

**A Lifetime of Service:**  
A Study of the Life and Contributions of Historian and Professor  
Michael A. Meyer

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## **Abstract**

This thesis covers selected topics in the biography and theology of Dr. Michael A. Meyer, professor emeritus at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. Meyer’s formative years—until the time he received his doctorate from HUC-JIR in 1964 — are discussed in the first chapter. We will also examine his experience immigrating to the United States, his time as a young student on the West Coast, his years in college, and his time studying abroad in Israel. The second chapter is a brief overview of one of the organizations that Meyer helped to create, Breira, which existed from 1974 to 1977. It was a short-lived, liberal, pro-Israel organization that supported a two-state solution, and we will discuss his experience in Breira and his views on the successes and failures of it. The third chapter focuses on Meyer’s theology, including his views on morality and religion, and on his concerns about the state of Reform Jewry, American Jewry, and world Jewry. The thesis depends upon original oral interviews I conducted with Meyer in Cincinnati, Ohio. In addition, it makes good use of selected published works by Meyer and original source documents held at the American Jewish Archives. Finally, I use secondary source material to provide proper historical context to the primary source findings. I have examined facets of Meyer’s life and ideology in the earnest hope that when we better understand his life experiences, we are able to shed important light on the overall nature of the work and provide to future historians a rich cache of information that can be used to evaluate the historical contributions of Michael A. Meyer.

**Working toward the pursuit of understanding**

To Rachel:  
for her unyielding support and endless patience

With gratitude to my teacher, Professor Michael A. Meyer

*in addition to*

my advisor and guide, Professor Gary P. Zola

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## Introduction

Michael A. Meyer received a doctor of Hebrew letters degree, *honoris causa*, from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 2001. The citation adorning the honorary diploma characterized Meyer as “a proud and passionate Reform Jew, a concerned participant in the movement’s religious welfare and a voice of moderation in determining its future direction.”<sup>1</sup> Meyer is indeed an internationally renowned scholar, an educator extraordinaire, a dedicated student, a scholar of history, and a passionate man of faith. He has significantly influenced scores of rabbinical students and scholars-in-training at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) as well as around the world. Even after his retirement in 2014, Meyer continues to study for his own edification. In addition, he maintains a busy travel schedule, venturing around the world, continuing to speak, teach, study, write, and educate the community at large. In his current status as professor emeritus of modern Jewish history, he has given guest lectures at his alma mater and universities worldwide.

Meyer received his Bachelor of Arts from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1959 and his doctorate from the Hebrew Union College – Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Meyer, Doctorate of Hebrew Letters *honoris causa* certificate, Jewish Theological Seminary, 2001 as quoted in David Ellenson’s “Michael A. Meyer and His Vision of Reform Judaism and the Reform Rabbinate,” in *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World: Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer*, ed. Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008).

Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in 1964. He joined the faculty of HUC-JIR immediately upon receiving his doctorate. Over the course of his career, Meyer produced fourteen volumes (three of which received Jewish book awards), more than two hundred scholarly articles, and hundreds of book reviews. He served as one of the first presidents of the Association of Jewish Studies (AJS), an organization that he helped to found. He chaired the Academic Advisory Council for the Center for Jewish History, served as president of the International Board of the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI), and is the only person to give the Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture more than once, an honor that was recognized when he received the New York branch of the Leo Baeck Institute's Moses Mendelssohn Award in 2015. In his own words, it was an honor that combined the careers and teachings of two remarkable men who "are really models for my life."<sup>2</sup>

Born in Germany in 1937, Meyer was three and a half when and his parents escaped Nazi Germany in 1941 and came to the United States. He grew up in the Los Angeles area, was president of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY– now known as the North American Federation of Temple Youth), and quickly became a student of history. His scholarship is both broad and deep, highlighted by his love for the study of the German-Jewish experience and the understanding of how modernity has influenced – and continues to influence – the Jewish experience. However, as his daughter-in-law, historian Lauren Strauss, stated in the commemorative volume for

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Meyer, in a lecture delivered at the Leo Baeck Institute, "German Jews: The History and Heritage. Celebrating 60 Years of the Leo Baeck Institute," The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, no. 58 (New York and Berlin, 2015), available online at [http://digipres.cjh.org:1801/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=FL1508655](http://digipres.cjh.org:1801/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=FL1508655) (accessed 20 May 2020).

Meyer: “Meyer’s influence extends well beyond his own immediate areas of research ... [and this] book is as much a testament to Michael Meyer’s character—his incredible work ethic and his personal and intellectual integrity—as to his scholarship.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Meyer’s contributions are not just to the field of history. His own theology, his profound commitment to Judaism, and his curiosity about how Judaism has adapted to modernity have supplied the fuel for his unflagging interest in and commitment to the study of the Jewish past. Meyer “continually asks himself how previous generations could reconcile Judaism and modernity and also how contemporary Jews can create a kind of Judaism that does not escape from modernity but rather integrates it.”<sup>4</sup> These are the ongoing tensions that Meyer struggles to balance and that drive his work forward. It is this impulse that undergirds his commitment to the enhancement of Jewish learning for his students, readers, and listeners.<sup>5</sup> According to Meyer, “I feel a special satisfaction in teaching rabbinical students with whom I share values and through whom I can have some influence on the Reform movement and the religious lives of individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to document Michael A. Meyer’s personal history as well as his perspectives on Reform Judaism, Zionism, Israel, and, of course, on the study of the Jewish past. This thesis attempts to gain insight into his various professional

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<sup>3</sup> Lauren Strauss and Michael Brenner, “Preface,” in *Mediating Modernity*, ix.

<sup>4</sup> Lauren Strauss, “Modernity through the Eyes of Its Chroniclers,” in *Mediating Modernity*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ismar Schorsch, “Michael Meyer,” in *Mediating Modernity*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Bloch Rosensaft, “Michael A. Meyer: Four Decades at HUC-JIR,” *HUC Chronicle* 62, (2003): 22.

contributions. It also endeavors to trace the evolution of his thinking over the course of his career and thereby gain a greater understanding of his work as a Jewish historian and a thought leader in American Reform Judaism. With the help of a new series of oral interviews, which constitute original research on Meyer and his career, this thesis aims to be of use to future scholars and historians interested in tracing Meyer's life and career. The recordings and transcriptions of these new oral interviews will be preserved at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio. It is hoped that this thesis will function as a modest beginning to the process of tracing Meyer's professional career and offering insight into how and why he has focused on his particular areas of study.

This work also seeks to explore Meyer's theology to gain a better understanding of his ideological commitment to Reform Judaism and, also, to better comprehend how his theology has shaped his thinking about the historical enterprise. It also documents Meyer's perspective on the changes that have occurred in the Reform movement over the course of his career. Above all, this thesis will attempt to organize and summarize Meyer's noteworthy career as a Jewish historian, an impressive scholar, and an influential teacher of generations of rabbis.

The next chapter in this monograph details Meyer's personal life and career by using data drawn from the new oral interviews mentioned above in combination with testimony Meyer provided to Cincinnati's Holocaust and Humanity Center. The information adumbrated in the first chapter is critically important to our understanding of how Meyer developed his interest in the study of modernity and Judaism. We will see



how his personal history influenced his perspective on Jewish history and, broadly speaking, the historical enterprise itself.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Michael A. Meyer: From Birth to Ph.D.**

To better evaluate and discuss the contributions of a historian to their field, it is useful to know the background of that historian. This chapter is an effort to outline key events and thoughts that Michael A. Meyer had as a young boy up until the time that he received his doctorate. The purpose is to provide an organized, documented, and noted biography of Meyer, which can be used by future historians to assess the whole of his contributions to history and his field. Meyer often provided analysis and conclusions in his writing. Understanding his background can help us to discover any possible bias in his work. The purpose here is not to provide any examples of bias, but rather to convey the historically significant events in Meyer's life, which may have influenced parts of his personal history.

While proctoring an exam for students at HUC-JIR, Meyer filled the time by reading the book *The Butchers Tale*.<sup>1</sup> Unbeknownst to Meyer, the book he was beginning, about a tale of antisemitism set in a Prussian town at the turn of the twentieth century, was based upon a true story – a story that gave Meyer new insight into his family history. The book tells the tale of a blood-libel accusation that turns a

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<sup>1</sup> Helmet Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003).

quiet city into the center of mass hysteria, with Jews targeted for the ritual murder of a young boy. The boy was found murdered in a local store owned by a Jewish man, Matthäus Meyer, who was later accused of the murder. Matthäus Meyer was Michael Meyer's paternal great-grandfather.<sup>2</sup>

The accusation against Matthäus Meyer was just the beginning of the growing antisemitism in the area. Matthäus Meyer remained in Konitz (Chojnice) for a few years with his wife, Lisette Neumann, and his son Albert, despite the accusation of murder. However, continued discomfort during the Weimar years<sup>3</sup> led to increased pressure on the family. Thus, the Meyer family left Konitz and made their way to Berlin. In Berlin, Albert grew up and was eventually married to Johanna. They gave birth to Karl Meyer, Michael Meyer's father. Karl became a law student and hoped to become a judge. However, the rising power of the Nazi regime put a halt to that dream as Jews were forbidden to become lawyers, let alone judges. Meanwhile, Karl met his wife, Susanne Paula Frey, and they married in 1936.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the information which is presented in this chapter comes from two sources. The first of these sources is the testimony that Michael A. Meyer presented to the Holocaust and Humanities Center of Cincinnati in 2018. This testimony recorded up to the sailing of the liberty ship in Long Beach Harbor (see fn. 14). The second of the sources is a series of oral interviews that were obtained by the author with Michael A. Meyer. The interviews took place on May 3, 2019, December 3, 2019, and January 14, 2020. These interviews are used to tell Meyer's own story throughout this chapter. Supporting material and documentation is provided where appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> After Germany's defeat in World War I, the German monarchy was replaced by a democratic form of government known as the Weimar Republic because the new government's constitution was framed and adopted in the city of Weimar in 1919.

By 1937, birthrates among all Germans, including German Jews, had declined to just 18.8 births per 1,000 people, down from 26.9 in 1913.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, on November 15, 1937—during a time of high anxiety, especially for Jews—Michael Albert Meyer was born to Karl and Susanne at the Jewish hospital in Berlin. In his oral history, Meyer reflected on his birth: “Of course I was an accident. Nobody in their right mind, in the Jewish community, at that time would want to give birth to a child, when the future was so uncertain.”<sup>5</sup> Despite his “accident” status, Meyer’s parents attempted to give him as normal a childhood as possible. Meyer attended a Jewish nursery school, and his friends were all Jews, as were all of his parent’s friends, as social interactions between Jews and non-Jews were against the law.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the great unrest and Jewish persecution, Meyer’s family seemed to carry on, abiding by every new rule that the Nazi regime would place on them. However, Meyer’s parents recognized the need to escape—a feat that would require the help of many. Meyer recalled three distinct incidents of aid that helped him and his family flee Nazi Germany and allowed him to grow up in America. These three occasions came in the forms of a warning, a secret, and a signature.

The first of these incidents, which occurred just a week before Meyer’s first birthday, was *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass). Though he cannot remember the event, Meyer recalls the stories that had been told to him about this night. “In the

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<sup>4</sup> Conrad Taeuber and Irene B. Taeuber, “German Fertility Trends, 1933-39,” *American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 2 (1940): 150-67.

<sup>5</sup> Testimonial of Michael A. Meyer, The Holocaust and Humanities Center, Cincinnati, OH, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Meyer, email communication with author, March 26, 2020.

aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi regime ordered the Jewish community to pay a 1 billion Reichsmark “atonement tax” and rapidly enacted many anti-Jewish laws and edicts.”<sup>7</sup> As a way of making back this money, the Nazis began rounding up Jewish men and sending them to work camps, where their work product would be sold and go toward paying down the debt.

The Meyer family, however, had been warned of the impending round-up of Jewish men. To avoid the Gestapo, Karl spent the night riding around Berlin on public transportation and then found an empty office building to sleep in. At home, Gestapo officials did not believe Susanne when she told them that Karl was out of town, so they spent hours waiting in the parlor, expecting he would eventually return home. When he did not return that night, the Gestapo left. In an attempt to get the word out about the actions of the Nazis, Susanne sent a letter to friends who had fled to Haifa. Since all mail was being censored, she had to determine a way to send the message without its being intercepted. Thus, she created a decorative border around the edges of the seemingly innocuous letter. Using Hebrew letters but German language, Susanne wrote, “*Karl wurde gesucht, aber nicht gefunden*” (Karl was sought after, but he was not found).<sup>8</sup>

However, Meyer’s maternal grandfather, Eugen Frey, was not so lucky. A veteran of World War I, he opened his door willingly to the Gestapo when they arrived. He

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<sup>7</sup> “Kristallnacht,” in *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019), <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Michael A. Meyer, “A Heritage Freighted Across the Abyss,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 40, no 2 (1988): 297-301.

believed that his status as a veteran would shield him from being taken to the camps like the rest of his Jewish brethren. To prove his loyalty, Frey retrieved the Iron Cross, which he was awarded for his service. The medal, however, provided no defense for him as the Gestapo officers laughed in his face. He was treated just like any other Jewish man and taken to the nearest work camp, Sachsenhausen. There, Frey worked alongside other Jewish men, paying down the debt to the German insurance companies. Though imprisoned, he was able to secure a visa to Chile, and he had enough saved to afford travel. Frey and his wife, Olga, left Germany and settled in Santiago, Chile, where they remained for the rest of their lives. Although they all escaped Nazi Germany, Meyer never saw his maternal grandparents again. His path was different: a safe passage to, and future in, America; and the person who tipped off his parents about the impending Gestapo searches is the first person whom he credits for providing refuge to him and his family.

The second individual who receives equal praise was a woman who tended the bakery that the Meyer family frequented. One of the many rules during the Nazi regime was that Jews were only allowed to shop during specific hours.<sup>9</sup> Failure to abide by these rules would quickly lead to a family's being sent to a camp. However, Meyer's mother needed something from the bakery one day, despite its being outside of the allowed hours. She took Michael to the bakery, where he was asked a simple question: Would he like a cookie? Naturally, the youngster accepted the sweet treat and was asked another question: "What is your name, young boy?" Not knowing the complexity

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Longerich, *The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134.

of the question, Michael responded, “*Michael Meyer, bei der Polizei als Israel bekannt*” (“Michael Meyer, known to the police as Israel”). At the time, all Jewish males were required to add the word Israel to their name, and all Jewish females the word Sarah.<sup>10</sup> Michael knew the law and answered correctly, but his answer exposed that he and his mother were Jewish. The baker should have turned them in, but she instead turned a blind eye, giving Michael his cookie and his mother the bakery goods she came for, and the two of them returned home. The woman is the second person who provided Meyer and his parents the opportunity to live another day in Nazi Germany and eventually secure passage to the United States.

To secure a visa and passage to the United States, many details had to fall into place for the Meyer family. The American consul official who authorized the visa required a specific Oriental rug to be delivered to him in return for the visa, a bribe the Meyer family was able to oblige. Then, to receive four tickets (Meyer’s paternal grandmother, Johanna, would travel with them<sup>11</sup>) for passage to the United States, the shipping agent required another bribe: a rocking horse, which was delivered to him as well. Next, Karl Meyer needed a critical signature from his boss at work, the foreman at Siemens. It was this man whom Michael Meyer identified as the third and final individual who provided refuge to his family as they made their way from Germany to America. At the time, all Jews needed permission from their employers that their departure would not hinder the war effort for Germany. When Karl Meyer approached his boss, the foreman not only permitted Karl to leave his job but told Karl, “Karl Meyer,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer’s paternal grandfather, Matthäus, died in 1906.

should also see better days one day.” The foreman’s permission not only gave passage for the Meyer family, but when Meyer discovered his father’s work card decades later, the date that they left, in May of 1941, was changed to February 1943, the month when all forced laborers were transferred to concentration camps. The foreman permitted Karl to leave, *and* he had made it look as though Karl never left, ensuring that nobody would ever come looking for the Meyer family as they made their way out of the country. These three individuals—the person who warned the Meyer family about the Gestapo raids, the woman from the bakery, and the foreman at the Siemens plant—all assisted in ensuring the Meyer family successfully escaped Nazi Germany.

### **Becoming an American**

The Meyer family, including Michael, Susanne, Karl, and Johanna, were supposed to take a train from Berlin to Barcelona. However, due to a decrease in price because very few people were traveling, the Meyers were able to buy plane tickets from Berlin to Spain. The Meyers spent only a few weeks in Barcelona, waiting for the ship that would transport them to the United States. According to Meyer, this was a cargo ship, which he remembers as little more than a “floating piece of metal.” It carried seven hundred passengers to New York.<sup>12</sup> Meyer recalls the sight of the Statue of Liberty as the ship pulled into the Brooklyn docks, a visual representation of the freedom from persecution his family had longed for. New York was not the family’s permanent destination, however; they would need to make their way to Los Angeles, where they

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019, Cincinnati, OH.



had extended family, including Johanna's sister and a distant relative who had signed an affidavit assuring the U.S. government that the Meyer family would be financially supported upon their arrival—a requirement for them to receive their visas. This distant relative was Johanna's sister's daughter's husband (the husband of Michael's first cousin, once removed), a physician who had escaped Germany just years earlier and was now practicing in the Beverly Hills area.

The Meyers would be in New York for just a couple of weeks, to make enough money for the train fare to Los Angeles. Karl and Susanne worked at the Brooklyn Jewish hospital as orderlies while Johanna took care of Michael in their New York apartment.<sup>13</sup> The apartment was arranged by HIAS, an organization that began in 1881 to help Jewish refugees.<sup>14</sup> The apartment was just good enough to get the family through until they could afford the train fare to go cross country. They arrived in Los Angeles, were greeted by the family, and found a one-bedroom apartment. Meyer and his grandmother stayed in the bedroom while Karl and Susanne slept on a Murphy bed in the living room of the cramped apartment. Meyer's grandmother spent the most time with him, raising him through much of his younger years as both his parents worked.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Meyer, email communication with author, March 21, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "HIAS rescues people whose lives are in danger for being who they are. We protect the most vulnerable refugees, helping them build new lives and reuniting them with their families in safety and freedom. We advocate for the protection of refugees and assure that displaced people are treated with the dignity they deserve." See: HIAS, "Mission and Values," <https://www.hias.org/who/mission-and-values> (accessed May 22, 2020).

Karl (known as Charles in the United States) got a job working in the Long Beach shipyards, doing electrical work for the American Liberty ships,<sup>15</sup> which aided the war effort; he typically left before five every morning. Charles was working to defeat the enemy that had shackled him and his family just months earlier, a job he was proud to do.

Just as Michael Meyer had identified three individuals who aided their escape from Germany, Charles identified what he called “The Three Sea Voyages,” which exemplified the roller-coaster journey that led to his freedom. The first of these voyages was in 1931 when, as a young college student, Charles was on a ship cruising the Baltic Sea. While observing the scenery, he overheard two men damning the socialists and Jews who they thought would cause the demise of Germany. This would serve as an early warning to Charles that antisemitism was rising in Germany. The second of these voyages, in contrast to the first, provided Charles hope for the future. This ship brought Charles’s family from Barcelona to New York, from war-torn Europe to the safety of the American shores. Finally, the third voyage solidified Charles and his family’s freedom in the United States. This voyage was on a liberty ship that Charles worked on in the Long Beach Harbor. As was tradition when a ship was christened, those laborers who aided

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<sup>15</sup> “Named by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to bring ‘liberty’ back to Europe, Liberty ships were from a British design and were built on a mass-production scale in order to save supplies ... As the war progressed, the ships were also utilized as troop transports in the convoys. Over time, the ships were deemed too slow and small, so a new line of ships were built, named Victory ships.” National Museum of the U.S. Navy, “Liberty Ships,” <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/nmusn/explore/photography/wwii/wwii-atlantic/battle-of-the-atlantic/merchant-ships/liberty.html> (accessed May 22, 2020).

the effort would join in a short trip around the harbor— a trip that allowed Charles to taste the freedom of the American shore.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Susanne's first job in Los Angeles was as a part-time caretaker for a refugee couple who left their children at home while they worked during the day. After a little while, Susanne found more steady employment in the May Department Stores Company in the Los Angeles area. As a recent immigrant, Susanne did not have the best English and therefore found herself working in the basement of the department store, where the cheapest goods were on clearance. This is where many immigrants shopped. She worked on a commission and was able to put together enough sales every day to bring home a respectable paycheck. The income helped to pay for a nursery school for young Michael, as his grandmother was unable to handle the young boy full time. As Meyer recalled, "[School] was a bit of a traumatic experience, at least initially, because I didn't speak the language."<sup>17</sup>

After establishing themselves in Los Angeles, the Meyer family made their first big purchase, a 1937 Chevrolet sedan. One day the family took a trip to Palos Verdes, to the home of a friend of Charles. As the car went around a turn, the door next to Michael fell off its hinges. Though it may have been a "jalopy," Meyer recalled the car with fondness as a sign of his family's getting closer to achieving their American dream.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See fn. 2. Throughout the rest of the chapter, biographical information and beliefs were obtained through oral interviews with Meyer.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Using the knowledge he had learned at the Siemens plant in Nazi Germany along with his experience on the American Liberty ships in Long Beach, Charles was eventually able to open his own business with a partner, Edward Gold. The company, which specialized in electrical work and contracting, did most of its work in Hollywood and later expanded to downtown Los Angeles. Charles had little formal training as an electrician, yet, he managed to teach himself what he needed to know to maintain his fledgling business. Initially he performed all of the work with only his partner, but they were soon able to hire their first employees. Slowly, Charles was able to transition from being an independent electrician to the role of an electrical contractor, preparing and obtaining contracts in the Los Angeles area. The company, Alvarado Electric Company, remained open until Charles and Edward retired decades later. After the company closed, Charles continued renting out the storefront for years.

It is important to pause here to explore the Meyer family's connection to Judaism as it evolved from their time in Germany until their settling in Los Angeles. When asked if and how his family practiced Judaism in Los Angeles, Meyer made it clear that leaving Germany simply meant not being in Berlin anymore. The Judaism that they celebrated in Berlin followed them to their Hollywood home. Meyer recalled that his family would have likely joined a Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles had it not been for an "extraordinary circumstance."<sup>19</sup> One day, while looking into the Los Angeles Jewish community, Johanna noticed a familiar name, Rabbi Max Nussbaum (1908-1974), as the new rabbi of Temple Israel, the Reform congregation in Hollywood. Nussbaum had fled

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Germany in 1940 after having been imprisoned. By 1942, he had been appointed rabbi at Temple Israel, a position he held until his death, caused by a heart attack at the age of 64. Nussbaum was not just the rabbi of the synagogue that the Meyer family choose to join; he had been the rabbi of their synagogue in Berlin just years earlier, where he had married Charles and Susanne in 1936; and later, he would officiate when Michael became a bar mitzvah at Temple Israel in 1950 and when he married Margie (nee Mayer) on June 25, 1961. Michael and the Meyer family allowed their Judaism to fill every part of their life. They became close friends with the Nussbaums, and even after the rabbi's passing, they remained supportive and friendly with Ruth, his widow, who outlived both Charles and Susanne.<sup>20</sup>

At this time of his life, Meyer's Judaism and German heritage led to a bit of shame, as his culture was different from many of his peers who attended Wilson Place Grammar School. In particular, Meyer recalls being embarrassed to have his friends and their parents to the cramped one-bedroom apartment, which housed three adults and one child. However, he kept his embarrassment to himself, made friends, and assimilated into American culture while learning English. In junior high school these differences began to show more clearly, however. Meyer recalls being teased because he lived in the wrong part of town, whereas most of his classmates lived in the wealthier Fairfax area. Meyer lost class president to a popular schoolmate and had a

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on Rabbi Max Nussbaum see Lewis M. Barth and Ruth Nussbaum, *Max Nussbaum, from Berlin to Hollywood: A Mid-Century Vision of Jewish Life* (Malibu, CA: Joseph Simon/Pangloss Press, 1994). Neal Gabler, "Rabbi to the Stars" in *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, NY: Crown, 1988).

difficult time making friends. He joined a social club known as the Ravens, which was made up of many young boys, some Jewish and some not. Meyer thought this could be a new group of friends. However, his culture and heritage clashed the group, leading to one of the more challenging experiences in junior high school:

I was not a charter member [of the Ravens]. I applied and was rather severely hazed ... and this was the time I was becoming Bar Mitzvah, which meant I had to go on Friday night for so many Friday night services. The Ravens, however ... would meet on Friday nights. Most of the members were Jewish, but there were some Christian members. So, I missed a few of the meetings [because of services] whereupon I was summarily informed that I was being kicked out. I made the mistake of saying, okay, can I go to a meeting and defend myself? So, I did that on a Friday night that I didn't have to be at Temple. I did the best I could in explaining the situation. They were meeting in the living room of someone's house, and after I finished, they said, "Okay, go to the kitchen. Wait. We'll get you the answer." So, I'm standing there nervously thinking, "Well, maybe they'll reverse themselves" and was informed that no, you're still kicked out. Well, I was I guess 12 at the time, and I was really, really upset. I walked three miles

home instead of taking a bus just to walk off the anxiety of it.

Junior high school was difficult.<sup>21</sup>

His difficult integration into American life as a young German Jew helped Meyer navigate high school, where he began to come into his own. He made a core group of friends through two key organizations: The Southern California Temple Youth Organization (SCFTY), the regional youth group branch of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC),<sup>22</sup> and the Jewish fraternity Aleph Zadik Aleph (AZA). Meyer remarked that these two organizations gave him “a feeling of belonging that I didn't have in junior high school.”<sup>23</sup> He served as president of SCFTY and was an active member in AZA, and those, in addition to Temple Israel, provided friendship and companionship, connecting Meyer to other youths who were also proud of their heritage and their Judaism.

The friends that Meyer gained in the youth groups helped him to find his place among the radically different demographics of Los Angeles High School. In twelfth grade, Meyer was elected as senior class president for the first semester of his senior year. For the second semester, he was the president of the school's House of Representatives. At the same time, Meyer served as the second vice-president of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), the parent organization of SCFTY, where

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The Union of American Hebrew Congregations is now known as the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). SCFTY was a member of the National Organization of Temple Youth (now known as the North American Organization of Temple Youth), which remains a branch of the URJ to this day. SCFTY is now known as NFTY Southern California (NFTY-SoCal).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

his portfolio included international relations and affairs. He was also responsible for coordinating with other Jewish youth groups around the world. As he became more successful in the NFTY movement, Meyer was nominated and ran for president of the organization. He was elected president of NFTY in 1956, at age eighteen, a year after he graduated from Los Angeles High.

Meyer was the first president of NFTY who lived on the West Coast. Nearly all his predecessors came from the Midwest, with some from the East Coast. At the time of his election, Rabbi Sam Cook (1907-1998), whom Meyer credits for teaching him skills in leadership and speaking, served as the director of the organization. In assessing his contributions as president of NFTY, Meyer takes little credit for the work he completed, stating that “the presidency was really largely an honorary thing,” as the heavy lifting was actually done by the staff in the national office.<sup>24</sup> For Meyer, the most memorable aspect of his NFTY presidency was the leadership sessions he organized at Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, the first of the Reform Jewish summer camps.<sup>25</sup> Planning and organizing those sessions led him to create many meaningful connections with people who would be colleagues and friends for years to come. In addition, at Union Institute, Meyer met one of the most important people in his life: the future rabbi, and his future wife, Margaret (Margie) Mayer.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> As of 1972, Union Institute has been called Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute (OSRUI) in recognition of the monetary gifts given by the three namesake families. See: Michael M. Lorge and Gary P. Zola, eds., *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006).



## An Intellectual Awakening

After receiving his high school diploma from Los Angeles High School in January 1955, Meyer matriculated to the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA). He was interested in studying psychology during his first year at UCLA, and he also explored the areas of sociology, history, and philosophy. He originally intended to pursue a degree in psychology, but this plan fell through after he learned that UCLA focused on teaching experimental psychology, as opposed to Meyer's interest, which was in clinical psychology. It was in his second year when he began to discover his interest in the juncture between philosophy and history: intellectual history, specifically the history of ideas.

Two men were instrumental in beginning to shape Meyer's love of history, helping him to discover his interest in the intersection of individuals and their experience of history. The more influential of the two was Professor Hans Meyerhoff (1914-1965), who worked specifically at the intersection of philosophy and literature. Meyerhoff wanted to understand the role of the individual in our world, so he studied social sciences and researched what led individuals to make certain choices. Meyerhoff's central teaching, which he continually tried to prove, was that "life was absurd but [life's] vital enthusiasm provided evidence that it was worth living."<sup>26</sup> Meyerhoff died in a car accident at age fifty, leaving behind a wife and infant daughter. Meyer recalled the work of this teacher, who helped him to appreciate the individual

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<sup>26</sup> University of California Academic Senate, "Hans Meyerhoff, Philosophy: Los Angeles," in 1967, *University of California: In Memoriam* (June 1967), accessed on May 22, 2020 at [texts.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb629006vt;NAAN=13030&doc.view=frames&chunk.id=div00016&toc.depth=1&toc.id=&brand=calisphere](https://texts.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb629006vt;NAAN=13030&doc.view=frames&chunk.id=div00016&toc.depth=1&toc.id=&brand=calisphere).

experience and find a love in studying how that experience affects the whole person.

The second man who influenced Meyer's intellectual development was Dr. Donald Meyer (of no relation to Michael Meyer), an intellectual historian who studied the individual in American history. His studies, which especially interested Michael Meyer, attempted to show the "shallowness of positive thinkers".<sup>27</sup> Donald Meyer died on May 27, 2018, at age 94, leaving behind a wife, sister, five children, and five grandchildren.<sup>28</sup>

During his second year at UCLA, Meyer elected to study abroad, at the Givat Ram campus of Hebrew University. Influenced by his time in NFTY, Meyer developed a growing interest in Israel. He studied Hebrew and Judaism at Hebrew University, and he struck up a friendship with his new roommate, Daniel Leifer (1936 – 1996). Leifer was a Harvard undergraduate student who had a deep interest in exploring both intellectual and artistic topics. Meyer attributed his interest in art and architecture to Leifer, who opened his eyes to areas of artistic expression that Meyer had not previously explored. More important, Leifer also introduced Meyer to Martin Buber<sup>29</sup>, and although Meyer did not fall in the same school of thought as Buber, the introduction inspired him to dive deeper into more spiritual readings. Meyer began to appreciate intellectual and aesthetic culture for its own sake, as opposed to only reading what was

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Meyer, email communication with author, March 26, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Himeka Curiel, "Meyer Remembered for Shaping Curriculum in History Department," *News @ Wesleyan*, <http://newsletter.blogs.wesleyan.edu/2018/06/05/meyer-remembered-for-shaping-curriculum-in-history-department/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> "Martin Buber (1878–1965) was a prolific author, scholar, literary translator, and political activist whose writings – mostly in German and Hebrew – ranged from Jewish mysticism to social philosophy, biblical studies, religious phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, education, politics, and art." Quote from Michael Zank and Zachary Braiterman, "Martin Buber," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buber/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

assigned to him in classes. Meyer recalled the many trips that he and Leifer took up and down the roads of Israel on a Vespa, which they bought together. They even brought the Vespa to Europe and explored the European countryside on their motor scooter. Meyer appreciated Leifer for helping him to develop a meaningful interest in spiritual matters. Following their many theological and spiritual conversations, Meyer and Leifer returned to America and went on their educational endeavors. Leifer studied at the JTS and became a rabbi in 1962. He died in 1996 at age sixty; he was survived by his wife, daughter, mother, and brother.<sup>30</sup>

Meyer returned to UCLA in the fall of 1958, where he continued his studies and began exploring the world of academics after deciding rabbinical ordination was not where his main interest lay. He remembered:

I had, for a long time, harbored the thought of becoming a rabbi. But ultimately, [I] decided that my growing interest in Judaism, which was nurtured by my activity in NFTY, would best be fulfilled by doing something in the nature of intellectual activity rather than the multiple and multifarious duties incumbent upon a rabbi. Also, I had my theological doubts [which] contributed to [the decision not to become a rabbi] as well. So, I decided I really wanted to become an academic.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The University of Chicago News Office, "Rabbi Daniel I. Leifer, Hillel Director at the University of Chicago, dies after more than 25 years of service," <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/96/960311.rabbi.leifer.obit.shtml> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

Meyer graduated *summa cum laude*, with a near-perfect grade point average. While completing his final year, he was approached by the dean of the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, Isaiah Zeldin (1920-2018). Zeldin urged Meyer to pursue a degree that HUC-JIR no longer confers, a bachelor's of Hebrew letters.

Meyer explained that he seriously considered studying for his doctorate degree at three different schools: Brandeis University, Columbia University, and Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. He ruled out Columbia after talking to students of Professor Salo Baron (1895-1989), who would have been his advisor, as it appeared it would take nearly a decade to achieve his degree; and he did not feel a connection to the professors with whom he would be working at Brandeis. After an interview with Professor Ellis Rivkin (1918-2010), Meyer decided that HUC-JIR would provide him with the best education. At the time Rivkin was the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History, a title that would later belong to Meyer.

Meyer was astounded by HUC-JIR's library, which would allow him to immerse himself in rabbinic literature, a topic to which he had not been exposed during his years of undergraduate studies. He declared his intention to study history as his main topic with a special interest in Hebrew literature (under Professor Ezra Spicehandler) and philosophy (under Professor Alvin Reines). Meyer recalled his lengthy conversations with Rivkin, which helped him to “appreciate the fact that [Rivkin's] unorthodoxy challenged me. [Rivkin] was never one to accept the conventional point of view, even when it seemed to almost everyone else that the conventional point of view was

right.”<sup>32</sup> Rivkin’s skepticism taught Meyer to dig deep before coming to conclusions – a methodology that Meyer continues to practice.

While Rivkin, Spicehandler, and Reines all provided guidance and education to Meyer, none of them was able to provide the mentorship that Meyer needed to complete his dissertation. Fortunately, the same year that he was searching for a mentor, a new professor began at HUC-JIR in New York: Fritz Bamberger, who would assist HUC-JIR President Nelson Glueck (1900 – 1971).<sup>33</sup> That year, Meyer and his wife, Margie, moved to New York with their newborn and endured “a very tough year [with] lots of anxieties: financial anxieties, scholarly anxieties.”<sup>34</sup> Meyer recalled how difficult it was for him to complete his dissertation. Years later, he could still see himself hanging cloth diapers up in his small New York kitchen. Meyer recalled, “[I] came to the conclusion that my work would be either falsehood or plagiarism. If I wrote anything that was original, [it] would be false, and if it was right, I feared I must have taken the idea from somebody else.”<sup>35</sup> His many anxieties made the writing process emotionally difficult. He was, nevertheless, able to compose and complete his dissertation. During this time, Meyer held a fellowship at HUC-JIR, which helped Margie and him pay the bills. As a part of his fellowship, Meyer taught an adult education program on the New York campus. It was just the first HUC-JIR campus where Meyer would teach; he would

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> See Jonathan M Brown and Laurence Kutler, *Nelson Glueck: Biblical Archaeologist and President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

later go on to live and teach in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and Jerusalem, all four HUC-JIR campuses—a feat only he (according to his own records and memory) has accomplished.

Meyer completed his dissertation in 1964. It was titled “From Mendelsohn to Zunz: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824,” and his work quickly attracted scholarly attention. He subsequently revised his dissertation, which was published by Wayne State University Press under the title *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identity and European Culture in Germany, 1749-1824*. As recently as November 17, 2019, *The Forward*, an online Jewish news and opinion organization, ranked Meyer’s book as number four on a must-read list.<sup>36</sup> In selecting the topic for his dissertation, Meyer emphasized the importance of his feeling personally connected to the subject he studied. As he phrased it, “My dissertation is related to my own background; its purpose is to preserve the cultural heritage of the German Jewish community.”<sup>37</sup>

While writing his dissertation, Meyer spent many hours researching at the Leo Baeck Institute (LBI) of New York. Years later, Meyer gave back to the LBI by joining the board. He eventually became the international board president of the institute and is the only person to have given the Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture more than once—an honor that was recognized when he received the LBI’s Moses Mendelssohn Award in

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<sup>36</sup> Alyssa Fisher, “7 Jewish Texts You Must Read,” *The Forward*, <https://forward.com/culture/books/434851/7-jewish-texts-you-must-read-profs-choose-their-favorites/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.

2015. In Meyer's words, this honor, which brings together the memories of both Baeck and Mendelssohn, is especially important because these two individuals "are really models for my life."<sup>38</sup> Years later, Meyer edited a four-volume comprehensive history—*German Jewish History in Modern Times*, which outlined the history of German Jewry from the middle ages to the Holocaust—was published by the LBI.

Following the completion and publication of his dissertation, Meyer began to search for an academic appointment in Jewish history. To Meyer's memory, only Hillel positions were open, no academic appoints were available. However, shortly before his job search, Meyer had taken a course with Rabbi Dr. Samuel Sandmel (1911-1979), who was the provost of HUC-JIR at that time. Sandmel was keenly interested in a paper that Meyer had written for Sandmel's class. Sandmel's recommendation, along with the recommendation of Professor Ellis Rivkin, attracted the attention of HUC-JIR President Nelson Glueck, who invited Meyer to join the faculty in Los Angeles. That campus was located then in the Hollywood Hills. According to Meyer, Glueck wanted the Reform movement make a greater impact on the West Coast, and bringing more scholars to the Los Angeles campus was one of the ways he thought he could make that impact. This was Meyer's first opportunity to teach rabbinical students—an experience he enjoyed and wanted to continue. He would remain there until 1967, when he left to teach at the Cincinnati campus.

As he reflected on his years as a member of the HUC-JIR faculty in Los Angeles, Meyer remembered the seriousness of the faculty and the students he met there. He

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<sup>38</sup> Meyer, "German Jews: The History and Heritage."

also strengthened his relationship with Rabbi Richard Levy (1937-2019), who had been a roommate in 1960 when Meyer lived in Cincinnati and who would go on to be an usher at Meyer's wedding. Levy, Meyer recalled, was "the most spiritual person [Meyer] had ever met. Someone who was [a] real serious believer."<sup>39</sup> Meyer stated that Levy was as influential in his life as nearly any other scholar, friend, or student. He challenged Meyer to expand his beliefs and experience spirituality in ways unseen before, similar to that of Daniel Leifer. Meyer and Levy remained in contact for decades.

Shortly after arriving at the Los Angeles campus, Meyer became involved in a fledgling academic conference for Jewish scholars—the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS). As a member of the board and the chair of the organization, Meyer played an integral role in developing a lengthy catalog of the Jewish studies courses that were offered at all institutions of higher learning across the United States, a tool he hoped would get more students interested in the field. It was through the AJS that Meyer became friends with Ismar Schorsch (b. 1935), chancellor emeritus at the JTS. Meyer and Schorsch quickly began exchanging essays and were among the first to read and review each other's first books; they continue to exchange scholarly works to this day. Though there were some tense days when Meyer was the chair of the international board of the LBI and Schorsch was the chair of the New York board of the LBI, their relationship remains strong today.

## Conclusion

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2019.



Meyer's early life, his escape from Germany, his difficulty in junior high school, and his growth in high school all played important roles in his personal development. He grew to love and appreciate his Judaism and Israel through SCFTY, NFTY, and AZA. He found his love of intellectual history in his early days of UCLA, and he met many influential individuals, both personal and academic, during his years in university, in Israel, and while completing his doctoral degree. Meyer's experience with the LBI and AJS continue to be valuable to him today.

The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the essential aspects of Meyer's early life leading up to his doctorate degree. What we have come to learn is that Meyer had no one singular moment when he decided to pursue the study of history. His interest in history, and Jewish history in particular, was a result of his many experiences as a child and young adult. Meyer lived through one of the most studied events in modern Jewish history, the Holocaust, and his work has mostly centered around Germany-Jewish experience. Therefore, historians who study Meyer's contributions should pay close attention to how, if at all, his personal history impacts his conclusions.

In addition, Meyer spoke about the importance of his spiritual connection to Judaism. It is clear that Judaism has influenced Meyer; he chose to study Judaism because he felt close to the subject. We will look more into his theology and how Meyer has employed it in the third chapter. Without a doubt, Meyer's moral compass has pushed him to see specific evil and good in the world, and he has made great strides to avoid bringing those preconceptions into his work as a historian. However, an important conclusion is to realize that religion and historical facts can conflict. During

those times of conflict, Meyer has attempted to separate his personal beliefs from his historical conclusions, though it is not a perfect process. Meyer has made clear that his pursuit of the truth has been entangled with his faith, but he has searched to find factual, historical conclusions for all of his writing. Future historians will be charged with determining if and when Meyer appropriately separated his faith and his pursuit of truth and if he ever was unable to do so.

It is important to note that the early experiences in Meyer's biography not only shaped his academic pursuits and spiritual perspective; they also impacted his future involvement in organizational development and leadership, as we will see with the role he played in Breira, a liberal Israel advocacy organization. This is the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Breira: Lessons Learned through Organizational Development**

The organization that came to be known as Breira was conceived following a meeting of roughly fifty individuals at Rutgers University. Its aim was to create a dialogue between the Diaspora and Israel that brought to light the views of those who, despite supporting Israel—financially, ideologically, or both—felt as though they disagreed with the political landscape following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which had been dominated by right-leaning organizations in both Israel and the United States. Breira's short-lived existence—from 1973 to 1977—was plagued both by external and internal problems. It suffered attack after attack from competing organizations. It was labeled as fringe, radical, and even anti-Israel. In addition, its leaders faced internal disagreements on how to manage their messaging, membership, and funding.

From its inception, Michael Meyer sat on Breira's preliminary advisory board and later on its executive board. He served as the only representative from the middle-America region to see Breira through from beginning to end. Having had the opportunity to speak with Meyer and review his archived materials regarding his time in the organization, the aim of this chapter is to first outline the tenets and history of Breira and then convey Meyer's thoughts as he looked back on his time serving as an

ambassador and member of the organization.<sup>1</sup> Some of the other thought leaders who joined Meyer in leading Breira were Jacob Neusner (1932 – 2016)<sup>2</sup>, Eugene Borowitz (1924 – 2016)<sup>3</sup>, Max Ticktin (1922 – 2016)<sup>4</sup>, and Arnold Jacob Wolf (1924 – 2008).<sup>5</sup>

## Creating Space for an Alternative Voice

“Breira Means Alternative” was a phrase scattered across nearly every pamphlet or letter that the organization published. Although one of its original publications blurred its political agenda, it quickly became clear that Breira intended to pursue a two-state solution that supported a return to the pre-1967 borders. An open piece of correspondence states: “Breira is a project composed of Jews active in a wide spectrum of Jewish scholarly, educational, religious, and communal life in the United States,

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on Breira, see Marla Brettschneider, *Cornerstones of Peace: Jewish Identity Politics and Democratic Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); Irving Howe and Matityahu Peled, *New Perspectives: The Diaspora and Israel* (New York, NY: Breira, 1977); Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon, *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2003); Howard Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1992); Michael E. Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Jack Wertheimer, “Jewish Organizational Life in the United States Since 1945,” *The American Jewish Yearbook* 95 (1995): 3–98.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Bauer, “Jacob Neusner,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacob-Neusner> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Berger, “Rabbi Eugene B. Borowitz, Influential Reform Theologian, Dies at 91,” January 31, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/us/rabbi-eugene-b-borowitz-reform-leader-dies-at-91.html> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Bart Barnes, “Rabbi Max Ticktin, Yiddish and Hebrew literature professor at GWU, dies at 94,” *Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/rabbi-max-ticktin-yiddish-and-hebrew-literature-professor-at-gwu-dies-at-94/2016/07/06/198fe5ce-42f0-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/rabbi-max-ticktin-yiddish-and-hebrew-literature-professor-at-gwu-dies-at-94/2016/07/06/198fe5ce-42f0-11e6-8856-f26de2537a9d_story.html).

<sup>5</sup> Editors, “Arnold Jacob Wolf,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arnold-Jacob-Wolf> (accessed May 22, 2020).

including persons with a variety of viewpoints. Its purpose is to legitimate and promote open discussion of issues connected with the State of Israel and its relationship with the Diaspora.”<sup>6</sup>

Recalling his attendance at the original meeting at Rutgers University, Arthur Waskow (b. 1933)<sup>7</sup> stated that

The people at Rutgers were basically Zionists who were worried with what they saw was the evaporation of serious Zionist ideology in Israel. They were worried about the diminution of the Jewishness of Israel as the holding of the West Bank sort of began to distort Israeli society more and more, and they had kind of an uneasy sense of impending disaster which they could not pin down to anything specific.<sup>8</sup>

Though Breira may have started as an open project that invited all voices, it is clear that their intention was to protect the Jewish state while realizing the crucial problems that surrounded the idea of a Jewish-*only* state in the land of Israel (as opposed to a two-state solution, splitting the land between Jews and Palestinians). Instead, Breira leaders advocated that Israel just needed to maintain ownership over the pre-1967 borders along with access to East Jerusalem. According to one of the original advisory committee members, Rabbi Max Ticktin (1922-2016), Breira was to

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<sup>6</sup> “Breira: A Project of Concern in Diaspora-Israel Relations,” Michael A. Meyer Papers, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 2, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

<sup>7</sup> For information on Waskow see the Shalom Center, “Life-history of Rabbi Arthur Waskow,” <https://theshalomcenter.org/life-history-rabbi-arthur-waskow>.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Waskow to Foer, 6 Jan 1981, Paul M. Foer Breira Collection, MS-771, Box 1, Folder 1, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

be for “Zionists who felt keenly for an alternative supporting Israel but [who] acknowledge[d] Palestinian self-determination as an issue.”<sup>9</sup>

Galvanized by the Yom Kippur War of 1973, young American Jews found themselves in need of a movement that spoke to their beliefs, and many of them got behind this new organization. Early members were asked to contribute \$500 each, through personal donations and the recruitment of new members; these funds went to establish an office in New York and eventually to hire Breira’s only paid staff member, Robert Loeb (b. 1948). Loeb, born outside of Chicago—where both Ticktin and Wolf lived and worked—led the organization from its beginning until right before its closure in 1977. With Loeb as the director, Breira set its sights on creating goals and means by which it could achieve those goals. While the organization would ultimately fall short of making a dynamic impact on the American Jewish community, it did garner some support. According to Meyer, at its height Breira had no more than 1,500 members pursuing its three main goals:

1. “To provide a platform within the American Jewish community for groups and individuals who share our approach to peace in the Middle East, as well as initiating and coordinating educational materials which encourage the process that leads to peace;
2. To support those in Israel working in a similar direction and to maintain ongoing contacts with them;

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<sup>9</sup> Undated letter from Ticktin to Foer, MS-771, Box 1, Folder 1, AJA.

3. To encourage and strengthen those positions among Palestinians and in the Arab countries that recognize the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign Jewish state.”<sup>10</sup>

Breira created a journal and a monthly newsletter, which published a total of twenty-five issues. Its attempt to hold a convention in Israel was denied a venue after Jerusalem politicians and community members were pressured to disengage with it. Breira did hold one national convention in Chevy Chase, Maryland, with an attendance of about three hundred, during which there were vehement protests outside of the meeting hall. Documents show that there were children as young as six years old holding signs that stated, “Death to Breira.”<sup>11</sup> When asked about it, parents of those children said the children had learned of Breira and their “anti-Israel” stances in their Jewish day schools.

In an attempt to ease the tensions between Breira and one of its leading opponents, the Jewish Defense League, Breira leaders invited its executive director, Bonnie Pechter, to speak at the conference. Despite the peace offering, Pechter spent her ten minutes at the podium inflaming tensions even more as “she compared Breira to the Jews who betrayed their brethren during the Nazi era.”<sup>12</sup> According to Meyer, Breira’s democratic roots were what led to Pechter’s being invited to speak. However, her lasting impact was not to help rebuild the bridge that had crumbled, but rather burn the very foundation it sat upon. This was not the only time that Pechter raised tensions

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<sup>10</sup> Resolution of Commission IV, MS-771, Box 1, Folder 5, AJA.

<sup>11</sup> “The Breira Story,” *Genesis* 2, 16 March 1977, MS-771, Box 1, Folder 5, AJA.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

over Breira. Eventually, she was dismissed as JDL executive director, in part because of poor leadership that led to her having “alienated the community” they wanted to build.

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Unfortunately for Breira, right-leaning Zionist communities saw the rise of this organization as a threat to the State of Israel. Despite Breira’s constant attempts to advocate for the State of Israel and to define itself as a pro-Israel organization that simply aligned with the two-state solution, it suffered devastating attacks in nearly every American Jewish publication and was shunned by Israeli politicians. In large part, Breira only gained membership in the Hillel and Reform movements, with a few Conservative rabbis joining as well. According to Meyer, had Breira been able to gain membership from more than just the liberal and Reform communities and expand to the level the founders desired, it may have been able to survive longer.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the ongoing threats and calls for dissolution from the outside community, Breira faced its share of internal issues as well. It was launched without a model or strategy for success, devolving into too many opinions and breaking up into internal factions. With both ultra-liberal and less radical members finding a home in the organization, there was no clear path to agreement as what precisely was Breira’s mission and *raison d’être*. In the end, these factions would not support each other, and

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<sup>13</sup> The community which they wanted to help was the pro-Israel diaspora supporters. Alisa Kesten, “The Jewish Defense League: An Update” (New York: American Jewish Committee Domestic Affairs Department, April 29, 1980), 1-3, <https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/jewi/Jewish%20Defense%20League%20Update%20AJC%20Kesten.pdf> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, May 3, 2019.



this too was a factor in the organization's demise. In addition, Breira did not manage its finances in a way that would have been successful for very long. Almost monthly, Breira leaders sent letters to members requesting additional donations and calls for higher membership fees. Unfortunately for its members, Meyer recalls, Breira closed its doors and disbanded its membership less than a decade after adopting its articles of incorporation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Reflections on a Short-Lived Organization**

As of this writing, Michael Meyer is the only remaining member of Breira's advisory board and its board of directors from the Midwest region. It is unsurprising that the early members of the organization sought out his participation: As a recognized name through his historical contributions and his role as a distinguished member of faculty at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, he was a natural choice for a potential liaison to the students at the College. Following the Rutgers meeting, individuals such as student Rabbi Eric Yoffie and Rabbi David Saperstein looked to engage Midwest representation in their organization. Writing to Meyer on August 21, 1973, Yoffie explained his own views on how this new organization should promote itself to the world at large:

I would like to point out that our purpose is to generate as much concern and support as possible in the general community. We are therefore approaching this matter with caution, stressing that we are concerned

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Zionists, and attempting to avoid connections which would cause us to be dismissed as “radicals” or “leftisits” [*sic*].<sup>16</sup>

Included in his letter is a document titled, “A Call to Discussion”; Meyer, having read this document, identified with one of the subjects—specifically, the realization that there is a crisis in which both the Arab and Israeli populations lay claim to one land and that a two-state solution that satisfies the needs of both parties must be found.

In explaining why he chose to join the advisory and directors’ boards of Breira, Meyer said:

I was drawn to it because I was concerned with the increasingly right-wing character of American Zionism and its exclusion of other points of view. I was concerned with the increasing settlement on the West Bank and by organizations like Gush Emunim [and] the whole Israel movement that [was] ... failing to recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. At that time the notion of a Palestinian state was considered heretical and what Breira was doing was insisting upon the possibility [that] two states should not be excluded.<sup>17</sup>

Meyer recalled that he felt a close connection to the young people who were trying to bring new light to a side of the discussion that had previously been silenced. As a faculty member, he also made clear that he would bring the discussion to all of the Jewish constituencies that he had access to in the Cincinnati area. Meyer became one of

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Yoffie to Meyer, August 21, 1973, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 1, AJA.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, May 3, 2019.

the few individuals in the organization who worked intently on a method by which the New York-based Breira could create local chapters outside of the East Coast. He was eventually recruited by a fellow board member to serve on the committee that would evaluate chapter proposals and membership bids. As Meyer explained, his desire to grow Breira outside of the New York and East Coast communities was evident through his continual conversations to recruit members and to help establish new chapters in cities across the United States. He maintained that his efforts to build a community that supported the goals of Breira continued until the day the organization ceased to exist.

The reasons for his participation in Breira come to light in his written statements surrounding the goals of the organization. As a contributor to the first position paper Breira published, Meyer agreed that it should be made it abundantly clear that the organization aimed to support the State of Israel to the best of its ability. Despite the many hostile accusations that other Zionist and Jewish organizations hurled at Breira, Meyer's written statements constituted a full-throated assertion that Breira was in fact a pro-Israel organization that simply held minority views. As he stated in the position paper, "We are a group of American Jews dedicated to the survival of the people of Israel and the State of Israel."<sup>18</sup>

According to Meyer, the original supporters of Breira wanted to create an organization unlike any other. They wanted an organization that declared that the Israeli government must pursue peace with its neighbors. They believed that to create a Jewish state in the land of Israel, the government of Israel must pursue a "policy of

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<sup>18</sup> "Breira," MS-804, Box 2, Folder 1, AJA.

conciliation with the surrounding Arab states and if it seeks imaginatively, justly, and compassionately to solve the Palestinian problem.”<sup>19</sup> However, what set Meyer apart from other leaders were his views on the tactics that Breira should have used to achieve its goals. For Meyer, Breira was an organization that should originally be kept internal to the Jewish community. He stated in a 1975 article, “Breira can succeed only if it becomes a force working within the Jewish community, not a pariah outside of it”.<sup>20</sup> Then, according to Meyer, once successful within Jewish circles, Breira could expand, reaching external to the Jewish community and make itself known in all mediums and publications to which it could gain access. In retrospect, , Meyer stated in a recent interview that Breira should have attempted to broadcast its views to the wider American community from the start, publishing its statements and op-eds in local and national news sources. Looking back, that would have attempted to persuade the non-Jewish community that there was more to consider than the status quo when it came to the political reality of Israel.

In addition, Meyer believed it to be important that Breira’s public statement in any forum should be that Breira supports the State of Israel and seeks to create a secure, Jewish, democratic state. Meyer contended that he was convinced this strategy was critically important so that any attempt by outsiders to accuse Breira of being an “anti-Israel” advocacy group could be thwarted immediately. Despite Meyer’s efforts to promote Breira as pro-Israel, those who accused the organization of being anti-Israel

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Meyer to Prinz, September 18, 1975, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 1, AJA.

succeeded. Eventually, this characterization stuck and certainly contributed to its downfall.

According to Meyer, his philosophy, which he considered vital to the success of the new organization, was not always pursued by Loeb, its director. During an interview with the American Jewish Peace Archive in November 2014, Loeb asserted that Breira was simply a collection of “good Jewish kids who loved Israel and wanted to see it survive.” Loeb blamed the demise of Breira, in part, on the fact that the members had an idea, but “didn’t have a program” to accomplish their mission.<sup>21</sup> While Meyer blamed the lack of dedicated activities on Loeb’s inadequate leadership, they clearly agreed that there was a lack of mission. According to Meyer, had Breira sought out a clearer direction, a more cogent strategy, and a stronger public campaign, it may have been able to survive into the 1980s or even longer.<sup>22</sup> Loeb, meanwhile, described the mission as ambiguous. As Loeb stated in his interview, “There wasn’t a position that anybody knew to advocate for... [the discussion] never really got off the ground.”<sup>23</sup>

To best understand the role that Meyer played in the organization, we must understand the types of attacks that Breira faced continually. Most often, Breira was the target of public attacks that were written and disseminated in both Jewish and non-Jewish publications. These attacks attempted to label Breira as filled with self-hating Jews who were anti-Israel. An example of such an attack appeared in the periodical

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<sup>21</sup> Aliza Becker interview with Robert Loeb, November 28, 2014, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://ajpeacearchive.org/peace-pioneers1/robert-loeb/>.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, May 3, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Loeb interview.

*Update*, published by the National Zionist Affairs Department of Hadassah. In its May 17, 1976, edition it labeled Breira's spokespeople as "anti-Israel" advocates who attempted to "sever existing organic ties between the U.S. Jewish community and Israel ... [and who wanted] the Israel government and armed forces, the organized Zionist community ... written off."<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, individuals such Rael Jean Isaac (b. 1933)<sup>25</sup> penned pamphlets and essays, published in the *Commentary* magazine that stated Breira was cultivating "an attitude of enmity toward Israel," with its membership rolls being filled with "many haters of Israel."<sup>26</sup> Meyer maintained that because Breira had not yet become a known name in Jewish households, those who were unfamiliar with it read Isaac's attack and likely found themselves unwilling to listen to Breira's positions, believing, rather, that Breira was actually the enemy of Israel and Zionism.

Furthering the fight, a November 1976 article in the *Jerusalem Post*, written by Wolf Blitzer (before his rise to fame at CNN), accused Breira leaders of meeting with two members of the PLO, off the record, in an attempt to find political common ground without the Israeli government in the room.<sup>27</sup> Though such meetings were taking place

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<sup>24</sup> "Cheerleaders for Defeatism," *Update*, 17 May 1976, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 2, AJA.

<sup>25</sup> Isaac, born in 1933 to Judah and Fannie, is an American writer and Fulbright scholar who has written six books and scores of articles. As recently as 2007 Isaac stated that there is no possible solution to the Middle East Peace problem, stating "Putting the idea of solving the Arab Israel conflict in the diplomatic trash bin should be the first order of business." -- Kerry M. Olitzky, *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Rael Jean Isaac, *Breira - Counsel for Judaism* (New York, NY: Americans for a Safe Israel, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> "Breira Conference, The" *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1977). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i323157>.

between PLO, Israeli government and private groups frequently, Breira officials held that there was no problem with them trying to find common ground with the PLO. Adding insult to injury, the then-president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld (1913 – 1996),<sup>28</sup> stated that Breira members “give aid and comfort ... to those who would cut aid to Israel and leave it defenseless before murderers and terrorists.”<sup>29</sup> Meyer recalled that these publications and statements provoked an internal splintering with the Reform movement concerning the fledgling organization, making it harder for Breira leaders to recruit new rabbinical members for fear that they would be rebuked by colleagues for joining the organization. Without the support of rabbis in the Reform movement, Reform congregations were not looped into the work of Breira. These circumstances, Meyer recalled, guaranteed that both lay and rabbinical members of the Reform movement – a community that might otherwise be inclined to support Breira’s mission -- continued to only hear of the critical positions held by the more vocal and powerful conservative Israel support organizations.

Meyer, however, continued to respond to most of these attacks with letters addressing the fallacies in each of their statements. In response to the *Update* article he stated that Hadassah “has – sadly – descended disastrously in both my estimation and that of my wife. I cannot understand why [Hadassah has] not printed a retraction or at

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<sup>28</sup> During his career, Rabbi Lelyveld served as Rabbi at Temple Israel in Omaha, NE, director of the national Hillel organization and Rabbi at Fairmont Temple of Cleveland from 1958 – 1986, President of the American Jewish Congress, Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Synagogue Council of America.

<sup>29</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

least a very thoroughgoing correction.” Meyer insisted in his written rejoinder that the Hadassah article was a “sheer absurdity” that “in the long run only weakens the cause dear to both of us.”<sup>30</sup> He included also a lengthy discussion of the specific inaccuracies in the article. In response to another public criticism of Breira, Meyer wrote, “The conclusion ... that members of Breira are not ‘consistent supporters of Israel’ ... is not correct. Breira is consistently committed to the support of Israel: politically, financially, morally. It differs from other Jewish organizations only in its willingness to favor alternatives to particular policies of the present (currently caretaker) Israeli government.”<sup>31</sup> Letters such as this are not in short supply in Meyer’s personal archives, as he saw it fit to serve as both a spokesperson and historian, laying out the reasons why such attacks were baseless and harmful to the overall goal that all supporters of Israel shared: the success and strength of a Jewish state in its ancient homeland.

When asked why Breira faced such vehement opposition so early in the process, Meyer asserted that opponents found it necessary to attack Breira before it and its politically liberal ideas had the chance to grow. In Meyer’s estimation, Breira could have become a large and meaningful institution, representing the most accurate policy position of the majority in the liberal Jewish movements. He believed that much of American Jewry actually agreed with Breira’s positions but never had the opportunity to hear them clearly. However, Meyer conceded that it is possible the organization never convinced the general public that its members were trying to create a secure future for a Jewish state—rather, it may have always been seen as a threat to Israel. In

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<sup>30</sup> “Letter: Meyer to Matskin”, September 13, 1976, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 2, AJA.

<sup>31</sup> “Letter: Meyer to Gwerzman”, January 5, 1977, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 2, AJA.



addition, from a historical point of view forty years later, Meyer concluded it was unlikely that, once Breira had been labeled anti-Israel, it could have ever effected real change in the political landscape. Moreover, since it was not around long, it was unable to create meaningful dialogue with other Israel support organizations.

Besides the damage done to Breira by its political opponents, Meyer observed that the organization “might have stressed the pro-Israel part more.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, he admitted that Breira suffered from an array of internal issues that plagued the organization from the moment that it opened: (a) The lack of an internal administrative structure; (b) financial instability; and (c) the disabling lack of trust that some Breira members had in the organization’s own leadership and staff. In Meyer’s opinion, these problems contributed heavily to the circumstances that led to Breira’s rapid disintegration.

Although Meyer expressed pleasure in having been involved with Breira, he made clear that he did not achieve his personal goals within the organization and considered it a facet of his career in which he failed to contribute significantly to the evolution of American support for Israel. According to Meyer, the modern organization J-Street would most closely align with the goals of Breira because of its support of a two-state solution, its desires to support the Palestinian community in the development of that solution, and its ongoing dialogue about the inequalities that Israeli Arabs and Palestinians face compared to Jewish Israelis.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, May 3, 2019.

Assessing how his time in Breira continued to affect him in the decades following its dissolution, Meyer returned to the quote that he wrote in a letter in 1975: “I chose to associate myself with Breira almost at its founding because I felt then, and I feel now, that there must be free discussion of the vital issues affecting Israel’s future within the American Jewish community.”<sup>33</sup> Meyer continued to stress the importance of this tradition in our world, stating that everyone has the right to hold his or her opinion regardless of opposing points of view. We must do our best, he concluded, to defend our own opinion on its merits, rather than attack the other party out of fear—as he felt Breira’s opponents did. Whether it is about Israel, Judaism, or any other controversial topic, it is clear that Meyer believes an open society with a free and fair marketplace of opinions is crucial to the ongoing development of our Jewish and American society.

Over the course of this chapter we have come to understand the role that Breira played in laying the foundation for pro-Israel organizations that did not agree with the status quo of their time. Breira was pressured by other pro-Israel groups, as it was perceived to be a threat to the State of Israel. For Meyer, his membership in Breira reaffirmed his liberal beliefs and confirmed what he already had formed as his political opinion on the state of Israel. By looking at Meyer’s time with Breira, we gain valuable insight into the life and experience of one of the scholars of our community who took an active role in a controversial organization. Meyer learned of the importance of being open to outside ideas, having felt what it was like to be a part of an organization that

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<sup>33</sup> Letter from Meyer to Prinz, September 18, 1975, MS-804, Box 2, Folder 1, AJA.

was cast as an outsider. He especially realized this after the speech which Rael Jean Isaac gave at the Breira conference, which was discussed earlier.

Meyer's writings and most recent interview offer us the chance to see the value that he placed in looking for the truth and being a spokesperson for the organizations he believed in. We come to see his desire to correct the record when articles and letters were published that misrepresented his passions and beliefs. We see the importance in being an articulate and devoted writer who constantly backed up his comments with personal experiences and factual accuracies. Finally, we understand that he consistently placed value on offering all parties the chance to voice their opinion, so long as he too was given the opportunity to present his, discuss differences, and hopefully find common ground.

Breira is an example of how Meyer put his ideas and ethics into practice. His beliefs and theology—how he established his ethics—is the subject of the next chapter. Diving into that theology and belief system will help us to better understand Meyer as an individual and a historian.

## Chapter 3:

### Belief, Religion, and Theology

Michael Meyer spent his career studying the history of the Jewish people, much of it focused on the history of Jewish thought. His methodology is anchored in the critical study of the past, and his reconstruction of Jewish history is based on meticulous research and scholarly analysis. Yet, as Jacob Rader Marcus observed, “The historian always wants to know what happened and why ... [but] no one, I fear, can jump out of his skin.” In other words, Meyer’s personal history played an important role in shaping his *Weltanschauung*, his distinctive perspective on Jewish history and the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, we turn to a discussion of Meyer’s theology to better understand the man behind the many books, hundreds of articles, and scores of reviews. We will analyze some of his core beliefs by examining his writings together with the information he shared in a series of personal interviews.

The single most crucial aspect of Meyer’s belief system has been his Judaism—a personal relationship with the religious tradition and his personal concept of God. When asked how Judaism has defined him as a person, Meyer stated that

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985*, Vol. 1 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 14.

Judaism doesn't define me as part of my person, but as my whole person, Judaism is the world in which I live. It's the world of ideas in which I live ... to a large extent. It's also the social world in which I live. It is the most significant element in my identity. It's hard for me to conceive of myself as anything other than a Jew.<sup>2</sup>

As examples of Judaism being the world in which he lives, Meyer explained that the novels he reads often have Jewish themes, the music he listens to is inspired by Jewish culture, and his work is deeply ingrained with the history of Jews and Judaism. Practicing Judaism means something specific in his day-to-day life. He recites the *Shema*<sup>3</sup> every day, attends Shabbat services every week when he is able, and observes the Jewish dietary laws in his home. Jewish observance has been a core value of his familial life. Many of his friends are Jewish. His identification with the Jewish experience inspired him to study the Jewish past, to learn from it, and to bring lessons from the Jewish heritage to as many people as he can. Meyer stated:

I believe that if one has a serious identity, an identity of any depth, that it has to be historical in character. Particularly, that's with regard to Judaism. Judaism has changed over the years, and if you want to understand, have a genuine relationship to Judaism, you can't just pick out one period or pick out one strand. You have to relate to the whole of it. Even if ultimately you identify only with this or that strand, you can't

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4.

pick and choose and say, okay, this is Judaism [and] this is not.... [Some may,] but it's not the historian's approach to it.<sup>4</sup>

For Meyer, Judaism is both the subject he studies and the moral compass that limits him. Judaism's ethical heritage compels him to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible. Meyer does not shy away from admitting his own bias but explained that he mitigates it by using the "historian's approach." He said that his moral compass may influence his historical analysis so his writing is not the "supreme" opinion on any one issue but rather a view through the scope of his experiences.<sup>5</sup> Meyer explained that when he speaks about other's experiences and how their experiences have affected society, he offers a subjective view. He strives for objectivity even if that goal can never be reached, and his approach to history must include all facets of the Jewish past, even those elements of which he is not proud. According to Meyer, historians must commit themselves to the "totality" of any subject. In so doing, they can analyze the entirety of history and not just the positive aspects. He stated:

If I'm [studying] history, I'm analyzing; I'm synthesizing ... I am committed to an ideal of scholarly impartiality in so far as that is possible.... The historian is responsible for understanding so far as he or she can.... There's a relationship that you have as a historian, but also as a person, to what came before you, whether you agree with it or not

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

because you come out of that tradition, and therefore you have a relationship to it.<sup>6</sup>

Meyer's stance is that one must be diligent in scrutinizing all aspects of history. A student of the past must always bear in mind that the study of history is not a reflection of one's personal morals but can enhance one's beliefs by bringing scholars closer to their ancestors. Though studying history does not need to alter one's morals, one's morals may indeed influence the way one understands history.

For Meyer to practice his personal version of Judaism, he defined specific moral adherences to follow. His Judaism "establishes a moral ideal, which [he tries] to live up to."<sup>7</sup> That moral ideal is to strive toward God by striving to see God in others. His belief in God has not only shaped his contemporary interactions with family, friends, and associates, but it has inspired a keen interest in the lives of his predecessors and in the Jewish experience of others. Meyer's specific interest in "the other" has led him to research how others<sup>8</sup> have interacted with and responded to their environments, relationships, and experiences. Meyer's theology has been affected by his research and historical contributions as he has attempted to find the ideal balance in relationships between "human beings and groups, nations, families, the various groupings into which human beings fall."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Though he is interested in the 'other', Meyer is also a Jew, and thus his interest is enhanced when looking at the experience of the Jewish 'other'. In addition, in order to better understand the other, Meyer finds it important to research his own history and how it overlaps with the history and experiences of the other.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

This impulse caused him to take deep interest in the ideas espoused by individuals such as Leo Baeck (1873–1956) and Hermann Cohen (1842-1918). Baeck stressed the importance of the personal nature of religion and its ability to evolve.<sup>10</sup> Cohen, meanwhile, “argued publicly for universal suffrage and for the rights of workers to organize democratically-constituted collectives. He also saw deep points of connection between ethics and religion, and he understood Judaism as a profoundly ethical system of belief and practice.”<sup>11</sup>

On a personal level, Meyer follows the teachings of the distinguished German Jewish philosopher and theologian Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), who divided his theological understanding of Judaism into three commonly distinguished categories: creation, revelation, and redemption. Meyer finds revelation and redemption to be the clearest to define. He believes that revelation is the discovery of the differences between “what is and what [his] moral imagination allows [him] to conceive.”<sup>12</sup> He strives toward a moral ideal, one that exists within him and that he can pursue through his daily actions and thoughts. Meyer’s belief in messianism<sup>13</sup> as the source of this

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<sup>10</sup> Albert H. Friedlander, “Leo Baeck,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leo-Baeck> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Scott Edgar, “Hermann Cohen,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cohen/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> “The term *messianism* denotes a movement, or a system of beliefs and ideas, centered on the expectation of the advent of a messiah (derived from the Hebrew *mashiah*, “the anointed one”)... messianism emerges as one of the possible answers: the certainty of a satisfactory natural, social, and historical order (and this certainty was particularly strong in Israel, based as it was on God's promise enshrined in his eternal covenant) is projected on the horizon of an ideal future.” From “Messianism: Jewish Messianism,” *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias->



moral imperative within each person is the link between revelation and redemption. For individuals to be redeemed, they must move toward the messianic impetus that has created the moral imperative within the individual, society, and religion. Redemption is achieved through the ongoing effort to obtain moral awareness and to put that morality into practice. For Meyer, there is both a personal and a communal redemption—as individuals, as Jews, and as humanity.

However, this leaves out the most troublesome category for Meyer: creation. To understand creation, Meyer asks himself whether the moral ideal that he is pursuing is something of his own conception; or, alternatively, he considers if there is a transcendent reason for his and humanity's creation in the cosmos. In Meyer's view, the answer to this question is a balance of both faith and doubt. Meyer's faith leads him to the belief that humanity was created for a purpose, one he tries daily to understand through his pursuit of morality. However, to truly understand the relationship between revelation, redemption, and creation, Meyer admitted that he will have to wait until death. He stated:

I have a real sense of a moral ideal. I have a real sense of an ultimate goal, but whether that all has a basis outside of the human sphere and outside of my own personal sphere is something that I think if I'm going to get an answer to that, it won't be until after my death.<sup>14</sup>

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almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/messianism-jewish-messianism (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

When asked what his “ultimate goal” is, Meyer stated that it is comprehension of genuine moral authority. He made no declaration of what he believes will happen after death and hesitated to define the “ultimate goal” as anything that is achievable in this world. For him, the principles of “*lo yisa goy el goy cherev, lo yil' medu od milchamah*” (nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore)<sup>15</sup> and “*ve-ahavta le-re'acha ka-mocha*” (love your neighbor as yourself)<sup>16</sup> are the perceptible moral imperatives that function as the ultimate goal to pursue in the earthly life.

Rationally or not, Meyer believes that there must be intent behind the creation of humankind and life. His inability to understand why humanity was created explains why he must have faith in creation. He *believes* there is purpose and meaning to it. While evil, injustice, and pain cause him pause, in the end he has decided to rely on faith. The authority behind this faith is a constant search to become more adherent to the moral imperative. Meyer has concluded that the creator of this moral imperative is God. The human being's attempt to become one with the moral imperative is the human's search for God. However, in Meyer's conception, while God is the moral imperative, it is unrealistic to believe that an individual will become one with God in this life. Instead, the person strives to understand the moral imperative, which is discovered through interactions with society and learning from these interactions.

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<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

<sup>16</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

Meyer's theological stance on morality closely follows the Columbus Platform, adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in 1937, the same year as his birth:

In Judaism, religion and morality blend into an indissoluble unity.

Seeking God means to strive after holiness, righteousness and goodness.

The love of God is incomplete without the love of one's fellowmen.

Judaism emphasizes the kinship of the human race, the sanctity and worth of human life and personality, and the right of the individual to freedom and to the pursuit of his chosen vocation. Justice to all, irrespective of race, sect or class, is the inalienable right and the inescapable obligation of all.<sup>17</sup>

This closely echoes Meyer's search for God through his interactions with others. In addition, Meyer agrees with the notion that "Judaism emphasizes the kinship of the human race, the sanctity and worth of human life,"<sup>18</sup> as he believes that all humans, regardless of religion, have a soul that can be redeemed; there is no "proper soul" that a Jew possesses that a non-Jew does not. In addition, as a historian, Meyer understands his religion by combining traditional Jewish thought with the teachings of the Enlightenment. He attempts to combine his experience and belief with science into his way of life and moral adherences. Meyer respects everyone's right to their beliefs, so

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<sup>17</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis, "The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism," May 27, 1937, Columbus, Ohio <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

long as those beliefs do not inhibit or obstruct another's belief. He backs this up by stating that Jews, as a chosen people, are not a superior race, but rather they are a people who have chosen to discover the meaning within one's existence.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, to discover the meaning of one's existence, Meyer asserts that there should be an emphasis on the future, striving to understand what the 'ideal' could be.

Meyer's contention that an individual should focus on the future begs the question: Why did he spend his career looking at the past? His answer is that an understanding of the past is crucial to achieving a better future. He strives to reconstruct the past in a way that individuals can learn from the experience of others, understand the circumstances that led to historical events, and then use that knowledge to create a more beneficent future.

Meyer genuinely valued his work, his friendships, his interaction with students, and his partnership with colleagues over his decades-long career at HUC-JIR. It helped him develop his relationship with Judaism, which he believes closely followed the arc of Reform Judaism from its classical roots to what it has become today. Over the course of his career, he became more religiously observant, attending worship services more regularly and donning a kippah while praying and celebrating the Sabbath at his home. While he was teaching on HUC-JIR's Jerusalem campus, from 1970 to 1972, he and his wife, Rabbi Margaret Meyer (ordained in 1986), decided to keep a kosher home – a practice that continues today.

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of a chosen people is derived from Deuteronomy 14:2.

As for his relationship with God, Meyer said, “I don't think I ever had a belief in God that was significantly different from what I have now.”<sup>20</sup> While he noted that he had certainly gravitated to a different theologian or philosopher during various stages of his life, his relationship with God has largely remained the same: a personal relationship complicated by “a continuous dialectic between doubting and believing.”<sup>21</sup> Meyer’s search to understand his theology has motivated the historical work that he has done throughout his career. Though he tries to separate his personal belief from the conclusions that he comes to in his writing, the topics that interest him are often connected to his theology. He stated:

I'm obviously interested in those individuals whom I feel theologically close to and tend to write about them, which is why I wrote a biography of Leo Baeck.... I've written a couple of things on Hermann Cohen and on various Reform thinkers. So, my own theological quest has been enriched by reading these various thinkers.... I've always been drawn to Jewish religious history and intellectual history.... The reason for that is obviously my own attempt to understand myself. My dissertation was really an attempt to understand what is a modern Jew, which is what I called myself and to try to determine where that began. Because, clearly, I was not a medieval Jew, but [rather I tried to answer] what did it mean

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

to be a modern Jew? What was the modern element? What was the Jewish element? How did they interrelate with each other?<sup>22</sup>

Being connected to his topic and researching it in its entirety is crucial to the development of Meyer's books and articles. Understanding his theology allows readers to see better the man behind the research. It is vital to comprehend the motivation for Meyer's interest in history to show how his personal beliefs and experience have influenced his writing and conclusions.

### **A Foundation in Reform Judaism**

Another key component of Meyer's personal belief system has been his lifelong identification with the Reform Jewish movement. Through his studies, Meyer attempts to determine some of the critical issues that face Reform Judaism, American Judaism, and Judaism in general. A product of the Reform movement from his days in youth group until his retirement as an HUC-JIR professor, Meyer has asserted his belief that the biggest threat to Reform Judaism in America is the ever-changing definition of Jewish identity. Citing the low birthrate among Reform Jews, Meyer expressed uncertainty that Reform Judaism would be able to sustain itself. According to Dr. Edieal Pinker of Yale University, by 2058, Orthodox Jews will outnumber Reform and Conservative Jews combined. By 2088, Orthodox Jews will likely outnumber all other

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Jews, including the unaffiliated.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the number of Jews who have left their respective movements is highest among Reform Jews, who have seen a 28% exit from Judaism completely.<sup>24</sup> This trend is reflected in the 2013 Pew Research Center study that found an increasing number of Reform Jews have chosen to intermarry.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding intermarriage, Meyer believes that Reform Jewish clergy should be held to a different standard than the lay member. He stated that that clergy members should exercise extreme caution before entering into a romantic relationship with any non-Jew. He stated that he is “opposed to individuals who are married to non-Jews, who are not converted to Judaism, becoming rabbis.” He feels that clergy members should declare their “commitment to the future of the Jewish people” by marrying someone who shares their religious values and can commit themselves to similar (even if not the same) theological stances.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to Meyer’s concern over interfaith marriage he believes that the Reform movement must address the increasing trend of disaffiliation among younger Reform Jews. Failure to do so will lead, Meyer believes, to a speedy decline for the

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<sup>23</sup> Ari Feldman and Laura E. Adkins, “Orthodox To Dominate American Jewry In coming Decades As Population Booms,” *The Forward*, <https://forward.com/news/402663/orthodox-will-dominate-american-jewry-in-coming-decades-as-population/> (accessed May 22, 2020); Edieal J. Pinker, “Projecting future Jewish demographics in the United States: Whither the Jews?” <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Projecting-future-Jewish-demographics-in-the-United-Pinker/7d041e6300076a6cc7d6676e2d99c5b3dfd8f540> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Luis Lugo et al, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” *Pew Research Center* (Oct 1, 2013), <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, December 3, 2020.

movement. Meyer also believes that the Reform movement has not dealt sufficiently with the integration of science into religion—for example, integrating new theories such as the CRISPR technique<sup>27</sup> into the religious understanding of what a human being is. In an era of studying the human genome efforts to edit DNA, he questions why the Reform movement has not begun to seriously address questions of genetics and humankind. In addition, Meyer believes the Reform movement has insufficiently engaged with the question of creation and how science and religion do not have to be at odds. Meyer hopes that synagogues and Reform religious groups will create groups that can discuss the interplay of religion and science to determine how we can better use science in religious discussions, sermons, and text analysis.<sup>28</sup>

Meyer is also concerned that younger Jews are losing the connection that their parents and grandparents had to Judaism. He said, “They may remember that grandma was a Jew, but that doesn't really influence their lives. It doesn't become a significant part of their identity. It's simply an interesting part of their background”.<sup>29</sup> The 2013 Pew study supports this. While Meyer does not have a solution for engaging young Jews, he expressed hope that new generations of Jewish leaders will find innovative ways to do so.

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<sup>27</sup> “CRISPR/Cas9 is a technique that allows for the highly specific and rapid modification of DNA in a genome, the complete set of genetic instructions in an organism.” From: What is Biotechnology?, “CRISPR-CAS9,” <https://www.whatisbiotechnology.org/index.php/science/summary/crispr> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



Although Meyer continues to look forward, he also has expressed a desire to return to some of the elements that the movement has left behind. One of those is the movement's monthly magazine, *Reform Judaism*, which ceased publication in 2014.<sup>30</sup> He also laments the movement's decision to eliminate its department of education, including doing away with staff and formalized education plans. He understands that funding issues drove those decisions, but he is frustrated by them nonetheless. As a historian, Meyer realizes that there are always new trends, but as a devout Reform Jew, he has become disheartened with these recent changes.

Beyond all of these concerns, however, Meyer believes that the most substantial issue facing Jews today is the gap between American and Israeli Jews. Meyer believes that the conservative politics of the State of Israel cause liberal American Jews<sup>31</sup> to distance themselves from the state. Meyer believes that "chauvinism on the part of the Likud" hinders liberal Jewish support for Israel, as does Israeli treatment of non-Jewish residents, which he described as "a secondary position politically."<sup>32</sup> He cited as examples the destruction of Arab property following terrorist attacks and the burning of Palestinian agriculture. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plea for immunity

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<sup>30</sup> "*Reform Judaism* magazine was the official voice of the Union for Reform Judaism, linking the institutions and affiliates of Reform Judaism with every Reform Jew. Covering developments within the Reform Movement while interpreting world events and Jewish tradition from a Reform perspective, it was received quarterly by nearly 300,000 member households (members of 860 Union congregations) as a benefit of their synagogue's Union affiliation. It ceased publication in 2014, after the printing of the Fall 2014 edition." See "About RJ Mag," <https://reformjudaismmag.org/about-rj-mag> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> For this essay, the liberal American Jewish group is defined as anyone in the non-Orthodox movements. The largest components of this category are Reform, Conservative and unaffiliated Jews.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Michael A. Meyer by author, January 14, 2020.

from indictment on corruption charges is another reason that liberal American Jews distance themselves from the state, Meyer added.<sup>33</sup> Other examples he gave include the West Bank settler movement<sup>34</sup> and the dissidence between Orthodox and liberal Judaism in Israel.<sup>35</sup>

It should be noted that Meyer's beliefs about the difficulties that liberal American Jews face regarding their support for Israel are undoubtedly influenced by his time in Breira. Recall that Breira attempted to gain true political equality for non-Jews in Israel and to achieve religious equality for liberal Jews—and faced strong opposition to both. Some data supports Meyer's reasons for the separation between liberal American and Israeli Jews.<sup>36</sup> However, these issues are also influenced by his personal experiences and political beliefs.

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<sup>33</sup> For more information on Netanyahu's plea for immunity, see Christopher Hopkins' article "Israel's Netanyahu Asks Parliament for Immunity From Corruption Charges," <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/01/792918617/israels-netanyahu-asks-parliament-for-immunity-from-corruption-charges> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> For more information on West Bank Settler Movement, see Greg Myre and Larry Kaplow's December 29, 2016 article, "7 Things to Know About Israeli Settlements," <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/12/29/507377617/seven-things-to-know-about-israeli-settlements> (accessed May 22, 2020). Or see the Jewish Virtual Library's "Facts About Jewish Settlements in the West Bank," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/facts-about-jewish-settlements-in-the-west-bank> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> For more information on the Reform/Conservative movements in Israel see Lulu Garcia-Navarro "In Israel, When is a Jew Not Jewish Enough," <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/10/131216486/in-israel-when-is-a-jew-not-jewish-enough> (accessed May 22, 2020). See also Naomi Zeveloff's *Haaretz* article from March 8, 2020, "Is There a Future for Reform Judaism in Israel?" <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/reform-judaism-a-fledgling-israeli-enterprise-1.5377367> (accessed May 22, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the separation between American and Israeli Jews, including some empirical data see Frank Newport, "American Jews, Politics and Israel,"

Meyer's decades of study of the American Jewish experience and his close connection to the Reform movement is valuable to scholars, leaders, and practitioners of Judaism in general and Reform Judaism in particular. The historical insights he has provided over the decades—including his perspective on those factors that have connected and distanced Jews—can be a guide as Reform Judaism experiments with how to grow in the modern age. On a more micro level, studying Meyer's theology and beliefs allows us to obtain a more nuanced understanding of how his personal convictions have influenced his analyses and shaped his interest in the Jewish past. Michael Meyer has studied the modern Jewish experience, but he has also lived it. He is a subject of his own topic.

This examination of Meyer's theological beliefs and personal convictions have provided a snapshot of how he views the future of Reform Judaism, American Judaism, and Judaism across the globe. It provides scholarly opinions on what Jews must address to strengthen Jewish life and ensure its future. Through a series of personal interviews we have come to understand those issues that he defines as crucial to Jewish existence; how he researches the totality of a subject to mitigate any preconceptions he may harbor; and how his personal experiences and belief system have affected his hundreds of publications and his decades of work as a teacher and a historian.

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*Gallup* (August 27, 2019), <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/265898/american-jews-politics-israel.aspx> (accessed May 22, 2020) and *Moment Magazine*, "The Growing Gap Between Israel and American Jews," *Moment Magazine* (August 21, 2018), <https://momentmag.com/growing-gap-israel-american-jews/> (accessed May 22, 2020).

## **Conclusion:**

### **Lessons to Learn**

Michael A. Meyer has studied history and the Jewish experience for more than fifty years. His knowledge is broad, and his contributions to the field of history are vast. Having written hundreds of books, articles, and reviews, Meyer continues to share his expertise even into his retirement. As we have come to learn throughout this thesis, Meyer's biography and personal experience have been an important influence in his desire to study history. From his childhood days in Nazi Germany to his youth in Los Angeles to his time as a professor at HUC-JIR, the details of Meyer's life have shaped his ideas about the past and the role that history continues to play in fashioning the future. In particular, Meyer firmly believes that the study of history is vitally important to Jewish leaders and clergy members who are responsible for leading the Jewish community into the inscrutable future. The distinguished cultural historian Peter N. Stearns has explicated this very point in his essay titled, "Why Study History":

Studying the stories of individuals and situations in the past allows a student of history to test his or her own moral sense, to hone it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings. People who have weathered adversity not just in some work of fiction, but in real, historical circumstances can provide inspiration. "History teaching by example" is one phrase that

describes this use of a study of the past—a study not only of certifiable heroes, the great men and women of history who successfully worked through moral dilemmas, but also of more ordinary people who provide lessons in courage, diligence, or constructive protest.<sup>1</sup>

Meyer is an example of a teacher who has used his own moral compass in his approach to studying and teaching the lessons of history. He approaches his topics with as little bias as possible, but he simultaneously acknowledges that it is impossible to read or study history without incorporating it into one's personal experience. As Meyer put it: "Although it may be true that we seldom learn from history, its study does provide us with perspective and, sometimes, even consolation."<sup>2</sup>

Personal experience, therefore, has been the focus of much of his work. Meyer's study of the experiences of individuals and societies has given his students the ability to comprehend and empathize with the struggles and sensibilities of those who are different. His singular expertise makes his biography, his personal experiences, his theology, and his beliefs uniquely valuable. As Meyer stated multiple times in his oral interviews, he has been influenced by his own personal history, just as we all are.

There surely is much more to learn about Meyer as a historian and a prominent figure in American Reform Judaism during the last decades of the twentieth century and

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<sup>1</sup> Peter N. Stearns, "Why Study History," American Historical Association (1998), [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/why-study-history-(1998)) (accessed March 12, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Meyer, "Confronting Crises," *Reform Judaism* (Fall 2009): 28-30.

the first decades of the twenty-first century. His career unquestionably deserves more in-depth study. It is my hope that this thesis constitutes a modest contribution to preserving a sense of Meyer as an individual and a historian and that the personal information gleaned from his own testimony will benefit future researchers and historians.

All in all, this thesis brings us to three main conclusions:

First, it is not possible to completely divorce ourselves from our life experiences or the societies in which we live. Meyer found comfort and meaning in learning about his people, and those feelings led him to a compelling interest in the study of the Jewish historical experience. He has studied German Jewry and the German-Jewish experience extensively because he lived it. His interest in this topic is unquestionably rooted in his own youth, in his childhood memories of that epoch, and in his parents' German-Jewish culture, which was transplanted into the fields of Los Angeles, California. Meyer's desire to learn about his own heritage and the history of those similar to him inspired him to dedicate his career to the study of the Jewish past. He has worked diligently to acquire as much information as possible about any topic with which he had a personal connection. In this sense, his career as a historian has been driven by a self-reflective impulse, exemplified by the discussion of *The Butcher's Tale* in the first chapter of this thesis. Meyer has allowed his passion for history and his own experience to intermingle in a way that is beneficial to his readers and students and is motivating for himself. Though he admits that his personal experiences have created an unavoidable bias, these same experiences have also provided him with a great desire to uncover as much information as possible. Meyer has spent countless hours researching, translating

documents, and interpreting a diverse array of source materials, culminating in a wealth of writings and teachings.

Second, understanding the shared values and experiences of the Jewish people as a whole is important to the continuity of the Jewish experience. Meyer has articulated critical issues that he believes the Jewish people must address to survive and flourish in the future. From intermarriage to religious polarization to changes in ethical values and mores, Meyer has emphasized the importance of building community across different movements. He believes that we can create Jewish communities that will last for eternity, and he hopes that "we recognize that our understanding of that eternity rests within our changeable human and Jewish selves."<sup>3</sup> For Meyer, the fundamental lesson that he passes on to future generations is that partnership, even when disagreeing, will provide the opportunity to learn from each other and create a stronger Jewish community. As a product of the Reform movement, Meyer's current observations, his personal experience, and his knowledge of the past provide an important commentary on how the movement can better prepare itself for the future. Though his analyses may be colored by his own experiences and his opinion of what is "best," he provides an essential lesson to all: To build off of the past, to create a stronger future, leaders must first understand the foundation of the movement that they are trying to improve. The prominent American writer and novelist Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973) captured this idea in her oft-quoted aphorism: "One faces the future with one's

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Meyer, "Our Collective Identity as Reform Jews," in *Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 93-96.

past.”<sup>4</sup> Meyer believes that those who attempt to lead their people without understanding the past are misguided.

Third, history is not just about the series of events that occur on a timeline. Instead, as Meyer has exemplified through his work, history is also about the human being’s personal struggles and sensibilities. Individuals experience history through the lens of their own culture, context, and circumstances. No two experiences are identical and, therefore, it takes a broad and deep look at any event to understand how it has affected an entire nation, society, religion, or peoplehood. In his oral interviews, Meyer commented on the importance of doing extensive research before coming to any conclusion. If we are unwilling or unable to do such research, we must label any “conclusion” a personal opinion. The lessons of history emerge, Meyer argues, through the process of meticulous and thorough research. His *oeuvre* – his historical writings taken as a whole – exemplify and validate this.

Michael Meyer has bequeathed to the world a valuable historical inheritance. His decades of dedication to his subject have led to countless contributions. His students at HUC-JIR and students of history around the world have benefited from his research and expertise. Meyer has spent his career studying the Jewish history of individuals, organizations, and communities as they engaged with modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> Pearl S. Buck, *What America Means to Me* (New York: The John Day Company, 1943), 67.



In this thesis we have examined facets of one historian's life and ideology in the earnest hope that when we better understand his life experiences, we are able to shed important light on the overall nature of his historical work.

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