The Wide World of Central Synagogue

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New York, New York
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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.

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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
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
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
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.”

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
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 Mizrachi 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.

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
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