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**SAMUEL S. COHON:**  
**A SPIRITUAL AND INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion**

Cincinnati, Ohio  
1992

Referees  
Professor Jakob J. Petuchowski  
Professor Eugene Mihaly

This Thesis is Respectfully And Graciously Dedicated  
To The Memory Of My Teacher,  
**Jakob J. Petuchowski** ז"ל:  
Whose Respect And Gratitude For His Teacher,  
Samuel S. Cohon  
Inspired This Student  
And  
Guided This Work

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who have been a continual source of help and inspiration to me, and who, therefore, made this thesis possible:

To my teacher and friend, Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski ז"ל, who encouraged me to undertake this project nearly two years ago, and whose recent and untimely death has left a permanent void in my heart. This thesis belongs to him as much as it belongs to me; he carefully examined every word and affectionately pored over every thought. It is my hope that I might some day be able to bring even a fragment of the honor due to his name and memory as that which he brought to his beloved teacher and mentor, Dr. Samuel S. Cohon.

To the staff of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, who made the research for this thesis possible, and who created a warm and inviting home for me during my study of Cohon's papers.

To Professors Jacob Rader Marcus, Ezra Spicehandler and Elizabeth Petuchowski, who, through their memories, allowed me to become better acquainted with Samuel Cohon.

To Professor Eugene Mihaly, who graciously provided me with the support and guidance I needed in the final days of this thesis, and agreed to serve as reader in the absence of his colleague and my referee.

To my rabbis, teachers and friends, Bernard H. Mehlman, Ronne Friedman, Samuel K. Joseph, and Gary P. Zola, who are a continual source of inspiration to me.

To my grandmother, Dr. Ilse Seidemann, who has long instilled within me the love of Jewish learning and the value of intellectual pursuit.

To my parents, Robert and Anita Seidemann, who continually support me in my endeavors, and who remind me to take time to enjoy life and all it has to offer.

And finally, I am forever indebted to Joe -- my husband, my friend, my partner. His smile, his patience, his encouragement, and his love helped to make this thesis a most gratifying and fulfilling venture.



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## DIGEST

Samuel S. Cohon (born in Lohi, Minsk, Russia, 1888; died in Los Angeles, 1959) was a rabbi, a scholar, and a theologian, who, after serving the pulpit rabbinate, taught theology and liturgy at the Hebrew Union College for a period of thirty-six years. In addition, as the major liturgist of the American Reform Movement and as the architect of the Columbus Platform of 1937, he helped shape the American Reform Movement in the period of its transition from its so-called "classical" phase into the form in which we know it today.

This thesis is a study of Samuel Cohon the Reformer, and the important bridge that he built between the Reform Movement of the Pittsburgh Platform and our own Movement today. The first chapter of the thesis is essentially biographical in nature. It explores Cohon's life beginning with his Eastern European background through his later years as a student and teacher of Reform Judaism in America.

The second chapter of the thesis provides an introduction to Cohon's major work in the area of Reform Jewish theology -- the Columbus Platform of 1937. This chapter outlines some of the reasons Cohon became involved in this important project and analyzes his role as architect of the Platform.

The third chapter of the thesis is a detailed study of the contents of the Columbus Platform in light of Cohon's own theology. This chapter juxtaposes the final draft of the Columbus Platform against the background of Cohon's theology known as the "four C's".

Cohon's role as liturgist of the Reform Movement is the subject of the fourth chapter of this work. This chapter provides the reader with an overview of Cohon's responsibilities as editor of the Union Haggadah (1923),

the Rabbi's Manual (1928), and the newly revised Union Prayer Book (1940, 1945).

Chapter five focuses on Cohon the scholar. This chapter provides a working bibliography of Cohon's publications and outlines the many areas of Jewish scholarship in which Cohon was involved. The chapter concludes with a brief survey of Cohon's critics in the scholarly world.

Finally, the thesis closes with an epilogue that aims to reach some general conclusions regarding Cohon's contribution to twentieth century Reform Judaism in America.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### A BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT OF SAMUEL S. COHON

Just one year before his death, in a rare autobiographical account, Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon reflected upon his youth, his upbringing, and his career as a rabbi. "What meaning can be extracted from the years of my life, that convey a message to you who prepare yourselves for the rabbinate?"<sup>1</sup> Cohon asked his students at the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. "Whatever significance my life possesses derives from my humble pursuit of the path of the Torah,"<sup>2</sup> Cohon answered. And while humility may have been the mode by which Cohon approached the Torah and his lifelong pursuit of Jewish learning, his contribution to the storehouse of Jewish knowledge, and to Reform Judaism in particular, was anything but modest.

Born in 1888 in the small village of Lohi in Minsk, Russia, and raised in the nurturing and pious atmosphere of the shtetl before immigrating to America in 1904, Samuel S. Cohon was a man influenced by the environments in which he lived and the people with whom he studied. Educated first in the yeshivot of Russia and Eastern Europe and later by both Jewish and secular institutions of higher learning in the United States, Samuel Cohon's education was as varied and diverse as the rabbi he later

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel S. Cohon, "My Youth and Preparation," 1958. Samuel S. Cohon Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, Hollinger Box 22, Folder 5, p. 1.

All subsequent references to the Samuel S. Cohon Papers of the American Jewish Archives will be listed by title (if authored by Cohon) or by the name of the correspondent or writer (in the case of letters or other papers not authored by Cohon). In any case, the abbreviation "SSC Papers, AJA, 22/5" (indicating box/folder number) will be used.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

came to be. Throughout his life as a rabbi, teacher, theologian and scholar, Samuel S. Cohon combined the yeshivah and shtetl of the Old World with the rationalism and Scientific Study of Judaism of the New World in order to create a new type of Reform Judaism on American soil which would "adapt Reform . . . to the specific challenges of the twentieth century."<sup>3</sup>

The migration from the Old World to the New World proved to be both filled with promise and disappointment for the young Cohon. Cohon found himself immediately attracted to the rationality and idea of progress upon which the Reform Movement in America was conceived; however, he felt that Reform Judaism was cold and devoid of religious sentiment. While America "was indeed a land of promise . . . with freedom, equality, and opportunity for all . . . the spiritual radiance of Jewish life was dimmed."<sup>4</sup> The rationalism of the nineteenth century and the struggle of the early reformers to break away from the primitive and antiquated forms of Orthodoxy had led to the creation of a spiritual vacuum among American Reform Jews which none of the pioneer reformers had envisioned.

During his initial years in America, Cohon continually lamented the inferiority of Jewish education, the lack of interest among Jews in their religious heritage and culture, and the emphasis on the materialistic aspect of life rather than the spiritual. While rejoicing in the opportunity afforded to all people in America to worship and practice religion freely, Cohon nevertheless realized that all "efforts to transplant East-European religious life to the New World proved abortive."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Cohon set his sights and

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<sup>3</sup> Michael A. Meyer, "Samuel S. Cohon: Reformer of Reform Judaism," Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought 15 (Summer 1966): 319.

<sup>4</sup> "My Youth and Preparation," 1958, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/5, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.



efforts upon "touching people with a religious message"<sup>6</sup>; a new message that would be meaningful and lasting for Jews living in a world in which Judaism had simply reached a "deplorable state of affairs."<sup>7</sup>

Cohon was not satisfied being only a critic of Reform Judaism. Instead, he spent his early years in America formulating a plan for the spiritual regeneration of American Reform Judaism. At the heart of Cohon's agenda was his determination not to invalidate or obliterate the work of the early reformers, but to "carry their aims forward with as much ardor as ever . . . and, in addition, do what they left undone."<sup>8</sup> Cohon believed that enough modernization had taken place within the Movement during the nineteenth century, and that the challenge of the twentieth century was "chiefly to intensify Judaism" through the "Judaization of the Jew."<sup>9</sup>

As the name implies, Cohon's intention to "Judaize the Jew" began not with the Reform Movement as a whole, but with the Reform Jew as an individual. Cohon believed that while the first generation of reformers had adequately articulated the Movement's ideological differences from Orthodoxy, it was the task of the new generation to make sure that Reform Jews identified with their movement and understood both the freedoms and the boundaries of Reform Judaism. Cohon's positive and optimistic view of human nature in general allowed him to approach his task with enthusiasm and passion. Deeply committed to the potential within each individual to grow and change, Cohon believed that America provided the basis for each person to become a "truly cultured man . . . who is true to himself, physically, mentally, morally and spiritually, and not just he who makes a vain show of

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Cohon to Israel Bettan, November 9, 1914, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/5, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> "Light in the Sanctuary," March 5, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/7, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

some superficial and external polish in speech and manners."<sup>10</sup> Cohon contended that in order for one to become a religious person, one first had to approach his life in general with a sense of resolve and purpose. It was incumbent upon each and every Reform Jew to understand and practice the "art of life" which included:

acquiring an understanding heart so that we may be able to discern between good and bad and thereby develop an optimistic outlook. . . . This art is not a gift but a reward, a crowning of the incessant struggle for the life of reason. . . . Wisdom, religious earnestness, and the fear of God rescue us from slavery to the passing moment and the bodily selves. These guides, alone, ennoble life, dignify it, and render it eternal.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, while optimism was one of the hallmarks of Cohon's personality, he experienced moments of stress and anxiety as well. Particularly during Cohon's initial years in the pulpit rabbinate, following his ordination from the Hebrew Union College, he often expressed his frustration with the members of his congregation. Early in his rabbinic tenure at Zion Congregation in Chicago, Cohon wrote to his lifelong friend and colleague Israel Bettan: "I do not know how it is with other Rabbis, but I find myself wasting my strength in crying to deaf ears -- often amid more than half empty pews. . . . Few come to us because they are stirred by the truth hidden in the heart of Judaism. We are, after all, a people of shopkeepers."<sup>12</sup> While the humor in this statement by Cohon is evident, there is also an important

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<sup>10</sup> "Light and Truth - Life's Guides," January 31, 1913, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/7, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> "The Art of Life," January 17, 1913, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/2, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Cohon to Bettan. (See footnote #6)

message in these lines which offers a unique insight into the personality and purpose of Cohon the rabbi and teacher. That is, Cohon believed that his objective in winning people back to Judaism would only be successful if a religious spirit based on both the past and present could be fostered among Reform Jews. Cohon was as concerned with where Jews and Judaism had come from as he was dedicated to the direction in which he hoped they would progress.

Yet, progress for Cohon was not simply a linear or one-dimensional process. For Cohon, progress was built upon the lessons of the past and the reality of the present; it encompassed the heart as well as the mind. Throughout his career as pulpit rabbi and especially during his professorship at the Hebrew Union College from 1923 until his death in 1959, Cohon stressed the romantic and emotional aspects of Judaism as well as the already overly-emphasized rational component. Cohon believed that Constructive Reform had to be based on education and not indoctrination, conviction and not convenience,<sup>13</sup> so that young and old would be exposed to the beauty and sanctity of Judaism and ultimately come to love its teachings. While Cohon approached Jewish scholarship in a serious and objective fashion, he frequently spoke about his mission as a Jewish teacher in a poetic and almost flowery style. In the following passage, Cohon beautifully articulated his goals as a messenger of tradition and also demonstrated his familiarity with classic English literature.

My purpose . . . is to help my youthful  
friends to scale those mountain heights of  
the Jewish genius, which no true lover of

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<sup>13</sup> "What is Our Judaism?" April 2, 1958, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5.

Cohon used this language frequently in both his published works and his personal papers.



Israel . . . can afford to miss, where the air is pure and soul-restoring. Often have I climbed those hills and when after painful and laborious efforts, tired and worn out, I had made my way through the tangled woods on the slopes and through the obscure paths higher up, and beheld a glimpse of those serene heights of the human spirit, which compensated me for the struggle and reinvigorated me, I vowed that I would lay out a smooth path to take throngs of young and strong climbers to the mountain of the Lord, to the hills of Zion, where the spirit of God has found a permanent dwelling.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, it was quite natural for Cohon to view teaching and the process of transmitting Jewish knowledge and values in such a reverential manner, for Cohon himself was particularly indebted to his own teachers over the years. There is scarcely a document in Cohon's papers that does not graciously mention the many teachers from whom Cohon had received his education as well as his inspiration. Just as Samuel Cohon viewed Reform Judaism as one link in Judaism's ongoing chain of tradition, so too, did he regard himself as but a continuation of the legacy that he had inherited from his masters.

"The scholar who attracted me to the college . . . as a lad of twenty . . . was David Neumark, whose Hebrew philosophical writings had fascinated me,"<sup>15</sup> Cohon often remarked. Neumark appealed to Cohon both as a person and as a scholar. He was also one of the few Zionists on the faculty of the College who escaped the great "purge" of Zionists that took place during those years at the College. As a teacher, Neumark "brought to his lecture room a rich store of enthusiasm and of love for his subject which proved

<sup>14</sup> Religious school materials from Zion Congregation, 1915-6, SSC Papers, AJA, 5/5.

<sup>15</sup> "Farewell Remarks to the Faculty of the Hebrew Union College," May 10, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 9/3, p. 1.

contagious,"<sup>16</sup> Cohon wrote in a memorial essay about his teacher. Neumark's scholarly work in the field of Jewish philosophy spoke to the rationalistic side of Cohon, for Neumark "strove to break the barrier that separated Torah from philosophy . . . and vindicated the rightful claim of the Jewish people to systematic philosophy."<sup>17</sup> Yet, Neumark's emphasis on philosophy and reason were never to the exclusion of the emotions. While Neumark upheld Jewish intellectualism, "in his eager search after knowledge, he yet lived by his faith."<sup>18</sup>

In fact, Cohon's thoughts and impressions about David Neumark are similar in both tone and mood to his remarks about Jehudah Halevi. In Cohon's eyes, Halevi's contribution to the Jews of his time was analogous to Neumark's importance for modern Jews. Even though these two scholars were separated from one another by centuries, Cohon admired them for their ability to strike a balance between human reason and human emotion. For them, like for Cohon, there must be a proper place for both philosophy and religion; however, "religion is primary . . . and has a more secure foundation in the experience of the Jewish people in the course of their history."<sup>19</sup> In a paper on Halevi's conception of God, Cohon goes even one step further: "Philosophical explanations cannot inspire the same reverence for God as religious belief, notwithstanding their logical form."<sup>20</sup>

At times, Cohon's stress on the emotional component of religion led him to words and thoughts bordering on the mystical. Echoes of Cohon's Eastern European past may be detected in many of his writings. Cohon

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<sup>16</sup> Cohon, "David Neumark," B'nai B'rith Magazine 39 (February 1925): 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> Cohon, "Jehudah Halevi," American Jewish Year Book 43 (1941-42): 478.

<sup>20</sup> "Halevi's Conception of God," 1941, SSC Papers, AJA, 19/3.

maintained that the truly religious person is characterized by his constant quest to know a God, who, ultimately must remain mysterious and unknowable. Cohon even went so far as to remark that "the mystic spirit of Kabbalah has been of greatest value in keeping Judaism alive. . . . Mysticism in its noblest forms has made the communion with God a reality for us. . . . While it did not tear the veil that hides the Godhead from the eyes of mortals, this life-breath of faith has freshened our moral and spiritual vision."<sup>21</sup>

In addition to his Eastern European roots, Cohon often credited Rudolf Otto with having nurtured his own mystical spirit. Cohon frequently quoted Otto in his own work in order to stress the holy and awe-inspiring aspect of religion. Otto creates the category of the holy or sacred in his book The Idea of the Holy and views it as the "innermost core of every religion. . . . Without it no religion would be worthy of the name."<sup>22</sup> According to Otto, one's goal as a religious person is to attempt to perceive the "numinous" in religion; that is, the "intrinsic quality of the holy that resembles beauty and music which, if not experienced, can never be fully grasped through verbal presentations."<sup>23</sup> The supernatural and superrational qualities in religion distinguish it from pure ethics, and, according to Otto, separate it from pure ethics.

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<sup>21</sup> Cohon, "The Royal Crown," sermon preached at his inauguration as Professor of Jewish Theology at The Hebrew Union College, December 28, 1923, printed in The Scribe, Portland, Oregon, December 29, 1923; also in The Sentinel, Chicago, LII, 9; rpt. in Religious Affirmations (Los Angeles: Limited Edition, 1983), p. 18.

It is interesting that Cohon was writing and speaking about the importance of mysticism in Judaism at the same time that Gershom Scholem was endeavoring to "put Jewish mysticism on the map." Perhaps it is no coincidence that the above sermon, "The Royal Crown," was preached by Cohon in the same year that Scholem published the Sefer ha-Bahir (German in Das Buch Bahir).

<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; rpt. ed. 1958), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Cohon, What We Jews Believe and A Guide to Religious Practice (Assen: Royal VanGorcum Ltd., 1971), p. 15.

While Cohon's faith was no doubt shaped by the mystical ideas offered by Otto, Cohon cautioned against allowing religious mysticism to degenerate into superstition. "In strange manner," Cohon wrote, "many of us so confuse faith with superstition that the observer can often not distinguish between the one and the other. This circumstance more than any other cause has discredited religion in the eyes of a great many thinking people."<sup>24</sup> Cohon felt disdain toward any superstition which appeared under the guise of religion. He continually railed against superstitious practices and beliefs in Judaism, and viewed them as primitive and crude substitutes for pure faith. Cohon offered a clear explanation of the differences between faith and superstition:

Faith is the child of love; superstition is the offspring of fear. Faith grows out of reason; superstition grows against reason. Faith is born in the heart of man, out of the conviction that divine law and order rule the world, and that this law is for the good of the whole. . . . Superstition owes its existence to the distorted mind that sees nothing but chaos in nature and in human life, and finds everywhere the play of malignant forces.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, due to the often perceived nexus between superstition and mysticism, Cohon maintained: "Much as I value mysticism in religion, I cannot blind myself to the danger of toying with it. The aberrations resulting from its application to the actual lives of men, are all too well known."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Faith and Superstition," February 12, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Simon (President of the CCAR) regarding Christian Science and Judaism, March 8, 1924, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/4.

Therefore, much like his most important teacher and mentor, Kaufmann Kohler, Cohon believed that the "middle way" between the extremes of rationalism and emotionalism provided one with the best course on his religious journey. The relationship between Kaufmann Kohler and Samuel Cohon was one that began at the Hebrew Union College while Cohon was a student, and continued growing and developing throughout the years. Kohler taught Cohon the importance of Jewish values as well as the need to study Judaism from a critical standpoint. Cohon took up Kohler's challenge to create in Reform Judaism a "broader liberalism, a religious truth that appeals to reason and common sense and enthrones God in all men."<sup>27</sup> Kohler served as a rabbinic as well as a scholarly model for Cohon; he helped Cohon set his priorities as a rabbi, and urged him to sharpen and polish his thinking and writing as a scholar. In a poignant letter to Kohler in 1921, Cohon wrote:

You have made of me into a different person. You have opened to me new sources of inspiration and have fired me with love for the truths of the Torah and with zeal for its honor. If the nine years of my ministry have not been without some value to the cause of Judaism, it is, in great measure, due to a spark of your religious enthusiasm.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, it is important to note that even though Kohler served as mentor and model for Cohon, these two men were indeed quite different. Kohler, like Cohon, was born into an Orthodox family; however, unlike Cohon, Kohler was trained in the schools and academies of Western rather than Eastern

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<sup>27</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, "Strife and Triumph," sermon preached in 1908; rpt. in A Living Faith, ed. Samuel S. Cohon (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1948), p. 87.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Cohon to Kohler, July 20, 1921, SSC Papers, AJA, 10/10.



Europe. Kohler's stress on the scientific study was the natural outcome of his education which, from a young age, provided him with instruction in secular as well as Jewish subjects. Cohon greatly admired Kohler's efforts directed at the "complete harmonization of modern thought with the ancient faith."<sup>29</sup> And while Kohler began his career as a radical framer of Reform Judaism and as a rebel against his native Orthodoxy, Cohon points out that Kohler moderated his views later in life in order to "unite and cooperate in building up Judaism and render it the object of love of pride and joy for all."<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly, it was the moderate Kohler whom Cohon admired and chose to follow; however, Cohon understood that Kohler's era initially called for a radical approach to Reform so that it would be successful in developing its own identity as a Jewish religious movement.

While Cohon always considered himself a student and disciple of Kohler, it was clear that Kohler viewed him as colleague and friend as well. Subsequent to Kohler's retirement from Hebrew Union College, President Julian Morgenstern appointed Cohon to the Chair of Theology, and in order to fill the vacancy on the faculty left by his teacher. Cohon expressed continual gratitude to Morgenstern for his appointment to the College faculty, and felt forever privileged to follow in the footsteps of his master. The College offered Cohon the ideal opportunity to shape the contour of Reform Judaism according to the moderate course that Kohler had initiated.

In fact, during Cohon's nearly four decades at the Hebrew Union College, he tried to convince his students that balance and moderation were as critical to the life of the Reform Jew as they were essential for the survival of

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<sup>29</sup> Cohon, "Kaufmann Kohler," Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century, ed. Simon Noveck (Clinton: B'nai B'rith Department of Adult Jewish Education, 1963), p. 235.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Reform Judaism. Cohon not only taught concepts and ideas in the classroom; moreover, his own personal religious practice served as an example to many of his students throughout the years. Cohon viewed Jewish religious practice as both a personal and a social affair. On the subject of the place of Judaism in one's life and community, Cohon stated: "Religion as represented in our Torah and prophets, spells a perfected social order, but an order in which the individual owns his own soul, in which he can dream and hope and love and fight for his ideals."<sup>31</sup> An advocate of personal religion, private prayer and individual piety, Cohon stressed the importance of organized religion as well. He said: "From a personal feeling (religion) is transformed into a social agency which ministers to the preservation of society. . . . Religion is impotent until it embodies itself into the life of the community and sets standards and goals for its aspirations and endeavors."<sup>32</sup>

Cohon's approach to the מצוות of Judaism also demonstrated his adherence to the principle of the "golden mean". Cohon maintained that "we of the Reform wing sometimes mistakenly underestimate the value of observance in religion. . . . The מצוות of Judaism are so many rungs in the ladder that links our earthly beings to the Divine."<sup>33</sup> While Cohon did not think it necessary or even possible to observe each of the 613 מצוות in the Torah, he did not suggest that Reform Jews abandon all of them either. He passionately believed that:

far from being the child of apostasy, Reform  
has its roots in the Torah and is the  
outgrowth of Jewish tradition. . . . Reform

<sup>31</sup> "Dreams and Reality - Hanukah During the Great Depression," 1931, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/6.

<sup>32</sup> Cohon, "Why Organized Religion?" *The Jewish Layman* 9 (September 1934): 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> "The Function of Religion," December 17, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/5.

Cohon's analogy of mitzvot to rungs of a ladder is very reminiscent of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

does not teach men and women to disregard the Sabbath or to neglect divine worship. . . . Neither does Reform urge them to eat shellfish and swine flesh. No conference of Reform rabbis ever passed resolutions to that effect.<sup>34</sup>

While Reform Judaism brought greater freedom to the Jew of the twentieth century, it did not equal total and complete anarchy for its members. Reform Judaism, in its optimal state, had to maintain limits. Perhaps Cohon's desire to establish limits in Judaism was inspired in part by Leopold Zunz, whom Cohon viewed as a predominant contributor to Reform Judaism. Surely Cohon would have concurred with his own summary of Zunz's views on this subject: "There must be a boundary line which one cannot transgress, without being excluded from the Community."<sup>35</sup>

For Cohon, membership in the Jewish Community, no less the Reform Jewish Community, meant dedication to the universal as well as the particular forces of the Jewish religion. Cohon stressed the dangers of extremism in this area, and advocated a safe balance between the two:

Judaism's particularism saves it from sinking into characterless theism or from becoming a variant of natural religion. Its universalism preserves it from the no less serious danger of becoming self-sufficient, separatistic and narrow.<sup>36</sup>

For Cohon, Jewish particularism included the responsibility of each Jew to learn about Judaism, to become familiar with the Hebrew language, and to

<sup>34</sup> "Design in Creation," October 8, 1920, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/5.

<sup>35</sup> Cohon, "Zunz and Reform Judaism," Hebrew Union College Annual 31 (1960): 272.

<sup>36</sup> Cohon, "Universal and Particular in Judaism," Judaism 1 (January 1952): 123.



keep the "nostalgic" language of Yiddish alive in the New World. While Cohon never took Jewish particularism to the extreme of Nationalism, he felt that the Jew's culture was unique and worth preserving. Yet, Jewish particularism, for Cohon, was most meaningful if it led toward the universal religious mission of the Jew; that is, making the world a better place in which all people can live. Cohon's universal vision was "not the impossible dream of converting all religions to one of them, but the process of education, of cultivating a spirit of understanding among all leaders."<sup>37</sup> And Cohon believed that only a religion which could be clearly defined religiously and theologically would be successful in achieving this universal mission.

It was for this reason among others that Cohon followed in the footsteps of Kohler and became an ardent champion of the discipline of Jewish theology. Just as Neumark believed philosophy had a rightful place in the history and study of Judaism, Kohler stressed that Reform Judaism had to be defined by creed as well as deed. For Kohler, "the object of systematic theology in Judaism . . . is to single out the essential forces of faith."<sup>38</sup> For Kohler and for Cohon, the survival of Reform Judaism was based on its ability to be defined according to a doctrinal basis. Cohon, as both a pulpit rabbi and as a professor of Jewish theology continually stressed the urgency for Jewish theology in the lives of his congregants as well as in the classrooms of the Hebrew Union College. Cohon viewed theology not merely as a medium for the articulation of Reform Jewish belief, but as a safeguard against the "absorption (by Reform Judaism) of various shades of opinion in alien religious thought."<sup>39</sup> Throughout his career, Cohon attempted to continue

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, Jewish Theology: Systematically and Historically Considered (New York: MacMillan Publishing, Inc., 1918), p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Cohon, "The Future Task of Jewish Theology," The Reconstructionist, January 10, 1958, p. 23.

the work of Kohler and create a theology for Reform Judaism that would "penetrate into the sanctuary of Judaism and reveal its treasures to thinking minds."<sup>40</sup> He frequently criticized the Hebrew Union College for being a "Jewish theological seminary with virtually no theology", and often reproached Reform congregations for being "too absorbed in externals . . . (including) wrangling over the haberdashery that goes with worship and over seating arrangements in the synagogue."<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, every facet of Cohon's work was dedicated to the articulation and advancement of Reform Jewish theology. As a professor at the College, as editor of the Revised Union Haggadah (1923), the Rabbi's Manual (1928), and the newly revised Union Prayer Books (1940, 1945), and as architect of the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism" (1937), Cohon "was perhaps the central theological figure in Reform Judaism in the United States . . . whose thinking exercised a primary influence upon the course of Reform in this century."<sup>42</sup> In addition, the majority of Cohon's scholarly publications and lectures centered on the field of Jewish theology as well. While the breadth of Cohon's expertise was expansive, from a stylistic standpoint, many of his articles, essays and lectures were similar. He often chose a particular theological motif or theme in Judaism, traced it back to its conceptual origin, and then followed it through centuries or even millennia of Jewish history. Whether he addressed the "Unity of God," "Authority in Judaism," "The Idea of Palestine in Jewish Theology," or any other theological subject in Judaism, Cohon always explained the relevance of his subject to contemporary Reform Judaism. Furthermore, he continually demonstrated that change and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Meyer, p. 319. (See footnote #3)

evolution in Jewish thought and practice have been indigenous to Judaism since its inception.

Whether he was teaching, writing, preaching or participating in one of the numerous CCAR, UAHC or B'nai B'rith committees on which he served, Cohon viewed his rabbinate as a "sacred office consecrated to divine service."<sup>43</sup> And for Cohon, the sacred office of the rabbi - whether Reform, Conservative or Orthodox - rested on the rabbi's resolve "to cultivate the reality of the divine spirit in our lives, and to make it the determining factor in our life and thought."<sup>44</sup> Even in Cohon's numerous scholarly articles and publications where he "painstakingly examined all the relevant sources"<sup>45</sup> pertaining to his subject, a spiritual and even reverential vein is ever present. He was determined to make Reform Judaism a living, interesting and vital religion in America. His contributions to the scholarly field of Judaism as well as to the practical aspects of the Reform Movement influenced not only the Jews of his era, but continue to have a lasting effect on the direction of the Movement even until our day.

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<sup>43</sup> Cohon, "The Spiritual Leader," inaugural address given at Zion Temple, Chicago, September 5, 1913; in The Sentinel (Chicago) 11 (1913); rpt. in Religious Affirmations, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Cohon, "The Watchpost of the Spirit," sermon preached at the Consecration Service of Temple Mizpah, Chicago, September 12, 1919; rpt. in Religious Affirmations, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Jakob J. Petuchowski, Introd., Essays in Jewish Theology, by Samuel S. Cohon (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1987), p. XIII.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THE COLUMBUS PLATFORM -- A PRE-HISTORY

Samuel S. Cohon's ideology and philosophy of Judaism constituted the foundation of his interpretation of Reform Judaism as well as the kernel of his rabbinate, scholarly writings and personal religious practice. While Cohon focused his interest and attention on a definition of Reform Judaism that would be appropriate and attractive for the Jews of his time, his interpretation always included a thorough and comprehensive appraisal of the past. For Cohon, Judaism did not exist in a vacuum; therefore, the Jewish experience of the first half of the twentieth century could not be separated from the Jewish past of nearly four millennia. Cohon's determination to achieve historical balance in his thought and ideological symmetry in his religious life resulted in a view of Judaism that fused diverse and even disparate components into an integrated whole. While many other Jewish scholars and leaders during Cohon's time looked to the future for answers to the problems confronting the twentieth century, Cohon carefully scrutinized Jewish history and tradition in order to place the difficult issues of his time onto the spectrum of Jewish development.

Reform Judaism, in Cohon's eyes, evolved naturally from traditional, or Orthodox Judaism. Yet, Cohon believed that Reform had a unique role to play on the stage of modern Jewish history which began with "our immediate task . . . of concentrating on the preservation and cultivation of a healthy Judaism in America."<sup>1</sup> And, after all, this particular mandate was not a new calling for Reform Judaism. For, in Cohon's estimation, Reform was actually

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<sup>1</sup> "The Function of Religion," December 17, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/5, p. 2.

created as a response to changing conditions first in Western Europe and later in America. The complete transformation of life that occurred in Europe simultaneously threatened the foundations of Judaism, and at the same time offered immeasurable opportunity for Jewish growth. "Reform was born of the resolve to stem the tide of religious assimilation, and to keep our people faithful under conditions of freedom,"<sup>2</sup> Cohon believed. And the urgent challenge of "bridg(ing) the gap between Judaism and the new political, social and cultural life of our people in America"<sup>3</sup> was as vital for Cohon's time as it was for the early pioneer Reformers of Western Europe. In Cohon's age, then, the resilience of Reform Judaism and its leaders would be tested by the dramatic and even shocking changes that seemed to take place on a daily basis during the first half of the twentieth century.

Yet the task of bridging the gap between one's life as a Jew and one's life as a citizen of an emancipated country was certainly not a new challenge for a Reform Jewish leader. After all, the founders of the Reform Movement, nearly a century and a half before Cohon, were confronted with the identical responsibility. Cohon believed that the European Enlightenment opened the door to Reform Judaism because it presented an unprecedented challenge to Orthodox Judaism. The Enlightenment had "transformed the thoughts of men,"<sup>4</sup> and compelled Jewish religionists to consider a major "adjustment to the needs of the day and to the new scientific outlook, without sacrifice of Judaism's essential spirit."<sup>5</sup> Individuals such as Moses Mendelssohn, a champion of both emancipation and the Enlightenment, participated in the

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<sup>2</sup> "The Faith of a Reform Jew," March 1, 1957, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> "Reform Judaism: An Abstract of Two Lectures Delivered at Temple Mizpah," 1920, SSC Papers, AJA, 4/6, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," February 5, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.



"regeneration of the Jewish people and the creation of a new era of Jewish life;"<sup>6</sup> however, it became clear to some individuals that a more aggressive plan of Jewish renewal was necessary if Judaism was going to endure the dangers associated with its new-found freedoms. While Mendelssohn provided a fresh approach to the freedoms and limitations of the Jew and his Judaism in the intellectual realm, the task of transforming Judaism was left to others after him who were willing to alter their Jewish practice as well as their intellectual orientation. The question that all of these individuals faced was how to most effectively "keep the light of Judaism alive in Germany, France, England and America . . . so that it would be a living spirit for to-day and to-morrow."<sup>7</sup>

The person whom Cohon admired most for his pioneering efforts on the American Reform scene was Isaac Mayer Wise. Cohon viewed Wise as one who "ministered at the altar of Judaism"<sup>8</sup> and enthusiastically offered the Jews of America a compelling formulation of Jewish life in the New World. According to Cohon, Wise was a great man who possessed a "mission" intended to ignite religious enthusiasm among all Jews in America. Cohon admired Wise not only for his assessment of Reform, (which Wise felt suffered from a lack of purpose and unity), but for the steps that he took in order to create harmony out of discord. While Cohon viewed Wise as an "organizer"<sup>9</sup> of the Reform Movement in America, he was also one who voiced concern about the spiritual well-being of American Jews. Not only did Cohon view Wise as the initiator and organizer of the Reform

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<sup>6</sup> "The Religious Expressions of American Jewry," June 17-20, 1946, SSC Papers, AJA, 25/2, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Reform Judaism: An Abstract of Two Lectures," p. 13. (See footnote #3)

<sup>8</sup> Cohon, "Ministering at the Altar," Hebrew Union College, Mimeographed Offprint of Founder's Day Service, Cincinnati, March 28, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Movement in American; but in addition, Cohon frequently used him as a charismatic example in order to motivate the Jews of his own day:

Difficulties no less formidable than those which blocked Dr. Wise's way impede ours, the same blindness of the masses to their spiritual needs, the same callousness among those who rest at ease in Zion, the same disunion among congregations and leaders, and an even greater confusion regarding first principles of belief and practice.<sup>10</sup>

The work that Wise began in strengthening Jewish life in America was carried on in a more systematic and philosophical manner by Kaufmann Kohler. While Wise's ideal of a united American Jewry had faded out of reality, the existence of a separate Reform Movement had been born in its place. Whereas Wise had sought to establish unity between all the Jews of America, Kohler sought to unify the growing number of congregations around the country who now called themselves "Reform" into a viable and dynamic Jewish Movement. In fact, by Kaufmann Kohler's time, the fledgling Reform Movement had blossomed to the extent that it seemed ready for a clear and comprehensive statement defining its design and purpose. The new challenges that confronted the Movement called for a new genre of leaders. "If Dr. Wise was the grand architect of Reform Judaism in America, Dr. Kohler was its chief interpreter."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, whereas Wise was a "towering personality" who "infused his great spirit"<sup>12</sup> into the Reform Movement, Kohler shaped and molded the ideology of the Movement and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Cohon, "History of the Hebrew Union College," American Jewish Historical Society 40 (September 1950): 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

the Reform Jewish institutions created by Wise. According to Cohon, Kohler took on the awesome responsibility of "elucidating the meaning of Reform Judaism and its relation to the vexing problems of the day."<sup>13</sup>

And the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, the outcome of a conference of American Reform rabbis summoned by Kohler, abides as the clearest portrait of Kohler's thought, and stands as the Movement's first attempt to formulate a cogent self-definition. Cohon considered the Pittsburgh Platform to be the most important basis for his own work as a Reform Jewish leader, just as he viewed Kaufmann Kohler as one in the "forefront of the creative scholars and thinkers . . . of American Judaism."<sup>14</sup> Cohon continually referred to the Pittsburgh Platform in his essays and his writings; moreover, he used it as the foundation for his own theological work that ultimately resulted in the Columbus Platform of 1937.

In Cohon's eyes, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 responded to two challenges: "that of Orthodoxy on the one hand, and of radical rationalism on the other."<sup>15</sup> Cohon praised the Pittsburgh Platform as a document that "dealt particularly with the doctrines which distinguished Reform from historical Judaism . . . and was entirely free from the element of coercion."<sup>16</sup> The Pittsburgh Platform served as a first step in Reform Judaism's self-definition because it "represented the reaffirmation of Reform in the face of the criticism of the conservatives, and reflected its adjustment to the political

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Cohon, "Kaufmann Kohler," in Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century, ed. Simon Noveck (Clinton: B'nai B'rith Great Book Series, 1963), p. 238.

While early on Kohler seemed to really stress Reform as a denomination, in his later years, he emphasized more non-denominational thinking.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> "A Preface to the New Platform," substance of an address delivered before the Association of Reform Rabbis of New York, April 13, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/7, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.



order and to the intellectual temper of the new age."<sup>17</sup> According to Cohon, the greatest contribution of the Pittsburgh Platform was the autonomy it gave to the individual in his or her religious practice. This value is summarized by Cohon in the following statement:

Instead of stating the beliefs which Jews must profess as part of their religious duty if they are to share in the salvation which Judaism holds out to its followers, they merely define the Reform Jewish position and present an ideal basis for the religious life, without restricting the right of private interpretation. They offer guidance and seek to achieve a greater unity of spirit and purpose within the ranks of Reform.<sup>18</sup>

And yet by the time Cohon began his career in the rabbinate, it became apparent to him and others that the Pittsburgh Platform had become antiquated. While it served the needs of its time, place and population, new changes on the horizon indicated that "in our eagerness to rationalize religion, we identified it (too much) with the non-religious attitude of the mind."<sup>19</sup> The Pittsburgh Platform had gone too far to the extremes of personal choice and the rational powers of the individual, and had somehow left the Jewish religion out of the picture. As early as 1913, just twenty-eight years after the birth of the historic Pittsburgh Platform, Cohon wrote: "The ideals to which the leaders of Reform Judaism gave their lives have been perverted in the minds of the people. In the minds of the people, Reform is nothing more than a minimum of religion which sanctifies convenience in place of

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<sup>17</sup> Cohon, "The Contemporary Mood in Reform Judaism," The Journal of Bible and Religion 18 (July 1950): 156.

<sup>18</sup> "Preface to the New Platform," p. 2. (See footnote #15)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

principle. Free, to them, means license."<sup>20</sup> While earlier in its history, it was important for Reform Judaism to identify itself as an American Movement, Cohon believed that it was essential for twentieth century Reform Jews to reassert their Jewish connections and associations if Reform was to survive as a Jewish phenomenon.

Cohon exhorted Reform Jews to renew their ties to the Jewish experience and to the Jewish traditions through the use of a "Jewish vocabulary". He was unafraid to utilize words and phrases associated with traditional Judaism in order to remind Reform Jews of their roots and of their heritage. Cohon wrote in a sermon: "We face a danger of forgetting the terms of our covenant and of failing to discharge our debt of honor."<sup>21</sup> Cohon believed that the autonomy provided by the previous generation of Reformers needed to be balanced by a new understanding of the concept of authority.<sup>22</sup> Cohon felt that the creation of a new type of authority was necessary in order to begin to ground the abstract values of Kohler's generation into more concrete expressions of Jewish life and practice. Cohon often addressed the issue of authority and wrestled with innovative ways of creating a unique variety of religious authority that a highly modernized and sophisticated people would tolerate:

One of the most pressing problems before us, is the reconciliation between individual freedom and authority in Judaism. While we may not want to entrust our hard won freedom of thought and conduct to any arbitrary external authority, we can find a

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<sup>20</sup> Part of unpreached sermon, intended for inaugural address at Zion Temple, 1913, SSC Papers, AJA, 4/8.

<sup>21</sup> "The Debt of Honor," May 21, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/5.

<sup>22</sup> Cohon's work "Authority in Judaism," Hebrew Union College Annual 11 (1936): 593-646 - is an important scholarly exposition on the subject.

greater sense of safety in having our freedom guided by some kind of moral authority coming from our own consciences and from the conscience of our people.<sup>23</sup>

Specifically, Cohon believed that greater attention needed to be paid to the particularistic characteristics of Judaism. While integration into American society had been adequately accomplished by Reform Jews, assimilation threatened the basis of the Jewish religion. Cohon maintained that "the only well tried remedy that we can and should apply, is to rebuild the foundations of Jewish living: To teach our people - though living in a Christian atmosphere - to think in terms of Judaism and of Jewish experience."<sup>24</sup> While the Pittsburgh Platform had been formulated as a reaction against the forces which challenged Reform Judaism's existence, Cohon felt that contemporary Reform Jews needed to conceptualize their religion in positive terms. Cohon emphasized the eternal, abiding values of Judaism that Reform Jews needed to adopt in order to make Reform Judaism more Jewish: "Religion cannot thrive on criticism, on negations, or even on revisions."<sup>25</sup> And, after time and persistence on Cohon's part, rabbis and Reform Jewish leaders "became convinced of (his) position;" that is, the Reform Movement, the Hebrew Union College and the Central Conference of American Rabbis needed to concentrate on an "honest understanding of Judaism, instead of the popular 'isms'."<sup>26</sup>

And it was as a reaction against many of the "popular isms" of the time that the Columbus Platform of 1937, under Cohon's authorship, was first

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Cohon to Dr. Goldenson, January 4, 1924, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/8.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Simon, March 8, 1924, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/4.

<sup>25</sup> Cohon, "Religion and the World Crisis," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 51 (1941): 229.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Rabbi Herman Snyder to Cohon, February 2, 1917, SSC Papers, AJA, 13/1.

conceived. While popular intellectual and philosophical trends in the secular world could be used to fortify and enhance Reform Judaism, these popular movements ought never become replacements or substitutes for religion. Due to the "half-heartedness and uncertainty of the (Reform) leaders," Cohon sought a "spiritual regeneration of both our leaders and laymen. . . in order to restore the health and the creative energy of our people."<sup>27</sup> Cohon deeply believed that contemporary Jews needed to be reminded, through a clear statement, of the primary goal of Progressive Judaism: "Progressive Judaism aims at the renewal and nurture of Jewish loyalty and devotion."<sup>28</sup>

Cohon called for this spiritual regeneration on a national level. He looked to the Central Conference of American Rabbis and its leadership to respond to the dire realities confronting Reform Judaism fifty years after the declaration of the Pittsburgh Platform. Particularly during a time when two World Wars had dramatically changed the face of Europe and European Jewry, Cohon believed that "American Judaism must assume a new responsibility entailed in leadership." As a result, he contended that "what the Jews of America do spiritually, culturally, and philanthropically, will affect the well-being of Jewish communities in many other parts of the world."<sup>29</sup>

Cohon believed that a complete revaluation of Reform would help preserve Reform Jews for Judaism, and Judaism for Reform Jews. In a

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<sup>27</sup> Cohon, "Ministering at the Altar," p. 83. (See footnote #8)

<sup>28</sup> Cohon, "The Teachings of Progressive Judaism," Address before the Ninth International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (Paris), July 3, 1955 in Religious Affirmations, p. 165.

<sup>29</sup> "American Judaism," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 28/4.

powerful statement to the Conference about the plight of Reform Judaism in the 1930s and the need for a new platform, as such, Cohon contended:

Our religious life has grown anemic. It lacks the vigor which comes of a sense of conviction. It is without purpose and without motivation. We have been eloquent in our negations and pitifully weak in our affirmations. On the most vital questions of faith and practice we have been hopelessly divided, and have no more authoritative guidance than our own individual judgment. Some of us are temperamentally against anything positive. We protest against every endeavor whether in communal or congregational life, whether in belief or observance. In consequence, our people are bewildered. Much of the chaos in our life would be eliminated if we rabbis got together on fundamentals, if we laid hold upon our basic convictions and objectives and placed them in the center of our thought and action.<sup>30</sup>

Since Cohon was not alone in his desire for a new statement of Reform Jewish belief and practice, the Central Conference of American Rabbis convened a committee of some of the most important and influential rabbis of the time. They were given the responsibility of creating a new formulation of Reform Jewish principles. Despite Cohon's disdain for CCAR committee work, he "accepted the appointment on the Commission on Platform out of a sense of duty"<sup>31</sup> in 1935. Moreover, following Rabbi Samuel Schulman's

<sup>30</sup> Cohon, Discussion in Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 46 (1936): 104.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Isaac E. Marcuson, October 7, 1935, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6. The Commission on Platform was composed of: Rabbis Barnett R. Brickner, Samuel H. Goldenson, Bernard Heller, James G. Heller, David Philipson, Max Raisin, Samuel Schulman, Abba Hiller Silver, Stephen S. Wise, Felix A. Levy, ex-officio.



resignation as Chairman of the Commission in 1936, the reluctant Cohon was persuaded by the Conference and the Commission to assume the mantle of leadership. Due to his reputation as a writer of theology, his vast Jewish knowledge, and his exceptional ability to mediate between differences of opinion, Cohon took on what seemed to many to be an impossible task.

In fact, it is fair to say that the entire two-year process involved in the formulation of the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism" was filled with conflict and laden with difficulty. Many rabbis in the Conference disagreed with Cohon's position, and shied away from constructing a new statement of belief that would supersede the historic Pittsburgh Platform. Moreover, since several important "individuals known to be opposed to a platform were placed on the Commission to enable them to express their views, (it was only natural that) the members of the Commission itself were divided in their opinions regarding the advisability of adopting a platform."<sup>32</sup> Some members felt that it was not prudent to replace the Pittsburgh Platform with a new Platform, and even among those who agreed that the Platform of 1885 had outlived its usefulness, there was great debate as to what shape or form a new Platform ought to take.

The story of the construction, adoption and aftermath of the Columbus Platform is a complex and interesting facet of Reform Jewish history and ideology. The discussions, both within the Commission itself and on the floor of the Conference, were rich in detail. The proceedings of the Commission also offer us extraordinary insights into the important issues of the times, as well as glimpses of some of the most colorful personalities in Reform Jewish history. One of the most striking events associated with the work of the

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<sup>32</sup> Cohon, CCAR Yearbook, 1936, p. 104. (See footnote #30)

Commission on Platform occurred early in the committee process, under the Chairmanship of Rabbi Samuel Schulman. Professor Michael A. Meyer explains that Samuel Schulman was appointed Chairman of the Commission on Platform by the president of the CCAR, Rabbi Felix Levy, because "he was one of the best intellects in the Reform rabbinate, with an excellent command of Jewish sources and broad philosophical interests."<sup>33</sup> And yet, Meyer goes on to report, both his age and his tendency to identify himself with the classical Reform trends of the previous generation moved him to construct a draft of the platform which the majority of the members of the Commission believed represented an echo of the past rather than a voice for the future.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, when Schulman presented his proposed platform draft to the members of the Commission in March and April of 1936, it became clear to even the individuals on the Committee who sympathized with classical Reform that Schulman's draft could never be acceptable as a restatement of Reform Judaism for the twentieth century. In a confidential letter from Cohon to Freehof, Cohon reported that "not a single member in attendance favored the adoption of Schulman's statement. . . and that on a number of points it does not go beyond the Pittsburgh Platform."<sup>35</sup> Schulman's statement was a "lengthy, highly theological, and ponderous document that was more argument and exhortation than collective statement. It specified no religious observance and left open the question of whether the Jews were only a religious community or also a nation."<sup>36</sup> In Cohon's own words, Schulman

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<sup>33</sup> Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 318.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, April 29, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Meyer, p. 318. (See footnote #33)

had presented a "long polemical sermon. . . which was verbose, repetitious, replete with stereotyped phrases, confused and argumentative."<sup>37</sup>

While arguments over Schulman's draft continued, a combination of his ill health and his injured pride forced Schulman to resign from his position as Chairman of the Commission on Platform, and resulted in Cohon's appointment as chairman in his stead. Having already prepared a draft of his own, Cohon undertook the long and arduous process of convincing members of the Commission and rabbis in the Conference of the accuracy of his vision regarding the needs of Reform Jews, and of the suitability of his statement of principles. Throughout his tenure as Chairman of the Commission on Platform, Cohon demonstrated his talent as a prudent politician as well as a brilliant scholar and writer.

His was not an easy task, as there were considerable ideological differences among members of the Conference regarding even the most basic definition of Reform Judaism. However, Cohon solicited the opinions of any and all members of the Conference, and took copious notes incorporating the suggestions and revisions that were submitted to him into his platform draft. Cohon quickly came to learn which voices from the Conference could be ignored, which would need to be appeased, and which would have to be unconditionally obeyed.<sup>38</sup> The responsibility of "present(ing) in as few words as possible, a balanced view of Judaism. . . calling for definite beliefs, personal and social ethics and observances in the home as well as in the synagogue"

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, p. 2. (See footnote #35)

<sup>38</sup> Cohon elicited suggestions and corrections regarding his draft through more than one circular letter to every member of the CCAR. It is interesting that each and every suggestion of Abba Hillel Silver was incorporated verbatim into Cohon's draft and ultimately into the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism."



was one of the most difficult and formidable assignments that Cohon confronted during the course of his career.

From the outset of the process, Cohon was on the side of creating a written platform that would serve as a set of guidelines for Reform Jews. While Cohon "did not deceive (himself) for a moment into thinking that (the platform's) adoption would be followed by universal acceptance. . . (he believed) that it would offer great help to Jews who wanted to be helped."<sup>39</sup> He believed that such a restatement of principles should be aimed at "eliminat(ing) the confusion in our religious life, rethink(ing) our position regarding the fundamentals of our faith and find(ing) improved ways of translating them into the life of our people."<sup>40</sup> Cohon maintained that the changing conditions of the world demanded that Reform Judaism respond to its environment differently than it had in the past.

Cohon explained that "the primary task of Reform Judaism was no longer adjustment to the modern temper but rather the complete self-reaffirmation as a religion in a world predominantly secular and materialistic."<sup>41</sup> The platform that Cohon constructed was ultimately adopted by the Conference as the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism." It was designed to define Reform Judaism as a faith; "it must touch the heart as well as the mind if it is to function as a personal force in our lives."<sup>42</sup> In a powerful summary regarding the objective of the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism," Cohon stated:

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<sup>39</sup> Cohon, "Reform Judaism and the Halachah," Discussion in Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 56 (1947): 303.

<sup>40</sup> Cohon, "Towards a New Platform for Reform Judaism," The Ohio Jewish Chronicle, May 21, 1937. Also in SSC Papers, AJA, 27/1.

<sup>41</sup> "Toward a New Platform for Reform Judaism," p. 2. (See footnote #40)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

By the side of personal morality and social justice we must cherish knowledge of Torah, worship and the poetic and symbolic elements that make Judaism a thing of power, of beauty and of joy. Restating the fundamentals of Judaism, we do not presume to speak for either Orthodoxy or Conservatism. We voice only the convictions of Reform Judaism, confident that by rendering religion more meaningful for those who are within our camp, we shall contribute to the welfare of all Jewry. Our redefinition of aims is actuated by the desire not to stress differences but to shed light upon our own way, hoping to strengthen thereby our union with כלל ישראל. Seeking agreement among ourselves on fundamentals, we leave room for differences in detail. We present no dogmatic creed which may restrict private judgment but an ideal basis of religious union.<sup>43</sup>

Such were the goals of the Columbus Platform. And since the Platform was drafted, revised and edited under the chairmanship of Samuel Cohon, it represents the example and the pinnacle, par excellence, of Cohon's ideology and philosophy of Reform Judaism. It served, and in many ways continues to serve, the Reform Movement both as a descriptive document detailing the state of Reform Judaism as Cohon saw it, and as a prescriptive directive for its future. In order to fully appreciate the language, the thoughts and the ramifications of the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism, it is necessary to understand more about Cohon as its architect and craftsman. Cohon's influence is indelibly inscribed upon every word and phrase of the Columbus Platform, and the categories he frequently used to describe Judaism as a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

religion become apparent as one learns more about his ideology and mode of thinking.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### THE COLUMBUS PLATFORM – A COMMENTARY

Like much of Cohon's theological writings, the inner logic of the Columbus Platform is built around his conceptualization of Judaism as a religion which satisfies the requirement of the "**Four C's**." Of all of Cohon's contributions to the field of Jewish theology, his organization of Judaism in terms of the Four C's has come down to us as his most memorable lesson as well as his most enduring hallmark. Cohon defined the Four C's -- Creed, Community, Code of Conduct and Cult -- as the basis of every religion. Each one of these characteristics of religion may be defined on its own and is important in its own right; however, "all the Four C's comprise a complete unity and are organically related to each other."<sup>1</sup> The fusion of the Four C's into one unified definition of religion was summarized succinctly by Cohon:

A conception of religion that may satisfy the spiritual needs of all men, learned and ignorant alike, must present a working **creed** about God and man. That creed must be embodied in a church or **community** of people who carry forward its ideals into life. The creed must lead to the community's **code of conduct**, which expresses itself in a **cult**.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Judaism as a Religion," SSC Papers, AJA, 21/3.

This outline-draft was used by Cohon in no less than eleven places throughout the country, and was revised over a period of twenty-two years. It is interesting to note this this lecture was one of the few in all of Cohon's papers that was presented by Cohon on a number of different occasions. The great majority of his lectures/sermons were delivered once and written for a single purpose and place.

<sup>2</sup> "Is Einstein's View of Religion Correct?" November 30, 1930, SSC Papers, AJA, 20/1, page 8. Boldface lettering added for emphasis.

Any serious study of the Columbus Platform as a theological document must be undertaken concurrently with Cohon's formulation of the Four C's. These four components - **creed, community, code of conduct** and **cult** - not only provide the outline for the individual sections of the Columbus Platform; but in addition they provide the driving force behind and the unifying principle of the document as a whole. A close look at the Columbus Platform, in its final structure and sequence elucidates Cohon's position regarding creed, community, code of conduct and cult, even though these Four C's do not appear as formal section headings in the Platform.

The Columbus Platform commences with a short statement of purpose:

**In view of the changes that have taken place in the modern world and the consequent need of stating anew the teachings of Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis makes the following declaration of principles. It presents them not as a fixed creed but as a guide for the progressive elements of Jewry.**

This brief preamble to the Columbus Platform outlines the core of Cohon's belief regarding the centrality of the concept of **creed** in Reform Judaism. Cohon, unlike many other Reformers of his time, did not shy away from articulating the creedal components of Judaism. In fact, it was Cohon's tenacity regarding the necessity to define Judaism as a creed that resulted in the drafting of the Columbus Platform in the first place. Cohon, like his teacher Kaufmann Kohler, maintained that Reform Judaism was in need of a



"living creed" which was designed to "lend meaning and purpose to living."<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1915, Cohon summarized his view of the function of a creed:

One's actions are the result of his convictions. . . . Creeds are not something that can be thrown aside. They are the most sacred things in life. Creeds are man's most precious ideas and ideals and convictions. Creeds unite men and nations. . . . A community or nation must have some central idea, belief, or common interest, to link its members into one bond.<sup>4</sup>

Cohon firmly believed that defining a religion according to its "creedal foundations" was important, necessary, and had historic precedent. He maintained that "the constant reference to Mendelssohn's opposition to creed (was) misleading," and that Mendelssohn, in fact, only altered the Maimonidean creed by substituting the introductory formula 'I am convinced' for 'I believe'.<sup>5</sup> And while some commended Cohon and "appreciated (his) earnest fight for a creed upon the Conference floor,"<sup>6</sup> many individuals demanded convincing evidence that "the time has come for us in this age of chaos, to take our Judaism seriously and instruct our people in the way they should follow and the things should do."<sup>7</sup> In response to the reluctance of many members of the Conference regarding the subject of creed, Cohon claimed: "Personally, I do not share (your) fear of creeds or dogmas."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, "The Need of a Living Creed," Sermons By American Rabbis (Chicago, 1896), rpt. in A Living Faith, ed. Samuel S. Cohon (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1948), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> "Monopoly in Religion," December 17, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/5, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Cohon, Discussion in Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 46 (1936): 104.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Rabbi Eugene Sack to Cohon, August 28, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 12/8.

<sup>7</sup> Cohon, CCAR Yearbook, 1936, p. 106. (See footnote #5)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

Cohon's powerful rhetorical questions on the Conference floor demonstrated his stubborn persistence that the way to fortify American Reform Judaism was precisely through a strengthening of its beliefs:

Since when has it been a mark of merit for a religion to be without creedal foundations? . . . Every religion is unique in its essential doctrines as well as its mode of expression. . . . Shall we not have something to say regarding God, the soul, Torah, ethical ideals and ceremonials? Or shall we adopt a liberalism of the spineless variety that never dares stand definitely anywhere?<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the carefully worded introduction to the Columbus Platform attests to the dissension that existed on the subject of creed, as well as to the resolution of the conflict between those who favored a creed and those who opposed it. The mere articulation of the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism represented a victory for those who were on the side of a creed; however, its function "not as a fixed creed," but as a guide for Reform Jews satisfied those who were averse to "present the substance of (Reform) Jewish faith and practice."<sup>10</sup>

Any detailed study of a religious creed must first establish, as the Columbus Platform does, a definition of the religion under discussion. In the first of two paragraphs subsumed under the heading "The Nature of Judaism," Cohon puts forth a basic explanation of Reform Judaism as a particular and universal faith:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Cohon to Dr. Charles Morrison, Editor of the Christian Century, June 8, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6.

**Nature of Judaism:** Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people. Though growing out of Jewish life, its message is universal, aiming at the union and perfection of mankind under the sovereignty of God. Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to the spiritual as well as to cultural and social life.

Cohon firmly believed Judaism to be first and foremost a religion, "in contradistinction to the attempt of reducing it to a racial culture, to a civilization, or to a kind of "humanism."<sup>11</sup> Reform Judaism, like its Orthodox counterpart, "emphasizes faith rather than race as the bond that holds Jews together and gives them a mission in the world."<sup>12</sup> As is evident by the above definition of Reform Judaism, Cohon viewed Reform as a natural outgrowth of traditional Judaism. In contrast to many of the important Reformers who preceded him, Cohon preferred to stress the noun rather than the adjective in Reform Judaism in order to demonstrate that Reform occupies a legitimate place on the spectrum of historical Judaism. Yet, while Cohon looked forward to a time when "we may come to an

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<sup>11</sup> "American Judaism," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 28/4.

The polemical note in the Columbus Platform against Mordecai Kaplan's concept of Judaism as a civilization is evident throughout. A complete discussion of this polemic, as well as the Platform's defense against other trends which sought to move away from the definition of Judaism as a religion, will be taken up in the section on "Israel".

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Cohon to Morrison. (See footnote #10)

In the area of Judaism as a "race", we see a subtle semantic difference between Kohler and Cohon. Early in his career, Kohler frequently referred to Judaism as a race in order to stress the close proximity of Judaism and the Jews, and even some of Cohon's earlier work reflects this tendency as well. Later in Kohler's career, however, he downplayed the idea of Judaism as a "race" and instead talked a great deal about the possibility of creating an "adjectiveless Judaism." A similar tendency is seen in Cohon. Cohon saw the danger in extending the idea of Jewish peoplehood too far -- especially during the Nazi years -- and, as a result, he ceased making reference to any racial quality inherent in Judaism.

adjectiveless Judaism,"<sup>13</sup> he never sought "to eliminate the word Reform or to apologize for its existence."<sup>14</sup>

Cohon did not agree with the "old charge that Reform represents a break with historical Judaism."<sup>15</sup> Rather, he agreed with Emil G. Hirsch's explanation that Reform Jews must be loyal to both the past and the present. Cohon summarized Hirsch's view of the gradual evolution of Judaism:

Hirsch laid new stress upon the  
שלשלת הקבלה - the continuity of the Jewish  
tradition. While reminding his hearers that  
the present is the product of the past, he  
emphatically asserted the right of the present  
to self-determination. Presenting to his  
audiences the onward march of Judaism  
through the generations . . . he confidently  
pointed to the still greater future that awaits  
this great religion of righteousness.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Cohon was firm in his assertion that "Reform is not a sect apart from the rest of Judaism. . . even though it has deviated in a number of points from Orthodoxy."<sup>17</sup> The paradoxical phenomenon that causes Reform Judaism to be at one with and yet different than Orthodoxy, Cohon called "progress;" or, as in the Platform, "progressive development." Cohon believed that there was nothing unusual about religious progress; it is a natural phenomenon inherent in anything that is human. While tradition may be

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Samuel Halevi Baron, May 9, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Rosenberg, January 16, 1944, SSC Papers, AJA, 9/9, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> "The Next Step in Reform Judaism," October 12, 1934, SSC Papers, AJA, 23/1.

<sup>16</sup> "Memorial Resolution for Dr. Emil G. Hirsch," 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 19/3.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rosenberg, p. 2. (See footnote #14)

the foundation from which progress ensues, "Judaism is subject to the changes which come over all things human, with advancing time and tide."<sup>18</sup>

The Columbus Platform then proceeds to detail the eternal as well as the dynamic sources from which Reform Judaism derives its "truths":

**Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man's will, heart and mind to the service of God and of humanity.**

Where Orthodoxy maintains a static view of the sources of Judaism's truth, Reform remains far more open to the discoveries of contemporary times. The Reform Movement, as defined by Cohon in the Platform, views history as "a powerful and indispensable factor in human progress."<sup>19</sup> For Cohon, the present day provides as much in the way of faith for the Reform Jew as the past. The beauty of Reform Judaism is that it offers the Reform Jew both the traditions of the past as well as the reason and rationality of modernity as he develops his Jewish identity. Due to this duality regarding the Reform Jew's responsibility to both the past and the present, Cohon taught that "in light of the Torah, it may be given to the rabbi to discern the divine image amid the storm and turmoil of the present, and to ascertain the meaning of the confusing events of our day."<sup>20</sup>

And yet, this balance between tradition and modernity was one of the most challenging issues Cohon confronted in both his rabbinate and his

<sup>18</sup> Cohon, "Creative Judaism," *Menorah Journal* 38 (Autumn 1950): 1.

<sup>19</sup> "Graetz, The Historian of the Jews," October 26, 1917, SSC Papers, AJA, 19/1.

<sup>20</sup> "Guarding the Sanctuary," March 29, 1946, SSC Papers, AJA, 19/1.



scholarly work. While Cohon maintained that "Reform is not bound to seek justification for its views in historical data," he also contended that Jewish tradition is a precious legacy that "guarantees the continuance of Jewish religious life."<sup>21</sup> It was in light of both the past and the present that Cohon maintained:

Reform Judaism represents no new religion but the ancient faith in a new setting. It is neither anti-Orthodox nor anti-ceremonial, but a positive and progressive force striving to make our timeless religion meaningful to us in the light of present day knowledge and experience.<sup>22</sup>

Science, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, presented both a challenge to and an opportunity for Reform Jewish expansion. While it did provide the basis for the Scientific and Historical Study of Judaism, when taken to its extreme, science also had the potential to represent the negation of faith. Cohon viewed science and scientific discovery as one important source of truth for Reform Jews, but not as its sole basis. The Reform Jew's search after truth may be aided by science and its discoveries, and he should therefore "welcome all the new light that science and philosophy can bring."<sup>23</sup> In fact, Cohon believed that Jews of all times and places have used the prevailing trends in scientific study in order to formulate their conceptions of Judaism and to enrich their Jewish identities. Thus, the Columbus Platform reflects Cohon's view that "Judaism has long held that all

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<sup>21</sup> "Guiding Lines of Authority in Reform Judaism: An Address To Rabbinic Students," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 19/1.

<sup>22</sup> "American Reform Judaism," March 5, 1948, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/2.

<sup>23</sup> "From Miracle to Law," June 7, 1916, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/5.

truth, whether revealed in ancient or in modern times, by prophet or by scientist is sacred."<sup>24</sup> And yet Cohon drew a clear distinction between the use and abuse of science. He deeply believed that God exists behind and within everything in the universe - including science. Thus, with respect to scientific discovery and its application to religion, Cohon established the following boundary:

On one thing only, Judaism is insistent: that the universe is not a confused mass of dead matter and a blind force. To the Jew and to every other truly religious man, nature is a grand living organ through which the universal spirit, God, sounds His harmonies.<sup>25</sup>

Expressed in a humorous fashion, Cohon said about science:

Science is like a gun, which, in the hands of the officer of the law protects the community, and in the hands of the outlaw, threatens the well-being of men. What makes the creations of science beneficial, is the motive of service and goodwill behind them.<sup>26</sup>

In an age when many individuals preferred humanism and even atheism over theism, Cohon was an ardent theist. As architect of the Platform, his theism prevailed over the many other trends that existed within the Conference with respect to God:

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<sup>24</sup> "Dedication of the Sefer Torah, Mizpah Congregation, October 27, 1924, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "The Kingdom of God," September 6, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/4, p. 6.

**God: The heart of Judaism and its chief contribution to religion is the doctrine of the One, living God, who rules the world through law and love. In Him all existence has its creative source and mankind its ideal of conduct. Though transcending time and space, He is the indwelling Presence of the world. We worship Him as the Lord of the universe and as our merciful Father.**

Of all of Cohon's theological beliefs, his conception and definition of God remained traditional, and probably stemmed from his Orthodox background. The above statement regarding God is purely theistic in tone, and is extremely strong in its polemical argument against secular humanism. It also indicates a sharp departure from the Pittsburgh Platform's "God-idea" and its break from traditional Judaism's personal God. God, for Cohon was an abiding spirit who "manifested Himself in every clime and in every age, and we who live in this land of freedom must open our hearts and our minds to His call."<sup>27</sup> Cohon frequently used the **שׁמׁע** to point out that "central to belief in Judaism is the belief in the one God."<sup>28</sup>

Identical to traditional Judaism, Cohon believed that God was a personality rather than a principle. Moreover, Cohon maintained, against great opposition during his time, that ethical monotheism necessitated such a belief in a personal God. God, for Cohon was both immanent and transcendent, for "immanence without transcendence loses God in finite process and thereby ceases to be the Eternal One."<sup>29</sup> Belief in God requires one to have faith in that which lies beyond our senses. Cohon said: "What complicates our search after God is the fact that we are conditioned to regard

<sup>27</sup> "Surely the Lord is in This Place," December 10, 1948, SSC Papers, AJA, 26/4, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> "What is Judaism," April 28, 1922, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Max Eichorn regarding the issue of personal creed, June 26, 1940, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/4.

material things as the only things real."<sup>30</sup> However, Cohon encouraged people to rely on both faith and reason in their quest to find the meaning of God: "While we cannot grasp Him with our senses, we can approach Him with our minds. . . . Though we cannot see the mind, we know its reality. What the mind is to the living person, God is to the universe."<sup>31</sup> Cohon believed in an "all-forgiving God" who responds to the תשובה of humanity. Cohon maintained that "from the viewpoint of Reform, God intervenes in man's affairs. God is the Father and Guide of all Nature and all men, and must be understood to be a continuous help to human beings in sorrow as in joy."<sup>32</sup>

While Cohon continually cautioned people against creating "spurious substitutes for the divine. . . and against losing the vision of God,"<sup>33</sup> he did differ from Orthodoxy in his view of God's authority in the lives of Reform Jews. In his outstanding study entitled "Authority in Reform Judaism," Cohon maintained that authority in Reform Judaism rested in: "(a) the needs of the Jewish people, and (b) their attitude to the Divine as expressed in their conceptions of revelation and tradition."<sup>34</sup> While Reform Jews have indeed "come to think of God in a considerably different way" than our ancient patriarchs, the Deity, for Cohon, remained the "Holy One, unique, mysterious, and infinite, above time and space, and surpassing all natural imagings of Him."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> "What God Means To Us," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> "The Faith of a Reform Jew," March 1, 1957, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Cohon to Miss Shulemith Malkin, July 3, 1946, SSC Papers, AJA, 11/6.

<sup>33</sup> Cohon, "Guard Well the Vision: A Seventieth Birthday Message" (HUC-JIR), March 20, 1958, published in pamphlet form, rpt. Religious Affirmations, p. 188.

<sup>34</sup> Cohon, "Authority in Judaism," Hebrew Union College Annual 11 (1936): 641.

A more complete discussion of the idea of authority in Reform Judaism will be found in the section on Torah.

<sup>35</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," February 5, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2, p. 22.

Linked with any of Cohon's discussions about God were his comments about man, whom Cohon believed to be "a co-worker with God."<sup>36</sup> Thus, following the exposition about God in the Columbus Platform's section on creed, is the following statement about man:

**Man: Judaism affirms that man is created in the Divine image. His spirit is immortal. He is an active co-worker with God. As a child of God, he is endowed with moral freedom and is charged with the responsibility of overcoming evil and striving after ideal ends.**

Cohon believed in the centrality of man in God's plan. He rejected the "pessimistic mood in neo-Orthodox Protestant thinking, which sees man as a lost creature, burdened with sin and guilt,"<sup>37</sup> and instead viewed man as the pinnacle of God's creation. Cohon also maintained that man's body and soul alike were "stamped with the likeness of God's image,"<sup>38</sup> and that no apologies need to be made for his physical existence. In fact, Cohon contended that man's "physical life (serves) as the vehicle of his moral and spiritual life."<sup>39</sup> As in the Columbus Platform, Cohon frequently referred to man as the "child of God." He explained that one who is a child of God "carries within himself the ordering force and the tendency to harmony and beauty . . . ever in harmony with the rhythm of the divine life."<sup>40</sup>

And, according to Cohon, man's soul is that which links him to God and harmonizes with the rhythm of the divine life. Man's life is fullest when his soul - that is, his heart and mind - become sensitized to God. Cohon

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Cohon to Malkin. (See footnote #32)

<sup>37</sup> "American Judaism," p. 10. (See footnote #11)

<sup>38</sup> "Judaism As A Religion," p. 6. (See footnote #1)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 23. (See footnote #35)



maintained that "only the devout mind that surrenders itself to God may glimpse something of His nature as the creative mind that governs all existence and that sets the laws for man's life and conduct."<sup>41</sup> While Cohon certainly acknowledged God's presence in the world and in man, he rejected pantheism. While he saw God in everything and everyone, he always separated the Creator from His creation. Similarly, while man can strive toward the ideal of Imitatio Dei, he did not believe, as the mystics contend, that man could ever achieve complete unity with God. Instead, it was man's duty on earth to imitate God by "striving after truth, beauty, goodness, righteousness, and holiness . . . in order to build the Kingdom of God on earth."<sup>42</sup>

In one of his most important scholarly essays entitled "Original Sin," Cohon explored the nature and role of humanity in God's world. Cohon clearly rejected the idea of original sin as derived from Adam; however, he recognized since "man is the captain of his soul . . . his inclination turns evil through his own determination."<sup>43</sup> He saw the **יצר הרע** as existing in all people by nature, but never considered it "absolutely evil." Instead, he explained in his essay, the **"יצר הרע"** serves a useful purpose . . . for, while rousing man's passions, without (it) there would be no family life and no enterprise whatever."<sup>44</sup> By balancing the **יצר הרע** with the equally passionate **יצר טוב**, man is free to "range himself on the side of God or rebel against Him."<sup>45</sup> While he may, from time to time, find himself on the side of evil, he always has the opportunity to atone for his life and repair his ways

<sup>41</sup> "What God Means To Us?", p. 8. (See footnote #30)

<sup>42</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 24. (See footnote #35)

<sup>43</sup> Cohon, "Original Sin," Hebrew Union College Annual 21 (1948): 290.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 304-5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

through the process of *השוכה*. Available to humanity at all times, *השוכה* is a human processes that assists individuals in achieving their ultimate goal of salvation. In the end, salvation comes about:

not through the mythical death of a divine savior on a cross or through magical rites and sacraments, whether by baptism or circumcision, but through the resolute direction of his heart and mind away from darkness toward the light of God, through heeding the divine imperatives of personal and social duty, of goodness and truth.<sup>46</sup>

And yet on a practical level, Cohon the rabbi surely recognized that building God's Kingdom on earth, becoming a co-worker in God's creation, and ultimately attaining salvation is no easy task. Moreover, since man is endowed with "moral freedom," he frequently confronts evil in the world and is compelled to make decisions regarding the course of his behavior and actions. While Cohon did not often address the problem of evil in his lectures or sermons, in a handwritten note in one of his personal files, he wrote:

The experience of evil is the stumbling block of all the religions and philosophies. . . God works within us through our intelligence. But reason involves risks. The gift of reason carries with it freedom of choice to do that which is good as well as that which is evil, to destroy life as well as to save it. To have been created as free from temptation would have meant either that we were deprived of reason or elevated to the superhuman state of angels. In either case, we should have been deprived of our humanity.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>47</sup> Handwritten notes in Cohon's personal files, July 3, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 13/1, pp. 1-2.

While man may attain salvation through his life's deeds on earth, his spirit endures eternally. Cohon subscribed to the Maimonidean view that "immortality refers to the soul only and not to the body."<sup>48</sup> While all of man's energy ought to be concentrated on his days and years on earth, death does not signal the unconditional termination of one's life. That is, "immortality is not a mere matter of duration of the spirit after death, but also the preservation of the values which give meaning to human life."<sup>49</sup> Every person makes a contribution - good or bad - to the world in which we live, and that contribution serves as his eternal legacy. Since "our efforts are of moment to the entire social structure . . . only the person that strives to contribute to the larger life of mankind may live on after his physical life draws to an end."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Cohon summarized, "immortality appears not as an intrinsic attribute of the soul but an achievement."<sup>51</sup>

The Torah serves as the Jew's most reliable guideline in life, and is the bond that joins man and God. Following the Torah and its teachings leads one to holiness in this life, and promises the reward of immortality about which Cohon frequently spoke. However, Torah is a means as well as an end; and Revelation is the process by which Torah was conceived and continues to grow and develop.

**Torah: God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty, and orderliness of nature, but also in the**

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<sup>48</sup> "Immortality: A Jewish View," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 19/5, p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Volume II of Cohon's mimeographed lecture notes from his Theology classes at Hebrew Union College is entitled Man and His Destiny (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1933, rev. in 1940-42 and 1954). In this volume there is a thorough treatment of the subject of man's immortality.

vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and no one age. Yet the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel's ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law. It preserves the historical precedents, sanctions, and norms of Jewish life, and seeks to mould it in the patterns of goodness and of holiness. Being products of historical processes, certain of its laws have lost their binding force, with the passing of the conditions that have called them forth. But, as a depository of permanent spiritual ideals, the Torah remains the dynamic source of the life of Israel. Each age has the obligation to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs, in consonance with the genius of Judaism.

Cohon certainly believed the Jews to be the "People of the Book," and frequently spoke of the Bible as the "spiritual homeland of the Jews."<sup>52</sup> In many ways Cohon maintained a traditional view of the Torah and subsequent rabbinic literature, and often referred to God as **נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה** - as Israel's Lawgiver. And yet, it is on the subject of Torah and Revelation that Reform departs most dramatically from its traditional origins. While Orthodoxy rests on a singular and infallible Revelation which must be followed eternally, Reform understands that "the Bible cannot be of final authority" because "though (the Bible) is honored beyond all other literature as the historical foundation of our faith, (Reformers) have grown conscious of its human origin and consequently of its human limitations."<sup>53</sup> The Revelation, for Cohon, as for many other Reform Jews, was an event that combined Divine gift with human genius, and was not confined to Sinai. Consequently, "not everything in its pages is of equal value. . . . The loftiest

<sup>52</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 13. (See footnote #35)

<sup>53</sup> "Guiding Lines of Authority in Reform Judaism." (See footnote #21)

ethical and spiritual truths may be found by the side of imperfect interpretations of the nature of man and of motives of duty."<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, since Revelation is a progressive phenomenon rather than a single event, contemporary human experience plays a part in the perpetual Revelation that takes place between God and Israel. In this way, Revelation exists as an ongoing dialogue between God and the Jews so that "revelation is as basic to contemporary Judaism as to Biblical religion."<sup>55</sup> Cohon viewed the Bible as the first of many occasions on which God "spoke to the Jews in accord with the particular needs of our people and of ourselves."<sup>56</sup> And yet, Cohon continually emphasized, Revelation is not a one-sided process. That is, "God speaks to us only if we are eager to learn His message."<sup>57</sup> And while sometimes the message of Revelation is temporal and other times it is eternal, the Reform Jew must ever be open to communication from God, for it aims to "convey purpose and direction to human life and, at the same time, reflect(s) the divine source whence they issue."<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, since the Revelation at Sinai was not unconditionally authoritative, the הלכה that has issued forth from the Torah over the generations is likewise of transient value. Cohon continually reminded the Jews of his time that "Revelation cannot be limited to the Pentateuch, to the Talmud, or to the שלחן ערוך. By the side of the הלכה, the Torah includes הגדה in its broad sense."<sup>59</sup> And, Cohon's broad sense of הגדה encompassed any Jewish literature over the generations that is "purely inspirational,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> "Revelation," 1959, SSC Papers, AJA, 25/3.

<sup>56</sup> Cohon, "Progressive Revelation," Delivered at Rockdale Temple, January 13, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 24/2. Rpt. Religious Affirmations, p. 129.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Cohon, "The Teachings of Progressive Judaism," Current Religious Thought, (January-February 1956), rpt. Religious Affirmations, p. 161.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 162.



intended to edify the people and to imbue them with faith, hope, and with courage."<sup>60</sup> Cohon even considered the Talmud itself to be an *אגדה* of sorts, for he saw it as inspired literature of a particular time and place.

(The Talmud) is the product of Judaism's deliberate adjustment to the new and perilous conditions of a hostile world. . . . Its masters strive to show men what steps to take out of the moral chaos and spiritual confusion, and how to translate the glorious visions of the prophets into a program of daily living.<sup>61</sup>

Cohon always looked to the spirit of the literature rather than its letter in his evaluation of its worth and value to contemporary times. While Cohon acknowledged that many of the Talmud's ritual and ceremonial laws had been discarded by Reform Judaism, he believed the Talmud's eternal merit and beauty rested in its ability to "stimulate heart and mind, to awaken ethical ideals and spiritual consecration."<sup>62</sup> In fact, Cohon never discouraged Reform Jews from defining Torah for themselves, and did not feel that it was Reform Judaism's place to prevent individuals from following some of the more "traditional" ceremonies and practices.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Cohon believed that the Reform Jew's creed had to include not only an appreciation of the "moral and spiritual truths of the Torah," but also a recognition that "the Torah still speaks with a commanding voice . . . if we submit ourselves

<sup>60</sup> Cohon, What We Jews Believe And A Guide To Jewish Practice (Assen: VanGorcum & Co., 1971), p. 79.

<sup>61</sup> "The Talmud," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 26/5, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> The subject of Jewish practice will be taken up more fully in the section on Jewish "cult".

voluntarily and joyfully to its guidance, and if we 'accept the yoke of the Kingdom in love.'"64

In the final analysis, Torah, for Reform Jews, must be used as a means toward religious living rather than as a mere document containing precepts and commandments: "From an external body of doctrine and law, it thus becomes our internal possession, the very atmosphere and rule of our being."65

Undoubtedly, the section of the Columbus Platform "which presented the drafting committee with the greatest difficulty and which called forth the most discussion was the one on Israel."66 Moreover, as one learns more about Cohon's definition of the Jewish community, one realizes that the Platform's section on Israel represents a compromise between Cohon's own viewpoint and the equally emphatic opinions of others. The first paragraph presented little or no problem to Cohon or to the Commission, was most likely drafted by Cohon himself, and certainly would have sufficed, in and of itself, as Cohon's assessment of Israel as a religious community:

**Israel: Judaism is the soul of which Israel is the body. Living in all parts of the world, Israel has been held together by the ties of a common history, and above all, by the heritage of faith. Though we recognize in the group-loyalty of Jews who have become estranged from our religious tradition, a bond which still unites them with us, we maintain that it is by its religion and for its religion that the Jewish people has lived. The non-Jew who accepts our faith, is welcomed as a full member of the Jewish community.**

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64 "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 19. (See footnote #35)

65 Ibid.

66 "American Judaism," p. 11. (See footnote #11)

For Cohon, Judaism could not be separated from the Jewish people. Cohon, throughout his career, maintained a deep belief in the central importance of כלל ישראל. Because he refused to see Reform Judaism as a separate sect, he maintained that "Reform, like the older forms of Judaism, is an affair of the whole community of Israel, and not merely the individual Jew."<sup>67</sup> As is stated in the Columbus Platform, Cohon felt that Jews throughout the world are "united by ties of kinship, historical associations and basic spiritual ideals."<sup>68</sup> Cohon frequently referred to the Jews as a "religious community;" he saw religion and not nationality as that which binds Jews together over time as well as space. Being a member of the entity called כלל ישראל entails recognizing the existence of a "world-Judaism," in which all Jews throughout the world are "one in spirit."<sup>69</sup> Even though Jews are often separated by great geographical distances and ideological differences, Cohon believed that "our peoplehood is founded primarily upon our religion of Torah."<sup>70</sup> Time and again, Cohon reminded Jews that they should never separate themselves from the Jewish community:

Living in all parts of the world, sharing different cultures and civilizations, subject to different flags, we have been held together by ties of kinship, historical memories and associations, and, above all, by our common heritage of faith.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> "The Faith Of A Reform Jew," p. 13. (See footnote #31)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> "Reconstruction," Chicago, 1919, SSC Papers, AJA, 24/5, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 12. (See footnote #35)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Cohon was not afraid to stress the particularistic qualities of the Jewish "heritage of faith." He frequently encouraged Jews to be proud of their Judaism; to recognize the fact that "for faithful Jews, the name Jew is a name of honor, that should be upheld with dignity."<sup>72</sup> In teaching children, he constantly urged religious school instructors and rabbis to "foster an affection for Judaism and for its ideals of life. . . . Besides informing the children's minds, we must cultivate their hearts and awaken in them loyalty and love for the Jewish spirit."<sup>73</sup> Cohon believed that belonging to the Jewish community meant not only subscribing to its faith, but also having "faith in ourselves. . . . Our ground for faith in our people is assuredly not their physical strength nor their material security in the world today. . . . We are a people - a historical community - held together by our Torah."<sup>74</sup> Cohon felt that Reform Jews had an important task in contributing to the unity of Israel and in teaching others that "the Jewish people constitute a historical family or fellowship of faith, held together by the bond of the ancient **ברית**."<sup>75</sup>

The historical Jewish family, or fellowship of faith includes all Jews - Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. Different expressions of the Jewish religion, even dissimilar modes of Jewish practice do not disqualify any Jew from membership in **כלל ישראל**. Cohon said that "it is the union of hearts that we need and union of purpose; but that does not necessarily mean uniformity."<sup>76</sup> His actions as well as his words demonstrated his deep conviction that both "Orthodox and Reform are **דברי אלהים חיים**."<sup>77</sup> Cohon

<sup>72</sup> Letter, Cohon to Rabbi H. Cerf Strauss, January, 1935, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/4.

<sup>73</sup> "Jewish Education," The Mizpah Monthly Magazine 1, no. 2, pp.5-7. Also in SSC Papers, AJA, 1/9.

<sup>74</sup> "The Faith of the Modern Jew," October 8, 1943, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2.

<sup>75</sup> "Judaism as a Religion," pp. 3-4. (See footnote #1)

<sup>76</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 1. (See footnote #35)

<sup>77</sup> "Abiding Reality," September 14, 1928, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/1.

continually searched to find ways to engage Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews in social intercourse, as well as in shared scholarly and intellectual pursuits. In fact, in 1917, Cohon organized America's first study *כלל*, sponsored by the Chicago Rabbinical Association, and designed for Jews on every point of the spectrum of belief and practice.<sup>78</sup>

Part of Cohon's motivation to engage in dialogues and programs with Orthodox and Conservative Jews rested in Cohon's refusal to allow Reform Judaism to become a "mere sect, torn away from the body of Jewry."<sup>79</sup> As a result, he believed that it was the responsibility of the Hebrew Union College and Reform rabbis to "cultivate the knowledge of the (traditional Jewish) disciplines that will unify us with the rest of Jewry."<sup>80</sup> Cohon continually called for a "thorough and sympathetic understanding of every phase of Orthodox life."<sup>81</sup> While some rabbis criticized Cohon for being too sympathetic toward the Orthodox, others praised him for his positive disposition toward branches of Judaism other than Reform. Dr. Bernard Heller wrote in a letter to Cohon: "I was elated by your magnanimous attitude to Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. Without ignoring differences, you accented their common denominator."<sup>82</sup>

Cohon frequently dismissed charges of Jewish "clannishness" as false, and he maintained that "the feelings of family union, of religious kinship, and of common traditions exist - and should exist - among the Jews, just as they are present among all people of like interests."<sup>83</sup> Being a Jew, for Cohon, was not clannish in the least; in fact, it entailed being a member of a particular

<sup>78</sup> The documents regarding this conference are in the SSC Papers, AJA, 6/1.

<sup>79</sup> "Orientation in the Rabbinate for HUC Students," 1955, SSC Papers, AJA, 23/2, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Lefkowitz, May 7, 1920, SSC Papers, AJA, 8/5.

<sup>82</sup> Letter from Dr. Bernard Heller to Cohon, March 30, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 8/1.

<sup>83</sup> "Clannishness," October 31, 1913, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/2.



people with a universal responsibility. Moreover, being a member of a particular people is simply part of life's reality. Cohon stated quite plainly:

In actual experience, we do not encounter man in general, but specifically man as Jew or as Christian, as white, as yellow, or as black, that is, as related to others. We are children of a particular people, with a certain heritage and with specific problems. We derive our physical being, our cultural and spiritual endowments, from our group, and with these we make our contribution to the welfare of humanity at large.<sup>84</sup>

And yet, the Jews of Cohon's time asked, would not associating with the particular aspects of Judaism and with כלל ישראל lead to a decrease in the Reform Jew's sense of Americanism? Cohon answered them with an emphatic "no"! Because Judaism is a religion rather than a nationality, a Jew may be a Jew anywhere in the world. Cohon himself was a patriotic American as well as a proud Reform Jew. The two, for him, were not mutually exclusive; in fact, the one complemented the other. However, Cohon explained:

In recent years there developed a tendency among some American Jews to resist every effort at strengthening our ties with the rest of Jewry, as inconsistent with their conception of Americanism. . . . It has now reached a point where the very reference to Jews as a "people" or even to "Jewishness" sends the "America firsters" into tantrums!<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> "Being a Jew," September 17, 1955, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/3, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> "The Need for Roots," 1958, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/7, p. 6.

In the final analysis, the degree of assimilation that many Jews of Cohon's time had reached was actually "anti-American," for it contradicted the freedom and liberty that America offered its varied population of religions and cultures. "The greatness of Americanism consists not in negating but in affirming the right of different racial, religious, and political groupings to free and unhampered existence and development."<sup>86</sup> Cohon resented accusations against him that he was not patriotic enough. Cohon loved America and its freedoms, and felt that there was no better place in the world for Jews to live. However, he did not believe that continual "loud proclamations of patriotism" were necessary for Jews in America:

The name "Jew" is a sufficient guarantee of its bearer's faithfulness to the country of which he is a part. But even if a loud demonstration of our patriotism were necessary, we dare not consecrate our altar to patriotism.<sup>87</sup>

Particularly following World War II, with "anti-Semitism on the wane" and the "unparalleled prosperity" of Jews, Cohon warned that "Americanism is not enough!"<sup>88</sup> With "two cars in every garage, and two chickens in every pot, (Jews in America practiced) the idolatry of wealth and comfort"<sup>89</sup> even as Jewish organizational life appeared to be flourishing. Many Jews did not heed Cohon's words regarding the need to preserve their Judaism, and chose to "replace religion with secular (American) culture."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "Is Americanism Enough?" February 23, 1940, SSC Papers, AJA, 20/1, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Cohon to Hebrew Union College Board of Governors, December 5, 1917.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> "Judaism in the Life of the Individual and Society," May and June, 1957, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/3.

As these Jews of the forties and fifties dissociated themselves from the religious mission of the Jewish community, and substituted in its place a purely American identity, they "turned on their ancestry, and rebelled against their Jewishness . . . they fled from Jewry and Judaism."<sup>91</sup>

While some Jews chose pure Americanism as their faith, others opted to adopt the "religion" of secular humanism in place of Judaism. Cohon rebelled against any and all efforts to "reduce" Judaism to any form of humanism, devoid of any religious or ceremonial components. He railed against Jews who considered their religion as merely a "cult of good fellowship, such as is fostered by the service clubs, cults of civic betterment or of social justice."<sup>92</sup> In Cohon's mind, moral living was indeed virtuous; however, it was not, in and of itself, equivalent to the Jewish religion. Cohon argued that the "atheistic trend in the current humanism"<sup>93</sup> stood in direct opposition to Judaism as a monotheistic religion comprised of creed as well as deed. Cohon believed that Jews who professed and practiced a type of "mere moralism deprived of any specific Jewish nature or uniqueness" had divorced themselves from the Jewish religion because they "made no distinction between the secular and the holy", and consequently were only interested in "utilitarianism and pragmatism."<sup>94</sup>

While some individuals chose to substitute secular humanism for Judaism, and elected to dissociate themselves permanently from the Jewish community, others actually considered that their association with the Jewish community was enough to define them as Jews. Many of these people, led by

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<sup>91</sup> "The Jewish Problem," 1946, SSC Papers, AJA, 20/5.

<sup>92</sup> "The Meaning of Judaism to the American Jew," October 18, 1958, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/3, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Cohon, "Reform Judaism in America," *Judaism* 3 (1954): 351.

<sup>94</sup> Cohon, "A Preface to the New Platform," *Hebrew Union College Monthly*, May 22, 1937, p. 93.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, called themselves Reconstructionist Jews, and ultimately were successful in creating a Reconstructionist Movement during Cohon's lifetime. Cohon had great ideological differences with Kaplan and his Reconstructionist Jews, even though correspondences in Cohon's files indicate that Kaplan and Cohon were friendly and amicable toward one another. Cohon sharply objected to Kaplan's definition of Judaism as a "civilization . . . where religion is either wholly ignored or is considered but one of the elements of this Jewish civilization."<sup>95</sup> Cohon believed that such an excessive exaggeration of the Jewish community as espoused by the Reconstructionist Movement represented a rejection of Israel's "soul" in favor of its "body".

Cohon frequently criticized the Reconstructionist Movement for its inability to clearly define itself and its "civilization." Cohon felt that Kaplan subordinated the Jewish religion to the vague idea of Jewish civilization, even though Kaplan claimed that his Movement did not represent a total divorce from Jewish religious practice. Kaplan stated: "As long as we respond with reverence to some of the hallowed elements of Jewish civilization . . . this secularism cannot be regarded as a total deprivation of Jewish religious traditions."<sup>96</sup> While Kaplan defined these "hallowed elements" as things which "give otherness and individuality to a civilization . . . and include non-transferable elements like language, literature, arts, religion, and laws,"<sup>97</sup> Cohon believed that nowhere "is it clear where to draw the line between the

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<sup>95</sup> "The Next Step in Reform Judaism," October 12, 1934, SSC Papers, AJA, 23/1, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Cohon, "The Semantics of Judaism," *The Synagogue Review* 30 (May 1956): 7.

'transferable' and the 'non-transferable elements' of civilization."<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, Cohon explained:

Professor Kaplan is confused as to the relation of religion to civilization. . . . He definitely speaks of religion as but one element or part of civilization. Elsewhere he argues that a "religion is a quality inherent in the very substance of a civilization". . . . Religion reappears not as a quality which leavens the whole of Jewish civilization, but as a part of it, which may be separated (!) from the other parts.<sup>99</sup>

Cohon believed that "by stressing many other interests and elements besides religion, Reconstructionists hoped that the non-religious and even irreligious Jews would flock to the banner of Judaism."<sup>100</sup> Its complete rejection of the ancient idea of Jews as the "Chosen People," as well as the "weakness of its 'God-idea'"<sup>101</sup> caused Cohon to evaluate it as a Movement of "tenuous character."<sup>102</sup> While it may have hoped to be "all things to all people,"<sup>103</sup> Reconstructionism, in fact, exhibited a type of "partisan zeal" for which Cohon had little patience or tolerance.<sup>104</sup> In the final analysis, Cohon viewed the Reconstructionist Movement as a "maze of vagueness, self-contradictions, and fantastic proposals."<sup>105</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Cohon, "Judaism - A Civilization or Religion?" *The Jewish Layman* 9 (December 1934). Also in SSC Papers, AJA, 21/2, p. 4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>100</sup> "American Judaism," p. 10. (See footnote #11)

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> "Analysis of Dr. Kaplan's Declaration of Principles," October 11, 1949. Prepared for and at the request of President Nelson Glueck, SSC Papers, AJA, 8/6, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Cohon, "Judaism - A Civilization or Religion?" p. 4. (See footnote #98)

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



Far more destructive to the unity of Jewry and to the internal harmony of the Reform Movement than Reconstructionism was the issue of Zionism. For Cohon, Zionism, like Reconstructionism, represented an artificial extension of the concept of Jewish peoplehood; however, unlike Kaplan's Movement, Zionism built the component of nationalism into its self-definition. While the yearning of the Jewish people for its historic homeland had always been a central component of Jewish ideology and worship, the agenda of the nineteenth century political Zionists included a transformation of Israel's spiritual mission into a political one. The issue of Zionism caused more debate and dispute for Cohon and the Commission on Platform than any other section. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in the end, the following statement on Zionism was agreed upon and adopted by the members of the Conference:

**In all lands where our people live, they assume and seek to share loyally the full duties and responsibilities of citizenship and to create seats of Jewish knowledge and religion. In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.**

Cohon's skill as a mediator, and his willingness to compromise his own personal ideology for the benefit of the Reform Movement quickly becomes apparent to anyone who studies the heated discussions about Zionism among members of the Conference. Though Cohon disagreed with the aim of political Zionism, it was nevertheless obvious to him why such an

escalation in Jewish nationalism had come about. Two World Wars, the formation of modern nations throughout Europe, and the continual threat of anti-Semitism caused many Jews throughout the world to abandon hope in the countries in which they were living, and instead, influenced them to look toward a Jewish homeland that would provide them with permanent safety and freedom.

While the idea of Jewish Nationalism had been completely rejected by the framers of the Pittsburgh Platform, (who felt that Jewish Nationalism presented an affront to American Judaism), by the first half of the twentieth century, many Reform Jews chose to cast their lot with the Zionist dream of establishing a Jewish State in Palestine. Moreover, Cohon, a fairly consistent "non-Zionist"<sup>106</sup>, found out quickly as Chairman of the Commission on Platform, that many of the most important and influential Reform rabbis of the time became world leaders in the effort to create a modern Jewish State.

Throughout his career, Cohon was consistent in his argument that Zionism and political Nationalism ought never be used as replacements for the Jewish religion. While the majority of his sermons, essays and letters on the subject of Zionism reject "reducing Judaism to a mere nationalist culture and nationalistic loyalty,"<sup>107</sup> a few of Cohon's early papers offer evidence that initially, Cohon may have sympathized with some, if not all, of the Zionist mission. It is possible that Cohon's early identification with Zionism may have been influenced by Kohler's continual linkage between the Jewish religion and the Jewish Nation. Kohler wrote in the Jewish Encyclopedia: "Judaism is not a religion pure and simple, based upon accepted creeds like

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<sup>106</sup> Cohon only referred to himself as such rarely. He was not one who was easily categorized, and he refused to play into the partisan politics of the Reform Movement.

<sup>107</sup> "What Ails Us Modern Jews," September 30, 1933, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5, p. 9.

Christianity or Buddhism, but is one inseparably connected with the Jewish Nation as the depository and guardian of the truths held by it for mankind."<sup>108</sup> However, despite Kohler's connection between the Jewish Nation and the Jewish people, it is important to recognize that Kohler was a self-proclaimed anti-Zionist. Cohon, however, used Kohler's terminology to actually bolster what may have been Cohon's early tendency to associate himself with the Zionist agenda. Early in his rabbinate, in 1923, Cohon used words reminiscent of Kohler's to comment on the indivisible relationship between the Jewish religion and its nation: "Despite the present-day quibbling about the primacy of racial-national or of religious elements in our life, the two remain inseparably connected. Whoever separates them, removes the cornerstone from the structure of our life."<sup>109</sup>

Especially when linked to Ahad Ha-Am's dream of a spiritual center for Jews, Zionism may have initially appealed to Cohon in theory if not in reality. Cohon's Eastern European background, his love for Hebrew, and his attachment to Zion as a historical homeland for the Jews would have naturally attracted Cohon to Zionism.<sup>110</sup> In an address to a group of Zionist students in 1916, Cohon said:

You are organized for an ideal purpose. If Zionism is anything, it is an ideal. Zionism wishes to preserve the Jewish people. Why preserve it? Why set up a private little establishment by the side of a large center of which you can be a part? You say anti-

<sup>108</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, "Judaism," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. VII (1904 ed.), p. 359.

<sup>109</sup> "Spiritual Assimilation," April 14, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 26/3, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> In this way, Cohon was quite different from his teacher, Kaufmann Kohler. Cohon's Eastern European orientation differed from Kohler's Western European background. Not only was Cohon a lover of the Hebrew language, but he also was the driving force behind a group of Hebrew-speaking intellectuals in Cincinnati who met on a regular basis. Cohon was beloved by this group of people — many of whom came to identify themselves with Zionism.

Semitism prevents the full growth of the Jewish people in the גלות. True! You say: the Jewish spirit is hampered in an anti-Jewish environment. True! Though I am not a shekel-paying political Zionist, I fully agree with you on these points. Let us then, understand our position: We wish to preserve Israel because we believe that there is something noble in Israel, something which mankind at large needs. What is it? The Jewish spirit.<sup>111</sup>

On several occasions, Cohon praised Ahad Ha-Am who "raised a cry against Herzl and his followers, who sought salvation through charters and diplomacy."<sup>112</sup> While rejecting political Zionism, "Ahad Ha-Am and others have repeatedly pointed out that Palestine, being the cradle of Israel can be turned into a cultural center, when light and learning will emanate to the Jews of all lands of the Diaspora."<sup>113</sup> In 1916, Cohon clearly sympathized with these goals: "Those of us who live in Christian countries feel the force of this argument. We feel the weight of the fetters that bind the Jewish spirit and arrest its free unfoldment. Thus many of us raised our hearts to the east for a rebirth of the Jewish spirit."<sup>114</sup>

And yet as the years progressed, and the Zionist dream became increasingly secular and national and less spiritual and religious, Cohon sharply criticized Zionism "not so much (on the grounds of) Zionism's affirmations but (because of) its negations."<sup>115</sup> Not only did Cohon believe that Zionism represented a negation of Jewish religious values; but rather, it

<sup>111</sup> "After Zionism - What?" March 8, 1916, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/1.

<sup>112</sup> "Memorial Address on Ahad Ha-Am," 1927, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/1.

<sup>113</sup> "Mosesohn of Jaffa," June 13, 1916, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/5.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "Zionism and Anti-Zionism," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 28/3, p. 2.

stood for an abrogation of "the political emancipation of the Jews in the lands of their birth or adoption."<sup>116</sup> This idea implies, Cohon reasoned, "that only in Palestine should Jews regard themselves as fully at home."<sup>117</sup> Especially during World War II, Cohon found great danger in what he viewed as the Zionist negation of the Diaspora:

The (Zionist) ideology bears a striking resemblance to the Nazi claims that Germans of every land should consider themselves part of the German nation. The outside of Palestine would thus be reduced to the status of guests of the respective countries in which they reside. It is not only bad religion but dangerous politics, playing directly into the hands of anti-Semites. . . . The appeal to racial blood rather than to individual reason and conscience spells the doom of morality and of humanity.<sup>118</sup>

While Cohon was an ardent supporter of the Jews as a people, he sharply distinguished between Jewish peoplehood and that brand of Jewish nationalism which sought to eliminate Jewish life outside of Palestine. Cohon stated: "While political Nationalism should be eliminated from Judaism, we run into danger if we also eradicate Jewish 'peoplehood' and 'Jewishness.'"<sup>119</sup> Moreover, Cohon viewed the issue of Zionism as a threat to Jewish unity because of the dissent it caused between Jews. He frequently referred to Palestine as "the dividing issue in the Jewish life of our country today."<sup>120</sup>

<sup>116</sup> "Jewish Reawakening," April 16, 1948, SSC Papers, AJA, 20/6, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> "Israel," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 26/7, p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Samuel H. Baron, August 28, 1952, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/3, p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> "Jewish Reawakening," p. 13. (See footnote #116)



The divisiveness that Zionism caused within the Reform ranks became evident with the formation of the American Council for Judaism under the leadership of avowed anti-Zionist Rabbi Elmer Berger.<sup>121</sup> The American Council for Judaism, founded in 1942 as a result of the CCAR resolution in favor of a Jewish army. The ACJ was a Reform organization that disagreed with the affirmation of Jewish peoplehood espoused by Cohon in the Columbus Platform, and "oppose(d) the effort to establish a National Jewish State in Palestine or anywhere else as a philosophy of defeatism."<sup>122</sup> Despite repeated efforts by Berger to gain Cohon's support of the American Council for Judaism, Cohon never joined the organization, and frequently "criticized it for not being sufficiently for Judaism."<sup>123</sup> While the Council attracted a number of non-Zionists like Cohon due to its opposition to political Zionism, Cohon could never endorse the Council's complete denial of Jewish peoplehood because "though not in any secular or nationalistic sense, it was essential to Cohon's whole concept of Judaism."<sup>124</sup>

In addition to addressing the ideological issues associated with Zionism, Cohon also thought and wrote a great deal about the practical problems regarding the existence of a Jewish State in Palestine. Cohon was not alone in wondering which Jewish characteristics would form the basis for a Jewish identity for one living in a basically secular Jewish State. It is fair to state that Cohon did not see Zionism as the remedy for Jews either in America or in Palestine. Cohon wrote:

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<sup>121</sup> There are several sources on the subject of the American Council for Judaism and Elmer Berger: Thomas A. Kolsky's book: Jews Against Zionism: The American Council for Judaism: 1942-48 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); also, there is a Rabbinical Thesis by Mark Glickman entitled: One Voice Against Many: A Biographical Study of Elmer Berger - 1948-1968 (Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 1990).

<sup>122</sup> "Statement of The American Council for Judaism, Inc.," 1943, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/3, p. 1.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski to Lisa Eiduson, March 4, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

Living in Israel, participating in its social, political and cultural pursuits and using Hebrew in conversation, still leave the religious question unanswered. One thoughtful Israeli educator recently asked: "Are we Israelis still Jews?" His question springs from no stubborn persistence in the old opposition to Zionism, but out of the earnest recognition of the problem of Jewish spiritual existence.<sup>125</sup>

In addition to the reality regarding the substance of Jewish identity in Palestine, Cohon also questioned the feasibility of moving all Jews from around the world to the newly created Jewish State: "No matter how highly some of us may think of Palestine, the stubborn fact is that it offers no room for the seventeen million Jews of the world even if they were to accept the extreme ideology of Zionism!"<sup>126</sup> Moreover, because Cohon rejected the idea of removing all of the Arabs out of the land, he frequently argued: "Palestine could only offer a home for a mere fraction of the Jewish people."<sup>127</sup> In fact, Cohon was one of the few individuals of his day who even spoke about the potential "Arab problem" in Palestine were a Jewish State to come into fruition. As early as 1922, Cohon made the following statement regarding the Arab population in Palestine and the ramifications of the Balfour Declaration:

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<sup>125</sup> "Progressive Judaism," 1953, SSC Papers, AJA, 24/2, p. 7.

The article to which Cohon was referring is:

עקיבא ארנסט סימון, "האם עוד יהודים אנחנו?"  
פרקים ביהדות  
 (עורכים: פמוחבסקי ושפיידהולד)  
 ירושלים: הוצאת יוניון קלג  
 דף 250

<sup>126</sup> Cohon, discussion in Central Conference of American Rabbis Year Book 45 (1935): 351.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Samuel B. Finkel, October 16, 1933, p. 6.

The apparent disregard of the six hundred thousand Arabs by the Balfour Declaration led to renewed riots in Jaffa on May 1, 1921, in which 31 Jews were killed and about 200 wounded. It is the bitter irony of history that Jewish life, safe under Turkish misrule, has been given over to danger under the British administration, headed by a Jewish governor. The Arabs, filled with false suspicions and encouraged by Jew-haters in many lands, have openly threatened further violence in case of the ratification of the British mandate over Palestine, under the terms of the Balfour Declaration. This ratification took place at the last meeting of the League of Nations, and now the Arabs show a very restive spirit.<sup>128</sup>

And yet, particularly with the advent of World War II, and the annihilation of Jews as a result of Hitler's Final Solution, Cohon somewhat softened his stance against Zionism, and urged that Palestine be used to the fullest extent as a place of refuge for Jews fleeing Europe. The Columbus Platform of 1937 reflects the ongoing necessity of Reform Jews "to affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it . . . a haven of refuge for the oppressed . . ." Cohon contended: "There are more moderate types of Zionism which are concerned with Palestine only as a home for our brethren wherein they may find refuge from the mortal storm which is now raging and where they may rebuild their lives either temporarily or permanently."<sup>129</sup> Although much of the debate among members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis focused on whether Palestine was to be viewed as a homeland or the homeland of the

<sup>128</sup> "The Year 5682 (1922) Throughout the Jewish World," Union of American Hebrew Congregations Bulletin 12: 27-28. Also in SSC Papers, AJA, 28/2.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Rosenberg, p. 1. (See footnote #14)

Jews, by 1937, most agreed to the urgency of "practical work in Palestine" and efforts at colonization.<sup>130</sup>

In one communication regarding the Columbus Platform's section on Israel, Cohon said: "I personally do not care for the phrase 'a Jewish homeland;' however, I see no serious danger in it. The indefinite article takes away the partisan claims of political Zionism."<sup>131</sup> Despite the frequent criticism levelled by members of the Conference that the wording "a Jewish homeland" was too vague, it "carefully avoided the extremist position . . . in an attempt to find common ground which our Zionist and non-Zionist members can get together."<sup>132</sup> Especially following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the subsequent waning of the anti-Zionist faction in the Reform Movement, Cohon continually encouraged American Jews to support Israel and welcome the Israelis into the community of כלל ישראל. Cohon said that Americans and Israelis must unite in order to assist one another as members of the greater Jewish community:

In our own days, we have witnessed the resurgence of the Jewish people in Palestine. Whatever our attitude to Zionism may have been, we cannot but regard the restoration of the State of Israel as miraculous. Endless problems confront the new State, but with the aid of World Jewry and especially American Jewry, it will weather the storm.<sup>133</sup>

The section of the Columbus Platform on Israel, or community, concludes with a statement emphasizing Israel's mission to the world, and

<sup>130</sup> Letter from Cohon to Samuel B. Finkel, October 16, 1933, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/5.

<sup>131</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Wolsey, April 1, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Zielonka, April 15, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> "The Challenge of the Future," December 15, 1952, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/1.

looks toward the Messianic Age that will usher in an era of peace for all humanity:

**Throughout the ages it has been Israel's mission to witness to the Divine in the face of every form of paganism and materialism. We regard it as our historic task to co-operate with all men in the establishment of the kingdom of God, of universal brotherhood, justice, truth and peace on earth. This is our Messianic goal.**

As opposed to the controversial section on Israel in the Columbus Platform, the section on ethics was met with almost total unanimity by the Commission on Platform as well as by the members of the Conference. While the three-paragraph section in the Platform is entitled "Ethics", Cohon referred to this section as the Jew's code of conduct. The Jewish community's code of conduct functions as the manifestation of its creed:

**Ethics and Religion: In Judaism religion and morality blend into an indissoluble unity. Seeking God means to strive after holiness, righteousness and goodness. The love of God is incomplete without the love of one's fellowmen. Judaism emphasizes the kinship of the human race, the sanctity and worth of human life and personality and the right of the individual to freedom and to the pursuit of his chosen vocation. Justice to all, irrespective of race, sect or class is the inalienable right and the inescapable obligation of all. The state and organized government exist in order to fulfill these ends.**

In Cohon's words, the Jew's code of conduct "reaches beyond experience toward the Invisible; to the inmost core of our being and reality,



and becomes a life with God."<sup>134</sup> Though stemming from its particular creed, the code of conduct permits the Jew to live and thrive in a world that is universal in nature. The coalescence of Judaism's creed and code of conduct results in what Cohon commonly referred to as "ethical monotheism."

Cohon frequently spoke about Jewish "piety" in connection with his description of the Jew's code of conduct and his religion of ethical monotheism. Cohon viewed Jewish piety as the Jew's most vital contribution to humanity's shared goal of perfecting the world. While Jewish piety begins with the Jew, it possesses unlimited potential to add beauty and harmony to life on earth. In Cohon's words:

Jewish piety, whether old or new, expresses itself in voluntary enlistment in the service of the kingdom of God. And this kingdom is not merely with the heart of the individual person but in the trials and experiences of groups of men as well. The spiritual is in large measure conditioned by the social and comes to full fruition within it. Self-dedication to God means to carry religion into the home, the market-place, the factory, the shop, the city hall, the courthouse, the studio, the classroom and the laboratory. The kingdom of God is as wide as civilization and as broad as the spiritual efforts and aspirations of men.<sup>135</sup>

Cohon contended that the "union of religion and morality is the supreme glory of Judaism."<sup>136</sup> And union, for Cohon, meant "indissoluble." Cohon said the following concerning the relationship of morality and

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<sup>134</sup> "Judaism as a Religion," p. 2. (See footnote #1)

<sup>135</sup> Cohon, "Piety, Old and New, in Judaism," Current Religious Thought, October 1948, p. 20.

<sup>136</sup> "What is Judaism," April 28, 1922, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5, p. 10.

religion: "Religion was the fountain-spring of morality not only in the distant past, but it still nourishes the stream. Remove religion from morality and you sever the stream from its source; you remove the incentive to moral action. You say to man: 'Be moral.' He answers: 'Why?'"<sup>137</sup> Religion serves as the motivating force behind ethics; it gives humanity reason to act morally in the world. Of course, Cohon saw God as the "impelling dynamic" behind both religion and ethics; "God is the source of all goodness and of all truth."<sup>138</sup> Since "the modern Jew is the heir of a great theistic and ethical tradition it is his challenge to make that tradition function in his life."<sup>139</sup>

Cohon believed that "the 'good way' that religion seeks can be limited to neither 'rugged individualism' nor 'rigid collectivism.'"<sup>140</sup> In addition to making the ethical monotheistic tradition function in his life, the Jew also has the responsibility of "translating his religion ever more purposefully into personal and social morality."<sup>141</sup> Cohon believed that the prophets had a great deal to teach modern Jews, for the "prophetic ethics" aimed at the improvement of the moral and social order. Cohon frequently referred to Amos' vision of justice; to Hosea's conceptions of love and mercy as well as his hope for peace; and to Isaiah's emphasis on holiness based on justice.<sup>142</sup>

And justice, for Cohon included each person's right to practice his own religion. Cohon took seriously the prophetic words of Isaiah 56:7: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."<sup>143</sup> Cohon was one of the first

<sup>137</sup> "The Fountain-Spring of Morality," February 16, 1917, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/4.

<sup>138</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 25. (See footnote #35)

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>140</sup> "The Function of Religion in Our Day," 1930, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/5.

<sup>141</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 28. (See footnote #35)

<sup>142</sup> "Judaism as a Religion," p. 7. (See footnote #1)

Cohon continually used these examples as illustrations of the contributions of the prophets.

<sup>143</sup> Cohon, Jewish Theology: A Historic and Systematic Interpretation of Judaism and its Foundations (Assen: Royal VanGorcum Ltd., 1971), p. 82.

rabbis of his generation to initiate serious inter-faith dialogue on a scholarly level with Christian clergy and scholars. Cohon's papers show evidence of his belief that understanding between different religions can lead to the promotion of shared endeavors in the practical world. He worked arduously to end the "mutual antagonisms (in existence) between Judaism and Christianity," for he felt they "obscure(d) the common bonds between them and prevent(ed) a dispassionate approach of the two faiths."<sup>144</sup> He believed that the best way to promote inter-faith dialogue and shared enterprises among Jews and Christians was through the process of thorough education on both sides. Moreover, Cohon believed that such education ought to "recognize the differences in existing religious bodies and teach respect for all of them."<sup>145</sup> He adamantly believed that "a better understanding (between Jews and Christians) does not involve accepting a common basis for dogmatic belief; rather, the real basis for good will among Jews and Christians (is) active tolerance based on mutual respect for each other's religion."<sup>146</sup>

Cohon had no tolerance, however, for any violation of the line that separates Church and State. While he believed that the universal aspect of religion ought to be a "way of life" for every individual, he did not believe there was any place in the public arena for the expression of the particularistic elements of religion. He not only waged war on the blatant seasonal and holiday singing among public school children; but he also aggressively fought the more subtle "instruction in Christian lore as done by teachers" in the public schools.<sup>147</sup> He contended that such expressions of religion in the

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<sup>144</sup> "Judaism and Christianity," 1951, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/1.

<sup>145</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Martin Thames, March 24, 1948, SSC Papers, AJA, 13/5.

<sup>146</sup> "Jew and Christian," N.D., SSC Papers, 20/ 2, p. 2.

<sup>147</sup> Letter from Cohon to Superintendent Boggess on the subject of religion in the public schools, February 4, 1914, SSC Papers, AJA, 12/6.

schools were clearly sectarian in nature and "defeated the purpose of the public schools."<sup>148</sup> What was true for Christians also held for the Jews. While Cohon "heartily welcome(d) non-Jews who were attracted to our religious belief and practice and voluntarily desire(d) to join our fellowship into our midst. . . (he did not) believe in any organized attempt that smacks of missionizing among our neighbors."<sup>149</sup>

Because both Jews and Christians anticipate a better world based on the vision of the prophets, Cohon felt that they could successfully work together to perfect the ills of society. Cohon said that Jews and Christians ought to unite around their common "social ideal . . . which seeks to advance the perfection of humanity by applying the prophetic principles of justice and brotherhood to social and to personal relations."<sup>150</sup> In the first of two time-bound statements in the Columbus Platform,<sup>151</sup> the following section on social justice delineates many of the problems plaguing the world in the 1930's as well as Judaism's remedy for these issues:

**Social Justice:** Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations between warring classes on the basis of equity and justice, and the creation of conditions under which human personality may flourish. It pleads for the safeguarding of childhood against exploitation. It champions the cause of all who work and of their right to an adequate standard of living, as prior to

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Max Eichorn, January 28, 1957, SSC Papers, 7/4.

<sup>150</sup> "The Faith of Reform Judaism," p. 26. (See footnote #35)

<sup>151</sup> Dr. Michael Meyer offers this observation on page 319 of his book Response to Modernity. The subsequent section on peace similarly reflects the age.

**the rights of property. Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect men against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.**

The above statement on social justice, and the next which focuses on peace were inspired by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver who felt that Cohon's initial draft "was not sufficiently specific on the subject of social ethics." He was unhappy with Cohon's first draft because it "laid itself open to the charge of being too general and too 'safe.'"<sup>152</sup> The above statement on social justice reflects a number of the revisions that Silver recommended:

There should be a definite statement on the priority of labor and interests to profit and the accumulation of wealth in our economic system; to the needs to protecting the working people against the hazards of old age, sickness and unemployment; the protection of childhood and womanhood against exploitation.<sup>153</sup>

Moreover, Silver's demand that "peace should come in a separate heading in the Platform"<sup>154</sup> was incorporated into the final draft of the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism. In a letter to Cohon, Silver proposed the following statement for the Platform's section on peace:

In the realm of international relationships, Judaism has, from the days of its earliest prophets, proclaimed to mankind the ideal of universal peace. The physical and spiritual disarmament of all the nations of the earth

<sup>152</sup> Letter from Abba Hillel Silver to Rabbi Felix Levy, June 10, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Letter from Abba Hillel Silver to Cohon, March 15, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6.



has been one of the essential teachings of our faith. Judaism regards justice as the primary condition of universal peace even as it is the foundation of the well-being of nations. Judaism calls for united world organization and international action for collective security, disarmament and peace.<sup>155</sup>

While the final draft of the Columbus Platform slightly alters Silver's statement on peace, it nevertheless incorporates the majority of Silver's words and captures the spirit of his sentiment:

**Peace:** Judaism, from the days of the prophets, has proclaimed to mankind the ideal of universal peace. The spiritual and physical disarmament of all nations has been one of its essential teachings. It abhors all violence and relies upon moral education, love and sympathy to secure human progress. It regards justice as the foundation of the well-being of nations and the condition of enduring peace. It urges organized international action for disarmament, collective security and world peace.

The final section of the Columbus Platform, entitled "Religious Practice," is divided into a number of sections, and serves as Cohon's exposition of cult in Judaism. A brief introduction to this section of the Platform succinctly outlines the importance of Jewish ceremony and practice to the lives of Reform Jews and to the existence of Reform Judaism:

**The Religious Life:** Jewish life is marked by consecration to these ideals of Judaism. It calls for faithful participation in the life of the Jewish community as it finds expression in home, synagogue and school and in all other agencies that enrich Jewish life and promote its welfare.

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

Cohon took pride in this section of the Columbus Platform because it addressed the issue of Reform Jewish observance. He said:

The novel element in the Platform was the emphasis on religious practice. Whereas ceremonies and rituals were somewhat disparaged in the Pittsburgh Platform, the Columbus Platform urges the preservation of such institutions and observances in the home and in the synagogue as tending to awaken and to foster the religious sentiment.<sup>156</sup>

Throughout his career, Cohon encouraged Reform rabbis to assist their congregants to practice Judaism in accordance with modern beliefs and contemporary outlooks. Cohon firmly believed that Jewish belief and Jewish identity must be combined with Jewish practice; he championed a "renewal of Jewish faith and conviction, a positive way of consecrated living, based on Jewish knowledge and understanding."<sup>157</sup> Cohon contended that it was time for "Reform, no less than Orthodoxy, to make demands. A religion that does not seek to guide and direct, that asks for nothing, that is soft and yielding, and that is all things to all men, is in reality nothing to any man in particular; consequently a doubtful benefit to mankind."<sup>158</sup>

Cohon did not believe in ritual and ceremony purely for its own sake; rather, he maintained that "a reawakened appreciation of ritual observance... betokens recognition of the fact that vital religion must express itself not only

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<sup>156</sup> Cohon, "The Contemporary Mood in Reform Judaism," The Journal of Bible and Religion 18 (July 1950): 158.

<sup>157</sup> Untitled and undated fragment, SSC Papers, AJA, 4/1.

<sup>158</sup> "Only Such A Religion," March 1, 1926, SSC Papers, AJA, 23/2.

in spiritual sentiments and ethical formulas but also in symbols and facts, in deed as well as in belief."<sup>159</sup> He believed that "a conscious effort must be made by the rabbis to invest observances with spiritual value" so that Reform Jews would come to understand that Jewish practice and modernity were not mutually exclusive ideas.<sup>160</sup> Cohon often expressed frustration over the fact that so many Jews - both Reform and Orthodox - were simply not doing anything: "Ask Jews what share they take in Jewish life, what Jewish responsibilities they assume and discharge and you may find a blank."<sup>161</sup> While Cohon clearly believed that "the (external forms) are not the whole of Judaism, and may be revised and modified for greater effectiveness and vitality," he believed that "without some externals Judaism could not be preserved through the ages."<sup>162</sup>

And preservation, for Cohon, meant more than biological survival. As one interested in the quality of Jewish life, he believed that ritual practice and observance enhanced one's Jewish identity. He saw religion as a "living tree" whose rites and ceremonies provide the "protective covering" that enables Judaism to live and function in the lives of Jews.<sup>163</sup> Cohon felt that ceremonies and practices fulfilled two important Jewish functions: they keep tradition alive and assist the Jew in his or her daily living. Cohon said:

Judaism becomes dynamic in our lives when its  
light is brought to bear upon our daily conduct. . . .  
It is only by squaring our practice with our  
profession that our Judaism becomes for us, a

<sup>159</sup> Cohon, "The Future Task of Jewish Theology," The Reconstructionist, January 10, 1958, p. 21.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> "The Religion of Duty," December 27, 1918, SSC Papers, AJA, 25/1, p. 6.

<sup>162</sup> "The Faith of the Modern Jew." (See footnote #74)

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

heaven-sent guide in perplexity, and a staff of support in both joy and sorrow.<sup>164</sup>

And just as Reform Judaism calls for a continual evaluation of its principles and beliefs so that it might be meaningful to Jews in modernity, it similarly requires an ongoing assessment of its practices and observances.

Cohon said:

Judaism cannot remain static and negative. It must advance to a clearer vision of its own nature and tasks. There must be a forthright assessment of the contents of Judaism, a redefinition of its abiding elements, and a charting anew of the ways of relating them to the intellectual and social movements in our world of tension and conflict.<sup>165</sup>

Cohon believed that it was the responsibility of Reform Jews to "find for ourselves the most satisfying ways of expressing our religious ideas and values."<sup>166</sup> He felt that this task was best accomplished through both an "appeal to the past" and a look ahead to the future.<sup>167</sup> Cohon always preached: "There is a wide difference between having a history and making history. . . . The past can only be serviceable when, instead of weighing as a burden, it spurs on to new activity, to new efforts, to new duties."<sup>168</sup> Thus, the various Jewish "institutions" about which the Columbus Platform speaks, are of value not only because of their association with Jewish tradition;

<sup>164</sup> "The Debt of Honor," May 21, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 17/5.

<sup>165</sup> "Progressive Judaism," p. 7. (See footnote #125)

<sup>166</sup> Cohon, "Creative Judaism," *Menorah Journal* 38 (Autumn 1950).

<sup>167</sup> "On the Golden Jubilee of Zion Congregation, Chicago, Illinois," October 16, 1914, SSC Papers, AJA, 4/8, p. 2.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4, 5.

moreover, these institutions provide the modern Jew with a way of life for the present as well as the future.

Cohon viewed the home as the most important Jewish institution, and a critical medium through which Jewish values and Jewish practices are passed from parent to child:

**The home has been and must continue to be a stronghold of Jewish life hallowed by the spirit of love and reverence, by moral discipline and religious observance and worship.**

Cohon frequently reminded his congregants that "Judaism must not be confined to the Synagogue and - as is all too often the case - eliminated from the home."<sup>169</sup> Cohon believed that the home should both outwardly display and inwardly embody the teachings and practices of Judaism. He encouraged Jewish families to affix מזוזות to the doorposts of their homes not for superstitious reasons, but in order to remind family members and their guests that they are entering a Jewish home.<sup>170</sup> He also urged families to celebrate holidays and commemorate life-cycle events in their homes. In addition to welcoming the arrival of a new baby to the family through the home observance of a ברית מילה, or a baby naming, he even went so far as to suggest a modern version of a פדיון הבן ceremony. After one rabbi had taken his suggestion to perform the home ceremony of פדיון הבן, Cohon commented:

I am glad to have your report that the

<sup>169</sup> "What Ails Us Modern Jews," p. 11. (See footnote #107)

<sup>170</sup> "Faith and Superstition," February 12, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/2.



פֶּרִיּוֹן הַבֵּן proved satisfactory. You carried out the very suggestion that I tried to put forward that when such a ceremony is conducted it should take the form of a consecration of the child. An opening prayer embodying the sentiments of the occasion, a few words to explain the occasion and the Priestly Benediction over the child should suffice.<sup>171</sup>

While some ancient Jewish rituals may not be of value for modern Reform Jews, a good number of "ceremonial and artistic forms have shown themselves psychologically indispensable."<sup>172</sup> Cohon especially emphasized the home observances of: kindling the Sabbath and Festival lights, participating in the Passover סֵדֶר, and building a סִכָּה. When celebrated in the home, these rituals make an indelible mark upon the memories of the children in the household, and are events in which the entire family can share. Furthermore, Cohon never discouraged a family from practicing rituals that are no longer performed in most Jewish homes, for Cohon believed that every ancient Jewish rite has the potential to carry a modern message. For example, the following are his comments on the ceremony of בֶּעוֹר חֹמֶץ:

The ceremony of בֶּעוֹר חֹמֶץ, though no longer observed in most of our homes, still has a message for us. Ceremonies are but the language in which religion speaks to man. Our mystics looked upon leaven as the corrupting principle in life. חֹמֶץ, to them, was the symbol of sordidness and of materialism, of the evil inclination in the heart. Consequently, this occasion of

<sup>171</sup> Letter from Cohon to Chaplain David Hachen, February 10, 1953, SSC Papers, AJA, 8/1.

<sup>172</sup> "What Ails Us Modern Jews," p. 11. (See footnote #107)

removing the leaven from the homes served as a summons to remove the חמץ of the heart. . . . If it be not within our power to remove all the leaven from the whole household of Israel, we may be able to remove the gross materialism, the rank of indifference, and the misguided piety from our own homes.<sup>173</sup>

While the home serves as a place for the enactment of Jewish rituals and ceremonies, the synagogue functions as its partner. The Columbus Platform summarizes Cohon's view of the function of the synagogue:

**The synagogue is the oldest and most democratic institution in Jewish life. It is the prime communal agency by which Judaism is fostered and preserved. It links the Jews of each community and unites them with all Israel.**

Cohon believed the synagogue to be the "symbol of American Jewish life," and Cohon continually lamented the fact that many Jews in America seemed to be saying "farewell to the synagogue."<sup>174</sup> As a בית התפילה, a בית המדרש and a בית הכנסת, the synagogue operates as the "center of Jewish religious, cultural and social life."<sup>175</sup> The Constitution of Mizpah Congregation in Chicago, written by Cohon and the congregation's founding members, beautifully defines the obligations of the synagogue in Reform Jewish life:

In devotion to the faith of our fathers, we the undersigned men and women have resolved

<sup>173</sup> "Removing the Leaven," April 16, 1916, SSC Papers, AJA, 25/3.

<sup>174</sup> "What Ails Us Modern Jews," p. 10. (See footnote #107)

<sup>175</sup> Cohon, "Has the Synagogue Outlived Its Usefulness?" The Jewish Layman 9 (October 1934): 3.

to organize a Reform Synagogue on the North Shore of Chicago. Its object shall be to promote the knowledge and practice of Judaism among our people by the following means:

1. By conducting Divine Services distinctly Jewish in character and consistent with the laws of reason and truth. (בית התפילה)
2. By maintaining a Religious School in which instruction shall be given to the young in the principles of Judaism, in the history and literature of Jewish people, and in Hebrew. (בית המדרש)
3. By establishing a social center for the promotion of friendship among young and old. (בית הכנסת)<sup>176</sup>

With regard to the synagogue as a בית התפילה, Cohon encouraged rabbis to hold services in the synagogue that would be relevant and interesting for Reform Jews. He believed that for those who desired it, the "reintroduction of daily worship would be assuredly a step in the right direction."<sup>177</sup> He urged rabbis to wear שליתות during worship services and recommended the "restoration of the חזן in modern form to the synagogue."<sup>178</sup> Coupled with the return of the חזן, Cohon anticipated an increase in congregational singing, a renewed interest on the part of Jews in joining congregational choirs, and an augmented repertoire of Jewish synagogue music.<sup>179</sup>

In addition to the aesthetic aspects of worship in the synagogue, Cohon was also interested in its democratic values. He continually reminded both

<sup>176</sup> "Mizpah Congregation," January 12, 1919, SSC Papers, AJA, 4/1.

<sup>177</sup> Letter from Cohon to Anna Oxenhandler, December 14, 1934, SSC Papers, AJA, 12/1.

<sup>178</sup> "Religion and Music," 1924, SSC Papers, AJA, 24/7, p. 4.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

rabbis and laypeople that every single Jew is considered a critical member of the "kingdom of priests," and, as a result, it was not the sole responsibility of the rabbi to determine the direction of the congregation. He advocated an increase in congregational participation in all aspects of the worship services, and lobbied for complete democracy among its members with regard to both administrative and ritual matters. Cohon attempted to "do away the pew system of membership in the synagogue"<sup>180</sup> and "was a strong believer in a voluntary membership fee to make the synagogue a possible home for all sincere Jews."<sup>181</sup> Cohon believed that the synagogue ought to champion complete equality between men and women. In a particular reference to Temple Mizpah, Cohon said: "An outstanding feature of the synagogue is the fact that the women members are allowed an equal voice with men on all congregational matters."<sup>182</sup> And with respect to the equality of women in Jewish ritual, Cohon commented:

From its inception, Reform has endeavored to promote the equality of the sexes in religious life. To this end it has introduced the ceremony of confirmation for girls as well as for boys, and, more recently, the בית מצוה. . . . In this spirit the inclusion of women in a quorum for public worship has been taken as a matter of course in most Reform synagogues.<sup>183</sup>

While Cohon was creative in his approach to synagogue programming and innovative in his attitude to worship service, he did maintain certain

<sup>180</sup> "Temple Mizpah," The Sentinel, February 7, 1919.

<sup>181</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Norman Gerstenfeld, January 15, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/9, p. 2.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Letter from Cohon to Robert I. Kahn, July 9, 1951, SSC Papers, AJA, 10/8.

standards, and ardently remained within the boundaries of what he considered to be acceptable Reform Jewish synagogue practice. For example, Cohon said: "To Sunday services, I have no objection. All days of the week are suited for divine worship. At the same time I believe in making every effort to preserve the Jewish historical Sabbath."<sup>184</sup> Cohon strongly opposed the transfer of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday because he felt that doing so would surely create "a gulf between Reform Jews and the rest of world Jewry."<sup>185</sup> Even though many Reform Jews had legitimate commitments and responsibilities in their occupations that prevented them from setting aside an entire twenty-four hour period of rest, Cohon nevertheless believed that "even if the whole Sabbath cannot be kept, what prevents us from keeping part of the Sabbath?"<sup>186</sup> Cohon contended that at the very least, Friday evening ought to reflect the sanctity of the Sabbath both at home and at the synagogue:

Friday evening should be set aside for the cultivation of Jewish values. Through the time honored and beautiful ceremonials of kindling Sabbath lights, of blessing the children, of the Kiddush prayer and of grace at the meal, the family circle is cheered and the home is filled with a Jewish atmosphere. The synagogues, too, should be filled on that night not only with mourners who come with heavy hearts to recite the

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<sup>184</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Mann, March 21, 1918, SSC Papers, AJA, 11/6, p. 1.

This statement by Cohon may have been inspired by Kaufmann Kohler. While Kohler initially was one of the chief advocates of the Sunday service, in his essay "The Sabbath Day of the Jew"

(1891), he explained his change of heart. Kohler concluded that it was best for Judaism and the Jews to keep the Sabbath on the prescribed seventh day.

<sup>185</sup> "Shall We Change the Sabbath to Sunday?" 1935, SSC Papers, AJA, 25/7, p. 6.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.



קדיש in memory of their departed kinsfolk,  
but also with men and women whose hearts  
are full of joy, who come to sing songs of  
praise and thanksgiving and to seek counsel  
and guidance in the ways of life.<sup>187</sup>

In a similar argument, Cohon also expressed opposition to the practice of reading the Torah on Friday evening rather than on Saturday morning. On this matter, Cohon said: "The introduction of Torah reading on Friday nights - though a semblance of justification might be discovered in its favor - would defeat its purpose on psychological as well as practical grounds."<sup>188</sup> Cohon's fascinating rationale regarding this matter was twofold:

Two thousand years of usage have established the practice of reading the Torah by day so firmly as to make the institution and the occasion inseparable. . . . The discerning would rightly view it as a ceremony שלא בזמנה, and hence empty of true inwardness. The rest of the people, too, would regard it as burdensome, for it would lengthen the service which (as those well know who have ministered to American congregations), owing to the late hour at which it is conducted, must be brief.<sup>189</sup>

In the final analysis, Cohon believed that the synagogue had to be an institution concerned with the "perpetuation of our faith and with the spiritual welfare of our people. . . . We must not lightheartedly sacrifice the Sabbath day with which our spiritual life has been linked and which has

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> "Shall the Torah Be Read in the Friday Evening Service?" N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 25/7, p. 2.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

brought untold blessings to many nations and has lent dignity to human life and labor."<sup>190</sup>

In addition to the home and the synagogue as locations where Judaism might to be practiced, he also saw them as places where Judaism ought to be studied. Education in the **בית המדרש** - whether it be the home or the synagogue - was the key to Jewish survival, and the prerequisite for any decisions regarding Jewish practice:

**The perpetuation of Judaism as a living force depends upon religious knowledge and upon the education of each new generation in our rich cultural and spiritual heritage.**

Cohon was a champion of Jewish education for adults as well as children. He believed that overcoming the many problems associated with Reform Jewish education was one of the most serious challenges confronting the Reform Movement of the twentieth century. Cohon believed that the "vital power of Judaism comes from the knowledge of the Torah, and that in many ways the **ישיבות** - both old and new - have kept Judaism alive."<sup>191</sup> He sincerely believed that "the teachers, the parents, the home and the synagogue, share the responsibility of solving the burning problem of the Jewish education of our youth."<sup>192</sup> He repeatedly said: "The Book is our true homeland – a homeland of greater endurance than any terrestrial spot. It is therefore our duty to ourselves, to re-possess our 'homeland', to extend its boundaries and to utilize its spiritual resources."<sup>193</sup>

<sup>190</sup> "Shall We Change the Sabbath to Sunday," p. 7. (See footnote #185)

<sup>191</sup> "Reconstruction," p. 2. (See footnote #69)

<sup>192</sup> "Jewish Education," pp. 5-7. (See footnote #73)

<sup>193</sup> "Guiding Lines of Authority in Reform Judaism," p. 15. (See footnote #21)

Regarding the ultimate goal of Jewish education, Cohon said: "The purpose of religious education cannot be mere Jewish survival, but rather the investment of our lives and lives of our children with sanctity, with worth and with beauty."<sup>194</sup> Cohon's gift of his own personal library of over 9,000 volumes to the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1959 serves as a beautiful example of his unselfish dedication to the education of Jewish students. In Cohon's own words at the Los Angeles ceremony: "We dedicate this humble library to the advancement of the knowledge of God and of the spirit of man."<sup>195</sup>

In addition to reviving education among Reform Jews in America, Cohon also attempted to revitalize the ancient Jewish institution of prayer among his congregants as well as his students:

**Prayer is the voice of religion, the language of faith, and aspiration. It directs man's heart and mind Godward, voices the needs and hopes of the community, and reaches out after goals which invest life with supreme value. To deepen the spiritual life of our people, we must cultivate the traditional habit of communion with God through prayer in both home and synagogue.**

Cohon believed that both private and public worship were important to the soul of the individual as well as to the life of the Jewish people. Cohon maintained that "religion is born of the response of man's spirit to the Divine, of the direction of our soul to the Source of its being."<sup>196</sup> Cohon

<sup>194</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Schwartz, September 21, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 13/8.

<sup>195</sup> "Treasures of the Spirit," delivered at the dedication ceremony of the Samuel S. Cohon library to the HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, May 31, 1959, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/1, p. 9.

<sup>196</sup> "The Function of Religion," December 17, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/5, p. 11.

espoused a traditional view of prayer as the link between man and the personal God; as the mode of communication between finite and infinite.

Religion is more than worship, but it is nothing without worship. Worship is of the very essence of religion. We live in acts and not merely in emotions or thoughts. Religion like music must not only be composed but also rendered, in order to be enjoyed. As in art the inner feelings translate themselves in forms, so in religion religion sentiment is expressed in symbols and ceremonies."<sup>197</sup>

The final two paragraphs of the section on religious practice also function as the conclusion to the Columbus Platform. In these two short paragraphs, Cohon takes up a number of different themes; however, they are similar in that they all exist in order to enhance Judaism as a "way of life:"

**Judaism as a way of life requires in addition to its moral and spiritual demands, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction.**

While a good number of these issues have already been explored, it would be negligent to offer an exposition of Cohon's ideology without detailing his position regarding the role of הלכה in the life of modern Jews, and without mentioning his great love for the Hebrew language. Cohon

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<sup>197</sup> "Jewish Worship," Institutes given during 1943-45, SSC Papers, AJA, 20/6, p. 1. A complete discussion of Cohon's view of prayer will be included in connection with Cohon's revision of the Union Prayer Book.

always referred to Reform Judaism as a "conserving force" that appeared on the horizon of Jewish history to "clear away the obsolete forms which grew irksome and unsatisfying, and to build new and more stately mansions for the Jewish soul in its quest after the beauty of holiness."<sup>198</sup> The Reform Jew's responsibility, according to Cohon, rests in striking a balance between old and new. Cohon stated: "While some הלכה is essential to all forms of Judaism, it can no longer form the be-all and end-all of Judaism."<sup>199</sup> While "Reform Judaism does not demand the strict observance of all the traditional laws . . . neither has it officially abolished them."<sup>200</sup> The following paragraph summarizes Cohon's view of הלכה for Reform Jews:

While many of these observances have been reduced to mere matters of external custom, they still make for self-restraint and for religious discipline. They further distinguish us as Jews and strengthen our connections with our forebears and with our brethren in all parts of the world. Consequently, irrespective of whether or not individual Reform Jews observe these laws, our children should be instructed to understand them, for only through understanding can they acquire the respect for and the appreciation of the beliefs and observances of our Orthodox and Conservative brethren which are so vital to an intelligent participation in Jewish life.<sup>201</sup>

Both due to Cohon's extensive knowledge of traditional הלכה and to his appreciation of Jewish forms and ceremonies in general, he was

<sup>198</sup> Cohon, "The Beginning of Reform," *The Synagogue Review* 28 (March 1954): 217.

<sup>199</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Jacob B. Agus, December 9, 1954, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/1.

<sup>200</sup> Letter from Cohon to Samuel Deutsch, November 14, 1943, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/2.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.



frequently called upon to discuss and decide matters of הלכה both within the Reform Movement and outside of it. Cohon's papers disclose evidence that he corresponded with hundreds of rabbis and laypeople throughout the country, and frequently offered responsa regarding nearly every aspect of Jewish life and practice. In one letter from Cohon to David H. Wice, Cohon stated his reasons as well as his sources of authority regarding the laws of כשרות. Cohon said:

You ask regarding the Reform rabbi's attitude regarding the Dietary Laws. In my judgment it shall be determined not only by the formal resolutions adopted by conferences (ie. Pittsburgh Platform, paragraph #4) and by the results of inquiry into their historical origin, but also by practical human considerations. For the vast number of our people these laws form part of Jewish life and loyalty. If the rabbi does nothing to encourage them, he should at least do nothing to uproot them. Though he is not bound in conscience to observe them in all minutiae, he might do well not to partake of such foods as are definitely offensive to observant Jews. At least, he should avoid eating them in public so as not to offend those who have scruples regarding the matter.<sup>202</sup>

He encouraged, wherever possible, an approach to הלכה for Reform Jews that would seek to fuse ancient forms with contemporary adaptations. Cohon used "past customs as a means of stimulating our religious consciousness, rather than as absolute standards of action."<sup>203</sup> He was masterful at the art of applying the value of the ancient הלכה to

<sup>202</sup> Letter from Cohon to David H. Wice, January 13, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 14/2.

<sup>203</sup> "Guiding Lines of Authority in Reform Judaism," p. 15. (See footnote #21)

contemporary circumstances. In addition, he continually used the meanings and messages of the Jewish holidays and festivals as canvases on which he illustrated the problems and issues of the day.

However, even though Cohon believed in the importance of creating some type of Reform הלכה for the Jews of his day, he did not deceive himself or others into thinking that such a הלכה would be acceptable to Conservative or Orthodox Jews. For example, in answer to a query regarding a Reform גט, Cohon wrote: "Many couples would welcome a written גט by the rabbi prior to remarriage. . . . However, the Orthodox community will not recognize it."<sup>204</sup> Similarly, as we have seen above, he encouraged the observance of כשרות among Reform Jews even though he acknowledged that many Orthodox Jews might still refuse to eat in a kosher Reform Jewish home.<sup>205</sup>

Finally, a few words must be put forth regarding Cohon's love affair with the Hebrew language. Though it has already been stated that Cohon was certainly not a Jewish nationalist, he nevertheless believed that Hebrew was a central component of Jewish expression. Cohon viewed Hebrew as the authentic "accentuation of one's Jewishness,"<sup>206</sup> and he continually insisted that it be taught in synagogues to both children and adults. He believed that Hebrew reflects the soul of the Jewish people, that it is the preferable language of prayer, and that it is an academic medium through which Jewish study should occur.<sup>207</sup> Cohon viewed Hebrew as "one of the means through which

<sup>204</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Samuel H. Baron, April 1, 1954, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/3.

<sup>205</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mr. Frederick C. Howe, U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 5, 1934.

This three-page letter gives a thorough exposition of the history of the laws of כשרות and also explains some of the differences in attitude and practice between Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jews.

<sup>206</sup> "The Bond of Language," January 7, 1921, SSC Papers, AJA, 16/6.

<sup>207</sup> Cohon, "The Religious Significance of Hebrew," E'nai E'rith News 15 (January 1924): 143. This article was published under the unauthorized title: "The Renascence of Hebrew."

our Reform Jewish congregations are held together as part of universal Judaism."<sup>208</sup> He searched for ways to popularize the Hebrew language and its literature, and he even served on the Advisory Board of the Histadruth Ivrit. An admirer of Bialik, Ahad Ha-Am and Menahem Ribalow, Cohon subscribed to the ancient notion that "the very letters of the Hebrew alphabet were invested with sanctity," and that it is a "privilege for Jews to strengthen the bonds of language that connect them with the seers and singers of old."<sup>209</sup>

The poignant conclusion to the Columbus Platform ends on an inspirational note, and serves to rouse the Reform Jews of both Cohon's time and beyond it to action:

**These timeless aims and ideals of our faith we present anew to a confused and troubled world. We call upon our fellow Jews to rededicate themselves to them, and, in harmony with all men, hopefully and courageously to continue Israel's eternal quest after God and His Kingdom.**

It is always difficult to assess the success of a document such as the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism. Undoubtedly, history shows that, for the most part, it was recognized as a "magnificent statement . . . that one can subscribe to with all one's heart."<sup>210</sup> However, it must be stated, that the Platform was not without its critics. While some disagreed with elements of its theology, still others took issue with its style and its manner of presentation. Some individuals found "the wording of the Columbus Platform so ambiguous in places as to allow completely opposite

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<sup>208</sup> Letter from Cohon to Mrs. W.H. Hoffman, October 25, 1954, SSC Papers, AJA, 9/8.

<sup>209</sup> "The Religious Significance of Hebrew," p. 143. (See footnote #207)

<sup>210</sup> Letter from Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof to Cohon, April 10, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6.

interpretations."<sup>211</sup> Other individuals criticized its style for being "academic and innocuous."<sup>212</sup> Rabbi Louis Wolsey, for one, believed that the "English of the statement ought to be simplified."<sup>213</sup> Wolsey contended:

The Platform is clothed in such phraseology as to deny to it an easy understanding upon the part of our laymen. Its theological language is much more adapted to the student and professional scholar than it is to the general population and it, therefore, would be a sort of cloistered or esoteric expression, which would hardly be made use of by congregations that want to know what is the attitude of Reform Judaism.<sup>214</sup>

While most individuals believed that the Columbus Platform succeeded in accomplishing its goal of formulating a clear statement for modern Reform Jews, Louis Finkelstein viewed the Guiding Principles as "a compromise program," that did not go far enough to differentiate Reform Judaism as a separate Jewish movement. Finkelstein maintained:

Reform Jews have tried to formulate a definite platform outlining the principles on which they agree, and which they believe basic to Judaism. The most recent platform is that adopted at a meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1937. In this platform no effort is made to indicate the way Reform Judaism differs from the Orthodox or Conservative interpretation of Judaism. And, indeed, the platform does not

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<sup>211</sup> Letter from Rabbi Israel Mattuck to Rabbi Felix A. Levy, June 9, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 4.

This letter from Mattuck was sent to Felix A. Levy in response to Cohon's initial draft.

<sup>212</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof, April 29, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 3.

<sup>213</sup> Letter from Rabbi Louis Wolsey to Cohon, March 22, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/6, p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

contain much to which Orthodox and Conservative groups can take exception. It is rather in its implications than by its direct statements that it deviates from tradition.<sup>215</sup>

It would have been extremely instructive to have heard Cohon's response to Finkelstein's critique of the Platform, for it is quite possible that Cohon may not have interpreted the above analysis as entirely negative.

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<sup>215</sup> Louis Finkelstein, The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949), Vol. I and Vol IV, pp. 420 and 1344.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

### COHON AS LITURGIST OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT

In addition to Samuel Cohon's dedication to shaping the ideology of the Reform Movement through the Columbus Platform, Cohon also offered significant contributions to the Movement's liturgical repository. Cohon viewed personal prayer as central to one's identity as a Jew, and he saw communal worship as a binding force of the Jewish community. Whether prayer was private or public, Cohon believed that it needed to be revived among Reform Jews in America as an important value as well as an active Jewish endeavor. Throughout his years as a pulpit rabbi, and even during his tenure as Professor of Liturgy and Theology at the Hebrew Union College, Cohon always stressed that prayer "is the lifting of the heart and mind to God."<sup>1</sup>

Cohon maintained a fairly traditional view of Jewish prayer and worship. He understood prayer as a sacred conversation between man and God; as a dialogue that manifests itself in the forms of **קבע** and **כוונה**. Man's mind as well as his heart must be directed toward the living God, who, according to Cohon, "is a creative intelligence which shapes all forms of nature and directs them towards ends which may be beyond our understanding."<sup>2</sup> Cohon believed so strongly that prayer involves a two-way conversation between man and the God, that he went so far to say that prayer without belief in a personal God was not only futile, but sinful as well. Regardless of the gravity of the Jew's sin, however, he never loses his

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<sup>1</sup> "What I Believe About Prayer," June 29, 1956, SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "What is Left of Prayer?" The Jewish Layman 9 (January 1935): 3-4. Also in SSC Papers, AJA, 27/5.

membership in the Jewish community. Thus, on the principle that "an Israelite, even though he sins, is still an Israelite," Cohon stated:

"Accordingly, he remains a Jew if he does not subscribe to a particular attribute of God, which, in our judgment, is essential to Judaism, and the working postulate of worship."<sup>3</sup>

Prayer serves a useful and beneficial function for humanity. According to Cohon, when man engages in prayer, he both offers something to God and receives something from Him in return. Cohon said: "All voyagers on the sea of life find in prayer a source of strength. It prepares them for life's battles."<sup>4</sup> And in preparing man for the challenges and realities of living, prayer serves a numbers of different functions in one's personal and religious life. He believed that the expressions one utters in prayer not only provide man with an "opening of the soul before God . . . in which all sham and pretense go," but also provide humanity with "a means of reconciliation with God."<sup>5</sup> The worshipper may find refuge in God through prayer, and also learn to trust in and depend on Him. Moreover, prayer actually possesses the power to alter the course of life's events. Cohon maintained: "Change in life (is) often effected through the serious word of prayer."<sup>6</sup> Finally, Cohon believed that prayer assists us in "clearing our vision."<sup>7</sup> That is, he viewed prayer as a spiritual act that nurtures and develops man's conscience. Cohon contended: "Conscience is the channel through which the voice of God

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<sup>3</sup> Cohon, "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," discussion in the Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 38 (1928): 292.

<sup>4</sup> "Prayer," March 16, 1956, Outline-draft of address given at H.U.C.-J.L.R, SSC Papers, AJA, 24/1, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

whispers softly in our hearts, and makes us merciful and compassionate, and above all, commands us to be just."<sup>8</sup>

Cohon continually preached that "people who abandon prayer, in large measure, cut themselves off from the rich reservoirs of religion and impoverish their spiritual life."<sup>9</sup> He saw his generation as one that had "neglect(ed) religious devotion in all its forms; of study of Torah, self-discipline and prayer."<sup>10</sup> Because Cohon viewed such disregard of the tradition as detrimental to the Reform Movement, he dedicated a large part of his career to restoring prayer to Reform synagogues and to renewing the Movement's liturgical forms. As was characteristic of Cohon, he began this endeavor with himself - with his personal practice and with his own rabbinate. Cohon prayed on a daily basis, and encouraged his students and congregants to do the same. In addition, he frequently spoke to his congregants and students about the importance of creating a prayerful atmosphere in the synagogue as well as in the home. As part of Cohon's own congregational rabbinate, he often introduced new modes of worship into the synagogue service, and urged his congregants to experiment with some of the traditional home practices and rituals that had been abandoned by the first generation of reformers. In short, his "striving to recover the lost desire to pray in the Reform Movement" required both a return to tradition and the creation of new and innovative expressions of worship.<sup>11</sup>

Cohon expressed himself as a competent liturgist in a number of ways. His papers contain numerous original prayers written for nearly every

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<sup>8</sup> "Man's Relation to God," January 30, 1914, SSC Papers, AJA, 22/ 2, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> "What is Left of Prayer," p. 3. (See footnote #2)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 269. (See footnote #3)

occasion imaginable.<sup>12</sup> Whether he wrote in Hebrew or in English, Cohon always strived to capture the meaning of the event or occasion, and to imbue it with a religious message. Among the most poignant prayers found in his papers is one that was written and delivered on the occasion of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Isaac Mayer Wise Temple in 1932, and another prayer composed shortly after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>13</sup> As a rabbi, Cohon viewed himself not as a mediator of prayer between God and man; rather, as a facilitator of worship for his congregants. In a beautiful prayer in Cohon's own handwriting, perhaps obviously based on the idea content of such traditional prayers as the הנני and the עם פיפיות,<sup>14</sup> he humbly expressed his role as שליח צבור:

O Lord my God! Standing before Thee in the presence of the congregation, I pray for an understanding heart and for a steadfast spirit. Make me the instrument of Thy truth that I may faithfully show Thy word unto Thy children who may turn to me for their spiritual guidance. As a servant of Thy majesty may no obstacle come through me. Thou has been my guide from my childhood days, guide me also in the days to come that my mouth shall declare Thy glory and my lips praise Thy greatness. From secret sins keep Thou me, also from presumption and pride that my heart and will shall be ever with Thee, and that my example shall not belie my precept. May the words of my mouth and the meditation

<sup>12</sup> Most of Cohon's original, unpublished prayers may be found in folders 4 and 5 of Box 33 in Cohon's papers in the American Jewish Archives. He was frequently called on to offer invocations and benedictions for special occasions, both in the Jewish community and outside of it. Moreover, nearly every one of his sermons concluded with a prayer based on the theme of his address.

<sup>13</sup> Both of these prayers may be found in the SSC Papers, AJA, 33/4.

<sup>14</sup> These prayers are found in Philip Birnbaum's High Holiday Prayer Book (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951), pp. 325 and 380. Cohon himself placed the עם פיפיות as the frontpiece for the Rabbi's Manual (Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1928), p. 7. He also put something like it in the newly revised Union Prayer Book II for the Atonement Evening Service (Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1945), p. 126.

of my heart be acceptable before Thee, my protecting Rock and living Redeemer.

Grant me strength to speak Thy truth without fear and to lead my fellowmen through the paths of justice and peace and to Thy fountain of love. In Thy mercy mayest Thou bless all Thy children who are assembled here, who strive to know Thee and who are faithful and sincere in heart. May Thy blessing of peace ever rest with us all. Amen.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the prayers that Cohon composed for his own personal or congregational use, he also contributed to the liturgical development of the Reform Movement. As editor of the Union Haggadah (1923) and the Rabbi's Manual (1928), and as a foremost contributor to both volumes of the Union Prayer Book (1940 and 1945), Cohon helped to shape the worship trends of the Reform Movement during his own lifetime and for many years after his death. In addition to serving as one of the primary editors for all of the above mentioned volumes, he also made significant contributions to the 1951 edition of the Union Home Prayer Book. Despite Cohon's negative sentiments regarding the composition of liturgy through a "committee endeavor,"<sup>16</sup> Cohon nevertheless involved himself wholeheartedly in all of the above publications of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and indeed dealt adeptly with the many frustrations that he faced over the years.

The most personally gratifying CCAR publication edited by Cohon was the 1923 revision of the Union Haggadah. Cohon was appointed Chairman of the Committee on the Haggadah revision by Rabbi Louis Wolsey on November 12, 1918. Cohon was a young rabbi at the time of this appointment; however, he had already demonstrated to many of the senior

<sup>15</sup> Untitled, handwritten prayer - SSC Papers, AJA, 33/4.

<sup>16</sup> "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 268. (See footnote #3)



members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis that he was willing and prepared to take on the difficult task of serving as Chairman of such an important committee. In addition, Cohon had a special fondness for the Festival of Passover. As early as 1915, he articulated his views concerning the traditional beauty of Passover, and its meaning as an important Reform observance. He viewed Passover as a Feast of Freedom -- freedom that encompasses one's spirit as well as one's body. "As Reform Jews," Cohon stated, "freedom can have but one meaning: The regaining of one's soul, the self-mastery through which we may cultivate the best that is in us. Of such freedom all of us stand in need."<sup>17</sup>

Naturally, Cohon viewed the Passover Seder as the centerpiece of the Festival, and indeed, as one of the most unique and important family celebrations of the Jewish year. Cohon wrote: "The Jewish home derives much of its beauty and warmth from the religious atmosphere which pervades it, and particularly from the special ceremonies that hallow it on the Sabbath and the Festivals. Among these, the Seder ranks foremost."<sup>18</sup> Cohon spoke warmly and nostalgically about the Seder, and continually encouraged families to celebrate the Seder in their homes, surrounded by friends and family. Cohon wrote: "Everything connected with the Seder, the table decorations, the ornamental matza dish and those joys of children's hearts - the stained-glass wine cups - all lend tone and color to the occasion."<sup>19</sup> Cohon saw the Passover Seder as a time when ancient history comes alive through the compelling story of the Exodus from Egypt and the powerful symbols

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<sup>17</sup> "Pesach: The Feast of Freedom," April 2, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 18/3.

<sup>18</sup> "The Prague Haggadah," Review of *Die Pessach Haggadah des Gerschom Kohen*: Prague 1527, ed. by B. Katz and H. Loewe, Berlin 1926, in *E'nal E'rith Magazine* 40 (1926): 180-81. Rpt. in SSC Papers, AJA, 24/1, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

associated with the Festival meal. Therefore, Cohon understood the Seder as an occasion when "the past is brought near to the present;"<sup>20</sup> a time during which "past experience lends atmosphere and artistic beauty to the an eternal ideal, as much needed today and tomorrow as it was yesterday."<sup>21</sup>

Cohon argued that the Haggadah used at the Passover Seder ought to likewise reflect the beauty and message of the Festival. While he perceived the 1908 revision of the Union Haggadah as a significant improvement over earlier editions, he felt that there was still room for increased liturgical improvement and heightened aesthetic sensitivity. He found the 1908 Haggadah to be "in a disjointed and disconnected condition, and just when a passage is in the midst of explaining something it comes to an end."<sup>22</sup> He encouraged the Committee on Haggadah to revise the 1908 Union Haggadah so that it would be more in line with tradition while at the same time reflect the needs and aspirations of modern Reform Jews. This "double agenda" of creating a Haggadah that would both echo the past and fulfill the demands of the present was not a mandate that frightened or intimidated Cohon. In fact, for him, the attempt to strike a proper balance between past and present represented the perpetual challenge of Reform Judaism – and a challenge that Cohon appreciated and enjoyed.

In one of the initial reports of the Committee on Haggadah to the CCAR, Cohon summarized a few of the shortcomings of the 1908 Union Haggadah that prompted the Conference to call for a revision. Cohon wrote:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Cohon, What We Jews Believe And A Guide to Jewish Practice (Assen: VanGorcum Ltd, 1971), p. 195.

<sup>22</sup> Cohon, "Report of Committee on Revision of the Haggadah," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 29 (1919): 57.

The Union Haggadah, as adopted by the Conference in 1908, aimed at enhancing the beautiful home service on Passover eve, by providing a ritual consistent with the spirit of Reform Judaism. The work of editing the Haggadah, of writing several prayers, and of adding new hymns and other valuable matter, was creditably performed, creating thereby a book of great merit. However, the editors of the Union Haggadah must have been at least partly conscious of the fact that their work needed many improvements to render it acceptable to every modern Jewish home, and to endear it to every Jewish heart.<sup>23</sup>

Like everything else in Reform Judaism, Cohon believed that the Haggadah needed to appeal to the minds as well as to the hearts of contemporary Reform Jews. He felt that the 1908 Haggadah leaned too far toward the rational and intellectual aspect of Passover and not enough toward the spiritual and whimsical side of the Festival and its story. Therefore, he encouraged the Committee to "make the (1908) Union Haggadah the basis of its work, retaining its Hebrew and English wherever possible . . . (but also) feel justified in going back to the parent source and draw upon its rich material, in order to retain the symbolism, the devotional spirit, and the playfulness of the old Haggadah."<sup>24</sup>

Cohon and the Committee on Revision of the Union Haggadah believed that the addition of traditional prayers and homilies for Passover would enhance their revision. These historic forms "typified the Jewish spirit . . . and (caused it to take on) the form of a historical drama presented at the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

Festival table, with the father and children as leading actors."<sup>25</sup> Against the wishes of other rabbis in the Conference who desired to do away altogether with the "archaic" aggadic style, Cohon strongly defended its retention in the revised Union Haggadah, claiming: "The removal of the aggadic style from the Haggadah is about the same as writing a sonnet without regard to the sonnet form."<sup>26</sup> In this instance, Cohon's views prevailed. Thus, in an effort to "lend historical color to the Haggadah" as well as maintain its traditional style, the 1923 revision of the Union Haggadah added the Four Questions to the Seder. In addition to the Four Questions, the 1923 Union Haggadah also included the following traditional prayers and forms:

1. The passage commencing with מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה and including והיא שעמדה, the delightful Midrash opening with the words צא ולמד and ending with the enumeration of the ten plagues.
2. Psalm CXIV.
3. The Hebrew text and translation of ואמרתם זבח פסח, ויהי בחצי הלילה כי לו נאם, and אדיר הוא forming part of the miscellany.
4. Additions for reponsive readings for the דיין and the Grace after the meal.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Landman, February 7, 1922, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Report of the Committee on Revision of the Haggadah," p. 56. (See footnote #22) These revisions are also enumerated in several places in Cohon's papers. The final version of the newly revised Union Haggadah only reflects a portion of these changes suggested by Cohon. With regard to #1 above, what appears in the final version of the Haggadah is the Biblical passage on which צא ולמד is based and not the midrashic passage that Cohon recommended for inclusion. With regard to #3 above, we find in the 1923 Union Haggadah an English adaptation of ויהי בחצי הלילה and not the Hebrew text that Cohon suggested.

While the above revisions were not incorporated into the newly revised Union Haggadah exactly as Cohon suggested, these changes did meet with general acceptance by the majority of the members of the Conference. However, other suggested supplements to the newly revised Union Haggadah that appeared to indicate a return to tradition, were harshly criticized by some individuals as being offensive to the sensibilities of Reform Judaism. In particular, Cohon faced serious opposition from Dr. Henry Berkowitz, editor of the 1908 Union Haggadah, in response the Committee's decision to retain the Seder's traditional customs surrounding Elijah. In an undated letter to Cohon, Berkowitz expressed his disdain for those customs that create a "fairy atmosphere" at the Seder table:

I wish to register my earnest protest against restoring to the seder table the so-called cup of Elijah and against the act of opening the door for Elijah. The whole motive of modernizing the mood is set aside by this reversal. Your own explanations indicate that this is all pure legendary. . . . Even as symbols we cannot sincerely use the Elijah elements of the old Haggadah, for they embody the concept of the personal Messiah whose actual coming was held to be, not figuratively but really imminent.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, on the issue of Elijah, Cohon stood his ground in the face of Berkowitz's criticism, and retorted: "Our children simply have to be taught to revere time honored customs. Left to themselves they will laugh at the matza, and morror, at the Passover and at the Torah, at Israel, and even at

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Berkowitz to the Committee on Revision of the Haggadah, N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6.



God Himself."<sup>29</sup> In short, the Seder was to be used to educate Jews as much as it was to be enjoyed as a Festival. Cohon saw value in a Haggadah that would conform both in style and in sequence to the traditional Haggadah; however, he also viewed it as an instructional piece for children and adults alike. As a result, Cohon favored the inclusion of all biblical quotations within the text of the Haggadah, and also was instrumental in adding the miscellany throughout the book. He did not believe, however, that the Haggadah should be a place for Jewish polemics; therefore, the decision was made by the Committee "not to retain in the introduction the passage in the Old Haggadah which deals with the attitude of modern man towards ceremonies."<sup>30</sup>

The revised Union Haggadah of 1923 reflects Cohon's belief that the Haggadah ought to be a work of art as well as a religious narrative. He spent numerous hours concentrating on details of the Haggadah that would increase its aesthetic appeal for Reform Jews. In addition to commissioning Isadore Lipton to illustrate the revised Union Haggadah, he also worked extensively with Professor Jacob Singer of the School of Fine Arts of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln on the musical portions of the Haggadah. Cohon was interested in a Haggadah that would be practical as well as beautiful; he paid close attention to the size and shape of the manual, the color of its cover, and even to its typeface and calligraphy.

In the final analysis, the 1923 revised Union Haggadah met with tremendous success, and was used - and continues to be used - by thousands of Reform Jews throughout the country. Cohon received numerous letters of congratulations upon the completion of the Haggadah in 1923 that praised his

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<sup>29</sup> Letter from Cohon to Landman, p. 2. (See footnote #26)

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof and Rosenau, June, 1922, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6.

efforts as well as the fruits of his labors. The following excerpt of a letter from Freehof to Cohon typifies the accolades that Cohon and his Committee reaped:

Your book is a joy to the heart. it is Jewish without sacrificing a single Reform principle. The illustrations add materially to the attractiveness and to the joyous spirit of the Seder. The dance of the animals at the close of the **נ"ך** **דן** expresses a living happiness and is a fine antidote to the dead solemnity of the previous Haggadah. I consider this Haggadah to be the first fruits of the newer tendency in our American Reform Judaism toward Jewishness and away from mere ethical monotheism. I am proud of even the tiny bit I could contribute to the book.<sup>31</sup>

And even Dr. Berkowitz, who had frequently exerted his authority and seniority during the process of the revision of the Union Haggadah, ultimately applauded the young Cohon on his endeavor as well as his product:

Let me congratulate you on the success of the revised Haggadah. It is a real achievement in every way. Whatever may have been the doubts and criticisms expressed by me in my correspondence with you on receiving the "proofs", I am free to say have all disappeared through the admirable manner in which you have worked out the details of the whole service and through the thorough, scholarly and frank manner in which you have elucidated the whole subject.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, April 2, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Dr. Henry Berkowitz to Cohon, April 9, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6.

Cohon's humble reply to Dr. Berkowitz, consistent with Cohon's character, reflects his personality as one who respected the wisdom and experience - albeit critical - of those whom he considered his teachers:

Your pleasant remarks concerning the revised Haggadah have made me feel very happy. While I have received quite a number of "mi sheberachs", your sentiments carry the greatest weight because they come from one who has grappled, perhaps in a greater degree than I, with problems in reconstructing the unique ritual of the Seder for modern use.<sup>33</sup>

On June 29, 1926, just three years after the completion of the Revised Union Haggadah, Wolsey appointed Cohon to serve as Chairman for the Committee on Revision of the Minister's Handbook. While the Committee on Revision was not formally convened until 1926, many rabbis, including Cohon, had been voicing their dissatisfaction with the 1917 Minister's Handbook for several years. Cohon, as early as 1915, expressed his serious reservations about the proposed draft of the Minister's Handbook to Rabbi Rosenau, then the Chairman of the CCAR Committee on the Handbook. Cohon told Rosenau that in many places the Minister's Handbook fell short of communicating what he viewed to be the creed of Reform Judaism. For example, he sharply criticized the marriage service found in the Minister's Handbook as out of line with contemporary Reform Jewish belief. He believed the "the traditional seven (marriage) benedictions are nearer in spirit to the modern man than the form contained in the handbook."<sup>34</sup> No

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Cohon to Berkowitz, April 20, 1923, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/6.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Rosenau, October 28, 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/2.

doubt, Cohon's objection to the traditional שבע ברכות must have rested partially in the references to Zion that appear in these benedictions. Moreover, he found parts of the ceremony simply inconsistent with modern thought and philosophy: "Do we have to ask our grooms whether they promise to love, honor, and cherish their brides? This is their duty as men and as Jews."<sup>35</sup>

Cohon also found fault with the "sickly note of otherworldliness . . . that had crept into the confession of faith in the conversion and confirmation services as well as in the funeral, tombstone dedication, and anniversary services" in the 1917 Handbook.<sup>36</sup> Cohon continued in his criticism of the theology contained in the Handbook and stated:

Some passages even suggest the author's belief in rewards and punishments in a heaven and hell. While this may be the conviction of some Reform teachers, I doubt whether it expresses the creed of Reform Judaism. Even those who believe in a personal immortality, need not go into extravagant descriptions of the "peace and bliss" (Minister's Handbook, 1917, p. 62) that await the soul. . . . We must be aware of making the confusion in the minds our people more confounded.<sup>37</sup>

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However, in another place, on an undated handwritten note on a proposed marriage ceremony for the Rabbi's Manual, undoubtedly submitted to Cohon by a rabbi in the Conference, Cohon actually expressed his objection to the suggestion that "the entire traditional שבע ברכות be reproduced in Hebrew in the new Manual." Cohon wrote in the margin: "I do not concur in the suggestion. Much in the traditional שבע ברכות does not belong in a Reform service. Anyone who desires them can find them in the traditional סידור, or in a rabbinical handbook." Such inconsistency in Cohon's thinking is indeed unusual. (SSC Papers, AJA, 3/1, p. 5 of proposed "Marriage Service.")

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. It is very interesting that in the 1928 Rabbi's Manual (p. 40) the exact wording to which Cohon objected in 1915 is used in the marriage ceremony. Other than the above 1915 statement by Cohon regarding this formula, Cohon's papers reflect no further discussion on the issue.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rosenau. (See footnote #34)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

It is important to mention, however, that even though Cohon was adamant in his desire to revise the Minister's Handbook, many other influential rabbis in the Conference ardently defended the 1917 volume, and stubbornly fought Cohon and the Committee on Revision throughout the process. Many of the "old guard," including Samuel Schulman, who had worked on the 1917 Minister's Handbook, expressed their disapproval and "doubt as to the value of constantly changing and revising prayers and modes of ceremonials."<sup>38</sup> In a fifteen page manuscript to Cohon and the Committee on Revision, Schulman not only articulated his objections to the notion of revision, but also went on to detail his specific criticisms regarding nearly every page of the proposed draft of the new volume. In almost every case, Schulman came to the conclusion that the particular ritual or ceremony under consideration "was better in the old book," and he "frankly and honestly could not consider the revised version an improvement upon the old Minister's Handbook."<sup>39</sup>

While Schulman and others obviously failed in their battle to convince the Conference to abandon revision of the Minister's Handbook altogether, they did meet with some measure of success regarding specific details of the new edition. Of all of the ceremonies in the Minister's Handbook considered for revision, the marriage ceremony received the most attention, and went through the greatest number of alterations before reaching its final form in the 1928 Rabbi's Manual. One of the most interesting debates surrounding the revision of the marriage ceremony was

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<sup>38</sup> Samuel S. Schulman, "Comments and Suggestions in the Matter of the Revised Minister's Handbook," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 3/3, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2 and 15.



the argument over the formula of marriage itself. Schulman, for one, tenaciously fought to retain the old formula as it appeared in the Minister's Handbook. He expressed his reasoning in the following lengthy but brilliant explanation, worth reproducing here in order to lend insight into the argument at hand:

Now as to the formula of marriage, I wish to say that after a very thorough debate, the Committee that prepared the old Minister's Handbook, adopted by the formula suggested by me: "According to the faith of Israel and the law of God." This formula has a history. The Reformers sought some substitution for the traditional formula. . . . Your Committee has changed it to "law of Israel". . . . The formula which your Committee adopted means nothing. For what, after all, is the law of Israel, what does it mean in a marriage ceremony? When in the traditional formula, it is said "be thou consecrated unto me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel," we have an expression logical and consistent. The ring is the symbol of acquisition. The thing of value is evidence of the contract. And the marriage is consummated according to the law of Moses and Israel, which means the Mosaic Law, as interpreted by the Talmud and later authorities. It is a purely legal formula. But you know that we have broken with the Halachah. We are not actually marrying according to the law of Moses and Israel, in the technical sense. Therefore, your phrase "law of Israel," is most indefinite. . . . I say "according to the faith of Israel and the Law of God." The word faith, in the formula refers to religion. And faith, is an excellent word to use, because it is beautifully comprehensive as a spiritual term. . . . Now, as to the additional "law of God," in my formula, this has been taken over from

Einhorn. In itself the phrase is not sufficiently concrete to distinguish a Jewish marriage from any other, because all marriages of other faiths are supposed to be according to the law of God. But I feel it does round out the formula completely, because "law of God," when supplementing "faith of Israel" means that this marriage is being consummated according to the fundamental laws of right, of duty, of unselfish love and faithfulness, all of which are purely ethical terms.<sup>40</sup>

Despite his compelling explanation, Schulman was only partially successful in convincing Cohon and the Committee to retain his formula "the faith of Israel and the law of God." As is evident in the 1928 Rabbi's Manual, Cohon was persuaded by Schulman's suggestion to abandon the phrase "law of Israel," and to substitute "faith of Israel" in its place. However, Cohon stopped short of reproducing Schulman's entire formula in the new Rabbi's Manual and chose not to include the words "law of God" in the formula of marriage.

Against the suggestion of others, Schulman notwithstanding, Cohon also refused to maintain "the order in the old book where the marriage is consummated before the benedictions."<sup>41</sup> While Cohon must have ultimately come to the conclusion that there was merit in reproducing the majority of the שבע ברכות in Hebrew and English, he was unwilling to acquiesce to others' insistence that the wine, according to tradition, needed to be the first benediction. Cohon was successful in convincing the Committee to include a portion of Kohler's marriage ceremony in the Rabbi's Manual. He took pride in the fact that "embodied in the Marriage service (is) a fine

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

paragraph from the late Dr. Kohler's marriage manuscript ritual, that eloquently voices the sacred character of marriage:"<sup>42</sup>

As together you now drink from this cup, so may you, under God's guidance, in perfect union and devotion to each other, draw contentment, comfort and felicity from the cup of life, and thereby may you find life's joys doubly gladdening, its bitterness sweetened, and all things hallowed by true companionship and love.<sup>43</sup>

As a general rule, the Rabbi's Manual shows evidence of Cohon's tendency to restore traditional rituals and observances to Reform Judaism. In addition to the above mentioned inclusion of the שבע ברכות in the wedding ceremony, the incorporation of the traditional Hebrew וידוי in the prayer for the dying, and the complete אל מלא רחמים and צדוק הדין as part of the funeral services, represent a clear return to Jewish tradition. Designed to "reflect quite consistently the present day attitude of Reform Judaism and its theology," the Rabbi's Manual was created in order to "satisfy those who hunger for more rather than less Judaism."<sup>44</sup> Thus, in addition to including more Hebrew, the Rabbi's Manual also "provided a larger variety of material for several important occasions in the life of the individual and of the

<sup>42</sup> Cohon, "The Rabbi's Manual - A Rejoinder," The American Israelite, August 3, 1928. Cohon's dedication to creating meaningful marriage rituals for the Reform Movement continued throughout the years of Cohon's rabbinate. In fact, in 1942, Cohon created a new marriage certificate for the Conference that was widely used by rabbis for decades. This certificate continues to be used by the CCAR - and without any acknowledgement of Cohon's authorship.

<sup>43</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi's Manual (Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1928), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> "The Rabbi's Manual - A Rejoinder." (See footnote #42)

congregation, and took cognizance of a greater number of such occasions, in order to invest them with the sanctity of religion."<sup>45</sup>

The change in title of the volume itself from Minister's Handbook to Rabbi's Manual also reflects a most definite return to Jewish tradition. However, what appears to the modern reader to be a simple change of phrase, at Cohon's time, was actually a sharp controversy. While Freehof "preferred the old title because 'minister' includes more than 'rabbi' and the book is for all who officiate - laymen or rabbis,"<sup>46</sup> Cohon felt that the Manual ought to be primarily intended for use by rabbis, and deserved a particularly Jewish title. He believed that the volume would aid them as they officiated in their traditional capacities within the Jewish community.

Many of the prayers included in the revised Rabbi's Manual were actually composed by Cohon. Cohon's personal papers are filled with drafts of prayers that ultimately found their way into various sections of the Rabbi's Manual.<sup>47</sup> However, of all of the original material that Cohon contributed to the Rabbi's Manual, it is fair to say that his greatest contribution to it was the large section of historical and explanatory notes that he drafted exclusively for the new Manual. The nearly sixty pages of notes that appear at the conclusion of the Rabbi's Manual, in many ways, forms the heart of the volume, and exemplifies Cohon's belief that ceremony without explanation is meaningless. Many rabbis opposed the lengthy explanatory notes in the Rabbi's Manual, and felt that the Manual resembled a "primer for a

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, December 31, 1927, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/3.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Cohon composed the "Prayer for the Dying" (Rabbi's Manual, page 57), the "Memorial Prayer" (Rabbi's Manual, pages 72-73), and the closing prayer for the "Afternoon Service at a House of Mourning" (Rabbi's Manual, pages 90-91). Drafts of these prayers, in Cohon's handwriting and from his typewriter, may be found in the SSC Papers, AJA, Boxes 33/4 and 33/5.

kindergarten class rather than a handbook for rabbis."<sup>48</sup> However, Cohon believed that it was important that the Manual provide accurate explanations for rabbis so that there would be no misunderstandings about the meaning of the ceremonies and rituals they were called upon to perform. In summary, the prayers contained in the Rabbi's Manual reflect Cohon the liturgist, the ceremonies mirror Cohon the rabbi, and the explanatory notes typify Cohon the teacher and scholar of the Reform Movement.

Despite the differences of opinion regarding certain matters of ideology and practice, and the occasional criticism that the Rabbi's Manual "pointed backward to custom rather than forward toward character,"<sup>49</sup> the Rabbi's Manual did receive a great deal of praise from rabbis in the Conference. Rabbis enjoyed the expanded variety of prayers that the new Rabbi's Manual offered, and many of them benefitted from the explanatory notes at the end of the volume. Many rabbis, Cohon included, used the notes at the end of the Manual as a quick reference to questions concerning Jewish custom and practice. In a lovely letter to Cohon, written shortly after the publication of the new Manual, Rabbi Eugene Blachschleger said:

Since my return home, I have had occasion to use the new Rabbi's Manual at a funeral, an unveiling, and at a wedding, and I find it most satisfactory and very much superior to the old Minister's Handbook. I am sure that the other men in the ministry will find it as helpful as I have.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Rabbi Isaac Marcuson to Cohon, May, 1928, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/3.

<sup>49</sup> No Author, "Review of the Rabbi's Manual," The American Israelite, July 1928, SSC Papers, AJA, 3/3.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Rabbi Eugene Blachschleger to Cohon, July 16, 1928, SSC Papers, AJA, 1/6.



By far the most difficult and frustrating of all of the CCAR publications Cohon worked to revise was the Union Prayer Book. The revision of both volumes of the Union Prayer Book spanned more than a decade of work from the early 1930's well into the middle of the 1940's. While some effort to revise the original 1894 (High Holiday) and 1895 (Sabbath, weekdays, Festivals) Union Prayer Book had already been accomplished in 1918 and 1920, the actual alterations to the prayer books proved to be minimal, and the revised volumes only served as temporary solutions for Reform rabbis and their congregants. Thus, Michael Meyer points out that while "a new edition of the volume for Sabbaths, festivals, and weekdays had appeared in 1918, for High Holidays in 1920 . . . this UPB was only slightly different than its (1894, 1895) predecessor."<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, by Cohon's time, it became evident to most people that a full-scale revision of both volumes of the Union Prayer Book was necessary. Partly because the revision was so many years in coming, and partly due to the amount of material requiring revision, the actual process of updating and revising The Union Prayer Book editions did not promise to be easy. Furthermore, the entire matter was complicated by the fact that there were enormous differences of opinion as to how the revision would be best accomplished.

The process of revision was also difficult because of ideological factors. The Reform Movement had changed drastically between the 1890's and the 1930's. By the time Cohon and others began their work on the Union Prayer Book in the 1930's, there were Reform Jews on nearly every point of the ideological spectrum. And since belief often affected practice, these differences

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<sup>51</sup> Michael A. Meyer, Response to Modernity (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), p. 320.

in ideology naturally manifested themselves in differences in worship and ritual. Therefore, while many Reform congregations in the 1930's were still using the Union Prayer Book volumes, they were often supplemented or even partially replaced by creative readings and prayers that better expressed the particular ideological sentiments of the worshippers. Thus, given the diversity of Reform Jewish belief and expression, the idea of creating a new "Union" Prayer Book was simply formidable.

And yet, for Cohon and many others, there was simply no choice but to revise the outdated Sabbath and High Holiday volumes of the Union Prayer Book. Cohon's own sharp criticism of both volumes of Union Prayer Book began as early as 1913 when he expressed to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations his desire to "substitute Einhorn's prayer book עולת תמיד for the Union Prayer Book."<sup>52</sup> From a practical standpoint, Cohon believed that "the Union Prayer Book used by the congregations seems wholly inadequate for the needs of the people. It is based on the Orthodox service; but whereas there every person reads the prayers and the חזן leads the congregation in decorous reading, in our case, the rabbi is called upon to do all the reading."<sup>53</sup> Reform Judaism and Reform Jewish prayer in particular needed to be an affair of the entire Jewish community, and not solely the rabbi. As a result, Cohon believed that an increase in the amount of congregational participation in services was necessary if the Reform Movement was serious about keeping Jews involved in the synagogue. In addition to its paucity of congregational readings, Cohon also felt that the old Union Prayer Book did not offer enough variety for either the rabbi or the congregation. In general,

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Cohon to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, October 20, 1913, SSC Papers, AJA, 13//5.

<sup>53</sup> "Recommendations to Zion Congregation," 1915, SSC Papers, AJA, 5/2.

he concluded: "The Union Prayer Book presents a difficulty by virtue of its sameness."<sup>54</sup>

From an ideological standpoint, much of Cohon's criticism of the Union Prayer Book was similar to the dissatisfaction that he had voiced about the Minister's Handbook. Cohon believed that the time had arrived in the Reform Movement for a reintroduction of particular prayers, ceremonies and even holiday observances that had been abandoned by the first generation of Reformers, and were consequently left out of both volumes of the Union Prayer Book. While the voice of Reform needed to be as strong in the revised volumes of the Union Prayer Book as it was in the original editions, Cohon wanted to design a prayer book that "would be more theistic, appealing to the omniscient, all-pervading, all-sustaining providential God."<sup>55</sup> Cohon wanted a more Jewish prayer book; one that would resound with more Jewish themes.

In addition to criticizing what was missing from the Union Prayer Book volumes, Cohon also bemoaned the tone that pervaded the prayer books in general. He felt that the "the Union Prayer Book unconsciously reflects the present apathy and skepticism toward prayer,"<sup>56</sup> and believed that a new, more optimistic liturgy was critical to the life and vitality of the Reform Movement. He wanted to see more Hebrew, more songs, and more ideology that was consistent with modern Reform Judaism in both the Sabbath and the High Holiday liturgies. Cohon worked to create prayer books

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Meyer, p. 320. (See footnote #51)

<sup>56</sup> Cohon, "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 249. (See footnote #3) Professor Meyer also cites this quotation in his book Response to Modernity, p. 318.

that would "consistently omit all references to a personal Messiah and emphasize instead the hope in the dawn of the Kingdom of God."<sup>57</sup>

And yet it became clear to Cohon at the initial meeting on revision of the Union Prayer Book I in December, 1931, that his agenda was certainly not the only one brought to the table for consideration.<sup>58</sup> Even though Cohon and the Chairman of the Committee on Revision of the Union Prayer Book I, Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof, agreed with one another on most practical and ideological issues surrounding the book, there were many other individuals on the Committee and within the Conference who were equally vocal. It became evident very early on in the process of revision that it was going to be impossible to please everyone. However, because everyone agreed on at least one thing - namely, that greater variety was needed in the new Union Prayer Book I - Freehof had the brilliant idea of appointing different individuals to work on different sections of the volume, thereby allowing for variety in form as well as ideology.

Initially, all of the members of the Committee were assigned relatively equal portions of the Union Prayer Book I to revise; however, as time advanced, certain individuals who may have been initially enthusiastic about participating in the revision, eventually relinquished their responsibilities due to waning interest or lack of commitment. Although Rabbis Bettan, Calisch, Witt and Lazon, to some extent, fulfilled their assignments, it is fair to say that the majority of the revision of the Union Prayer Book I fell into the capable and willing hands of Freehof and Cohon.

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<sup>57</sup> Letter from Cohon to Reverend J. Lunsford Robinson, October 27, 1935, SSC Papers, AJA, 12/7.

<sup>58</sup> The Committee decided to take up the revision of the Union Prayer Book I for Sabbaths, weekdays and festivals first. It will likewise be considered first in this study. Following a complete discussion of the revision of the Union Prayer Book I will be a separate analysis of the Union Prayer Book II for the High Holidays.



Cohon's contribution to the first volume of the Union Prayer Book was extensive. Because of the hundreds of pages of notes, drafts and revisions found in Cohon's papers on the prayer book revision, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between prayers that Cohon wrote himself and those he edited based on the work of others. However, minutes from a November 20, 1933 meeting of the Liturgical Committee offer evidence that Cohon was assigned the following responsibilities by Freehof: he was to revise the Sabbath evening service "for the fourth Sabbath of the month" in the old Union Prayer Book, and he was to write on the theme: "The Sabbath as a Vehicle of Tradition."<sup>59</sup> Cohon was also given the task of revising all readings and prayers contained in the prayer book for the holidays of Chanukah and Purim. In addition, he was responsible for revising the table of Scriptural readings for the Sabbath as well as the special readings for festivals and holidays found at the end of the Union Prayer Book I. Furthermore, in 1932, Cohon was appointed Chairman of the Sub-Committee in charge of Sunday (daily) services, since there seemed to be a great need for more variety and depth in the weekday service. In that same year, he was also chosen to be the Chairman of the Committee on Revision for the Friday evening service.<sup>60</sup>

As the years progressed, and the working relationship between Cohon and Freehof developed, Cohon's responsibilities increased dramatically. In 1933, Cohon and Freehof worked together extensively on the revision of the English translation of the קדיש prayer, as well as an appropriate introduction to the קדיש. In 1934, Freehof requested that Cohon prepare a new קידוש service, as well as five introductory readings before the ברכו for the Sabbath

<sup>59</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, November 20, 1933, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>60</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meetings, December 19, 1932, February 17, 1932, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.



morning service.<sup>61</sup> In March of 1936, Cohon was asked to prepare the זכור for Passover, as well as to revise the 1918 liturgy intended for use on the seventh day of Passover.<sup>62</sup> Cohon accepted these responsibilities with enthusiasm, for he felt strongly that זכור ought to be said on Festivals as well as on Yom Kippur, and believed that Reform Jews would benefit from a more serious observance of the seventh day of Passover. Since Cohon had been so influential in the successful revision of the Union Haggadah, and had a particular affinity toward the Festival of Passover, he also volunteered "to write a new opening prayer for the close of Passover, as well as a new middle prayer and an opening prayer for the morning."<sup>63</sup> One of the last "official" obligations that Cohon undertook was that of "submit(ing) a sample page of readings from Jewish literature to precede the Friday evening, Saturday morning, and holiday services."<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the extensive above mentioned listing of responsibilities that Cohon assumed for the revision of the Union Prayer Book I, he was very instrumental in creating new translations for the קדושה, the עלינו, and the second paragraph of the אהבה רבה.<sup>65</sup> While Cohon believed that the blessings before and after the reading of the הפסטר needed to be added out of deference to Jewish particularism, he also argued that it was necessary to change the English translation of the רצה from: "Look with favor, O Lord,

<sup>61</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, November 20, 1934, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>62</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, March 31, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

It was only natural for Cohon to prepare this material for the seventh day of Passover since it was he who urged the Committee to enhance the seventh day of Passover observance and liturgy.

<sup>63</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, June 1, 1936, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>64</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, February 7, 1938, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>65</sup> These prayers appear on pages 126, 150 and 118 respectively in the newly revised Union Prayer Book of 1940. They may be compared with the prayers as they appear in the old Union Prayer Book on pages 76, 124 and 68-70 in the revised Union Prayer Book of 1918.

upon Israel, Thy people . . ." to: "Look with favor, O Lord, upon us . . ." so that it would be more universal in scope.<sup>66</sup>

By far the most interesting discussion regarding the issue of translation occurred during the revision of the קדיש. The third paragraph of the קדיש, as it appeared in the old Union Prayer Book, presented both Cohon and Freehof with ideological difficulty in both the Aramaic and the English due to its allusions to the afterlife and retribution. Cohon aimed to purge the קדיש of its too detailed description of the Hereafter, for he believed that the "authors of these prayers were too anxious to localize and describe the state of the soul after death, with unwarranted concreteness."<sup>67</sup> As early as 1917, Cohon wrote regarding the קדיש :

The references to **בחולקא שבא** (in the Union Prayer Book) were naive . . . implying a belief in heaven and hell, discarded by modern religious thought. . . . Such prayers that hold out the bliss of the beyond as the supreme goal of life strike a note of other-worldliness which ill befits our faith.<sup>68</sup>

While the promises of a blissful afterlife were extricated from the Aramaic with the omission of **בחולקא שבא לחיי עלמא דאחי וחסדא ורחמי**, and the substitution of the words **וחנא וחסדא**, the English translation presented a far greater challenge. The problematic 1918 version reads:

To the departed whom we now remember,  
may peace and bliss be granted in life eternal.

<sup>66</sup> Compare page 110 of 1918 revised Union Prayer Book with page 138 of 1940 newly revised Union Prayer Book.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from Cohon to Rabbi Isaac Marcuson, April 23, 1917, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

May they find grace and mercy before the Lord of heaven and earth. May their souls rejoice in that ineffable good which God has laid up for those who fear Him, and may their memory be a blessing unto those who treasure it.<sup>69</sup>

Cohon and Freehof exchanged several drafts<sup>70</sup> of the proposed revision of the above paragraph before reaching their final "compromise" as it appears in the 1940 Union Prayer Book I. Initially, Freehof suggested the following:

The departed whom we ever remember abide in the perfect peace of life eternal. They still live on earth in every act of goodness they performed. May God, who gives grace to all who revere Him, grant that their memory live on in splendor and be a blessing unto us who treasure it.

Cohon countered with a more literal translation:

Unto Israel, unto men of righteousness and unto all who departed from this world in accord with the will of God, may abundant peace be granted and the grace and mercy of heaven and earth. Amen. Yea, may abundant peace of heaven and life be vouchsafed with us and unto all Israel. Amen.

Obviously convinced of Freehof's more freely flowing translation, Cohon suggested:

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<sup>69</sup> Revised Union Prayer Book, 1918, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> These drafts appear letters and notes exchanged between Cohon and Freehof during the Autumn months of 1933. They may be found in the SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

The departed whom we now remember have entered into the peace of life eternal. They still live on in **the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory.** May the beauty of their life abide among us as a loving benediction.

Freehof offered his final recommendation:

The departed whom we now remember have entered into the peace of life eternal. They still live on **earth in the hearts of those who cherish their memory and in every act of goodness they performed.** May the beauty of their life abide among us as a loving benediction.<sup>71</sup>

The final version, found in the 1940 revision of the Union Prayer Book

L, reflects a combination of the final drafts of both Cohon and Freehof:

The departed whom we now remember have entered into the peace of life eternal. They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory. May the beauty of their life abide among us as a loving benediction.<sup>72</sup>

As partners in the process of revision, and as friends and colleagues in the rabbinate, Freehof and Cohon often expressed words of mutual respect and gratitude. They frequently called upon one another to answer questions

<sup>71</sup> Boldface type added in order to highlight the slight differences in their renderings of the translation.

<sup>72</sup> Newly revised Union Prayer Book, 1940, p. 76.

regarding Jewish practice, and they genuinely enjoyed the scholarly exchanges they shared with one another over the years. In one of the many letters of thanks that Freehof wrote to Cohon, Freehof exclaimed: "For me, there would be no Liturgical Committee without your membership!"<sup>73</sup>

In addition to its revised translations, the Union Prayer Book I was supplemented with a number of prayers and readings that were designed to inspire the worshiper and to appeal to tradition. As early as 1931, the Committee voted "to adhere to the traditional framework of the service; moreover, the variants which are to be included in the prayer book, should incorporate traditional material whenever possible."<sup>74</sup> In addition, the Committee "moved and adopted the motion that for each of the festival services, the traditional prayers were to be varied (as the traditional prayer book did by means of its payyetic insertions) so that each service be distinct and specific to the festival; but that in printing the festival services, the text be combined and telescoped."<sup>75</sup>

As a result of these recommendations, the Committee on revision decided to revive the traditional seventh day of Passover and ז'כור service, and to incorporate the customary הקפות into the שמיני עצרת service. The return to tradition is likewise evident as "a passage in the morning service for ספוח makes clear reference to the presence of the symbolic אחרון and לולב."<sup>76</sup> In order to enrich the synagogue service, the Committee agreed to "carry the domestic rite of kindling the Sabbath lights into the synagogue," and to add a קידוש service to the Friday evening and holiday services.<sup>77</sup> Finally,

<sup>73</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, October 20, 1937, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, December 21, 1931, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Minutes of Liturgical Committee meeting, December 21, 1931, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Meyer, Response to Modernity, p. 322. (See footnote #51)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



were added "to make prayer more personal."<sup>78</sup> "All of this," writes Professor Meyer, "reflected the new appreciation of ceremony and tradition that had been gaining momentum in Judaism for some time."<sup>79</sup>

And yet the appeal to tradition in the Union Prayer Book I did not stand as the only "novelty" in the Reform Movement's revised volume. Despite Cohon's resistance, it became obvious that at least some concessions were going to have to be made to appease the humanists and the Zionists within the Reform ranks. Not everyone agreed with Cohon that a humanistic service would represent a "compromise with atheism;"<sup>80</sup> and not everyone concurred with Freehof that "the matter of humanism was not taken seriously (by Reform rabbis) and did not represent more than the point of view of a handful."<sup>81</sup> In fact, there was a growing number of rabbis who were interested in humanism and demanded that there be a humanistic service in the new Union Prayer Book I. Therefore, included in the Union Prayer Book I was a Friday evening service (number 3) "that would appeal to the humanists and those who believed prayers must above all strengthen moral commitment."<sup>82</sup> That particular Sabbath evening service, writes Professor Meyer:

contained words of thanks to the coal miners  
who "dig far away from the sun that we may  
be warm"; sought divine assistance "to be  
among those who are willing to sacrifice that

<sup>78</sup> Cohon, "The Union Prayer Book and Reform's Addition to Judaism," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, 24/1, pp. 14-15.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, October 6, 1933, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, June 20, 1934, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8.

<sup>82</sup> Meyer, p. 321. (See footnote #51) Meyer also points out that a "purely humanistic" service was submitted to the Committee by Rabbi Joseph Baron. In this service, no mention of the name of God appeared in the English text. The Committee rejected this submission by Baron. Cohon's papers also reflect this incident.

others may not hunger"; and perceived God's presence in human acts of righteousness.<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, Cohon was more willing to incorporate a service that included prayers expressing aspirations toward Zion than he was inclined to acquiesce to a "humanistic" service. The Committee decided that the fifth Friday evening service would include prayers for the rebuilding of Zion.<sup>84</sup> Meyer points out that this service:

invoked God to "uphold also the hands of our brothers who toil to rebuild Zion" and added the petition: "Grant us strength that with Thy help we may bring a new light to shine upon Zion. Imbue us who live in the lands of freedom with a sense of Israel's spiritual unity that we may share joyously in the work of redemption so that from Zion shall go forth the law and the word of God from Jerusalem."<sup>85</sup>

While the revision of the first volume of the Union Prayer Book may not have succeeded in curing all of the ills associated with prayer in the Reform Movement, it certainly represented a large stride in the direction of positive change for Jews in the middle of the twentieth century. In contrast to the 1895 volume of Union Prayer Book that Cohon believed "expresses for the most part only rhetorically the heart's hunger for God and lacks much of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Rabbi Morris Lazaron was responsible for the prayers for Zion. It is ironic that later Lazaron was also one of the founding members of the American Council for Judaism. Before 1948, Lazaron, like many others, believed in Zionism as an idea; however, he ultimately joined the ACJ because he felt that the Council was more for Judaism than it was against Zionism.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., pp. 321-22.

the creative character of the historical תפילה,"<sup>86</sup> the revised Union Prayer Book I of 1940 indeed incorporated many more individual prayers of praise, petition and thanksgiving to God. In addition, the 1940 Union Prayer Book I, in many places, goes far beyond its predecessors in voicing the human longing for God and God's response to humanity. While it still offered variety to the worshipper because of its "eclectic approach to tradition,"<sup>87</sup> the revised Union Prayer Book I, is theologically more consistent than the old volume, and is less confusing in its approach to the areas of God, Revelation and Retribution.

Cohon was generally pleased with the revision of the the Union Prayer Book I. He sought to create a prayer book that would "speak to the hearts of all worshippers" through the language of "past religious experience,"<sup>88</sup> and, in general, this goal was achieved. Prayer, for Cohon, was "שיר המעלות" - a song of ascents" - and the revised Union Prayer Book I certainly represented an "uplifting of heart and mind unto the heights, a mysterious inner consecration of man to God, an enthusiastic exultation in all that is good, pure and holy."<sup>89</sup>

Immediately upon its completion of the Union Prayer Book I, the Committee on Revision began work on the Union Prayer Book II for the High Holidays. While the first volume of the Union Prayer Book required extensive revision both in terms of its tone and its content, Cohon contended that the (1894) High Holiday volume, in many places, "reaches sublime heights."<sup>90</sup> He believed that the 1894 High Holiday volume of the Union

<sup>86</sup> "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 249. (See footnote #3)

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>88</sup> Cohon, "The Religious Ideas of a Union Prayer Book," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 40 (1930): 292.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>90</sup> "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 266. (See footnote #3)

Prayer Book largely conveyed the meaning and the message of the Days of Awe. As part of his 1928 critique of the Union Prayer Book, Cohon praised the High Holiday liturgy contained in the original 1894 edition:

These solemn days are presented as occasions for self-searching and for the renewal of the heart. They stir us to envisage life as a whole and to realize its divine endowment. The Rosh Hashanah liturgy fosters the consciousness that our lives are sustained by "the King of Eternity, the immovable rock amidst the ebb and flow of the ages." (UPB, Vol. II, pp. 229-230) The confessions and supplications of Yom Kippur awaken us to the sense of sin, to our moral and spiritual weakness and to our need of Divine grace and forgiveness. Attuned to the spirit of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Trito-Isaiah and the penitential Psalms, the Yom Kippur devotions manifest deep religious inwardness.<sup>91</sup>

While the High Holiday liturgy, in many places, was beautiful, there still remained a substantial amount of work to be done to revise it. The revision of the High Holiday volume of the Union Prayer Book focused on enhancing the beauty of the old volume by eliminating needless repetition, by more careful use of metaphors, and through the revision and addition of certain traditional components of the services. Like the revision of the first volume of the Union Prayer Book, Freehof served as Chairman for the revision of the Union Prayer Book II, and assigned individuals specific sections of the prayer book to revise. Cohon was appointed to prepare the majority of the morning service for Yom Kippur, as well as the Talmudic and

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

philosophical readings for the large section entitled "Selections from Jewish Literature," designed for meditation and study between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.<sup>92</sup>

Because the records of the revision of the second volume of the Union Prayer Book were not as complete and as thorough as the first volume, it is difficult to precisely reconstruct the discussions and arguments surrounding the changes and additions. What is clear, however, is that Cohon's revision of the morning service for Yom Kippur accomplished many of the goals that he had articulated at the beginning of the process of revision. Cohon eliminated many of the Psalms that appeared at the beginning of the Morning Service for the Day of Atonement (UPB II, 1922, pp. 134-159), for he believed that the "Atonement services suffer from the wearisome repetition of Psalms and disconnected selections from the Bible and other Jewish literature."<sup>93</sup>

As in the first volume, Cohon was interested in increasing the amount of Hebrew in the worship services. While the morning benedictions in the old volume appear only in English, Cohon expanded upon them and added the Hebrew. Especially noteworthy in morning service for Yom Kippur is the expansion of the ברכות השחר with the addition of a portion of the traditional prayer praising God, beginning:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם פוקח עורים Another important change that Cohon initiated was the addition of the שומר ברוך prayer for the morning service in Hebrew and English from the traditional פסוקי דזמרה. Cohon wrote the opening meditation for the Yom Kippur morning service (UPB II, 1945, p. 168), as well as the readings for Yom Kippur on pages 170 and

<sup>92</sup> These assignments were reflected in Committee meeting minutes of November 10, 1941 and March 26, 1942, respectively.

<sup>93</sup> "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book," p. 266. (See footnote #3)



171 of the 1945 newly revised Union Prayer Book II. Moreover, Cohon provided the De Sola Mendes translation for the אֲדֹנָי עֹלָם (UPB, II, 1945, p. 172). In addition, he suggested the Halevi version of the poem, "O Lord, where shall I find Thee?" that is found in the Morning Service for the Day of Atonement (UPB, II, 1945, pp. 192-3). Cohon also spent a great deal of time and energy assisting Freehof in rewriting prayers in the old volume of the Union Prayer Book that still had merit, but required alteration.

While Cohon and Freehof maintained frequent and effective communication throughout the revision of the Union Prayer Book II, an abundance of administrative and editorial problems – complicated by the accelerating events of World War II – nearly led to the abandonment of the entire revision of the second volume. The complete breakdown in the process of revision became apparent to Cohon as he reviewed the final manuscript of the Union Prayer Book II in early April, 1945. Although the volume had already gone to press, Cohon was shocked to find numerous errors of omission, careless mistakes, and countless inconsistencies. Moreover, Cohon believed that the manuscript, in many places did not reflect decisions that had been made by the Committee. However, due to the paucity of formal records, it was almost impossible for the members of the Committee - Cohon and Freehof included - to reconstruct decisions that had been made regarding many of the details of the volume.

In a long letter to Freehof dated April 3, 1945, Cohon enumerated an extensive list of the mistakes and errors that he found in the final draft. He expressed particular anger and unprecedented rage over the כָּל נִדְרֵי ritual as it appeared in what was soon to be the Newly Revised volume of the Union Prayer Book II. Cohon was astonished when he came across the Aramaic text of the כָּל נִדְרֵי in place of the Hebrew translation that he had

written and had assumed was accepted by the Committee for inclusion in the revised volume. Cohon wrote:

The Aramaic text of the **כל נדרי** is a major calamity in a Reform ritual. To my knowledge the Committee did not rescind its original decision to include the Hebrew substitute which I furnished.<sup>94</sup>

To Cohon's surprise, Freehof answered:

As to the text of the **כל נדרי**, you will recall that I opposed having the **כל נדרי** altogether. Are you under the impression that the Committee accepted your text? I believe that the Committee accepted the traditional text (over my objection).<sup>95</sup>

Cohon's objection to the traditional **כל נדרי** prayer was similar to that of the early Reformers who completely eliminated it from Yom Kippur due to its absolution of past vows. Cohon certainly recognized the fact that "the original quaint formula itself appears to have sprung from (the) pure motive . . . of absolving (man) of rash promises that affected his own conscience and his personal relation to God"; however, he agreed with the pioneer Reformers that such a formula for absolution of vows could prove dangerous to the "welfare of the Jewish people."<sup>96</sup> That is, Cohon believed that the traditional **כל נדרי** contained a message that was both dangerous within the

<sup>94</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, April 3, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, April 6, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> Cohon, "Kol Nidre," May 23, 1958, SSC Papers, AJA, 21/5, p. 5.

Jewish community, and could easily be misinterpreted outside of it. Cohon wrote:

Unscrupulous men with elastic consciences, used it as a means of escaping their obligations and oaths. Jew-haters, taking advantage of the lapses of individual Jews, accused the whole Jewish people of being unreliable and untrustworthy. Pointing to the **כל נדרי**, they argued that the Jew does not intend to keep his promises, his pledges, and his oaths. . . . (Therefore), the Reform rabbis in the conference held at Brunswick in 1844, resolved unanimously that this formula is not essential to Jewish worship, and that, for the good of Judaism, it should be abolished.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, it was not simply that Cohon was headstrong about the use of his own text in place of the traditional **כל נדרי**; in fact, as a rule, Cohon preferred tradition in liturgy over innovation. He opposed the Aramaic **כל נדרי** prayer on the principle of Reform Jewish ideology and belief. And on the issue of the **כל נדרי**, perhaps more than any other, Cohon uncompromisingly stood his ground. He even went so far as to threaten to dissociate himself altogether from the revision of the second volume of the Union Prayer Book on account of the misunderstanding - intentional or inadvertent - regarding the **כל נדרי**. Cohon maintained that "not a single argument was advanced at the Providence meeting of the Conference in reconciliation of the old formula with Reform Jewish thought. . . . After all, a

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

century of Reform tradition is against the retention of the old text. Even Mordecai Kaplan has dispensed with its use."<sup>98</sup>

Despite Cohon's request to stop printing the Union Prayer Book II due to all of the reasons described above, Freehof believed that the "book is not that bad as to warrant the terrific expense of . . . throwing away \$10,000.00 and 30,000 copies."<sup>99</sup> Freehof promised Cohon that the second printing of the book would correct the errors found in the first printing; however, "the difference between the two printings will not be so great as to invalidate the use of both editions simultaneously in the same congregation."<sup>100</sup> With regard to the כל נדרי, Freehof assured Cohon that he would "put the matter before the Committee to test their recollection and also ask them if they want to change their mind (and use Cohon's text in place of the traditional Aramaic wording)."<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, Cohon's text was never used to replace the traditional כל נדרי.<sup>102</sup> Because the members of the Committee could not reach a consensus as to how to best handle the matter of the כל נדרי, subsequent printings of the Union Prayer Book II contained a prayer asking God to heed the petitions of Israel on the Day of Atonement, and simply the words: כל נדרי ("The Kol Nidre Chant"). Lawrence Hoffman summarizes the "compromise" reached for the second printing of the prayer book:

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, April 8, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8, p. 2.

The discussions about the inclusion of the כל נדרי in the Union Hymnal may be found in the Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 40 (1930): 101-108.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Freehof to Cohon, April 10, 1945, SSC Papers, AJA, 2/8, p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> While Cohon's version of the כל נדרי never appeared in the Union Prayer Book, congregations which used (and continue to use) Idelsohn's songbook as part of worship have it available to them. It is found in Abraham Zevi Idelsohn's שירי ישראל: The Jewish Songbook (Cincinnati: Publications for Judaism, 1951), pp. 252-255.

In the end, the entire first printing, which contained **כל נדרי**, was withdrawn from the market, and in the second printing, the prayer was deleted. Rather than go to the expense of printing the entire book anew, however, only the page that had included **כל נדרי** was altered. Readers who recall the old (Newly Revised) Union Prayer Book will remember that the Yom Kippur Eve service contains a page with a double-spaced prayer asking that our promises may be found acceptable to God. Below, there appear the words **כל נדרי**, and instructions in tiny italics "The **כל נדרי** chant." That was the compromise. In the extra blank space only partially used up by the double spacing, there once appeared the **כל נדרי**.<sup>103</sup>

The matter of the **כל נדרי** was thus left to the discretion of the individual congregations, and to the next generation of rabbis who revised the 1945 Union Prayer Book II into the 1978 Gates of Repentance.<sup>104</sup>

Shortly before the completion of the second volume of the Union Prayer Book, Cohon asked Marcuson to omit his name from the Liturgy Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In a letter to Freehof, Cohon explained:

As I remarked to you personally, I do not think it wholesome for the rabbinate to have life tenure of offices, chairmanships and membership on committees of the CCAR. Its best interests will be served by changing the

<sup>103</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, Gates of Understanding II: A Companion Volume to Gates of Repentance (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1984), p. 118.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Gates of Repentance restores the **כל נדרי**. Lawrence Hoffman points out that the traditional Aramaic text is accompanied by "an altered English 'free translation' which informs us that only vows to God, not to people, are nullified. . . . No one can now mistake the message of the prayer as evidence of Jewish irresponsibility in the face of promises."



personnel after a reasonable period of service. The completion of the second volume of the Union Prayer Book is a good time for me to step out and to let someone else have a chance.<sup>105</sup>

In the final analysis, Cohon would have probably been surprised at how long both volumes of the Newly Revised Union Prayer Book remained at the center of Reform Jewish worship in the United States. However, their longevity in the Reform Movement was due only in part to their appeal to Reform rabbis and their congregants. It is fair to state that the Newly Revised Union Prayer Book of 1940 and 1945 remained - and in places, still remains - as the official liturgy of the Reform Movement simply because the time, energy and expense required to revise it was overwhelming and out of the question. And even once the revision of the Union Prayer Book took place, and yielded the 1970's volumes Gates of Prayer and Gates of Repentance, some individuals have continued to view the volumes of the 1940's as superior. Thus, while the characters in the drama continue to change, the arguments remain the same.

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<sup>105</sup> Letter from Cohon to Freehof, November 28, 1943, SSC Papers, AJA, 7/8.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### COHON: THE SCHOLAR AND HIS WORK

Cohon's work as a theologian and liturgist of the Reform Movement was propelled and nourished by his insatiable desire to secure knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Cohon placed his own scholarly endeavors as a priority above all others, and as a prerequisite for "practical" work in the Movement. While Cohon will no doubt be remembered in the history of the Reform Movement for his work "in the field," it is important not to underestimate this man's dedication to scholarship and to Jewish learning in general.

Cohon was a recognized and published scholar whose expertise extended to a vast array of Jewish subjects. Moreover, Cohon's influence as a scholar reached far beyond the confines of the Reform Movement in America. Both because of his extensive knowledge of Judaism and also due to his reputation as a careful and thorough researcher, Cohon was looked upon as an important Jewish intellectual by Conservative and Orthodox Jews as well as by the Christian scholarly community. Cohon's correspondences reveal that he was in frequent contact with rabbis and professors at the Jewish Theological Seminary as well as at the Yeshivah University. He was often called upon to give addresses at these leading Jewish institutions as well as to deliver lectures and seminars at some of the major Christian seminaries throughout the country. Everyone who came into contact with Cohon the scholar recognized his encyclopedic recall of facts and his breadth of knowledge. He had the unique ability to research a subject from beginning to

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<sup>1</sup> This idea was articulated many times by Cohon himself and reiterated later by his students.

end, present that subject in a conceptual and logical form, and then draw clear and relevant conclusions from his study.

Throughout his career, Cohon wrote hundreds of scholarly essays and articles. There was scarcely a facet of Jewish studies that Cohon did not address in his published and unpublished scholarly works. While the present study is not intended to duplicate the complete chronological listing of Cohon's writings compiled by Theodore Wiener<sup>2</sup> during Cohon's lifetime, it is nevertheless important to stress the range and scope of Cohon's scholarship by highlighting some of his more noteworthy contributions to the field of Jewish studies.

It is fair to say that the majority of Cohon's scholarly essays and addresses fall into the very general area of Jewish theology. His theology lectures,<sup>3</sup> originally intended for Cohon's own use in the classroom, were ultimately bound and issued by the College-Institute in the form of mimeographed books. These theology lectures - continually revised and edited by Cohon throughout the years - provide critical insights into the field of Jewish theology, and also address questions and issues pertaining to Reform Jewish belief. The major divisions of Cohon's theology lectures into the topics of "Theology and Religion," "Man and His Destiny," and "Judaism as a Way of Living" also provide the basis for Cohon's posthumous publication Jewish Theology.<sup>4</sup> In the words of the foreword to Jewish Theology, the book "aims to interpret the nature of the Jewish religion

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Wiener, "The Writings of Samuel S. Cohon: A Bibliography," Studies in Bibliography and Booklore 2 (December 1956): 160-179.

<sup>3</sup> Cohon, Theology Lectures. Mimeographed for use in the Theology Classes of the Hebrew Union College. (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Placement Bureau), 1933-35. These 3 volumes in 4 were revised in 1940-42 and 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Cohon, Jewish Theology: A Historical and Systematic Interpretation of Judaism and its Foundations (Assen: Royal VanGorcum Ltd., 1971).

historically and systematically . . . and to indicate its meaning for contemporary Jewish life."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it represents the "fruitage of years of teaching at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion."<sup>6</sup> While Jewish Theology represents Cohon's scholarly approach to the subject, his books Judaism: A Way of Life<sup>7</sup> and What We Jews Believe<sup>8</sup> present Cohon's theology in formats that are more appropriate for the popular audience.

In the area of Jewish theology, Cohon wrote a number of essays<sup>9</sup> of scholarly significance as well. Among them, the following are frequently quoted by Jewish scholars in the field: "Love, Human and Divine in Post-Biblical Literature" (1917), "The Origin of Death" (1919), "Palestine in Jewish Theology" (1925), "The Idea of God in Judaism" (1935), "Authority in Judaism" (1936), "Original Sin" (1948), "The Name of God: A Study in Rabbinic Theology" (1950), "Existentialism and Judaism" (1952), "The Existentialist Trend in Theology" (1953), "The Unity of God: A Study in Hellenistic and Rabbinic Theology" (1955), "The Semantics of Judaism" (1956). Cohon's meticulous approach to Jewish learning as well as his tendency to present his subjects from a historical perspective is evident in all of these theological essays. In addition to these articles, Cohon also made important contributions to the Universal Jewish Encyclopedia<sup>10</sup> (1939-43) and to the Encyclopedia of Religion<sup>11</sup> (Ed. by Ferm, 1945).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., from author's unfinished preface to book, no page number.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cohon, Judaism: A Way of Life (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1948).

<sup>8</sup> Cohon, What We Jews Believe And A Guide To Jewish Practice (Assen: Royal VanGorcum Ltd., 1971). What We Jews Believe was originally published as a series of articles in the The Jewish Layman, Cincinnati, 1931.

<sup>9</sup> A complete listing of all of Cohon's articles and essays, may be found in the Bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Cohon's contributions, mainly in the area of Jewish theology were as follows: Vol. I (1939): "Angel of Death" (pp. 302-303), "Atheism and Judaism" (pp. 578-579), "Atonement" (pp. 601-608), "Authority" (pp. 630-639). Vol. 2 (1940): "Brotherhood of Man" (pp. 558-561). Vol. 3 (1941): "Chosen People" (pp. 166-169), "The Christ" (pp. 170-171), "Creed" (pp. 400-403). Vol. 5 (1941): "Inspiration" (pp. 571-575). Vol. 6 (1942): "Judah Halevi" (pp. 225-229), "Judaism"

Certain of Cohon's works address specific historical issues and events. Among them, a few of the more significant are: Cohon's rabbinic thesis entitled "Main Currents of Jewish Life in Russia in the 19th Century" (1913), "A Review of Contemporary Jewish History" (1922), "Contemporaneous Jewish History" (1923), "Jehudah Halevi" (1941), "Religion and the World Crisis" (1941), "Saadia Gaon" (1942), and "Pharisaism - A Definition" (1956).

While most of Cohon's articles and essays include sections that address the Reform Jewish aspect of his subject, he also published numerous works that fall specifically into the area of Reform Judaism. Especially noteworthy because of their importance to Reform Jewish history is Cohon's early publication entitled "The Mission of Reform Judaism" (1922) and his "History of the Hebrew Union College" (1950). Cohon was also responsible for many essays that illuminate the history of Reform Judaism through its foremost thinkers and leaders. Cohon frequently wrote and spoke about Dr. Samuel Hirsch (1915), Dr. Gotthard Deutsch (1922), Dr. Emil G. Hirsch (1923) and Dr. David Neumark (1925, 1929). In addition, he edited and published Dr. Neumark's תולדות הפילוסופיה בישראל על פי סדר המחקרים - Essays in Jewish Philosophy (1929) as well as arranged a bibliography of Neumark's

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(pp. 232-237), "Kavvanah" (pp. 346-348), "Kingdom of Heaven" (pp. 386-391). Vol. 9 (1943): "Religion" (pp. 124-126). Vol. 10 (1943): "Theology" (pp. 242-244), "Torah" (pp. 267-269), "War" (pp. 449-452).

<sup>11</sup> Cohon wrote the following entries in the Encyclopedia of Religion: "Apocrypha, Old Testament" (pp. 31-32); "ark" (p. 38); "Ashkenazim" (p. 41); "Ashtoreth" (p. 41); "Atonement, Day of" (p. 45); "bar mitzvah" (p. 56); "Gog and Magog" (p. 306); "Hasidism" (p. 324-325); "Hoshana Rabba" (p. 347); "huppah" (p. 350); "hymns, Hebrew and Jewish" (pp. 353-354); "Judaism" (pp. 402-404); "Judaism, reform" (pp. 405-406); "Judas Maccabeus" (pp. 406-407); "Judith" (p. 407); "ketubah" (p. 416); "levirate marriage" (p. 441); "Mikilta" (p. 479); "memra" (pp. 479-480); "minha" (pp. 492-493); "minyan" (p. 493); "New Year, Jewish" (p. 533); "patriarchal system" (p. 565); "phylacteries" (p. 584); "Rashi" (p. 634); "seder" (p. 700); "shekinah" (p. 707); "shema" (p. 707); "sheol" (p. 707); "shofar" (p. 709); "Susannah, History of" (p. 751); "tabernacle" (p. 759); "Tabernacles or Feast of Booths" (p. 759); "tables of the Law" (p. 759); "trisagion" (p. 795); "Wellhausen, Julius" (p. 820); "Wisdom Literature" (pp. 826-827); "Yiddish" (p. 835).



writings (1929). Finally, Cohon wrote and published several important articles that detail the life and work of his most influential teacher Dr. Kaufmann Kohler (1943, 1948, 1951).

With special attention focused upon Reform Jewish practice and custom, Cohon wrote a great deal on the subject of Jewish liturgy as well. Among his addresses and articles about prayer and liturgy are: "The Structure of the Prayer Book" (1923), "The Theology of the Union Prayer Book" (1928), and "The Religious Ideas of a Union Prayer Book" (1930).

Cohon also wrote articles that addressed the subject of Jewish literature from the Bible until modern times. Because of his Eastern European background, and his love for the "Holy Tongue," he had a lifelong love affair with the Hebrew language. In addition to attempting to bring the ancient Hebrew sources closer to the lives and hearts of American Jews, he also endeavored to heighten the awareness of modern Jews to the beautiful storehouse of Modern Hebrew Literature that existed. Cohon's essays show that he was an admirer of Chayim Nachman Bialik (1909), Ahad Haam, and I.L. Gordon (1910).

Cohon was one who devoted a great deal of time to improving inter-faith dialogue. He worked both from a scholarly perspective and a practical standpoint to enhance communication and understanding between Jews and Christians. Among his scholarly works in this area are: "The Jews and Jesus" (1921), Christianity and Judaism Compare Notes (1927), "To Further Understanding Between Jews and Christians" (1929), and "The Place of Jesus in the Religious Life of His Day" (1929). Cohon's outstanding article "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" (1939), a work intended to expose the deliberate falsifications and distortions of the Bible, Talmud and other sacred Jewish

literature, received a great deal of attention from both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities.

Subsequent to his death in 1959, Cohon's widow, Irma, undertook the task of completing some of his unfinished manuscripts and preparing them for publication. In addition to the volume Jewish Theology that is discussed above, several posthumous books have appeared and have certainly contributed to the field of Jewish studies as well as to our understanding of Samuel Cohon. Among the volumes more recently published is the book: What We Jews Believe And A Guide to Jewish Practice (1971)<sup>12</sup>. The unidentified author of the foreword to this book (presumably Mrs. A. Irma Cohon) writes that this double volume has popular appeal only in the sense that it presents the "weaving of a simplified pattern with threads every one of which can lead back to whatever depth the reader is capable of fathoming."<sup>13</sup>

Published in 1978, just seven years after What We Jews Believe And A Guide to Jewish Practice, was the posthumous special edition book entitled Day Book of Service At The Altar As Lived By Samuel S. Cohon (1888-1959).<sup>14</sup> While no author is mentioned in association with this volume, it was most likely compiled and written by Mrs. Cohon about her husband. The Day Book of Service At The Altar, though extraordinarily reverential in nature, is nevertheless a fascinating biographical volume that provides the reader with a daily diary of Cohon's life and work throughout his career as a rabbi, teacher, and scholar. In 1983, a collection of some of Cohon's more important

<sup>12</sup> See footnote number 7 above. A Guide To Jewish Practice was in preparation at the time of the author's death.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. VI.

<sup>14</sup> Day Book of Service At The Altar (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Press, 1978).

sermons and addresses over the course of his career were published in the form of a limited edition book entitled Religious Affirmations (1983)<sup>15</sup>.

Finally, in a recent effort to bring to light some of Cohon's most important scholarly essays, the Alumni Association of the Hebrew Union College published a book entitled Essays in Jewish Theology (1987). This book of over three hundred pages contains ten essays in the area of Jewish theology, and also includes an important introduction by Dr. Cohon's student and successor in Jewish Theology and Liturgy at the College-Institute, Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski.<sup>16</sup>

And in that introduction to Cohon's Essays in Jewish Theology, Petuchowski beautifully summarizes his teacher's influence from both his perspective as Cohon's student and as a scholar in the field. Petuchowski writes:

Those who have had the privilege of studying with the late Professor Samuel S. Cohon, and those who now have the opportunity of reading some of his writings, know that he . . . was "a man in whom there was everything" (b. Sotah 47b). Indeed, for Cohon, the 'everything' included far more than merely 'Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, Tosephta and Aggadoth.' It also embraced a knowledge of all branches of Hebrew and Jewish literature, of philosophy, of psychology, of comparative religion, of Jewish and general history, of Christian and of Jewish theology, and of the vast area of Jewish liturgy. The highways and byways of Wissenschaft des Judentums, the modern scientific study of Judaism, were as familiar

<sup>15</sup> Cohon, Religious Affirmations (Los Angeles: n.p., 1983).

<sup>16</sup> Cohon, Essays in Jewish Theology, ed. Walter Jacob, Stanley Dreyfus, Sidney Brooks (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1987).

to him as were the streets of Neharde'a to his Babylonian namesake (b. Berakhot 58b).<sup>17</sup>

And while Cohon indeed received considerable praise and recognition for his many contributions to the field of Jewish studies, he, like any other scholar, was not without his critics. Of the books published by Cohon during his lifetime, two of them in particular - Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes<sup>18</sup> and Judaism – A Way Of Life<sup>19</sup> received a great deal of critical attention. The published reviews of these volumes as well as the "informal critiques" that Cohon received about his writings in the form of personal letters over the years are instructive in gaining a perspective of Cohon in light of his critics.

Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes, a volume designed to encourage tolerant understanding between Jews and Christians, was aimed at "hastening the era of good will between followers of different faiths."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it represented an innovative approach to the field of inter-faith dialogue as a whole. Written by Cohon and Professor Harris Franklin Rall of the Garrett Biblical Institute, this book "contains the lectures given by a distinguished Christian theologian, explaining his religion to students for the Jewish ministry, and the lectures delivered by an equally distinguished Jewish theologian (Cohon), explaining his religion to students for the Christian ministry."<sup>21</sup> Most of the reviewers of Cohon and Rall's Christianity And

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Introduction by Petuchowski, p. XI.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel S. Cohon and Harrison Franklin Rall, Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927).

<sup>19</sup> Cohon, Judaism – A Way Of Life (Cincinnati: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1948).

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Rudolph I. Coffee, Ph.D., "Toward Better Understanding," rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, Criterion, February 10, 1928. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Judaism Compare Notes commended both authors on the unprejudiced and fair explanations that they offered regarding their respective religious beliefs. Given Cohon's disdain for religious apologetics, it is not surprising that many of the reviewers of the book happily recognized the absence of "excited apologetics for one's own creed" . . . as well as the (futile) "attempt to prove that there really is no difference between Judaism and Christianity."<sup>22</sup>

Cohon was generally praised for his scholarly, clear, and compact summary of the Jewish religion;<sup>23</sup> more than one reviewer expressed the sentiment that "Nowhere in shorter space . . . does there exist so clear an account of the stages of Judaism, the distinction between the Biblical and Rabbinic conception of faith, and an elucidation of the nationalistic and universal elements in Judaism."<sup>24</sup> In the volume Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes, one reviewer commented that "in brief space, Cohon presented to the Gentile reader an illuminating picture of the soul of Judaism. . . . He presented Judaism at its best, (and) this is as it should be."<sup>25</sup> In a style that one has come to expect from Cohon, Cohon "lectured in a dignified manner," and, in fact, "his lectures contained more warmth and were much more interesting than Professor Rall."<sup>26</sup> Even in the face of potential controversy and difference, Cohon presented Judaism politely; he portrayed his religion from the perspective of a dispassionate scholar as well as a religious man.

<sup>22</sup> Irwin Edman, "Fair Exchange," rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, The Menorah Journal, March, 1928, p. 315. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>23</sup> "Religions," rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, name of journal unknown. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>24</sup> Edman, "Fair Exchange," p. 316.

<sup>25</sup> I. G. M., rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, The Crozer Quarterly, April 19, 1928, pp. 235-236. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Jaffe, rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, name of journal unknown. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.



And yet some critics found fault with Cohon's systematic treatment of Judaism in the book Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes. While a number of individuals contended that Cohon paid due deference to both traditional and Reform Judaism, others felt that his approach in Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes was too "partisan" in nature and scope. That is, Cohon was criticized for an

exposition of Judaism that betrays his professorship at the Hebrew Union College by an extended treatment of Reform at the expense of other vital expressions of modern Judaism. Whether Dr. Rall's outline will satisfy as an all inclusive Christianity we cannot affirm or deny; but we are sure that the title of book would gain by prefixing the word "Reform" to its Judaism.<sup>27</sup>

It was not that Cohon was unable or even unwilling to direct his discussion toward a more "global" analysis of Judaism; rather, it was Cohon's bias toward Reform Judaism and its potential to be meaningful and vibrant in Jews' lives that led him to what one critic called a "malproportioned special pleading for Reform Judaism."<sup>28</sup> Thus, while Cohon "has not for one moment sought to proselytize converts to Judaism through its statements, . . . he has asked Christians to understand the Reform Jewish viewpoint."<sup>29</sup>

With respect to the style and presentation of Cohon's lectures in Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes, there was a significant amount of disagreement among the reviewers. While some believed that the book was

<sup>27</sup> N. A., rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, Reflex, January, 1928. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>28</sup> Edman, "Fair Exchange," p. 316.

<sup>29</sup> Coffee, "Toward Better Understanding."

presented in the "simplest language"<sup>30</sup> and was intended for layman and scholar alike, others found the book "somewhat dry and labored . . . scholarly and authoritative."<sup>31</sup> One critic even went so far as to say that Cohon was too rationalistic and cerebral in his approach; "he loses himself in detail . . . and does not state so well the spiritual essence of the religion he is trying to present in its essence to Christians."<sup>32</sup>

Some of the same accolades as well as criticisms regarding Cohon's presentation of Judaism in Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes may be found with respect to his volume Judaism – A Way Of Life, published exactly twenty years later in 1948. Judaism – A Way Of Life represents a distillation of Cohon's theology lectures at the Hebrew Union College into a form that would be both appealing and meaningful to the educated layman. Cohon hoped that the book would be used by student and teacher, scholar and layman, rabbi and congregant alike. On the whole, most of the critics found Judaism – A Way Of Life to be complete and informative, thorough and interesting. One reviewer wrote: "Herein is a systematic theology of liberal Judaism. . . . The book fulfills admirably the requirements of a systematic treatment of liberal Judaism."<sup>33</sup> Without exception, all of the reviewers of Judaism – A Way Of Life made mention of Cohon's scholarly facility; his ability to "provide authentic information for both Jewish and Christian

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<sup>30</sup> Danby, "The Jew And Christianity," based on Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall, name of journal unknown, N.D. In SSC Papers, AJA, 29/7.

<sup>31</sup> Jaffe, rev. of Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes by Cohon and Rall. (See footnote #26)

<sup>32</sup> Edman, p. 316.

<sup>33</sup> John Clark Archer, rev. of Judaism – A Way Of Life by Cohon, N. D., SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3, p. 1.

readers."<sup>34</sup> Cohon was especially pleased by Professor Mordecai Kaplan's response to his volume. In a personal letter to Cohon, Kaplan wrote:

I have had time to glance through it and find that it fills a real want for our times. You are to be congratulated upon your interpretation of the traditional sources into a meaningful and luminous ethical and religious pattern that is very appealing.<sup>35</sup>

While most people agreed that the volume accomplished its goal as a general and basic survey of Judaism, there was some disagreement as to Cohon's style and presentation. While Rabbi Israel H. Levinthal congratulated Cohon on his "rare gift of presenting the fundamental beliefs and teachings of our holy faith in a clear and succinct fashion,"<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Harold Reinhart believed that "some may feel that Cohon is a little too rationalistic and practical when he writes."<sup>37</sup> Emanuel Gamoran of the Union of American Hebrew continually encouraged Cohon to "simplify . . . and use technical terms less often."<sup>38</sup> One anonymous reviewer summarized his feelings toward the volume and its possible readership: "The book Judaism -- A Way Of Life is too beautifully written to be a text, and demands too large a background to serve a class in adult education; but I devoured every page of it, because it was something new and beautiful for me."<sup>39</sup> Other

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<sup>34</sup> Abraham Burstein, rev. of Judaism -- A Way Of Life by Cohon, The Jewish Review, December 30, 1948. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Kaplan to Cohon, January 10, 1949, SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Rabbi Israel H. Levinthal to Cohon, January 17, 1949, SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>37</sup> Rabbi Harold Reinhart, "Problems of Jewish Thought and Action," rev. of Judaism -- A Way Of Life by Cohon, The Synagogue Review, March 1949, p. 116. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Gamoran to Cohon, December 5, 1946, SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>39</sup> Unknown author, letter to Cohon, April 15, 1953, SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

individuals, like Professor Robert Gordis of the Jewish Theological Seminary similarly found Cohon's approach refreshing and innovative:

Your work rests on a solid foundation of scholarship, and yet is popular in approach. I was particularly gratified to notice the stress upon the content of Jewish religious thought. Most works concerned with Judaism tend to restrict themselves to customs and ceremonies.<sup>40</sup>

Most people recognized the fact that Cohon's Judaism -- A Way Of Life, like the earlier volume Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes, was written from the Reform point of view; however, the critics differed as to just how effective such a perspective was within the context of Cohon's overall presentation of Judaism as a "way of life." While one reviewer contended that "the author does not overlook tradition and its wealth of ideas and ideals that for so long constituted the Jewish way of life,"<sup>41</sup> others felt that Cohon was perhaps too sectarian in his approach and analysis. Regardless of the critics' opinions about the degree to which Cohon emphasized the Reform Jewish perspective, one critic correctly pointed out that "Judaism -- A Way Of Life exhibits (Cohon's) great love for Judaism. . . . One is continually aware that for this author אהבת ישראל and כלל ישראל is a reality."<sup>42</sup>

And yet, even more than Christianity And Judaism Compare Notes, Judaism -- A Way Of Life certainly received some serious criticisms. More than one reviewer felt that "the reader is lost in a maze of citations and

<sup>40</sup> Professor Robert Gordis, rev. of Judaism -- A Way Of Life, N. D. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>41</sup> "Jewish Theology," rev. of Judaism A Way Of Life by Cohon, Jewish Bookland, March-April 1949. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

<sup>42</sup> Rev. of Judaism -- A Way Of Life written for Progressive Jew (South Africa), author and date unknown. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

details"<sup>43</sup> . . . "They do detract sometimes from the author's independent handling of his theme."<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, it was suggested, Cohon took on too much in the book Judaism -- A Way Of Life; perhaps he was too ambitious in his desire to expound upon the total history of Judaism and its value as a living force in people's lives. In addition, while one critic recognized that "there can scarcely be any doubt that the author is a Jew, his own Judaism may account for the difficulties now and then in reconciling liberalism and tradition."<sup>45</sup> In all fairness, however, that same critic recognized that "some inconsistencies seem inevitable in any effort to liberalize historic Judaism."<sup>46</sup>

Emil Fackenheim was particularly harsh in his review of Cohon's Judaism -- A Way Of Life. In a long article in Commentary, Fackenheim pointed out that while "Cohon's book is superior to the ordinary book of this sort in that it is the product of sincere search and a willingness to face what is difficult and uncomfortable,"<sup>47</sup> Fackenheim nevertheless found Cohon's volume to be lacking and insufficient in many respects. Fackenheim wrote that even though Cohon's book contained many virtuous attempts to address the difficult subject of modern Jewish theology, "it shares the basic defects of American Jewish theological writing; indeed, the virtues make the defects all the more obvious and saddening."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Personal letter from Gamoran to Cohon.

<sup>44</sup> John Clark Archer, p. 2. (See footnote #33)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, "Evasion Through Metaphor," rev. Judaism -- A Way Of Life by Cohon, Commentary, N. D., p. 302. In SSC Papers, AJA, 32/3.

Attached to the mimeographed copy of this review by Fackenheim was a typed note that stated: "Indifferent to his indebtedness to the author, this pompous egoist elaborately misconstrues, in order to justify his derogation; for he is bent upon his long-determined effort to inherit the chair of theology, for which 'he alone' is sufficiently equipped." It may be assumed that this editorial note was from the pen of Mrs. A. Irma Cohon, for it was she who organized her late husband's papers.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 303.



Specifically, Fackenheim criticized Cohon for confusing "basic philosophical and theological categories . . . (and for) psychological concepts appear(ing) where theological ones ought to."<sup>49</sup> Fackenheim insinuated that Cohon was simply not equipped to handle theological writing: "Cohon shares the common vice of modern Jewish theological writing in using metaphor homiletically, as a substitute for precise thought where such thought is imperative."<sup>50</sup> He attacked Cohon's use of language throughout the book, and felt that many of his phrases and concepts were unclear and even confusing to the reader. Finally, Fackenheim found that the gravest shortcoming in Cohon's Judaism -- A Way Of Life was its "pragmatism." Fackenheim boldly stated:

We witness today a general tendency to defend Judaism on the grounds of its social and psychological usefulness, and simultaneously rabbis forsake their proper business, theology, to meddle with psychiatry. But Judaism cannot be understood in pragmatic categories. . . . The pragmatic interpretation transforms religion, which Cohon himself says must be "heroic," into a comfortable practice of mediocrity. . . . It would be very desirable if Cohon forgot for a while all about the useful, the practical, and the popular, and used his great learning to work out a clear, coherent, and true theology for modern Judaism -- and if he left it to lesser men afterwards to popularize his results.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the formal criticisms that Cohon received during his scholarly career, it is important to mention that Cohon's work both as a scholar and as a rabbi was under continual evaluation from his many students and colleagues in the field. There are literally hundreds of informal letters in Cohon's correspondence files that suggest that Cohon was not only receptive to criticism, but indeed solicited it from people whom he respected. Important scholars and rabbis, students and colleagues continually offered him letters of congratulations as well as words of harsh judgment on his articles and books, his sermons and classes.

What is more important, however, is the fact that for every letter of evaluation to Cohon in his files, there is also a letter from him in return. Whether Cohon was expressing gratitude for an accolade, answering a question, clarifying a point of fact, admitting an error, or staunchly defending his position, Cohon always responded. And while sometimes his tone was appreciative and at other times his manner was obviously defensive, Cohon believed that anyone who took his work and Judaism seriously enough to react in writing deserved his time and attention. And it was not only that Cohon enjoyed and appreciated a good scholarly disagreement or difference of opinion. Most importantly, Cohon lived by the principle that the common goal of searching to draw nearer to the truth necessarily superceded any one individual's toil and labor -- and most certainly his own.

## EPILOGUE

Indeed, most people who knew Samuel S. Cohon agree that he was an unusual man. As a pious Reform Jew, he was as loyal to the Movement as he was to his personal religious beliefs. As a man of absolute integrity, he was as true to the past that he inherited as he was committed to building a future for Reform Judaism in America. He faced issues and challenges with an eye toward tradition and within the context of his personal faith. While he was realistic about the problems confronting the Movement during the difficult times in which he lived, he never allowed himself to fall victim to pessimism or despair.

In fact, Cohon was occasionally criticized for his optimism. Particularly during the decade following World War II, Cohon was often faulted for maintaining a somewhat naive outlook in the midst of a world filled with skepticism and doubt. He was accused of failing to acknowledge the power and impact of new trends that were permeating religion; for closing his ears to some of the extremist voices that attempted to change the course of the Reform Movement and religious life in general. Yet, naivete was only the outward symptom of the conflict that was manifesting itself within Cohon. The reality was that Cohon found himself in a world that was growing increasingly foreign to him; a world that was pressing against the boundaries and limits of his definition of Reform Judaism.

Cohon's attitude toward existentialism was a case in point. After only brief exposure to this new philosophical movement, Cohon immediately rebelled against it; he bristled at its despairing and anguished tone. Cohon was simply unable to place existentialism within the context of Judaism in

general and within the purview of his personal faith in particular. While he addressed the subject of existentialism in a scholarly and theological way, he distanced himself from both its reality and its influence. He stated:

Where existentialism takes a despairing view of human life, it runs counter to Jewish religious tradition. Where it disparages reason, it impairs sound faith. But where . . . it seeks deeper levels of truth and a more genuine communion with the living God, it is on the classical road of Jewish theology seeking the way to true *דיוקן*, the unification of experience and thought and the sanctification of life.<sup>1</sup>

As we have already seen, while Cohon had an unusual talent for mediating and moderating between extremes, he nevertheless drew the line when he felt that the essentials of Judaism were in danger. Perhaps the times were simply moving too swiftly for Cohon, the man who continually studied and evaluated the new through the eyes of the old. Some of his students recall that the end of Cohon's life was a bit disappointing for him as he felt increasingly less at home in the new era that was being ushered in as a result of post-War confusion and ambivalence. Some even go so far to suggest that it was not merely that Cohon disapproved of the existentialist trend in philosophy; rather, that he may not have fully understood this new phenomenon.

As Cohon lived out his final years in Los Angeles as an emeritus member of the new and growing Los Angeles faculty of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, he grew ever distant from the younger,

<sup>1</sup> Cohon, "The Existentialist Trend in Theology," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook 63 (1953): 385.

American-born faculty and students who came to study there. The decade of the 1950's brought with it a generation of rabbis and Jewish leaders dedicated to the "social gospel" -- to an agenda of Jewish social action in which one's religion played only a marginal role in one's enterprises. While the Reform Movement witnessed unprecedented growth and a dramatic increase in membership, some felt that it was a Movement that was splintered and fragmented. The reality of the State of Israel, the trend toward "Covenant Theology" and the new "God-denying humanism" embodied in naturalism and divine finitism became the new buzzwords of the Reform Movement.<sup>2</sup> Cohon's Jewish vocabulary simply would not accomodate these innovations.

And yet, at the same time, Cohon must have noticed that the Movement was growing in other directions as well; in directions which he must have viewed as more positive. Reform had become a multi-dimensional and global Movement, and, as Cohon's years progressed, he did see some of the fruits of his own labor. Cohon was pleased to observe a growing interest in Reform Jewish theology; an interest that he felt may have partially grown out of the 1937 Columbus Platform. He believed that "the renewed interest in theology can be a blessing to Judaism if it does not align itself with anti-liberal forces that despair of human nature and disparage reason and freedom."<sup>3</sup> He also was thrilled to see that the Reform Movement had become a mass movement in America; an important and influential religion that had moved from a quiet childhood to an energetic adolescence. In 1958, Cohon wrote: "We congratulate ourselves on the fact that (Reform)

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<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 361.

<sup>3</sup> Cohon, "Reform Jewish Theology," March 20, 1950, SSC Papers, AJA, Box 24/6, p. 6.



has affected the spiritual life of most Jews in America and of great numbers in other sections of the world."<sup>4</sup>

And, despite Cohon's occasional charges regarding the frailty of Jewish spiritual life in America, Cohon must have observed that "what stood firm in the 1950's was religion."<sup>5</sup> Even though Cohon's modesty would have prevented him from taking credit for the religious and ceremonial revival taking place among Reform Jews in the 1950's, perhaps he recognized that more Jews were actually practicing their Judaism than ever before in America. Michael A. Meyer writes:

While Jewish identity had been steadily moving away from religious expressions toward ethnic ones, that process now reversed itself. "Our rabbis have begun to speak more fervently of a God-centered, rather than of a people-centered, religion and culture," one CCAR member noted to his colleagues. . . . Religious institutions, which had been fighting a losing battle against the growing influence of community federations, during the 1950's found themselves once more in a position of strength. The synagogue, and not the federation, represented Judaism as Jews and non-Jews then understood it."<sup>6</sup>

And yet, while it is true that much of Samuel Cohon's influence may be implicitly felt in the Reform Movement of contemporary times, it is difficult to pinpoint this man's explicit contributions. It is true that the

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<sup>4</sup> Cohon, "Guard Well the Vision," A Message Delivered at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles on the Occasion of Cohon's 70th Birthday, March 20, 1958, in Religious Affirmations (Los Angeles: N.P., 1983), p. 186.

<sup>5</sup> Meyer, p. 354. (See footnote #2)

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, p. 354. (See footnote #2)

Columbus Platform, the Union Haggadah, the Rabbi's Manual, the Union Prayer Books, and his numerous essays and articles added to the storehouse of Reform Jewish history, liturgy and theology; however, most people who knew Cohon agree that he was not a rabbi who ventured into the frontiers of the unknown or unexplored. He was not a teacher who inspired his students in a collective way with deep or profound insights into the tradition; with keen observations or daring conclusions about Reform Judaism in the twentieth century. And perhaps, he may not have even been the type of scholar who mastered a fully analytic approach to his research; who was able to put aside his personal piety in order to read the literature in a critical manner.

However, his students and his colleagues agree that Cohon was indeed a "keeper of the faith." He was a Reform rabbi who believed deeply and sincerely in his Judaism and in his God. Cohon was a teacher who lived and worked to influence one individual at a time; one Jew at a time. Closely tied to reality, without illusions or delusions of grandeur, Cohon studied and read continually. And while he was rarely publicly polemical, he nevertheless made a lasting impact upon the many students who came to his book-lined study to learn from him. Though he was a man who had definite opinions, he was not one who regularly entered into the arena of conflict; he was, as one of his students called him, a "רודף שלום ואוהב שלום" - a pursuer of peace and a lover of peace."<sup>7</sup> Cohon is remembered as "a somewhat withdrawn kind of person who took deep interest in his students and was always wonderfully helpful."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with Professor Eugene Mihaly, October 7, 1991, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld of Fairmount Temple to Lisa Eiduson, June 4, 1991, Beachwood, Ohio.

Shortly after Cohon's death on August 22, 1959, S. H. Levey wrote: "In the world of Jewish letters Professor Cohon was a rarity, combining the virtues of the **חכם** **חלמיד**, the **צדיק** and the **חסיד**."<sup>9</sup> As a **חלמיד חכם** Cohon was a "genuine scholar of the old school."<sup>10</sup> He was perhaps even more of a student than a teacher. Cohon approached learning with care and reverence. For Cohon, study and faith went hand-in-hand. As a **צדיק** Cohon "went out among his brethren, feeling their pain, writhing in their agony, rejoicing in their joy, and taking pride in their triumphs."<sup>11</sup> He was a keen listener and a great mediator who cared about his people. Cohon was not a **צדיק** in the "saintly" sense of the word; to view him in this light is to diminish him. Rather, it was Cohon's very qualities as a human being – his gentle demeanor as one of the great menschen of the rabbinate that made him the **צדיק** that he was. And finally, as a **חסיד**, Cohon was "the personification of piety and faith."<sup>12</sup> Cohon, as a man of the old world and the new, was an inspirational anomaly to those who knew him. He was a man of dignity, honor and integrity who prayed every day and who tenaciously held onto his belief in a personal God. He was a believing and honest Reform Jew who continually sought to find his place in the complicated world in which he lived, and assisted others in their search as well.

Cohon loved his rabbinate and his students. In his farewell remarks to the faculty of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati upon his retirement in May of 1956, Cohon said:

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<sup>9</sup> S.H. Levey, "Professor Samuel S. Cohon," N.D., SSC Papers, AJA, Box 15/5, p. 1. It appears that that this particular piece of writing, found in the "condolence letters" sent to Mrs. Cohon, may have actually been Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's "official" statement following the death of Samuel Cohon.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Looking across the years the question sometimes comes to mind: Would I repeat my choice of forty-eight years ago and choose the rabbinate as my career? And the answer comes unhesitatingly with an emphatic yes. Indeed, if I had seven lives I would invest all of them in the rabbinate, not because of its emoluments and honors, but because of its unparalleled opportunities of service in the cause of Judaism and of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cohon, "Farewell Remarks to the Faculty of the Hebrew Union College," Cincinnati, Ohio, May 10, 1956, SSC Papers, Box 9/3, p. 2.

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