

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders
IV. Solomon Schechter and Conservative Judaism
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Shabbat shalom!

It was a dark and stormy night. Actually, that's not quite true. It was night, and dark enough, but the sky was clear, and the weather was hot and humid. The setting was mid-July, in the city of Cincinnati, and the year was 1883.

Over 200 guests had gathered for dinner to celebrate the very first ordination of American rabbis in the very first American rabbinic seminary, the Hebrew Union College, founded by the immigrant rabbi from Bavaria, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Four young rabbis had just been ordained. I've always felt something of a connection to one of them, David Philipson, because he died in the year I was born. He's the one on the left in the picture on tonight's handout.

Rabbi Wise had a dream – to create a unified American Judaism, with unifying institutions that would transcend the Jewish communal strife he had experienced back in Europe. Notice the word “Union” in the name of the college – and the absence of the word “Reform.” Indeed, when he had created the congregational body that would sponsor the Hebrew Union College eight years earlier, he had called it the Union of American Hebrew Congregations – again emphasizing “union” and omitting any reference to Reform. For the denominations as we know them did not yet exist.

True, various congregations here and in Western Europe had been introducing reforms into their services in recent years – streamlining the liturgy; reading more prayers in the vernacular, the introduction of choral music often accompanied by an organ and the offering of modern-style sermons – but that was up to each congregation. Wise felt that the American Jewish community could still be unified and strengthened through great national umbrella organizations, and the fact that some congregations were more liberal and others more traditional didn't trouble him at all.

And so the great banquet was arranged. Liberal Jewish leaders and ardent traditionalists alike came to celebrate the great new seminary, at Cincinnati's exclusive Highland House restaurant. Rabbi Wise ordered that the menu be strictly kosher, but somehow things went awry. He claimed afterwards not to have seen the printed menu, which included Little Neck Clams (half shell); Filet of Beef (aux Champignons) with soft shell crabs; a

“Pommes Duchesse” salad of shrimp, and at the end, after an entrée that included veal and pigeons, the whole thing was topped off with ice cream.

Those who left the hall in disgust never heard the great speeches, and for that matter never got to eat the ice cream.

It was really too bad, because all these Jewish leaders, almost entirely having come from Western Europe, had much more in common than they had differences. Ever since the time of Napoleon, western European Jewry had wrestled with the Enlightenment and modernity, coming out of the ghetto and getting a modern education – entering universities and professions, becoming citizens and participating in modern society, all the while balancing that with their Jewish identity. Whether traditionalist or radical reformer, the Jews of Western Europe who came to America all believed in freedom of conscience, personal autonomy in their decision making and how they balanced the living traditions of the past and the needs and attitudes of the present.

What made the dinner worse was the presence of the press. No Twitter or Facebook then, but the Jewish press immediately labeled the debacle the “Trefa Banquet,” amid accusations that someone had deliberately set out to sabotage Wise’s efforts at unifying American Jewry.

Thus was born the Conservative Movement. Quickly raising some funds, and castigating what they saw as a radicalizing of Judaism away from all connection to Jewish tradition, the leaders of this dissident group took just three years to found their own seminary – Jewish Theological – in New York.

Isaac Mayer Wise continued his efforts to unify – he created the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889, open to all American rabbis – and he created a prayer book that he expected would be adopted by all American congregations. But it was not to be. As millions of Jews began to arrive from Eastern Europe – Jews who had not known the Enlightenment, or citizenship, or integrating into modern society – the new Conservative expression became more deeply entrenched, and more radical reformers hijacked Wise’s movement away from him and refashioned it into what we know as Classical Reform (even his prayer book was rejected in favor of the new Union Prayer Book, to Wise’s everlasting disappointment).

Even with a new seminary, Jewish Theological (JTS), the new movement still wasn’t really a movement, and still didn’t even have a name. But in 1901 the directors hired a new president, a brilliant British scholar and rabbi, Solomon Schechter, who became the true builder of American Conservative Judaism.

And what I find so ironic about the new Conservative Movement is that Schechter, in describing the new movement, uses words that could have been lifted out of speeches and articles by Isaac Mayer Wise, the institutional founder of what became American Reform Judaism. Here are two passages by Schechter:

The first is in a book of essays he called *Studies in Judaism*, published in 1896, just before coming to the United States: “*Since the interpretation of Scripture is mainly a product of changing historical influences, the center of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of the secondary meaning. This living body is not represented by any corporate priesthood or rabbihood, but by the collective conscience of the people.*” He goes on... “*A consequence of this conception of Tradition is that it is neither Scripture nor primitive Judaism, but general custom which forms the real rule of practice. The norm as well as the sanction of Judaism is the practice actually in vogue. Its consecration is the consecration of general use.*”

Here we have the essence of Reform: Changing historical influences...the needs of the age...reason...the conscience of the age, and practices based on the changing needs of the community. Who could object to that?

One more passage, from Schechter’s speech as he took the presidency of JTS: “*This seminary will promulgate no creed. Its appeal is to no particular section of the community. Its consistency is Judaism, and its motto is unity and combination. German scientific methods and the spirit of inquiry, mastery of the subject matter and contemplative temperament, with practical religious common sense – all these forces should be enlisted in the service of God and contribute to American Judaism. This is, in the fullest sense, a seminary for America, that represents all types of Jews.*” Again, sounds just like Wise’s dream of a “big tent” within which all Jews will feel respected, authentic and at home.

We sometimes see denominations as barriers, and our differences as unbridgeable, and I suppose sometimes this is so. But take a look at the picture in the flyer – Rabbi David Philipson on the left was in the first class of Hebrew Union College, and became a great scholar of Reform, publishing many books. Solomon Schechter is next, with a full beard, followed by Dr. Cyrus Adler, a great Conservative scholar of Semitics and professor at JTS; on the right is Rabbi Samuel Schulman, an outspoken Reform rabbi who became president and later honorary president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis –

and all four are studying the Talmud and its traditional commentaries. Denominations were no barrier to the four of them sitting together and learning.

The Trefa Banquet of 1883 is pretty well known as an iconic event in the development of American Judaism. Less well known is the sequel. Though the two Movements had participated together in various umbrella bodies of American Jewish life, a true rapprochement was planned in 1985, when my rabbinic body invited several national leaders of the Conservative Movement to attend our annual convention and address the Reform rabbinate. We met at the Hyatt Regency Minneapolis, late that June, and planned a banquet lunch. It was an historic occasion, and the press had their own table – Ari Goldman of the *New York Times*, and reporters from several other national media, including *Time Magazine* and one of the wire services.

I was handling convention arrangements for the CCAR, and instructed the catering director on the menu, choosing a kosher fish – with fins and gills. But the chef decided, on his own and without consulting anyone, to honor the 600 rabbis in attendance with his special crabmeat stuffing. All went well until someone – one of ours, fortunately, not one of theirs, bit into a bit of shell. Whispers started circulating, and the question was quickly raised, “should we announce?” Our president was called off the head table, where he whispered, “Don’t tell.” And somehow these great Conservative rabbis never knew, and word never went to the press, and what would have been known as the Second Trefa Banquet was averted.

It was a thoroughly mortifying experience, the only bright side of which is that the hotel offered to comp the entire lunch.

But here’s my bottom line: I’m one of those who sees denominations as pretty much passé. Theologically I see no difference at all between Reform and Conservative Judaism; we both emphasize the reinterpretation of Torah in every generation, and we both emphasize learning from and being open to the whole range of our tradition, regardless of what our personal practices turn out to be. One thing remains very clear: It is precisely the great diversity of expression in Judaism that is one of our greatest strengths.

By the way, small historical footnote: Solomon Schechter, the great Conservative scholar and leader, had a grandson, Dan Schechter, who became a prominent lay leader in the Reform Movement, and a worship consultant for the prayer book we use at our Shabbat services.