Sheldon H. Blank: A Biographical Study

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
2011

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Dedicated to

Sheldon H. Blank

Though I never met you, your words and your deeds have left a profound impact on my understanding of and my commitment to the rabbinate.

Acknowledgments

My deep appreciation goes to Dr. Gary Zola, Dr. Jason Kalman, Dr. Dana Herman and the staff of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. Their time, energy, and insight provided invaluable guidance and leadership for this endeavor. I would also like to thank Rabbi Joseph Levine, Miriam Sachs and Sheldon and Amy's grandchildren for sharing their personal memories with me. It has been an honor for me to study Sheldon Blank; this process and his life will continue to inform my own life. Thank you.

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Abstract

This thesis serves to explore the life and professional contributions of Dr. Sheldon Haas Blank (1896–1989), bible scholar and professor at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Among the topics explored in this thesis are: Blank's biographical information; the formative experiences of his early years; his educational background; the development of his biblical understanding and his unique commitment to the call of the prophets; the development of Blank's understanding of war and the content of sermons he preached on the subject; and finally, his relationships with colleagues, students, friends and family. This thesis seeks to collect and analyze the impact of Blank's biographical information, scholarly contributions, political voice and relationships.

Introduction

Sheldon Haas Blank was an American rabbi and a prominent figure in the field of biblical studies during the last half of the twentieth century. As a member of the faculty of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati for more than sixty years, Blank influenced several generations of rabbis and biblical scholars whom he taught. Blank was born and raised in Illinois. After earning his high school diploma, Blank matriculated at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and he simultaneously enrolled in the University of Cincinnati. After his rabbinical ordination in 1923, Blank enrolled in the University of Jena in Germany. He completed his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies in 1925 and joined HUC's faculty. He remained at the College for the remainder of his long and productive career.

As a teacher of liberal rabbis and a biblical scholar, Blank influenced the American rabbinate, the field of biblical studies, and the Reform movement in Judaism.

The first chapter of this thesis will provide readers with a broad biographical overview of Blank. This biographical chapter will provide a reconstruction of his life, from his early upbringing in Illinois, to his education as a young adult, through his final years in Cincinnati.

The second chapter will focus on Blank's biblical scholarship. It will trace Blank's academic training as a scholar and how his understanding of sacred text evolved over time. This chapter will set Blank into the general context of biblical scholarship by comparing his works with those of his contemporaries. We will also explore Blank's scholarly contributions to the field of biblical scholarship.

The third chapter will focus on Blank's activities as a leader of Hebrew Union College and American Reform Judaism in the realm of social justice. As a student, and more so in his role as professor, Blank used his voice and his understanding of the prophets to urge others to act with justice. This third chapter will explore his political voice, specifically as seen through his sermons and addresses on war.

The final chapter of this thesis will analyze Blank's character as understood through his relationships. This chapter will explore Blank's role as teacher, colleague, husband, father and grandfather. In looking at these roles the reader will understand more of the principles and priorities of Blank.

Biographical Information: Sheldon Haas Blank

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the life of Dr. Sheldon Haas Blank. This chapter will detail his youth, including his early years in Mt. Carmel, Illinois and his family background; his years as a student at the University of Cincinnati, the Hebrew Union College as well as at the University of Jena in Germany; and finally his years as a Professor at HUC-JIR. Finally, this chapter will focus on Sheldon Blank not as rabbi and scholar, but as friend and family member.

Sheldon Haas Blank was born in Mt. Carmel, Illinois on the west bank of the Wabash River on September 17, 1896. He was the son of Solomon H. and Byrde H. Blank. Mt. Carmel was a small town; at the time of Blank's birth the Chamber of Commerce claimed the town boasted a population of 5,000.[1]

Solomon, Sheldon's father, was born in the village of Lendershausen near Wurzburg in Bavaria. He was one of five children (Moses, Solomon, Leah, Mariana and Stella)[2] born to Seligman and Henrietta Blank. From a young age Sheldon had a deep interest in his father's ancestry; he relished hearing stories of his father's life in southern Germany. Sheldon was particularly interested in hearing stories of his paternal grandfather Seligman, a Hebrew scribe who was born in 1810. Seligman spent his working days making tefilin, mezuzot and copies of the Torah. Seligman traveled the country providing his services to the many communities, homes, and synagogues that he visited. As a child, Solomon (who was the youngest of his siblings) knew to be very quiet

[1] Sheldon H. Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p. 1, address delivered at HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, 11 March 1987, Sheldon Blank, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.
[2] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

when his father was working at his desk. Solomon remembered his father saying a prayer before he would start his scribal work.[3]

Solomon and his only brother Moses, five years his senior,[4] left Germany for the United States on November 9, 1881 and arrived in New York twenty-three days later. The brothers first found work in Philadelphia where Solomon learned English. During the next eleven years Sol worked in numerous places in the United States, including New Castle, Pennsylvania, Warren Plains, North Carolina and Birmingham, Alabama. In 1892 Sol moved to Anderson, Indiana – a small town not far from Indianapolis. Anderson was experiencing a boom because of the discovery of natural gas. Sol bought a complex which used to be a grocery store and opened it as a menswear business. This complex was originally owned by Mr. Louis Loeb.[5]

Louis Loeb had a niece Byrd who would come to visit her family in Anderson. During one visit she met Solomon and they became good friends. They corresponded after she returned home. Sol went to visit Byrde in Carmi and asked her father Louis Hass, who maintained a successful general merchandise business, for permission to marry his daughter. On August 16, 1894, they were married. As the Anderson paper reported:

> Sol H. Blank, the well known clothier to be married August 16, 1894. In local Hebrew circles today there is rejoicing over the announcement of the coming marriage of one of their most prominent leaders. He is Sol H. Blank, the well known South Side Clothier. The bride-to-be is a relative of the Loeb family and it was during a visit here that the acquaintance and engagement occurred.[6]

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[3] Letter from Sheldon H. Blank to his granddaughter, Deborah Sachs, July 1976, in author's possession.
[4] Solomon H. Blank, *My Life as a Merchant, 1181 to 1942* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1954), p. 1.
[5] Ibid., p. 24.
[6] Ibid.

There was a sizeable Jewish community in Anderson. Because of his Judaic knowledge Solomon was elected service leader of the congregation and led most Shabbat and holiday worship while there. Solomon led the prayers and would read to the congregation sermons from Reform Rabbis, he looked to leaders of Reform Judaism for religious guidance.

As the natural gas industry in Anderson weakened the merchandise business struggled as well. With hopes of better economic opportunities Sol and Byrde decided to leave Anderson. Sol consulted with his father-in-law and they decided to move to Mt. Carmel, Illinois which was close to Byrde's parents. They believed that a business in an area that depended on farmers' trade would be more stable. They would later have all three of their children in Mt. Carmel.[7]

The following paragraphs will explore the lessons that Sol and Byrde taught to Sheldon, values which Sheldon carried with him throughout his life. Even though they lived in a small community, Byrde and Sol imparted the values of the importance of a Jewish education, the need for inter-faith learning and dialogue, the power of the written word, the commitment to hard work, the need to help those in need and the importance of being involved in current civic issues.

Sheldon was the middle child of three, all born in five year intervals. His brother Irvin was five years his elder, and sister Henrietta (Henri for short) followed Sheldon. The three siblings got along very well with no memorable rivalry to speak of.[8] Sheldon engaged in youthful activities exploring the area where he lived, playing with friends and spending time with family. On a regular basis Sheldon and Irvin would bike together a

[7] Ibid.
[8] Irv Blank, Eulogies delivered at Dr. Blank's funeral, Cincinnati, OH, 17 February 1989, SC-1055, AJA.

few blocks away to fill their tins with fresh milk.[9] Throughout Blank's youth, his father was proprietor of the Globe, the "One Price Clothing House" on Main Street in Mt. Carmel.[10] This work kept him very busy:

> In order to keep up this work I had to use Sunday mornings and many weekday evenings for it. That naturally caused me to stay away from our home a great deal, which I often regretted then and later, since I knew very well that a father is needed also in a home where children are growing up.[11]

Once the kids were old enough Byrde would join Solomon in the shop to help with the business.

During Sheldon's youth his parents were very involved in communal affairs. Byrde was a member of the local literary club, the "Matinee Ladies" and also wrote notes for the daily newspaper on the history of the region. Along with managing The Globe, Solomon worked for the Salvation Army:

> ... that is to say, he accepted contributions from charitable others and dispensed pittances to needy townspeople-a one man community chest. No doubt he helped shape my early notion of social concern.[12]

Sol and Byrde, although busy, were very committed parents. Through their community engagements, Sheldon's parents taught him the value of hard work and community service, which remained central to Sheldon's life.

Unlike Anderson, the Jewish community of Mt. Carmel was demographically quite small. The community consisted of the Blank family and a handful of itinerant Jews who moved in and out of town. As Solomon wrote:

> When I first considered moving to Mt. Carmel, I inquired of some of the prominent citizens as to the advisability of locating there. I was not

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p.5.
[11] Blank, *My Life as a Merchant*, p. 30.
[12] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p.5.

> encouraged by them because they claimed that up to that time no merchant of my religious belief had succeeded in that hundred year old town which had been founded by a Methodist clergyman. But I decided to take my chances, even if my religious belief had differed from that of nearly all other residents. I have never regretted this step…We associated with the inhabitants, took interest in things they were interested in and assisted in civic affairs. My life as a merchant and my long years of business experience brought me in contact with many people and through these contacts I established warm and valued friendships.[13]

While it was a small Jewish community, Blank later recalled that, "We were comfortably Jewish and I think that we were accepted."[14] The Blank children received the majority of their Jewish education from their parents. In order to educate their children, Solomon and Byrde relied on a prayer book and the publication of weekly Bible story pamphlets published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The Blanks were also members of the Reform Jewish synagogue in Evansville, Indiana. Sol took great pride in his religious education and would speak around the city about Judaism. Solomon held close relations with all the Christian ministers of Mt. Carmel (about 15 of them). As he reflected:

> My opinion is that a Jew can live with and be respected by all the citizens of a town as long as he lives a clean and upright life and takes interest in the people and in civic activities.[15]

In later years they also introduced their children to Jewish topics using the printed sermons of HUC alumnus Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923), which he delivered from his pulpit Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia.[16] As he grew older, Sheldon

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[13] Blank, *My Life as a Merchant*, p. 74.
[14] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p.1.
[15] Blank, *My Life as a Merchant*, p. 70.
[16] Krauskopf was a member of the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College; he was a leader in Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. He was also involved in a project with the Jewish Publication Society of America, publishing a new translation of the Bible titled, *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text, a New Translation*, 1917.

began traveling weekly to Evansville in order to attend Rabbi Max Merritt's (1879–1963) confirmation classes at Temple B'nai Israel.[17]

Sheldon attended public school in Mt. Carmel and graduated high school in 1914. His graduating class accepted his proposal for a class motto, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," the same title of the last formal address he delivered at Hebrew Union College in 1987:

> What the "open sky" meant to me then was probably the farm, a mile or so from home, where we went for milk-out there beyond the Big Four Railway's tracks. That "open sky" was the big world out there.[18]

In 1914, Blank left home to attend the University of Cincinnati and HUC living in a boarding house in Avondale. During his years at the University, Sheldon would return home during school vacations and for occasional visits throughout the year.[19]

In the mornings Blank attended classes at the University of Cincinnati and in the afternoons he took courses at Hebrew Union College. It was at both of these institutions that he began to critically reflect on the world at large and his role in shaping it:

> Here I soon learned that the Hebrew word for the big world is ha'olam, and even learned, as years passed and as I passed courses, that, as Jews, we have a responsibility as concerns the perfection of that big world-that big imperfect world out there, which role we call tiqqun olam and think of as a mission.[20]

Blank enjoyed both the academic and social elements of his student years. At the University of Cincinnati, Blank became active in theatre and student publications. Blank starred in numerous theatrical productions around the city and produced "The Lost Silk Hat," which was performed at Rockdale Temple on November 21st, 1920. During his

[17] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p. 6.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.
[20] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," p. 6.

students years Blank began developing his writings skills through his involvement in student publications. Later in his life he would be known for the artistry he brought to his written pieces. At HUC, Blank contributed numerous articles to the *Hebrew Union College Monthly*, a student publication.[21] Blank also served as co-editor of the monthly.[22] As a student Blank also taught at the Reading Road Temple which later merged with B'nai Jeshrun under Dr. Jacob Kaplan (1874–1965).[23] Dr. Jacob Kaplan was the president of The Religious Education Association of Ohio and as a student, Blank served as the secretary.[24] With few exceptions, Blank received fairly high marks at both HUC and the University of Cincinnati. Blank reflected on his time as a student saying:

> I seem to have done well enough at HUC; I received scholarships year after year. These with some financial help from home and more from cousin Isaac (my mother's cousin Isaac Loeb of Anderson).[25]

At HUC he took a variety of courses including but not limited to: Greek, Psychology, History, Liturgy, Deuteronomy, Catechism, Grammar and Kings, Mishnah, and Socialism.[26] Blank received a B.A. degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1918.

Shortly after graduation Blank enlisted in the infantry. Later in life he was unable to recall the reasons that lead him to join the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Blank started at the University of Cincinnati in a student army training corps and then attended an officer's training camp in Rockford, Illinois. He became, by his own testimony, a "90 day wonder" and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in late 1918

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[21] *The Hebrew Union College Monthly* would be the longest student-run publication, from 1914 until 1949. Abba Hillel silver was its first editor.
[22] Letter from Samuel Kraus to Sheldon blank, 8 December 1921, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 1, AJA.
[23] "Cincinnati's Good Neighbors," *Cincinnati Enquirer* (9 June 1976), MS 730, Box 10, Folder 5, AJA.
[24] Sheldon H. Blank, "The Conference for the Lamentation of Armaments," 11 November 1921, MS 730, Box 12, Folder 15, AJA.
[25] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.
[26] Ibid.

after Armistice Day. Soon after Blank resigned from his position in the AEF. Years later he spoke about his time in service:

> Before I saw active duty the war was over, and the only scar I bear I received right here where I now stand. I can almost see the X that marks the spot...I was assigned to the wheelbarrow detail; I was hauling cinders to make a company steel when I slipped and cut my lip on the barrow for my only scar.[27]

In 1920 Blank received his M.A. at the University of Cincinnati, having completed a dissertation titled, "Kant, Croce and the a priori Synthesis." Blank received rabbinic ordination from HUC in 1923 having completed a thesis titled, "The Organization of Jewish Communities in Tannaitic Times." Rabbis Cronbach and Lauterbach, advisors of Blank's rabbinic thesis, wrote in a letter to the faculty:

> The thesis exhibits a degree of scholarship surprisingly in advance of the expectations cherished of Hebrew Union College students. It should be accepted with the highest commendation and, subject to some revisions, its publication approved.[28]

While Blank had enjoyed his bi-weekly pulpit experience in Jackson, Tennessee he was not interested in settling into pulpit work immediately after ordination. Blank—in contrast to many of his peers—did not search for a congregational position:

> I have sometimes regretted the fact that when my formal education was completed, I accepted the faculty post which I still hold—with no interval of service to a congregation. I said "formal", because when I started teaching I soon learned that *that* in fact, is the point where one's real education begins—when he starts teaching...Also I admit that personal contact between teacher and student, family and alumni, is not qualitatively different from the relation between pastor and congregant. Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder whether my teaching over the years might not have been more relevant if somewhere along the way, I, myself, had experienced the rewards and suffered the defeats of a pastoral ministry.[29]

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[27] Sheldon Blank, "To Care Enough: Vietnam Commencement, 23 May 1968," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), pp. 125–128.
[28] University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College grades, MS 730, Box 15, Folder 5, AJA.
[29] Sheldon H. Blank, "Threatening Realities and Beckoning Hopes: How the Prophets Viewed the Future," May 1977, MS 730, Box 10, Folder 6, AJA.

While Blank was a student at HUC, Ismar Elbogen (1874–1943) from the Hochshule in Berlin visited Cincinnati, and Henry Slonimsky (1884–1970) was a faculty member on the Cincinnati campus. They both left a great impression on the young Blank. Because of them, and for reasons which will be further explored in the second chapter, Blank and his classmates Nelson Glueck and Walter Rothman, with encouragement and financial support from then President of Hebrew Union College, Julian Morgenstern, traveled to Germany in 1923 in order to study for their doctorates. Their colleague and later lifelong friend Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995) was already in Germany working towards a doctoral degree at the University of Berlin.[30]

In June 1923, Blank, Rothman and Glueck boarded the steamer Manchuria for Germany. Marcus met his three new rabbinic colleagues at the port in Hamburg and introduced them to German beer at a sidewalk café. Shortly thereafter, they separated and spent that first summer in different places in order to become familiar enough with German to be able to benefit from the University courses. Blank lived in Wurzburg with his aunts Marianna and Stella, two of his father's sisters about whom he had heard so much during his youth. Blank went with his relatives to visit his father's old home in Lendershausen. There were no longer any relatives in Lendershausen but he did meet with some friends of the family. One of these friends Emanuel "Manny" Silberman showed Blank a Torah scroll of which his father Seligman was the scribe. The relationships that he formed in Germany would prove to be very important decades later in Blank's life. Sheldon Blank was involved in advocating for numerous extended

[30] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

relatives, friends and strangers in the years preceding and during WWII, and was successful in helping to bring some of them to safety.

Manny Silberman was one of several individuals for whom the Blanks (Sheldon and his wife Amy) wrote affidavits. In 1938 his immigration to America had been approved. Blank still held dear the memory of the Torah scroll and asked in a letter for it to be brought. Unfortunately, Blank had ruined the surprise as Manny had already intended on bringing the scroll. The Torah remained a sacred jewel to Blank and was used for family b'nei mitzvot. Currently, the Torah is used by students and faculty at the Hebrew Union College in the Scheuer Chapel. Manny made his way to Cincinnati and the Blanks helped to support him.[31]

The trip to Germany opened Blank's eyes to more of the world:

> I began to gain perspective soon after our arrival in Germany when someone asked me where I came from, and when I said "America" inquired further, "North? Or South"?[32]

That Fall, Blank, Glueck and Rothman returned to Berlin and enrolled at the University of Berlin. While in Berlin, Blank lived with the then-librarian of the Hochshule. Blank also spent some time in the Hochshule and engaged with the students, including Fritz Bamberger (1902–1984).[33] During his time in Germany, Blank continued to maintain a relationship with the College community in Cincinnati, exchanging letters with then-President Julian Morgenstern.[34]

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[31] Letter from Sheldon H. Blank to his granddaughter, Deborah Sachs, July 1976, in author's possession.
[32] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.
[33] Bamberger was educated at the University of Berlin where he earned his Ph.D. in intellectual thought. He immigrated to American in 1939 and worked as the Director of Editorial Research for *Esquire* magazine. In 1961 he took a post working as the assistant to the President of the New York Campus of Hebrew Union College and served as Professor of Intellectual History.
[34] Letter from Julian Morgenstern to Sheldon Blank, 11 August 1924, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 1, AJA.

The three friends decided that Berlin was not the right fit for them and they all transferred to the University of Jena in the spring of 1924. In 1925, Blank completed his doctorate at the University of Jena. The policy of the university was that the students had to take courses on German idealism and the philosophies of Kant and Hegel. Many years later, Blank lamented how quickly he had earned his academic credentials: "Somewhat rashly and perhaps not wisely, I completed my program in two years." During his studies at the University of Jena Blank felt that Hebrew Union College had well prepared him, especially in Bible.[35] Blank wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Jena. Of his thesis, titled "Das Wort Torah," Blank wrote:

> The goal of my research was the discovery of the basic sense of the biblical word torah. I hope that my learned colleagues will agree with my finding. After much seeking in cognate languages and exploration of the biblical usage, I concluded that torah is "ein richtunggebendes ort" a word to point the way.[36]

In 1925 Jacob Rader Marcus was invited by Rabbi Israel Mattuck[37] (1883–1954) to serve the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London for High Holy Days. Marcus did not accept the invitation and Blank was subsequently invited. Blank's decision to go to London led him to the most cherished relationship he would have in his life. Blank visited the Hill Street Synagogue immediately after his arrival in London, and there he met Amy Kirchberger.

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[35] Letter from Julian Morgenstern to Sheldon Blank, 11 August, 1924, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 1, AJA.
[36] Sheldon H. Blank, "Inaugural Banquet of President Alfred Gottschalk," 1972, MS 730, Box 10, Folder 5, AJA.
[37] Born in Lithuania, Mattuck was educated at Harvard and Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He moved to London where we then helped to shape the theology, ritual and liturgy of Liberal Judaism. In 1926 Mattuck became the first chairman of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Amy (b. December 18, 1898)[38] was the third child in her family; her parents, Emma and Karl Kirchberger, emigrated from Germany to London in 1888 and joined an orthodox synagogue in the city.

Like Sheldon, as Amy aged she became more connected to Liberal Judaism and further felt a social obligation to care for those in need. As her daughter would reflect years later:

> After finishing her schooling at 17, and in her late teen years during the First World War my mother grew dissatisfied with what she was learning about the Judaism of her family and gradually became involved with the people then founding the Liberal Jewish Movement in England…At the same time, she was doing social work in the East End of London, where there was a large colony of poor Jewish people, and learned a lot about how other people lived.[39]

When Blank met Amy she was working as Rabbi Mattuck's volunteer secretary. She studied with Rabbi Mattuck and became very close to his family. She worked with young adults who were new members to the synagogue and youth groups and also taught in the Sunday school.[40] Amy and Sheldon began spending time together and on October 18th 1925 while taking a country walk in Harrow on the Hill, they decided they would wed.[41]

Back in Cincinnati, then-president of HUC, Julian Morgenstern, was looking for new faculty. Jacob Rader Marcus, himself already a junior faculty member, proposed Blank, Glueck and Rothman. Blank was the first of the three to receive an official invitation to join the College faculty and Glueck and Rothman soon followed. Without delay Blank accepted the invitation. Many years later, in 1985, Blank recalled Marcus's role in bringing him to the College:

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[38] Sheldon H. Blank, Passports, MS 730, Box 15, Folder 2, AJA.
[39] Miriam B. Y. Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 28, in author's possession.
[40] Ibid., p. 29.
[41] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

> But it was only after many years that I learned what I now acknowledge and confess: that I owe to Jacob Marcus and his shall I say wisdom? The nearly sixty rich years that I have spent here since 1926, fifty one of them as teacher here in this dear place, the rest in early retirement editing the Hebrew Union College Annual. I love you, Jake; and I wish that this statement might be preserved in the priceless reservoir that you have created: the American Jewish Archives.[42]

Morgenstern also suggested to Blank that he spend time in Israel before returning to Cincinnati in order to improve his Hebrew proficiency before joining the school's faculty. Blank traveled to Israel and studied there until Spring 1926. Blank attended the Hebrew University and the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR) in Jerusalem. William F. Albright (1891–1971), famed archaeologist, philologist, biblical scholar, and ceramics expert served as ASOR's director at the time.

Blank returned to London early in the summer of 1926 in time for the meeting of progressive Jewish leaders around the world. This gathering would lead to the creation of the World Union of Progressive Judaism (WUPJ).[43] Amy and Sheldon were married at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St. John's Wood on July 21, 1926; Rabbi Israel Mattuck and Julian Morgenstern officiated. Sheldon's family was unable to attend the wedding. There was a celebratory luncheon at the synagogue after the ceremony.

During his time in England, Blank developed relationships with leading individuals in the British Progressive Jewish movement. For example, he exchanged letters with Hon. Lily H. Montagu and Dr. Israel Mattuck.[44] He would maintain many of these relationships in his later years. As Lily Montagu wrote in a 1953 letter to Blank:

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[42] Blank address delivered at a reception in his honor, 9 October 1985, Cincinnati, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

[43] At its founding, the WUPJ was under the leadership of Lily Montagu and Claude Montefiore. The intention of the WUPJ was to unite into a permanent union, and to support progressive Jewish movements worldwide.

[44] Letter from Blank to Lily H. Montagu, 11 June 1956, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 4, AJA.

> The charming letter from you and Amy gives me particular pleasure. Your friendship means a tremendous amount to me, and at this moment, I recall so vividly the visit that we paid to your home in 1948, and the expression of your good feeling towards me.
>
> I think that this birthday will certainly be one of the most exciting ones because my friends, all over the world, seem determined to regard it as something exceptional that I should have reached the age of eighty. I can claim no merit for it. It does, however, bring to me the realization of the wealth of friendship that God has given to me, and I am most deeply humble and grateful for it.[45]

Byrde, Blank's mother, traveled to New York from Mt. Carmel, Indiana in order to meet Amy and Sheldon at the dock upon their return to the United States in 1926. From there they went on a short visit to Mt. Carmel. At first Amy was not used to American culture, as Sheldon's brother Irv would later reflect, "Everything moved too fast for her; she did not understand United States slang; there was continuous light-hearted fun and so much giggling."[46] Amy and Sheldon relished the opportunity of beginning a life together and building a home. After the visit they moved to Cincinnati where they rented a home on Morrison Avenue, and Blank began teaching at the College. While living on Morrison Avenue Amy and Sheldon began their family with the births of their two daughters at Jewish Hospital, Miriam on December 24, 1930 and Elizabeth on September 10, 1933.

By 1935, Amy and Sheldon were thinking about buying a home. Amy's mother visited from London and offered to help pay for a new residence. Not being pleased with any of the houses they saw they decided to buy a lot on Lafayette Circle, which would become 201 Lafayette. In the fall of 1935 they moved into their newly built home.[47] This house would become the central hub of the family with an open-door policy to students,

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[45] Letter from Montagu to Sheldon H. Blank," 14 December 1953, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 4, AJA.
[46] Irv Blank eulogy delivered at Dr. Blank's funeral in Cincinnati, 17 February 1989, SC-1055, AJA.
[47] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

colleagues and friends. Fifty-three years later Blank and Amy still had much pride for this home on Lafayette:

> We love its roomy comfortable design, its random width oak board floors, its fireplace. We have furnished it attractively-fine oriental rugs and antique pieces, largely from Liberty's in London. Our children love it too. Students seem also to enjoy the atmosphere of our home and to remember it as alumni.[48]

Along with teaching Bible at the College, Blank was involved in many committees and activities including the publication of the *Hebrew Union College Annual* (*HUCA*). He began as secretary in 1924 and continued in that role until 1926 when he succeeded Morgenstern as "Chairman" of the board. Blank served as chairman until 1971 and, in 1973, he became Editor of the *HUCA*. In 1940, Blank took on the position as Chairman of the "Committee on Comprehensive Examination in Collegiate Department." Blank served as Chairman of the Faculty Committee on Curriculum in 1944. In 1951, Blank was elected the Vice-President of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis. In 1952 he increased his responsibilities and leadership obligations to the Society by assuming the position of National President. In 1959 Blank served on a Special Faculty Committee on Sabbatical Leave. He also served as Chair of the Cincinnati Faculty in the late 1940's-1955. On May 12, 1955 Blank wrote a letter to then President Nelson Glueck resigning from this position:

> With the passing of the years the realization has grown in me that I cannot successfully occupy two positions. The increasingly heavy burdens of the office of "Chairman of the Faculty," what with increased enrollment, students transferring from New York, the graduate program, and other new activities, threaten to occupy my full time. And, together with that office, I have been carrying a teaching load which is 70% of the normal program. I have asked myself in which of my capacities I can serve the college the better-because the interests of the College and its programs are close to my heart. I believe that in the field of specialization, both in the

[48] Ibid.

> classroom and publicly, I have much to offer. And, I think, if a choice must be made, it is more important for the College, and for me that I devote the years which remain before my retirement, to scholarship and teaching.[49]

On June 2, 1955, P. Irving Bloom the then President of the Student Body wrote in a letter to Blank:

> We the members of the Student Body wish to express our deep regret upon learning of your resignation as Chairman of the Faculty. It is somewhat difficult for us to express our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for the manifold services you have rendered us in the past. Our pen may be awkward in its endeavor to find suitable words, but our hearts know well the love and respect that we shall always hold for you. We hope and pray that you will continue to aid us in the future with your counsel and guidance. You have been an inspiration to us in the past; may God grant the blessing of your presence, of your counsel and advice, of your inspiration, for many years to come.[50]

During his time at the College Blank was also involved in the programming of local community congregations. For example, in 1952 Blank delivered four evening lectures at Rockdale Temple in Cincinnati on the theme: "Jeremiah: The Life of a Prophet."[51]

As his career progressed, Blank published many works. Blank's earlier publications focused mostly on ancient manuscripts, language, and archaeology. Blank's true scholarly passion, however, was on the prophets—their character and what they demand of humanity. He believed that the prophets taught lessons of right action and that they presented a model of a liberal religion. Beginning in the 1950s most of his work focused on the prophets and were homiletical in nature. In 1958 Blank published the first of three books, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*. Three years later, Blank published his second

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[49] Letter from Blank to Nelson Glueck, 12 May 1955, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 4, AJA.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Sheldon H. Blank, Academic Affairs, MS 730, Box 4, Folder 7, AJA.

book *Jeremiah, Man and Prophet*, a publication of the Alumni Association of HUC-JIR. Blank's third and final book, *Understanding the Prophets*, was published in 1969. Blank gave numerous addresses—many were at important gatherings of religious leaders—which were later published. In 1977, HUC Press published a compilation of some of Blank's favored pieces titled *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses*. In the forward, Samuel Sandmel (1911–1979)[52] comments on Blank's wonderful writing style and his authoritative voice:

> For most of us the sporadic encounter with Sheldon Blank's spoken message promptly disclosed the unique combination of gentleness and gentility. One noticed that he treated his chosen theme with respect, indeed as though he might through some inadvertence damage it. He chose his words carefully and was sparing with adjectives, especially extravagant ones, as if an excess might weaken the telling force of those he chose to use. Warm as is his manner, and strong as his voice can be, he has always been enough soft-spoken that it has been the content of what he has said, devoid of all histrionics, that has conveyed his convictions.[53]

Blank taught Bible in the college for fifty-one years, always with an emphasis on the Prophets. He viewed the Prophetic Literature as a call to action, and he actively fostered this kind of thinking among those whom he taught:

> I have felt that teaching "Bible" to students training for the rabbinate involves more than exercise in text and translation. It can and should promote a social consciousness. That conviction grew in me under the influence of my model as Bible scholar, my teacher, Moses Buttenwieser and his interpretation of the prophets…I inherited his courses and the prophetic literature became my specialty. Such influence as I may have had upon our alumni and American Reform Jewish Congregations has been by this route.[54]

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[52] Born in Dayton, OH, Sandmel earned a B.A. degree from the University of Missouri, and was ordained at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1937. After serving as congregational rabbi, in 1942 he entered the U.S. Naval Reserve as a chaplain. From 1946–1949 Sandmel served as the director of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation at Yale, and he received his Ph.D. from Yale in New Testament in 1949. From 1949–1952 Sandmel was a professor of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt. Sandmel returned to Hebrew Union College in 1952 as Professor of bible and Hellenistic Literature. He was the author of approximately twenty books, and a scholar in interfaith work. Sandmel served as the president of the SBL in 1961.

[53] Blank, *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), p. ix.

[54] Sheldon Blank, Personal Writings, August 1988, Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

Not only did Blank preach and teach on the topic of Prophetic Judaism and its call to social action within the walls of HUC but he used his passion to inspire others. In Blank's lifetime the world went through unbelievable turmoil: World War I, World War II, Civil Rights, and the Vietnam War. Blank believed that the mission of Israel was not one of apathy but of action, one which fights for equal rights of all people and is willing to voice dissent when disagreeing with what is being done. He himself was not exempt from this. Through his sermons, articles and addresses Blank spoke to the contemporary issues of the day. Blank's political voice will be further explored in the third chapter of this thesis.

Blank retired from teaching at the conclusion of the 1976–1977 academic year. He was 80 years old. For another decade, however, he remained a constant presence in the life of the College in Cincinnati. Daily, he could be seen walking from building to building, oftentimes holding hands with his beloved Amy. Blank had an office in the dormitory and still maintained his role as editor of *Hebrew Union College Annual*, albeit with a colleague as associate director. After retirement Blank served on the Faculty Publications Committee and on the student-faculty committee on Religious Affairs. In terms of the length of his service on the HUC faculty, and in light of his energetic involvement in the life of the Cincinnati campus, Blank's career influenced the College as an institution as well as generations of rabbinical students.

The impression he left on Hebrew Union College and on the Cincinnati community at large is evident in the many honors he received during the course of his professional career. In 1965 Hebrew Union College gave Blank a named professorship:

the Nelson Glueck Professorship of Bible.[55] In 1976, Cincinnati's mayor, Bobbie Sterne, proclaimed October 21, 1976 as Sheldon H. Blank day, noting his many years of service to the Cincinnati community. A *festschrift* or commemorative volume was published in 1986 by The Ohio State University in honor of Blank's contribution to the field of biblical studies. The volume contained an impressive array of essays written by prominent biblical scholars.

Family played a particularly central role in Blank's life. Understanding his emotional and intellectual relationship with his wife, Amy, sheds much light on Blank's professional development. Amy Blank was a remarkable person in her own right. A noted poet, an author of children's books, and an independent scholar, Amy influenced Blank's outlook on every aspect of his life. These two people shared a deep and abiding love for one another – a truly simpatico relationship. They respected one another's intellect and treasured one another's character. They prioritized family and were very present in the lives of their children, and later their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Amy and Sheldon loved to travel.[56] As their family grew they encouraged all members of the family to join them on their travels. Blank loved his children, and very much honored the role of grandfather. He acted as the family rabbi, blessing family births, b'nei mitzvoth, and wedding couples.[57] Blank loved nature and wanted to instill this love in his grandchildren. Blank would sit with his grandchildren at 201 Lafayette Circle and would watch the birdfeeder outside of the playroom, teaching them the names of each bird that flew by.

[55] Letter to Sheldon Blank regarding Nelson Glueck Professorship of Bible, 1965, MS 730, Box, 15 Folder 1, AJA.
[56] "Of Granddaddy, by his Grandchildren," eulogy, 17 Feb 1989, SC Box A-89 396 AJA.
[57] Ibid.

For his 75th birthday Blank wrote a children's book titled *MMMM* a book using words that started with only the letter "M" based on a story he would tell his grandchildren. He asked each grandchild to decorate a page of the book, instilling in them an appreciation for literature and creativity. Blank spoke kindly to his grandchildren; he made sure that they knew how proud he was of them. Eulogizing Blank in 1989, his family took special note of his deep love for and bond to his grandchildren:

> But to know the true measure of his generous spirit as a family man, one had to see the delight he took in all his grandchildren and the interest and personal involvement with which he followed their development. He made it a point to give each one separately his undivided attention; he listened, encouraged, assisted in any way he could. He had the rare gift of communicating, with utter naturalness, the genuineness of his sympathetic interest in each grandchild, and it must be added that he extended that gift to his grandnieces and grandnephews as well, and latterly even to his great grandchildren, to the extent that their tender age permitted…No life cycle occasion was even thinkable without Sheldon at the center of it, officiating with humor and great personal warmth, making each such occasion, whether naming ceremony, bar or bat mitzvah, wedding, anniversary, or funeral, a memorably special and deeply moving event.[58]

Toward the end of his life, Blank's health began to decline and his professional routine was increasingly curtailed. Blank was asked to attend and teach at a CCAR convention in 1986. He poetically declined the offer and commented on his health stating,

> Dear Friends,
> You make me both glad and sorry.
> I am glad that you still think of me and that you want my thinking at a Torah session. I thank you for that and for your generous wish to include Amy in the arrangements…But I am sorry because my reason tells me: No. It asks me to face up to the fact that my years are taking their toll. And, also, that I have shamefully neglected the sources in the long interval since I stopped offering my Bible courses. This makes me sorry.[59]

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Letter from Blank to Rabbis Glaser and Stern, 7 January 1985, MS 730, Box 5, Folder 6, AJA.

On December 31st 1986 Alfred Gottschalk informed Blank that the College's Committee on Honors had selected him to receive an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from the College Institute. In conveying this honor to Blank, President Gottschalk stated: "you have been a moral force on this faculty and for your students a beacon of light showing them the pathways of a prophetic Judaism, as well as the highways of biblical thought."[60]

To mark Blank's 90th birthday, the College held a luncheon in Blank's honor. President Gottschalk announced the establishment of the Sheldon H. Blank Graduate Fellowship in Bible, contributed by alumni and friends. In Blank's acceptance speech he read these words:

> I am overwhelmed by the Sheldon blank fund and the opportunity which it offers. I owe warmest thanks to the alumni of this college and to all of the friends who associated themselves with this tribute. I am also very happy with the president's designation of the use to which the fund will be put. I would only hope that whoever profits from the Fellowship may have a special interest in the prophets. Steadily over the fifty one years of my teaching experience I have contemplated the role of the American Rabbi, whether the role is that of the priest in his holiness or that of the prophet with his social concern. Most of our colleagues will surely agree that both of these roles are appropriate; but they may also suggest that ministering to Reform Jewish congregations in America today, we are experiencing a shift in emphasis. Those among you who knew me as a teacher, at least in my maturer years, or who have read some of my writings, will know that I sought to bring into focus that social concern and to sow the seeds of social action in the spirits of those who read with me the words and considered with me the lines of the Hebrew prophets. I accept credit for such success as I may have had and I ask no reward greater than the satisfaction I have already experienced following the career of many among you.[61]

[60] Letter from Alfred Gottschalk to Sheldon Blank, 31 December 1986, Sheldon Blank Nearprint: Biographies. AJA

[61] Speech given at his 90th birthday luncheon, 17 September 1986, Sheldon Blank Nearprint: Biographies, AJA.

Sheldon H. Blank passed away on February 14, 1989. The funeral service was held in the Scheuer Chapel of Hebrew Union College on February 17th. The HUC campus closed for the morning. HUC's social action committee asked students to donate to the Jewish Peace Fellowship in honor of Blank. He was survived by his wife and best friend of sixty three years Amy, their two daughters, Elizabeth and Miriam, his brother Irvin, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Blank was born into a family that cherished hard work, ancestral roots, religious education, and the pursuit of justice, all ideals which he carried with him throughout his life. Through his schooling he developed the tools and the voice which could professionally support his interests. His publications added unique material to the body of scholarly work, specifically his interpretations of prophetic thought and its relationship with liberal Judaism. Through his work at Hebrew Union College, Blank influenced an institution at the heart of Reform Judaism, through his leadership position, his involvement in the *Hebrew Union College Annual* and mostly through his lasting relationships with students and faculty.

The Development of Blank's Biblical Scholarship

At the beginning of his career as a professor at Hebrew Union College Blank's scholarship was not unique; his publications fit with those of his contemporaries with a focus on archaeology and biblical language. As Blank gained public recognition for his scholarship and as his unique biblical understanding developed, his real passion for the prophets and for their characters as moral exemplars emerged. The first half of this chapter explores Blank's scholarly development and the second half his understanding of the prophets and their demand.

Blank was greatly influenced by his studies and professors at Hebrew Union College. As a student, Blank studied under the supervision of Moses Buttenwieser (1862–1939). Blank held a great deal of respect for Buttenwieser's knowledge of text and his scholarly approach. Along with being a scholar, Buttenwieser was known for his commitment to social justice, using the prophets as role models.[1]

> Blank has aptly noted, if understated, that "a fair amount of subjectivity" attaches to Buttenwieser's method. Indeed, Buttenwieser believed that he could precisely date specific passages in the books he treated. Although contemporary scholars would consider his historical approach arbitrary, it must be acknowledged that Buttenwieser was a superior Semitic philologist and grammarian whose translations of poetic passages may still be consulted with benefit.[2]

Blank also studied with Julian Morgenstern (1881-1976), who was committed to the documentary hypothesis. From Morgenstern, Blank gained an appreciation for

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[1] Buttenwieser was born in Beerfelden, Germany. He studied at the University of Leipzig and the University of Wurzberg. Buttenwieser earned his Ph.D. in 1986 at the University of Heidelberg. In 1897 he immigrated to the US where he became Assistant Professor of Biblical Exegesis at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He was a scholar, translator and author.

[2] S. D. Sperling *Students of the Covenant: a History of Jewish Biblical Scholarship in North America* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), p. 53.

interpreting the Bible in its historical context. As Blank described it, Morgenstern argued through his teachings and his publications that the "textual history of the Pentateuch is far more complex than many have been aware of which means, incidentally, that the Torah is truly the product of a people and not of a select few, and that it was of such central importance in the lives of that people that, by revising, and re-editing, and supplementing it, they kept it alive."[3] Blank acknowledged that Morgenstern, too, had greatly influenced his thinking, although the influence waned in Blank's later years.

During Blank's time as a student at Hebrew Union College, Philadelphia and Cincinnati were the two main centers of Jewish American Biblical scholarship. "The simple fact that Jews were a minority meant that there were many more Christian than Jewish seminaries in the United States and in consequence more opportunities for Christian scholars to study and teach. University appointments in bible were generally held by Christians."[4] Still at this time nearly all of the influential Jewish biblicists in America were either European born or European trained. It is for this reason that then Hebrew Union College President Morgenstern encouraged Blank to study in Europe; this would allow him eventual access to the academic world of American Jewish Bible scholarship and would give him training which was not available in America.

When Blank began his career at Hebrew Union College there were two main themes dominating Jewish Biblical scholarship in America: the findings of archaeology and the importance of understanding the text in the language in which it was written. Between the two World Wars biblical scholarship had greatly advanced as a result of the

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[3] Blank, "A Survey of Scholarly Contributions: Bible," in *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years*, ed. Samuel E. Karff (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1976), pp. 287–316, p. 298.
[4] Sperling, *Students of the Covenant*, p. 54.

continued achievements in Middle Eastern Archaeology. The discoveries of primary sources, in varying languages allowed biblicists to reimagine and reconstruct the ancient Israelite world.

> Probably the most important axiom that modern research has driven home with ever increasing forcefulness is that to know anything we must know it in its historical setting; there is no hope of understanding any part of the Old Testament unless it is viewed in the frame work of its total historical background. This is one of the very good trends in recent years and it is to be found in practically all modern writings. The day has passed when it was sufficient to know Hebrew only and one could confine himself exclusively to the Old Testament. Today the Old Testament scholar must have a working knowledge of all the more important Semitic languages and he must know something of the culture of all the more important Semitic peoples.[5]

In light of this, during his first two decades as a professor at Hebrew Union College, Blank's scholarly work focused primarily on archaeology and ancient manuscripts. During this period he wrote on Nelson Glueck's "Recent Archaeological Work in Palestine," he published numerous works on ancient Bible Manuscripts including an analysis of the Ben Naftali Manuscript which was published in the Hebrew Union College Monthly. In 1932 his work "A Hebrew Bible Ms. in the Hebrew Union College Library," was presented at the Eighteenth Congress of Orientalists in Leiden. This document was a detailed account of a manuscript in the HUC-JIR library; it marked the unique vowel characteristics of the texts and compared it to other preserved manuscripts. All of his publications, during his first ten years (aside from a review which was published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* and articles in 1939 in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*) were published in the *Hebrew Union College Monthly* or the

[5] Theophile J. Meek, "Recent Trends in Old Testament Scholarship," in *Religious Education: A Platform for the Free Discussion of Issues in the Field of Religion and Their Bearing on Education*, vol. 41, ed. Laird T. Hites (Chicago: Religious Education Association, 1946), p. 70.

Hebrew Union College Annual.[6] In 1946 Blank published "The Dissident Laity in Early Judaism," this was an expansion of the Presidential address: "The Voice of the Laity in Early Post-Exilic Judaism" presented at the meeting of the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society in April 1937.

Blank's training at the University of Jena and his early publications based on language, archaeology and history made him a real player in the world of biblical scholarship. Through the mid-forties while Blank had published on manuscripts and textual anomalies that had not been studied before, he had yet to contribute anything unique to the body of scholarly publications. Beginning at this time Blank began to identify and develop his true passion for the subject that would define his unique scholarly contribution to the field: the demand of the prophets. In the late forties, Blank had earned himself honor and respect from the wider community of Biblical scholars, he began publishing in various academic journals. Around this time Blank began publishing more material on the prophets, most specifically on their moral character.[7]

In 1946, Blank wrote of the scarcity of academic materials on the character and teachings of the prophets:

> They contain values that have no less relevance in our day than in the days of those prophets themselves...The condition of the text is such that a great deal of research had to be done before the real teachings of those prophets could be disentangled. The tenacity of the conservative view that each book is a verbally inspired unit impeded bible scholarship. Research could not even begin until the spirit of man was freed from the shackles of traditionalism. The scientific study of the Bible is only a little over a hundred years old; and it was not until quite recent times that Bible students had clarified and grasped the significance of the prophetic writings...Research in the prophetic literature has reached the stage

[6] Blank, *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), pp. 159–167.
[7] For a bibliography of blank's work see his *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), pp. 159–167.

> where educators can and should take over and popularize the findings of the scholars."[8]

Blank believed that enough scholarship had been done on the language of the prophets and the surrounding history that the focus needed to change. Popularizing the prophets became Blank's life's work.

> The prophets were personalities and may well be studied as such-as men who gave direction to the courses of human thought. They were the Lincolns and Jeffersons and Platos of their day. Their writings were documents of enlightenment. Both they and their words deserve a place in history...As matters stand, the teachings of the prophets have no more than trickled down the centuries. They have indeed fertilized the minds of the few, making them fruitful. But the great masses of men have remained oblivious to their qualities...It must be recognized that they addressed themselves to the task of eradicating contemporary evils. Accordingly, much of what they had to say can only be understood against the background of their own times and had reference to local and temporary conditions. Nevertheless, if we scrutinize the manner in which they attacked contemporary problems the pattern of their thinking emerges. And it is this thought pattern which has more than temporary significance. Motivating and directing their approach to immediate situations were principles that were not conditioned by time or place. It is this pattern and these principles which have lasting validity. [9]

Blank's commitment to the character of the prophets and the lessons which can be gleaned from them was the heart of his oeuvre and would be in the later period of his life the vast majority of his work. This scholarly focus was not unique to Blank. These views and scholarly endeavors were shared with many other biblicists of his day, particularly protestant biblicists. For example, Robert Balgarnie Young Scott[10] in 1968 published *The*

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[8] Blank, "Religious Educational Values in Prophetic Literature," in *Religious Education: A Platform for the Free Discussion of Issues in the Field of Religion and Their Bearing on Education*, vol. 42, ed. Laird T. Hites (Chicago: Religious Education Association, 1946), pp. 83–85.

[9] Blank, "Religious Educational Values in Prophetic Literature," p. 84.

[10] R. B. Y. Scott was born in Toronto, Ontario. He studied at Knox College, and received a Bachelor of Arts and a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. In 1926 he was ordained in the United Church of Canada. He taught at Vancouver's Union College and in 1931 began teaching at the United Theological College of Montreal. He taught Old Testament at McGill University from 1948–1955. In 1947 he became the Dean of the Faculty of McGill. In 1955 he became the Danforth Professor of Religion in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. Scott retired in 1968.

Relevance of the Prophets. This book introduced the prophets and detailed their message, and their call to those of the modern world. Of the need for this book Scott wrote, "a book on the Hebrew prophets was needed which would show their importance for religion today, and especially for the responsibility of religion in the struggle for justice, freedom and human solidarity."[11] While with different language, Blank would argue a similar message through much of his writings-the prophets inform our social awareness and our call to action. This book details the prophetic world, the theology of the prophets, the prophets' relationship with social order—all topics of Blank's later work. During this time of political and social unrest there was a wave of biblicists looking to the prophets to find a way to be guided by their religious texts. In looking at the words of Scott one can see that while Blank was a poetic and artistic writer, and a skilled biblicist, his commitment to the prophets, and the nature of his scholarship, was not entirely unique:

> Again, we may learn from the prophets something as to the way in which religion may become the dynamic and its ethic the directive of social transformation. The vital religion they proclaimed and the moral standards they set forth so firmly came to have in time a profound influence on the spirit and ethos of the community, and eventually on its forms of worship and social laws. A new understanding of religion and its all-embracing ethical requirements was established because of their mission, though of course the mass of men fell short of full understanding and still farther short of its implications for conduct.[12]

As such, in 1940 Blank published "Studies in Deutero-Isaiah," and in 1948 he published "The Confessions of Jeremiah and the meaning of Prayer." This latter publication was Blank's Presidential address given at the meeting of the Midwest Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. The talk was intended to set a new agenda for the society or at least shift it directly. During the Sixth International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, held in London July 14th-19thof 1949, Blank presented "The

[11] R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), p. vii.
[12] Ibid., p.16.

Mission of Israel: Biblical Origins." Blank published more works in the 1950s than any other decade of his literary career. Additionally, in the 1950s, his published works were more widely read than in previous decades. In December 1952, Blank delivered "Men Against God, The Promethean Element in Biblical Prayer," as the Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1954, Blank published "The Prophetic Element in Progressive Judaism;" this article detailed the link between modern progressive Judaism and the prophets. This specific topic would be the focus of many of his future addresses, lectures and writings.

In 1958, Harper & Brothers Publishers published his first book, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*. This book would later be reprinted in paperback in 1967 with only minor emendations. *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*, introduced the concepts of the various voices within the book of Isaiah: the Historical or First Isaiah, Second or Deutero-Isaiah, Trito-Isaiah, the Isaiah of legend, Isaiah the messianist and Isaiah the apocalyptist. This book did not focus only on the historical situations which were the setting of each of the voices but rather focused on the unique prophetic characteristics of each voice:[13]

> A man would be daring who ventured to say how many such "Isaiahs" there were. And little it is that we know of the prophets whose writings the book contains...As persons they are shadows. It is misleading even to call them Isaiahs-for us they are nameless. We have only their words. A study of their lives would fail for want of information. But, properly, it is their faith we study, as their words may reveal it. The faith of the later Isaiahs differs in many respects form the faith of the first Isaiah. The faith of the first Isaiah is frightened with imperatives. It is the religion of the ten commandments, of the "thou shalt not" and, even more, "thou shalt." It is what most of us mean when we speak of "prophetic faith." The faith of the later Isaiahs is a source of endless confidence-a

[13] Stiles Lessly, review of *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*, *The Journal of Religion* 41, no. 4 (1961): 326–327.

> faith for the valley of the shadow, but equally, for living. It is what most of us mean when we speak of "faith."[14]

In 1961, the Hebrew Union College Press published his second book, *Jeremiah, Man and Prophet*. Similar to *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah*, the focus of this book was not the literary-historical problems but rather the voice, character and life of the prophet. In *Jeremiah: Man and Prophet*, Blank attempts to uncover the person, the character of Jeremiah. J. Philip Hyatt of Vanderbilt University reflected that, "His treatment of Jeremiah is mature, being based on a lifetime of study and reflection; and it is appreciative, for Blank finds much that is congenial in the message of the prophet. The author is a scholar and a man of faith, and the reading of his book can only be rewarding."[15] In 1969, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations published Blank's third and final book, *Understanding the Prophets*.

Blank's topics of publications in the 1960s varied from "The Sukkah-its History and Promise," to "The Theology of Jewish Survival According to Biblical Sources." The 1970s were his final years of publication; with few exceptions his writings during this decade were on the prophets and were homiletical in form and content.

In a survey of scholarly contributions made in the field of Bible by Hebrew Union College, Blank wrote of his own contribution:

> I have tried to give the prophets their due. After my manner and according to my capacities I have gone with Buttenwieser some of the way, attempting to clothe with reality the persons of some of the prophets and to disseminate, in the classroom and for a larger public, their teachings.[16]

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[14] Blank, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 7–8.
[15] J. Philip Hyatt, review of *Jeremiah: Man and Prophet*, *Journal of Bible and Religion* 30, nos. 3/4 (1962): pp. 321–322.
[16] Sheldon Blank. "Bible," in *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: At One Hundred Years*, ed. Samuel E. Karff (Cincinnati: OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976), p. 299.

The Prophet as Moral Exemplar

The idea of prophet as moral exemplar was at the crux of much of Blank's writings. In his earlier career he focused on the history of ancient Israel and on biblical Hebrew. He used both his understanding of history, and his grasp of the language in his textual interpretation of the prophets. He argued through much of his oeuvre that the prophets serve as a moral exemplar for modern people; the more one understands the prophets (both their intent and their actions), the more morally committed an individual will be inspired to be. In explaining the prophetic influence on modern ethical sentiment Blank wrote:

> By the end of the prophetic movement--after the Babylonian captivity, which scholars speak of as the formative period of the religion called Judaism-the pieces could be assembled as a pattern. Through the voice of the late anonymous author of a chapter near the end of the book of Isaiah, God speaks, condemning gestures of fasting and self-mortification in favor of moral living... Now look forward at the somewhat later life-pattern drawn by the authors of Psalm 15 and Job 31-the psalmist's picture of the one who may reside securely on God's holy mountain and, too, Job's self-portrait as a moral and deserving man--and again observe the broad similarity with the description of God's moral demands in Isaiah 58. Isaiah 58 forms a link between the earlier prophets and lawgivers, and the passage from Psalms and Job.
>
> The conclusion seems to be justified: By the dawn of what is known as Judaism, in the early postexilic period, a model and a standard had evolved. If I were to dramatize the thought, calling this development the birth of the social conscience of western man, that would be an overstatement--and yet not wholly wide of the mark.[17]

While Blank acknowledged the potential errors which could arise when making generalizations he did not refrain from generalizing, carefully, in his writings regarding the character of the prophets. "Call it fanaticism, a martyr complex; call it inspiration, a

[17] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," in *Scripture In the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville: Parthenon, 1982), pp. 169–182, pp. 181–182.

spirit of dedication, idealism, sober conviction-whatever its name, it made them recklessly uncompromising. And they were no more prudent than they were tolerant."[18]

Blank saw the prophets as individuals who spoke directly, whose words were simple but honest, individuals who had vision and the desire to achieve it. Blank saw the vision of the prophets presented in many texts. The following texts are examples that Blank has identified as examples of prophets speaking their message simply and directly:[19]

> Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying, "If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell the grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an ephah that is too small and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals." The Lord swears by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget any of their doings."(Amos 8:4-7)

> Ah, those who plan iniquity and design evil on their beds; when morning dawns, they do it, for they have power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away. They defraud men of their homes, and people of their land. (Micah 2:1-2)

The Prophets questioned and challenged the principles and beliefs that were centermost in their communities.

> They asked whether on the "day of God" Israel would really be victorious, whether Jerusalem was in fact impregnable, whether the pact between Israel and God was truly eternal; they questioned the Sinaitic origin of sacrifices, God's interest in the cult, the sanctity of sacred places; they challenged all comforting, inherited notions, and they quite upset a lot of people. They, too, prized peace of mind, but they did not equate it with apathy.[20]

These Prophets were met with challenge from the people whom they were trying to change.

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[18] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), pp. 1–11. (Paper read at the Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, June 1955, Asbury Park, New Jersey), p. 3.
[19] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," in *Scripture in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville: Parthenon, 1982), pp. 169–182, p. 175.
[20] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," p. 3.

Blank separated the prophets into two categories, prophets of challenge and prophets of hope. While these two categories have contrasting tendencies they have in common that "human condition shaped their messages."[21] The prophets of challenge most inspired Blank:

> But it is to the thin-lipped prophets of challenge, who came with grim threat and warning, that we look for moral guidance. Survival-the way of continuing life-was much on the mind of these prophets, as indeed it is on our own minds today. They looked toward Assyria, and in turn to Babylonia, to the foe that loomed from the North, and they asked, Would God indeed be adrift without Israel? We look at the proliferation of nuclear weapons and waste and nuclear power plants and plutonium, and we ask, Will there be a twenty-first century? And many of us would say with the Hebrew prophets, It is a human choice.[22]

Without looking specifically at the outcome or the form of the Prophetic visions, they had this in common: "The need to lead their people, whether by encouragement or by rebuke, into the way of life. That was the common denominator: Their people's survival was both task and goal."[23]

Jeremiah

In Blank's opinion, Jeremiah more than any other prophet, allows the reader into his thoughts. He is forthcoming with his emotions. Jeremiah articulates his self pity, his frustration, and his quest for God. Jeremiah held no authority over the people which he did not earn himself. As they questioned his authority so too did he question himself.

> Since the fate of his people depended upon his success with them and, specifically, his ability to make them see that he brought them an urgent message from their God, and since there was so little time, his mission had a grim

[21] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," p. 172.
[22] Ibid., pp. 172–173.
[23] Ibid., p. 172.

> earnestness and his argument no collegiate debate, no matching of wits for empty honors.[24]

Blank argues there were prophets who tried to convince themselves and prophets who tried to convince others. For Jeremiah that line was blurred. This gave him "fortitude and a moral courage which enabled him to proclaim the word, regardless of the adverse opinions of others."[25] This serves as a model for humility. Jeremiah even uses his cousin as evidence of his authority and relationship with the divine:

> Jeremiah said: The word of the lord came to me: Hanamel, the son of your uncle Shallum, will come to you and say, "Buy my land in Anathoth, for you are next in succession to redeem it by purchase." And just as the Lord had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the prison compound and said to me, "Please buy mu land in Anathoth, in the territory of Benjamin; for the right of succession is yours, and you have the duty of redemption. Buy it." Then I knew that it was indeed the word of the Lord." (Jeremiah 32:6-8)

Blank sets forth Jeremiah's claim of hearing the divine word through six propositions: First, Jeremiah did not focus as much as others on fulfilled predictions to prove his authority. Second, his only plea is an affirmation. When accused of heresy he responds:

> Jeremiah said to the officials and to all the people, "It was the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this House and this city all the words you heard. Therefore mend your ways you're your acts, and heed the Lord your God, that the Lord may renounce the punishment He has decreed for you. As for me, I am in your hands: do to me what seems good and right to you. But know that if you put me to death, you and this city and its inhabitants will be guilty of shedding the blood of an innocent man. For in truth the Lord has sent me to you, to speak all these words to you." (Jeremiah 26:12–15)

Third, Jeremiah speaks the unpopular but necessary word. "But who will pity you, O Jerusalem, who will console you? Who will turn aside to inquire about your welfare? (Jeremiah 15:5)" Fourth, Jeremiah questions whether his words are those of God. He

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[24] Blank, "Of a Truth the Lord Hath Sent Me," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), 1–11. (The Goldenson Lecture for 1955), p. 12.
[25] Blank, "Of a Truth the Lord Hath Sent Me," p. 12.

accepts that they are the words of God for two reasons. "They are not his words because no one would be such a fool as to invite the disasters which speech entails...He would say quite different things were he to obey his own impulse."[26] The plight of Jeremiah is the deep sadness in his words. Fifth, he argues to the people that if they will not follow Jeremiah's word on the basis that it is the word of God, they should follow it on the basis of the word being truth. And sixth, "What Jeremiah says for God is rational and thus comports with the nature of God; it is what such a God as he knows must naturally say." To Blank, this is the logical understanding of the voice of Jeremiah. The word of God should be followed because it is true but also because it is right. It is not surprising that Blank, a committed Reform Jew has this understanding of God and of this prophet's word. Ethics and righteousness are more important than ritual and one who is committed to the word of God will be committed to righteous paths. For Jeremiah, as Blank understood it, knowing God is knowing justice.

Jonah

Blank described the book of Jonah as "one of the greatest sermons ever preached."[27] Jonah was sent on a mission to preach to Nineveh the injustice of their actions. He was not to rebuke them for their acts against the Israelites but for those against their own community. Throughout the narrative Jonah desires death, while everyone else desires life (the king of Nineveh, the men of Nineveh and the sailors). For example, he offers himself as a sacrifice to the sailors and asks for death. "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came

[26] Blank, "Of a Truth the Lord Hath Sent Me," p. 18.
[27] Eugene Mihaly, "Sheldon H. Blank" in *Central Conference of American Rabbis Annual Yearbook Volume* 85 (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1989): p. 258.

upon you on my account." (Jonah 1:12) Jonah's character is not one which should be modeled, according to Blank.

Jonah is the only individual in the story that is an Israelite. By examining the nature of the other non-Israelite characters Blank interprets a moral lesson. The book's author presents them as simple people; they have received no divine instruction yet they are regarded as being "good and generous, sensitive and open minded."[28] They listen and attend to Jonah's word. "The author of the book of Jonah found in Nineveh that kind of listening which Amos and Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel sought in their people reputedly in vain. But not only the people of Nineveh; the motley crew of the vessel bound for Tarshish—they, too showed themselves reasonable and generous."[29]

Blank is particularly impressed by the author's presentation of the sailors on the boat in the midst of the storm. They try all means possible to save themselves before hurling Jonah into the sea, at which point they pray to God:

> Still more impressive than their conversion, however, is the humanity which makes them spend their whole strength to reach the shore before they consent to abandon the offending prophet. To the healthy-minded author of the book of Jonah the nations were both reasonable and worthy-and the Jews' service on their behalf was neither a waste nor unrewarding.[30]

Jonah was not sent by God on a mission to his own people, but to a different nation. From the book of Jonah Blank argues that the mission of the Jewish people is directed outward.

> Nowhere more clearly than in Jonah and probably nowhere much earlier than in Jonah has the thought become articulate that Israel is responsible for the Nineveh's of this earth. Our sense of human responsibility dawned with the genius of the book of Jonah... But when, instead of the mission of Israel, we talk

[28] Blank, "The Dawn of Our Responsibility," paper presented at the Twelfth International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism in London, England (July 1961), p. 37.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

> of our "mission *to* the Jews" we are playing the semantic game. We are using the word "mission" in an extended sense, a borrowed and not quite legitimate sense. It is time we chastened our vocabulary, because in fact the "mission of Israel" proper is directed outward. It is a mission to the gentiles...Pursuing our mission, we would not be seeking members for our synagogues but active acceptance of our values.[31]

Amos

In the eighth century, Amos argued that "measured by the standard of social justice, contemporary Israel had failed the test. That society was a condemned structure, condemned by its obliquity. Remote was the prospect of survival."[32] Blank viewed Amos as a prophet of challenge and believed that by interpreting the verses 5:4-5, one can understand the theology of Amos. "Thus said the Lord to the House of Israel: Seek Me, and you will live. Do not seek Bethel, nor go to Gilgal, nor cross over to Beer-sheba; For Gilgal shall go into exile, and Bethel shall become a delusion." (Amos 5:4–5) In his, "two word classic" (See me and you will lave) Blank argued that Amos phrased human responsibility and choice. If Israel is to survive they must seek God. Amos' next verse does not clarify the confusion of the meaning of the text. "Do not seek Bethel, Nor go to Gilgal, Nor cross over to Beer-sheba." (5:5) From this, Blank argued, one can interpret that seeking God is *not* making pilgrimages. As Blank states of this verse, "God does not care much for "religion."[33] While verse 5 further argues what one should not do, it does not shed light on how one can seek God. Blank believed that the answer to this question can be found in verse 14. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and that the Lord, God of Hosts, May truly be with you, as you think." In Blank's words, we learn from

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[31] Ibid., pp. 38–39.
[32] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," p. 164.
[33] Ibid., p. 173.

verse 14 that: "'seeking God' is 'seeking good.'"[34] What does it mean to seek good? Blank argues that this is clarified in verse 15. "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; perhaps the Lord, the God of Hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." (5:15) The term gates is associated with the courtroom as the elders met at the gate of the entrance to the city to sit in judgment.

> "By this three-part progression, "seeking God" comes to mean "seeking good." And "seeking good" comes to mean regard for the rights of one's fellows, concern for the victims of rapacity and violence, the poor and the weak, widows, orphans, strangers-no white man's court, no rich man's privilege, an end to bribery and venality-in a word, mishpat, justice."[35]

Blank's understanding of Amos's call is that individuals who want to seek God must seek good and must work for justice.

Isaiah

Like Amos, Isaiah preached that seeking God is doing "good", and pursuing justice is doing "good." Isaiah was direct with his people, rebuking their wrongdoings. "His was no amiable parlor talk, and one may doubt that Isaiah was welcomed again."[36] Isaiah serves as an exemplar of the commitment to justice and to speaking the necessary word. Blank writes that American rabbis need to be woe-sayers, to use their words to create change:

> In fact, in a sense, we go beyond the prophets when, to the ministry of preaching, we add the dimension of social action. It is good that we do so, but speech in itself is good. And we should not be contemptuous of resolutions and pronouncements, statements and platforms. They are distant relatives of prophetic utterances. The prophet's role was to make God articulate; it was his function to speak for God-with words and symbols to condemn and warn, to approve and encourage. Be it admitted that words then had more substance than now, the fact still remains that

[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 174.
[36] Ibid., p. 175.

> articulation was the prophet's function. Similarly, resolutions and pronouncements and platforms create the climate for action. When the American rabbi undertakes, as he does, to create such a climate, he adopts a role which partly parallels the prophet's role.[37]

Theological Conclusions from Blank's interpretation of the Prophets

Blank believed that God is greater than anything humans could understand. "God is greater by far than the human imagination has ever conceived. His thoughts are not our thoughts...high as the heavens are above the earth, so are his thoughts higher than our thoughts."[38] Even so, he also wrote on the hints that the prophets provide about the nature and perhaps character of God. Through his interpretation of the text, Blank concluded that God: is a universalist, created the world to be inhabited, did not create a covenant with the Israelites in order for them to suffer; and God prefers ethics instead of ritual.

In Blank's understanding, God had a special relationship with the Israelites. However, God is universal, caring for all of humanity. To Blank, this is evidenced nowhere more clearly than in the book of Jonah, a man who "seeks to elude his destiny in vain and learns about the size of God."[39]

As presented earlier in the chapter, Jonah is a metaphor, for human character and human obligation; Nineveh and Tarshish too are metaphors.

> In his mashal God alone is a metaphor. In his story God is God-but Jonah ben Ammittai is no prophet-not in any narrow sense a prophet-he is the people of Israel entrusted with a prophetic task; he is men of any color called to serve; he is any man, "everyman"; he is we. In the mashal the city of Nineveh is no longer the cruel seat of the ruthless Assyrian Empire. ... The "great fish" is no whale, no known or unidentified, extinct or mythological monster of the sea, it is whatever keeps a people on its course, whatever prevents a man from running quite away, character, history, "fate" to the Greek, to the Jew-God-a manifestation of God's generous will. And, incidentally, the fish did not appear in order to save Jonah

[37] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," p. 2.
[38] Ibid., p. 4.
[39] Blank, "The Dawn of Our Responsibility," p. 35.

> from a watery grave: Jonah did not want to be saved from the sea; Jonah wanted to die. He lived because God needed him; the fish was sent to bring him back to land and sent him on his purposed way to Nineveh.[40]

Jonah was delivered from the fish in order to save Nineveh. This teaches about the nature of God. Jonah was not sent to Nineveh because they transgressed the priestly code, or because they were not performing proper rituals, or because they had wronged the nation of Israel. The people of Nineveh were condemned and Jonah was sent, for their crimes against each other. God forgave them once they had committed to an end of acts of violence. It was not only the mission of Israel that God sought, but the mission of humanity.

> The God whom Jonah served (though he served him unwillingly) reached far beyond the borders of Israel. He had made the distant city Nineveh and he cared still what went on there. The remote part of Tarshish also was not beyond his reach. After Jonah had identified himself as a Hebrew he had said: "I worship the Lord, the God of all the world who made the sea as well as the land." It is because his God is moral, just and merciful that Jonah must warn the evildoers; it is because his God knows no national boundaries that Jonah is sent to Nineveh; and it is because his God is the Lord, "who made the sea as well as the dry land" that Jonah can not escape his mission even by way of the sea. Jonah's God is beyond geography.[41]

Throughout Blank's lifetime the world was in turmoil. Blank lived through WWII, through Vietnam and through the nuclear threat. "Or consider today's near panic, the fall-out of the mushroom cloud-our new awareness that man, the subduer and lord of creation, but little lower than the angels, is capable of self-destruction, can and may in fact write "finis" to his destiny."[42] These things all induced great fear, and in many an apocalyptic understanding of the world. As he spoke in his final address:

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[40] Ibid., pp. 35–36.
[41] Ibid., p. 38.
[42] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," pp. 4–5.

> Blame the television screens, bringing distances near, proclaiming the brotherhood of all—one world! They are "we"—those huddled masses on this puny planet Earth. Victims of natural disasters—victims of human folly, depravity and neglect. They pass before us on our TV screens—their bodies wasted by famine, torn by violence, warfare, factionalism, racism, Hitlerian madness—all accusingly present as anguished we watch. The ever-receding horizons raise the curtains on the dismal scene. We are horrifyingly one miserable world—a world threatened indeed with <u>total</u> disaster, with the end of all life on earth."[43]

Through his interpretation of the text Blank argued that the world was created to be inhabited and that God would ensure the survival of humanity. In Blank's understanding God created the world as a program, as a "populated planet, orderly and permanent, which God has willed."[44] It is both from Genesis and the prophet Isaiah that Blank develops this understanding.

The Genesis text states that the world was created out of "chaos empty and dark" and that God reflected that the created world was good. Verse 1:28a is of crucial importance to Blank's argument, "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it.'" Out of chaos the world, and more specifically humanity, was created. This was pleasing to God and God commanded Adam and Eve to multiply and fill this world. Blank pairs this Genesis text with Isaiah 45 in order to establish the eternal nature of this divine program.

> The prophet throws it in as a kind of aside, in parenthesis, a couple of clauses-but it is one of the truly great utterances of biblical man, a towering peak among peaks. I have forgotten who said it but I read it somewhere: he could forgive whoever robbed him of large parts of the Bible if only they let him hold on to this 45th chapter of Isaiah. That is how I feel too and I am especially attached to this one line there in the middle of a verse, which the author sort of throws away.[45]

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[43] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," pp. 7–8, address delivered at HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, OH, 11 Mar. 1987.
[44] Blank, "The Theology of Jewish Survival According to Biblical Sources," paper presented at the Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Boston, MA, 1968, p. 46.
[45] Blank, "The Theology of Jewish Survival According to Biblical Sources," p. 46.

This is the verse that completes the equation for Blank: "For thus said the Lord, the Creator of heaven who alone is God, who formed the earth and made it, who alone established it-he did not create it a waste, but formed it for habitation. I am the Lord, and there is none else."(Isaiah 45:18)

This verse held, in Blank's opinion, the "best hope of man in a nuclear age."[46] Humankind will survive with God's blessing and will.

In his writings Blank questions Israel's relationship with God. In his scholarly works he argues that God has the ability to cast the Israelites away, as a punishment for their actions. However, Blank also argues that the lot of Israel is not one of suffering, they are not in a state of perpetual atonement. Beginning with Amos the prophets began preaching a notion of the punishment of God. "Through him, God said of his people: I know you well, yes; therefore I will punish you." (3:2)[47] Amos took it further still, not only will they be punished but as God's people, because of their actions, God had cast them aside. Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel similarly threatened the Israelites with this potential casting away, until the threat became manifest in reality. "With sublime detachment, God had looked the other way, and his temple lay in ruins. The generation that heard it was shocked by the prediction; the generation that survived it was stunned by the event."[48]

The notion that God could and had at times cast away his relationship to the Israelites is one Blank questioned. He avoided taking a clear stance on whether such a thing had ever really occurred. However, in 1955 he formulated the issue of the nature of

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," p. 4.

the covenant and its stability in such a way as to provide insight to the fear that persisted during that decade:

> If these prophets had given us nothing but perspective, it would have been enough. And what has greater relevance today than the perspective they gave? The terms have changed-of course; but only recently, and our thinking still retains some measure of parochialism. Nevertheless, though only recently, the terms have changed. It is not Jerusalem or Canaan but this planet Earth, not the family and court of Zedekiah or any royal sanctuary but the species known as man, not "Yavneh" but God, that we have now to be brought in relation...From an Amos we learned that God was not limited by his traditional commitment to his people Israel.[49]

Blank did not go so far as saying God had cast them away. He questioned God's ability to do so. Blank rejects the notion that the Bible paints a future for the Israelites in which they are martyred and suffer, in return for a messianic or redemptive reward.

The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 is most commonly used as the textual precedence for this notion of Israel as suffering servant. One can find this notion in Isaiah 53, however Blank rejects that this is the intended or actual meaning of the text.

> He had come to say that Israel suffered more than enough. By no means destined to suffer for mankind's redemption, Israel might now look forward to an amazing rebirth, a glorious restoration. That is the theme, the theme of the song of the so-called suffering servant (52:13-53:12) no less than the theme of the remaining chapters which go by the name Deutero-Isaiah.[50]

Isaiah does speak often of suffering, and there is a redemptive/restorative essence to the text, "He might see his offspring and have long life, and that through him the Lord's purpose might prosper." (53:10)

The question, Blank argues, is the "when" of the suffering. The Isaiah text is clear that suffering had happened. Blank questions more the argument that this suffering had benefited other nations. And, Isaiah "may be understood to say, though here legitimate

[49] Ibid., p. 5.
[50] Ibid., pp. 6–7.

doubt is in order, that Israel by past suffering has atoned vicariously for the sins of others."[51] Finally, Blank argues that the exegete could see that this was perpetual suffering, that suffering was this servant's lot, that Israel is in a state of perpetual atonement. However, he believed this link to be unsubstantiated.

Only in verse 53:10a is this question of "when" presented. "But the Lord chose to crush him by disease. That, if he made himself an offering for guilt, he might see offspring and have long life." Blank contrasts this with other verses in Isaiah. "You have one biblical passage (but only one) that seems to envisage for Israel a destiny of vicarious suffering. But the peg is too weak to support the whole philosophy."[52] The history of the Jewish people, time and time again, has naturally led its philosophers to believe in this understanding; that the Jewish suffering is lacking neither meaning nor the will of God.

> To be sure, we can still have the philosophy yet forego the biblical peg. Yes, let us keep the philosophy-and pray we may never need it again...Time after tragic time, events in Jewish history have prompted its philosophers to have recourse to these thoughts. Only too recently, the horrified victims of Nazi madness, we sought to understand God's ways in such terms as these. We were in sore need of light. Let us keep the philosophy, but look for no biblical peg to support it.[53]

Perhaps Blank's complete rejection of this notion (and his encouragement to look for no biblical peg) is a result of history. As stated, Blank finds in Isaiah the true objective-that of mission. In relation to Isaiah 53 and its impact on the history of the Jewish people Blank wrote,

> Partly by our history, partly a misinterpretation of a historically significant chapter of the bible, we have been diverted from our true objective. It may be we have too readily accepted a role to which others assigned us, making Isaiah 53 our

[51] Ibid., p. 7.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

> excuse. It may be have preferred passivity and so resigned ourselves to sorrow with a pious word: "this too is for the best."[54]

Blank argued that the prophets were anti-ritual, that God did not need the ritual. The prophets preached ethics over ritual. This notion must have the theological underpinning that God does not desire empty ritual, that God desires ethics. The texts which Blank used to show the relationship between ritual and ethics abound. They include but are not limited to Amos 5:21–25, Hosea 6:6, and Micah 6:6–8.

Blank acknowledged that this understanding of God, through a reading of the prophets is a generalization and one which has exceptions throughout the prophetic works. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and the final chapters of Ezekiel all advocate for temple ritual as means of showing respect for/commitment to God. Blank argued that there are two ways to view God's commitment to ethics and ritual. The first, that God rejects ritual completely and the more moderate view, that God prefers ethics to ritual. Blank cannot argue, based on his textual understanding, which one is truer of God's nature. Yet, he does argue that ethical behavior is preferable to rituals.

Prophetic Roots of Liberal Judaism

Throughout his texts, addresses, and writings Blank argued that Reform Judaism, while having a relationship with modernity, was rooted in antiquity. The elements of Reform Judaism that are distinct from other Jewish denominations were not new but rather had precedence in ancient history. This rootedness could be found through numerous narratives and texts within the Tanakh, but is most clear in the prophets. The

[54] Ibid.

characteristics of the prophets are those that define Reform Judaism for Blank from its beginnings.

Through the discussion of four themes Blank illustrated Reform Judaism's connection to and roots in prophetic thought: the need to question, what it means to be "religious", the shape of our hope and our sense of mission.[55] Blank believed that these connections should not be overstated, "we certainly do not identify with the prophets-the gulfs are wide between them and us. We simply observe a kinship."[56]

To Blank, the prophets represented the ideal individual who would question that which with they did not agree. The prophets questioned accepted norms, rituals, and mindsets. During the time of Amos and Isaiah the people believed that they were ensured a fruitful future: their fields would flourish, their progeny would be numerous, their enemies would fall to the victorious army of the Israelites because they had accepted the covenant that was given at Sinai making them exclusively God's people, and making God exclusively theirs. Amos and Isaiah questioned, doubted, and had the courage to speak against this accepted idea, arguing that the people's actions had made this agreement null and void. Blank believed that Reform Jews should follow this model.

> Those prophets were not genial, hearty men, with a cheery word and a chuckle; they were sober and disheartening messengers, with thin lips and grim warnings. In nearly all they said, they questioned the unquestionable, challenging the common beliefs of their day. Look away from their austere, demanding faces, set aside the bitter contents of their message, and focus only on the quality of their denials and it will be apparent that one feature of Reform Judaism is rooted in those prophets. That feature is our refusal to accept at face value inherited traditions.[57]

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[55] Blank, "Prophetic Roots for a Liberal Religion," in *Aspects of Biblical Thought* (New York: Joint Commision on Jewish Education of the UAHC and the CCAR, 1966), pp. 3–14.
[56] Ibid., p. 3.
[57] Ibid.

Blank writes on Reform Judaism's doubt and discomfort regarding that which is accepted by the community at large. Reform Judaism is based on the need to understand the "why" behind a decision and the freedom to modify it if the answer is not suitable with the ethical standard.

> And we do this not only in matters of ceremony and practice-the observance of Tishah B'Av and Purim, the keeping of *kashrut*, the covering of the head-but also in matters of theological reasoning-the meaning of "chosen people," the meaning of revelation at Sinai, the concept of Messiah, the meaning of God. In the Reform Jewish tradition, we allow ourselves to ask just such questions as the prophets asked and-most significantly-to trust the answers that we find.[58]

The prophets questioned the meaning of "religion," and the obligations of the "religious individual." "The prophets mingled denials with their affirmations. They spoke clearly about what religion is not."[59] Jeremiah questioned his peoples' understanding that they could sin and treat others poorly and still be protected in the house of God. The prophets that Blank focused on believed that God did not want empty ritual or immorality, they used their voices to argue what it was that God did want. They questioned whether the "frequent social functions they attended at the Temple and the dues they paid in the form of animal sacrifices or cereal offerings were proper compensation to God for His bountiful gifts."[60]

Questioning the meaning of "religion" is a tenant of Reform Judaism. Perhaps the most important questioning lies in the understanding of the Tanakh as a human document.

> Let it be said that in our denomination, as Reform, progressive, liberal Jews, we read the Bible as a human document-human, but with deep insights and basic moral and spiritual values. We read the Bible reverently, but we deal with it selectively, and it is in this manner that I will be treating it here.

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[58] Ibid., p. 4.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

> this approach permits us to appreciate much of what we find in the Scriptures and, at the same time, harbor reservations about certain other parts and persons, admitting that not everything or everybody in the Bible is wholly admirable. There are passages to which, approaching the Bible selectively, I shall not be pointing with approval and pride-actions and themes not germane to our topic: "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source of Moral Guidance."[61]

The prophets did not completely reject tradition; they were of an ancient line. However, they brought their own creativity, modern insights and ethical understandings to their observance.[62] The prophets were not apologetic for their beliefs or their arguments; these are the ancient roots of Reform Judaism's understanding of ethics:

> Today indeed, Reform thinking is not inclined to absolutes. We do not define religion exclusively in terms of the moral demand. We find value as well in the ceremonies which we perform in our homes and congregations. To be sure, we no longer pray for the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple with its priesthood and its rites, but still we value the worship that enriches our lives. We cherish the opportunities which bring us together as a prayerful community united in aspiration. We do not reject as a delusion all that those prophets condemned. And yet, like them, we mightily affirm the primacy of the ethical demand. It is was a matter of ceremony or of justice, there is no doubt which we would choose. And those biblical prophets nourish also the roots of this preference.[63]

Blank also wrote on the slippery slope of this thinking. In prophetic thought, as in Reform Judaism, ethical behavior supersedes ritual, but to what end? Blank saw that taken too far Reform Judaism could be without uniquely Jewish characteristics, he did believe in maintaining ritual and tradition that fit with modern ethics and did believe in the power of ritual:

> A liberal man, we insist, must be tolerant; and Reform Judaism, as a liberal religion, takes pride in its tolerant spirit. As a consequence, we say: "Different religions, Judaism, Christianity, are different roads to the same destination." We say: "Hats or no hats, confirmation or bar mitzvah, bath mitzvah, the Union Prayerbook or the Adler Prayerbook, what do these signify?" And speaking thus, we talk ourselves into a problem. For eventually we have to ask: must we not somewhere draw a line? Do our principles never limit our tolerance'; How far can

[61] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," p. 169.
[62] Blank, "Prophetic Roots for a Liberal Religion," p. 4.
[63] Ibid.

> a religion go, how far can Judaism go, how far can Reform Judaism go in the toleration of differences and still retain its character? A conflict eventually arises between what we call principles and the virtue of tolerance.[64]

The dream of Reform Judaism and the hope for the future are also rooted in the prophets. Blank saw two themes of hope in the prophetic text. Blank believed that the prophets' hope for the future was a people returned from exile to a nation rebuilt. That hope still is present in Reform, along with other denominations as the Zionist ideal. The second theme of hope is messianism. Originally this hope was for a King from the line of David. When Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to the land he did not allow for the rebuilding of the Davidic monarchy. The hope for an actual king was lost. The Israelites then began dreaming of a future king and put upon that king all their dreams for humanity. "Under his benign and righteous rule mankind would be reconciled, the jungle would be tamed. There would be no war or want."[65] In prophetic times the messianic hope transformed into a hope not for a king but for "the messianic age, the time when nations will learn war no more and will vanquish poverty. This is our hope today-and these are its prophetic roots."

This second phase of the messianic vision is the dream of Reform Judaism. A time when all will have what they need and none will be in want; not because of a king from the line of David but because of people's commitment to one another.

Blank believed that if our eyes are only on the messianic vision of our future and not on what we can be doing in the present, then we are not being true to our essence:

> Our messianic tradition is perhaps to blame. We are still impaled on our ancient massive ideal and can see no goal that falls short of those swords into ploughshares. Our knowledge that God created the vastness of the heavens and the populous earth hypnotically hides from us all little places, the Indian village,

[64] Blank, "The Relevance of Prophetic Thought for the American Rabbi," pp. 2–3.
[65] Blank, "Prophetic Roots for a Liberal Religion," p. 4.

> the refugee camp, the parched eroded hills of Greece, the migrant workers' caravans, displaced persons, overpopulated cities, and understaffed medical centers. Lacking humility we can not see small useful tasks; we must be doing all or nothing....we need nearer goals than vines and fig trees all over the world.[66]

This leads to the fourth theme of comparison, and the one in which Blank's greatest passions resided. Blank argued that there are two forms of hoping for the future. The first, to believe with faith that the day of one's dreams will arrive, to pray for that realization and to wait in good faith. The second form of hope is to create the future one desires, to be an active part in bringing oneself to better days.

> Or one can hope with a determination, and move with a sure tread towards the desired goal. Prophets gave expression to both sorts of hope: those whose faith led them to expect that in his own good time their God would bring on the Messiah or the messianic age, and those composed primarily of human effort. There were more in keeping with the modern temper. The messianic day indeed would dawn; mankind would be reconciled-indeed! But *we* have to work towards that end. It is our job along with God's.[67]

This sense of mission informed much of Blank's life. His commitment to social action and the issues of particular importance to him will be explored in the coming chapter. Blank believed that as the prophets spoke and fought for the future they wanted to create. Reform Judaism should follow this model that action and public speech must be the form of a vision rather than abstract language and prayers to God. As Blank wrote, "To the extent that the hungry and the homeless, the sick and the lonely, are not words to us but people-to that extent are we implementing our mission" [68] This commitment to mission is not, Blank argued, uniquely a Reform characteristic but it is central to the movement:

> With all the proper reservations, we may say that there has been, and to some extent still is a kinship between prophetic religion and historic Judaism, with its

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[66] Blank, "The Dawn of Our Responsibility," p. 42.
[67] Blank, "Prophetic Roots for a Liberal Religion," p. 5.
[68] Blank, "The Dawn of Our Responsibility," p. 42.

> current manifestation in Reform. With roots deep in the soil of the Hebrew Scriptures and nourishment from developing Rabbinic tradition down to the ages, Reform Judaism has a powerful commitment to social justice and human rights. The Hebrew Scriptures have served us as a source for moral guidance.
> Early in its history, near the beginning of the nineteenth century, Reform liked to call itself perhaps somewhat arrogantly, Prophetic Judaism Our commitment has been both individual and institutional. As for individuals, to be sure, the intensity of this commitment has varied from person to person; but it is statistically evident, I should think, that Jews, be they Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox, are disproportionately well represented on the rosters of sponsors of liberal causes in the interest of humanity. Jewish philanthropists, too, give liberally of their means to share with the needy and relieve the world's hunger.
> This is not said with self-praise and complacency. With self-reproach, we admit to ourselves that we do too little. Our moral sense still draws nourishment from Bible soil, and the bible word still disturbs us. The Bible serves as a motive force, a call to nobler living.[69]

Through these four themes (questioning accepted values, redefining "religion", our sense of hope, our obligation to mission) Blank finds the rootedness of Reform Judaism in the prophets. The more Reform Jews study the prophets and hear their call, the more ethical and righteous the movement will be:

> This is the proposition that we explore here explore: not that the Bible is out prime authority, but that the roots of Reform are sunk deep in the soil of prophetic thought, drawing food and strength from the lives and teachings of the prophets…The bible is not, in that sense, our authority. But the more we learn of the bible the more clearly we recognize our rootedness there.[70]

[69] Blank, "The Hebrew Scriptures as a Source for Moral Guidance," p. 182.
[70] Blank, "Prophetic Roots for a Liberal Religion," p. 3.

A Prophetic Voice

As detailed in the previous chapter, Blank believed that the ancient Hebrew prophets could serve as moral lodestar for the contemporary liberal Jew. Just as the prophets of old spoke out and challenged the unethical norms of their society, so too did Blank believe that twentieth century American Reform Jews were morally obligated to challenge unethical and corrupt behavior in modern society. He not only taught this to his students, but he modeled this conviction through his own actions and voice. The Jewish mission, to Blank, was a universal mission and a messianic era could only come when every individual fought for equal rights for all and demanded humane behavior in every corner of the world. Blank took to heart the mindful, educated, and proactive living that he advanced in the context of his scholarly writings and in his classroom. In his role as member of the faculty at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and as visiting scholar-in-residence at Reform congregations throughout the nation, Blank often had the opportunity to share his discourse with varying communities through addresses and sermons. In doing so, Blank did not shy away from discussing the salient and challenging issues of the day.[1] Rather, using the prophets as a touchstone, Blank spoke about the controversial issues of his era. He encouraged his listeners to eschew apathy and to take action based on inspirational teachings that came from the words of the Hebrew prophets.

Through a selective study of Blank's addresses and sermons, this chapter will analyze Blank's personal commitment to the ideals of Prophetic Judaism that played a prominent role in his teaching and scholarship. Although Blank spoke out on many of

[1] While this chapter will discuss Blank's public pronouncements on war, Blank also spoke publicly on a variety of topics including, but not limited to, civil rights, gender equality, Israel, and inter-faith outreach.

the important political issues of his day, this chapter will focus on his ideas about war and peace. Over the course of his lifetime, Blank's ideas about war evolved. He lived through WWI as a student at the University of Cincinnati, through WWII as a young professor having recently spent time in Germany, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars as a well established and highly respected member of Reform Judaism. His sermons and addresses explicate his thoughts on war and, also, his changing ideas about the role that the American Jew should play in each one of these major military conflagrations.

World War I

As outlined in the opening chapter, Blank was a student at the University of Cincinnati and at Hebrew Union College during WWI. During these years, Blank was just beginning to understand his own voice and the role he might play in the society-at-large. In June of 1918, Blank graduated from the University of Cincinnati and enlisted in the infantry. He attended an officer's training camp and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. However, even before Blank began his term of duty, the war ended. He resigned his commission and left the service before engaging in active service.

At the end of the nineteenth century America emerged as a world power, with involvement in WWI America strengthened this role. After WWI, many in America were challenging the ethics behind America's involvement. There was a widely held belief that WWI had brought on the age of American Imperialism. There were many, both before and after the war, who raised their voices against imperialism, arguing that the supposed benefits were a fallacy. As Norman Angell argued:

> He establishes this apparent paradox, in so far as the economic problem is concerned, by showing that wealth in the economically civilized world is founded

> upon credit and commercial contract (these being the outgrowth of an economic interdependence due to the increasing division of labour and greatly developed communication). If credit and commercial contract are tampered with in an attempt at confiscation, the credit-dependent wealth is undermined, and its collapse involves that of the conqueror; so that if conquest is not to be self-injurious it must respect the enemy's property, in which case it becomes economically futile. Thus the wealth of conquered territory remains in the hands of the population of such territory. When Germany annexed Alsatia, no individual German secured a single mark's worth of Alsatian property as the spoils of war. Conquest in the modern world is a process of multiplying by x, and then obtaining the original figure by dividing by x. For a modern nation to add to its territory no more adds to the wealth of the people of such nation than it would add to the wealth of Londoners if the City of London were to annex the county of Hertford.[2]

Blank did not give any addresses on the "Great War" while it was happening. However, he subsequently reflected on the experience in sermons he preached at his student congregation in Jackson, Tennessee. It is interesting to note that Blank's words bespoke his dissatisfaction with the "Great War" and, moreover, he spoke critically about the idea of war itself. Blank's words were colored by sentiments of anger and disappointment. One of his student sermons, "The Lamentation of Armaments," was given three years after the end of WWI.

Blank added his voice to those, like Angel, who rejected the idea of imperialism benefiting a nation. In this particular oration, the young Blank unequivocally spoke against war. Here Blank opposes American imperialism and contemporary arguments that vaunted the economic benefits of the "Great War," Blank argued his case to the small Jewish congregation:

> No material gain however great no menace to private property or to commercial interests however imminent, no need for new markets or resources however urgent, can begin to justify in the least degree the killing of one human being in war....the victors in a war-for-gain are the losers, that industrial prosperity goes to the vanquished nation, that indemnities are collected with a loss rather than a

[2] Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), pp. x–xi.

> gain for the conqueror, that the occupation and annexation of land by a victorious nation does not make the citizens of that nation the right by a single penny.[3]

In this same sermon Blank angrily questions whether those who claim themselves to be pacifists, would maintain their stance when pressured by war. He believed that many let go of their ideals in their involvement with WWI. Even men who say they do want peace, Blank argued, can easily abandon that sentiment in difficult times:

> The minute the shadow of an impending war darkens the air, a man's intellectual knees give way, he turns a ridiculous series of inconceivable mental somersaults, waking up dazed and dizzy to find himself in a training camp or on a recruiter platform... We are nothing but hypocrites prating peace....Nothing can ever succeed in stemming the tide but that men should cry out though the sword be raised above them to slay them—"Take my life if you must—strike at my heart—better to die than to kill—better far to suffer death than to make one move against another's life!"[4]

Here, Blank was referring to those that gave up their pacifism because they believed in the rationale behind America's involvement. Rabbi Stephen Wise is an example of a Jewish leader who was, before the "Great War" a strong supporter of pacifism. He did not during the war align himself with pacifists, although his pacifism was renewed in the thirties. As he spoke:

> I was anything but a pacifist during the World War. But, if there is another conflict—as there may well be, owing largely to America's failure to work for peace—if the churches again bless banners and offer up prayers for the victory of national armies, they may still retain their edifices, organs, music and incense; but the spirit will no longer be in them. They will be mortuary chapels, not living churches.[5]

In speaking about Vietnam to UC students Blank later reflects that he doesn't know what he would have done had he been forced to choose. However, at this point in his life he

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[3] Sheldon H. Blank, "The Conference for the Lamentation of Armaments," 11 November 1921, MS 730, Box 12, Folder 15, AJA.
[4] Ibid.
[5] "Religion: A Rabbi," *Time* (24 March 1924): accessed at www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,718034,00.html (3 March 2011).

seemed to adamantly be speaking about a complete rejection of any war. However, Blank was never put to this same test as the war was over before he had to engage in active duty.

During the war the Board of Governors of Hebrew Union College strongly encouraged faculty, staff and students to add their voices to the patriotism of the nation. On November 27, 1917 the Board displayed the following on the bulletins of the College:

> The Hebrew Union College was founded to have the young men whom it educated for the ministry preach and teach Reform Judaism and promulgate American ideas and ideals. Loyalty and patriotism have characterized the institution since the establishment.
> This is our country. We know no other flag than the flag which floats over it. Our country is at war and all of its citizens must not be passively, but actively loyal and patriotic. No one who does not subscribe to these sentiments is welcome within the walls of the College.[6]

Blank believed it was imperative to have fair and honest reporting of current issues, he strongly supported muckraking. Blank believed that dishonest journalism was the cause of America's involvement in WWI. As he spoke:

> If we Americans had known the truth about that damnable European mess that we threw ourselves into a few years ago, if we had known then what we know now about that unholy scramble that might be ridiculous if it were not so tragic, if the newspapers had only told us a few of the true facts in the case we would not be throwing clods to-day in the face of the unrecognizable remains of an unknown soldier in our great national graveyard.[7]

World War II

As noted in previous chapters, Blank had strong roots and connections with Germany. As a child he heard stories of his grandfather Seligman, the scribe. He made the decision

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[6] Michael Meyer, "A Centennial History," in *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years*, ed. Samuel E. Karff (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1976), pp. 1-286, p. 80.
[7] Sheldon H. Blank, "The Conference for the Lamentation of Armaments," 11 November 1921, MS 730, Box 12, Folder 15, AJA.

to get his doctorate in Germany and, while there, he developed relationships with some of his extended family. During the years leading up to the Second World War Blank, gave numerous sermons on the obligation of American Jewry to support European Jews in need. He felt as though he had the authority to do so as he had lived in Germany for 36 months while earning his Ph.D., and he visited Germany several times before WWII.[8] He felt obligated to those in Germany perhaps because of the knowledge that had his father never left Blank too would have been in danger. During this trip he saw first hand how dangerous things had become for the Jewish communities in Germany. In an address he delivered to Reform congregation in Duluth, Minnesota, Blank noted:

> I have observed the growth of Anti-Semitism in Germany and have seen what I wish I could have been spared seeing—the devastating effect upon the Jews in Germany of the reign of terror inaugurated nearly two years ago with the accession to power of the Nationalist Socialist Party.

During his last trip before the war, Blank saw instances of anti-Semitism which he shared with the congregation in Duluth: anti-Semitic billboards, propaganda in textbooks, and a group of German youth marching through the streets chanting "sharpen well your knife; soon Jewish blood will flow."[9]

For these reasons Blank was especially affected by the atrocities that were taking place in Germany. His wife, Amy, having been born in London, also had many European connections. Together they felt obligated to do what they could, and Blank believed that American Jews needed to act to support European Jews. His addresses indicate that he sought to alert the American Jewish community to the seriousness of the situation in

[8] Sheldon H. Blank, sermon given at Temple Emanuel Congregation in Duluth, Minnesota, MS 730, Box 13, Folder 1, AJA.

[9] Ibid. Blank is referring to the lyrics that were often sung to the music of the *Horst Wessel* song, frequently called the Nazi National Anthem. In German, the phrase was rendered: "Wenn das Judenblut vom messer spritzt dann gehts noch mal so gut." See Irene Herskes, *Passport to Jewish Music: Its History, Traditions, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 158.

Germany. Blank detailed four obligations of the American Jew to those in Germany: to provide funds for those remaining in Germany, to organize and assist Jewish refugees, to stay informed of events in Germany, and to disseminate accurate information to counteract anti-Semitic propaganda.[10]

Blank and Amy actively helped to advocate for German Jewish refugees. Beginning in the mid-thirties they sent affidavits of support and tried to rally others to lend their support to those who were in need. Preserved among Blank's personal papers are hundreds of letters relating to his efforts to support Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. He wrote letters to his relatives, to the German Consulate, to immigration lawyers, and to various leaders of the Jewish community of London. Through his correspondence with various attorneys in the States, it is possible to see that some of the lawyers were able to help while others were not. Irvin, Blank's brother, was also involved in the advocacy and letter writing.

Blank exchanged correspondence, for example, with Manfred Segall of Berlin, who was a distant relative. Blank sent numerous letters both to Segall and to the German Consulate. In this exchange, Blank promised to provide Segall with financial support once they immigrated to the US. He also pledged to find his relatives work. These letters span numerous years and the tone of the exchange becomes increasingly more desperate with each letter. While Sheldon had sent the necessary information there were others involved who had not submitted all of the necessary documents. Additionally, once the documents were sent the families had to wait long periods, months at times, for meetings with the German Consulate. Those in Germany waited anxiously for the letters to arrive,

[10] Ibid.

and expressed great joy and comfort upon the receipt. As one of Manfred's letters expressed:

> Thank you very much for your kind letter and for the enclosed affidavit. We received it at March 13th and we hope it to be a good sign, that it came in the morning of our wedding day. It is so very kind of you to help us so very much so that surely we shall become able to immigrate.[11]

Blank's name became known in some German communities as an individual who was able and willing to help. He provided affidavits not only for family members seeking dire assistance, but also for those he did not know personally. One such pathetic communication will illustrate the nature of the appeals that Blank received during these years:

> Now my sister has a big wish. She asks me to tell you that her husband can not do much business and has to suffer very much through the Nazis. They had to move in another apartment and they can hardly earn their living. They ask me if I can bring their daughter Lore, 14 years of age into a family. And they also ask for an Affidavit for themselves. I only came some months ago...We have no other relatives who could help us. I ask you in the name of my sister to excuse me but you surely know how it is in Germany. My sister would always be grateful to you.[12]

Blank received numerous letters of this sort, and many of them indicate that they received the professor's name from acquaintances in Germany who indicated that Blank was amenable to assisting those who sought to escape Nazi oppression. Amy Blank also received appeals for help and, as the following note indicates, she also willingly provided affidavits for those she did not know personally:

> I also want to thank you for your great kindness to give us the affidavit and I promise you that it will be my first duty to work, so that I have no need of anymore assistance, except the affidavit.[13]

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[11] Letter from Manfred Segall to Sheldon Blank, March 17, 1938, MS 730, Box 6, Folder 1, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.
[12] Letter from Joseph Stein to Sheldon Blank, date unknown, MS 730, Box 6, File 1, AJA.
[13] Letter from Ellen Doctor to Amy Blank, December 16, 1937, MS 730, Box 6, File 1, AJA.

Not only was Blank a known entity amongst community members in Germany but also amongst other immigration aid organizations in the United States. There are letter exchanges between Blank and Isaac L. Asofsky (1890–1988) who was the general manager of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).[14]

Not everyone for whom Blank wrote affidavits of support was able to leave Germany. However, numerous individuals were able to emigrate because of his letters and advocacy. Manfred Segall, as discussed above, was able to leave Germany and immigrate to America before Kristallnacht. After his arrival Blank continued to write him letters assisting him in finding work and aid. There are also letters both from organizations in America and in England asking Blank for funding which was promised in affidavits of support in the case of refugees who experienced difficulty in finding employment.

During the War Blank gave numerous sermons and addresses on American Jewry's need for action. On Rosh Hashanah 1944 Blank delivered a sermon titled "On Human Dignity." He recalled that in many instances he had seen letters from soldiers which reflect that they are fighting to establish the principle that "no one has the right to push anyone else around." Unlike his sentiment after WWI, Blank now concluded that some wars were necessary—always horrific—but, there were times when war was the only option. America and Judaism, he believed, accepted the notion that there were times when a community had no alternative but to fight for the ideals of equality and justice:

> All men are equal. We have one law for the home-born and for the stranger. We administer justice impartially and guarantee to every man the maximum of liberty

[14] Letter from Isaac L Asofsky to Sheldon Blank, March 27, 1938, MS 730, Box 6, Folder 1, AJA. On Asofsky, see Mark Wischnitzer, *Visas To Freedom: The History Of HIAS* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Pub. Co., 1956).

> consistent with the good of all. ...For, the recognition of the dignity of man is of the very essence of Judaism.[15]

By Rosh Hashanah 1945, the war had ended. During that High Holiday season Blank served a congregation in Chicago, Illinois. He gave a sermon on living in a world after WWII, as Jews and as Americans. He explained that as Jewish Americans feelings are tangled. He acknowledged feelings of relief, gratitude, sorrow, hope and a new sense of responsibility. At this stage in his life, Blank believed that the war had been necessary in order to defend the rights of others. However, in this sermon Blank explained why the war's end had evoked a complicated array of conflicting emotions:

> There is the burden of conscience. We were fighting for a righteous cause—indeed. But we were fighting. All our united efforts were directed towards the immediate goal of destruction of property and life. We rejoiced when a city of men, the innocent along with the guilty, was bombed to rubble with carnage untold. We approved of the ultimate goal; and we condoned the means, because mankind had not yet found a better way...And so this too is a relief—that we need not kill any more—not aid and abet in the preparations for slaughter.[16]

Blank also took note of the deep sadness that was felt, sadness for lost American lives, and sadness for the decimation of European Jewry:

> We bethink with sorrow likewise the millions of our fellow Jews, hounded from their homes, cruelly tortured in spirit and in flesh, the blessed dead among them and the living many of whom as yet have little cause to be grateful for their lives.[17]

Blank maintained that divine guidance coupled with human action had ultimately helped to bring World War II to an end. Rather than raise a fist in anger at God, Blank encouraged the congregation to offer words of praise for the end of the war, explaining that:

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[15] Blank, "Of Human Dignity," sermon delivered on Rosh Hashanah 1944, MS 730, Box 13, Folder 1, AJA.
[16] Blank, "Our New Responsibilities," sermon delivered in Chicago 1945, MS 730, Box 13, Folder 1, AJA.
[17] Ibid.

> Optimism is of the essence of religion. That right eventually triumphs over might, in spite of all that evil men may do, that truth cannot be crushed to earth forever, that man ascends with God's help towards a better world, ascends, though the way be rugged and uneven, this is the essence of religious optimism... It is only a whisper of hope but it is there. We hope that we may now be done with dying—that this war, now ended, is the last.[18]

Blank ended with a charge to the congregation. He told them that, both as Americans and as Jews, it was their duty to rekindle a spirit of Jewish responsibility. As Americans, they had the new responsibility not to abuse power, as citizens of a free nation they had the responsibility to vote, but as Jews they were obligated to work towards a messianic era. Blank insisted that American Jewry had a special obligation to the remnant of European Judaism. The center of Judaism had shifted westward, Blank argued, and each Jew in America must now feel even more so responsible for the future of world Jewry. Blank ended his address with these words: "Our prayer on this New Years Eve is that we may prove equal to our responsibilities—worthy of our opportunities. So may it be."[19]

1950s and 1960s[20]

In the late fifties to early sixties, Blank began publishing more regularly and speaking out frequently on salient issues of concern. While it had been nearly two decades since the end of WWII, the horrors of the Holocaust were still prevalent in his thoughts and challenging his theology. Through his work with the refugees and also, because information about the horrors of the Holocaust had become ever more clear during the 1960s, Blank became increasingly convinced that the human species possessed

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] While the Korean War was a monumental event in Blank's lifetime, the author was unable to find addresses on the subject of this war.

freedom to do good or evil. He believed that religious leaders – particularly rabbis -- needed to challenge their fellows to pursue that which is just and right. In the age of nuclear warfare, this role was more important than ever.

In Dallas, Texas on November 3, 1957 Blank gave an address titled "The Hebrew Prophets-In Their Time and in Ours." Beginning with a reference to Sputnik, which set off a shockwave of fear in the US, Blank urged his listeners to transform their political fears into a prophetic activism that would enable them to shape their futures.[21] He alluded to the demanding call of the Hebrew prophets, and he argued that the ideals of the prophetic were applicable to modern day political issues:

> As Americans we have all been set on our ears by a recent phenomenon in the starry skies. The appearance of a satellite "made in Russia" has seemed to us to be an omen as evil as a blood streaked moon to the ancient Romans. And each of us has his own private cause for concern whether it involve his health, his children, debts, friends-or whatever... Where can we find security, you and I, and our America, security for ourselves and our children? ...There is no security without responsibility. We have observed one common factor within those aspects of prophetic thought which we have here reviewed and it is responsibility. Whether we spoke of the false security under the misinterpreted covenant, the prophetic repudiation of ritual as against the ethical imperatives, the dimensions of God, or the implications of our being chosen, always human responsibility figured in the prophetic argument. Prophetic faith is predicated on faithfulness. The human goal of the Hebrew prophets is not supine expectancy but earned repose. Security is not a gift, it is a giving. I wonder what out foreign policy would be today of our leaders had the goals and the perspective of the Hebrew prophets.[22]

Many of his addresses in the 1950s and early 1960s were a reflection on the lessons of WWII. Blank spoke of the gap created by the Holocaust and the damage done to a people that is linked from generation to generation. This gap, to Blank, was not only

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[21] On Sputnik, see Barbara B. Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

[22] Sheldon H. Blank, "The Hebrew Prophets-In Their Time and in Ours," address delivered in Dallas, Texas, 3 November 1957, MS 730, Box 10, File 4, AJA.

the intellectual advancement and scholarly power that was lost by those killed in the Holocaust, but also a gap in spirit:

> Month by month new evidence came to light to convince us of the degradation of which man is capable…What had become, we had to ask ourselves, of the reputed nobility of man?[23]

In 1958, Blank addressed the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London on Rosh Hashanah. The Liberal Jewish Synagogue had originally brought him to London more than twenty years earlier, and he used the occasion to reflect on the events that had occurred during the interim. The Holocaust taught Jews, once again, the horrors of human evil. Blank challenged them to consider a question that the Psalmist posed generations ago: "There are not many here who do not remember what happened twenty years ago, in November 1938, and the whole procession of unfolding horror that followed…The question became a question in dead earnest. What, indeed, is man?"[24]

The questioning of the nature of humanity and of the obligation of the American Jew to worldwide Jewry and to their own Jewish identity was not unique to Blank. The Holocaust forced the modern Jew to face difficult theological and personal identity questions. As literary critic Alfred Kazin reflected,

> On many sides, indeed, for Jews as well as non-Jews, the Holocaust-as it came finally to be known, is a symbol that does not always help us to *see* what happened-was so inexplicable as to be virtually inadmissible. To Jews like myself, brought up on the idea that "history" has been our ruling hope as well as proof of our continued existence-the most striking reaction in oneself was a kind of terror that the organized killing of millions of innocent people could be shrugged off *mentally* by anyone at all-and that, on a higher level, people would make so little effort to think about "the Holocaust." There seemed to be no place

[23] Blank, undated Sermon, MS No 730, Box 10, Folder 4, AJA.
[24] Blank, "Jewish Ways to Understanding," address delivered in the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London, 3 1958, MS 730, Box 10, File 4, AJA. Blank is alluding to *Kristallnacht*, November 9–10, 1938. The question "What is man, that you are mindful of him?" appears in Psalm 8:4.

in many distinguished minds for this, though there was mind enough to investigate the subtlest mysteries of physical matter.[25]

Blank was deeply moved by his visit to London in 1958. There he saw signs of both desolation and rebuilding. A month later he reflected on his visit to London:[26]

> Twenty-two years ago in the fall of 1925 I had the pleasure of being present when the new synagogue of the Liberal Jewish Congregation in London was dedicated. It was a massive structure, the entrance flanked with white stone pillars. The roomy auditorium, light and airy and beautiful, rang with joyous music and echoed the hope in the hearts of the worshippers. I stood in that same Temple just a month ago amidst the dust and rubble. I was startled by the flapping of wings and saw two large birds fly in behind the tarpaulins which covered the altar and the silent organ. There flashed into my mind the prophet's familiar picture of desolation: ruins inhabited only by wild birds and beasts. Then I looked to one side and saw workmen laying brick on brick rebuilding the Temple wall. That scene symbolizes the year 5707 which has now drawn to a close. It has been a year of rebuilding brick by brick the ruined sanctuary.

Despite war's devastating aftermath, which Blank captured so vividly with his words, he also focused heavily on the ideas of responsibility and hope. All was not lost, he observed, and there had been progress made since the end of the war. For example, Blank believed The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1948, marked important progress. Raphael Lemkin was the lawyer who fought for this achievement As Dr. Israel Charny writes,

> Raphael Lemkin was a dramatic and noble character whose personal life story, like that of many great men and women who leave behind a special treasure for the story of humankind, sits on the edge of a tragic abyss. Lemkin is credited, almost singlehandedly, with designing the proposal for an international law against genocide which was the basis for the United Nations Convention on Genocide, the single most important piece of international legislation to date on

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[25] Alfred Kazin. "Living with the Holocaust," in *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*, ed. Michael E. Staub (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), pp.81-86, p.84.
[26] Blank, undated Sermon, MS No 730, Box 10, Folder 4, AJA.

> the subject of mass murder of millions of people, and for seeing the Convention through the political processes of the U.N. to its successful adoption.[27]

"Genocide - the attempt to exterminate a people," Blank noted, "has been termed a crime and I believe the new peace treaties specifically allude to it as such. Ironical that such a stipulation should be necessary at this late date in the history of civilization!"[28] Blank was similarly inspired and comforted by the creation of the United Nations, especially considering the fact that it included more of the world's population than the League of Nations and that the US would be a member of that organization.[29] Blank confessed his belief in the importance of hope and of acknowledging the progress that humankind has achieved:

> There are tremendous things that have happened and the sum of them is staggering. If we are frank I think we will admit that ten or fifteen years ago we would not have thought all of this possible. It is only our impatience, now that new vistas have opened up before us, that makes the pace seem so slow. When we can see no farther than the next corner we think that we are making progress; it is on straight roads that stretch to the horizon that we seem to creep.[30]

Blank nevertheless insisted that there was much more that needed to be done, particularly regarding the displaced persons, a concern that was of interest to him during the war. Blank openly expressed frustration that the government was willing to let them wait. Blank accused those not fighting for safe homes for the displaced persons to have a "scar on the human spirit," that of "apathy". He urged his listeners not to remain silent:

> Surely as long as this problem remains we must continue to provide the means which keep those agencies functioning whose privilege it is to bring aid and comfort to the languishing Jewish communities abroad and to assist in the

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[27] Steven L. Jacobs, *Raphael Lemkin's Thoughts on Nazi Genocide: Not Guilty?* (Lewiston: E. Mellen, 1992), p.v.
[28] Blank, undated Sermon, MS Col. No 730 Box 10 Folder 4, AJA.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

> rebuilding of the homeland...With the decimation of the great reservoir of Jewish life in central Europe, the leadership and responsibility become ours.[31]

Vietnam War

Blank was very troubled by the Vietnam War, and he spoke out against America's decisions. In 1967, Blank gave the Rabbi Harry Levi Memorial Address which he titled, "An Ear to Hear, a Mouth to Speak and a Job to Do." In this address he clearly stated his disapproval of America's military action in Vietnam, no matter how well intentioned the effort was when it began in the early 1960s:

> No doubt there are many Americans who think of our military presence in Vietnam as a sort of mission, believing we are there to propagate the American or democratic way of life as against the spread of a different, demonic ideology. Whether they're right or whether we are there to establish, promote, and protect bases for further military operations and markets for American goods, or whether we are there for some other not wholly idealistic ends, we must observe that any mission which is furthered by napalm and terror is no mission. Do you shudder when you hear that on a certain day American bomber pilots executed so and so many successful "missions" against the North?-"missions" indeed!
> In these last sentences of mine the accent was not on the words "napalm," "terror" and "bomber." I was not suggesting that we should "clean up" this war and make it "respectable." There is no such thing as a "clean" war. To kill a seventeen year old in civilian clothes with napalm is not "dirtier" than to kill a nineteen year old in uniform with a bayonet. The one is a person as well as the other, dead is dead, and it does not matter what clothes a youth is buried in. There is no fair and foul in war; war is foul.[32]

Nearly fifty years before delivering these words, Blank himself had been a young military veteran who reflected on the "Great War." In those days, he expressed grave doubts about the merits of war under any circumstance. During World War II, Blank revised his

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Blank, *An Ear to Hear, a Mouth to Speak, and a Job to Do*, The Rabbi Harry Levi Memorial Address for 1967, Cincinnati, MS 730, Box 10, File 5, AJA.

ideology. He supported America's military involvement in WWII, believing it to be a true expression of humanitarianism. In the 1960s, however, we see that America's involvement in Vietnam provoked Blank to return to his original contention that war was a cruel and corrupt effort. He argued that war as a mission was antithetical to Judaism. The Bible professor insisted that "peaceable persuasion" was always the ideal approach that the Jewish tradition promoted.

Blank was not unique in this sentiment. At the Biennial Assembly in 1965 in San Francisco the Union of American Hebrew Congregations adopted a resolution which called for a political settlement of the war in Vietnam and a cease fire. Others, like Blank, used their voice, and their position of assimilation and leadership in America, to speak out against Vietnam. As Rabbi Vorspan spoke:

> I believe that our deepest rationale is the imperative of Judaism itself. Our unique history has made us specialists in the survival of human crisis; indeed, I think this accounts in part for the growing fascination on the part of non-Jews with literature about the mystery of Jews, Judaism and Jewish history. We tend, correctly, to attribute our drive for social justice to Jewish religious values. We explain our position on racial justice in terms of the Judaic concept of the sanctity of the human personality and the equality of all the children of God. Yet the commandment to seek peace, to pursue it, to be messengers of peace unto the nations-that commandment is infinitely more emphatic and unambiguous. It was our prophets who gave the world the vision of universal peace; and our rabbinic literature is an unceasing demand that Jews stand, co-partners with God, in shaping the messianic vision of a time when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares.[33]

Blank was very supportive of anti-Vietnam student initiatives. In April of 1967 Blank signed a declaration along with other HUC-JIR students, faculty and staff demanding that the US government bring an end to the war in Vietnam. This declaration began with these words:

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[33] Albert Vorspan, "Vietnam and the Jewish Conscience," in *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*, ed. Michael E. Staub (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

> In the spirit of our tradition which bids us "be of Aaron's disciples, loving peace, and pursuing peace" [Abot 1:12], we, the undersigned members of the Hebrew Union College student body, faculty, and staff, declare our fellow-feeling with all who seek an end to war and violence in Vietnam.[34]

The declaration calls on the government to search every possible way to bring peace to the people of Vietnam and to abandon bombing raids. It also states that the government has done unnecessary harm to the Vietnamese people and that American soldiers had needlessly lost their lives. It further stated that America's military engagement in Vietnam had only deepened the suffering of the Vietnamese people.

On May 23, 1968 UC students signed the "We Won't Go" pledge. This pledge stated that, "Our war is unjust and immoral. As long as the United States is involved in this war, I will not serve in the armed forces." Blank was asked to speak to the gathering of these students. In looking at the content of this address one can see how much had changed in Blank's sentiment. He wasn't able to say with certainty what he would have done if he was in their shoes:

> I was not then and I am not now a brave man. I do not think that I am a conscientious objector to all wars, if I were to say that I am a pacifist I would have difficulty in convincing even myself. Pacifism is not a state of mind; it is a type of action. I cannot know whether I am a pacifist until I have been tried. If I were to say that I advocate civil disobedience I would discount that remark at once and observe that I am a model of a law-abiding citizen.[35]

While Blank was unable to say what he would have done, his respect for the students who had vowed to disobey their orders to be drafted into the armed forces was clear. He told the students that though he could not imagine himself in their position, he was unquestionably able to empathize with their point of view. Blank told his listeners that he

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[34] Declaration signed by HUC-JIR students, faculty and staff to end the war in Vietnam, SC-12604, AJA.
[35] Blank, "To Care Enough: 'Vietnam Commencement' May 23,1968," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), p. 125.

imagined that they were frightened, and that they were finding it hard to make plans for their future. Yet, he acknowledged, they were firm in their beliefs, and he was inspired by their ability to hold true to them. He gave them encouragement and even attempted to bring them comfort:

> We know some things to be right, and true, and good-not simply practical or strategic, or politic or diplomatic, but morally right and true and just, not to be negated by considerations of hurt or advantage, of caution or expediency. Of these things we say: This I must do because I must. Should all of us not thank the Lord? Should we not thank the Lord for brave men who will not kill, for men with reverence for life who will not kill, who look on the face of the enemy and see a human visage, who look at the enemy and see only men and women and children, with flesh that will burn and with bodies that will bleed? We thank the Lord for men who can not learn to hate and will not kill. We thank the Lord for brave men who care enough...Long after this war disappears into history, the world will still remember the words of the Hebrew prophets of 2000 years ago, pointing the pathways of morality out of the jungle of inhumanity to that day when men will not hurt nor destroy in all this holy mountain. That was our mission in ancient days and it is still our mission today.[36]

On the national Vietnam Moratorium Day, October 15th 1969,[37] Blank joined his voice to the call of so many others across the nation when he spoke to the HUC community in the Scheuer Chapel. In his address, Blank spoke of the most dedicated pacifist he knew, HUC's own Abraham Cronbach (1882–1965).[38] He discussed Cronbach's horizontal scale with absolute militarism on one end and absolute pacifism on the other. Blank went to insist that one cannot argue that the Biblical text rejects war, or

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[36] Albert Vorspan, "Vietnam & the Jewish Conscience," in *The Jewish 1960s*, pp. 142-143.

[37] Moratorium day was a demonstration opposing the United States' engagement in the Vietnam War. On April 20, 1969 Jerome Grossman called for this strike if the United States' involvement in the war had not ceased by October 15th. For more on the National Vietnam Moratorium, see Ken Hurwitz *Marching Nowhere* (New York: Norton, 1971).

[38] Abraham Cronbach (1882–1965) born in Indianapolis, was the son of German immigrants. He studied at the university of Cincinnati and at Hebrew Union College. Cornbach served as a congregational rabbi at Temple Beth El in South Bend, Indiana. In 1911 he studied at Cambridge and the Hochshule. He received the Doctor of Divinity in 1915 from Hebrew Union College. In 1922 he joined the faculty of Hebrew Union College as a professor of social studies. Cronbach was a pacifist who was committed to sharing his beliefs and inspiring others.

that it supports it. "No, the variety of views that we might find within the population of a contemporary American community can be matched by the assortment of views which we find between the covers of the *Tanakh*; and the distribution is probably similar in the two places, despite the passage of over 25 centuries." Yet in this noteworthy address, Blank argued that the demand for hope is clear in the text. Blank cited a passage from the prophet Isaiah (2:4) to illustrate his point that God promises to beat the swords into ploughshares. While human action must be a part of it, God will someday ensure that swords will become ploughshares.

Blank's address on the National Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam was not as clear a disavowal of war as were some of his other addresses, particularly those he delivered as a young man after World War I. Perhaps this was because he spoke that day as a representative of the Hebrew Union College and not only for himself:

> Does this seem somewhat remote from the activity of this day of Moratorium? We who are here, along with the youth of America, and not the youth only, are hoping today to bring influence to bear upon the rulers of this state to move them towards peace. Many of us, if not all, are giving expression to our dissatisfaction with things as they are. We are putting on record our dissent. That is perhaps the point at which we here most nearly approach the position of the Hebrew prophets. They were the dissidents of their time-of all times, refusing to accept as inevitable the status quo. They dared to ask questions quite as we do today, and hoped by so doing to help shape a future-a future.[39]

Blank's Voice at the end of his Life

In the last fifteen years of Blank's life he focused, in many of his addresses, on the need for a reawakening of the prophetic call. He also spoke on his fear of human apathy. Blank feared that Reform Judaism had lost its emphasis on the prophets. As he spoke in 1977 in an address in Cleveland:

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[39] Blank, "Spoken in the Scheuer Chapel, October 1969: Vietnam Moratorium Day," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), p. 132.

> I suspect that in our national organizations and on the local scene this variety of prophetic Judaism is experiencing a de-emphasis. To be sure, the Committee on Justice and Peace of the Central Conference of American Rabbis...is still devoted and alert—and at the annual sessions it presents statements and resolutions, formulating platforms, articulating goals, expressing solidarity. The national Union of American Reform Congregations has its social action program as well. And these are admirable and useful. My concern is that in the last decade or so the emphasis has shifted away from such activity; I sense a contraction of that capacity for indignation which characterized our movement but recently.[40]

Time and time again Blank referred to the power of humans to destroy life.

> We in our day, have fallen prey to confusions. Wasting resources, human and natural; overpopulating our planet; waging senseless wars; polluting the air we breathe, the water we drink; our ears assailed with decibels and double talk; we are quite bewildered. We can only welcome the reassurance in that prophet's words: "not to revert to primal chaos," "to be inhabited."[41]

Two months after he spoke these words, Blank gave an address at an HUC Alumni Association Luncheon titled, "Review of American Jewry," where he again challenged those in Reform Judaism to do more. He feared a shift in Reform Judaism away from social action. As he spoke:

> What pains me is the suspicion of a slackening in our day, among our colleagues (by no means all but) generally and within their congregations, a slackening of the will for social justice-a shift towards formalism and away from the more human concerns of what we have somewhat presumptuously called "Prophetic religion."[42]

In 1980 Blank delivered a Founders Day address on the Los Angeles campus of HUC titled, "Humanity with All its Fears..." In this address Blank again spoke of the need for action, and action that was based on hope. Blank told his listeners that "The Enemy is Us." He recounted the many ways that humans debilitated society through the effects of war, violence, drugs, cults, etc. The number of worthy causes that demand help

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[40] Blank, *Threatening Realities and Beckoning Hopes: How the prophets viewed the Future*, Cleveland May 1977, MS 730, Box 10, File 6, AJA.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Blank, review of *American Jewry* Spoken at the Alumni Association luncheon, June 22, 1977, MS 730, Box 10, file 6, Speeches 1977–1987, AJA.

and immediate attention overwhelmed modern men and women. He likened this crisis overload to the clamor of junk mail. Blank argued that the recent past as well as the present state of affairs validated his conviction "that humanity [was] in trouble indeed, in bad trouble and in need of our concern."[43] Yet once again, Blank emphasized the importance of hope. It was vital, he insisted for humankind to believe that not all was lost and that a better future could be realized. Blank encouraged those present to act with sober optimism, hope combined with patience. As Jews, Blank told his audience, they must never abandon their efforts to hasten the messianic era. Sober optimism was the way "to achieve the world-uniting messianic goal-a reconciled humanity. That is the Jewish shape of hope suited to our troubled times and human condition."[44] And speaking directly to the alumni of HUC – the rabbis and Jewish educators who had gathered to commemorate the founding of their alma mater, Blank said:

> So to preserve the ancient ideals and maintain the basic moral thrust of our tradition. It is: to seal the instruction <u>through</u> disciples—through disciples among men, thus molding public opinion, affecting the human climate, promoting the survival of humanity. It is: a noble enterprise. It is: an essential enterprise, demanding our purposive devotion for the sake of man and all his fears. That is our true and proper business. And that is the sum of my Founders Day message in the year nineteen hundred and eighty.

In the last decade of his life Blank expressed grave concern over the future of humankind. He no longer worried about his own generation which was beginning to fade from the scene, but he expressed deeply felt concern for the world which his children and grandchildren would inhabit. In 1983 Blank spoke at a testimonial dinner that honored Rabbi and Mrs. Sanford E. Rosen in San Mateo, California. He questioned, in the nuclear

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[43] Blank, "Humanity with All its Fears," Founders day address, Los Angeles, 17 March 1980, MS 730, Box 10, File 7, AJA.
[44] Ibid.

age, how long humanity would be present. He asked, "How long until we self-destruct?"[45]

> I worry and fear and I advocate fear in others. We face a human choice. It is not only reasonable but essential for us, for Christians and Jews and Moslems and Buddhists, Black and White, Asians and Europeans and Africans and Americans, Democrats and Republicans and Communists and liberals-essential for all of us to pool our fears and our resources of mind and spirit to defend ourselves against the encircling doom, the apocalypse...If humanity is now to survive must we not in our day impart reality to that distant dream? We can do no less than applaud activity that draws together in peaceable co-existence religious, ethnic, political or national entities.[46]

March 11, 1987, Blank gave his final address at Hebrew Union College titled "Go Forth Under the Open Sky." In this address he reflected on his life growing up in Mt. Carmel, Illinois. He spoke of his years in high school and of the development of his social consciousness at the University of Cincinnati and at Hebrew Union College. He spoke of WWI and WWII, and of the scientific advancements the world had made. Blank ended this address not with words of hope but rather words of challenge to those who would remain on the earth as advocates for humanity after he would pass:

> They are "we"—those huddled masses on this puny planet Earth. Victims of natural disasters—victims of human folly, depravity and neglect. They pass before us on our TV screens—their bodies wasted by famine, torn by violence, warfare, factionalism, racism, Hitlerian madness—all accusingly present as anguished we watch. The ever receding horizons raise the curtains on the dismal scene. We are horrifying one miserable world—a world threatened indeed with total disaster, with the end of all life on earth.
> View with me then, against such a scene, our Jewish Mission. "...And yet man's only hope—tiqqun olam: a Jewish mission for our day. We must speak.
> As Reform Jews in America, we are especially favored. We cherish our American tradition of free speech, proud to live in a land where freedom of speech is axiomatic—a freedom defended too by our Reform Movement and by our bastion of freedom, the Hebrew Union College. We must use that freedom and speak for the world—threatened as it is by the incredible build-up of nuclear arsenals

[45] Sheldon Blank, Testimonial dinner honoring Rabbi & Mrs. Sanford E. Rosen at the time of his retirement as Senior Rabbi of Peninsula Temple Beth-El, 6 June 1983, San Mateo, CA., MS 730, Box 10, File 6, AJA.
[46] Ibid.

> powerful enough many times over to blast all hope for life in our "olam," an ultimate "big bang." So threatened we must speak... Speech is our vehicle: around the world, in our many tongues, we must make our voices heard under the open sky. With nostalgia I have spoken, my colleagues and all friends-spoken with nostalgia for a youthful vision of an open sky.
> Mourn with me now for my lost dream. Thank you.[47]

Sheldon Blank witnessed great political and national upheaval and change in his life. The years of his life were tumultuous years for humanity and for Judaism. As a young adult he understood himself to be a pacifist at all costs, he was greatly troubled by America's involvement in WWI. As a young intellectual he questioned whether there was ever any benefit to war. And strongly believed that war, would never bring real reward.

This philosophy was challenged with WWII. He had spent a great amount of time in Germany before WWII and had developed real relationships there. His position shifted, that war is deeply saddening and complicated and should be approached with ethics-but that it is at times very necessary.

This was the same mindset that he held during the Vietnam War, feeling as though America had not ethically been engaged and that senseless deaths were occurring. He used his position of leadership and his skilled voice to share these beliefs with others.

Blank had lived a long and full life. He had experienced much in his many years. Blank died with belief in the ability of humanity to make a difference and humanities ability to destroy itself. With his words he encouraged ethical survival he raised up disciples, his students, his colleagues, those who were moved by his voice-to defend others.

[47] Blank, "Go Forth Under the Open Sky," pp.7–8.

Sheldon Blank's Character and Personality

The previous chapters have explored the biography of Sheldon Blank, evaluated his scholarship and biblical understanding, and described the effect his political voice had on students and colleagues. Blank was a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, an advocate for social responsibility, and a well respected academic. Yet, for those who were close to him, Blank was remembered as much for his character as for his learning and literary craftsmanship. It is his character which is first recalled when those who knew him reflect on their time spent with him. This chapter will explore Blank's character as demonstrated through his relationships. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a descriptive analysis of Blank's role as a teacher, colleague, friend, husband, father and grandfather.

Blank as Teacher

Blank was deeply committed to his students. He honored and encouraged free inquiry.[1] As a professor Blank encouraged his students to question what was being taught. Blank encouraged his students to think for themselves and to use education as a means of achieving personal growth and a greater level of self understanding. In describing his educational philosophy, Blank emphasized his commitment to the ideals of free inquiry:

> He may, of course, not learn. He may leave as he enters, with all his treasured notions still about him. If so, he has squandered in years; he has not found

[1] Eugene Mihaly, "Sheldon H. Blank," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Annual Yearbook* 85 (1989): pp.257–258.

himself...Is not this the all-important unavowed goal of all education: that a man discovers his authentic self, and live with it in peace?[2]

Blank encouraged his students to not only be changed from their education, but also to be creators of change. As discussed in the previous chapter, Blank believed that his understanding of the prophets informed and demanded certain actions. He was committed to the belief that study led a student to action. Yet he also tried to be a model of humility, and he discouraged his students from taking themselves too seriously or from overestimating their self- importance:

> When I deal with the prophets in my classes at our seminary, I do not fail to alert budding rabbis to the fact that they are not themselves to be prophets-dissenters, if the occasion requires, possessed of a capacity for moral indignation if the rights of man are trampled, crusaders for just and holy causes-these yes, but without the intensity of creative genius, without the single-track fanaticism and the ineffective angry word. Reform Judaism at its best is but a cultivated variety of the wild plant we call prophetic. But it is that.[3]

Blank developed relationships not only with the rabbinic students at Hebrew Union College but also with the graduate students who were pursuing a Ph.D. in the Cincinnati campus's School of Graduate Studies. As one of Blank's graduate students later recollected:

> [Sheldon Blank exerted] . . . a penetrating moral influence upon generations of students...and has greatly contributed to the molding of their character and mode of life. Among these students were many Christian doctoral candidates...He has been an unfailing inspiration and stimulus to his friends and younger colleagues, constantly kindling their excitement for learning.[4]

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[2] Blank, "A Foundation Is to Build, Founders' Day Address, 1963," in *Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1977), p. 119.
[3] Blank, "Threatening Realities and Beckoning Hopes: How the Prophets Viewed the Future," Cleveland, May 1977. MS Col. No 730 Box 10, Folder 4, AJA.
[4] Reuben Ahroni, "Biblical and Other Studies in Honor of Sheldon H. Blank," *Hebrew Annual Review* 8 (1984): 2.

Blank tried, whenever possible, to attend morning worship services in the school's chapel. One of his faculty colleagues remembered Blank's dependable presence at these student-led services.

> I can see Dr. Blank with his dark blue suit on every day. He had the feeling of what the synagogue was. When I walk in I can see him there, his presence there meant a lot.[5]

In his classroom, Blank gave the impression that he was a rather reserved person. He spoke with measured, carefully planned words, and he used a "slow and deliberate mode of presenting."[6] Yet he gave the impression to his students of a "loving, supportive, patient caring friend who was an exceptional listener without trying to make a statement. He was witty, he could be a very inspiring speaker but not because he was rousing. . ." in his delivery. Blank was able to move his listeners because of the words he selected. More than how he expressed his thoughts, it was the content of what he said that enabled him to become a source of inspiration.[7]

In addition to the relationships Blank enjoyed with his students in the classroom, he and his wife would frequently invite students to their house. Often for large gatherings and other times for smaller more intimate lunches. One of Blank's best remembered customs was to invite the student who delivered the sermon on Shabbat morning to their house, with their partner. Or they would invite a couple of students to spend Shabbat afternoon in their home on Lafayette Street, where they would serve and discuss current events, family and school. Amy Blank would sometimes share a poem she was working on.[8]

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[5] Interview with Dr. David Weisberg, 28 Jan. 2011.
[6] Interview with Dr. Barry Kogan, 1 Feb. 2011.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

> At home he was warm and friendly. He was not one to crack jokes all the time but he had a really wry sense of humor. The kind that could easily go with a wink. They were sweet, welcoming, loving human beings. In addition to him being a very fine and knowledgeable professor.[9]

One could assume from his classroom relationships that he was very formal even so Blank created opportunities where his students could feel at home with him and be somewhat informal.[10] Sheldon and Amy often had large gatherings for the HUC community at their house. For example, there was an annual "Sukkah Party" for the Hebrew Union College community and other members of the Cincinnati Jewish community. This event was held in the Blank's home-made sukkah located on the porch of the terrace on 201 Lafayette.[11] The Sukkah party was one of numerous large holiday gatherings were held at the Blank home over the course of an academic year.

Blank's interest in the students at HUC was not entirely unique. Most of the professors during Blank's time spent time with students who studied with them or with whom they were close. While Blank may very well have felt closer to some of the students over others, he took pains not to show favoritism. In general, he succeeded in relating very well to all the students.[12]

As discussed in chapter three, Blank encouraged and often supported the rabbinical students in their political and social action endeavors. "You knew he was all about justice," one of his former students noted, "not as an abstraction but as a way of living your life." The rabbinical students frequently relied on Blank for advice around political issues. He was particularly helpful with the support and guidance that he showed to the students after the Kent College incident of May 4th 1970, when four students were

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 32.
[12] Interview with Dr. Barry Kogan, 1 Feb. 2011.

killed and nine other injured by the opening of fire of the Ohio National Guard during a protest against the American invasion of Cambodia.

> Dr. Blank listened to us; he was the paradigm of patience, of basic sympathy and wisdom. What was the wisdom? He looked for ways we could do what we wanted to do but to plan for it, to do it deliberately... He listened, he tried to be supportive he tried to draw our attention to the things we needed to think through. It was a reminder that there was an aftermath to the excitement.[13]

Blank never lost his interest in or his passion for politics. This allowed him to engage with students (and colleagues, friends and family) no matter their age:

> Sheldon Blank's life was an exiting, searching quest. He persisted in confronting the hard questions. He rejected the easy answers. He was modest, non-dogmatic, non-judgmental, open accepting. He listened up. And up to the last week of his life, he was open to change. He never stopped growing. This quality made him the contemporary of each generation.[14]

From time to time, Blank noted that despite his decision not to enter the congregational rabbinate, the students at Hebrew Union College had become his congregation. He taught them, celebrated with them, and offered them pastoral care. He sensed that while he did not serve a congregation per se, he was indeed serving the Jewish world through his commitment to Reform Judaism and to the many rabbinic students he taught:

> I'll tell you something else about myself: I am an American Jew. I accept myself as an authentic American Jew-without apology-without self hate. I am a member-by your courtesy and my birth date an honorary member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis-American Rabbis who serve American Hebrew Congregations. If I myself have not served such a congregation directly I hope that in my way as teacher of American rabbis I have at least obliquely served congregations of American Jews. That has been my intent.[15]

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[13] Ibid.
[14] Mihaly, p. 257.
[15] Blank, "Review of American Jewry," Alumni Association Luncheon, Cincinnati, 22 June 1977. MS Col. No 730 Box 10, Folder 4, AJA.

Blank as Colleague

Blank's true passion in his life was Hebrew Union College and the impact the College had on Reform Judaism at large. "And as for me," Blank confessed in 1965, "I think nothing explains me better than my loyalty to the College. I have always wanted what is good for the College. What is good for the College is what I have always wanted."[16] His closest friends throughout his life were, with very few exceptions, his faculty colleagues.

Like the relationship he nurtured with his students, Blank's relationship with his colleagues on the faculty went beyond the confines of HUC's campus. Blank developed real and lasting relationships with many of his colleagues. They were his friends and, in a certain sense, they were his family.

Of Blank's many HUC colleagues, there were two members of the faculty with whom he and his wife, Amy, enjoyed a particularly close bond: Jacob Rader Marcus (1896–1995) and Eugene Mihaly (1918–2002).[17]

Jacob Rader Marcus (or "Uncle Jake" to Blank's daughters Elizabeth and Miriam)—the highly regarded scholar of American Jewish history—was one of Blank's closest friends over the course of his long career. As was noted earlier in this thesis, Blank and Marcus had been friends since their student days, and they grew as scholars together. They laughed together, studied together, and challenged each other to be their scholarly best. They also enjoyed teasing one another. On his 80th birthday, Blank spoke about his friend "Jake" Marcus:

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[16] Response at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Alumni Association Luncheon , June 17, 1965, MS 730, MS Col. No 730, Box 10, Folder 4, AJA.
[17] Sachs, *My Memories* 2006–2007, p. 15.

> A thank you, lastly, to Jake Marcus. He used to be older than I was. Now I have caught up with him. He and I have been exchanging compliments, and wishes, on appropriate occasions for a lot of years now. Once, in 1924, when he was studying in Berlin, and Nelson Glueck and I were at the University of Jena, I sent him a picture postcard. In part I said on that card: "The weather has been miserable and I am fighting a cold. Hoping you are the same, I remain cordially yours." He sent it back to me. Thank you, friend, for your kind words. I wish you everything that you wish me.

Blank also maintained a very close friendship with Professor Eugene Mihaly and his wife. Mihaly served for many years as a professor of Midrash and Homiletics at HUC. His road to the College and Reform Judaism was distinctive. The son of an Orthodox rabbi, Mihaly received his first rabbinic ordination at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. A few years after completing his studies, Mihaly began to reject Orthodoxy and to identify with the teachings of Reform Judaism. In contrast to Jacob Marcus, Eugene Mihaly had been one of Sheldon Blank's students. Blank's kindly and supportive disposition meant a great deal to Mihaly when he began his studies at HUC, and these sentiments blossomed over the years:

> As I reminisce about Sheldon H. Blank and think about what he and his beloved Amy have meant these many years to myself, to my family, and to generations of loving students, countless experiences, events, and thoughts flood my mind. I think of Sheldon Blank's courtesy and kindness, of his gentleness. Sheldon Blank was a reserved, a shy, a modest man. He had a lively, even a sly sense of humor, a keen wit. I think of the very special bond of Sheldon Blank and his "woman of valor," his Amy; of the Blank home, the gracious warm atmosphere; of the nature walks, the bird watching, and the delight in spotting and identifying a rare wild flower...Surely, as long as I and numerous other students live, whenever we enter the synagogue of HUC-JIR in Cincinnati, we will see Sheldon Blank in the second row center. We hear his right, resonant voice whenever we read Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Sheldon blank is present in every one of our acts of compassion, of concern, or love.[18]

Colleague and friend Nelson Glueck, then President of Hebrew Union College wrote these words as a "citation" for Blank's 70th birthday. Poetically describing the

[18] Mihaly, p. 257.

impact at large that Blank had on the College and more so on the individuals that made up the College, Glueck wrote:

> We pay tribute and affection on the occasion of this 70th birthday. As a student of the Bible, he has been both pathfinder and interpreter of extraordinary importance. Through the students he has inspired and through the important publications he has contributed immeasurably to the knowledge and understanding of biblical literature. Generations of Rabbis have gone forth, equipped with the knowledge he has imparted to them and sustained by the loving care which he and his devoted wife have lavished upon them, to spread far and wide the teaching of the Scripture in the light of profound Jewish learning. Ever friendly and helpful, deeply religious and scientifically devoted and creative, he remains restfully active. The years have not stayed his drive for the advancement of human enlightenment. For all who have had the privilege of direct association with him and for all who admire and honor him, we send our heartfelt salutations, and implore God's continuing blessings upon him and his family.

Blank as Husband

Blank viewed his relationship with Amy as the greatest blessing in his life. Friends, colleagues, students, and family members reflect that you could feel and see the love they had for each other.[19] Blank felt the tremendous need to take care of Amy, and "they lived the life of gentleman and lady."[20] Their relationship was loving, supportive and fun.[21] As their son-in-law Joseph Levine reflected, one "can't understand Sheldon without Amy. They were the Romeo and Juliet of the faculty."[22]

Blank and Amy deeply enjoyed sharing the pleasure of life together. They took many vacations together. They traveled, at times to protect Sheldon from his hay fever and at others times just simply to explore. They both had a great love of mountains, and

[19] Interview with Dr. David Weisberg, 28 Jan. 2011.
[20] Telephone interview with Joseph Levine, 25 Jan. 2011.
[21] Interview with Dr. Barry Kogan, 1 Feb. 2011.
[22] Telephone interview with Joseph Levine, 25 Jan. 2011.

they took many hiking trips together. They particularly enjoyed visiting the Smokey Mountains in Virginia and North Carolina.[23]

Blank had great respect for Amy. He admired her intellect and her poetry.[24] Amy wrote poetry on varying topics, ranging from Judaism to the mountains.[25] Blank would bring Amy's poems into the classroom to share them with the rabbinic students.

They both honored the family of the other often taking trips to visit Amy's relatives. During the early 1940's after Saul had sold his store in Mt. Carmel, Sheldon's parents both moved to Cincinnati where they lived in an apartment close to 201 Lafayette.[26] Just before Pesach in 1945 Sheldon's mother died,[27] Sheldon's father lived with the Blanks for the remainder of his life—he died at the age of 98.[28]

Like her husband, Amy Blank was also involved in the Jewish community of Cincinnati. During the 1940s and 50s, for example, Amy Blank was the director of the lower primary grades at the Rockdale Temple Sunday School.[29] Once she had children of her own, Amy remained involved in the wider community and her own intellectual endeavors,

> All this while my mother was continuing to study and write…there is evidence in innumerable notebooks of the studying and research she did, often with mentors in England and on the faculty of H.U.C. and with rabbis who had been at H.U.C. There were theatrical productions, some written and/or translated by my mother, directed by my mother and father performed by the H.U.C. students. My mother was invited by the Sisterhoods of the Reform congregations in Cincinnati, and also other organizations, to read her poetry and to speak. She was involved in poetry reading and writing groups. During these years she had poems accepted and printed in various publications and also privately published.[30]

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[23] Telephone interview with Miriam Sachs, 26 Jan. 2011.
[24] Interview with Dr. Barry Kogan, 1 Feb. 2011.
[25] Telephone interview with Miriam Sachs, 26 Jan. 2011.
[26] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 9.
[27] Ibid., p. 13.
[28] Telephone interview with Joseph Levine, 25 Jan. 2011.
[29] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 31.
[30] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006-2007, p. 30.

There are numerous accounts of Blank publicly sharing his appreciation of Amy. , "What I like about me-is my young wife. I am endlessly grateful for Amy K.—the poetry in my life. I've lived with her now for fifty good years. I think I'll keep her."[31]

In the late 1980s both Sheldon and Amy began to have health problems. They didn't want to give up living in the house they built on Lafayette Street. Their daughters made frequent visits, around once a month, to give them support and to take care of the house. For several years they flew in to help care for their parents. During this time "There were hospitalizations, decisions about what medical and nursing care was needed, consultations with doctors, social workers, and lawyers...Bitsy and I worked together and became true friends."[32] About her parents death and how it affected both Amy and Sheldon Miriam wrote:

> He had been taken to the hospital the previous day because it was obvious that his organs were shutting down and he was in a great deal of pain. Our mother had wanted to go visit him, but she wasn't able to. The nurse's aides taking care of them tried to make it as easy for her to accept what was happening as they could...Our mother lost all interest in living and spoke often of wanting to die and the last time she went downstairs in the house was to celebrate her birthday the following December with a party arranged for her by the housekeeper and the aids. Our mother died on September 17 (our father's birthday) in 1990 at the age of 91."[33]

Blank as Father

Before Amy gave birth to Miriam and later Elizabeth, she suffered several years of miscarriages and surgical procedures. When the girls were young Amy and Sheldon

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[31] Blank, 80th Birthday address, Cincinnati, 21 Oct. 1976, MS 730, Box 1, Folder 15, AJA.
[32] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 42.
[33] Ibid., p. 42.

hired what was then called a nurse who would frequently be there to help with taking care of the children.[34]

They were very loving and caring parents who introduced their daughters to literature, religion and the importance of community. As a young child, Miriam Sachs noted that she had no sense of what her parents did for a living-to her they were just her parents.[35]

Like colleagues, friends and students, Blank's daughter's viewed their parents as cultured adults. The children knew that their father had been from a small town in the Midwest but Amy and Sheldon lived unlike many others from small towns of the area. Miriam reflects that once the family was driving across country and their car had a flat tire. A farmer stopped to help Sheldon with the tire, Miriam remembers that it sounded to her like her father was speaking a different language when speaking to the farmer. The daughters understood that the home they grew up in was very different from that of their fathers.[36]

Miriam felt very close to her mother, she remembers that her mother had tea every afternoon as a pick-me-up, when the children were around they would share with their mother in this ritual. In her own memoirs, Miriam Blank described her mother, Amy, as a "special woman":

> I don't know how she knew that I was extra-sensitive to touch but somehow she sensed it; perhaps it was instinctive, or perhaps it was based on my reactions. Whatever made her aware of it, the result was a gentleness that I've found to be a rare quality...This combination of gentleness, or sensitivity, and toughness proved to be a very successful method of bringing up her daughters.[37]

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[34] Telephone interview with Miriam Sachs, 26 Jan. 2011.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 26.

As children Miriam and Elizabeth did not fully understand the magnitude of their father's communal contributions. However, as they aged, Elizabeth and Miriam began to understand their father's influence on the community at large:

> His community work was pro-civil liberty, anti-war; he spent much time advising students. He spent much time teaching students who were aspiring rabbis and inviting them to our house for coffee and sticky buns (known to us as "shnecken," snails in German), and as a result there were few decades during which I knew almost all the Reform rabbis in the United States.[38]

Particularly inspiring to their children, was their parents' work in advocating for immigrants who were fleeing from Nazi Germany. "It wasn't a matter of helping them with money," Miriam Blank recollected, "because we weren't particularly wealthy, but it (the affidavits of support and the funds and detailed in the previous chapter)enabled them to immigrate. Many of them spent some time living at our house as they tried to get settled in their new country. In any case, I heard a lot of German spoken in my childhood."[39]

One of these immigrants, Ralph Berger, lived with the Blanks for six years. Miriam was ten and Elizabeth was seven when Ralph, their first cousin, came to stay with them. The young Berger's father, Oscar Kirchberger, was Amy Blank's brother. The Kirchberger's had lived in England, but they moved to France in 1931. In June of 1940 the entire family (parents and two children) boarded a ship to England, from England Ralph, his sister Stella (who had cognitive disabilities) and Ralph's mother Vera traveled to Canada. Vera and Stella traveled to California to be with Vera's mother, and Ralph came to live with the Blanks in Cincinnati.

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[38] Ibid., p. 3.
[39] Ibid.

Ralph stayed with the Blanks until 1946 and was accepted into the grade above Miriam's:

> Eventually, but relatively quickly, actually, Ralph and Bitsy and I became like two sisters and a brother, which included many good features as well as the jealousies and disagreements that are common among siblings. Ralph made friends in school and they sometimes came home with him. I know my parents said that when Ralph came upstairs from the basement and told my father that his friend was running around with a torch made of burning newspapers and he, Ralph, wasn't sure that doing that was all right, they, my parents, decided Ralph was showing good sense and could be trusted.[40]

After graduating high school Ralph went to the University of Cincinnati, during which time his sister and his father in England both died. During his first year at the University of Cincinnati Berger stayed in the HUC dormitories. He would frequently stop in to the Blank's residence for meals. After graduation he moved to the West Coast and earned his Master's degree and Ph.D. in Microbiology at the Universities of Washington and California.

Blank's daughters also saw their house as a community center for scholars:

> Up until the time I finally left Cincinnati to live in Cambridge, 1957, I had the exciting chances to have dinner with the many guests invited to our house from Hebrew Union College...There were students, faculty members, and visitors to the College for one event or another. There were often people of some note who had come to teach, lecture, or be presented with honorary degrees. I was always proud to have gotten to know them, however briefly. Many visitors also came just for tea or coffee and a form of sticky buns...served in front of the fireplace in the living room instead of the dining room.[41]

Similar to Blank's colleagues and friends, the children enjoyed meals together around the table and the Jewish rituals which were so dear to Sheldon and Amy:

> Once we children were old enough to sit at the big table and eat with the grown-ups, that's where we ate supper every evening from then through high school, except on some week-end nights when we sat around the kitchen table. On

[40] Ibid., p. 48.
[41] Ibid., p. 13.

> Fridays when we were small, we were given baths and dressed in clean clothes before Shabbat (then called Shabbos) dinner. My father put on his velvet jacket, my mother lit the candles. My father said Kiddush we took a sip of wine (grape juice for the children), and ate a piece of challah dipped in salt. We sang.[42]

Miriam went to school at Radcliffe, after graduating from college she returned to Cincinnati for 6 years and worked for most of that time for the Assistant Director of the Cincinnati Jewish Community Center. She moved in 1957 back to Cambridge and in September 1958 began working in Waltham at Brandeis University. It was at Brandeis that she met and fell in love with Murray Sachs, a French scholar who had recently joined the European Language faculty.[43] They were married September 14th, 1961.

Miriam and Murray had their first child, Debbie April of 1963. Their second child, Benjamin was born in November of 1967. Tragically, Benjamin was born with chromosomal abnormalities.

> Finally, in August, during another such hospitalization for pneumonia, we got a call one morning to tell us that Benjamin had died during the night. He had lived for nine months. We had come to realize that his death was inevitable, and of course it was a relief, but that didn't make it easier. We had a small funeral, for ourselves and my parents and my uncle and aunt from Belmont, with my father officiating and saying a few words, and a gathering in our house afterwards for a few additional relatives and friends. We did it mostly because we thought Debbie should experience a closure to the whole situation. She complained of "something in her neck" that was bothering her. It was clearly a "lump in her throat," and we tried to help relieve her of the pain. I get a lump in my throat just thinking about hers.[44]

In November of 1969, Miriam gave birth to a healthy son, Aaron.

Elizabeth decided to attend Goddard College in Vermont, during orientation she was greeted by a man who claimed himself to be the president of the College. This man was Joseph Levine, who was not the President of the College, but who was actually a

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[42] Ibid., p.13.
[43] Ibid., p. 64.
[44] Ibid., p. 71.

second year student and Elizabeth's future husband. They were married in the summer of 1952 in the garden of 201 Lafayette.

The next year Joseph Levine began his training at Hebrew Union College. Joseph Levine felt respected and accepted by his in-laws, and was particularly close to Amy. Elizabeth and Joseph had four boys: Daniel, Jeremy, Jonathan and David.

In the winter after Sheldon's death, Elizabeth was diagnosed with colon cancer. In the midst of her own sickness Elizabeth courageously helped to care for her mother and after her mother's death, to join with Miriam in sorting out the logistics of their parents things.

> But, throughout these sad matters that we had to deal with, we had to deal with the sadder fact that bitsy was going to die herself in the near future. By the time that the house in Cincinnati had been emptied and everything was either given away or sold, including the house, Bitsy's health got worse, and the cancer metastasized to her brain. Joe and Bitsy took a trip to Switzerland to visit David, and they went on a short cruise up the coast to Alaska from Seattle. And eight months after our mother had died, Bitsy died on June 1, 1991, under hospice care...I arrived an hour or two after her death, although I had been there to visit several times recently. Joe organized a memorial service which was held a week later. The family and friends gathered and expressed their love.[45]

Blank as Grandfather

Blank was a beloved and loving grandfather. He and Amy had 7 grandchildren, the children of Elizabeth and Joseph Levine (Daniel, Jeremy, Jonathan and David) and the children of Miriam and Murray Sachs (Debbie, Benjamin and Aaron). Blank enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren at their home in Cincinnati.

[45] Ibid., p. 41.

Blank and Amy were the center of the family. They were a "stable, reliable axis around which the family rotated."[46] As both Blank and Amy lived long lives, their grandchildren had the opportunity to develop real and lasting relationships with them before their deaths. One of Blank's grandchildren referred to him as "one of the most inspiring figures in my life."[47]

Blank was a dignified man in every aspect of his life, including his role as grandfather. He would not be seen giving piggy back rides or crawling on the carpet, his devotion and his love for his grandchildren was showed to them in the way that he spoke to them and the things that they shared.[48] Blank shared with his grandchildren his great love of nature, literature, Jewish life, travel and social awareness. Sheldon and Amy would watch the birds over breakfast and would invite their grandchildren into this ritual.

As he did with his colleagues and his friends, Blank shared his dry and timely sense of humor with his grandchildren. He would tell them jokes delivered with perfect dry timing. One of his favorite jokes:

> Elephant (to mouse): My, what a puny thing you are!
> Mouse: Well, I've been sick.[49]

These jokes, and Blank's love of and skill with puns live on in the family. Joseph and Elizabeth's three boys all have "B" as their middle initial. The "B" stands for Blank, and also for blank, in that they have no middle names, only initials-both acknowledging the name and pun-loving nature of their grandparents.[50]

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[46] Email correspondence with Jeremy Levine, 6 Feb. 2011.
[47] Email correspondence with Aaron Sachs, 1 Feb. 2011.
[48] Telephone interview with Joseph Levine, 25 Jan. 2011.
[49] Email correspondence with Jeremy Levine, 6 Feb. 2011.
[50] Ibid.

While his grandchildren felt very close to him they also recognized his skills as writer, speaker and scholar. His grandchildren remember his public speaking- his "fine use of simplicity, and short, declarative statements that made his talks excel over most others."[51] This skill also helped with his joke telling.

Blank and Amy also shared their liberal politics with their wider family. One grandchild shares that it is with pride that he is able to share that his grandparents were card carrying members of the ACLU.[52] As his Grandson Aaron Sachs reflected, "I especially appreciate that he was a feminist, a peacenik, and a scholar who cared about writing for a broader audience. He was also kind, thoughtful and gentle, and he spent his life making meaning."[53]

Blank took the time to get to know each of his grandchildren. He would walk with his grandchildren on Lafayette circle, and often they would ask their grandfather for advice and counsel.[54] The grandchildren would bring Blank problems and he would help them to explore possibilities.[55] Blank's grandchildren recall that their grandfather was a kind human being whose love for his family was unconditional.[56]

Blank's grandchildren had the sense that he and Amy lived well, they introduced the grandchildren to fine dining and "moderate indulgence" (one scotch before dinner).[57] The grandchildren would brag to their friends about the grandparents' love of travel, especially as they grew in years. These trips may have been a way to get respite from allergies but to the grandchildren they were adventures.

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Email correspondence with Aaron Sachs, 1 Feb. 2011.
[54] Telephone interview with Joseph Levine, 25 Jan. 2011.
[55] Telephone interview with Miriam Sachs, 26 Jan. 2011.
[56] Email correspondence with Jeremy Levine, 6 Feb. 2011.
[57] Email correspondence with Jeremy Levine, 6 Feb. 2011.

Blank and Amy stayed in touch with their family even when not living close by. Daniel Levine, one of their grandchildren has hundreds of letters from his grandparents. More from Amy than from Sheldon, but still a fair amount from Sheldon.

Daniel Levine had the opportunity of going to graduate school from 1975–1980 in Cincinnati, while there he saw his grandparents on a weekly basis. He would bring his friends over to their house to share in their company. Every Friday he would meet Blank and Amy at the chapel of HUC.

> At services we prayed, sang with Bonia Shur, and watched Uncle Jake (Marcus) cup his hands on his ear better to hear every syllable of the Yahrzeit list. Since I had met so many HUC faculty as a young child, and since my father had taken me back to campus on several occasions in later years, I felt that all HUC were my family—and still do…After the service, we would go back to 201 Lafayette Circle for Shabbat dinner. I remember how Granddaddy would rub his hands together during some part of the ceremony…and him dipping the bread into the silver saltcellar before sharing it with Grandma and me. So many times I wished that I had a recorder to capture their conversation; I tried to remember everything they said, but my brain was not able to do it. How I wished to keep everything in my mind.

Blank served as the family rabbi. The first wedding that Blank performed after his ordination was that of his younger sister. According to one family legend, Blank began his charge by saying, "Little sister…" and everyone in the congregation burst into tears.[58]

201 had a beautiful dining room where so many ordinary meals and special events occurred. The house had a toy room, always filled with toys for the visiting guests, the toy room also had books in it. All of the rooms had collections of books, aside from the rooms with food. As Daniel Levine reflects, "I grew up loving the books: their sight, smell, and their oldness."[59] In the corner of the living room was an ark with the Blank

[58] Telephone interview with Miriam Sachs, 26 Jan. 2011.
[59] Email correspondence with David Levine, 7 Feb. 2011.

Torah scroll. After his death many of these books were taken, as requested by Blank, by the grandchildren. As Daniel reflects:

> I have Granddaddy and Grandma's books at home on a shelf of family publications, and in my office at the University I have (and use) his Septuagint (3 volumes) and his Hebrew Bible—both with his own notes. Granddaddy told me to take lots of his books from his home, and I did. I have (and have used) his Loeb volumes of Josephus and Philo, and his copies of the works of Sam Sandmel, another member of our family circle from HUC, and whose son Ben I have known since early childhood, and who was the best man at our wedding, and remains my best friend.[60]

Passover was the biggest gathering at 201. "It wasn't uncommon to have twenty people sleeping in the house at once, on couches, mattresses on the floor...including one old double bed in the attic known as the "bed of affliction."[61] Every year the seder was a bit different, Blank would lead the seder but individual parts were added so that there was unique group participation. "Much of the service was in English and some of it was dramatic, some serious some poetic, some funny and all interesting. The reading was shared, the singing and the music was beautiful."[62] Family members would gather from surrounding areas to join in the seder:

> The musicians, or pretend musicians, among the children present accompanied the songs from the Haggadah. The pewter plates that were family heirlooms were used on the table, as were other objects that were meant for use at seders...These were very special times. The table was extended as far as it would go, and the smaller side table was often used to seat some of our guests.[63]

The passing of their grandparents was very difficult for the grandchildren. However, it eased the pain that Sheldon and Amy lived on in the memories of the so many that they had touched. As Daniel Levine reflects, "They are in my brothers' homes, in my cousin's homes, and in the stories we tell our children about them and their house.

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Sachs, *My Memories*. 2006–2007, p. 32.
[62] Ibid., p. 17.
[63] Ibid.

They are in their writings, which we treasure and share with others. They are—as we tell our children—in our hearts."[64]

Also, Sheldon is remembered by so many of the students whom he taught. Whenever his grandchildren meet a Reform rabbi of a certain age they can make that connection and share stories.[65] These connections even happen with non-rabbis and non-Jews.

> Dr. Levine,
>
> Thank you for taking part in my graduation ceremony on Saturday. It meant a lot to me. I know Dr. Coon appreciates it as well. I feel for you, having had to sit through another afternoon ceremony and then a wedding as well. You earned your stripes on Saturday!
>
> I'm coming to realize that the academic world is small in many ways. Besides out mutual association with the U of Cincinnati, a close friend and O.T. scholar Jack P. Lewis studied under your grandfather Sheldon Blank at Hebrew Union. Also, when I told my dad that your grandfather was Dr. Blank, he thought I was joking with him. He told me that Blank was one of the foremost O.T. scholars of the 20th century. My dad has studied from many of his works, especially the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (I think). My dad's doctorate is in Hebrew Wisdom Literature. It is funny that I think he was more excited to hear that your grandfather was Dr. Blank than he was to see me graduate! I thought you might appreciate the connections. Your student, Nathan Howard.[66]

They are remembered by their grandchildren with deep love and affection:

> I think of Granddaddy every day, and always have. It's not a stretch, but rather a natural thing that is almost like breathing. He and Grandma have been part of my life since I can remember anything, since I lived my first five years in the same city with them.[67]

More than anything-the grandchildren are left with lessons about the importance of family. As David Levine wrote:

> In 1980, Grandaddy officiated at Jeremy and Lisa's wedding - the first wedding of our generation. Afterwards, he called a meeting of all of us grandchildren and

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[64] Email correspondence with David Levine, 7 Feb. 2011.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

> spoke something like this: "Yesterday, I married Jeremy and Lisa. A generation before, I married the groom's parents. And more than 50 years ago, I married your Grandmother, if you know what I mean. I am lucky enough to still be married to your Grandmother and I hope and pray that 50 years from now, Jeremy and Lisa will celebrate their Golden Anniversary, too. I won't be there. But you all will. And I would like to ask you all to make a pact to gather together again in 2030 and celebrate with them." I was 15 years old at the time, and that made a deep impression on me. This coming May, I will attend the wedding of Jeremy and Lisa's son (the first wedding of *his* generation). And he, too, will be married by his grandfather. I find strength and comfort in this kind of family continuity.[68]

While his role as teacher, colleague, husband, father and grandfather all were unique, in looking critically at them you can see shared characteristics in all of the relationships. Blank was a noble individual, he cared for the well being of others. Blank was eloquent with his speech, he spoke in measured words and deeply appreciated wittiness. He was loyal and caring for those with whom he was close.

[68] Ibid.

Conclusion

Sheldon H. Blank was born into a humble family in a small town in the Mid-west of America. His parents were both models of community involvement, of respect for and commitment to literature and faith and, most of all, they taught Blank to appreciate the importance of family. He would embrace these values over the course of his life.

During his years as a student at the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College, Sheldon Blank began to understand and develop his literary skills. He published short pieces and developed an interest in prophetic literature. Also at this time his perspective on the world changed as his education introduced him to the wider world of philosophy, literature and history.

After graduation and ordination Blank spent a year in Germany, receiving his doctorate and furthering his academic goals. In the meantime he also developed relationships with relatives living in Germany, which heightened his sense of familial obligation.

After completing his doctorate, Blank returned to Cincinnati to begin his teaching at HUC. In his early years Blank's main scholarly focus was on the language and history of the text. As a teacher, he drew upon the knowledge he gained during his student years as well as the archaeological experience he gained from his studies in Jerusalem in 1926 .

A decade into teaching, Blank began to develop his own unique scholarly voice. He began to emphasize the broad moral lessons contained in the writings of the biblical prophets. Blank personally identified with the literature he studied, and he conveyed these lessons to the students he taught at HUC. He also conveyed his ideas about the prophets to the many congregations and Jewish organizations he visited over the decades.

His teachings were further disseminated through the scholarly articles and volumes he published. These publications bespoke Blank's understanding of Reform Judaism-a liberal religious movement rooted in the prophetic ideals that emerged from the biblical text. Blank taught that the world was created by God for human habitation. He similarly believed that the survival of humankind was God's intention -- but the human being's responsibility. Blank believed in God as a universal spirit that compelled Jews to concern themselves with the universal needs of all communities and individuals, not exclusively on particularistic Jewish concerns.

To his students, colleagues, friends and family, Blank is remembered as a reserved but very warm human being. He cared deeply for those around him – his family and his community. He was a deep thinker, and a teacher who fostered compassionate and gentle relationships. It is clear that he profoundly influenced the lives of his family and his friends.

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