaken new interest in...divine worship and kindle in the hearts of worshippers the spirit of true devotion."³⁰

Rabbi Nathan Krass, Moses's successor, did not alter the adult service although he frequently focused on the nature of prayers recited at the children's services.³¹ Moreover, while he was of East European heritage, born as Nathan Krasnowetz in Odessa in 1879, the rabbi did not attempt to broaden the ethnic base of the congregation's constituency. By the mid-1910s significant numbers of Russian immigrants had risen above their downtown station and had moved to this uptown enclave. But Krass was not for them. This first graduate of Hebrew Union College to lead Central Synagogue was a staunch Classical Reformer, distant from those who may have hailed from traditional Jewish backgrounds. His strength, among his core



Rabbi Nathan Krass



constituency, was as an orator which helped fill the rows.³²

In his Sabbath addresses, and in his very popular Sunday lectures, he impressed his adult audiences with his knowledge of Jewish and Christian sources. (Non-Jews turned out, too, for his Sunday talks and asked questions from the audience.) Krass was also quite comfortable with literary and poetic images of varying genres, which he was fond of quoting. For example, Shakespeare's Shylock came twice under the rabbi's scrutiny and criticism in 1923. When he was not speaking of Jewish causes and defending his people, he used these public opportunities to preach about the leadership role that he believed America had to play in the immediate post World War I era. Speaking of a wider world of concerns, he countered the isolationist impulses around him when he averred that "if Americans would take part actively in the deliberations of Europe, if the Americans would join in these councils not merely as silent, sterile, observers, but as dynamic forces, saying that back of us there is a moral and spiritual power of a great democracy...I think they [Europeans] might listen with a great deal of interest. That, I take it, is the great function of democracy." Krass's messages to the congregation and to the larger New York community were important enough that his supporters had his talks duly transcribed, word for word, for future reference and for posterity. His fame from the rostrum, however, caused an unintended consequence for Central Synagogue. He did so well in his calling that in 1923 Louis Marshall, President of Temple Emanu-El, lured him away to this city's flagship Reform congregation, much to the dismay of Krass's admirers on Central Synagogue's board.³³

Still, Kops's observations about the "critical times" at hand had much merit. The issue at hand in the early 1920s was not what went on during devotions or the loyalties and affinities of those who regularly attended, but how to connect with those who did not frequent the sanctuary.³⁴ This problem, as Kops was sure to point out, bespoke a dilemma that afflicted many congregations. In very frank tones, Kops emphasized the "short-comings which have of late

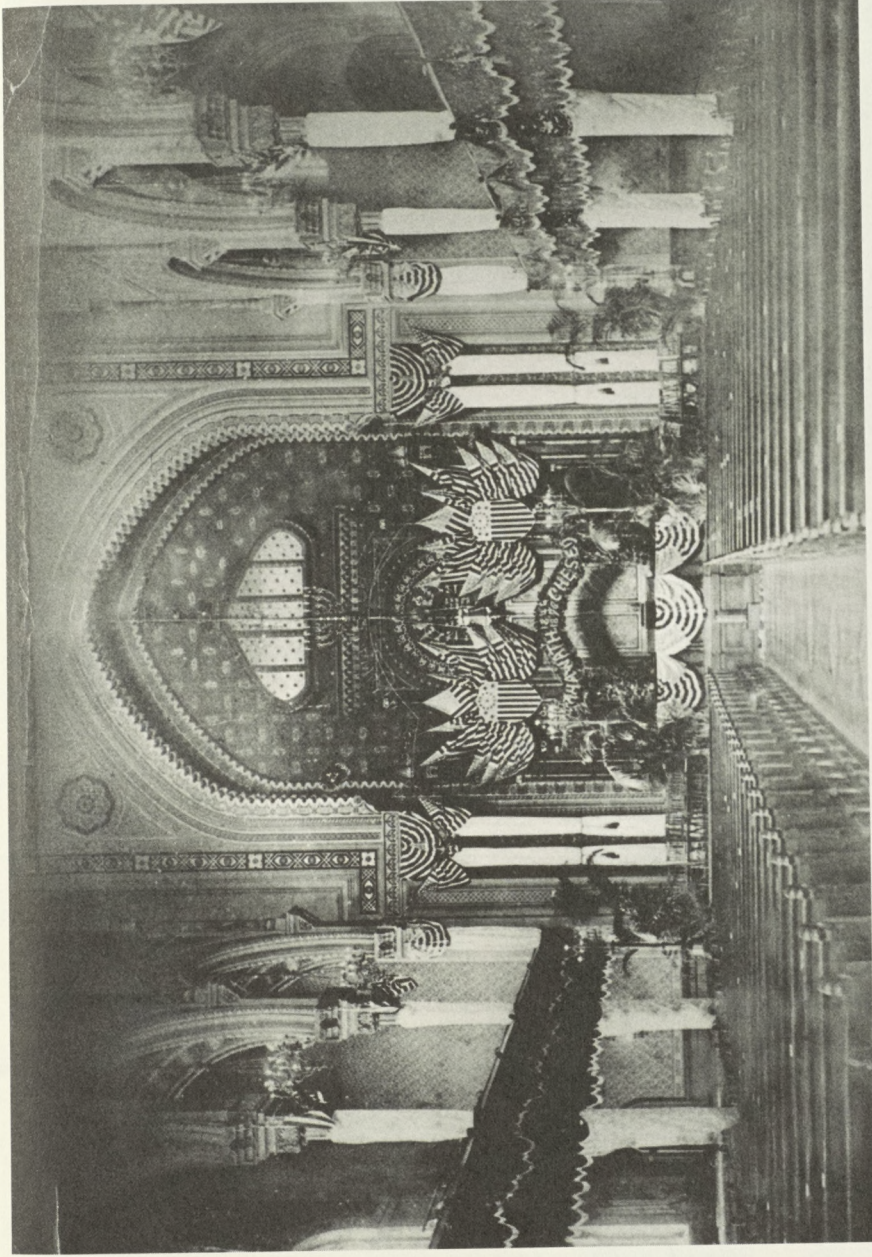


developed” among young people divorced from religious life. He worried that “the alluring influences of a large city of New York are so strong and many sided . . . that they are apt to destroy the soundest and most sacred traditions of home.”

The answer was thus clear: “A Community Centre [sic] will give your children the opportunity to imbibe the true spirit of Jewish religion, at an age when their minds are susceptible to a Jewish atmosphere.” He and his associates conceived of a multifunctional institution in a “modern building, with up-to-date equipment” including “large and airy school-rooms for the religious training of the children . . . consonant with the taste and refinement of the younger generation.” It also had to provide areas for “social affairs and gatherings and club rooms for those who wish to take an active part in the promoting of the social side of our congregation.” Ideally, those who were trained well in the Sunday School would gravitate naturally to regular participation in temple life as adults. As important, those who would come initially just to associate with other Jews, it was hoped, would, over time, be induced to stay or return to pray.³⁵

For Kops, the prime movers of the new operation would be the women of the congregation. Not only would the Community Center’s mission “touch the heart of every mother,” but, as he saw it, they, and not their husbands, had the time and energy to “direct the destiny of their children. They realize that their husbands and brothers are more and more occupied with the intense work which is required in the pursuit of their business, and cannot do justice to their duties at home.” Though not couched in so many words, Kops effectively articulated a new substantial activity for Central Synagogue’s women whose social service role among the poor had been taken from them just five years earlier. Now, they might look to their own internal congregational family concerns.³⁶

As an advocate for this new program for young people, Kops and his committee clearly took their cues from other congregational initiatives all



Central Synagogue sanctuary decorated for 75th Anniversary (1922) celebration, reflecting Rabbi Krass's beliefs in America's post World War I leadership role.



Charity boxes, originally in Central Synagogue's sanctuary, for donations for orphans and Mt. Sinai Hospital. These boxes are now located in the synagogue's foyer.



around them. Central Synagogue's move came during the era of Institutional Church and Institutional Synagogue developments that promised to capture young people away from street life and back towards the sanctuary. Scant years earlier, Jewish social worker, Isaac Berkson, had raised a voice of concern just a few blocks north in Yorkville when he wrote about "half-baked second generation youngsters...cocksure and smart guy" sons who were "indifferent to, if not ashamed of Jewish life." Another critic of the weakness of religious life in town spoke sadly of "earnest, however, well-intentioned, however eloquent rabbis" who could not even begin to make an impression upon these "well-known products of the city street corner." By the late 1910s, Berkson was deeply involved with that neighborhood's Central Jewish Institute [CJI] then led by a young Orthodox rabbi, Herbert S. Goldstein. The plan that came to fruition in 1916, on 85th Street and Lexington Avenue, called for "amalgamating Jewish social, cultural and recreational programs with religious educational activities under an established Orthodox synagogue." A year later, Goldstein struck out on his own with the same game plan when he created the Institutional Synagogue in Harlem. Again, the targeted audience was expressly "many of those... attracted to...its diverse activities [that] would not be apt to go to synagogue per se." The year that followed witnessed Goldstein's erstwhile teacher at the Seminary, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, create the most elaborate Synagogue Center program of its time, including not only a modern school and club rooms but a swimming pool, within the complex that he built in The Jewish Center on Manhattan's West Side at 86th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues. Central Synagogue leaders were well-aware of the growth of Jewish life on the Upper West Side. Five years before, Kaplan made that neighborhood his home. With many of the congregation's members moving across Central Park, serious thought was given, for two years, about relocating to 91st Street and Central Park West.³⁷

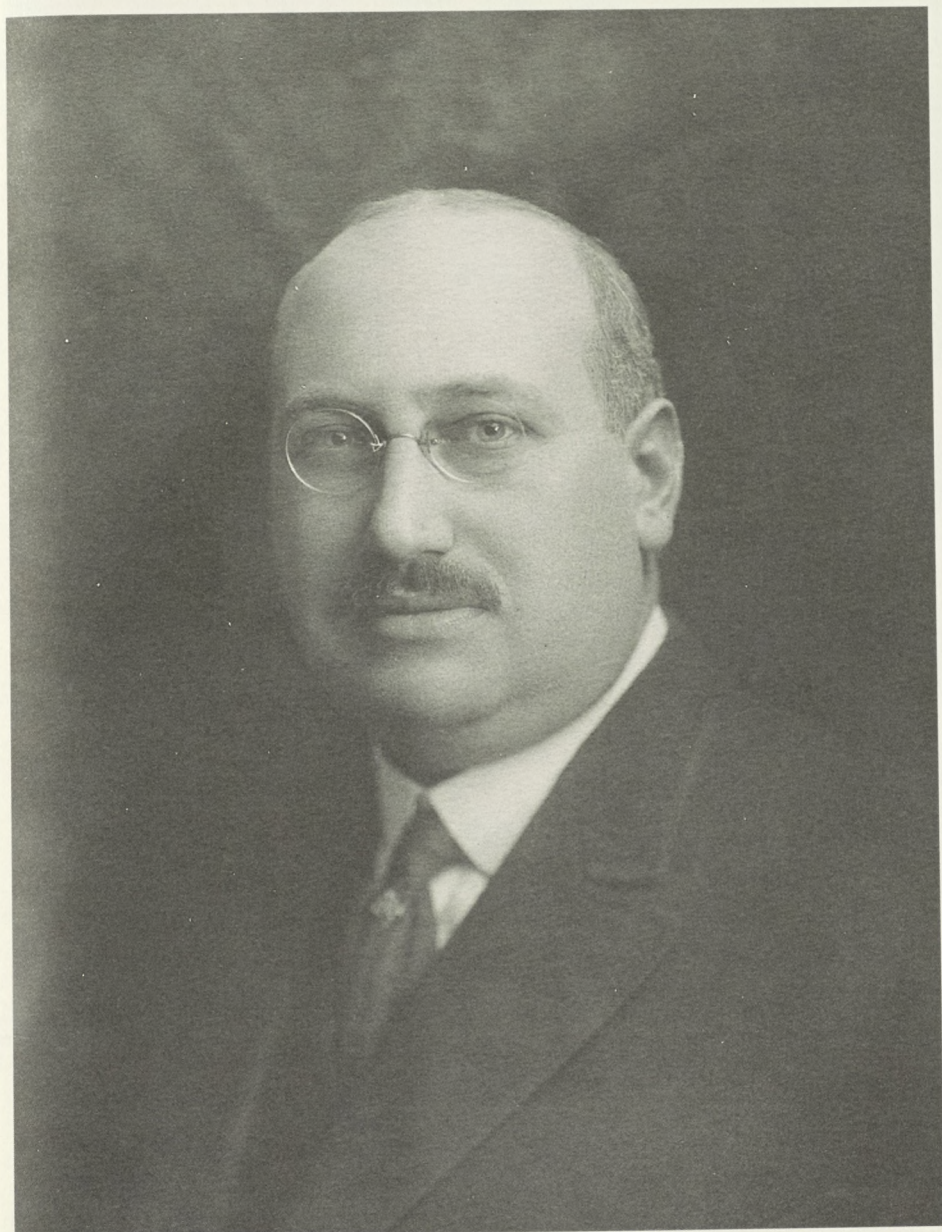
Despite Kops's and his associates' sincere desire to do almost as much



as these other organizations, Central Synagogue would not have a pool or other athletic facilities. Kops emphasized that from a purely financial point of view, “the establishment of a Community Centre [sic] is a necessity as a competitive factor for the maintenance of our spiritual position within the community.” For him, “the same principle holds good between congregations as in other business enterprises. No organization can afford to stand still. Either they go ahead or they go back.”³⁸

The plan for the Community Center came to fruition in 1926 when the synagogue bought from the YWCA a commodious building on 62nd Street between Madison and Park Avenues, which had served as a “clubhouse and hotel for girls.” For forty-one years, this six-storied building with a roof garden would serve the congregation well. A year after its opening in 1927, synagogue president Max Schallek could boast that the “building equal in facilities to any club house in the City of New York...served as an opportunity to fill our membership with a new spirit and devotion.” For the men and women of the congregation and their sons and daughters, it was becoming “a center of social life...under the surroundings of the highest character.”³⁹

While the men of the synagogue availed themselves of the center’s facilities, especially for Brotherhood “meetings and entertainments,” for the women, as Kops had predicted, the work and amusements of the Women’s Organization on 62nd Street, “made ... [them] feel that they are an essential, integral part” of synagogue life. In 1928, such was Schallek’s appreciation of the women who ran sewing classes, created a Girl Scout troop, chaperoned youth dances, and organized art exhibits “giving an opportunity to Jewish men and women to display their products and skill” among a myriad of weekly and seasonal activities. The congregation formally appreciated and rewarded the Women’s Organization’s efforts that same year when its president was admitted to the Board of Trustees.⁴⁰ Two years after accepting such a coveted position, for which she had lobbied,



President Max L. Schallek



Central Synagogue's Religious School students gathering in front of the Community House with teachers and Rabbi Wise.



Daisy Goldstone characterized Schallek as “that staunch defender of women’s rights...whose evaluation of the women’s organization makes us very proud and insures our ever-willing cooperation.” This tribute to Schallek may have resonated well in congregational ranks during an era where women were first granted suffrage in the United States.⁴¹

The expanded role of women also kept Central Synagogue in step with the direction that many other women’s organizations were taking in New York at the time. After World War I, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform sisterhoods, each in their own milieu, “transferred their energies and allegiances from the larger Jewish community to that centered around the congregation per se.” In other words, “the sisterhood” became “a vehicle for raising Jews....Appealing to the ‘Jewish mother,’ the sisterhood bridged the complementary spheres of home and synagogue.” This internal-looking dynamic that addressed the spiritual and social world of their children within a congregational environment would not, however, be the sole sisterhood story in the 1930s, at least, not at Central Synagogue when the congregation and its neighborhood suffered during the Great Depression. Though unlike the Rebekah Kohut era during which relief efforts extended out of their vicinity, the women’s organization focused its “social service” issues locally, providing “milk ...daily to many families,” according “temporary financial assistance,” addressing the traumas of “nervous cases,” and granting scholarships to children “to finish their education,” as well as stipends to youngsters desirous of escaping the city’s heat and woes at summer camps.⁴²

Rabbi Jonah Bondi Wise, Krass’s long-term successor, was entirely comfortable with the community center concept and its opportunities for lay activism, frequented the events, and often complimented the women and men who ran the programs. Wise came to Central Synagogue just as the purchase of the YMCA building was being finalized and after the congregation ended a brief yet intense flirtation and engagement with



Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and the latter's Free Synagogue community. For two years subsequent to Krass's departure (1924-1925), Central Synagogue and the Free Synagogue had "federated" providing Stephen Wise with another venue, beyond Carnegie Hall and the Free Synagogue House, to espouse his version of Reform teachings. Central Synagogue liked his growing reputation as a national Jewish leader. But the relationship ultimately foundered, according to Free Synagogue supporters, because their rabbi's activities were becoming far too overextended. He was then simultaneously Acting President of the Jewish Institute of Religion and President of the American Jewish Congress. It is also possible that "the strong-willed and outspoken" Wise and his brand of incipient Neo-Reform ideology and practice did not mix well with Classical Reform tones at Central Synagogue.⁴³

On the other hand, Jonah Bondi Wise was the son of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, arguably the father of American Reform Judaism, and fit in well with the "old established congregation." Indeed, he immediately showed his Classical Reform bona-fides. In his discussion with the committee that planned his installation, Jonah Wise made it known that "I am constitutionally unable to wear a hat in the synagogue." Practically that meant both that those who stood with him on the pulpit would no longer wear their fancy hats and that they, along with everyone else, did not wear yarmulkes in temple. Apparently, down the road, this policy tended "to discourage the affiliation of a large bloc of highly desirable prospective members who were strongly attached to the ancient custom of covered heads at prayer."⁴⁴

But even as Wise had his way in mandating ritual matters, he saw his purview in promoting religious experiences extending far beyond the sanctuary and surely into community-centered work. Actually, before coming to New York, the rabbi, while serving Temple Beth Israel of Portland, Oregon, where ironically he followed Stephen S. Wise in a pulpit, Jonah Wise had come to the realization that "opportunities for creative



synagogal work,” whether through boys clubs’ social gatherings or even through a victorious temple basketball team, were “far more effective than prayers and sermons” in bringing synagogues and people close together. For Wise, it has been said, “inner spirituality” was not undermined when houses of worship “broadened their functions no matter how much or little religious attitudes were in evidence.” Through his more than twenty-five-year career at Central Synagogue, Rabbi Jonah Wise was deeply appreciative of the efforts blocks away at the Community Center, even if athletics never did become part of its *mélange* of activities for young people. However, the hallmark of this rabbi’s career, which spanned the most catastrophic and climatic years of twentieth-century Jewish history, was his and the congregations’ involvement in the issues surrounding the Holocaust and the rise of the State of Israel. Within and without the precincts of 55th Street, he created an international pulpit.⁴⁵



Confrontation with World Jewish Crises

Until the 1930s, except for Shaar Hashomayim's advocacy during the Mortara Affair, Central Synagogue's engagement with the wider world of Jewish concerns was essentially local. By the time of the Great Depression, the congregation had earned a sterling reputation of long-standing for its efforts in not only aiding the city's Jewish poor but indigent Christians as well. During this decade of profound national need, the financial resources of the synagogue were severely taxed. Still, under Rabbi Jonah Wise's leadership, its men and women persevered in assisting the needy around them. In 1932, for example, the Women's Organization of Central Synagogue assumed "the gigantic task of keeping open the Rest Room for unemployed women and girls" while "in the vestry room, over 5,000 people [were] fed" on a regular basis. It was a moment of great pride for the group when in 1932 Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Rest Room and lauded its efforts. In 1935, the rabbi involved himself and the congregation in a Federal plan for "social regeneration" called "the Homesteads Project." Under this initiative, land was purchased, homes were built and "industry... founded" for "two hundred families from the needle work trade for the subsistence homestead in Hightstown, N.J." For philanthropic old-timers at Central Synagogue, it was reminiscent of relocation schemes that the city's German Jews had undertaken before World War I to disperse the over-crowded downtown enclave. Now, however, Wise pitched the plan to a receptive synagogue board to aid more than just their own co-religionists, even though many of the impoverished garment workers may have been Jews, as "a battle for better being so near to the heart of our honored President, F.D. Roosevelt."⁴⁶

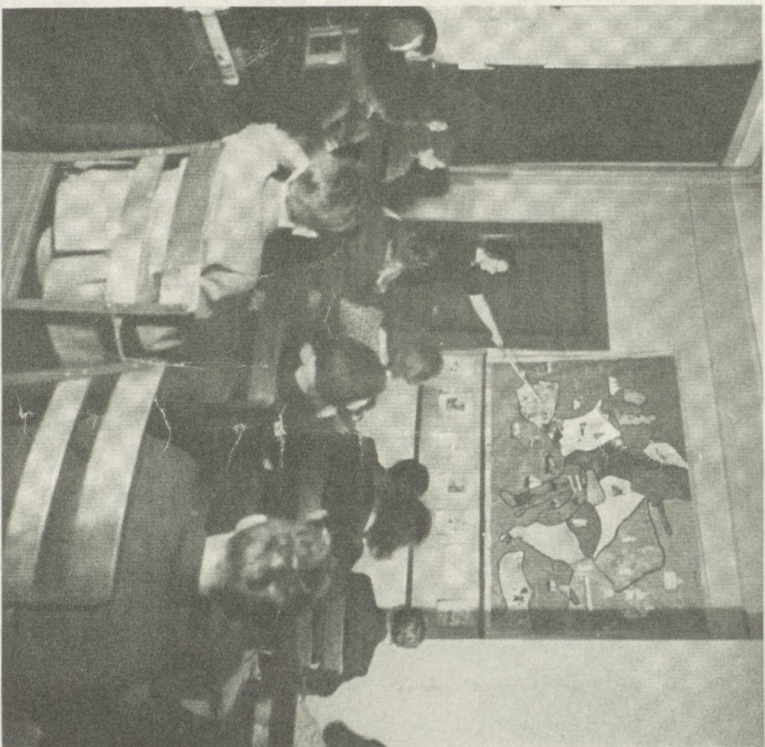
Synagogue president Max Schallek was deeply appreciative of his rabbi's efforts outside the portals of 55th Street. In June 1933, he told the congregation that "what he [Wise] was doing in the far-flung field of his activities brings credit and honor to our congregation and helps to make



it... a leader in Jewry.” Apparently, he was moved to say as much because Schallek was “sadden[ed]” to “hear criticism based on petty things made by many who do not realize that the chief work of the Rabbi is to instill into the Congregation a religious spirit and an enthusiasm to do things.” He reprimanded those who believed that Wise’s sole role [should be] “talking from the pulpit and visiting the sick.” As the 1930s unfolded, however, there was no need for any additional presidential reproves. It became widely recognized that the Jewish people in Central Europe were confronted with Nazism’s daunting challenges. Support for endangered co-religionists became the focus of Wise’s activities within and without his pulpit messages even as he averred that “as a pastor I frequently needed seven league boots...to call on the sick, comforting the sorrowing and have done what we could to bring the message of our faith to the individuals in special need.”⁴⁷

His ever-expanding role began in 1933, when on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, where he was its oft-times chair and foremost fundraiser, he undertook a fact-finding tour of the Jewish charity needs in the Third Reich. The “Joint” (JDC) had been established in 1914 as a unique, cooperative communal organization that brought together the Orthodox Central Committee for the Relief of Jews Suffering During the War, the Socialist People’s Relief Committee and the Reform American Jewish Relief Committee for concerted effort to assist Jews trapped between the warring European armies during the Great War. After World War I, JDC focused its attention on the plight of Polish and Ukrainian Jews who were displaced, starving and frequently under physical attack through pogroms. But now, with Hitler’s rise to power, German Jewry needed substantial assistance, even as the needs of East European Jews continued unabated.⁴⁸

Although Wise never explicitly criticized American immigration policy, he made clear to the Joint and to his congregation that the majority of German Jews were destined to live under tyranny. In 1935, he reported to



VISUAL EDUCATION

MUCH time and care have been given to the planning and working out of this phase of modern education.

Two types of visual education are programmed: in the classroom and in the assembly period. Each teacher plans her work with the stereopticon machine to fit her religious instruction program, during which the pupil, through questioning and discussion, gets a vivid picture of the lesson taught.

Visual instruction in the assembly period is devoted to those subjects in which the school as a group is interested.

The combination of these two methods has done much to create extreme interest in and understanding of the religious school work.

Religious School students at their geography lesson about the wider world. Central Synagogue Religious School booklet, 1937.



his associates that the issue was “how to meet the onslaught of Hitler and survive it...Most of them [German Jews] will remain because there is no place for them to go and no country wants people over forty unless they have the highest specialization for some work.” At that point, neither Wise nor anyone else foresaw the unfathomable calamity that would befall European Jewry. Focusing on the real-life realities among Jews under great pressure at that moment, Wise discerned that “the young people will leave... Germany will be an old folks’ home and a graveyard.”⁴⁹

Wise also frequently asserted to his congregation that “amiable efforts” through “protests and boycotts ...[to] move German public opinion to relent...have proven absolutely futile.” His answer to this continuing crisis was to “do what Israel has always done in the face of murderous crusaders, inquisition, expulsion, piracy and the like. We will do Zedakah.”⁵⁰ Thus after Kristallnacht in November 1938, the rabbi insisted that “until help of governments is available for food, shelter, clothing, medicine, etc.” and “orphans cry bare-footed on the cold streets...families separated and women huddle in fright with whimpering children while waiting some news of men in jail and concentration camps...new plans must come, new means be found” for the Joint Distribution Committee.⁵¹

Congregant I. Edwin Goldwasser strongly seconded Wise’s sentiments. In an “op-ed style” piece in *The Scribe* (the congregational newsletter), he saw both “American tradition” and “Jewish ties and ideals” obliging the membership “to make sacrifices even as our co-religionists abroad are being sacrificed.”⁵²

Although Rabbi Wise was unsparing in his condemnation of all that the Nazis perpetrated, and spurred his membership to open their hearts and pocketbooks, he was nonetheless concerned that appropriate hatred of Hitler not make Jews vengeful towards the nation that produced a modern-day Haman. Before Purim of 1937, Wise wrote to his congregants that “The Book of Esther...conveys the idea of reprisal for the persecution



of Israel as a legitimate viewpoint. This, of course is contrary to all the thinking and action of the Jews.” Bringing the story of the downfall of the evil Persian Prime Minister to contemporary times, Wise averred that “so seldom in all the long history of exposure to galling persecution have the Israelites ever formulated a policy of revenge.” Ever the Classical Reform rabbi, so sure to emphasize, and anxious to teach, what he deemed as the lofty ethical teachings of Judaism, he was also certain to note that good Christians, too, were victims of the Third Reich. Thus, in April 1938, the rabbi called upon “every-self-respecting Jew [to] enroll himself in the fight against... the frightful calamity which has been visited upon Jews, Catholics, Protestants, liberals, intellectuals, and every worthwhile element in the countries being ravaged by the Hitler program.” And even as horrible news came to back to the United States, early in 1940, about the murder of Jews in Poland, Wise published excerpts of a report, secured from the Vatican, about German persecution of Polish Catholic priests. Soon thereafter, an article in *The Scribe* reported that Central Synagogue’s spiritual leader had “prompted the Joint Distribution Committee to send goodly sums to the Pope of Rome and to the Federal Council of Churches wherewith to serve the oppressed of their respective creeds.” In praising his colleague, guest editorialist Rabbi Louis Wolsey of Philadelphia turned to a Talmudic dictum that “lays down the law that if a man finds both a friend and an enemy requiring his services, it is his obligation to help his enemy first, in order to subdue his evil inclination.”⁵³

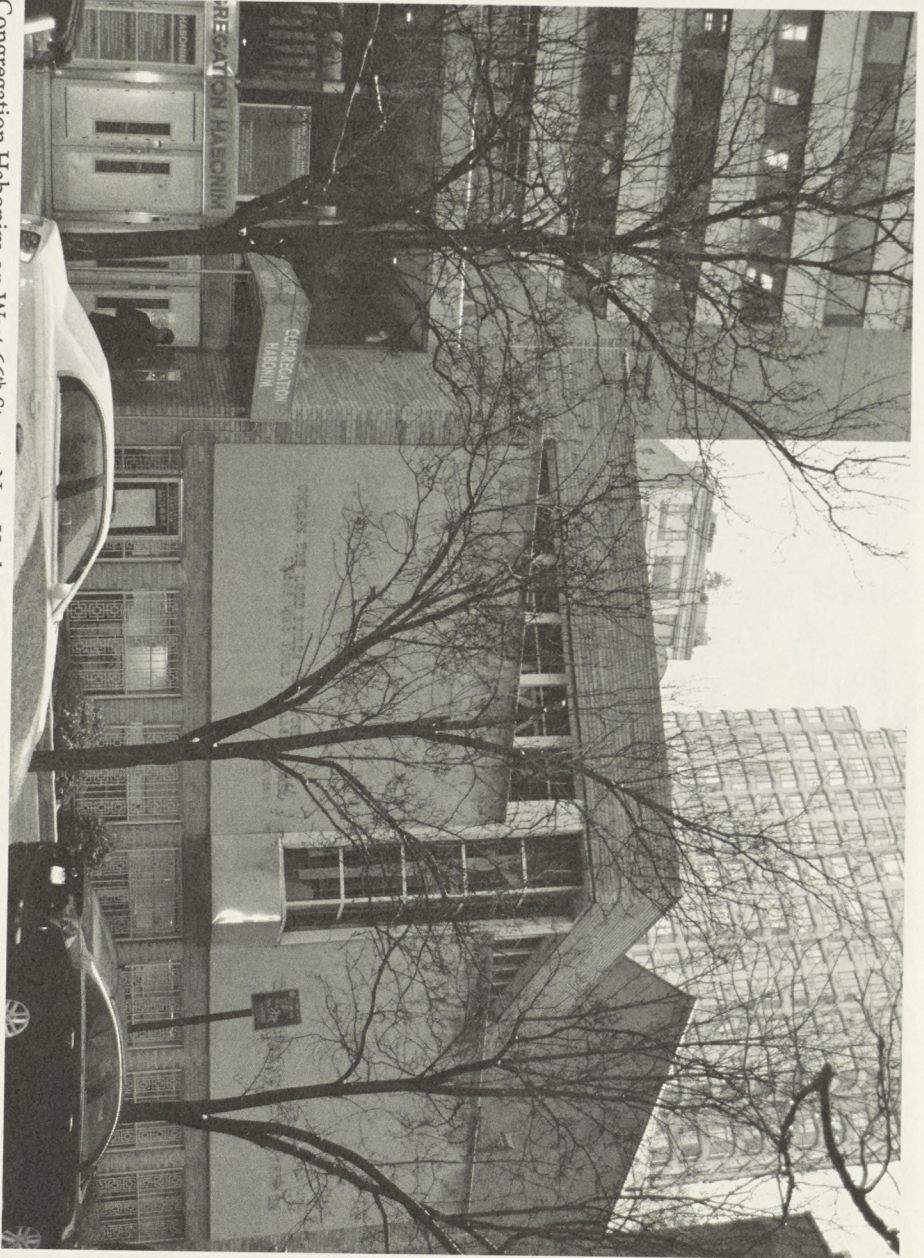
But even as Wise was constantly concerned with overseas aid, he and the congregation recognized that to a large extent that their charity mission began at home. From 1933 on, many refugees from Germany and later from Austria, who were fortunate enough to secure visas, made it to America’s shores. Actually, from 1933 to the start of World War II, more than a half of the Jews in the Third Reich found their way through the thickets of immigration laws and their harsh administration to start anew



in America. Tens of thousands of them, as did so many immigrants before them, disembarked in New York's harbor and settled in the metropolis. In line with the tradition of service established forty years earlier, Central Synagogue's men and women were there to assist the newcomers. Also on the minds of congregants, during this era of national concern over the impact on immigration amid the Depression, was the worry that "no refugee coming to America [become] a charge on our government and economy, but an asset for America's prosperity and democracy." The good name of the American Jew was at stake.⁵⁴

Thus, taking cues from the Federal government's program in 1935-36, Central Synagogue's Brotherhood dedicated itself "to take as many Jewish refugees and their families [as possible] out of New York where the congestion is so great and place them throughout the country." The Sisterhood focused on retraining the newcomers to America. In September 1940, five years into its program, the Sisterhood reported that, due to their "zest and vigor...190 persons were placed during the year." Operating out of the Community Center, efforts were expended towards "training lawyers into accountants and bookkeepers and teaching English to doctors." The Sisterhood also took on the socially and psychologically delicate task of "converting former employers of domestic service into what are frankly domestic servants. The creation of a new attitude of mind is as important as the domestic instruction. It requires skill, tact and patience." Yet, the volunteer teachers asserted that their labors were welcome and worthwhile since "it trains people for a field in which competition is less."⁵⁵

Central Synagogue also used the Community Center as a purely social meeting place for those adjusting to America. Music-lovers were particularly enamored with the Friendship House Music project, which offered a steady stream of "free, informal concerts" with refugee performers featured prominently. These events were open to the entire congregational family and gave them and Central Synagogue's long-time



Congregation Habonim on West 66th Street, New York.



members the chance to interact in a relaxed setting.⁵⁶

However, when it came to the immigrants' religious needs, both Central Synagogue's leadership and Dr. Hugo Hahn, who was a rabbi in Essen, Germany, until his synagogue was destroyed during Kristallnacht, believed that a "place of worship for newcomers was [needed] ...to provide them with the opportunity to stand on their own feet, to organize a congregation, to support it and to control its own form of worship according to their own judgment as to their spiritual needs." Though no one stopped to note the parallel experience, it was precisely that very desire for a group of Jews, new to America, to pray in a venue distinctive from all others that had brought Shaar Hashomayim and Ahawath Chesed into existence almost a century earlier. What Hahn knew was that Central Synagogue provided him with space in the Community Center for "regular services and auxiliary programs." He was proud to report in June 1940 that, subsequent to the "overcrowded" inaugural High Holiday services of 1939, "...we decided to build up a Congregation of Refugees." Recruitment was done primarily through word of mouth or through "personal contacts, held in the apartment of members." Hahn and the 350 families, who quickly heard his call, called themselves Habonim (literally "builders," but perhaps also meaning "re-builders"). They organized services "according to the forms of our former liberal congregation, with a sermon in German, but sometimes in English, a Cantor, choir and organ." A communal seder, "held in a downtown restaurant ...attended by 220 members" was a highlight of their first year of operations. Hahn noted with pride that such a gathering brought "relaxation, inspiration and comfort in the many troubles and sorrows which burden...hearts." By Rosh Hashanah 1940, response to Habonim's mission was so large that the congregation rented space for 1,200 worshipers to attend services at Town Hall.⁵⁷

In the years that followed, as Habonim's purview and influence expanded within the immigrant community, the congregation moved out



of Central Synagogue's home and rented space both in various venues on Manhattan's West Side and Queens. According to its own congregational chroniclers, Habonim "by design... was never a typical neighborhood synagogue." Rather, it sought to bring together those "who shared a common spiritual tradition regardless of exactly where they came from in Germany." It was not until 1958, that this so-called "commuter congregation" acquired its permanent home on West 66th Street.⁵⁸

Even as Wise and his congregation sought to make America a hospitable home for those able to escape Nazism, the rabbi and his lay leadership were keenly aware that there was conceivably, an alternative destination for those unwanted in the Third Reich, namely, Palestine. Indeed, in the first three years of Hitler's reign [1933-1936] some 165,000 persons settled in the Jewish homeland. In the years that followed, as the appeasing British tilted towards Arabs who were concerned about being eventually outnumbered by Jews, London severely limited the numbers of refugees admitted to that contested territory. In 1939, through its infamous White Paper, Palestine was effectively put off limits to Jews at a time when the needs of those trapped in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and the soon to be terrorized in Eastern Europe was ever more acute. According to the mandatory's strictures, only 75,000 Jews could enter Palestine over the succeeding five years.

For the World Zionist movement, Nazi oppression and British policy calcified the Jewish national movement's mission to secure a home for all Jews who needed refuge and ultimately to establish a Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine. When World War II began and the persecution of Jews in Central Europe led to their mass murder in the ghettos and death camps primarily in Eastern Europe, Zionists became increasingly aggressive and vociferous in their demands of the Allied nations to roll back the White Paper and to agree to a post-war Jewish state. The intertwining of concern for Jews in mortal danger with the call for Jewish national sovereignty



deeply perturbed Rabbi Wise. For while he would never gainsay the plight of his fellow Jews, as a staunch upholder of the Classical Reform anti-Zionist position, he had never seen Palestine as the only, or the preferred place, for Jews to reside, even for those who were threatened. Moreover, the existence and strident rhetoric of Jewish nationalists cast doubts upon the loyalty of Jews everywhere and their allegiance to the countries where they lived.

In 1930, Wise issued a warning to his congregation against “the dangers of nationalist Zionism.” In a sermon duly reported in *The New York Times*, which often carried synopses of his homilies, the rabbi asserted that a “Jewish national state in Palestine is not a major issue in American Jewish life...it does not now and never can achieve the place the Zionist nationalists demand for it.” While he asserted that help for Jews in Palestine should be “given without stint,” just like philanthropic American Jews send aid for those suffering in Eastern Europe, he wanted his listeners and Americans everywhere to understand that “Jewish nationalism, despite a generation of propaganda, is a definitely minor project in the hopes and loyalties of American Jews.” Wise prayed that “orators for the theory of Jewish nationalism would go into silence or at least visit the Grand Canyon and yell there.”⁵⁹

Predictably, in 1937, Wise dissented strongly when his own Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis [CCAR] repudiated the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 that had proclaimed that “we consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine...nor the restoration of any of our laws concerning the Jewish State.” Now, under the influence of rabbis such as Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland, Ohio, the majority of his colleagues went on record as strongly supporting the rehabilitation of Palestine as a “land hallowed by memories and hopes” and a “promise of renewed hope for many of our brethren.” While the declaration stopped short of advocating a Jewish commonwealth, the Movement’s momentum was in favor of Zionism. Jonah Wise could not abide with that decision.⁶⁰



Back at Central Synagogue, his long-time president Max Schallek was even more dogmatic and well-nigh apoplectic about Zionism. In his annual report to the congregation in 1934, he characterized Jewish nationalists who have “aroused American Jewry” as issuing a “call...based on the same racialism which we decry in Germany.” Sounding a clear alarm, he feared that the “call that we are a race having our homeland in Palestine, and that we desire as a part of our program to build up a national home...furnishes the Anti-Semite [sic] in America with his best argument against us... We must make clear that we do not have a divided loyalty and that while we hope to build up in Palestine as a refuge for Jews, we are primarily American Jews.”

Subsequently, in 1941, he wanted “our American people and the people of our city to understand that Central Synagogue represents the religious American Jew and that it is opposed to any form of nationalism, communism or fascism, all anti-religious forces and that it stands for a love of America.” Schallek also had no love lost for Jews on the left whose activities, in his view, undermined the status of American Jews. When Schallek passed away that same year, 1941, and D. Emil Klein succeeded him, the new president articulated the oft-repeated refrain that “Central Synagogue is utterly opposed to so-called nationalism, communism or fascism and any form of anti-religious activity.”⁶¹

During war-time, of course, the congregation had multiple opportunities to display its patriotism. Twice, in 1943 and 1945, the “Board of Trustees... decided to forego the annual dinner” which, in turn, gave Wise the opportunity to invite all concerned to a more meaningful communal seder. There, he told the faithful, “We shall break unleavened bread, eat bitter herbs and drink the four cups of wine in salute of our ancient freedom and in hope of the Four Freedoms for which we and our children are battling.” And just in case an anti-Semite might accuse Jews of shirking their responsibilities, Wise had a ready medium at hand to blunt all charges. Since the early



Maccabean Rally in Central Synagogue, December 6, 1942, showing support for America's participation in World War II.



1930s, the rabbi hosted a weekly half-hour, prime-time radio show called "The Message of Israel" broadcast live from Central Synagogue on the NBC network at 6:00 P.M., on Saturday evenings. While Wise did not habitually take on Jew-haters by name and was certain to emphasize the universal messages of his faith, he used this uncommon opportunity to help America's Christians, who were the vast majority of his listeners, "see their Jewish neighbors for what they were." He was aided in his endeavor primarily by Reform rabbinical colleagues. But Orthodox rabbi David de Sola Pool, minister of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue of New York, was also a frequent guest. "The Message of Israel," which continued on the air-waves beyond Wise's death in 1959, long outlasted the weekly screeds of Father Charles Coughlin, the most notorious user of the radio medium in the 1930s who spewed hatred against the Jews and President Roosevelt. "The Message of Israel" was widely seen as the Jewish equivalent of the "Catholic Hour" and the Protestant National Radio Pulpit as a minority faith was granted equal time to preach messages of tolerance, patriotism, universal brotherhood, and to advocate for the positive role religion might play in improving the lives of all Americans addressing their pressing social concerns. Wise was very proud of his efforts, which made "Central Synagogue a household word and a symbol of Judaism the length and breadth of this continent." It had "done more to spread knowledge and good will among us and our fellow-Christians than it is possible to estimate."⁶²

Meanwhile, throughout the war, Central Synagogue's Sisterhood raised funds to purchase "great quantities of goods, both for the British and for the American armed forces." The women of the congregation also handled the membership's purchase of War Bonds, an act defined as a "sacred duty." Similarly, in both a symbolic and practical move, plot owners whose loved ones were buried in the congregation's cemetery granted permission for the "removal of iron rails" from grave sites. "Such metal," it was explained, "is used in making the highest quality of fighting equipment." The names of



men in service were read out loud reverently with prayers for their safe return on Yom Kippur. And when one of Central Synagogue's sons, Platoon Sergeant Stanley Kops, was killed at Guadalcanal and honored posthumously with the Navy Cross, a plaque was unveiled for all to see at a Sabbath service.⁶³

While Central Synagogue's lay leadership was persistent in its four-square opposition to Zionism and its advocates, Jonah Wise, as a community-leader, was pushed to contemplate cooperation with Jewish nationalists for the greater good of the refugees. In the aftermath of Kristallnacht, the question of if, and how, he could work with Silver and others came to hand when discussions ensued towards creating a United Jewish Appeal. Until that acute crisis moment in Germany, for close to 15 years, JDC and the Zionist United Palestine Appeal (UPA) had frequently been in direct competition for American Jewry's charitable dollars. UPA collected funds for Hadassah, Mizrahi, the Jewish National Fund, and the Palestine Foundation Fund. In making its pitch, it asserted that "Palestine was the only solution to the Jewish problem" and occasionally scoffed at JDC's overseas projects. In dealing with local Jewish welfare funds, the two Jewish groups were at constant loggerheads over proportions of monies to be designated for Palestine as opposed to European and American relief activities. Prior attempts at conjoined efforts throughout the 1930s were unsuccessful. But, in January 1939, with the exigencies of European Jewry becoming so profound, the United Jewish Appeal plan was put back on the table. As one historian has put it, it was a deal whereby notwithstanding "ideological differences," JDC "reluctantly agreed to work for the opening up of Palestine... while the Zionists reluctantly understood the need to find other havens for Europe's Jews besides Palestine," particularly since "British restrictions" were closing off the Jewish homeland.⁶⁴

Initially, Jonah Wise was among those within JDC who were most reluctant to endorse the plan. However, due to the trauma of synagogues ablaze in the Reich, he agreed to cooperate with Silver, sharing the national



chairmanship of the new combine.⁶⁵ Yet, he retained his apprehension of the power of Zionism's thrust and projected himself as a watch-dog to assure that the poor of the Diaspora, including those starting out anew in America, not be submerged. He was known to contend that while the Zionists had other sources of philanthropic revenue "quite apart and practically equal to the United Jewish Appeal," JDC "has only one source of support and money." Allocations had to reflect that critical reality even if that "factual and honest" assessment engendered disagreements. For Wise, while "community harmony" was a valued objective, unity should not be achieved at an unreasonable "price" for those in need. In January 1941, he asserted to his congregation that while "nobody wants community quarreling...it is obvious that a 'Milquetoast' surrender... isn't worth the price."⁶⁶

In the two years that followed (1942-43) as the Holocaust raged, Wise felt compelled to move towards the Zionists' viewpoint. His change of attitude would do much to splinter him away from the Classical Reform rabbis who had long seen him as a leader and spokesman.

As late as the winter of 1942, Wise was still acting in character when he stridently opposed CCAR's declaration of support for a Jewish army to fight under a Zionist flag within the Allied Forces. For rabbis such as James G. Heller, newly elected president of CCAR, and Edward I. Israel, Executive Director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) both of whom were also colleagues within the leadership of the Zionist Organization of America, this provocative pronouncement constituted a full coming of age of Jewish nationalism within the Reform Movement. At that moment, Zionist operatives and spokesmen in London and Washington were petitioning, when they were not demanding, that a separate Jewish force be empowered to assist the forces of freedom in a war that was not going all that well for the Allies. The Zionist agenda was unambiguous. With the recognition of this contained unit, ipso facto national Jewish sovereignty in Palestine would be affirmed.⁶⁷



The call for a Jewish army would be a major component in the subsequent Biltmore Conference of May 1942. At this midtown New York hotel, 600 delegates from every American and world Zionist organization demanded unwaveringly that “the gates of Palestine be opened.” Reform Zionists very much wanted their religious group to be in line with the army proposal, and beyond that with a Jewish Commonwealth, even if the Allies did not countenance the creation of this military.⁶⁸

For Jonah Wise and his colleagues of long-standing in CCAR, this position was an abrogation of all that Reform Judaism had stood for, from his father’s day forward, and had been achieved, to his mind, in a surreptitious manner. The controversial vote, which set aside a 1935 agreement that CCAR take no position on political matters pertaining to Palestine, had taken place at the last session of the Cincinnati Conference when most of the 236 delegates had left that crucial gathering. The insurgents won but with a less than overwhelming vote of 64-38.

In the several months that followed, opposition to the Cincinnati deliberations coalesced into a counter-conference that was held in Atlantic City in June 1942. The foremost spokesman for the dissenters, Rabbi Wolsey, asserted in his keynote address that the faith had to choose between “nationalism versus religion” and to decide whether Jews should “retreat to a nationalistic ghetto” or affirm again “the universal message of the Jewish prophets.” To a large extent, Wise agreed with the sentiments of those who felt disenfranchised by the Jewish army stance. Indeed, he was the “chief draftsman” of a conference statement, which 95 rabbis signed, that “in the light of our universalistic interpretation of Jewish history and destiny, and also because of our concern for the welfare and status of the Jewish people in other parts of the world, we are unable to subscribe to or support the political emphasis now paramount in the Zionist program... Jewish nationalism tends to confuse our fellowmen about our place and function in society.”⁶⁹



The Atlantic City gathering and its conference declaration would form the mission statement for the American Council for Judaism (ACJ) created that same year. But Jonah Wise would not be among those who would so publicly oppose “a Jewish state, a Jewish flag or a Jewish army,” though in theory the Council would at least support “the development of Palestine as a refuge for persecuted Jews.” But how would these unwanted Jews get to a land that was closed off to them? Wise’s overriding concern was for the fate of refugees and perceived that the harsh American immigration laws would not permit the unwanted to find their way to the United States. Thus, he tacitly agreed albeit circumspect in his words, to the concepts articulated at the Biltmore Conference. Palestine had to be opened to sustained and substantial Jewish migration. By implication, it was a circumstance that was possible only in a sovereign Jewish state.⁷⁰

Wise’s quiet assent to what the Zionist had to do, but not what Jewish nationalism ultimately stood for, paralleled the emerging consensus within the Reform Movement. Towards the end of his life, in 1953, he would summarize his stance as follows: “I am not a Zionist. I am not a member of the American Council for Judaism. I have mentioned with respect the Israeli flag four or five years ago. I have been a consistent worker for the help and reconstruction of our unfortunate Jews in Europe.” It was in that spirit that he and most American Reform rabbis and their congregation rabbinical colleagues supported, for example, the calling in 1943 of the American Jewish Conference, a gathering that Wise described to his congregation as “a conference ... organized for the expressed purpose of establishing a common program of action on post-war Jewish problems.” For Zionists, however, the goal of this extraordinary assembly that brought under one roof virtually every Jewish organization was to do more than discuss “post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction” or even the critical and daunting question of the “rescue of European Jews.” The activists, led by Abba Hillel Silver, wanted this largest and free Diaspora community to go on the record in



support of the Biltmore Platform. When the delegates overwhelmingly backed this so-called “maximalist” position, Reform organizations—both CCAR and UAHC—had to decide whether to line up with the Zionists or to withdraw from this unity organization and pursue a common cause with the ACJ. CCAR’s executive voted strong support for Silver’s position. In a stance highly akin to Jonah Wise’s position, UAHC decided that while it would support all rescue, relief and rehabilitation requests and demands, it would remain neutral in order to “recognize the right of each individual to determine his own attitude on this controversial question.”⁷¹

In accord with this nuanced mandate to be supportive of the effort in Palestine, and later Israel, without signing on to Zionism, Wise told his congregation that “Reform Judaism, far from denying the validity of the effort to settle Palestine has made an enormous contribution to it and will continue to do so.” At the same time, he called upon American Jews to resist the “fanatical” call that “nationalism ... alone must be the core and center as well as the outstanding interpreter of Jewish life in every country, including the U.S.A.” While anxious to “forego recriminations,” he did once allow that some “conditions in Europe and in Palestine” have been “brought about by unwise programs and stubborn leadership.” Wise’s directed focus was that, “we ... must continue to sustain a mighty struggle to bring help to our brethren abroad.”⁷²

Finally, both Wise and the congregation’s leadership were on guard lest in the excitement and tension over the rise of the State of Israel, that the temporary American Jewish Conference not be constituted as a permanent authority over “the American scene” leading to the “potential nationalization of Jewish life.” In November 1948, Central Synagogue joined Temple Emanu-El in demanding that UAHC not be a party to a projected American Jewish Assembly that augured “to be the spokesman of all American Jews in domestic and international affairs.” To these critics, the Assembly “creates a single group, to be sure, but it also segregates us from



our fellow citizens.” And while “partition and a Jewish state in Palestine is now a national policy...partition and a Jewish bloc in America cannot on reflection be the desire of Jews in America.” In a strongly worded letter to UAHC’s executive, Central Synagogue’s trustees made clear that a “religious body... should not at any time forego...its religious character and its reasonability to American Jews.”⁷³



From Non-Zionism to Profound Zionism

Unlike Jonah Wise, Rabbi David J. Seligson (associate rabbi, 1945-1959; senior rabbi, 1959-1972) did not have to break with Reform tradition and the ideology of a famous father to act affirmatively towards Zionism as a palliative for Europe's distressed Jews of the late 1940s. The young rabbi, who was called to Central Synagogue's pulpit in December 1945, came from an Orthodox Religious Zionist background. Born and raised "in a totally Jewish atmosphere" where "Hebrew studies had been an integral part of [his] life," as a high school student he attended the Teachers Institute (T.I.) of the Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchanan. This school began as an educational project of the Mizrahi Movement. (Today the school is a branch of Yeshiva University.) While at the T.I., he became very close with its dean, historian and philosopher Dr. Pinkhos Churgin who was destined to become the founder of Bar Ilan University in Israel. Churgin was linked even closer to the young student when he married Seligson's aunt. But this Orthodox thinker could not have been happy when his disciple found "the Orthodox position on revelation, and its emphasis on the immutable and unchanging authority derived from Mt. Sinai was... untenable" and departed towards liberal Judaism. A budding relationship with Temple Emanu-El's Rabbi Samuel Schulman directed Seligson, with scholarship assistance, to Hebrew Union College where he was ordained in 1933.⁷⁴

As a young rabbi, Seligson showed an affinity for aspects of spiritual and cultural Zionism. While serving as spiritual leader of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue of Birmingham, England, he preached that beyond serving as "a real hope and refuge for thousands of our oppressed brethren," Zionism "will serve the Jew of the world over. It will serve as a center of inspiration to the scattered communities of Israel. From it will radiate religious, social and ethical values which will serve as beacon lights to the Jews of the Diaspora." Characterizing the rebuilding of "its waste places...to redeem the afflicted



of Israel... to build an ideal society” as a “miracle,” Seligson argued that “no Jew can be antagonistic to this modern miracle. No Jew can be indifferent to the role that Palestine is playing and continues to play in the life of the Jew.”⁷⁵

Seligson returned to the United States in 1940, where he ministered to Congregation Keneseth Israel in Port Chester, New York. From that pulpit he spoke to a Hadassah (Women’s Zionist) group in 1941 of the total harmony of Zionist and American interests as the Second World War threatened to involve America. In his view, “as the slimy tentacles of the Nazi octopus slither through the Russian defenses of the Caucasus and, as the Italo-German forces concentrate on the Egyptian frontier...the Yishuv in Palestine becomes ever more important as a bulwark for the defense, not only of the Jew, but of the world’s democracy.” Thus, “for American Jews to support Zionism... is as natural a duty as buying defense bonds.” To do otherwise, “at this time of crisis would be craven indeed.”⁷⁶

So disposed, Seligson was unsparing in his vitriolic upbraiding of the American Council for Judaism. He declared from Central Synagogue’s pulpit that its members were nothing less than “the enemy within.” Using terms like “deplorable,” “reprehensible,” “reckless,” and “irresponsible,” he characterized the “assertion...that the equality and freedom of American Jews is endangered” by their support for Zionism “is a tragic spectacle of Jewish self-hatred of the worst variety.” Anxious to “alert” his congregation and “American Reform Jews generally” of the evil being performed by “1% of American Jews,” Seligson turned to the traditional prayers to damn those who “flaunt brazenly before our fellow Americans.” The rabbi asserted that

The old prayer of the synagogue ritual comes to mind. It is a part of the 18 benedictions attributed to the slanderers, informers and traitors who wrought division in the religious camp of Israel... “So it is written: ‘And for slanders let there be no hope and let all wickedness perish as in a moment. Let all thine names be speedily cut off. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.’ ”⁷⁷



When David Seligson's angry tones were coupled with Jonah Wise's nuanced rhetoric, anti-Zionism was dead at Central Synagogue as Israel came into being.

But, the founding of the Jewish State did not augur a robust efflorescence of a Zionist cultural atmosphere at the congregation. To be sure, on May 15, 1948, a day after David Ben Gurion declared Israeli independence, Rabbi Wise affirmed the new commonwealth. However, as always, he sounded a universal theme even at this moment of heightened, particularistic Jewish enthusiasm. In a sermon entitled "Love Thy Neighbor," the rabbi predicted and emphasized that "the Jews of Palestine undoubtedly will create in the spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures a community in which all men of good-will will have confidence." Days earlier, the senior rabbi had struck his oft-repeated rescue mission note when he wrote to his congregants and implored them to "give of their money and their energy for the rescue of the remnant of Israel in Europe and the maintenance of the brave men and women in Palestine." But here he also departed from his script when he now linked the future fate of American Jews with that of refugees who sought Zion. He declared that "there is no hope *for any of us* unless we create a new life for the survivors of the most ghastly horror that humanity has ever witnessed." Perhaps speaking to himself as much as he addressed the membership, Wise asserted that "no personal feelings about Jewish difference should stand in the way of sacrificial giving at this time." Proud that "Central Synagogue is continually extending its notable programs far beyond the confines of the congregation," he called for redoubled "generous contributions to the United Jewish Appeal." Still, in his role as a leader of that umbrella organization's \$25,000,000 national campaign, Wise remained on guard that American and European Jewries receive their fair share of philanthropy. Early in 1949, his consistent position brought him into verbal conflict with aggressive American Zionist and Israeli fundraisers.⁷⁸



In the early years of Israel, congregants were occasionally reminded of developments in the Jewish state. When Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, passed away in 1952, the sad moment afforded Seligson the opportunity to teach about both "the man and [his] movement" and how this "pioneer of the spirit and research...was responsible for the issuance of the Balfour Declaration." A year later, the presence and institutional development of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Israel was noted as a matter of fact. With the merger of American Reform's two rabbinical schools in 1950, under its president Nelson Glueck, a renowned archeologist and Zionist, Jewish nationalism had become a way of life both at the Cincinnati campus, which was once the bastion of Classical Reform, and the New York school that Stephen S. Wise had initiated. Implicitly, Central Synagogue members were asked to join the march of their Movement towards Zion.⁷⁹

David Seligson also kept watch against those who might publicly defame Zionism and Israel, especially when ACJ, albeit in decline, orchestrated the attacks. The rabbi spoke out bitterly when British historian Arnold Toynbee addressing "the convention of the American Council for Judaism...likened] Zionism to anti-Semitism." In response, Seligson said that "the love of Israel is a part of the unique religio-cultural heritage of the Jewish people. It permeates the scripture; it breathes through our prayers. It colors our ritual." For Jews to abandon their "ethnic and national" orientations was tantamount "to a kind of collective suicide." Did Toynbee and his hosts actually believe that "through our willing self-destruction...Jews would bring about the spiritual millennium?"⁸⁰

A few months earlier, Seligson clearly had linked Zionism as an aid and guide to Reform Judaism fulfilling its mission to the world. He preached that in order for the Jews to survive and for "the world to be shown the way to peace, that every man has to learn to regard his fellowman as equal...we must have a spiritual homeland...the Land of the



Bible and the prophet. We are Jews and we are Jews at our proudest and our best when we fight the hardest with our money and with our talent for the building of the land and the saving of our people.”⁸¹

On other occasions, speaking within and without Central Synagogue’s pulpit, he averred that “we believe... Jewish destiny is one and indivisible. We belong to each other and are involved with each other.” In the spiritual sense, that meant that the “secular nationalism of Israel requires a new spiritual contact” that Reform Judaism could provide. Analogizing from the Babylonia of Talmudic times to American Jewry of his day, Seligson contended that “what *Bavel* [sic, written in Hebrew] contributed to Jewish survival was a *Torat Chaim* [sic, written in Hebrew], as a way of life, which made for the uniqueness of the Jews and the preservation of group life.” In the activist political realm, the rabbi emphasized—much as his predecessor had back in the 1930s—the inexorable linkage and responsibility Jews had for one another wherever they might be in danger. As early as 1959, Seligson was among the first within the American rabbinate to denounce the Soviet policy of “cultural and spiritual genocide.” In a sermon entitled “Lament for Russian Jewry,” that was reported upon in *The New York Times*, Seligson spoke of “cultural pogroms” and prayed that “in humanity’s redemption from sorrow and fear, redemption may come also to the afflicted our people.”⁸²

Subsequently, Seligson and lay leader J. Jacques Stone became delegates representing CCAR and UAHC in an “historic gathering” in Washington, D.C., in April 1964, where the problem of “growing discrimination against Jews in Soviet Russia” was discussed. The “Plight of Soviet Jewry” was also on the agenda of a joint meeting in 1964 of the Brotherhood and Sisterhood. Two years later, congregants were encouraged to join with thousands of fellow Jews in one of the initial “mass demonstrations on behalf of Soviet Jewry.”⁸³

Though Central Synagogue was surely *au courant* about the crises Jews faced worldwide and certainly within the Jewish state, its focus on Israel



did not become central to the synagogue's culture until the days after the Six Day War of June 1967. Part of the reason for the time lag was due to the attitudes of some of the laymen who sat in the front rows or near the Holy Ark. (These leaders sat with their wives during the services. Though women had long been trustees, effectively, the males governed the congregation. Not until the 1980s would Central Synagogue elect its first woman president, Mildred Ross.) An assistant rabbi of the time, Lewis E. Bogage has characterized the point of views of these leaders as "vacuous" when it came to interest in Israel or at most "lukewarm when it came to Zionist ideas." Bogage who had studied at Hebrew University before studying for the Reform rabbinate had strong Zionist feelings but had to be careful how he spoke about the Jewish State so as not to offend those who still had wrinkled American Council for Judaism membership cards in their billfolds.

Bogage has recalled that on one Kol Nidre night in the early 1960s, he had wanted to preach about "Israel... as a beautiful open state with great principles." Though he would stay clear of "addressing the harsh realities of young statehood," he was concerned how even that "idealized" message would play in the pews. To avoid controversy, he opened his remarks with a discussion of Nelson Glueck's archeological studies in the Holy Land and then he carefully segued towards an upbeat description of the modern geography and life in Israel.

Israel received a somewhat better reception in the congregation's religious school and youth groups. UAHC was producing new types of materials that taught aspects of Zionist culture to youngsters. "Dribbles of information," as Bogage has described these complementary sources, found their way into Central Synagogue's school, particularly within Confirmation classes. But "Zionism was not reflected in the priorities of the congregation."⁸⁴

A dramatic change in congregational attitudes was palpable in Rabbi



Seligson's charge to the congregation on Rosh Hashanah of 1967. In his review of the year, he attested that the coming New Year was special "in view of what happened to the Jewish people during the past year, especially those fateful days in the first week of June, we must surely and proudly not forget but remember." He declared that the Six Day War was "the *great watershed* of Jewish history of our times." Seligson observed proudly that "the change from the mood of Auschwitz and Buchenwald from the disillusionment of that experience to the affirmation and will to live of an undefeated people."⁸⁵

In a subsequent address, Seligson would stay very much on the message of Jewish physical heroism as an answer to the lot of those "butchered on Hitler's altar." Striking a note fundamentally different just a few years earlier when he had rhapsodized about how Zionism helped Reform Judaism fulfill its universalized mission to the world, he now argued that the Israelis' military success had shown the world "the *true nature of the Jewish people*."⁸⁶ Similarly, during Hanukkah in 1968, Seligson saw the commemorated victory as more than "a story of ancient courage alone. For in our time, the courage of Israel has demonstrated to the world that the Jewish will to live is strong, that the Maccabean spirit lives on."⁸⁷

Indeed, almost immediately after the Six Day War, from the pulpit and in the pews, a different spirit began to permeate the congregation. Congregants, including a significant number of new affiliates who harbored more positive perspectives towards Zionism, were now anxious to think and learn about Zionism and Israel. They paid close attention to Bogage's "Illustrated Report on Israel," based on his experiences travelling in Israel immediately after the Six Day War. He had accompanied his congregant and U.S. Senator Jacob J. Javits on a fact-finding trip just after the cease fire. The increased interest in Israel was likewise readily apparent in the adult education study options. In prior years, the emphasis of the frequent breakfast seminars had been on the history of Reform Judaism and Bible study. In 1964, for



Central Synagogue, July 6, 1970, at the 100th anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone.



example, discussions focused on “What is Reform Judaism... what are its origins and what is its meaning today.” The Bible seminar looked at the Book of Genesis and considered the beginnings of mankind. In October 1967, in addition to standard courses on the Bible intended for “their literary and humanistic value,” members were offered seminars on “The Zionist Idea and its Effect on History,” “Israel: The Modern State” and “The World Role of Israel Today.” This new curriculum traced the “growth and development” of Jewish nationalism from its nineteenth century origins from the perspective of “its relevance to present day Judaism.” Similarly, students were sensitized to “the influence of modern Israel in contemporary Jewish life” and its “effect... psychologically and sociologically on the American Jewish community.” Perhaps, most significantly, as a guide to personal action, Seligson and Bogage led “a discussion of what our responsibility is to the maintenance, upkeep and preservation of the State of Israel and our relationship to it as American Jews.” Meanwhile, those who attended Sabbath morning services on November 19, 1967, heard Rabbi Melvin R. Zager of the Tel Aviv Progressive Congregation discuss “the difficulties of teaching, preaching and representing Reform Judaism in the State of Israel.”⁸⁸

At that point, both Central Synagogue’s rabbinic leadership and their national Movement began speaking strongly about breaking the hegemony Orthodox Judaism had maintained over religious life in the Jewish state. In a book proposal called *Plain Talk* that Seligson conceived of in August 1967, Seligson opined that “the population of Israel, particularly the pioneers and the native born, really have no religion, but the religion they do not have is Orthodox.” Nonetheless, “there is a felt need for a new religious orientation, a spiritual undergirding for the secular nationalism that prevails in Israel.” However, “this urge” has been “alienated by the theocratic authoritarianism of the religious political party with its government imposed regimen.”⁸⁹



Central Synagogue students gathering in front of the sanctuary for the Israel Day Parade, late 1970s.



It remained, however, for a dynamic and creative Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman (assistant rabbi, 1970-1972; senior rabbi, 1972-1985) to bring Zionism and Israel into the heart and core of synagogue life at Central Synagogue. A panoply of activities raised consciousness of, and funds for, the Jewish State. The year of his arrival, the Sisterhood and Brotherhood jointly sponsored their first "Gala Israel Festival." In 1973, as the Jewish state commemorated its 25th anniversary, the congregation experienced on Sunday, May 6, its first specially created "service and program" as that event was defined as "one of our annual festivals." Prior to that time, when Israel's birthday occurred, it was "acknowledged and saluted, respectfully and rationally honored... with an offering of genteel prayers during Sabbath worship." By then, Zimmerman had energized many congregants while troubling "some very unhappy members" when he decreed that the Israeli flag had to fly from the *bimah* across from Old Glory. Until then, a specially created "Central Synagogue flag," a legacy from Rabbi Wise's era, had graced the podium. The young rabbi also ruffled some feathers when he authored "a creative prayer in Hebrew and English" for the State of Israel that he recited holding the Torah before its return to the Ark at the conclusion of the Torah portion of the Sabbath service. During Rabbi Wise and Seligson's heydays, "when the Torah was returned to the ark, one of the rabbis would recite Longfellow's, 'Sail On O Ship of State'" while the organ played "America" as background music concluding with the ringing of chimes.⁹⁰

As another sign of the changing times within Central Synagogue, at the 1973 celebration and at other occasions, when congregants were called upon to support the UJA, the charity so dear to Jonah Wise, monies were explicitly earmarked for the Israel Emergency Fund. No carping about local needs occurred, though such concerns certainly existed. Such largesse was deemed as "a religious act in discharge of each member's obligation to his congregation and world Jewry." The religious school's curriculum was amended to add Israeli dance and Modern Israel studies for Upper School

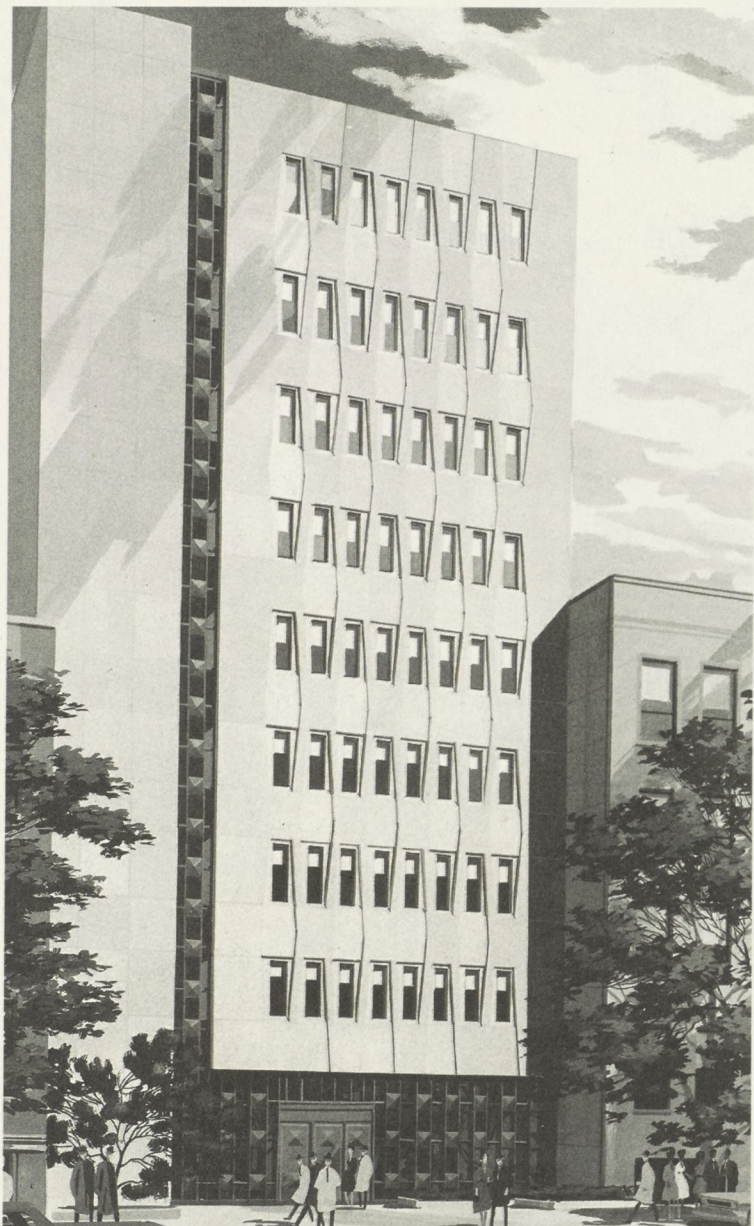


students. All students were encouraged to celebrate Tu BiSh'vat [Arbor Day in Israel] through the purchase of trees in Israel. Linking two international Jewish concerns, purchasers were told that their saplings would find a home in a designated UAHC area called the Freedom Forest for Soviet Jewry. As of 1975, the congregation's youngsters were marching in the Salute to Israel Parade. The study of Hebrew was upgraded beyond the rudiments of prayer book study to allow students the possibility of speaking the language of the Land of Israel. As part of the Parent Parallel Education initiative, Zimmerman redoubled on an initiative that Bogage had started as "Zionism and Reform," which was occasionally taught and which provided mothers and fathers with a stronger sense of what their children were learning.⁹¹

Rabbi Zimmerman and his wife, Judy, were extraordinarily pleased when, in March 1976, they led forty congregants on a two-week tour of Israel. Previously, the congregation had been informed and was proud of their rabbi's several trips to Israel, where he was a staunch advocate for Reform's role in the spiritual and religious-political life of the Jewish State.⁹² In January 1975, he started talking about taking them with him as "a MITZVAH [sic] not just as an economic necessity" for Israel. A year later, after overcoming some reservations about travel to "a country that is unsafe or on the verge of war," the plan came to fruition as Central Synagogue was linked even further with the people and culture of Israel. For several years, the mission was a highlight of the congregational calendar. In 1976, interest in Israel was institutionalized when an Israel Committee was founded. President Samuel Brodsky explained that "the subject is claiming a greater share of our daily attention, and yet we tend to feel inadequate, if not helpless to affect the course of events." Accordingly, "to fortify ourselves with a better background... we need a forum in which to analyze our relationship to Israel, to answer the questions of how important is Israel to us and vice versa."⁹³



But perhaps Rabbi Zimmerman's proudest moment as a promoter of Israel on 55th Street in Manhattan took place in 1979, when he shared with the congregation a letter from a young "member of Central Synagogue and an ex-president of the Youth Group" who reported from Israel on her six-month work-study program under the auspices of the National Federation of Temple Youth. After describing the joys of her stay, she concluded, "Israel is my home and this feeling and experience is what I have tried to bring across to those who I know and to those who I do not know yet but with whom I feel a kinship unique among Jews everywhere."⁹⁴



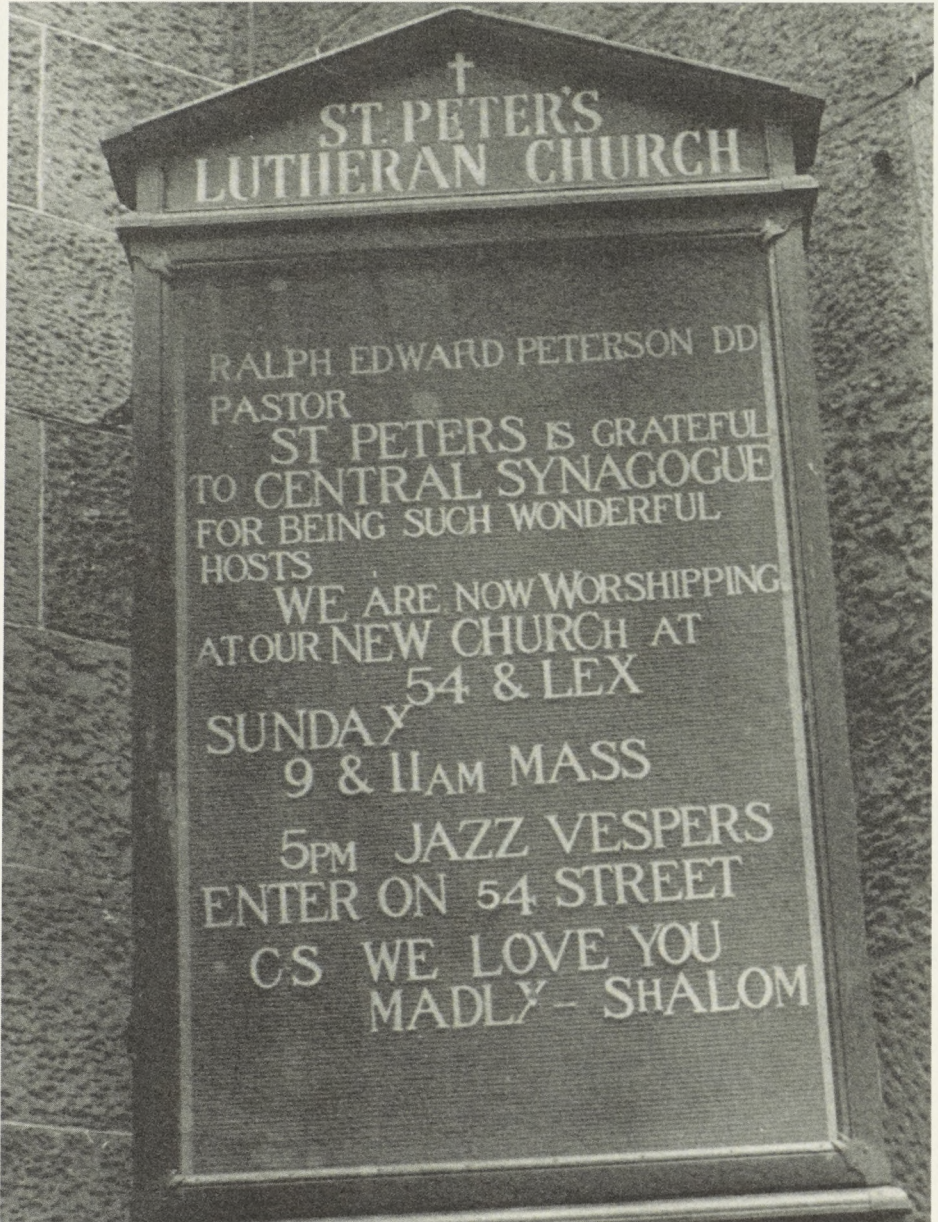
Architect Ely Jacques Kahn's presentation rendering, 1965, for the new Community House at 123 East 55th Street, New York.



New Urban Concerns

In the 1970s and 1980s, Central Synagogue remained an internationally aware congregation. As always, it was concerned with the fate of fellow Jews under attack. In keeping with the tenor of those critical times, members and rabbis took to the streets on behalf of Soviet Jewry. In 1980, reflecting an on-going commitment, the monthly bulletin addressed the following poignant appeal to those within congregational ranks who *had not* attended the prior years' Solidarity Sunday for Soviet Jewry: "If you didn't march last year because things were getting better, march this year before they get any worse." Beyond boldly noting the importance of rallies, as an additional meaningful experiential activity for children and parents, congregational families were asked to "adopt" a Russian Jewish family that awaited a visa to immigrate to Israel. Members were asked to write letters of encouragement to their overseas brethren, and small gifts marking the Jewish holidays that were made in religious school classes found their way to anxious hands in the Soviet Union.⁹⁵

During this period, Central Synagogue, as the quintessential urban congregation, also rode with steady hands and sure feet the roller-coaster ride of decline and revival of its beloved city. Through brick and mortar, with the construction of a new community house that opened in 1968, a statement was made that this urban house of worship was here to stay in the metropolis. Through providing a new up-to date-venue for social, cultural and educational activities, Central Synagogue made clear that it was intent on blunting the "call of the suburbs," a fear that Rabbi Wise had first expressed early on during the post-war period. Some years later, in 1975, with the congregation holding its membership and dues base steady, albeit with some folks leaving for suburbia while others pledging their allegiance to the city, president Samuel Brodsky would observe with pride that "the most important development ... is that we have become that kind



In 1977, St. Peter's Church gave Central Synagogue a hearty thank you on the church's bulletin board displayed at Central Synagogue.



of center of Jewish community life which we used to think was possible only in a suburban congregation... We have now demythologized the concept that... cultural programs, interfaith programs and community activities would not be worth the efforts for a Manhattan congregation." He was pleased to report that members and community friends, Jewish and Christian, consistently turned out for Central Synagogue programs even in rough economic times and amid concerns over "crime control, housing problems, and other problems of our city which continues to suffer through crisis after crisis."⁹⁶

Among the regulars who attended Sabbath services and Sunday programs were scions of long-time Central Synagogue families who lived across city bridges and whose heritage of involvement and ongoing friendship circles drove them back to their Midtown religious ancestral home. Beginning in 1983, the congregation instituted in the new facility, lay-led daily weekday morning services attractive to those working in the area who wished to recite their daily prayers in a Reform venue; particularly those who felt the obligation to say *Kaddish* (the memorial prayer) for departed loved ones. Making the Jonah B. Wise Community House, later referred to as the Community House, also available to "outside" groups helped the organizational bottom-line while adding a touch of diversity to the on-going activities across the street from the sanctuary. Needless to say, as the city began to secure stronger financial footing, even during some downturns in the mid-1980s, Central Synagogue became even more attractive to a new generation of Jews who rediscovered, often with their young children in tow, the joys of Manhattan while anxious to maintain their Jewish ties. Some well-ensconced members, like those so-called "fifth generation Centralites," deemed this new "heterogeneous mixture" of Jews as a problem. However, for the rabbis "newness was a challenge and opportunity to forge out of a tradition a dynamic openness" and "a sense of rootedness."⁹⁷



Sisterhood members served visually impaired guests at a seder in the 1980s. Sam Levinson was the entertainer at the dinner.



The congregation's commitment to perseverance within New York City was grandly and frequently honored. For its part, eager to have Central Synagogue remain forever part of the city scene, the metropolitan officials, and later the state and the federal government, would immortalize their stately religious building—and those who followed its traditions—through its designation as a New York City Community Trust (1957) and then as a New York City (1966) and national historical landmark (1975). As always, the congregational mission transcended standing and serving the religious and cultural needs of its Jews. Rather, in the 1970s and 1980s, the rabbis and laity reconnected to their long-standing heritage of aiding those in the city who were poor, disadvantaged or troubled. And there was much work to be done.⁹⁸

Early in his tenure, Rabbi Zimmerman spoke of renewing the congregation's mission in light of the times. At the annual congregational meeting of 1973, he averred that “never have there been so many opportunities for service ...it is matter of recapturing the spirit of this great congregation and turning its gaze in that spirit to the present and future...I see a congregation preparing itself in heart and spirit to assist in rebuilding and recreating the urban environment in which we live.”⁹⁹

The congregation's distinguished past and proud present were combined in the mid-1970s when its women, now accompanied by its men, returned to the Lower East Side as friendly visitors. At that point, the New York Jewish community, after a generation or more of neglect, was becoming keenly aware of its “forgotten” fellow Jews, especially the elderly indigent who had been left behind as so many others had achieved affluence and social standing in the metropolis. Situated downtown, Project Ezra established ongoing relationships with scores of shut-ins and was grateful when it became a favored charity. Not only did volunteers meet individually with their clients in their apartments, but occasionally a special luncheon and entertainment program was tendered at Central Synagogue for those in need of both good food and companionship. A comparable relationship



was created with the Jewish Braille Institute of America for those who “lead relatively monotonous, sedentary lives” as Books on Tape and programs of music and entertainment were offered for the sightless at the synagogue. Sisterhood members went the extra step of personally reading to the blind.¹⁰⁰

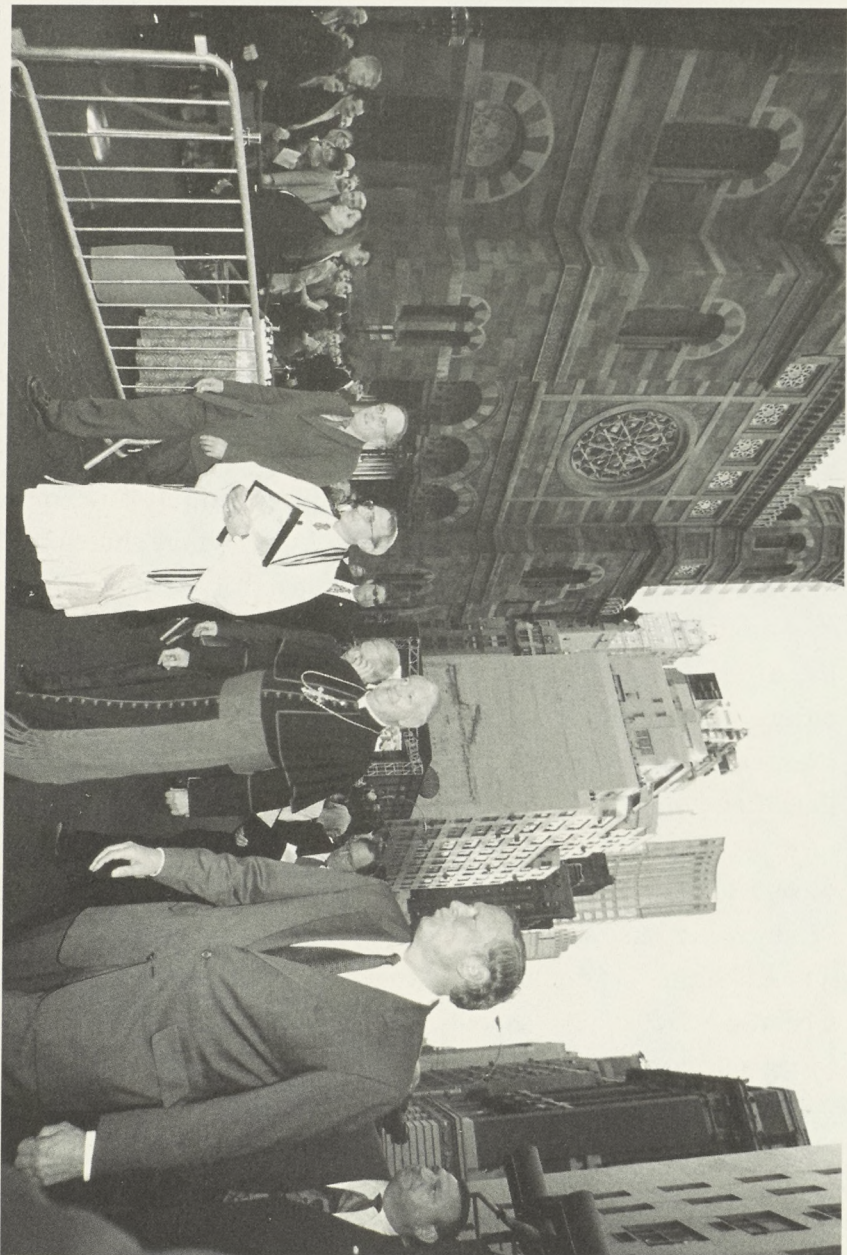
In the early 1980s, the congregation responded with similar largesse and concern, when “the plight of the homeless and hungry of all faiths and backgrounds worsens dramatically... as cold weather spreads to New York.” Under the leadership of Dr. Nathan Shapiro, a group that came to be known as the Caring Committee established a breakfast program twice a week, first in the vestry rooms and then at the Community House. Soon, this “feeding program...one of the few that seeks to feed all who arrive without turning anyone away,” was accommodating “300 individuals who are provided with additional food for a second meal of the day.”¹⁰¹

This effort, part of a consortium with local churches, eventuated into a collateral contribution to greater religious understanding in the neighborhood. One of the partners, located just one block away from the synagogue, was St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. In prior generations, this “German church” had a reputation for intolerance towards Jews. This philanthropic effort that both Rabbi Zimmerman and Pastor Ralph Peterson championed marked the beginning of rapprochement. Friendship between the two congregations was further enhanced when the synagogue allowed the church to use a portion of its sanctuary building for Christian religious services while St. Peter’s was restructured. A series of seminars or religious dialogues on Israel and the Holocaust and other pressing local issues brought the two faiths and institutions closer together. To this date [2014], St. Peter’s notes in its mission statement that “perhaps the strongest and longest-continuing interfaith relationship between Saint Peter’s Church and another religious institution is that with neighboring Central Synagogue. The two congregations regularly engage in activities and



dialogue together, including the annual remembrance of the Holocaust.”¹⁰²

Despite all of his commitments, and his and the congregation's experience in community service, Rabbi Zimmerman was initially and admittedly “a neophyte” when it came to addressing the social pathology of alcoholism and drug abuse among Jews. His consciousness was, however, raised exponentially when, early in his time at Central Synagogue, a congregant appeared at his study and articulated her family's tale of woe. Her husband, “whom no one ever saw with a drink in his mouth on social occasions,” was, in fact, an alcoholic who desperately needed help. In the months that followed, as he counseled the family, Zimmerman was led on an impactful “journey” into New York's dark world of substance abuse and of the palliatives of Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] and Al-Anon meetings. The rabbi has recalled that “in six months I was in more church basements than I could count,” where he invariably noted that Jewish people were a significant portion of those afflicted and affected. Convinced that there had to be a Jewish venue for these troubled souls and their distressed loved ones, Zimmerman first spoke to his congregation about his new-found cause and then established a liaison with the social work professionals at the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. Although his outcry was often met with resistance from other rabbis who perceived that alcoholism was not a Jewish problem and/or did not want “to wash our dirty linen,” Zimmerman persevered. Out of his efforts evolved a Federation Task Force on Alcoholism that eventually morphed into the Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons and Significant Others [JACS]. Central Synagogue was also the site of the first AA meeting held under a congregation's roof; this social welfare effort, so much part of its mission, became an archetype for synagogues nationally. The program remained in place for more than a quarter century.¹⁰³



September 9, 2001, procession at the reconsecration of Central Synagogue after the fire of 1998. Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein led the procession, which included (left to right): New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Edward Cardinal Egan, New York Governor George Pataki, and clergy from many religious congregations.



Shofar blowers on the south entrance steps of Central Synagogue at the reconsecration ceremonies of September 9, 2001.



Sustained Commitments

In July 1991, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein was called to the Central Synagogue pulpit and began a twenty-three-year tenure at the congregation; second only to Jonah B. Wise.¹⁰⁴ Just a year into his work, synagogue president Michael J. Weinberger spoke warmly of “a rabbi who both listened and heard, who taught and challenged, who initiated the new and respected the old, who both earned and received the admiration and affection of those he dealt with and who seems to be enjoying every minute of it!” Weinberger’s words would prove largely prophetic about Rubinstein’s career and the fate of the synagogue to the present day [2014]. While the rabbi and his congregation would experience together some very trying and joyless times, most notably the 1998 fire that well-nigh destroyed their landmark building and which called upon all the spiritual and financial resources that could be mustered to rebuild, sustained commitments to Central Synagogue’s missions have marked its last two decades of service to their community and the wider Jewish world.¹⁰⁵

On continuing fronts, profound Zionism and unyielding support for Israel was constantly preached and acted upon in a multitude of ways. The Religious School curriculum focused attention on the life and culture of the Jewish State. “Enrichment elective courses,” including Israeli dancing, were now called *chuggim* as Hebrew increasingly was emphasized as a living language. To keep up with their youngsters, the synagogue offered adults “Speed Hebrew” courses within the Institute of Jewish Studies. Parents and children bought trees on Tu BiSh’vat and thousands of saplings were planted in the Central Synagogue grove. Dads and moms applauded vigorously as their boys and girls marched in the annual Salute to Israel Parade, several weeks after families participated in the Yom HaAtzma-ut [Israel Independence Day] ceremony. As high-school students, the most involved youngsters were treated to an Israel learning experience through



the largesse of a Youth Scholarship Fund. Adults were regularly provided with talks and discussions about the problems Israel faced at the United Nations. Those who wished to do more than empathize with the unfair treatment Israel received from the international community participated in the Critical Issues Committee that sought, for example, to combat the Arab economic boycott of Israel. Less than two years into his tenure, Rabbi Rubinstein and the Board of Trustees codified their enthusiasm for Israel as the congregation's strategic plan looked ahead towards the year 2,000 and beyond. In a revised mission statement, "connecting with and supporting Jews in Israel and around the world: to affirm the reality of *C'lal Yisrael*," [the collective community of Israel] was deemed as a "value integral to the life of members."¹⁰⁶

In February 2001, the synagogue community got a chance to personally "affirm...that Jews are all intertwined each with the other" when Rabbi Rubinstein organized a "Solidarity Mission to Israel." Congregational excursions to Israel had been common fare from Rabbi Zimmerman's time. Rabbi Rubinstein was a frequent visitor to Jerusalem. In fact, upon return from one trip in October 1992, he had reported optimistically about "a good time for Israel" where "for the first time not hearing 'things have never been that bad.'" He "sensed a feeling of well-being, something Israelis have not felt for a long time." But this journey nine years later was different. Four months earlier, at the end of September 2000, the second intifada had begun. Under siege, Israel desperately needed the support of, and visitations from, Diaspora Jews to bolster its spirits and economy. Many Jews in America were wary of traveling to such a volatile hot spot. At Central Synagogue, members were "urged ...to stand with Israel by being on the ground with Israel." Rubinstein declared: "We describe the Jewish people as family, and families gather at unplanned occasions of struggle. We need each other most of all when we hurt, so it should be natural to visit Israel especially when it is



being assaulted and threatened.” For those who could not make the trip, the rabbi implored them to make clear to the then new President George W. Bush administration how committed American Jews were to the U.S. staying the course of “compassion[ate Conservative]” support for the Jewish State.¹⁰⁷

By that time, Rabbi Rubinstein was also speaking firmly from the pulpit that his listeners had to support UJA-Federation [the two major charities had merged in 1986] despite their reservations about Israeli government positions on the status of Reform Judaism and its approach towards the peace process. On Rosh Hashanah 1998, he acknowledged that both he, and unquestionably most of his laity, were unhappy with the “lack of religious diversity” in Israel. He likewise believed that most American Jews questioned how committed the Netanyahu government was towards reaching workable rapprochements with the Palestinians. Yet he took great pains to make clear that such difficulties should not deter Central Synagogue members from contributing their fair share to UJA. Rubinstein asserted that nothing less than “the wholeness of the Jewish community” was “at stake.” Rather than complain about the umbrella charity’s distribution policies, Rubinstein made clear that this new combined agency served equally well the needs of Jews in the United States, including the Soviet Jewish refugees in their midst, as well as those requiring assistance within the Israeli population. Moreover, he averred that “a significant segment of...Israel funding has been designated for promoting diversity, tolerance and Jewish education.”¹⁰⁸

However, given his hopes for “diversity” and “tolerance” in Israel, Rabbi Rubinstein pulled no punches when proposed legislation in the Israeli Knesset attempted to change the Law of Conversion and further concentrate power within the Chief Rabbinate in 2010. This bill augured to further marginalize Reform Jews and Judaism in the Jewish State by granting Orthodox rabbis “exclusive oversight of all conversion matters, putting non-Orthodox conversions performed abroad at risk and greatly limiting



the options available to Israelis and *olim* (immigrants to Israel).” The rabbi wrote to his congregants while on “summer Sabbatical,” and called upon them to write to Prime Minister Netanyahu immediately expressing their dismay and dissent.¹⁰⁹

Rubinstein’s concerns on this volatile specific issue harkened back—to a very limited degree—to Jonah Wise’s constant apprehensions that Israel might attempt to impose hegemony over the “American scene.” Otherwise, as we have seen, the rabbi enthusiastically embraced “the nationalization of Jewish life.” Of course, by the 1990s, in innumerable other realms, Classical Reform at Central Synagogue was merely a quaint memory. This congregation followed, and often blazed, the paths Reform Judaism was taking in the contemporary era. Emblematic in style and substance of the multi-dimensional expansion of traditionalism within the synagogue was the visage of Rabbi Rubinstein in the sanctuary. The spiritual leader stood in the pulpit with a yarmulke and prayer shawl as he led the prayers. Such a sartorial sensibility had been his deal-breaker demand when he was interviewed for his post. Rubinstein, reportedly, told the search committee, in no uncertain terms, that “you had better have a long discussion, not about me, but about who you are as a Reform synagogue. Reform Judaism is about the ability to make decisions,” and he had decided that traditional garb was right for him. The board quickly concurred. It will be recalled that when Jonah Wise came on board in 1926, he had demanded almost the exact opposite of those who had planned his installation. He was by disposition unable to wear a hat during services and wanted those around him to act as he did. Bare-headedness became the congregation’s tradition. Rabbi Zimmerman had wanted a change but “did not push the issue.” Under Rubinstein, however, true to his belief that since “Reform Judaism ...allows people to make decisions about ritual,” congregants, both men and women, have the option of *kippah* and *tallit*. Presently, most worshippers follow the rabbi’s lead but it is their choice to make.¹¹⁰



One long-standing emphasis of Classical Reform and, for that matter, of Central Synagogue's 150-year history remained as powerful as ever. The congregation was still fundamentally committed to serving the poor and the oppressed whether in their city or around the world. The 2000 revised synagogue mission statement reaffirmed the "integral...value...of social action to help those in need." In the 1990s, out on the streets, evoking the spirit of Rebekah Kohut's cohorts of friendly visitors, and even further back to the Matzot Committee of the 1850s, the Caring Committee worked closely with City Harvest. This food rescue organization collects excess foods from restaurants, groceries and the like for distribution to the hungry of the city. Beginning in 1991, the synagogue joined in through its High Holiday Hunger Project. Congregants were asked to "bring as many bags as they can...filled with non-perishable goods on Yom Kippur Day." Such charity was a fitting complement to the prayers offered on the Day of Atonement. Similarly, the congregation "partnered" with Mazon, an American Jewish non-profit organization, dedicated to ending hunger in the U.S. and Israel. In 1986, at a time when all-too-many Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings and other Jewish celebrations were marked by excess, Boston-based social commentator, Leonard Fein, called upon his fellow Jews to think of the poor at these joyous events. He asked, and many communities and individuals responded to the needs of the poor through a donation of three percent of the cost of the happy occasion to the Mazon food program. Central Synagogue signed on to the program in 1986 and several years later sponsored its own Interfaith Hunger Service Central with neighboring churches.¹¹¹

In 1993, Rabbi Rubinstein took to the pulpit, anxious to sustain the momentum of the Caring Committee's ten-year-old "feeding program" and its relationship with Project Ezra. Through a strong homily, he compared the evil of ignoring "the weak, the feeble... the invisible citizens of society," to the "treachery" of Amalek, the tribe that attacked the Jews' Biblical



ancestors in the desert of Sinai. For him, “we are commanded to remember Amalek, not simply to blot out its name and the forces of destruction everywhere, if only we could, but also to redress the wrongs at the frayed edges of our society and to easily become invisible... This Torah portion is about Amalek, but it is also about us.”¹¹²

The annual Mitzvah Day was one of the many positive responses to this and subsequent plaintive pulpit calls. Through Mitzvah Day, the congregation established a liaison with Habitat for Humanity, God’s Love We Deliver that assisted AIDS patients, and cleaned up Carl Schurz Park, among other good deeds.¹¹³

Rubinstein also made clear that the congregation’s moral responsibilities transcended its city, nation and even Jewish causes. Rosh Hashanah 5755 (1994) was a propitious time to remind his listeners that even if it were right for Jews to be outraged at the bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Argentina just two months earlier, it was also proper to be mindful and proactive in response to the “enormous brutality, devastation and sickness that has devastated the people of Rwanda.” Proactive on both fronts, the synagogue raised funds to help rebuild the Jewish Center and joined UAHC and other Jewish humanitarian organizations in funding the construction of a Rwanda Center for thousands of Tutsi refugees who had fled the genocidal attacks of Hutu militia in that East African nation.¹¹⁴

Four years later (1998), it was time for the Religious School pupils to act upon what they were learning; they reached out to Albanian refugees who had been forced from their homes in Kosovo. As one local New York Jewish newspaper wrote, “First it was parents who were asked to give money. Now their kids are getting involved.” Central Synagogue’s young and old were publicly praised for assembling 1,000 “Kits for Kosovo” consisting of hand towels, toothpaste and toothbrushes, bandages, and emergency candles. It remained for the rabbi to put a gloss on the effort as



he defined the activism on behalf of Gentiles “as a Jewish issue. It is a matter of history, religious values and the core of our faith and purpose.”¹¹⁵

Religious school children and their parents likewise addressed and embraced with similar vigor the financial calamities that befell Argentinean Jewry in the new century when their nation’s economy collapsed. Recognizing, as Rabbi Rubinstein put it, that Jewish brethren had become “the ‘new poor’...the ‘sudden poor’” and were “in need of emergency assistance to survive,” Central Synagogue adopted the Jews of Córdoba. Rabbi Rubinstein reported in a heartfelt sermon in September 2004 that “the children of our Religious School gathered funds to support Jewish children in that city. Our children believed that they had to take care of other children who suffer the financial loss of their parents and community.” He pledged, “This year we will do more.” Subsequently, he organized a mission to Argentina “to see the devastation for ourselves and to work with the community.” His constant refrain was: “There are Jews in desperate need. We constantly reach out to those who are hurting in our city. Now, in the very best tradition of this congregation, we reach out to help those who, though out of sight, are very much in mind... We must not forsake them.”¹¹⁶

Even as Rabbi Rubinstein words and actions added luster to Central Synagogue’s world mission, he was also outspoken in redoubling the synagogue’s other, equally important heritage. The 1990s and the first decade of the new century was a time for this Reform congregation to strengthen the religious group identity of the Jews both in its midst and within the city. The findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey greatly troubled the rabbi. He would frequently reference its worrisome results in his sermons and columns in the synagogue’s *Bulletin*. He was “traumatized by the shock,” that “according to our best thinkers and most scientific analyses, we can no longer assume Jewish survival. We have been put on notice that we are an endangered species, you and I. The fictional parable on the last Jew on earth, or at least the last Jew in America, is now imaginable, if not foreseeable.”¹¹⁷



Rubinstein was especially perturbed that reportedly more than half of Jews were marrying out of the faith and that a similar cohort, though not necessarily the same people, did not “feel that being Jewish is very important.” This dramatic step back from affiliation and allegiance to Judaism was highly noticeable in New York City where even in this largest Jewish Diaspora city, it was possible for those who did not care about their religious future simply to drift away. It would be said that among the gentrified Jews of that era, who gave much vitality to their city but who, on the other hand, evinced little interest in ancestral ties, some might continue a High Holiday tradition that dated back generations. They promenaded around their neighborhood in their finest clothes while abstaining from stopping at the synagogue of their choice. But now their crowd likely included non-Jewish friends and, increasingly, relatives.¹¹⁸

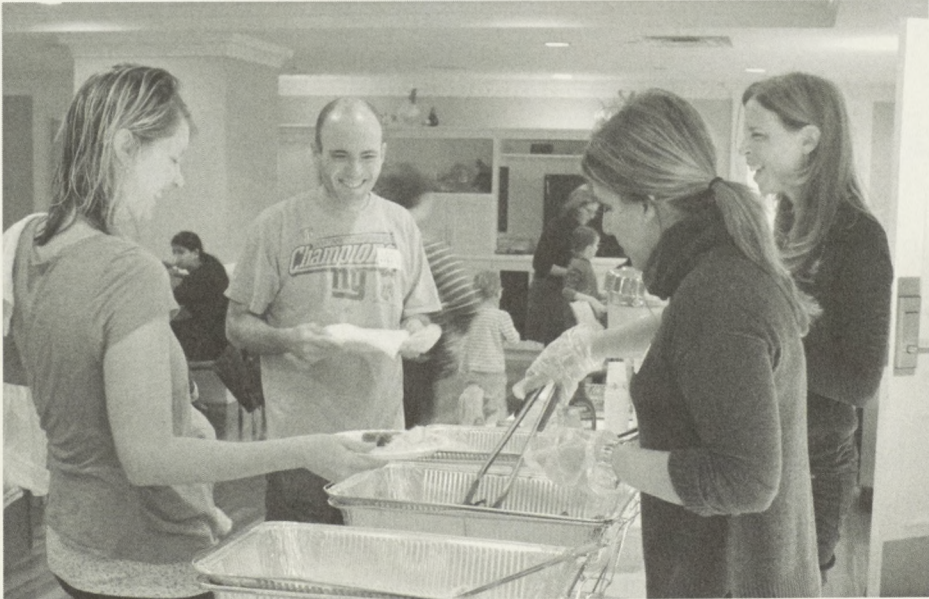
Among the more daunting challenges that vexed the congregation and the larger Jewish community at this critical moment was the question of whether outreach towards intermarried couples would “statistically and substantively benefit the Jewish community.” In other words, should limited communal and synagogue resources be allocated primarily to prevent exogamy as opposed to working to “bring back” to Jewish involvement those who had married-out? Early in his career at Central Synagogue, Rubinstein and his laity engaged in fact-finding projects that were marked by a willingness to hear opposing voices. Under the auspices of the Steinhardt Forum, Rubinstein invited both an Orthodox - and a Reform-affiliated lay leader to debate this pressing issue with the rabbi listening in and moderating. Attorney Lawrence Kobrin spoke of a “‘triage’ approach whereby the Jewish community focuses its resources and attention on those within our own community whom we can reach.” He perceived intermarrieds as those who made “an affirmative decision to move away from Judaism.” His fellow lawyer and liberal Jewish spokesman, David W. Belin demurred as he saw a “golden opportunity” to engage



THE JEWISH WEEK, MAY 28, 1999



Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein (L) and UJA-Federation's Rabbi Michael Paley (R) with some of the students who assembled Kits for Kosovo.



Central Synagogue participates in the local consortium of breakfast programs for homeless and poor and working poor neighbors.



Mitzvah Day programs, 2012, providing supplies and support for children's projects.



Mitzvah Day programs, 2012, (above) cleaning up a rooftop garden, (below) Rabbi Rubinstein with participants of the Doe Fund.



November 2012, Central Synagogue's members provided supplies and help for victims of Hurricane Sandy.



many of these “couples...searching for spirituality.” For him, “outreach” was “a major priority.”¹¹⁹

In a sense, Rabbi Rubinstein took counsel from both speakers. Given the unavoidable reality that “the chances of working, meeting and falling in love with a person not raised as a Jew in this open society of ours is great,” he recognized his obligation to “discourage intermarriage.” He reasoned that “there are additional struggles and challenges” in such marital relationships and “it is more difficult to raise children as Jews.” Thus, the congregation made a particular effort to influence young, single adults to think positively about Jewish life and their life-choices. Programmatically, Central Synagogue made every effort to enhance for these people basic Jewish traditions such as Sabbath observance. Towards the greater good, beginning in 1997, the rabbi was comfortable partnering with an Orthodox initiated program called “Shabbat Across America,” which targeted the same religiously at risk constituencies. Several years earlier, the founder of the National Jewish Outreach Program and a rabbi at the Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue, Ephraim Buchwald had spoken at Central Synagogue about the need “to provide basic Jewish experiences for every American Jew.” Reportedly, when the Friday night event took place, “hundreds of Jews gathered at Central to share friendship and community in welcoming Shabbat...this most unique gift of Judaism.” Similarly, its own synagogue initiatives, such as the Central Issues Group, were enthused with great spirituality. This outlet for “young adults in their 20s and 30s,” complemented its social welfare concerns beyond synagogue walls with “regular Shabbat dinners, a series of *Havdalah* evening programs” as the Day of Rest ended and a series of biannual all-day Shabbaton programs to engage members in education and learning in a friendly and informal atmosphere.”¹²⁰

However, when a Jew and non-Jew made their future plans known, the rabbi neither despaired nor rejected those who appeared in his study. He was sure to raise the possibility of conversion as he believed that “individuals are



searching for a place to hang their spiritual hats.” If that sort of outreach did not bring the Gentile partner completely into the Jewish fold with “its wonderful tradition to offer,” the synagogue offered multiple programs for the intermarrieds in its midst. Conversion to Judaism has not been a sine qua non for a non-Jewish spouse to be embraced as a member of the congregational family. He asserted that they, too, had to be provided with “the very best programs and examples of Jewish life.” His strategy has been that “I am playing for the next generation and what is of import to me is that we make sure that the next generation is Jewish.” Rabbi Rubinstein has been resolute that the Jewish community has to “face...the reality of an evolving Jewish community, one which will be increasingly diverse.”¹²¹



Central Synagogue's members travel to many countries to make learning come alive and to bring medical supplies and Jewish support to these communities.
Top two photos: Israel, lower photo: Cuba.



Epilogue: Continuing Emphases and Concerns.

In 2004, a monthly *Luach* (calendar) replaced the *Central Synagogue Bulletin* as the prime means of updating the congregational family about its panoply of activities that ranged, as always, from religious services within the sanctuary to social services beyond the portals of the restored and venerable sanctuary. The congregation's dual heritage of more than 150 years' standing remained robust. The new name for the newsletter, which soon was available in hard copy and online punctuated Central Synagogue's growing traditional bent as Hebrew was solidly integrated with the synagogue's culture.

During the latest decade of its history (2004-2014), with its priorities in place, the Central Synagogue family, 2,200 units strong, earned an "affectionate reputation as the city's first 'Megashul.'" But in actuality, the congregation was by then the virtual, spiritual home to a community of no less than 20,000 worshipers, living on five continents who annually have tuned in weekly, and especially on the High Holidays, to the live stream web-casts that have originated on 55th Street in Manhattan. These participants who have ranged in age from teenagers to those in their nineties have included the ill and home-bound, elderly, disabled, those living far from a synagogue, non-Jews interested in converting, non-Jews interested in Judaism, members who are traveling out of town, and members of the armed forces. These services have made so many people feel that, as one grateful respondent wrote, "even though I am not a member, I feel as if I am.... It is an incredible gift to us who cannot attend in person." Thousands more became part of the congregation's extended family in 2013 when SHALOM TV, the outstanding national "Jewish PBS" station began its cable broadcast of services.¹²²

During this time of dynamic congregational growth within and without the walls of Jewish New York, Rabbi Rubinstein was flattered and



“in a sense felt lucky” that he was consistently recognized through placement in the “top ten” within Newsweek’s highly unscientific though closely watched annual “Top Rabbis in America” survey. For the record, in 2013, he ranked number five. (Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, Central Synagogue’s incoming Senior Rabbi, was also on the 2013 list of top 50 rabbis.) More important, while most of the gentrified men and women who sat in the pews or who attended social and cultural activities were doing well professionally, it was important for the rabbi to reiterate frequently and act on the pressing reality that affluence was not universal. The rabbi “vowed that no one’s status in the congregation would be changed due to financial reasons.” The synagogue’s policy has been to waive even minimum dues for members who have been financially strapped. Indeed, for those who were in deeper economic distress, Rubinstein has made available stipends and loans from his rabbinical discretionary fund. As always, the congregation also looked to help those in need beyond its precincts within the city of which it felt so much a part. Such was Rubinstein’s message in 2009 when he wrote of “a malaise driven by economic conditions has fallen over our city” and of “a necessity to share a prevalent concern about other people.”¹²³

That same month of January 2009, *Luach* reported that “our knitting program to assist the community’s needy is in full swing.” The Caring Committee was soliciting both new volunteer workers and contributions of “clothing items such as socks and men’s pants and shoes” among other “sundries” for the poor. The English in Action group mentored individuals in “conversational English.” This endeavor was highly reminiscent of what was done generations earlier for Habonim’s immigrants. Only now, most of the clients were non-Jews. In addition, a “partnership” was created with the Urban Horizons Early Childcare Discovery Center for “low income families in the South Bronx.” The spirit of Rebekah Kohut and so many others during more than a century and a half was alive and well on 55th Street.¹²⁴



When I began my work in the spring of 2013 at the 6th floor archive in the Community House, which Anne Mininberg and her colleagues, Amy Goldberger, Phyllis Loeb, and Cathy Gollub lovingly maintain, I was already keenly aware of Central Synagogue's heritage of service to the needy. Its prominence had been frequently noted in the literature of American Jewish History; my field of expertise. Several weeks into my work a feature article in *The Forward* evidenced for me that these positive impulses were more than just a historical legacy. Under the leadership of Rabbi Marion Lev-Cohen, Central Synagogue's Rabbi for "Community Engagement," a new title for a long-standing approach to religious life, a "pilot program [that] helps Jews transition into older adulthood" called Wise Aging was established. Beyond assisting the eleven seniors who regularly attend sessions on 55th Street, the initiative already augurs to involve other synagogues and Jewish centers to begin comparable programs. What a wonderfully felicitous link over a century's time from Rebekah Kohut to Rabbi Lev-Cohen, exemplifying women's commitment and leadership in community service. This coda to my epilogue suggests that such activism on behalf of Jews and others both within and without the city that Central Synagogue calls its home will continue to mark its distinguished history.¹²⁵



About the Author

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NOTES

The following abbreviations are used in the notes:

ACS= Archives of the Central Synagogue

AH=*The American Hebrew*

AJYB=*American Jewish Year Book*

CSB=*Central Synagogue Bulletin*

¹ Robin and Larry Rubinstein, "Foreword," Elizabeth Blackmar and Arthur A. Goren, *Congregating and Consecrating at Central Synagogue* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2003).

² For a characterization of the early religious priorities of Ahawath Chesed that arguably also applies to Shaar Hashomayim, see Blackmar, "The Congregation and the City," in Blackmar and Goren, 13.

³ On the founding of multiple downtown immigrant synagogues, see Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1946): 49-52; Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1976): 21-27. See also, Malcolm Stern, "The Story of Central Synagogue," typescript of speech delivered to the Jewish Genealogical Society, 1991, at the Central Synagogue [ACS].

⁴ *Central Synagogue: 140 Years* (New York: Central Synagogue, 1979): 3.

⁵ Grinstein, 403. Stern, 3, notes that the congregation's first cemetery was located "somewhere on 89th Street" before removal to Cypress Hills in Queens.

⁶ On Lilienthal's New York era and his involvement with Jewish education, see Grinstein, 233, 398. See also, Bruce L. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal: The Making of an American Rabbinate* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011): 68, 82-85, for a discussion of the school and the Jewish relationship with the public schools. On the rabbi's implementing confirmations, see Jonah B. Wise, "From Our Record," *The Scribe* (May 21, 1952): 1.

⁷ Grinstein, 426.

⁸ Bertram A. Korn, *The American Reaction to the Mortara Case: 1858-1859* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1957): 39; Allan Tarshish, "The Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859-1878)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (September, 1959): 16-32.

⁹ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920* (New York: NYU Press, 2012): 49-55.

¹⁰ For a listing of the constituent congregations that does not include Ahawath Chesed, see Tarshish, 19.



- ¹¹ “Draft Report of the Executive Committee of the Association for the Free Distribution of Matsot to the Poor” (undated document in the Library of the American Jewish Historical Society). The document indicates that just like Shaar Hashomayim, Ahawath Chesed contributed \$20 to the cause.
- ¹² On the early disputes over synagogue practice at Ahawath Chesed, see Gary P. Zola, *The Americanization of the Jewish Prayer Book and the Liturgical Development of Congregation Ahawath Chesed New York City* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2008): 24-25.
- ¹³ On Huebsch’s editing of both his prayer book and the *Union Prayer Book* efforts, see Zola, 27-32.
- ¹⁴ New York City neighborhoods defy easy geographical definition. I have chosen to follow Andrew S. Dolkart’s lead in characterizing the area as “Midtown,” based on a contemporaneous newspaper report from 1872 on the area within which Central Synagogue was built. See Andrew S. Dolkart, *Central Synagogues in its Changing Neighborhood* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2001): 7.
- ¹⁵ There is a disagreement in the sources over how affluent the membership of the newly-uptown Ahawath Chesed was. Isaac Mayer Wise recalled some “140 members, few of them rich” moved to the new neighborhood. See Stern, 5, for Wise’s remarks. However, historian Blackmar, 9, has noted the high cost of seat holding, indicative of affluence. Zola, 34, as indicated in the text, has characterized the congregants as “middle class.”
- ¹⁶ On Kohut’s background and training, see Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: the Historical School in 19th-Century America* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965): 345-47. See also, Zola, 36 on his contract.
- ¹⁷ On the sermon and its relationship to Conservative Judaism, see Davis, 344-46.
- ¹⁸ On Kohut’s involvement in the founding of The Jewish Theological Seminary in opposition to the Pittsburg Platform, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators: Varieties of Orthodox Rabbis in America, 1886-1983,” in Gurock, *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* (Hoboken: KTAV, 1996): 1-2, 352-54.
- ¹⁹ On synagogue board attitudes, see congregational minutes for May 2, 1886, noted in Zola, 78, n. 77. For Gottheil’s riposte, see *The New York Times* (June 28, 1885), 2 noted in Zola, 41.
- ²⁰ Zola, 42-45. See also Herbert Schwarz, “Centenary of Central Synagogue,” *Liberal Judaism* 14, 5 (December 1946): 8.
- ²¹ Zola, 46-47. On the move towards mixed seating, see Gasa Pacus, “Reminiscences” undated document [ASC].
- ²² For a text of the Pittsburgh Platform, see Ronald H. Isaacs and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. *Critical Documents of Jewish History: A Source Book* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1995): 58-60.
- ²³ On Rebekah Kohut’s founding of the Sisterhood and its religious mission for women, see Polland and Soyer, 54, 65-66, 68.



- ²⁴ Polland and Soyer, 53, 65-68. See also, Jenna W. Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890-1940," in Jack Wertheimer, ed. *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England/ Brandeis University Press, 1987), 208-10; Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936," in Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna, eds. *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England/ Brandeis University Press, 2002): 153-154.
- ²⁵ Polland and Soyer: 213-14; Selma Berrol, "When Uptown Met Downtown: Julia Richman's Work in the Jewish Community of New York, 1880-1912," *American Jewish Historical Society Quarterly* 70, 1 (September, 1980): 35. *The New York Times* (June 26, 1912): 13. See also Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962): 239.
- ²⁶ On the decline of these sisterhoods' work, see Joselit, 210; Herman, 166-169. Herman's research has uncovered the unhappiness of the Central Synagogue's women that is not indicated in the Federation's or the United Hebrew Charities' house histories. For the record, Frankel's and Waldman's degrees were not in social work but chemistry and philosophy respectively. Waldman was also a rabbi ordained at The Jewish Theological Seminary.
- ²⁷ "Report of the Committee of Arrangements for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of Central Synagogue (October 4, 1922)" [ACS].
- ²⁸ On the debates within the congregation over the languages of sermons and the best time for services, see Zola, 50-51. Zola also noted that another sign that the synagogue was increasingly Americanized was that board minutes began to be kept in English as of 1899.
- ²⁹ On Moses's contributions to the editing of the *Union Prayer Book*, see Zola's extensive discussion, 55-64. See also Eric I. Friedland, "The Historical and Theological Development of the Non-Orthodox Prayerbooks in the United States" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967): 115, noted in Zola, 53.
- ³⁰ For Moses's hopes for the power of liturgy expressed years earlier, see Isaac S. Moses, *Tefillat l'Mosheh*, Preface, noted in Zola, 65, note, p.84, 117.
- ³¹ Judah M. Cohen, *Sounding Jewish Tradition: The Music of Central Synagogue* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2011): 43.
- ³² On Krass's background, see "Biographical Sketches of Rabbis and Cantors Officiating in the United States," AJYB 5664 (1903-04): 70. See also, "Dr. Krass is Dead," *The New York Times* (November 23, 1949): 29. See also on his reputation and move to Temple Emanu-El, "Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Central Synagogue" (April 4, 1923): 4-5 [ACS].
- ³³ For examples of Krass's lectures that have been preserved, see "Shylock: A Character Analysis, Dr. Nathan Krass, Sunday January 28, 1923;" "Rain: A Study in Sociology and Religion, Dr. Nathan Krass, Sunday February 25, 1923." For his feelings about isolationism, see "Hands Off; Should America Meddle with Europe to the Extent of Helping Europe Overcome her Difficulties," Dr. Nathan Krass, Sunday, March 16, 1923: 16-17.[ACS]. See also on his reputation as an orator and move to Temple Emanu-El, "Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Central Synagogue" (April 4, 1923): 4-5 [ACS].



- ³⁴ There is, however, a difference of opinion within congregational memoirists over how well Krass filled the pews during his tenure. Malcolm Stern has argued that "Krass's reputation as an orator packed the house week after week." See Stern, 7. On the other hand, Sam Cauman, a biographer of Jonah Bondi Wise, has contended that under Krass "the membership was narrowly based. Dues-paying members were few for a house of worship so large." He also notes that the congregation—as suggested above—was "all but a handful... from the older, or 'German' element in American Jewry." See Sam Cauman: *Jonah Bondi Wise: A Biography* (New York: Crown Publisher, 1966): 109. See also "79th Annual Report to the Members of Congregation Ahawath Chesed Shaar Hashomayim" (April 29, 1926): 3 [ACS] which notes that statistics on membership indicate "most strikingly the absolute necessity of increasing... membership." In my view, the tenor of Kops's appeal, indicates that minimally some greater aggressiveness in recruiting steady members was warranted. Perhaps, many of the Jews and Christians who attended the lectures were not dues paying members.
- ³⁵ "Report of the Committee of Arrangements for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of Central Synagogue, October 4, 1922." [ACS].
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ The relationship between Central Synagogue's community center and the Institutional Church-Synagogue era has been noted previously by Blackmar, 19. See also on that era, Charles Stezle, "The Institutional Church," in Robert D. Cross, ed. *The Church and the City, 1865-1910* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967): 341-343. For his comments about "half-baked" youngsters, see Isaac B. Berkson, *Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study with Special Reference to the Jewish Group* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1920): 120-21. On the founding of the CJI and its mission, see "Dedication of the Central Jewish Institute," *AH* (May 26, 1916): 78. On the founding of the Institutional Synagogue, see "The Institutional Synagogue," *AH* (January 18, 1917): 322. For a comprehensive discussion of Kaplan's ideas with regard to the Synagogue center, see Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: a Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993). On the interest Central Synagogue had in moving to the West Side, see Andrew S. Dolkart, *Central Synagogue in its Changing Neighborhood* (New York: Central Synagogue, 2001): 43-44.
- ³⁸ "Report of the Committee of Arrangements for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of Central Synagogue, October 4, 1922." [ACS].
- ³⁹ On the purchase of the building from the YWCA, see "New York Notes," *AH* (February 5, 1925): 430. See also, "President's Annual Report" (April 15, 1927) [ACS].
- ⁴⁰ Previously some women as individuals were members of the Board of Trustees. This new appointment was recognition of the women as a group functioning in the synagogue.
- ⁴¹ Mrs. Henry [Daisy] Goldstone to Max Schallek (April 25, 1927); "President's Annual Report" (May 14, 1928); "April, 1928, President's Report, Women's Organization of Central Synagogue" for the reference to Schallek as a supporter of women's rights, see an untitled report of the Women's Organization, April, 1930 [ACS].
- ⁴² On the new role for sisterhoods generally in New York, during the 1920s, see Joselit: 211-13. On the women's organization relief efforts during the early 1930s, see Women's Organization of Central Synagogue, "Annual Report-April 1932 to April 1933," 1-2 [ACS].



- ⁴³ On the possibility of continuing the federation of the two Reform synagogues, see Max Schallek to Frederick I. Guggenheimer (February 4, 1925) [ACS]. See also Stern, 7, for an indication of Central Synagogue's difficulties with Stephen S. Wise.
- ⁴⁴ Cauman, 109-110.
- ⁴⁵ Cauman, 114-15, 119.
- ⁴⁶ "Annual Report, Women's Organization Central Synagogue, April 1932-April, 1933" [CSA]; Jonah B. Wise, "Annual Report," May 1935 [CSA].
- ⁴⁷ Schallek to members of the Congregation [June 1933]; "President's Annual Report, May 4, 1934" [CSA]; Jonah B. Wise, "Annual Report, May, 1935" [CSA].
- ⁴⁸ On the founding of the JDC, see Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother's Keeper; A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929-1939* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974): 6-9.
- ⁴⁹ Bauer, 131-32.
- ⁵⁰ Wise, "Annual Report," May 1935 [ACS].
- ⁵¹ "Untitled Front Page editorial," *The Scribe* (December 9, 1938): 1.
- ⁵² I. Edwin Goldwasser, "The Joint Distribution Committee," *The Scribe* (January 1, 1940): 3.
- ⁵³ "Purim," *The Scribe* (March 5, 1937):1;"Combat Nazism," *The Scribe* (April 8, 1938): 2; "Priests Demolish Synagogues," *The Scribe* (February 2, 1940): 2; Rabbi Louis Wolsey, "Eye for Eye," *The Scribe* (February 9, 1940):3.
- ⁵⁴ "Untitled Front Page editorial," *The Scribe* (December 9, 1938): 1-2.
- ⁵⁵ "Annual Meeting, Report of the Brotherhood," May 18, 1935, 3 [ACS]; Annual Meeting, Report of the Brotherhood," May 17, 1936, 4 [ACS]; "Annual Report, Sisterhood," April 1, 1935, 1 [ACS]; "Sisterhood," *The Scribe* (September 27, 1940): 1.
- ⁵⁶ "Community House," *Bulletin of Central Synagogue* (May 21, 1935): 5; "President's Annual Report," April 2, 1942, 1 [ACS].
- ⁵⁷ "The Soul of the Immigrant," *The Scribe* (September 27, 1940): 3; "Congregation Habonim," *The Scribe* (January 24, 1941): 3.
- ⁵⁸ For the congregation's own sense of its history, see www.habonim.net.
- ⁵⁹ "Zionism a Minor issue, J. B. Wise Declares," *The New York Times* (September 28, 1930): N6.
- ⁶⁰ Cauman, 174-75.
- ⁶¹ "President's Annual Report, May 4, 1934," 8-9 and "President's Annual Report, April 13, 1941," 3-4 [ACS]. See also, "President's Annual Report, May 7, 1939," 2, and "President's Annual Report, April 2, 1942," 2 [ASC].
- ⁶² Jonah B. Wise to Friends, April 1, 1943 and March 5, 1945 [ASC]; Cauman, 141-42, 145. See also *The Scribe* (October 12, 1949): 1.



- ⁶³ "President's Annual Report, April 2, 1942," 2 [ACS]. See also, *The Scribe* (October 10, 1942): 3; "War Bonds," *The Scribe* (November 1, 1944): 3; "Stanley Kops Memorial," *The Scribe* (May 28, 1943): 1.
- ⁶⁴ On the founding of UJA, see Marc Lee Raphael, *A History of the United Jewish Appeal 1939-1982* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 1982): 1-9.
- ⁶⁵ On Wise's decision to help head up the UJA, see Cauman, 162.
- ⁶⁶ "Help and Hope," *The Scribe* (January 24, 1941): 1. See also, "An Appreciation," *The Scribe* (February 28, 1941): 2 for further criticism of Zionist and UJA.
- ⁶⁷ Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961): 79-81.
- ⁶⁸ On the history of the Biltmore Conference, see Naomi W. Cohen, *American Jews and the Zionist Idea* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1975): 60-62,87; Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1975): 399-400.
- ⁶⁹ Cauman, 181.
- ⁷⁰ On the circumstances that led to the forming of the American Council for Judaism and Wise's refusal as a "moderate" to join the organization, see Thomas A. Kolsky, *Jews Against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism, 1942-1948* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990): 45-51.
- ⁷¹ Cauman, 189. "American Jewish Conference" *The Scribe* (May 28, 1943): 2. Halpern, 233, 242-44; Joshua Trachtenberg, "Religious Activities," *AJYB* 46 (1944): 93-96.
- ⁷² "What Are American Jews," *The Scribe* (February 28, 1945): 1; "New Year, 5707," *The Scribe* (November 6, 1946): 1.
- ⁷³ Frederick Greenman to Presidents of Union Congregations, February 9, 1948 ; Harold Weisbrod to Chairman, Executive Board, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, February 12, 1948 [ACS].
- ⁷⁴ On Seligson's early training and move towards Reform Judaism, see David Julius Seligson, *Rabbi, Chaplain and Burra Sahib* (United States; the author, no date indicated): 12-17.
- ⁷⁵ David Seligson, "The Land of Promise" (unpublished sermon delivered sometime between 1930-35 while Seligson was rabbi at the Liberal Synagogue in England. Sermon typed on synagogue letterhead.) [ACS].
- ⁷⁶ Seligson, "Balfour Declaration," (unpublished sermon, 1941) [ACS].
- ⁷⁷ Seligson, "The Enemy Within," (unpublished sermon, circa 1945-48) [ACS].
- ⁷⁸ "Rabbi Asks for Parade by U.S in Israel" *The New York Times* (May 16, 1948): 2; "Counting the Omer," *The Scribe* (May 5, 1948): 1; "Israel Curb Asked for 'Splinter' Aid," *The New York Times* (February 13, 1949): 28.
- ⁷⁹ "Chaim Weizmann—Man and Movement," *CSB* (November 21, 1952): 1; "Hebrew Union College to Establish Hostel in Israel," *CSB* (February 6, 1953): 3.



- ⁸⁰ "Toynbee's Views Scored by Rabbis," *The New York Times* (May 14, 1961): 10.
- ⁸¹ David Seligson, excerpt from untitled sermon dated December 28, 1960, p.11. [ACS].
- ⁸² Seligson, "Giving Light," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*. vol. 69 (1959): 200. See also, Seligson "15th Anniversary of Rabbi Stanley Ferston" (undated address) [ACS]. Seligson's assistant rabbi in the early 1960s also spoke of Judaism in Israel. See Lewis E. Bogage, "The Israeli Jew: An Observation of Hope," CSB (November 15, 1963): 1. On Soviet Jewry, see "Soviet is Accused of Crushing Jews," *The New York Times* (May 17, 1959): 56.
- ⁸³ On discussions of Soviet Jewry, see CSB (September 25, 1964): 3; (October 16, 1964): 2 (November 30, 1964):3. For the announcement of the rally, see "Mass Demonstration for Soviet Jewry," CSB (November 30, 1966): 8. A week before the rally, guest preacher, Dr. Sidney L. Regner of CCAR spoke on "Russian Jewry As I Saw It." See CSB (November 30, 1966): 3.
- ⁸⁴ Phone interview with Rabbi Lewis E. Bogage, July 10, 2013 [ACS]. To be sure, the teaching of Zionism to youngsters, which included bringing in Israeli students studying at New York colleges as guest lecturers, was not done in a surreptitious manner even if these appearances were not noted in the synagogue's monthly schedule of events.
- ⁸⁵ "New Year's Message-5728," CSB (September 1967): 1
- ⁸⁶ "Rabbinic Commentary," CSB (November 30, 1968): 1.
- ⁸⁷ "Feast of Lights," CSB (December 15, 1968): 2.
- ⁸⁸ "Adult Education," CSB (November 12, 1964): 3; "Adult Education: Breakfast Seminar," CSB (October, 1967): 2. "Guest Rabbi from Israel," CSB (October 1967): 3. See also interview with Bogage.
- ⁸⁹ On this book project that does not seem to have come to fruition, see Maud F. Savage to Seligson, August 8, 1867, and the attached book proposal. [ACS]. On Reform Judaism's new attitude towards Orthodox control in Israel see, Edward B. Fiske, "Liberal U.S. Rabbis Seek Role in Israel," *The New York Times* (October 24, 1968): 1.
- ⁹⁰ "Gala Israeli Festival," CSB (January 1972): 1; "Come and Celebrate Israel's 25th Anniversary," CSB (May 1973): 1. See also interview with Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, July 17, 2013, [ACS] and Rabbi Sanford Seltzer to Gurock, email communication, July 18, 2013.
- ⁹¹ On UJA funds earmarked for Israel, see CSB (May 1972): 5; "Israel Needs Your Help," CSB (December 1974): 4; "Central Synagogue Religious School," CSB (September 1972): 3-4; "Religious School News," CSB (March 1973): 4; "Parent Parallel Education," CSB (January 1979): 5; "Salute to Israel Parade," CSB (June 1974): 5.
- ⁹² On Rabbi Zimmerman's involvement as an advocate for Reform in Israel, see, for example, "From the Rabbi's Desk," CSB (April 1973): 1; (June 1974):2; (March 1974): 3; "1st National Assembly of ARZA," CSB (November 1978): 5.
- ⁹³ On the trip to Israel, see "From the Rabbi's Desk," CSB (January 1975): 2; "A Preview of Our Israel Trip," CSB (January 1976): 5; "From the Rabbi's Desk," CSB (June, 1976): 2. On the creation of the Israel Committee, see "The President's Corner," CSB (June 1976): 2; "Israel Committee," CSB (February 1977): 2-3.



- ⁹⁴ "An Open Letter from Israel," *CSB* (February 1979): 5.
- ⁹⁵ For examples of announcements of rallies, see "Silence Kills," *CSB* (November 1971): 2; "Solidarity-Sunday '74," *CSB* (April, 1974): 5; "Solidarity Sunday for Soviet Jews," *CSB* (April 1980): 3; "Solidarity Sunday: Speak Out for Soviet Jews," *CSB* (May 1983): 2. See also, "Central Synagogue Adopts a Russian Family," *CSB* (March 1975): 4.
- ⁹⁶ On the decline and revival of New York City in the 1970s-1980s and its impact on its Jews, see Gurock, *Jews in Gotham: New York Jews in a Changing City, 1920-2010* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), chapter 6. On the building of a new community house, see Blackmar, 23-24. She also notes the use of the building by outside groups. Goren notes Rabbi Wise's early concerns about migrations away from the congregation and city. See Goren, 66. For Brodsky on suburbia, see "Excerpts from the President's Report for 1975," *CSB* (March 1976): 3.
- ⁹⁷ On families who lived away from Yorkville returning for activities and on the inauguration of daily services, see interview with Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, July 17, 2013. On old timer members' concerns about the new heterogeneity of the rank and file, see "Who We Are," *CSB* (February 1983): 1.
- ⁹⁸ On the designation of the 55th Street building as a landmark, see Blackmar, 36.n. 38.
- ⁹⁹ "From the Rabbi's Study," *CSB* (January 1973): 1.
- ¹⁰⁰ "Project Ezra," *CSB* (April, 1978): 5; "Blind Program," *CSB* (December, 1978): 5.
- ¹⁰¹ "From the Rabbi's Study, Feeding the Hungry," *CSB* (January, 1984): 1; Michael J. Weinberger, "Central Synagogue: A Recent History, 1980-1992," typescript [ACS].
- ¹⁰² Interview with Rabbi Zimmerman. See also www.saintpeters.org/mission for its statement about inter-faith dialogue.
- ¹⁰³ Interview with Rabbi Zimmerman. See also, Stern, 8.
- ¹⁰⁴ Rabbi Zimmerman left the synagogue in 1985 for a position in Dallas, Texas. For one year, as the search committee looked for his successor, Rabbi Harold Saperstein serves as Interim Senior Rabbi. In 1986, the congregation chose Rabbi Stanley Davids to fill the pulpit. Davids served until 1990 when he was informed that his contract would not be renewed. Reportedly, Davids "did not accept the decision of the Trustees and a long and sometimes ugly congregational upheaval ensued." The struggle within the congregation ended in the spring of 1990, when at a synagogue meeting, attended by over 450 concerned members, the existing slate of officers and trustees was sustained, and with that vote upheld, the decision to look elsewhere for a rabbi. See Weinberger, 11-12, for his account of this difficult period.
- ¹⁰⁵ Weinberger, 13. See also, Jim Yardley, "Rabbi Promises to Rebuild Synagogue Damaged by Fire," *The New York Times* (August 30, 1998): 29-30.
- ¹⁰⁶ "About Our Religious School," *CSB* (November 1991): 3. See also on adult Hebrew training, *CSB* (October 1992): 2. Flyer, "Say it With Trees in Israel" (December 1991); "Celebrate with ARZA at the 1992 Salute to Israel Parade," *The Central Supplement* (May 1992): 1; "Full Speed Ahead for the Critical Issues Committee," *CSB* (January 1993): 6; "A Magical Journey," *CSB* (October 1992): 4; "Central Synagogue in the Year 2000," *CSB* (November 1993): 5.



- ¹⁰⁷ "Letter from Jerusalem, December 5, 2000," *CSB* (January 2001): 1; "A Message from Rabbi Rubinstein," *CSB* (October 1992): 2; Peter J. Rubinstein, "From the Rabbi," *CSB* (February 1, 2001): 3; "Central Synagogue Solidarity Mission to Israel," *CSB* (February 2001): 3. The congregation continues to sponsor additional "engagement" missions of this sort to Israel.
- ¹⁰⁸ Rubinstein, "From the Rabbi," *CSB* (January 1, 1998): 3.
- ¹⁰⁹ Rubinstein to Congregants, July 14, 2010. The letter includes "'News Update from the Union for Reform Judaism- July 13, 2010" [ACS].
- ¹¹⁰ Nadine Brozan and Gustav Niebuhr, "Reform Jews Mirror Return to Ritual," *The New York Times* (June 1, 1999): A 16; Gary Rosenblatt, "After Doubling Its Size, Central Synagogue's Rabbi to Retire," *The Jewish Week* (March 22, 2013): 3. See also, "A Message from Rabbi Rubinstein: Changes in Reform Worship Since Rabbi Wise's Time," *CSB* (February 1995): 3 and interview with Rabbi Rubinstein, August 12, 2013.
- ¹¹¹ "Central Synagogue in the Year 2000," *CSB* (November 1993): 5; "High Holiday Hunger Project," *CSB* (September 1994): 3. In 2000, nine years into its relationship with City Harvest, the synagogue was praised as "one of the top donors" to the project. See "Dear Rabbi Rubinstein," *CSB* (May, 2000): 15. See also Hazel Beckerman, "About Mazon," *CSB* (March 1993): 6; "Mazon Grant History," *CSB* (April 1994): 9.
- ¹¹² Rubinstein, "Amalek and the Homeless," *CSB* (April 1993): 4, 6. See also "Ezra Program Set for May 15," *CSB* (May 1994): 6.
- ¹¹³ On the establishment and activities of Mitzvah Day see, "Social Action in Action: Mitzvah Day and More," *CSB* (December 1998): 7.
- ¹¹⁴ "A Message from Rabbi Rubinstein," *CSB* (September 1984): 3.
- ¹¹⁵ Stewart Ain, "Kids Caring About Kosovo," *The Jewish Week* (May 26, 1999): 3; "Kits for Kosovo," *CSB* (June 1999): 3.
- ¹¹⁶ Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, "Responsibility to World Jewry: Each According to the Need," Rosh Hashanah 5765 (September 15, 2004), <http://centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/responsibility-to-world-jewry-each-according-to-the-need>.
- ¹¹⁷ See for examples of evocation of the population survey, "New Year's Greeting," *CSB* (September 1993): 1; Rubinstein, "The Point of Decision," *CSB* (November 1993): 1, 3; "A Message from Rabbi Rubinstein," *CSB* (November 1994): 3; "From the Rabbi," *CSB* (February 2000): 3.
- ¹¹⁸ "A Message from Rabbi Rubinstein," *CSB* (November 1994): 3-4. The phenomenon of Jewish young people avoiding the synagogue as they walked the streets on the High Holidays with their non-Jewish friends was observable as early as the 1980s. Arguably, the 1990 Jewish census confirmed the degree of inter-marriage. See Gurock, *Jews in Gotham*, 172.
- ¹¹⁹ "Steinhardt Forum Focuses on Critical Survival Issue," *CSB* (June 1993): 3.



- ¹²⁰ Rubinstein, "From the Rabbi," *CSB* (March 1998):3. See also, "Shabbat Across America," *CSB* (March 1998): 3. On Buchwald's appearance, see "Central Issues Group Presents 2nd Program," *CSB* (January 1993): 5. On The Central Issues Group program, see *CSB* (September 1993): 9.
- ¹²¹ Rubinstein, "From the Rabbi," *CSB* (March 1998): 3. See also interview with Rabbi Rubinstein.
- ¹²² On the size of the membership, see Sophia Hollander, "After Fire, Temple Rises," *The Wall Street Journal* (October 8, 2011): on-line edition. The information on Central Synagogue's and SHALOM TV's broadcasts was provided by Danielle Freni, Director of Communications, Central Synagogue, via email, December 10, 2013.
- ¹²³ On Rubinstein's selection as a top rabbi and the waiting list for membership, see "America's Top 50 Rabbis for 2013," www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/03/21. See interview with Rabbi Rubinstein for his vow about congregational membership and his activities on behalf of the economically distressed members of the congregation. See also "Message from the Rabbi," *Luach* (January 2009): 2.
- ¹²⁴ "This Month at Central Synagogue," *Luach* (January 2009): 12-13.
- ¹²⁵ Gabrielle Birkner, "Aging Wisely," *The Forward* (May 21, 2013): on-line edition.





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Central Synagogue