Do Jews Believe?
The Rise and Fall of Jewish Theology in Post World War II America

Joshua Isaac Beraha

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York

March 14, 2014

Advisor: Lawrence A. Hoffman

Summary

In this thesis I attempt to describe the rise and fall of Jewish theology in post World War II America. I assess why prior to the war, American Jews were concerned with everything but theology and why after the war, theology came into focus in a way it never had before.

During the post-war years, many notable rabbis and scholars became advocates for theology while some attempted to write a new systematic Jewish theology, unique to America and to the post-war era. By zooming in on *Commentary* Magazine from 1945-1950, this thesis offers an analysis of some of the major contributors to the conversation on theology during those years.

The goal of the thesis is to show that despite a fervent call for a new Jewish theology in the early post war years, by the mid 1960s that call was still unanswered.

Chapter 1 analyzes the state of American Jewish theology before World War II. Chapter 2 examines the impact of World War II on my topic while chapter 3 outlines the specific theological questions that developed in the post-war period (in particular, 1945-1950) as seen through *Commentary*.

In addition to the many articles about theological issues published in *Commentary* magazine, this thesis relies on several books on American Jewish history.

Acknowledgements

I am daily grateful to God, my creator and sustainer.

Thank you to my advisor and teacher Larry Hoffman, who taught me not *what* to think, but *how* to think and opened my mind to the transformative power of ritual.

To all my teachers at HUC-JIR; I am indebted to your great wisdom and generosity in sharing it with your students.

To Rabbi Danny Zemel; I am thankful for your friendship and mentorship. You taught me what it means to be a rabbi.

To the entire Temple Micah staff and community; thank you for welcoming me and my family into your warm and vibrant synagogue. You helped shape me as a person and a Jewish educator.

To the staff at the HUC-JIR, New York Klau Library; thank you for providing the resources and space that made this thesis possible.

My friends and classmates! Jodie, Ethan, Jonah, Brandon, Kelly, Ally, Bethie. You guys rock and I couldn't have made it through Rabbi school without you.

Thank you to my extended family; my father-in-law, Elliott Abrams, who loaned me several books on American Judaism and who, over our dinner conversations, pushes me to think deeper about the American Jewish community; my late mother-in-law, Rachel Abrams, who taught me to preach what I believe; my grandfather-in-law, Norman Podhoretz, who took the time to meet with me and Rabbi Hoffman to discuss topic possibilities for this thesis; my Nana, Charlotte Wasser, who taught me to play baseball and continually encourages me in all my endeavors.

To my parents, Nathan and Karen Beraha, my primary Jewish educators, who provided for me a warm, loving environment from which to explore the world.

To my beautiful wife, Nani, and energetic son, Raphael; I am forever grateful to have you in my life. You inspire me to live life to its fullest.

To my unborn child who is due any minute; truth be told, I'd have welcomed your birth whenever you decided to come, but thank you for waiting for me to finish!

Table of Contents

Introduction

A SURVEY PUBLISHED by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [now Union of Reform Judaism] in 1875 reported that the Jewish population in America was estimated to be around 230,000. By 1905 that number rose to 1.7 million and by 1936—4.6 million.[1] It is no secret to the student of American Jewish history that during this period American Jewish culture flourished. But despite a few lone voices—Kaufmann Kohler, for example, who wrote a treatise on the subject in 1918 and Mordecai Kaplan himself, for whom theology was central—the state of Jewish theology was only pitifully represented within it. Ironically, Christian theology was thriving at the time—practically a national pastime celebrated in newspapers and magazines, and making men like Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth familiar household names as well as academic guides to the theological elite in seminaries. But the Jewish community's primary interests lay elsewhere. Theology was simply not on its agenda. Nor did it become a matter of consequence for Jews until well after World War II.

By the 1960s, however, things were changing. In 1965, Arnold Jacob Wolf—an American Reform Rabbi—edited a book entitled *Rediscovering Judaism: Reflections on a New Theology*. Through nine essays by burgeoning Jewish intellectuals, Wolf attempted to give "contemporary answers to classical problems of Jewish theology."[2] In early 1966, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein— Mordecai Kaplan's son-in-law and a co-founder of the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism—published *Varieties of Jewish Belief* which featured 17 personal statements by leading Jewish figures on issues of Jewish theology.

---

[1] Glazer, Nathan. *American Judaism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957, p 161.
[2] Wolf, Arnold Jacob. *Rediscovering Judaism; Reflections on a New Theology*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1965, p 11.

In August of that same year, *Commentary*—the most influential magazine in American Jewish life at the time—ran a symposium called "The State of Jewish Belief." More than 30 rabbis responded to questions about such issues as God, divine revelation, the commandments and chosenness. In the introduction to the *Commentary* symposium, contributing editor Milton Himmelfarb argued that "one of the ironies surrounding all the discussion which has recently been taking place over the 'death of God' is that, in many intellectual circles at least, God has not been so alive since Nietzsche wrote His obituary almost a century ago."[3]

What happened from the time of mass Jewish immigration to America to the time of Rabbis Wolf, Eisenstein and the *Commentary* Symposium? How did the American Jewish community morph from Judaism as a cultural and ethnic heritage to Judaism as a religion, and to what extent did this shift take place? How did the nationalist, secular impulse in Jewish life swing to one that was religiously orientated? This paper will attempt to answer these questions.

Chapter 1 will show why there was virtually no American Jewish theological writing prior to World War II but a blossoming sometime thereafter. It will also ask: if not theology, what were the main concerns of the American Jewish community? Chapter 2 will focus on how World War II impacted the American Jewish community and answer the question as to why theological issues came to the forefront of concern at that particular moment in history. Chapter 3 will outline the specific theological questions that developed in the post-war period (in particular, 1945-1950) as seen through *Commentary*.

---

[3] Himmelfarb, Milton. "A Symposium: The State of Jewish Belief." *Commentary* 2.42, 1966.

Before probing the development of Jewish theology from the time of mass Jewish immigration to America to the post-war era, a definition of theology is necessary. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, in his book *A Jewish Theology* (1973), begins the conversation in the broadest of terms. He writes: "Theology is the science of God."[4] For a Jew attempting to understand the science of God, according to Jacobs, the questions are: "What is the Jewish concept of God? *Is* there a Jewish concept of God? What does Judaism teach about God's nature? Does God reveal Himself to mankind and if so how? How is God to be worshipped?"[5]

Jacobs argues that *contemporary* Jewish theology has to take into consideration "astronomy, psychology biophysics, para-psychology and many other subjects that impinge on his chosen subject."[6] Jacobs also argues that a contemporary Jewish theology must take into consideration all the many facets of modernity. Moreover, Jacobs writes that a Jewish theology should consider:

> The Jewish approach to God and how this differs from approaches of other religions; the relationship between God and man; the meaning of and significance of worship; the doctrine of reward and punishment; the doctrines of the Messiah and the Hereafter; the idea of the Chosen People and the theological implication of the State of Israel; the problem of evil; the question of divine providence and miracles; in short all those topics which have to do with Jewish belief in contradistinction to Jewish practice.[7]

[4] Jacobs, Louis. *A Jewish Theology*. New York: Behrman House, 1974, pp 1-2.
[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid., 6
[7] Ibid., 8

Surely, the *what* of Jewish theology is broad, but one thing is clear: Jewish theology must involve a direct systematic approach to questions about the Jewish God and an attempt on some level to discuss the implications for that theology for modernity.

Chapter 1: American Jewish Theology Before 1945

The large influx of Jews to America throughout the first two decades of the 20th century drastically altered the look of American Judaism, not just in the immigration years themselves but for two decades after that, as the immigrants acculturated to America, had children, and developed a distinctive approach to Americanism rooted in the eastern European ethos from which they had emerged. Although Jewish settlements in America date back to 1654, the new immigrants—in numbers alone but in countless other ways as well—completely transformed the American Jewish landscape. As we saw, the sheer number of Jews in America between 1875 and 1936 drastically increased. In 1881 (the year of the Czarist May Laws, and a convenient starting point, therefore) most Jews hailed from Central Europe; by 1924 (the date of the Immigration Act that ended the Great Migration), they were overwhelmingly Eastern European. The "German" immigrants may have come from equally humble origins but by the 1920s, they were relatively well off and comfortable with Gentiles and American society in general. The "Russian" immigrants (by contrast) were still poor, unassimilated to their new environment, and even uneducated.[8] But the distinction between these two groups meant little to Gentile America, which still saw the United States as a Christian nation, properly Protestant, overall, with Jews as a modest but significant set of outliers. As Arthur Hertzberg puts it, "In America the Jews were a sui generis minority; for them, and for all

[8] In Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, he details these so-called "German Jews." For the most part, he writes, they came from the then independent nation of Bavaria. But they also came from Central Europe as well from such places as Bohemia and Moravia. Some also came from Posen, an eastern province of Prussia. p 91

those who related to them, whether friend or foe, this was not a multi religious or multiethnic country; it was a Jew/Gentile country."[9]

The Eastern European influx was so vast, however, that regardless of the ethnic "German/Russian" divide, the more important division in the 1930s and '40s was generational. The "first generation" refers to the large groups of Eastern European immigrants who settled in America throughout the first few decades of the 20th century. The "second generation" is the children of those immigrants—those born and raised solely in America who came to maturity during the 1930's. A so-called "third generation" then is the children of this "second generation," born, that is to say, in the 1930s and '40s, and coming of age in the post War years, the period under discussion here.[10] These generational categories are significant, for in examining the development of Jewish theology in America, we will find a drastic difference between the first two groups on one hand, and the third one, on the other.

The focus of this chapter is on the "first" and "second" generations for whom theology was far from their purview. What typified them in fact was their "consistent, stubborn, and—given the intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century—almost miraculous *avoidance* of theology (emphasis added).[11]" This avoidance was widespread, for even in the several American rabbinical seminaries, *new* theological thinking was wholly absent. Even a history of Jewish theology was not a core part of the curriculum, despite the presence of teachers who were clearly capable of addressing the subject.

---

[9] Hertzberg 241

[10] Eisen, Arnold M. *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1983, p 8.

[11] Arthur Cohen, introduction to Milton Steinberg's Anatomy of Faith (as quoted in Goldy, Robert G. *The Emergence of Jewish Theology in America*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1990, p 7.

The Hebrew Union College (HUC, the Reform movement's seminary) employed scholars like Leo Baeck and (before he left for the Jewish Theological Seminary of America [JTSA]) Abraham Joshua Heschel—but Baeck taught midrash and Heschel taught history of medieval thought. This is especially surprising for Baeck whose 1905 book on theology, *The Essence of Judaism,* had won him wide recognition upon its publication in Germany. HUC, however, says Eugene Borowitz, "was unable to bring to its students a realization of theology's function and significance. Not in any one department of the College alone, but in every area where the ideas of Judaism were taught, there was detailed scientific investigation… but no inspiring theological creativity."[12]

The situation at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTSA, the Conservative movement's seminary) was much the same. The Seminary employed such thinkers as Mordecai Kaplan, Solomon Schechter, Louis Finkelstein and Louis Ginzberg—but none taught a single course in anything that dealt strictly with Jewish theology. At Yeshiva University too, theology was noticeably absent from the rabbinic curriculum.[13]

That theology was not a focus of the "first" and "second" generations of American Jews is clear, and scholars agree on this assessment. What is less clear is *why*—why didn't these immigrant groups, even the ones who established the two major seminaries, take an interest in Jewish theological topics? The answer to this question can

[12] Borowitz, Eugene. "Theological Conference: Cincinnati, 1950." *Commentary* 9.6, 1950.
[13] Goldy, Robert G. *The Emergence of Jewish Theology in America*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1990, pp 8-9.

be divided into four categories: practical work, pragmatic thought, Jewish tradition and secular interests.[14]

I. Practical Work

THE ARGUMENT from a practical standpoint is that the Jewish community was more concerned with *doing* than with *thinking*. Put simply, practical concerns superseded theoretical ones. First and foremost. among the practical concerns, was how to integrate into American society. These Jewish immigrants were wholly unfamiliar with American life—its language, culture, economy, government, educational system, etc.—and so most of their time was spent re-building their lives under drastically different circumstances from those they had known in Eastern Europe. How to be an authentic America and not a greenhorn took precedence over everything else.[15]

The need to integrate the many immigrant groups into American society was especially felt following World War I when declarations of loyalty were expected of any newcomers to the country. In 1915 President Roosevelt's charge to the immigrants echoed educator W.B. Cubberly who argued that the different immigrant groups should be broken up and assimilated "as part of our American race." For the children of immigrants, he argued, America should "implant (in them) the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government," and "awaken in them reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which

[14] Goldy uses similar categories. Using his argument as a framework, I've added some additional research as necessary.
[15] Goldy 9-10

we as a people hold to be of abiding worth."[16] Without doubt, Jewish immigrants, especially those of the "second" generation, felt enormous pressure to Americanize, a process that took time and psychical energy. It took years to master such subjects as English and American history; and psychical energy worrying about how to be an authentic Yankee.

But even with the extraordinary effort entailed in Americanization, it was not as if these first and second-generation Jews lost a sense of their Jewishness. How could they, even if they had wanted to, given America's subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle efforts to exclude Jews as a group from full American status? The country still was—as we saw—a Protestant stronghold; quotas increasingly kept Jews out of elite colleges, boardrooms, and suburbs. The sheer number of Jews was so large, moreover, that even if they had wanted to, they could never have assimilated easily into non-Jewish status.

Beyond the negative factor of being an un-assimilable massive minority, however, Jews retained pride in their own distinctiveness, a consequence in part of their very numbers, not to mention American separation of church and state that granted Jews the official and inalienable right to belong despite unofficial and informal concerns about them. Integration into American life therefore took the form of building robust Jewish institutions. American sociologist Nathan Glazer describes the situation well:

> Socialists, communists, anarchists, Zionists of all types, territorialists… and combinations of them all, in the dense areas of Jewish settlement in the big cities, had their groups, their centers, their social events, their newspapers and periodicals. Outside of politics there were the cultural Yiddishists and Hebraists with their circles and centers,

[16] W.B. Cubberly as quoted in Eisen's *The Chosen People In America*

> their publishing organizations, and newspapers and magazines… there were… philanthropic, defense, and benevolent societies… Jewish hospitals, orphanages, old people's homes, settlement houses, social agencies for the poor…the Joint Distribution Committee…the Jewish National Fund, the Palestine Foundation Fund, and the women's organization Hadassah.[17]

After the years of their conception, these institutions required an ongoing stream of leaders and fundraisers, members and funders—and here, we might have expected theology to inform Jewish consciousness of what they should be doing. Theology, that is, could have guided the ongoing raison d'etre of Jewish institutional life; but it didn't. Above anything else, the main concern of the "first" and "second" generations was the practical one of establishing an economic and socially viable Jewish life in America. Here, Nathan Glazer's distinction between "Jewishness" on the one hand, and "Judaism" the religion on the other, is helpful in understanding why theology was absent from these institutions. As Glazer argues, the first and second generation of immigrants were concerned with "Jewishness"—that is, cultural, not religious, representations of their identify.

Glazer's framing of "Jewishness" versus "Judaism" helps explain another practical concern—the shortage of American scholars who concerned themselves with Glazer's notion of Judaism. In Europe, the situation was different. In Germany for example, Jews like Abraham Geiger who were educated in religious and secular studies, took up theology as a primary focus. Geiger, in particular, was an important representative of German Jewish concern with Judaism as a religion—he had founded the journal *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie*, the "Scientific Journal of

[17] Glazer 87

Jewish Theology." As Milton Himmelfarb argues, "All modern Jews—insofar as they are modern, or even post-modern—walk in the footsteps of German speaking Jewry, the pioneers of Jewish modernity."[18] Matter-of-factly, the Jews in Germany spoke the language of Judaism the religion. But until 1945, many of the great works of the German Jewish theologians had yet to be translated into English.[19] Thus, despite the lack of theology in the seminaries, Jewish scholars might at least have known Mendelssohn, Geiger, Cohen, Rosenzweig and Buber, but they lacked a true in-depth understanding of their work.[20]

Moreover, the Eastern European immigrants came from a milieu in which Jewish law, *halacha,* dominated Jewish thinking and behavior. Only in central Europe had Jews gone to universities where Christian theology had predominated. As Glazer writes, "Among the immigrants were thousands of Jews with a fabulous knowledge of traditional law and usage, for the whole aim of Jewish life in eastern Europe (sic) was to produce students of the law."[21] Most "Russian" Jewish immigrants had arrived uneducated in secular studies and did not attend American universities here either. Taken together—the early Jewish American immigrants lacked the skills necessary to write a systematic Jewish theology.

What is more, the would-be theologians of the era—the rabbis—were frequently called on to tasks that had little to do with Jewish theology (at least on the surface). In general, rabbis served as the figurehead of the community, *de facto* "chief administrators"

---

[18] Goldy 11
[19] Martin Buber's *I and Thou* was translated into English in 1937. The first translation into English of Franz Rosenzweig's works did not appear until N.N. Glatzer published a collection of his writings in 1948.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Glazer 62

of community centers. In addition, their primary pastoral duties took them away from scholarly pursuits. They wrote sermons that would appeal to the secular, acculturated Jewish immigrants striving to be more American, hoping also to attract the younger generation back into the Jewish world. All this to say that if they were interested at all in theology, there was simply no time to write or study it.[22]

A final, although certainly essential, pragmatic concern of these early generations of American Jewish immigrants was fighting anti-Semitism. As Jewish immigrants began to enter America in the late 19th century, a national conversation was being held on immigration policy, in particular, on the "true" nature of America and Americanism. It was widely argued that America must work to maintain its white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority and that if America were to open its gates, that majority would be threatened. The result was a set of laws that limited immigration based on national origin (the first one of those was signed into law in May of 1921 by Warren Harding), and yet for three more years, Jewish immigrations came to the country in droves. Anti-immigration sentiment along with anti-Semitism persisted, of course, so that Jewish immigrants of the 1920s and 1930s—a time that American historian John Higham has labeled the "Tribal Twenties"[23]—faced quotas at leading universities and medical schools, in the banking and insurance industries. As Arthur Hertzberg puts it, "The anti-Semites were in agreement on one central point: the Jew is alien, subversive, and dangerous; he cannot be

[22] Eisen 10
[23] As quoted Raider, Mark A. *The Emergence of American Zionism*. New York: New York, 1998, p 43.

allowed the freedom of unfettered competition to achieve a place in society."[24] In trying to fight this mentality, the Jew had no time for God.

II. Pragmatic Thought

ALONG WITH PRACTICAL concerns came pragmatic thinking in the form of a distinctively American philosophical school known as pragmatism. The main (non-Jewish) thinkers in this field were Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and John Dewey. Building on an 1878 paper by Pierce, James delivered a 1907 lecture entitled *Pragmatism: A New Name for an Old way of Thinking*, where he discussed how we can reconcile "'the scientific loyalty to facts'" with "'the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type.'"[25] For James, the way to reconcile these two extremes—modernity and religion—was through personal experience. He wrote: "any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, *true instrumentally*."[26] In short, our understanding of truth is dependent upon our lived experiences and our rational, intellectual capacity, rather than on any supernatural, metaphysical idea. This has been described as a "naturalist understanding of truth," for its anthropological bent.[27]

---

[24] Hertzberg 239
[25] James, William. (1907) *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 as quoted in Hookway, Christopher. "Pragmatism." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 16 Aug. 2008. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Hookway, Christopher. "Pragmatism." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 16 Aug. 2008. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.

The Jewish American thinker Mordecai Kaplan—who wrote and published on the Jewish religion beginning in the 1910s—was highly influenced by the pragmatic, naturalist school of thought that James and Dewey established—especially Dewey, who had moved from Chicago to Columbia University and whom Kaplan knew personally. Like James and Dewey, Kaplan attempted to reconcile religion with modernity. His pragmatic approach responded to the social *experience* of the Jewish people in modernity, arguing that Jews must seek salvation in *this* world—the only world we can empirically know. His emphasis on salvation as a matter of our experience in the here and now made theology less important than the social functions of the Jewish people. Kaplan was further influenced by the sociology (and, therefore, very practical concerns) of Durkheim, from whom Kaplan learned to emphasize the priority of peoplehood and community. His concern was hardly God as a theological entity—a commander or lawgiver, for example. Rather, he focused on Jewish civilization, as it develops over time.[28]

Where is God in Kaplan's thinking? To begin, Kaplan's God is not a personal God. Kaplan's God is not anthropomorphic. Kaplan's God is merely a part of the natural order of civilization—not above it, an extension, Kaplan thought, of Maimonides: Maimonides had already stripped God of bodily qualities; Kaplan simply extended the idea and took away God's supernatural ones.

To be sure, this way of thinking made Kaplan a theologian. But his philosophy rendered God simply *an idea*, one of Durkheim's *sacra*, that could be studied for its sociological impact. It hardly invited scores of followers to develop further the

[28] Borowitz, Eugene B. *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide*. New York, NY: Behrman House, 1995, pp 100-105.

consequences of religious belief. In contrast, it gave voice to the trends already current in the first and second generation of American Jews. In that world, where Jewishness dominated Judaism, Kaplan's philosophy provided a way around traditional Jewish belief in an anthropomorphic, all-powerful God. He delivered just what was needed for Jews who wished to remain Jewish but no longer accepted the strict nature and divine origin of Jewish law—beliefs that had been dominant in Eastern Europe but were readily cast aside here. In the words of Eugene Borowitz, Kaplan's emphasis on peoplehood

> has served the needs of those who wanted to be Jewish but could not think of themselves as religious-either because they did not believe in God, or (more frequently) because they were anxious to be rid of the discipline of traditional Jewish observance and its European or immigrant overtones. With the help of Kaplan's theory or some variation of it, such non-believing or non- observant Jews (lay and rabbinic alike) could nevertheless devote themselves in all good conscience to Jewish life in its new American style, and they could feel themselves to be making a contribution to the maintenance and growth of Jewish culture without any commitment to theology or commandments.[29]

It is no wonder that by 1945, Kaplan's religious naturalism held the single greatest influence on American Jewish thought.[30]

III. Jewish Tradition

Beyond the practical and the pragmatic arguments comes the argument from Jewish tradition: the idea that there was no major theological activity prior to 1945 because Judaism has never been a doctrinal religion in the first place! Judaism was said

[29] Borowitz, Eugene. "The Jewish Need for Theology." *Commentary 2.34* 1962.
[30] Goldy 5

to be concerned with behaving, not believing. The 19th-century historian of the Jewish people, Heinrich Graetz, had expressly observed that Judaism *cannot* be understood by a philosophical analysis of its beliefs—rather, it had to be approached only by the study of its history—the ongoing existence of the Jewish People, not that people's ideas.[31] Louis Jacobs as well, in the introduction to his book *A Jewish Theology*, recognizes that Judaism might stand in opposition to theology "because Jewish thinking in its classical and formative periods… was 'organic' rather than systematic," and because "…the emphasis in Judaism is on action, on doing the will of God not on defining it."[32] Nathan Glazer proposes such an idea as well, in particular, in reference to the first and second generations of Jewish immigrants. He argues that these Jews so easily lost their faith because they had no faith to begin with. In his words, "they had no doctrine, no collection of dogmas to which they could cling and with which they could resist argument. All they had, surrounding them like an armor, was a complete set of practices, each presumably as holy as the next."[33]

Even if Judaism was *not* antagonistic toward theology, it may have been the case that Jews simply saw theology as wholly other, namely Christian. As Eugene Borowitz put it, rabbis and Jewish laymen understood that "to aspire toward the development of a theology is to assimilate a Christian concern, to impose on Judaism a perspective decidedly uncongenial to it—in other words, it is an attempt to translate Jewish experience into a language appropriate only to Christianity."[34] If not altogether afraid of

---

[31] Graetz as quoted in Gillman, Neil. *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.
[32] Jacobs 10
[33] Glazer 69
[34] Borowitz, *The Jewish Need for Theology*.

becoming like the Christians, rabbis and laymen might at least have feared that by creating a Jewish theology, "the next step would be to seek conformity to it, to force it upon others and thus destroy that productive pluralism, that creative intellectual dialectic which has been so precious a Jewish privilege."[35]

Whether Judaism is inherently opposed to any systematic theology remains to be seen, but these Eastern European immigrants certainly acted as if it were. For them, theological matters were of little or no concern.

IV. Secular Interests

If the first generation of Jewish immigrants attempted to hold on to any sense of Judaism as a religion with a strict set of God-given laws to follow, the second generation rejected that religion completely. They remained Jews of course, but their identity was shaped more by secular concerns than religious ones. It is true that synagogue building during the 1920s and 1930s was rampant—from 1,782 in 1927 to 2,851 10 years later—but these numbers can be attributed to the general trend of Jewish institution building, prompted as well by the realization that they were surrounded by Christians who thought Judaism was a religion and who expected religions to have houses of worship. But these synagogues were built as community gathering places more than as religious centers and were generally "indifferent or hostile" to "traditional religion."[36]

In a 1935 survey of New York City youth between the ages of 15 and 25 (second generation Jews), 72 per cent of the men and 78 per cent of the woman surveyed had not

[35] Ibid.
[36] Glazer 85

attended a religious prayer service in the past year.[37] This statistic is striking considering that it can be assumed that many of their parents at that age—most likely still in Eastern Europe—may well have attended religious services daily, and if not daily, then certainly on the Sabbath and the major holidays. But the second generation's concerns were in everything secular and nothing religious.

One of the main secular modes of thought that stimulated many minds of the second generation was Marxism, a mode of thought that the first-generation immigrants had brought here with them. Perhaps Will Herberg (a Jew who came to America from Russia as a baby in 1905 and can therefore be grouped among the "second" generation of American Jewish immigrants) best describes the allure of the Marxist movement. He wrote that Marxism was "a religion, an ethic, and a theology; a vast all-embracing doctrine of man and the universe, a passionate faith endowing life with meaning." He wrote that he himself had been attracted to Marxism for its belief in "the unlimited redemptive power of history," and for its ability to lead humanity "through terrific struggles to a final perfection of uncoerced harmony amidst peace, plenty, and untroubled happiness." This, and not the religion of Judaism, was the faith of many second generation Jews. As Glazer argues: "so long as this faith remained unchallenged from within, no attacks from without could shake it. Doubts were ignored or else drowned in action."[38]

At its core, Marxism is anti-religious. Even as an undergraduate in Berlin, Karl Marx identified with the left wing of the young Hegelians and was known as a "militant

---

[37] Ibid.

[38] Herberg, Will, and David G. Dalin. *From Marxism to Judaism: The Collected Essays of Will Herberg*. "From Marxism to Judaism: Jewish Belief as a Dynamic of Social Action." New York: M. Wiener Pub., 1989, 22-24.

atheist whose creed was (and remained): 'Criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism.'"[39] Marx held that religion was doomed because it was merely a symptom of an unjust society. He argued that ethics (and therefore religious ethics) evolve as societies change.[40] However much biblical Judaism may have realized certain basic truths, subsequent Judaism certainly has no monopoly on them—nor does any religion, for that matter.[41]

In his essay *On the Jewish Problem* (1844), Marx reasoned (against his colleague Bruno Bauer) that "If you Jews want to be emancipated politically without emancipating yourselves as men, the incompleteness and contradiction is not only in you, it is in the nature and category of political emancipation…"[42] What Marx saw as *complete* emancipation was not a citizenry that was politically free but privately religious. This he argued is a citizenry divided between public and private realms, and, therefore, deprived of true freedom. True equality according to Marx comes from the evaporation of religion entirely. In his words, "the social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism." No wonder that Jewish Marxists not only saw no need for their religion, but saw the positive need to eradicate it.

Another ideological trend that gripped Jewish thinking in the first and second generations was Zionism. The Poalei Zion—a Labor Zionist party and a derivative of a group founded in Russia—was transplanted to the United States in 1905. On American

---

[39] McInnes, Neil. "Karl Marx." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 1967.
[40]McInnes, Neil. "Marxism." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 1967.
[41] As the Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes, Karl Marx did not set out to start a new system of philosophy. If alive today, he would not consider what we call Marxism to be *his* system of understanding the world.
[42] Mendes-Flohr, Paul R., and Jehuda Reinharz. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Problem." New York: Oxford, 1980, p 324.

soil, Poalei Zion was able to form a "multi-faceted grassroots organization" of its own that was much more than an offshoot of its Russian counterpart. Out of Poalei Zion came the *Geverkshaftn* campaign (National Labor Committee for Palestine), Pioneer Women, *Jewish Frontier*, League for Labor Palestine and the National Labor Committee for Palestine. With a common socialist bent, these organizations appealed to the many Jews who had been members of socialist parties in Europe. But more than appeal to a pre-engrained cause, these organizations provided a structure that directed new immigrants to various fraternal societies, educational institutions, fund-raising associations, cultural groups and Yiddish journals that all gathered around Zionism.[43]

In opposition to the Labor Zionists were the non-Zionist socialist groups, the Workmen's Circle, who opposed Jewish nationalism. Between contesting each other and fighting for Zionism's actual cause, there was little time or energy to spend on issues of theology—which, in any case, seemed irrelevant to socialism on one hand and Zionism on the other. In an essay written in 1950, Eugene Borowitz summarizes the state of Jewish theology before the World War II.

> The Reform movement today…is just emerging from a period in which the rabbis rejected theology almost completely… They had real faith in God as the guarantor of human dignity, but beyond that they had little interest. Their concern with Jewish existence was directed at halting assimilation, fighting anti-Semitism, or enlisting in the ranks of the Zionists or anti-Zionists. Social justice and the prophetic role were the rabbinic order of the day, and the rabbis dedicated themselves to the fight for civil rights and social reform. Theology smacked of "pie in the sky" and was viewed with the traditional Jewish skepticism towards

[43] Raider, 30, 33.

preoccupation with hidden things when there was so much to be done with what had already been revealed.[44]

[44] Borowitz, *Theological Conference: Cincinnati, 1950.*

Chapter 2: The Impact of World War II

WORLD WAR II ushered in a period of drastic change in America. The country's economy—hit hard in October of 1929 with the crash of the stock market—changed course dramatically following the war. While suffering European countries sought slowly to rebuild their infrastructure and economies, post-war America enjoyed a time of great prosperity. For the Veterans of World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (known as the "The GI Bill") offered financial benefits that allowed a large percentage of them to attend college or buy homes. The professionalization of these veterans spurred economic growth throughout the 1950s. For others, the Federal Housing Authority made inexpensive mortgages available so that middle-class Americans might purchase their first homes. Highways were built, cars were mass-produced at affordable costs, and consumerism for household products and luxury items rose dramatically for all classes. Capitalism in post-war America enjoyed a golden age; the future looked bright.

In addition to the economic development in the post-war era, America underwent a religious awakening. From 1930 to 1960, church affiliation rose from 47 percent to 69 percent. The amount of money spent on church construction rose too: from $26 million in 1945 to *a billion dollars* by 1960. Hollywood turned out biblical films, and bibles sold briskly. Religious intellectuals like C.S. Lewis and Paul Tillich were well respected and put on the covers of magazines. Religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham and Fulton Sheen were able to reach large audiences hungry for a traditionally Christian message. Christian literature flourished. Mass conversions took place at a riveting pace. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who served in office from 1953-1961,

hailed religion as the "firm foundation" of the countries moral life and vigorously supported religion in the public square. By all measures, religion was trending high in America—from small middle-American churches to the intellectual circles of the major urban centers.[45]

Journalist Ross Douthat, whose description of this time period I have relied on, categorizes this time in terms of *confidence*.

> Both institutionally and intellectually, American Christianity at midcentury offered believers a relatively secure position from which to engage with society as a whole… At its best, this culture enjoyed the mix of openness and well-defendedness that any religious tradition should seek in its dealings with the world, supplying believers with both 'a place to stand and look outward on the world…' and a 'system of truth by which other things could be judged.'[46]

How did the American Jewish community fit in to the larger American trends of the time? In terms of economic prosperity, the third generation—whose grandparents were poor immigrants and whose parents struggled to break into the American workforce—experienced a type of wealth that their forebears could only dream about when they were told, back in Eastern Europe, of the *goldene medina*—the "Golden County." Like their non-Jewish colleagues, Jews bought cars and single-unit houses in the suburbs; and then filled those homes with abundant amenities. It is estimated that

[45] Douthat, Ross Gregory. *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. New York: Free, 2012, p 25.
[46] Ibid., 53

between 1945 and 1965, a third of American Jews left the big cities to buy homes in the surrounding suburbs.[47]

As Jews fled the cities, they raised money to build themselves sizeable suburban places of worship. In the years following the war, hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised for these buildings and prominent architects were hired to help in the design and construction.[48]

In terms of a religious awakening, Jews followed the American trend of becoming more religious. They moved away from cultural "Jewishness" toward religious "Judaism." As Nathan Glazer put it, "By the end of the Second World War…the issue was settled: Jewishness as a program for life in America—that is, the idea that the Jews in America could continue as a group defined not primarily by religion but by secular culture and quasi-national feeling—was recognized as impossible. And Judaism, in all its branches, was flourishing."[49]

The figures from this period are astounding. As reported in the *American Jewish Year Book,* between 1949-1950 "synagogue building continued," "membership in synagogues and affiliated associations was on the increase," "synagogue attendance was improving," "adult education was continuing to attract substantial enrollments," and "religious ceremonies were being observed in more homes with increasing regularity."[50] By the late 1950s, more than 60 percent of American Jews were members of a synagogue!

---

[47] Hertzberg 309
[48] Kaplan, Dana Evan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. New York: Columbia, 2009, pp 26-27.
[49] Glazer 108
[50] As quoted in Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale, 2004, p 277.

That the Jewish community prospered during the economic upturn and religious revival in post-war America is a reflection of two parallel trends: the relative demise of the pre-war anti-Semitism; and the rise of the Jew as an integrated and acculturated part of the American community—alongside Protestants and Catholics as a religion among religions. According to a survey done in 1950, from 1946 to 1950, the percentage of Americans who had recently heard any criticism of the Jewish people fell from 64 percent to 24 percent.[51] A decrease in discrimination against Jews occurred also in areas like employment, housing and education. Former director of the Anti-Defamation League, Benjamin R. Epstein put it succinctly when he commented that during the post-war period, American Jews "achieved a greater degree of economic and political security, and a broader social acceptance than had ever been know by any Jewish community since the (ancient) Dispersion."[52]

All of these changes—the decline in anti-Semitism, the increase in wealth in the Jewish community, and the move from a secular people defined by culture to a religious subset of America—helps to explain why the Jewish community moved toward an interest in theological issues. How?

With the decline in anti-Semitism, the Jews no longer needed to worry about fitting into American society. By the third generation, the Jews had arrived as an accepted subgroup on the American landscape. As sociologist Will Herberg described it in his famous book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, the American spirit encouraged immigrants to acculturate into American society by speaking English and adapting to American cultural tendencies, but no one expected them to abandon their religious identities. To

[51] Sarna 276
[52] As quoted in Sarna 277

the contrary, identifying with a religion—be it Protestantism, Catholicism or Judaism—was encouraged. Herberg negated the idea of America as a *single* melting pot, an idea that was common in the early part of the 20th century. True, he argued, immigrants adapted to America in many ways, but they did not, nor should they, give up their religious heritage. Though Herberg's thesis has been much debated, it has largely survived intact, especially for post-war third-generation Jews, who even rediscovered their religious identity in striving to assimilate into America. Because of this reemphasis on religion, theological issues rose to prominence.

The increase in wealth and the trend of suburbanization contributed to theology's rise in priority as well. As Jews got richer they were able to build large suburban synagogues that could serve not just as communal meeting places but gathering centers for religious occasions, especially those that furthered social engagement in the suburbs. Judaism developed as a religion then, albeit to some extent, a religion that supported Jewish solidarity as a people. It may be, then, that overall, Jewish socializing remained central; but it did so alongside and with the excuse, at least in part, of religion. It is not too much to say that Jewish communities were actually organized around the fundraising, planning, designing and furnishing of these lavish buildings. According to Jonathan Sarna, Professor at Brandeis University and author of the preeminent book on American Jewish History, it was these activities that constituted the suburban Jews' "central religious activity."[53] Although this religious activity might better be categorized as religious *belonging* (as opposed to believing), the mere existence of these synagogues—

[53] Sarna 279

no matter their initial focus—paved the way for theological questions to arise into the 1950s and 1960s.

Most obviously, it was the gradual move from "Jewishness" to "Judaism" as part of the general American religious revival that impacted theological activity positively. While the actual extent of the Jewish religious revival is unclear, Glazer's analysis of the move from "Jewishness" to "Judaism" is not incorrect. Even if synagogues were more socially than religiously oriented, it is difficult to separate out the *religious* aspects of certain trends that took place during this time. For example, the back-to-the-Bible movement that sought to "reclaim the Bible for the Jews," was certainly *social* in nature. Jews gathered at each other's houses to read the Bible and took courses in biblical studies. But even if these meetings were more about community than God, the fact that Jews had a renewed interest in studying the Bible at all accounts in part for the rise in theological interest during this period. It is, after all, difficult to read the Jewish Bible without asking big questions as to the nature of a specifically Jewish God. If the Jewish communities wished to reclaim the Jewish Bible, they also moved toward reclaiming the Jewish God.

In addition to these factors, the post-war American Jewish community was set for a new theology because World War II, and especially the Holocaust, tested the belief in socialist philosophy, in particular, the Marxist notion of "the unlimited redemptive power of history."[54] On this subject, Herberg's essay "From Marxism to Judaism" which appeared in *Commentary* in 1947 is worth quoting at length for his words show the decisive and strong shift in his thinking:

[54] Herberg, "From Marxism to Judaism" 22-24

> Put to the test, the Marxist faith failed. It proved itself incapable of explaining the facts or sustaining the values it had itself enshrined as its own ultimate goals. It could not meet the challenge of totalitarianism because it was itself infected with the same disease. By the logic of its own development, the ideal of unlimited freedom had become the reality of unlimited despotism. The individual personality, instead of being liberated for self-fulfillment, as Marx and Lenin had promised, was being engulfed in a total collectivism that left no room whatever for personal autonomy. Sacrificial dedication to the welfare of humanity had given way to narrow, ruthless, self-defeating power politics.[55]

More than a consequence of the Holocaust, however, the Marxist fall came about because of the Jewish experience with Stalin. Herberg was not the only Jew to witness the Stalinist purges throughout the 1930s, and then again, in the 1950s, when Stalin's purge of many prominent Communists included Jews in particular. Jews saw also how Stalin had deceived the leftist Popular Front—a coalition of various Spanish communist groups—during the Spanish Civil War. And like Herberg, Jews in general watched Stalin and Hitler sign a nonaggression pact in August of 1939. By the end of the war, it became clear that socialism could not defeat totalitarianism. Having to abandon the redemptive power of history alone as God, Jews turned back to their own religion for answers. They were forced to consider the possibility that their own tradition did indeed have something to say about God.[56]

---

[55] Herberg, "From Marxism to Judaism" 24

[56] David G. Dalin, in his introduction to *From Marxism to Judaism: Collected Essays of Will Herberg*, discusses that these events caused Herberg to become disillusioned with socialism. xv

The sentiment of this age is perfectly characterized by the poet W.H. Auden who, after the war, also questioned the value of secular humanism. Reflecting on that period in his life, he wrote:

Finally, hair-raising things
that Hitler and Stalin were doing
forced me to think about God.
Why was I sure they were wrong
Wild Kierkegaard, Williams and Lewis
guided me back to belief.[57]

Like Auden and Herberg, other intellectuals of the 1950s sought to "revise the story that modernity told about itself." In the wake of the Nazi concentration camps and the Russian gulags, "it was harder to credit the naïve progressive belief that the modern age represented a long march toward ever-greater enlightenment and peace, or that humanity was capable of relying for salvation on its own capacities alone."[58]

Coupled with the cynical outlook on humanity, post World War II was the tail end of the Protestant theological revival. This revival had been fueled by World War I, a time when Jews were just coming to America and concentrating on all the issues described in Chapter 1. Christian thinkers, by contrast, unbothered by immigrant concerns, were free to respond to the destruction caused by the Great War.

[57] As quoted by Douthat in *Bad Religion*, 21
[58] Douthat 23

Now Jews could do the same thing with regard to a parallel Jewish disillusionment with history. But Jews had nothing in their own tradition to which to turn, since, as we saw, earlier American Judaism had avoided big questions of theological meaning. Needing models for such a theological conversation, Jews now looked to the earlier Protestant thinkers who had already attempted to answer many of the questions Jews were seeking to answer. The prominent presence of the Protestant theological thinking on the religious scene in the post-era pushed the Jewish conversation forward.

The major Christian thinkers associated with the Protestant theological revival (also known as neo-Orthodoxy or neo-Reformation) were Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. In the United States, the works of Barth and Brunner were carried forward by the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Robert L. Calhoun and John C. Bennet. What inspired Jewish thinkers about neo-Orthodox theology was first and foremost what it stood *against*—mainly, a pragmatic approach to theology (like the work of Mordecai Kaplan). What positively inspired Jewish thinkers was neo-Orthodoxy's embrace or search for a "third way," between fundamentalism and modernism. The neo-Orthodox theologians wanted to have a relationship with the divine, but they held that reason alone is not sufficient to achieve that relationship. Thus the question became: how is it possible to be a man of reason and still have a relationship with God? For Jewish thinkers who refused to abandon their intellect but still wanted to understand the impact of World War II and the Holocaust, or wanted to live a true *religiously* Jewish life, neo-Orthodoxy gave them inspiration and a blazed trail of thought.

IT IS IN THIS CONTEXT that the intellectual magazine *Commentary* entered the scene in late 1945. *Commentary's* founders, and many of the magazine's first writers, were Jewish intellectuals like Herberg who were initially loyal to socialist, Marxist, modernist and cosmopolitan trends. Following World War II and especially in the wake of the Holocaust, when loyalties turned, *Commentary* gave these writers a voice to express their disillusionment with their world and a voice to convey their questions on whether or not Judaism had anything to offer them. As author Nathan Abrams explains in an essay marking the 50th anniversary of the magazine, "These intellectuals were always searching for a place in American intellectual life outside of their own Jewish community." After years of alienation and rejection, Abrams argues, they were desperate for a home. "*Commentary* began to fill the void of communal focus for many intellectuals…" and "emerged as the primary agent for constructing a new Jewish American discourse."[59]

As Abrams asserts, the beginning of this new Jewish American discourse was a rejection of any nostalgic ties to the old country. The editors of *Commentary* wished to inform its readership that the Jewish future lay squarely in America and nowhere else—not Israel, and especially not in Eastern Europe. That future needed definition, especially in terms of defining what it meant to be a Jew in the modern, post-war era. In its first years of existence, *Commentary* published dozens of articles related to Judaism in America. In particular, it took up the question of Jewish theology. The following chapter will discuss the specific theological questions of the post-war era as viewed through the pages of *Commentary*.

---

[59] Abrams, Nathan. *Commentary Magazine, 1945-59: "A Journal of Significant Thought and Opinion"* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007, pp 16, 31, 34.

Chapter 3: Wanted: A Jewish Theology for Americans

THE FIRST ISSUE of *Commentary* was published in November of 1945. In his opening editorial, Elliot E. Cohen—*Commentary's* editor from the magazine's inception until his death in 1959—remarked on the significance of the era. "We begin at a moment heavy with a sense of human destiny," he wrote. "Every schoolboy who listens to the radio knows that 1945 marks an epoch in world history. World War II has ended; the United Nations have won the greatest military victory of the ages; yet we stand troubled and hesitant before the glorious era of peace which we have awaited so long, and which now we seem not to know how to deal with."[60]

Whether Cohen knew it or not—and there is good reason to believe he did not (not yet, anyway)—one of the issues that the Jewish community seemed "not to know how to deal with" was its relationship to religion. Yet America, on the heals of a Christian revival in theological thinking, was turning more and more toward religion as a fundamental aspect of expressing identity, and the post-Holocaust Jewish community was coming to see that for Jews too, religion defined by belief as opposed to secular culture, could no longer be ignored. Indeed, the relationship of Jews to religion in general and, therefore, to theology in particular was becoming a source of tension and perhaps even insecurity.

This turn to theology would have been problematic if only because it followed two generations of Jews who had defined themselves as Jewish by way of a cultural heritage. In addition, however, and even without the goad from without by Christian culture's parallel turn to theological issues, theological concerns were bound to have been

[60] Cohen, Elliot. E. "An Act of Affirmation: Editorial Statement." *Commentary 1.1,* 1945.

raised because of the Holocaust, which inevitably prompted numerous questions about God, the chosenness of the Jewish people, and the nature of evil. Even if Cohen did not himself have theology in mind as a topic to which *Commentary* would turn in great depth, he did see the new journal as addressing issues of his day, the Holocaust being at least one of them. To that end, he and his fellow editors of *Commentary* vowed to "roll up (their) sleeves and in the sweat of (their) brow…dig," in order to offer the American Jewish community truths by which to live.[61]

In the first five years of the magazine (1945-1950), several articles were published that raised questions about the religious, theological aspects of Judaism. A review of these pieces reveals the nature of the conversation in the early post-war years.

The Call

THE TRUTH ABOUT Reconstructionism by Mordecai M. Kaplan was published in *Commentary* in December 1945, the magazine's second issue. The article was written as a response to an article by author Mordecai Grossman published in November 1945, the magazine's first issue. Grossman's article was called *A Civilization within A Civilization?* In the article Grossman documented the strength of Reconstructionism noting that it had "gained many adherents among educators, rabbis and lay communal workers… and contributed measurably to the vitality of Jewish life," but ultimately registered his dissent with the movement. Kaplan's intent in his response to Grossman was to "put the philosophy of Reconstructionism in its proper prospective." In Kaplan's view, Grossman "may have an adequate understanding of the basic motivation and

[61] Ibid.

intention behind the movement and of the relation of the particulars to the total idea, but (his) strictures fail to convey any understanding."[62]

For our purposes, we can see that the significance of these two articles lies less in their content than in their sheer presence. By publishing Grossman's critique of Reconstructionism *first*, and only later saw fit to include Kaplan's own rebuttal, the editors of *Commentary* showed their hand early. It would seem that the editors saw the changing tide toward the theological conversation in relation to Reconstructionism. Kaplan was, himself, a theologian and a somewhat "renegade" one at that, in that he was challenging the dominant views of Conservative Judaism, especially by doing away with a supernatural God. In part, it was this that Grossman objected to.

The truth of the matter is that the post-World War II Jewish community believed less and less in what Kaplan had been preaching—a view he reiterated now in *Commentary*: that "by abandoning belief in the supernatural… and by substituting the conception of Jewish religion as the soul of the Jewish civilization," one could "reckon with the challenge of modern nationalism and modern naturalism in a way compatible with the survival and growth of Judaism." Jews in fact wanted the opposite—not a civilization distinct from their neighbors, but to participate in the American civilization as religiously minded people.

What the new American Jewish civilization would look like was the subject of Elliot Cohen's article *Jewish Culture in America* published in May 1947. As he put it in his conclusion, "Man cannot live without culture, nor will he. Nature abhors that particular kind of vacuum." Accordingly, Cohen asked "whether we shall have a Jewish

[62] Kaplan, Mordecai M. "The Truth About Reconstructionism." *Commentary* 1.2, 1945, and Grossman, Mordecai. "A Civilization within A Civilization." *Commentary* 1.1, 1945.

culture conceived and nurtured in imitativeness, apologetics, nationalist separatism, and mediocrity, or whether we shall have a culture that we respect and that enhances our self-respect." Cohen is content to speak only of culture, not of God or theology. It would seem that Cohen was advocating for a strong sense of Jewish particularity but only as a secular culture, and certainly not with Jewish nationalism, which is to say Zionism, at the center. Neither God nor Zionism would be the focus of Cohen's Judaism.

Cohen's piece drew a rapid response from many readers, including one from Rabbi Jacob B. Agus—a prominent Conservative Rabbi who served congregation Beth-El in Baltimore, MD. His views were published in *Judaism vs. Jewishness*, a title given to a collection of letters and articles that Cohen had evoked. Agus argued that "Secular Jewish nationalism is in America an invitation to assimilation…" Agus' response to Cohen represents the emergence of the notion that that the new American Jewish civilization had to have a fundamentally *religious* character. It could not be built on nationalist separatism. In light of Agus's response to Cohen, and coupled with the articles by Grossman and Kaplan from 1945, we can see the arrival of religious thinking as part of the Jewish conversation.[63] Moreover, it is not just the fact that religious thinking was finally taking place; we can see as well the implicit debate on what such religious thinking should be about. Should God be part of it? Or was the issue still to be cultural, but not religious?

The cause of theology was furthered by conservative thinker and writer Irving Kristol's brilliant 1948 attack on rabbi and author Milton Steinberg's *Basic* Ju*daism*, entitled, *How Basic is "Basic Judaism"?* Steinberg was Kaplan's most outstanding

[63] Cohen, Elliot E. "Jewish Culture in America." *Commentary* 3.5, 1947 and Agus, Jacob B. "Judaism vs. Jewishness." *Commentary* 4.5, 1947.

advocate, the prominent Rabbi of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, Kristol took aim at Steinberg for the idea that there is such a thing as *basic* Judaism. For Kristol, Judaism is complex and deep, but one would hardly know it, he argued, from reading Steinberg's book. What Kristol wanted was *religion*, not "social philosophy"—precisely what Reconstruction seemed to be to its critics. He eschewed the Jewish trend of "certitude, harmony, and peace," in theological thinking and found it abhorrent that God had become a common folk word thrown around without any consideration for the "how" or "wherefore."

Kristol asked rhetorically if there is a uniquely Jewish perspective on God, and if Judaism has any wisdom to offer on the nature of the universe or on such notions as life and death and good and evil. Perhaps, Kristol worried aloud, "Judaism seems shy of asking the important questions for fear its answers might be inadequate." Despite his choice of the word, Judaism," Kristol must surely have had "representatives of Judaism" in mind when he leveled his critique. He obviously thought Judaism had a great deal to say on the subject in question but worried that the current debate around him focused only on "…political lectures, fund-raising, Zionism, inter-faith activities, public relations, social work and so on." Maybe, he concluded, "I have no right to ask Judaism to take all this into account." But surely he did. By "Judaism," he again means those who speak for Judaism, the Jewish intellectuals who ought to be asking deeper and more theological questions.[64]

In December of 1948, Reform rabbi and noted theologian Emil L. Fackenheim published *Can We Believe in Judaism Religiously?* thereby joining the ranks of

[64] Kristol, Irving. "*How Basic is Basic Judaism?*" *Commentary* 5.1, 1948.

Grossman, Herberg, Agus and Kristol in pursuing the *religious* nature of Judaism. With force Fackenheim declared modern Jewish theology to be wholly non-existent. He bemoaned the fact that in modern times it had not been proven that "Jewish tradition supplies truths or authoritative standards directly obligatory for modern man or modern Jew (sic)...truths or standards that transcend the social and cultural norms of the day." In a modern age, he argued, a "religion of reason" cannot offer comfort, healing or a path to life's ultimate questions. Why then should Jews continue to be Jewish at all? And is Judaism even "a fate urging to faith" or is Judaism devoid of theology altogether?[65]

The conversation continued in *Commentary* in 1949 with Herberg's publication of *Has Judaism Still Power To Speak?* Herberg was no professional theologian, but his voice was emerging in the postwar years as a significant critic of secular thinking. Herberg began the piece by describing the revival of theological thinking in Protestant circles that had followed the First World War—a philosophy of "crisis theology." But like Kristol and Fackenheim, Herberg was ultimately interested in *Jewish* theology. "What word has Judaism had for mankind in agony?" he asked rhetorically before introducing his readers to theologians Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Rabbi Abraham Kuk (sic) and Dr. Judah L. Magnes.

But Herberg was quick to discredit all of these thinkers. Buber, wrote Herberg, was mostly a force *outside* the Jewish world and Rosenzweig had barely appeared in English translation. As for Kuk and Magnes, they had hardly given the Jewish people anything like a complete theological package. And so, Herberg argued, "What American Jews have to show in the way of theology and religious thinking is hardly more than

[65] Fackenheim, Emil L. "Can We Believe in Judaism Religiously?" *Commentary* 6.6, 1948.

routine reiteration of inherited formulas…" The result, bemoaned Herberg, is that "the largest Jewish community in the world…does not possess one single significant journal of Jewish theology."[66]

Without a true knowledge of Buber and Rosenzweig, and without other theological thinking from would-be-theologians, Herberg charged Jewish religious leaders with preaching nothing of real worth. They fail to address "the crucial problems of modern life" and "have nothing to say that is not better said by the psychologist, sociologist, or political leader." Herberg knew there was more to Judaism than culture. "It cannot be that Judaism… the ancient People of the Book possesses no religious, no theological, no prophetic word for our time." But yet, all Herberg observed was "nationalism, culture, social service, and anti-defamation," so he was left to wonder (as his title put it), "Has Judaism Still Power To Speak?"[67]

That many religious leaders shared Herberg's concerns can be seen from the fact that in March of 1950, several Reform Rabbis attended the first meeting of the "Institute on Reform Jewish Theology" at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Borowitz—then assistant rabbi of Temple Shaare Emeth in St. Louis, Missouri—reported on the meeting for *Commentary*. His article *Theological Conference: Cincinnati, 1950: Reform Judaism's Fresh Awareness of Religious Problems* was published in June of that year. As Borowitz wrote, "The 'religious crisis of our time' is no stock phrase restricted to the theological journals." Rather, it is a "sharp day-to-day reality" for religious leaders who attempt to minister to their people. The old answers are no longer acceptable, Borowitz contended, as Jews display a "persistent anxiety and a deep, if hidden, fear of the future."

---

[66] Herberg, Will. "Has Judaism Still Power to Speak?" *Commentary 7.5,* 1949.
[67] Ibid.

The Institute attempted to address four main questions: 1) "Is the belief in God as an objective divine reality indispensable to modern Judaism, or must it be replaced by something more agreeable to the modern temper?" 2) "Is it possible for man to believe that an existing God is active in our world? 3) "To what extent is there authority within Reform Judaism?" and 4) "Can we still believe in progress as 'salvation'?"

Despite these framing questions, many of the rabbis in attendance were more drawn to the practical matters faced by the American Jewish community. But Borowitz observed that over the course of the conference, "it became obvious to the rabbis themselves… that while their practical maturity had grown in their years of experience, they had neglected to maintain a corresponding theological growth." The rabbis realized that "the old liberal theology based on 19th century idealism might have weathered the tumultuous 30's, but it could not survive the bestial 40's." They gradually recognized the current crisis and the need for "bold theological thinking." To that end, reported Borowitz, the attendees voted to establish a permanent Institute on Theology.

In addition to Borowitz's article, *Commentary* published three other significant contributions to Jewish theology in 1950, one by Fackenheim and two by Herberg. In *The Postwar Revival of the Synagogue*, Herberg began by explaining the American religious revival in relation to synagogues. He addressed the major building expansions, the record level of membership, the growth of religious schools and the rise in attendance at worship on High Holidays, Friday nights and Saturday mornings, admitting they were realities but wondering how much *religion* is present in them. His answer—predictable from his previous articles—was that there was too little. "The synagogue in America no longer represents a community of believers. Nothing in the way of belief or practice—

not even the belief in God or the practice of the most elementary *mitzvot*—may be taken for granted among synagogue members." Candidly, he concluded, the growth of synagogues in America did *not* reflect a growth in *religious* activity. It followed, for Herberg, that synagogues must turn to religion if they are to "make Judaism operative in the hearts and lives of the Jews whom it reaches."[68]

In *The Modern Jew's Path to God,* just a month later, Fackenheim concurred. "Judaism," he reminded his readers "has always been the living encounter of Israel with the God of Israel." But modern Judaism had been distorted so that none of the new interpretations were "able to provide a *religious* reason why a Jew should continue to be a Jew—why Judaism ought to survive." As in his previous article, *Can We Believe in Judaism Religiously?,* Fackenheim called for more Jewish theological thinking. But his conclusion in 1950 was slightly different from before. It was no longer just the reality of theology's absence in the Jewish debate that concerned him; he now wondered, in addition, "Can one *decide* (emphasis added) to believe in God? Can one on one's own volition 'accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven'?"

Taken together, the two articles demonstrate Fackenheim's realization that even if the American Jewish community were to turn toward God, a true religious existence might still be impossible. One cannot simply will one's self to belief. "No man can force the leap into faith;" he wrote, "he can merely remove the obstructions."[69]

In December of 1950, *Commentary* published Herberg's *Rosenzweig's "Judaism of Personal Existence": A Third Way Between Orthodoxy and Modernism.* For many readers, this essay served as their first introduction to the thought of Franz Rosenzweig,

---

[68] Herberg, Will. "The Postwar revival of the Synagogue." *Commentary* 9.4, 1950.
[69] Fackenheim, Emil L. "The Modern Jew's Path to God." *Commentary* 9.5, 1950.

who, as we have seen, had not yet been translated from the original German into English. As the editors of *Commentary* wrote in a side note to the article, "Franz Rosenzweig died twenty-one years ago, but it is only now that American Jews are beginning to learn that this man—considered by many to be the most original Jewish thinker of the 20th century—ever existed. The great bulk of his work still remains un-translated from the original German…"

In the article Herberg wrote that Rosenzweig's greatest achievement was to "transform ancient doctrines and theological formulas into a living power," and demonstrate how, in a modern era, it is possible for the Jew to "return to faith." It was Rosenzweig, wrote Herberg, who "showed that the ancient faith of prophet and rabbi was not merely compatible with the externals of modern culture—that was easy—but was in fact the answer to the deepest problems of the Jew's existence in the contemporary world." It was Rosenzweig who "blazed the trail of a new way in Jewish religious thinking—a 'third way' equally distinct from, and opposed to, the traditionalism of conventional Orthodoxy and the rationalistic modernism of 'liberal' religion." In doing so, Rosenzweig "was a pioneer," who gave us "a new conception of the ancient faith."

Herberg's championing of Rosenzweig was prescient and in the subsequent decades of the 1950s and 1960s, the theological philosophy of Rosenzweig (and Buber to some extent as well) would replace that of Mordecai Kaplan as the dominant theology for the American Jewish community.[70] Herberg's uncovering of Rosenzweig, then, was a first step in the decline of the influence of religious naturalism and an increase in the influence of existentialism.

[70] Goldy 5

THESE TWELVE ARTICLES from *Commentary*—published between 1945 and 1950—reveal the beginning of the conversation in the American Jewish community on the subject of Jewish theology. On the whole, the arguments by Grossman, Cohen, Agus, Kristol, Fackenheim, Herberg and Borowitz demonstrate the strong desire among these writers for the Jewish community to engage in deep Jewish theological thinking. More specifically, they were arguing for a return to some supernatural concept of God, not just the naturalist arguments left over from Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism. At this early point in time, they were still advocates for a cause that had yet to become mainstream in Jewish life. One might well have predicted, therefore, that there early advocacy would immediately lead to a burgeoning of a theological conversation outside their own limited ranks. That did not occur however. In the era immediately following, theology did not make enormous strides forward. On the contrary it cooled considerably.

A Response?

WHAT HAPPENED TO the cry of these passionate believers? Had their call been heard? Was Jewish theology in the 1950s a hot topic of debate among rabbis, intellectuals and Jewish laypeople alike? The answer to this question is complicated and depends on the barometer one uses to measure theological activity. On the one hand, the fervent call for a new Jewish theology found in some of the writers for *Commentary* in the late 1940s did indeed serve to spark many conversations *about* Jewish theology. On the other hand, it failed to inspire a flourishing of significant Jewish theological works like the ones produced in Germany half a century earlier. True, the thought of Buber and

Rosenzweig became more widely read and affected a shift in theological perspective from religious naturalism to religious existentialism, but yet, the ardent appeal for a *new* and *American* Jewish theology failed.

Not that there weren't attempts. In the early to mid-1950s several theological works were written—some direct attempts to create a new systematic theology and others an attempt to define Jewish thought in relation to Christianity. Herberg published *Judaism and Modern Man: An Interpretation of Jewish Religion*; rabbi and Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver, *Where Judaism Differed;* Steinberg, *A Believing Jew;* Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity,* and Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*. That these books found their way to publication certainly reflected a new attention to Jewish theology, but they had a limited influence on the wider Jewish population, on the Jews in the pews. On the whole, the American Jewish community of the 1950s was becoming increasingly secular and was far removed from the intellectual circles that desired more theology.

The Jewish trend toward secularism and away from religious belief in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the continued lack of concern for Jewish theology can be seen through four articles from *Commentary—A Critique of the New Jewish Theology: From A Secularist Viewpoint* by social historian and author Judd L. Teller (1958), *Crisis Theology & The Jewish Community* (1961) and *The Jewish Need for Theology* (1962) both by Borowitz, and *On the Eclipse of God* by Fackenheim.

I will start with *Crisis Theology & The Jewish*, published in July of 1961, because Eugene Borowitz states the problem directly. "A dozen years have passed since Irving Kristol… sought to demonstrate that Jewish thought in America was powerless to answer

the great questions—questions about man and his condition, about destiny and the meaning of history—that the war had raised in the troubled minds of so many intellectuals in the West." What happened in those dozen years, according to Borowitz? What happened to the call for Jewish theology? A group of younger theologians, he said, like Fackenheim and Herberg, responded to the call. The process of developing a new American Jewish Theology had begun. "But," wrote Borowitz, "the effort miscarried. Aside from a few articles and one book, perhaps two, the promise of these first few exciting efforts remained unfulfilled."[71]

In *A Critique of the New Jewish Theology: From A Secularist Viewpoint*, published in 1958, Teller claimed to be "typical of a great many Jewish secularists in (his) attitude to the new American Jewish Theology." This attitude is characterized by two facets: the outright rejection of religious, or non-secular Judaism; and the refusal to allow any Christian influence into Jewish thought. "History, as I read it," wrote Teller, "shows traditional Judaism to have been in steady evolution toward secularism…. By impeaching secularism and exalting theology, the Jewish existentialists impugn the basic element of my Jewishness…." Judaism, for Teller, was not about God or about even attempting to describe the "true absolute." Rather, it was about laws, about "demonstrative action." For him it was Christianity, not Judaism that properly trafficked in theology. He critiqued Herberg in particular for improperly introducing Christian categories and considerations into the new American Jewish Theology. Most particularly, he regretted the influence of Niebuhr and Protestant thought, complaining,

[71] Borowitz, Eugene. "Crisis Theology & The Jewish Community." *Commentary* 1.32, 1961.

"Herberg habitually introduces categories into Jewish history that are foreign to it, on the assumption that what happened outside Jewish history had also to happen inside it."

Though certainly not a coherent self-identified movement, Teller seemed to give voice to those secular Jews—the very same ones Glazer and Herberg described—who identified with Judaism *culturally* as opposed to *religiously*. For Teller, secularism was an integral part of Jewish life and contributed to its flourishing. He wrote, "Jewish existentialist anti-secularism runs counter to the plain historical truth that the Jews knew their greatest social, economic, and civil advances after the Enlightenment, under the spiritual influence of secular humanism." Though he praised Herberg and others for "advancing challenging theses which compel the American Jew to study the basis and essence of his Jewish affiliation," Teller nonetheless argued that "the great gains of the Jews in American society are the fruit of American secularism" and that "Herberg has moved so far in the other direction" in his calls for a religious revival.[72]

In August of 1962, Borowitz was a month away from leaving his position as Director of Education at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and beginning a professorship at Hebrew Union College lecturing on Jewish religious thought. It was at this point that he wrote *The Jewish Need for Theology* which plainly stated his position regarding the religious nature of the American Jewish community. "What Judaism needs…" he wrote, "is not a theology, but theological concern, not theological uniformity but theological informedness." According to Borowitz, American Jews in 1962 were still defined primarily by their Jewishness rather than by true religion. They were not even informed on theological issues. Rather, they were "turning the synagogue into an

[72] Teller, Judd L. "A Critique of the New Jewish Theology: From A Secularist Viewpoint." *Commentary 25.3*, 1958.

effectively secular institution" and "blaspheming a sacred history of millennia, indeed all the history the Jewish people has ever cared to remember."[73]

Borowitz expressed strong distaste for the secularist argument against Judaism being a religion to begin with. What is the religious component of being Jewish? Was there ever a religious component to begin with? These are pseudo-questions for Borowitz. The question Borowitz wanted the American Jewish community to ask was, "How shall we speak of Jewish faith?" He recognized that this question might marginalize a large segment of the Jewish population, but this did not concern him. "No one wishes to lose Jews for Judaism, but the time has come when the synagogue must be saved for the religious Jew. The time has come when we must be prepared to let some Jews opt out so that those who remain in, or who come in, will not be diverted from their duty to God." Notably, Borowitz's argument is itself theological. He might have claimed the need to discuss God simply on the grounds that it might be helpful to Jews of the time. His concern, however, was that in preventing Jews from discussing God in any way, they would be "divergent from their duty to God."[74]

Two years after Borowitz's article, *Commentary* published *On the Eclipse of God*—an article based on a lecture given by Fackenheim at the University of Toronto. The title of the article explained Fackenheim's thesis. The "eclipse of God" is a phrase borrowed from Buber who explained that in an eclipse of the sun, an object comes between the eye and the sun, making the sun un-seeable—if only for a brief moment. That one cannot see the sun does not mean that the sun does not exist. For Buber, this is the Jewish conception of God; despite numerous tragedies throughout Jewish history,

[73] Borowitz, Eugene, *The Jewish Need for Theology*
[74] Ibid.

from biblical times to the present, the Jewish God did not disappear, but rather, became eclipsed. The Psalmists are a good example of this, Fackenheim noted. Though they questioned God's whereabouts, they never doubted God's existence.

Fackenheim used Buber's metaphor to explain that it is "perfectly clear that we are undergoing an unprecedented crisis of religious faith." Modern man sees the eclipse but then *mistakenly* worries if there is any sun at all. "The modern believer… has glimpsed the possibility that all openness to the Divine may be pseudo-openness only—that man may be radically alone." Even though Fackenheim contended, like Buber, that the Jewish notion of faith according to the bible is based on "the believer's certainty of standing in relation to an un-provable and irrefutable God," he recognized that most people lack any real certainty. Thus, he concluded, the modern believer is burdened. The best he can do is testify that the non-existent God is not non-existent at all, but merely absent. This burden on both believers and would-be-believers epitomized the "crisis of religious faith."

Taken together, these articles by Teller, Borowitz and Fackenheim demonstrate the debate over Jewish theology in the late 1950s and early 1960s. If the immediate post-war period of the late 1940s was characterized by ardent arguments for a new American Jewish theology, the suburbanization period of the late 1950s was characterized by the unenthused, apathetic response to those arguments, on one hand, and a passionate counterargument by the secularists, on the other. To be sure, Jews were building synagogues at incredible rates and affiliating with those synagogues as at no other point in American Jewish history. But as Glazer argued during this period, "American Jews, if

they believe in anything, believe in the instrumental efficacy of religion."[75] That is to say, American Jews saw the synagogue in purely pragmatic terms. They recognized that it provided a frame—and a good one at that—for community and Jewish ritual. But as Teller, Borowitz and Fackenheim would argue, God had no place in those communities or Jewish rituals. The case for Jewish theology had been made in the decade before, but was now falling on deaf ears.

By the middle of the 1960s the religious revival in America had ended. Jewish theology lay mostly dead on the cutting room floor. Aside from a small circle of Jewish intellectuals and rabbis, the majority of the Jewish world spoke little about God. In the words of Borowitz in 1962,

> The stirrings of an interest in Jewish theology still affect only a few individuals responding mainly to one another and to that small group within the synagogue who have at least begun to ask the right questions. The leadership of what is purportedly the Jewish religious community is, as a whole, uninterested in theology and is convinced that theology has nothing to do with truly practical questions like the goals of the community's activity, the methods which are appropriate to reaching them, or the criteria by which either might be judged.[76]

In a period where religious faith could have been grounding, the opposite was true. The emerging "fourth" generation of Jews recognized that their parents, although members of synagogues and committed to Jewish life, had no real religious faith whatsoever. As the 1960s unfolded—each new year more turbulent than the last—young, suburban American Jews turned further away from religion and thus further away from God.

---

[75] As quoted in Kaplan 18
[76] Borowitz, Eugene, *The Jewish Need for Theology.*

In April of 1966 *Time* Magazine famously asked America, "Is God Dead?" The article sought to describe the role of theology in a period where belief in God was so far from absolute that even theologians were re-thinking their ideas of God in the context of an increasingly secular society. "The new theological approach to the problem of God," John T. Elson, the article's author wrote, "is not that of the ages when solid faith could be assumed. No serious theologian today would attempt to describe the qualities of God as the medieval scholastic did with such assurance."

The question—Is God Dead?—came at just the right time, so to speak, for Jews who were involved in backpedaling the theological claims of the 1950s. The putative absence of God seemed now to be a certainty even to Christians who had been so sure of God in an earlier era. Given the pervasive nature of the death of God movement in the mid 1960s, it is no surprise to find the Jewish world trying to deal with the question from a Jewish perspective. Was the *Jewish* God dead as well? An answer of sorts came four months after the *Time* article in the form of a symposium in *Commentary* entitled, *The State of Jewish Belief.*

The symposium, published in August of 1966, featured the response of 38 prominent Jewish thinkers to five central questions. 1) "In what sense do you believe the Torah to be divine revelation?" 2) "In what sense do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God?" 3) "Is Judaism the one true religion, or is it one of several true religions?" 4) "Does Judaism as a religion entail any particular political viewpoint?" And 5) "Does the so-called 'God is Dead' question which has been agitating Christian theologians have any relevance to Judaism?"

The symposium was so massive that all the answers—compiled into book form and published that same year—ran 280 pages long. The answers from the 15 Reform, 12 Conservative and 11 Orthodox rabbis were dense and at some points most likely impenetrable to an average reader. It could not have been the intent of the editors of *Commentary* for the entire symposium to be read in one sitting, or, perhaps, even for it to be read in its entirety *at all*. At a distance of almost half a century, the symposium reads more like a reference tool, a collection of writings meant to offer a glimpse into the minds of America's rabbis on issues of belief—but only a glimpse. Because of this, it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions based on the symposium alone. Besides, the issue of belief is hardly measurable and given that the rabbis were asked lengthy and complex questions but only given a small space to respond, it would be problematic to assess the responses as a fully adequate and comprehensive reflection of any of the authors' viewpoints.

Professor of theology and liturgy Jakob J. Petuchowski reflected this feeling of limitation in his response in the symposium. "No 'Jewish' Jew would expect answers to five serious questions—questions which go to the very root of Jewish being—in twenty-five hundred words… The reader who is truly and sincerely interested in the answers to the five questions posed here should go and study. He cannot, and he must not, rely on a twenty-five hundred word summary by any rabbi or theologian." Why? Petuchowski argued that in so few words, "there can be no reasoned discourse, no substantiation of personal affirmations." And so he concluded, there can be "no satisfactory answers."

Still, some generalizations seemed possible, and Himmelfarb—a contributing editor of *Commentary*—try to elucidate them. He observed that the biggest influences on

the theology of the respondents were Rosenzweig and Hirsch. On this finding, he was less than enthused. The notion, he wrote, that "a German Jew—a layman, not a rabbi—who died before Hitler took power and who came to Judaism from the very portals of the Church," and that Hirsch, also a German, are the biggest influence on America's rabbis, means that modern American Jews walk in the shadow of German theologians from an altogether different time and era. Himmelfarb was appalled at how little Americans had accomplished in the realm of theology. He sourly concluded, "What impression does this symposium give of the present state of Jewish religious thought? In general that there is far less theological ferment than among the Christians and that there are few new ideas about Judaism."

That the American rabbinate had nothing new to offer in terms of Jewish thought did not surprise Himmelfarb. Modern Jews, he argued, are long familiar with a godless religion and so, "the relative absence of newness was to be expected." Himmelfarb understood that theology had never been central to Judaism, unlike the Christians who "massacred each other for an iota: is the Son *homoousis* with the Father, of the same substance, or *homoiousios*, of like substance?" He also understood that "historically, some Jewries were more theological than others." But still—like Grossman, Cohen, Agus, Kristol, Fackenheim, Herberg and Borowitz almost two decades earlier—Himmelfarb wanted more. "How much?" he asked, "More, I would say, than we are getting."

Was Himmelfarb accurate in his assessment of respondents? Were Rosenzweig and Hirsch the dominant influences on the Rabbis? Did the symposium indeed demonstrate a lack of any new American Jewish theological thinking? Recognizing the

difficulty in trying to draw a broad conclusion based on thirty-eight respondents (as mentioned prior), I agree with Himmelfarb's reading of the symposium.

On the first question—were Rosenzweig and Hirsch the dominant influences on the Rabbis?—one could argue that Himmelfarb over-imagines the influence of Rosenzweig and Hirsch. Indeed, the two are hardly mentioned by name more than a handful of times. But a close reading of the respondents also yields very few mentions of Herberg, Heschel, Steinberg, Baeck or modern orthodox rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik—those American writers who published on Jewish thought prior to 1966. If the rabbis were not influenced by Rosenzweig or Hirsch, who then, were they influenced by? In essence, Himmelfarb makes his argument from the absence of any other influential systematic American Jewish theology from which the rabbis could have drawn upon to write their answers. Furthermore, this generation of post-World War II rabbis surely found insight in Rosenzweig, for his theology was composed in the midst of the First World War and therefore offered answers to questions that would have been of concern to those who lived after the Second World War.

Against Himmelfarb, however, one might argue that rather than the works of Rosenzweig, it was actually existentialism *on the whole* that influenced the rabbis. Indeed, Rosenzweig had almost no intellectual disciples and his works are either extremely difficult to understand or exist only in fragments. But Jewish existentialism was certainly perceived as being hot and was pioneered by Rosenzweig. Even if the rabbis had not read Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, existentialism was so dominant in the 1960s—via the likes of Tillich in Christian circles and philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in general culture—that even without a working

knowledge of Rosenzweig's philosophy, the rabbis' default position was existentialist and therefore Rosenzweigian.

On the second claim—that the symposium demonstrates a lack of any new American Jewish theological thinking—one could argue that Himmelfarb overstated the case. Indeed, many of the respondents discuss aspects of Judaism that clearly reflect a distinctly American milieu—discussions of slavery in America or American democracy for example. But again to Himmelfarb's credit, they do so through a German lens. One rabbi, Seymour Siegel—then a professor of theology at the Jewish Theological Seminary—stated directly, "What I have been saying is a restatement of Franz Rosenzweig's thoughts on the question of Jewish observance. Actually, I have little to add beyond his formulation."[77] There is no clearer statement of dependence made throughout the whole symposium and one would be hard pressed to find the same statement made about an American theologian.

Himmelfarb's final statement on the need for more American Jewish theology is more a matter of opinion than historical fact. But in my estimation, Himmelfarb was correct to demand "more…than we are getting." Despite the budding of a new Jewish theology in the 1950s and early 1960s, the *Commentary* symposium demonstrated an obvious incomplete flowering of that theology at the time.

Borowitz could have predicted as much. In the beginning of 1966—months before the *Commentary* symposium—he wrote in *Judaism* on the upsurge in theological activity among the Protestants, "I confess that I do not see much for Judaism to learn from the current Protestant discussion…" The Jews are a people, he argued, who are familiar with

[77] "The State of Jewish Belief: A Symposium." *Commentary* 42.2, 1966.

the death-of-God. He cited as examples the Jewish Enlightenment, the Hebraists, the Yiddishists, the Zionists and socialists, founder of the American Ethical Culture movement Felix Adler and the Jewish interest in the art world and academic universities. But as always for Borowitz, "the task of Jewish theology" remained "vital" and "immediate." To wonder about God is the "destiny of the Jewish people." The Jew, said Borowitz, "must find a way to speak of his Jewish faith so that he can confirm the devotion of a circumcised heart with the understanding of a secular trained intellect." The symposium later that year certainly affirmed his stance.[78]

In his response to the symposium (also published in *Judaism*), Borowitz maintained a negative feeling toward the lack of development in Jewish theology:

> Now that the thirty-eight responses have been published and the fifty thousand readers of Commentary have finally had the opportunity to be exposed to "the best minds of modern Judaism," nothing seems to have changed at all. Judaism still does not get equal time with music, art, plays, books and politics. The symposium attracted almost no press comment except in the Yiddish dailies, the *Forverts* and *Der Tog*, and, by the latest advice, it had drawn about a dozen letters to the editor, some snide, most simply unfavorable.[79]

He went on to mourn the fact that, compared with an earlier *Commentary* symposium, this one lacked any "'great names," and contained "no sensations." That the thirty-eight respondents all "believe in God, His Covenant with Israel, and the responsibility to live under the Law which flows from it," he wrote, is not a path towards a new Jewish

[78] Borowitz, Eugene B. "God-Is-Dead Theology." *Judaism* 15.1 Winter 1966: 85-94.
[79] Borowitz, Eugene B. "On the "Commentary" Symposium: Alternatives in Creating A Jewish Apologetic." *Judaism* 15.4, Fall 1966: 458-65.

theology, but rather, "just Judaism." Thus, like Himmelfarb, Borowitz's response was one of pessimism. No wonder that two years later he would continue his fight and publish *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*. In that book Borowitz declared the need for his generation, having "stampeded from Jewish tradition into general culture, …to reclaim (their) stake in… traditional faith."[80]

IN THE SPRING of 1967, Louis Jacobs, founder of the Conservative movement in the United Kingdon, summarized a far more optimistic view of the state of Jewish theology. He agreed with the claim that Christians dominated theology, but argued that the Jews had invented it in the first place and then handed it over to the Christians; theology was not necessarily alien to Judaism, therefore and, in fact, Jewish theology *might* be more alive and well than its critics recognized. His proof was that in the span of less than a year in 1965 and 1966 there were no fewer than five symposia on Jewish belief. In addition to the *Commentary* symposium in August of 1966, he cited the books *Varieties of Jewish Belief*, edited by Ira Eisenstein; *Rediscovering Judaism: Reflections on a New Theology*, edited by Arnold J. Wolf; *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism and Universalism*, edited by Raphael Loewe; and *Confrontations with Judaism*, edited by Philip Longworth.

After an analysis of each, Jacobs concluded that

> Taken together, the symposia may not provide our generation with a guide for the perplexed and may, indeed, be further causes for puzzlement in calling attention to the

[80] Borowitz, Eugene B. *A New Jewish Theology in the Making*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968.

> bewildering variety of responses to the state of Jewish belief. But that five such symposia should have been issued in a comparatively short period by responsible publishers and journals is certainly evidence that a real quest for religious belief is going on in the Jewish world of today. *Ken yirbu*.[81]

Jacob's analysis is not entirely wrong. He is right in arguing that the presence of the symposia alone attests to "a real quest for religious belief." But then again, the presence of the symposia *alone* are not representative of the American Jewish community as a whole in 1966. True, *Commentary* held a symposium on belief and several books were published that dealt with theological topics, but this can hardly serve as a measuring rod for what Jews in general believed about God or if they even cared about the subject at all. *Commentary*'s readership was highly intellectual and was not representative of a larger whole. The books by Eisenstein, Wolf, Loewe and Longworth can barely be considered as filling a deep-seated need within the Jewish Community in the late 1960s and they are hardly remembered much at all today.

What is a more likely scenario in my estimation is that the Jewish intellectuals at *Commentary* and the contributors to the various books on belief represented a minority subset of the American Jewish community. They were influenced by the God-is-Dead movement and possibly by the numerous calls for more theology from the likes of Borowitz, Fackenheim and Herberg, but they were hardly influenced by average American Jews who had long ago abandoned a belief in God—if they ever possessed one. Jewish theology in the late 1960s reached a kind of plateau, but it was only a theology of defense—responding to the general culture and to a few lone voices in the

[81] Jacobs, Louis. "Symposia." *Judaism* 16.2, Spring 1967: 207-213.

community. Without a new theology bubbling up naturally from within, Jewish theology would remain a fringe concern. And so it did.

Conclusion

FOR THE FIRST major wave of Jewish immigrants to America, theology was of little or no concern. Upon arrival to the land of opportunity, they quickly shed any religious identity and distinguished themselves as ethnic and cultural Jews. They spent their days immersed in Yiddish theatre and Yiddish newspapers. They built Jewish orphanages and hospitals and fought anti-Semitism. All the while, they sought out an answer to the central immigrant question: what does it mean to be American?

The children of these immigrants flew further away from the nest of Jewish faith. Though they continued to identify as Jews based on ethnicity, they would be hard-pressed to call themselves religious, if by "religious" one means having faith and considering what role God plays in relation to the cosmos. To be religious is to take worship seriously, in some form or another, and earnestly to question man's place in the world and a world to come. To be religious is to believe that the reason there is something rather than nothing is that some supreme God on high, or some first cause—something, anything—was here first and will continue to be here for all time. The second generation of American Jews had no patience for such religious matters.

As a rule of sociology, the third generation looks to recover the morals and standards of their grandparents, the first generation. In the case of the American Jews, this rule held true, at least for a certain percentage of intellectuals—the people whose work we have surveyed here, and the readership to which they appealed. At least that relatively small subset of the third generation of American Jews wished to bring Judaism *the religion* back into the conversation. They wished to recover from the first generation—what existed of it at least—a sense of having faith, of practicing Jewish

tradition with an intention of serving God; but to do so with greater sophistication, not simply as a return to the traditionalist rhetoric of the first generation's European past.

As we have seen, therefore, between 1945 and 1950, numerous articles in *Commentary* dealt with Jewish theology. Each in its own way begged the American Jewish community to return to serious Jewish thought as a means of engagement with being Jewish. Each pleaded with the third generation to move from Judaism as a culture to Judaism as a religion. But as synagogues proliferated, it was ethnic, not religious Judaism that dominated the concerns of the builders. God rarely entered the picture. Few heard the call of the *Commentary* theologians and so, the Jewish community continued on its "Godless" ways.

By the 1960s America had undergone a massive religious revival. God—alive or dead—was in vogue. And coupled with the rebirth of religion was what came to be known as a "new Jewish theology." Several notable scholars and rabbis published books about the Jewish conception of God and earnestly attempted to grapple with theology from a modern and American perspective. Magazines like *Commentary* too attempted to move the conversation and give the American Jewish public a picture of this new Jewish theology. But with the vantage point of history, it is evident that this new Jewish theology was nothing more than a re-working of the German theologians of old. While some new ideas were put into play, most were re-workings of an antiquated theology from Eastern Europe or Germany. Though some continued to grumble about the state of Jewish belief, American Jews—rabbis and lay people alike—barely took notice.

And then, as quickly as it came into focus, it ended: with the Six-Day War of 1967, theology seemed increasingly irrelevant all over again. In their postwar celebration

of Israel's victory, American Jews found further reason to rediscover their ethnic identity, especially as it was manifested in Israel's cultural form of Judaism. The Six-Day War and its aftermath all but killed the fervent plea for the Jewish community to return to God.

In August 1996, exactly thirty years after the now-famous *Commentary* symposium on the State of Jewish Belief, the magazine revisited the issue. As the editorial note to the 1996 symposium suggested as the impetus for revisiting the issue, "Whatever else American Jews may believe in, it is doubtful the majority of them believe in Judaism." And so *Commentary* felt obliged to ask again, "What Do American Jews Believe?" While an in-depth study of Jewish theology post-1967 is not the topic of this paper, the mere presence of this symposium in 1996 suggests that not much had changed in the thirty years between the two symposia. While Rosenzweig's influence may have waned, one would be bold to declare that the theological influence on the respondents of the 1996 symposium was purely American. Thus, nearly fifty years later after he wrote them, the words of Himmelfarb ring true, "we too need theology. How much? More, I would say, than we are getting."

Bibliography

Abrams, Nathan. *Commentary Magazine, 1945-59: "A Journal of Significant Thought and Opinion"* London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007.

Agus, Jacob B. "Judaism vs. Jewishness." *Commentary 4.5*, 1947.

Balint, Benjamin. *Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine That Transformed the Jewish Left Into the Neoconservative Right.* Public Affairs, New York, 2010.

Borowitz, Eugene B., Reprinted in condensed form as "A Theology for Modern Judaism, in The Jewish Digest, Feb. 1962.

Borowitz, Eugene B. *The Mask Jews Wear*; *the Self-deceptions of American Jewry*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.

Borowitz, Eugene B., The Idea of God. *CCAR Yearbook* 67, 1957.

Borowitz, Eugene B. Why Don't We Pray in Our Synagogues? *Keeping Posted* 10, no. 5, December 1964.

Borowitz, Eugene B. *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought: A Partisan Guide*. New York, NY: Behrman House, 1995.

Borowitz, Eugene B. "God-Is-Dead Theology." *Judaism* 15.1 Winter, 1966.

Borowitz, Eugene B. "On the "Commentary" Symposium: Alternatives in Creating A Jewish Apologetic." *Judaism* 15.4 Fall, 1966.

Borowitz, Eugene. "Crisis Theology & The Jewish Community." *Commentary 1.32,* 1961.

Borowitz, Eugene. "The Jewish Need for Theology." *Commentary 2.34* 1962.

Cohen, Elliot E. "Jewish Culture in America." *Commentary 3.5* 1947.

Cohen, Elliot. E. "An Act of Affirmation: Editorial Statement." *Commentary 1.1* 1945.

Douthat, Ross Gregory. *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. New York: Free, 2012.

Eisen, Arnold M. *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1983.

Eisenstein, Ira. *Varieties of Jewish Belief*. New York: Reconstructionist, 1966.

Fackenheim, Emil L. “The Modern Jew’s Path to God.” *Commentary 9.5* 1950.

Fackenheim, Emil L. “Can We Believe in Judaism Religiously?” *Commentary* 6.6, 1948.

Friedman, Murray. *Commentary in American Life*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple, 2005.

Glazer, Nathan. *American Judaism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957

Gillman, Neil. *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990.

Gilman, Neil. Beyond *Wissenschaft*: The Resurrection of Resurrection in Jewish Thought Since 1950. In *Who Owns Judaism?: Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Vol. XVII. Ed. Eli Lederhendler. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2001.

Goldy, Robert G. *The Emergence of Jewish Theology in America*. Bloomington: Indiana, 1990

Grossman, Mordecai. “A Civilization within A Civilization.” *Commentary 1.1* 1945.

Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989

Herberg, Will. “The Postwar revival of the Synagogue.” *Commentary* 9.4 1950.

Herberg, Will. “Has Judaism Still Power to Speak?” *Commentary 7.5* 1949.

Herberg, Will, and David G. Dalin. *From Marxism to Judaism: The Collected Essays of Will Herberg*. “From Marxism to Judaism: Jewish Belief as a Dynamic of Social Action.” New York: M. Wiener Pub., 1989.

Hookway, Christopher. "Pragmatism." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 16 Aug. 2008. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.

Jacobs, Louis. *A Jewish Theology*. New York: Behrman House, 1974

James, William. (1907) *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 as quoted in Hookway, Christopher. "Pragmatism." *Stanford University*. Stanford University, 16 Aug. 2008.

Kaplan, Dana Evan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. New York: Columbia, 2009

Kaplan, Mordecai M. “The Truth About Reconstructionism.” *Commentary 1.2.* 1945.

Kristol, Irving. “How Basic is Basic Judaism?” *Commentary* 5.1 1948.

Mendes-Flohr, Paul R., and Jehuda Reinharz. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*. New York: Oxford, 1980.

Podhoretz, Norman. *Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Petuchowski, Jakob J. (1967) The God We Worship. In *Dimensions*, Fall.

Raider, Mark A. *The Emergence of American Zionism*. New York: New York, 1998.

Raphael, Marc Lee. *Judaism in America*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.

Silver, Daniel. (1967) A Lover’s Quarrel with the Mission of Israel. CCAR Journal.

Teller, Judd L. “A Critique of the New Jewish Theology: From A Secularist Viewpoint.” *Commentary 25.3* (1958)

Wolf, Arnold Jacob. *Rediscovering Judaism; Reflections on a New Theology*. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1965.