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RABBINIC LEADERSHIP IN THE REFORM MOVEMENT  
AS REFLECTED IN THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF  
RABBI ABRAHAM JEHIEL FELDMAN (1893-1977)

By Lawrence Karol

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-  
Jewish Institute of Religion

1981

Referee, Professor Jacob R. Marcus

"Impress them upon your children"

(Deuteronomy 6:7)

Dedicated to

Abraham J. Feldman

ע"ה

who educated several generations  
of Connecticut Jewry

and to

my parents,

Joseph and Ruth Karol

who diligently taught

by their example

the meaning of honesty and integrity

and the meaning of

Reform Judaism

as a way of life

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## DIGEST

This thesis is a case study of leadership in the American Reform rabbinate as exemplified by Rabbi Abraham J. Feldman (HUC '18). Feldman, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1947-49, typified his profession in many respects. This work traces Feldman's life and career and analyzes the significance of his achievements and service.

Chapter One deals with Feldman's early life—in Russia, on New York's Lower East Side, and in Cincinnati. This section focuses on Feldman's background as an immigrant and a Zionist. It explores how he fused the best of his past with the ideals of American democracy and Reform Judaism.

Chapter Two covers Feldman's "internship" period as an assistant to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in New York; as rabbi at Congregation Children of Israel in Athens, Georgia; and as assistant to Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf at Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia. This section determines how each of these experiences later influenced Feldman as a rabbinic leader.

Chapter Three concerns Feldman's forty-three years at Congregation Beth Israel in Hartford, Connecticut. As senior rabbi, he was involved with every aspect of congregational life, serving as administrator, preacher, teacher, and pastor. The chapter analyzes the effectiveness of Feldman's leadership as he touched the lives of several generations of Connecticut Jewry.

Chapter Four probes Feldman's leadership outside his congregation. It deals with his contributions to the Jewish community of Hartford, to the general community of his locale, and to institutions and organizations of national scope. This section helps to establish the sphere of Feldman's leadership--that is, whether he was a leading local figure or a rabbi of national repute.

Chapter Five offers a brief summary of the main points of the thesis. It also reaches conclusions on Feldman's success as a rabbi and a leader in relation to his background and to his own competence and ability.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the nineteenth century, with the coming of the period of the emancipation and the disappearance of ghetto walls, changes in rabbinic functions occurred. It was the Reform rabbinate which was in large measure responsible for the change, in that the Reform rabbi from the very beginning was a different kind of a rabbi from the rabbis of former generations.<sup>1</sup>

The Reform rabbinate in the United States established a pattern of leadership unique in Jewish history. Graduates from seminaries in Europe and from Hebrew Union College pioneered a new agenda of priorities and activities for the rabbi. They did more than study, teach and serve as judges and guides for the Jewish community. They performed functions of greater variety and scope than their predecessors. They preached regularly, and to be effective as preachers, they had to be scholars. They served as educators, organizing congregational schools, determining curriculum, and teaching. They were pastors to their congregants, keeping in close contact with their people, visiting them, comforting them. They were expected to be leaders in the social movements in the community. Reform rabbis acted as ambassadors, interpreting Jewish thought, ideals and practices to the Christian community. They preached before church groups, led interfaith movements, spoke at civic events and dinners, and addressed non-Jewish college students on Judaism. They involved themselves in all kinds of Jewish movements and organizations. They performed priestly functions in their synagogues, officiating at life-cycle ceremonies, worship services and dedications.

The rabbi's leadership sustained the synagogue, linked congregants to the community, and won for the congregation prestige and respect.

Rabbi Abraham Jehiel Feldman exemplified the American Reform rabbi. He served as preacher, teacher, pastor, ambassador and community leader with skill and dedication. Dr. Julian Morgenstern, President of Hebrew Union College from 1921 through 1947, affirmed that Feldman was an exemplary Reform rabbi when he chose him to address the student body of the College in 1940. Morgenstern was confident that Feldman would speak "out of the wealth of his experience," telling "of his plans and purposes in the rabbinate, of his programs and methods, of his achievements and disappointments, of his joy and sorrows."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Morgenstern recognized the significance of Feldman's achievements, especially as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, Connecticut. Dr. Nelson Glueck, Morgenstern's successor, called on Rabbi Feldman to deliver a similar series of lectures in 1962. Glueck, too, saw him as a successful member of the Reform rabbinate:

He has been able to unite within himself the many varieties of competence and diversities of role that now make up the complex and different pattern of rabbinical work. It is altogether proper that Dr. Feldman considers the rabbinate to be a profession....[he] rejects the idea that the professional must necessarily assume a perfunctory bureaucratic manner in fulfilling the rabbinic role. For Rabbi Feldman, the professional must be a man of standards who aims for excellence and skill but avoids the routinization of religion. The institutions and program which the rabbi administers are inseparable from the ethics of Judaism and from the vibrantly living affirmations of the Jewish People.<sup>3</sup>



I will examine and evaluate the career of Rabbi Abraham Jehiel Feldman in detail, covering many aspects of his rabbinate. This thesis will present a picture of his effective and distinguished leadership, exhibited on the congregational, communal and national levels.

While I will focus on Feldman's career, I will also analyze how his background influenced his views on Judaism and the Jewish community. He retained the Zionist convictions of his youth throughout his life. Feldman affiliated with the Dr. Herzl Zion Club on New York's Lower East Side as a teenager. He continued to profess Zionism at Hebrew Union College. He began his career at a time when many Reform Jews looked with disdain upon Zionist aims. The Reform movement, however, maintained that Jews were obligated to aid in the rebuilding of Palestine within two decades after Feldman's ordination. This study will trace the significance of Zionism in Feldman's life and demonstrate how one rabbi reconciled the universal and the particular in Judaism.

Three types of source material provided the foundation for my research. First, Feldman's published books contained insights into his attitudes towards the rabbinate and Reform Judaism. They revealed how he ordered his priorities as a rabbi and as a human being. Ella Feldman Norwood, the rabbi's daughter, gave personal stories and valuable information in her biography, Not Bad for an Immigrant Boy, the only work written and published about her father.



Second, Feldman expressed his views on the greater Jewish community, Israel, and the world as editor of the Connecticut Jewish Ledger from 1929 through 1977. A sampling of 480 editorials brought to light many personal convictions which he would not have discussed on the pulpit, especially regarding politics.

Third, the Abraham J. Feldman Collection at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati furnished a wealth of data covering Feldman's first years in America, from the Educational Alliance of New York's Lower East Side to the Hebrew Union College; his days as a rabbi in Flushing, New York, Athens, Georgia and Philadelphia; his activities at Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, Connecticut; and his involvement in various local and national organizations.

I have divided my thesis into six sections: an introduction; a chapter on Feldman's early life up to ordination (1893-1918); a chapter on his first years in the rabbinate (1918-1925); a chapter on Feldman as Senior Rabbi of Beth Israel (1925-1968); a chapter covering his service in local and national organizations and institutions; and a conclusion that will summarize his career and evaluate his leadership.

It is my hope that this thesis will provide the reader with a well-rounded portrait of a Reform rabbi who served his people with distinction, and of a human being who immigrated to the United States and made an impact on his community and his country.

## CHAPTER ONE

### "BESIDE THE GOLDEN DOOR"

1893-1918

It was the unspoken hope of the immigrants that their visions and ambitions, the collective dream of Jewish fulfillment and the personal wish to improve the lot of sons and daughters, could be satisfied at the same time....The immigrant Jews would plunge into this alien world, they would gain its rewards, they would savor its pleasures and its wonders; but they would also make sure to keep their own standards and styles of life....Many of them were fiercely proud of those old ways and ready to unleash attacks on anyone daring to question their value....But the sons--they would achieve both collective Jewish fulfillment and individual Jewish success.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Feldman attained Jewish fulfillment and success. He combined the best values of his early background with the ideals of American society. He used his newly-acquired freedom in choosing the Reform rabbinate as his life's work, committing himself to American Judaism and American democracy.

Jehiel Feldman, Abraham's father, recognized the importance of liberty for the Jewish people. He joined the Lovers of Zion in Russia and raised his children in an atmosphere of hope for rebuilding Palestine as a Jewish home, a haven from persecution. Unlike some of his fellow Zionists, however, Jehiel did not settle in Palestine. He arrived in the United States on September 7, 1902, escaping when the Czarist regime

was heaping an increasing amount of restrictions upon the Jews.<sup>2</sup> He left only months before the Kishinev pogrom which claimed the lives of about 50 Jews and left more than 1500 shops plundered or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the family, for the time being, remained.

The younger Feldman recounted, in a letter appealing for a scholarship to Hebrew Union College, his early days in Russia:

I was born on June 16, 1893--not quite 19 years ago--in the city of Kiev in Russia. When six (6) years of age I started attending a private school where Jewish secular studies were taught at the same time.

When I was 9 years of age my father left for America. While he was in Russia we had the special permission to reside in Kiev, a city outside the Jewish Pale of Settlement. But as soon as he left Russia his family lost the privilege of residence and we moved to Pinsk, a city within the Pale.

It was in this city that I obtained the greater part of my Hebrew Education. During the four years stay in Pinsk I attended a private cheder for one year and the rest of the time the "Talmud-Torah of Pinsk." There I studied the Pentateuch, the Prophets, Judges, Samuel I and II, Kings I and II, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, 8 of the 12 minor prophets, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Book of Daniel and Nehemiah and the first 20-25 chapters of Psalms. I studied the Hebrew grammar and portions of the three Baba's of the Talmud. The secular studies consisted of the Russian language and arithmetic.<sup>4</sup>

He might have stayed there, had events taken a different course. Russia failed to defeat Japan in the 1904-1905 war, bringing revolutionary sentiments to a climax. Strikes, riots, and the assassination of prominent officials frightened Czar Nicholas II and his government into making concessions. Nicholas promised to convene a Duma, a parliament, to promulgate a constitution and grant rights to discontented minorities.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, however, Russian leaders were forming the Black Hundreds, bands of ruffians who perpetrated a wave of pogroms against the Jews

in the summer and autumn of 1905.<sup>6</sup> When the Duma finally met in April 1906, it could not stop the persecutions. It could only offer academic sympathy. Conditions worsened when Zionist activities became illegal after the unsuccessful 1905 revolution.<sup>7</sup> No Zionist Jew could truly live in freedom in Russia.

Young Abraham Feldman immigrated to America on May 15, 1906 to gain that freedom, settling with his family on New York's Lower East Side.<sup>8</sup> He enrolled soon afterward in the Baron de Hirsch School of the Educational Alliance, from which he graduated in 1908.<sup>9</sup> The Educational Alliance was a combination of night school, settlement house, day-care center, gymnasium, and public forum.<sup>10</sup> Feldman described this unique institution years later:

The Educational Alliance, as I recall it, was intended to provide a center to help Americanize the new immigration of Jews which occurred at the turn of the century. I remember Dr. David Blaustein, who was the Superintendent or Director of the Institution when I first knew it. He was, as I remember him, an informed and positive Jew, and he sought to serve the constituency which, of course, required a good measure of Jewishness. He was succeeded by Dr. Henry Fleischman, who was... a good administrator.

There were all kinds of Jewish activities going on there but those sponsored by the Alliance were oriented towards Americanization....

There were clubs and lectures and activities that had Jewish content. I remember Dr. Adolph Radin, who was the rabbinical leader at the institution.... But there was also Masliansky - a famous Zionist and Yiddish Lecturer and Preacher. He used to lecture on Friday nights in the big hall of the Educational Alliance and packed it, but he lectured in Yiddish - and what a beautiful Yiddish it was.... Masliansky was an ardent Zionist and was idealized by the people of the new immigration.<sup>11</sup>

Feldman attended the school at night and worked as a stock boy during the day. He received excellent marks for his work at

school, predominantly A's and B's.<sup>12</sup> The Alliance presented Feldman with a significant opportunity to further his Jewish learning and to acclimate himself to a new way of life in America.

Family finances forced Feldman to seek employment upon graduation from the Baron de Hirsch School. He remembered: "Dr. H. Fleischman... administrator--then acting superintendent --of the Educational Alliance became interested in me and took me into the employ of the institution. At the same time I attended evening High-School. After being in the employ of the Educational Alliance for 1-1/2 years I left of my own accord to better myself...."<sup>13</sup> Fleischman, in a letter of reference and recommendation, reported that "we found him efficient, industrious and honest," and regretted that "we cannot pay him a larger salary to retain him in our employ."<sup>14</sup> As an office boy for another firm, he was "honest, trustworthy, and conscientious."<sup>15</sup> He worked for a year as an office assistant at L. Sonneborn Sons Inc. Oilworks, again discharging his duties conscientiously.<sup>16</sup>

Feldman's competence and honesty won him a position more closely related to the Jewish immigrant culture. Dr. Paul Abelson, Editor-in-Chief of an English-Yiddish Dictionary being prepared for publication by the Jewish Press Publishing Company, appointed Feldman to take charge of the technical side of the dictionary. He read proofs and translated into Yiddish the slang words and expressions of the English language.<sup>17</sup> He spent eighteen months with Abelson on this project, up until he applied



for admission to the Hebrew Union College.

Feldman also participated in Zionist activities on the Lower East Side. Along with Abba Hillel Silver and Benjamin Friedman, future colleagues in the Reform rabbinate, Feldman belonged to the Dr. Herzl Zion Club, a Zionist group that met at the Alliance for a number of years. Feldman once characterized this club further:

We were a Hebrew-speaking club, and we had no difficulties there on that score although I recall one occasion when one of the up-town directors of the institution visited the club during one of our meetings and could understand not a word of what was being said because it was all conducted in Hebrew. He suggested to us that we ought to be talking English instead of Hebrew whereupon one of our boys... said to him, "Would you feel the same way about it if we conducted our meeting in French or in German?", whereupon the man blushed, turned on his heel and walked out.<sup>18</sup>

The members of the club were "poor, bright, dedicated, meeting for the purpose of debate and study."<sup>19</sup> They met on Saturday nights, putting long intellectual preparation into their discussions.<sup>20</sup> They held picnics on Sunday afternoons and put on plays aided by their parents. In fact, they produced the first play in America in the Hebrew language.<sup>21</sup> These were young Jews struggling to earn a few dollars for their needy families. The Herzl Club offered them an oasis in a sea of poverty, an escape from a weekday routine of work and study.

Benjamin Friedman, regarding Feldman's involvement in the club, remembered that he was "loyal to the aims and ideals" of the group, and that he "was not aggressive but willingly accepted serving as an officer of the club. He wanted to be more than just a member."<sup>22</sup>

In later years, Herzl Club alumni still felt a sense of camaraderie. Abba Hillel Silver, when turning over to Feldman the president's gavel of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1947, referred to their childhood association.<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Feldman responded, "I would be less than human if I didn't at least say what I deeply feel, how profoundly moved I was by the words spoken by Abba, with whom I have grown up since those early days, when as mere lads, almost before our Bar Mitzvah, we beheld a vision of Jewish service and allowed that vision and that light to lure us, to guide us and to lead us."<sup>24</sup>

The determination of the Herzl Club members in their early lives led many to success. The biographies contained in the 1929 reunion booklet testify to their achievements, encompassing the realms of religion, commerce, medicine and law.<sup>25</sup> The club had influenced their lives, and it had maintained Feldman's connection with Am Yisrael, the people whom he was destined to serve all his life.

#### Hebrew Union College

A determined young man wrote the Emanuel Theological Seminary Association in 1912, seeking financial help in order to enter the Hebrew Union College. He spoke of goals and needs:

Ever since I began thinking of my future nothing appealed to me more than the ministry, nothing was more enticing than the pulpit. I have been brought up as a Jew, I love my people....I have therefore decided to enter this field of ministry, to devote my life to Judaism....

I am now completing the admission requirements and by June of this year expect to be eligible for

admission to the U. of C. I am also now studying the Bible in review, Hebrew Grammar, and other subjects required for admission to a higher class in the Hebrew Union College....

I left school so that I may by my earnings be of material aid to my parents. I might add here that I am their eldest son and therefore they have no other support.

I cannot expect them to support me through five or six years of college for no other reason than that they could not do it. My mere ceasing of work will decrease their income considerably and means a sacrifice on their part. They can do no more, and I have no right to expect, much less ask any more.<sup>26</sup>

May I hope that my request will be granted?<sup>26</sup>

A former employer, in a letter of recommendation, had said of Feldman, "His development has been remarkable and his energy, industry and perseverance deserve recognition."<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Joseph Silverman of the Emanuel Association found him to be qualified to enter the College and Cincinnati University, citing "excellent recommendations to his moral character."<sup>28</sup> Isaac Bloom, secretary of the Board of Governors of the College, informed the applicant that approval of his application was assured, but he did not yet know if financial support was forthcoming.<sup>29</sup> The Emanuel Theological Seminary Association evidently offered the aid which Feldman needed. He took the entrance exams to the college and placed into the "A" grade in September, 1912.<sup>30</sup>

Abraham Feldman entered Hebrew Union College during the administration of Dr. Kaufmann Kohler, who had formulated for himself and the College rigid principles for Reform Judaism. He based his faith on the belief in the universal God of prophetic Judaism.<sup>31</sup> He saw revelation as a progressive process directed at the mental and moral faculties of men.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Kohler held that God had assigned Israel the historic task of bearing the lofty truths of religion to mankind.<sup>33</sup> In order



to bring Judaism's message to the world, he stressed the need for the Jewish religion to be flexible.<sup>34</sup> Kohler considered it his duty, as president, to mold the character and outlook of rabbinical students who came to the College, preferring young men who were "pliable" to those who had already formed their views.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he opposed Zionism, which challenged the notion that Israel was to fulfill its religious mission while remaining scattered among the nations. Kohler had no patience with Jewish nationalist movements which were essentially secular.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, he could not tolerate nationalistic expressions among his faculty. In one instance, he accused Professor Max Margolis of undermining the foundations of Reform Judaism through his nationalistic interpretation of some passages from the Prophets.<sup>37</sup> That Margolis did not openly admit the Zionist tone of his teaching infuriated Kohler.<sup>38</sup> The president relieved the professor of his responsibility for teaching the Prophets, and Margolis resigned soon afterward in 1907.<sup>39</sup>

Feldman was, in some ways, typical of the students entering the College during his time. For the period of 1904 to 1929, more than 70 percent of the students had parents who immigrated from Eastern Europe.<sup>40</sup> The average incoming student was nineteen years old, as was Feldman in 1912.<sup>41</sup> Many of the entrants were from poor families who lacked the means to provide them with an advanced education.<sup>42</sup> Feldman was atypical in that he was among the 28 percent of the students in 1904-1929 born in Eastern Europe, and he was one of the few who

began in the "A" grade."<sup>43</sup>

That Feldman was accepted at all is a credit to Kohler's willingness to admit anyone who seemed qualified and able to fit into the life and study at the College. While Kohler could not tolerate public expression of views he considered contradictory to Reform Judaism, he still welcomed students who were Zionists.<sup>44</sup> The door was open, therefore, for the immigrant boy from Kiev to commence his rabbinical studies.

Feldman took several courses during his first year in Cincinnati at Hughes High School. Dr. Hyman Enelow had advised him to gain a broader background in several subject areas, including Latin and history.<sup>45</sup> Feldman fared well, averaging in the 90's for Ancient History and Latin and in the 80's for Education and Geometry.<sup>46</sup> Upon completion of these courses, he began his undergraduate work at the University of Cincinnati in the fall of 1913.

He excelled in his classes at the College, achieving scores in the 90-100 range in 49 of 73 classes in his program through 1917.<sup>47</sup> The remaining grades fell primarily in the 80's, with 11 between 85 and 90.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly, his education in Pinsk and New York City had provided him with a strong background in Hebrew texts and other areas of Jewish studies. His strongest subjects were History, Talmud, Mishnah, Commentaries, Homiletics and Theology, in all of which he averaged above 90.<sup>49</sup> He was, without question, a superior student.

Feldman also succeeded as a student in the practical aspects of the rabbinate. He served congregations in Statesville,

North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Zanesville, Ohio during his years at the College. He made such a positive impression in Tulsa during the 1915 Holydays that Temple Israel asked him to return for a second year. L.D. Lewkowitz, Secretary of the Tulsa congregation, commented glowingly on Feldman's ability in 1915:

It is a pleasure to inform you of the excellent manner in which Mr. A. J. Feldman conducted Holyday services....

Mr. Feldman, during his short stay, endeared himself to every one of our members and it is the unanimous opinion that he is destined to become a power for much good among Israel.<sup>50</sup>

Another member of Temple Israel wrote to the congregation's president, telling how greatly he enjoyed the services, adding complimentary words for the student rabbi: "Your rabbi, while young, did most excellently, and I am proud of him as a coming Rabbi for this country."<sup>51</sup> Feldman was well on his way to becoming an effective leader who could make a significant impression on his congregants.

Feldman actively participated in organizations at the College and at the University of Cincinnati. In 1913, he founded the Menorah Society, a group for Jewish students, at the University, and served as its president in 1913-1916.<sup>52</sup> He was national vice-president of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association in 1916-1917.<sup>53</sup> He was associate editor of the Hebrew Union College Monthly and the University of Cincinnati News in 1916-1917, where he acquired experience in the field of writing for and publishing periodicals.<sup>54</sup> This involvement undoubtedly helped him later as editor of the Jewish Ledger in Hartford.

Feldman's participation in the Menorah Society enabled him to have close contact with an important figure in American Jewry. This was his recollection of a meeting with Justice Louis Brandeis:

In 1914, I was a freshman at the University of Cincinnati and...organized the Menorah Society....I was its first president.

I received word one day from New York that Mr. Brandeis was going to be in Cincinnati, while he was on his way to Louisville. So I wrote to Mr. Brandeis and asked him whether he would consent to address our Menorah Society at the University. By return mail, I had his gracious acceptance....

I then went to the Dean of the University and asked him to assign a room to us....He...informed me that he mentioned the matter to President Dabney of the University. He became quite excited over the possibility of Mr. Brandeis being on the campus and insisted on having a special student Convocation to have Mr. Brandeis address the entire student body and faculty....President Dabney informed me of what an important person Mr. Brandeis was and insisted that we yield to the University. Being a freshman, I had the "chutzpah" to say to him that I would consent provided he indicated that the Convocation will be held through the courtesy of the Menorah Society....

When Mr. Brandeis arrived, I called on him.... When I told Mr. Brandeis what had happened, he said, of course, he would have preferred to talk to the members of the Menorah Society alone....

What always stood out in my mind in connection with this incident, was the fact that this great man was willing to talk to a few Jewish students in preference to addressing the entire University body.<sup>55</sup>

Brandeis' humility and his repute as a Jew and an American must have been an inspiration to Feldman at that time. Feldman also looked to Brandeis as a great Zionist. In their conversation, Brandeis offered the young student rabbi an evaluation of Theodor Herzl's accomplishments, saying, "Herzl built better than he knew."<sup>56</sup> Both men were to add their contributions to the Zionist cause in subsequent years.

What was Abraham Feldman like as a student at the Hebrew Union College? "Abe was inherently kind and serious," said Benjamin Friedman, his contemporary. "He enjoyed the spectacle of student pranks but could not get himself to participate. Not that he was shy. He just couldn't do what he may have felt was frivolous. Yet he was one of us all the same."<sup>57</sup> Dr. Julian Morgenstern remembered that "he was an earnest and industrious student, constantly eager to enrich his store of Jewish knowledge and his background of Jewish culture. He was an ardent Zionist in the days when Zionism was looked at somewhat askance by the authorities of the College, and he told with pride that one dunam of land in Palestine had been registered in his name."<sup>58</sup>

Feldman did not have to conceal his Zionist views while at Hebrew Union College. However, his convictions did bring him into good-natured confrontations with Dr. Kohler, especially in the realm of homiletics. Kohler, in his early years as College president, made the chapel the focus of the institution, for both praying and preaching.<sup>59</sup> He would only allow student sermons to be delivered in the chapel which he had previously approved for homiletical quality and adherence to his version of Reform.<sup>60</sup> Yet pressure was brought to bear upon Kohler by students and rabbis in 1915 to prevent him from rejecting student sermons dealing with Zionism, provided they were religious in tone and otherwise unobjectionable to him.<sup>61</sup> This allowed Feldman to dare, in class and in the College chapel, to express his Zionism openly. It was his conviction that Zionism and Reform Judaism were compatible. He felt that Jews could combine



universalism and particularism successfully. He told of one instance in the Homiletics class which illustrates his conflict with Kohler:

[Once]...Dr. Kohler came into class--put his Ingersoll watch on his desk and said, "Boys, I'll give you five minutes to prepare an outline of an appropriate sermon for this week." So--it being Pesach I decided to turn to "The Song of Songs." I took for my text, "They have made me the guardian of the vineyards, but mine own vineyard I have not guarded" (SoS 1:6). I proceeded to attack the then current vogue among many Reform rabbis (not all) to overstress universalism and to scorn Jewish particularism. I pointed out that we minded everybody's business but not our own, and I touched on the neglect of Hebrew, on the neglect of the Sabbath, and the care-free rejection of religious observances. That, in brief, was the substance of my argument in that outline. But I didn't get that far with Dr. Kohler. For some reason he called on me first. He said: "Feldman--what's your text?" I told him. He straightened up in his chair, brought his fist down on the desk and with mock sternness said, "That's the trouble with you Zionists: Just like Israel Zangwill. He writes a book called 'They That Walk in Darkness', and forgets the balance of the verse: 'Have seen a great light.' So you...take for your text זמנני נוסרה את הכרמים - 'They have made me the guardian of vineyards, etc.' and overlook what precedes it בני אמי נחרו בי - 'My mother's sons were incensed against me.'" "Pesach and Easter coincide," he continued; "here is a wonderful chance to make a vigorous protest against the Christian injustices in their treatment of the Jew"....When he finished - I said very respectfully (I loved him! I revered him!), "Dr. Kohler, what you suggest is a good text, too. But I wanted to use the second part of the verse." He waved his arms as if in despair over my hopelessness and we all laughed good-naturedly.<sup>62</sup>

There is one well-known "debate" between Kohler and Feldman which took place in the College chapel. Feldman delivered the sermon--and Kohler offered a benediction in the form of a rebuttal:

I preached a sermon...on Sabbath Pikkuday. In that sidrah the High Priestly garb is described. Again, the theme which seemed to obsess me in those

days emerged. (Remember, I was a Zionist in love with Reform, who dared to hope to reform Reform's aberrations). I made the point that the High Priest through belonging to the tribe of Levi, when officiating in his priestly role was to remember that he represented not the tribe of Levi but the totality of the children of Israel. Therefore, he was to wear attached to the shoulders of his tunic the חושן or breastplate with the twelve names of the tribes. I reminded my fellow-students that when we receive ordination it is not as Reform Rabbis, but, as my diploma read then:

הרשות נתונה לו להיות רב ומורה בכל קהלות ישראל:

"Permission is granted him to be a Rabbi and teacher in all Jewish communities"; and whilst it is the Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary which gave the ordination, it acted on behalf of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations....Well - I read my sermon to Dr. Kohler during the week. He criticized some of my homiletics - and I accepted. He criticized my sharpness - and I accepted. But, when he wanted me to modify my concept I demurred -- and got away with it. On the Sabbath I preached, Henry Berkowitz, ע"ה, ...asked me to suggest a solo which he might sing. I suggested that he sing Psalm 137, "By the River of Babylon", with its vow concerning remembering Jerusalem. He sang it. After the sermon Dr. Kohler got up to read the Adoration and the Kad-dish. Then he gave one of his famous closing prayers. In it he thanked God for giving us, "as the Midrash tells us," two types of men, both serving God's purposes, men of the stamp of Aaron, "lovers of peace and pursuers of peace", and men of the stamp of Moses, unyielding and uncompromising, ... "Justice must prevail even if the mountain be split." When he finished his prayer and benediction he turned to me and said, "Well, Feldman, Gut Shabbos. Did I answer you?"<sup>63</sup>

Kohler and Feldman, despite their differences, had great respect for one another. Feldman, while serving in Philadelphia, was publishing a number of his sermons preached at Kene-seth Israel, and desired to dedicate the collection, entitled Religion in Action, to Kohler in honor of his forthcoming eightieth birthday.<sup>64</sup> Looking back on his years at the College, Feldman intimated to his former teacher the extent of the Professor's influence on him: "I have gotten a great deal in

the six years that I spent at the Hebrew Union College. I owe more than I can express to the College, but, may I say this that, of all the influences under which I came during those six years, none has been as great a blessing to me, in my life and work, none has meant as much to me inspirationally and religiously as that blessed influence which you, through your piety, spirituality and Jewish loyalty and scholarship exercised over me. Once again, accept my sincere thanks."<sup>65</sup> Kohler accepted the dedication, assuring Feldman that he had followed his career all along "with warm interest."<sup>66</sup> Kohler probably realized that he could not change Feldman on the issue of Zionism, but that he had played a major role in shaping his student's outlook on Reform Judaism. Theologically and spiritually, Kaufmann Kohler left a lasting imprint on Abraham Feldman's faith, because it was Kohler who began to form the mold of that faith.

Feldman obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1917.<sup>67</sup> He then had another year of courses to complete at the College, as well as his rabbinic thesis. He chose for his thesis topic, "The Grouping of the 613 Commandments in Rabbinic Literature."<sup>68</sup> He dealt with the various categories the rabbis had applied to the 613 precepts contained in the Torah. Feldman carefully studied each system of division, according to number and types of commandments. He traced the development of these groupings in the Talmud, Halachot Gedolot, Azharot recited on Shavuot, and the works of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Moses Maimonides. He concluded his analysis



with Maimonides because, he said, "to this day no one has succeeded either in superseding him in method of enumeration or to replace him in the esteem of the people as he replaced and towered above those who preceded him."<sup>69</sup> Feldman's thesis totalled 51 pages, including detailed notes and a bibliography. The quality of his work was enhanced by the fact that he did not translate Hebrew and German quotations. This would indicate that both the writer and the readers understood the passages without further explanation. This speaks well of Feldman's scholarship. He dedicated his thesis to his parents, "my first teachers. ..in filial gratefulness, reverence and love," and to "them--whose intense Jewishness, whose Jewish loyalty, whose love for all things Jewish--inspire me; whose never-ceasing love and devotion--stimulate me."<sup>70</sup> His family and his teachers had shaped an immigrant boy into a young man of knowledge and competence.

It was quite appropriate that Feldman remember his family in the dedications of his rabbinic thesis. In many immigrant families, parents and other brothers and sisters pulled together to send one of their number to school. The Feldmans were no different, sending the eldest son, who had been the most scholarly in his interests even as a small boy in Russia, to college.<sup>71</sup> The other Feldmans "were so proud of their big brother's progress and scholarship that they fawned over him, clothed him, kept the home fires burning literally, and saw to it that he didn't have to worry about the home front while he was preparing himself for a future in the rabbinate. For the remainder of their lives

they felt, rightly, that they were a part of his successful career...."<sup>72</sup>

While the Feldmans maintained the family home in New York, their older brother had met a young woman who was destined to join the Feldman clan. Ella Norwood, Feldman's daughter, told how Student Rabbi Feldman met his wife-to-be, Helen Bloch:

While he was a student at the University of Cincinnati, a group of boys decided to go see their team play basketball instead of attending class. Dad was not enthusiastic about the outing, but the professor had said that he would join them if one hundred percent of the class agreed to attend....While looking around the gymnasium, he (Feldman) espied a group of girls two rows in front of him. Some of the boys knew them, and his professor had waved at a particularly pretty co-ed seated with them. Dad...liked the appearance of this girl. He inched his way over to the professor, tried to get his attention, and failing in his efforts, kicked the man in the shin and firmly demanded an introduction to the girl in front.

By coincidence, that girl was attending the game under identical circumstances--her professor had made the same proposal to his class, and she went along as reluctantly as Dad had. The introduction was completed....Neither of them ever attended another basketball game, but they later agreed that, along with the University of Cincinnati's team that year, they were big winners.<sup>73</sup>

The two courted for some time, and were eventually married in Cincinnati on June 2, 1918, the day after Feldman's ordination.<sup>74</sup>

Dr. Kaufmann Kohler ordained the class of 1918 on June 1 at the Jewish Hospital of Cincinnati, where he was recovering from a hip fracture.<sup>75</sup> The twelve class members entered his room, and Kohler addressed them in the words of Jacob when his twelve sons gathered to take leave of him before he died: "Assemble yourselves, and hear ye, sons of Jacob" (Genesis 49:2). He gave a brief charge, and, dividing the priestly benediction into twelve sections, he invoked a blessing for each student. He

offered a midrashic interpretation, and then semichah.<sup>76</sup> When he came to Feldman, Kohler asked a blessing with the word "(the Lord) keep thee."<sup>77</sup> It was an appropriate invocation, for upon his retirement, in October 1968, Feldman recalled the words Kohler spoke, "May the Lord guard you," adding in retrospect, "Gratefully I testify that He did."<sup>78</sup>

Feldman preached, on the morning of his ordination day, at the old Reading Road Temple in Cincinnati on the theme "Reforming Reform Judaism."<sup>79</sup> He chose his text from the Second Book of Chronicles: "And now serve the Lord your God and His people Israel." He declared that this verse would be the watchword of his ministry.<sup>80</sup> And it was just that. Feldman brought to the rabbinate a background that highlighted the importance of K'lal Yisrael. His father had raised him to hope for the return to Zion and the restoration of Palestine as a Jewish homeland. He then was an Eastern European immigrant boy who escaped Russia at a critical period in Jewish history. He learned and grew on the Lower East Side of New York City by working hard and by taking advantage of institutions and groups that enhanced and nurtured his Jewish spirit and knowledge. Finally, he turned to liberal religion--to the rabbinate--to live a fulfilled life as a Jew and an American. He would, as a religious leader, serve America, God and the Jewish people with dedication and loyalty.

## CHAPTER TWO

### "FIND YOURSELF A TEACHER AND GET YOU A COLLEAGUE"

1918-1925

A senior Rabbi must have something to give a junior Rabbi, and the young man, for his own good, must make certain of this before accepting the invitation to be someone's intern. The senior Rabbi must, moreover, be willing to guide and teach....the younger man should never<sup>1</sup> hesitate to ask his elder colleague questions....

The determination of policy rests with the senior Rabbi. To carry out whatever policy is laid down and to do it in complete loyalty is a duty of the junior, when it is assigned to him. Likewise, when in the performance of his duty the junior has taken a stand, it is part of fairness and common kindness on the part of the senior to stand by his colleague in equal loyalty.<sup>2</sup>

...yet....Do not stay too long as assistant in one congregation!...After the first two years you will not learn much that you do not already know....One becomes an assistant to learn from an older man, not to succeed him. It is an internship, an apprenticeship one serves.<sup>3</sup>

Abraham Feldman was the only one of his class of twelve to take a post as an assistant.<sup>4</sup> He was advised against it, but he desired an internship position because he thought he needed the training from an experienced rabbi.<sup>5</sup> He served under two great organizers in the Reform movement, Dr. Stephen Wise and Dr. Joseph Krauskopf, who fundamentally influenced Feldman's rabbinate. He served alone for several months in Athens,

Georgia, where he found that he could function as a rabbi competently and effectively on his own. This period in Feldman's career prepared him for his long years of service in West Hartford. He would later refer to these years of internship as an important growth period in which he developed skills and abilities that would enhance his leadership in subsequent years.

### The Free Synagogue of Flushing

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise invited Feldman to serve as Fellowship Assistant of the Free Synagogue for the year 1918-1919.<sup>6</sup> Feldman assumed his duties on July 1st at the Free Synagogue of Flushing, a branch of the main congregation.<sup>7</sup>

Feldman's first year in the rabbinate was a discouraging one. He told of his frustrations there in a sermon ten years later:

Ten years ago, in my first pulpit, in a small long Island community we had no Sefer Torah. . .at our services, and the lay leaders of the congregation refused every request I made for such a scroll. We had no Synagog there, but worshipped in an unsightly hall with calcimined walls. They objected to a Sefer Torah because "we have outgrown ceremonies, which are superstitions," and I was considered much too orthodox and narrow for a graduate of the Reform School for the training of Rabbis. In the platform of that hall, on Yom Kippur, a chair was placed for me to occupy, and the chair was ornamented with a carved Lodge cross. When I objected--I was again ridiculed as a narrow bigot. I was told in that congregation by its lay head that it was silly to recite the Shema in Hebrew, that it would sound so much better in the vernacular.<sup>8</sup>

He still tried to serve his congregants to the utmost of his abilities despite these ideological differences. He discovered, however, that he was making little impact on the members of the Free Synagogue. He became disheartened over his work,



and was quickly coming to consider the rabbinate as a hopeless profession. He related his despair to Wise in a letter early in 1919, describing various problems he was having with the membership. He had told the congregation at a special meeting that "it takes the heart out of my work to continue facing those (empty) benches week after week."<sup>9</sup> Several reasons were given for poor attendance at services, including the problem of baby-sitters and Feldman's sermons. One man claimed that the sermons "took for granted a knowledge which...they did not possess."<sup>10</sup> Another member declared that the pulpit was "dealing with subjects which were of interest to people of the 16th-18th centuries, but that as 20th century men and women they want world problems and modern themes discussed."<sup>11</sup> Feldman pointed out that his sermons since the Holidays had dealt with contemporary topics, such as "What means our Victory in Arms", on democracy, "What does the Free Synagogue stand for?", and "Shall the Jew Retain his Distinctiveness?".<sup>12</sup> In all instances, there were only 25-30 people in attendance.

At the monthly trustees meeting, the parnass blamed Feldman for the decrease in the number of pupils in the religious school and for the lack of enthusiasm among members.<sup>13</sup> Then the trustees raised the issue of Christmas. Feldman had urged upon his congregants that the birth of Christ was not a Jewish "Yom Tov," which some students in the religious school did not seem to know.<sup>14</sup> He ridiculed, in a sermon, the "broad-mindedness of Jews to whom 'Santa Claus was more at home than amongst Christians.'"<sup>15</sup> His protests caused such a stir that

his congregants were "less deeply hurt by the Polish pogroms than by my attack on the Jewish celebration of the birth of Christ. 'Rabbi F. is an orthodox.' 'Rabbi F. is narrow-minded.' 'Dr. F. is a Jewish bigot,' etc."<sup>16</sup> Feldman met with his president and executive secretary to reach a truce, but even that did not ease the hurt of what had transpired since he took his post.<sup>17</sup> He felt that to be positively Jewish in his personal life, he would have to risk being considered a bigot by his congregants.

At the conclusion of his letter to Wise, Feldman expressed what then constituted the basis of his rabbinate and of his concern for Am Yisrael:

You know me well enough to know that my people and my people's...continued existence in vigor and buoyancy are very, very dear to me. I like to think of Israel as the etz chayim and want to help preserve it not only as the symbol of eternal life, but as a life-giving factor and influence. That is why I would be a Rabbi. To clear away the lifeless branches which stunt its growth and deprive it of its fruitfulness, to permit it...to spread out...and send its roots deeper into the ground--this I consider to be the function of Reform Judaism, which is why I am a Reform Rabbi. Were it fair to judge by my experience during the last six months--I should say that the task is either hopeless, or that I am not fit to help in the work of preservation and development.

For the first time in my life...I, who am by nature an optimist am growing somewhat pessimistic.<sup>18</sup>

Feldman did not remain much longer at the Free Synagogue of Flushing. His experience had almost broken him, and it took persuasion from Dr. Henry Englander (at Hebrew Union College) and Dr. Wise to keep him in the rabbinate.<sup>19</sup> Wise offered Feldman his judgement: "You have now been in a big city for a year and you ought to be in a smaller community in which you

would have the responsibility of the rabbinate upon your shoulders....I believe your experience with us for a year has been of some service to you. I think what you now need in order to fit you further for wider usefulness in the ministry is a year or two of service in a community like Athens, which I learn is very attractive."<sup>20</sup> Feldman accepted the post in Athens, Georgia, whereupon Wise left him with important words of advice: "Don't constantly imagine that people are trying to tread on your toes. Keep your toes out of the way--in fact, the best thing to do is to forget that you have toes. These people...are evidently resolved to accept you as their leader (at Congregation Children of Israel in Athens). Leadership does not mean boss-ship nor domination nor scornful patronage. The power of leadership ought always carry with it two things--a sense of responsibility and a spirit of humility....Hold yourself with unbending dignity...but remember that the aim of the people in Athens is not to...neglect or insult you but to follow you and look to you for high counsel and to revere you."<sup>21</sup>

Feldman may not have enjoyed his experience as Wise's assistant, but he certainly did learn from it. He would later remark that Wise taught him to have "a certain amount of courage to speak one's mind regardless of where the chips fall."<sup>22</sup> He would describe his one-time senior as a "master-builder of Jewish life," a "shining symbol of the American rabbinate, a rabbinate unique in its far-ranging service at once prophet, minister and ambassador of Judaism, an authentic and brilliant representative of and spokesman for Jews and Jewry" before



America and the world.<sup>23</sup> Wise was an exemplar of a rabbinic leader who imparted the message of prophetic Judaism with enthusiasm and conviction. Of his association with Dr. Wise, Feldman would always be proud.

Congregation Children of Israel  
Athens, Georgia

Feldman accepted the position at Congregation Children of Israel at a salary of \$2100 per year.<sup>24</sup> It was a comparatively small congregation, but it was what he needed to regain his confidence. Feldman would later advise other rabbis that they could draw much nurture from a small community.<sup>25</sup>

Dr. Julian Morgenstern, president of the Hebrew Union College in 1921-1947, commented on Feldman's short tenure in Athens: "...he served for only one year, but a very active and momentous year, one which left a deep and lasting impress upon his entire subsequent ministry. In particular, his work with the Jewish students of the University of Georgia, located in Athens, was unique in various respects and of manifold value both for them and for himself."<sup>26</sup>

Max Michael, president of the Athens congregation, provided for Feldman's arrival by changing the By-Laws so that the Rabbi would be an honorary member of the Congregation and of the Executive Board.<sup>27</sup> Feldman had suggested this in order to manage congregational activities with authority and efficiency. He wanted to establish that a partnership between the rabbi and the congregation was preferable to a situation where the rabbi was merely the servant and custodian of his congregants.

Michael evaluated Feldman's service in Athens thoroughly and positively in a letter to Dr. Stephen Wise. He attested to the great competence with which Feldman led the congregation, and implied that this young rabbi had changed his congregants' perception of a Jewish spiritual leader:

Rabbi Feldman not only made good in Athens, but he has made this Congregation very good. The Congregation at Athens...adhered to the idea that the Rabbi was a good man in his place but that his place was exceedingly small; that the Rabbi was a good man to preach the sermons, bury the dead and give the blessings, but...did not possess any ideas which could benefit a congregation....

When we tendered our pulpit to Rabbi Feldman we adopted a set of By-Laws, which in effect, though not in words, had one limitation upon the Rabbi's conduct and activities and that limitation was that he must not curse in the pulpit.

The first meeting of the Congregation, since Rabbi Feldman's election, was held on yesterday. He was present at the meeting, he took part in the deliberations, both of the congregation and of the Trustees. He made recommendations and they were adopted, and then when he was out of the room for a moment his salary was substantially raised. Rabbi Feldman is not only loved by the members of his Congregation, but he is loved by and respected by the Christian community of Athens....

He can get anything he wants. He asked for a Bible for the pulpit and fifteen were offered to him. He asked for a library for the Sunday School and he got it. He asked for the adoption of the revised edition of the Union Prayer Book, he got it, and I really believe that if he wanted it he could have built a sanitarium for the treatment of tubercular flies.

I really thank you for advising Rabbi Feldman to come to Athens and I appreciate the fact that it is up to us to hold him and I have no fears of our being able to do that.<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Michael's letter testified to the great ability Feldman demonstrated as administrator of his congregation and ambassador to the non-Jewish community of Athens. Feldman had rediscovered his confidence and his courage very quickly. He had gained the

experience which Dr. Wise knew he would derive from a small community. He had reshaped the mold of the rabbi in Athens, so much so that Max Michael would plead with him two years after his departure: "What we are looking for is a Rabbi Feldman, and you have got to help us get someone like him, if possible; if not, someone as near like him as possible."<sup>29</sup>

Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Congregation Children of Israel in Athens was unable to hold Feldman for very long. Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia wrote Feldman in December, 1919, telling him that he needed a new assistant rabbi. James Heller was leaving the post, and someone had suggested Feldman as a capable successor. Krauskopf delineated for Feldman the assistant's duties: "reading a portion of the services, preaching every other Saturday, if he so desires, and delivering a Sunday discourse once every month, during the Sunday Service Season. He is also expected to take part in the teaching of the Pre-Confirmation and Confirmation Classes, and to assist in the Superintendency of the Religious School. At Funerals, he is expected to officiate at the cemetery, and to conduct the Minyan Services in the homes of the bereaved."<sup>30</sup> He added that he would expect the assistant to conduct a weekly service at the National Farm School (formed by Krauskopf in 1896) and to aid in the school's management.<sup>31</sup> He offered a salary of \$2000, which was less than the amount the Athens congregation paid Feldman at the time. Feldman indicated his interest in the offer and his

sense of flattery that someone was thoughtful enough to mention his name. He was, however, a married man with a child; therefore, financial matters greatly concerned him. He would take the job if he could receive a higher salary than proposed.<sup>32</sup>

Keneseth Israel, evidently, granted his request. Krauskopf reported to Feldman on January 8, 1920, "I was glad to receive word. . .directly from the President of your congregation, Mr. Michael, that the Congregation has reluctantly released you and that you will be with us at the end of the month. I can assure of a very hearty welcome, and of my belief that in due time you will find yourself perfectly at home in our community."<sup>33</sup> Feldman left Athens after serving there only six months, long enough to reestablish his faith in himself as a rabbinic leader.

#### Krauskopf, Feldman's Teacher and Colleague

If Feldman felt at home in Philadelphia, it was because of the concern and graciousness of his senior Rabbi, Joseph Krauskopf. This great leader, ordained in the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College, had designed for Feldman an opportunity to share in all rabbinic duties, to learn from his senior, and to work independently while under supervision. Krauskopf was a model for Feldman, who would later declare, "I spent three years with Rabbi Krauskopf, and those years have left an impress upon my whole ministry; my whole life has been influenced by that which I learned from. . .him. He had much to give, and I think I was wise enough to take all that he gave."<sup>34</sup> Dr. Julian Morgenstern characterized this senior-assistant relationship as

an "intimate and friendly association."<sup>35</sup> Krauskopf "wielded a potent and lasting influence" on Feldman, causing him to "grow rapidly in the technique of his profession."<sup>36</sup> Feldman called Krauskopf "a great preacher, a remarkable organizer, and a resourceful congregational leader" who shaped his religious thinking and his sense of religious values.<sup>37</sup> He realized that by emulating Krauskopf, and by accepting his counsel and criticism, he, too, could achieve success in his profession.

Feldman composed a biographical sketch of Krauskopf for the 1924 American Jewish Year Book. This article revealed what he considered important in Krauskopf's paradigmatic career. Feldman cited the legend of "Krauskopf luck": When Krauskopf wanted something, he got it.<sup>38</sup> He reached his goals through diligence, unceasing toil and undying vision.

Feldman remembered Krauskopf as a courageous preacher, whose sermons "gripped the Jewish community of Philadelphia."<sup>39</sup> He spoke from the pulpit of his beliefs, goals and values. He captivated his congregants because he knew how to hold their interest. Feldman disclosed how Krauskopf had helped him in this area:

When I began my preaching career I followed the pattern of the structure of a sermon that was given, viz., an Introduction or "Exordium" as it was called; the "Body" or the main part of the discussion; and the "Conclusion" which called for a summary of what was said, and the "peroration"....I discovered that my "Introductions" were too long, too involved, too cumbersome. The "body" was then either too thin or bulged in the wrong places. The "summary" was repetitious and the "Conclusion" too labored and/or too long delayed. I discussed it once with my senior colleague, Dr. Joseph Krauskopf, who was a great and a very successful preacher. He gave me some sound



advice. He said, in effect, eliminate your "Introduction." You want to gain the attention of your listeners quickly. So--plunge into the "Body" of your sermon at once. Arrest the attention of your audience. If you have to give background to what you say--do it later. Avoid summaries and conclude when you are through.<sup>40</sup>

Krauskopf seldom left his pulpit. "A congregation should know," he told Feldman, "that their Rabbi is always at his post. Occasionally you may wish to have someone else in your pulpit. There are circumstances that require it. Let this be very occasionally, and let each be an exceptional event."<sup>41</sup>

Feldman highlighted Krauskopf's talents as an organizer. There were hundreds of people who attended the regular Saturday morning service at Keneseth Israel.<sup>42</sup> Dr. Krauskopf, however, instituted a service on Sunday morning for Jews who, for economic and industrial reasons, could not attend the synagogue on the Sabbath.<sup>43</sup> Up to three thousand people came to hear Krauskopf's Sunday discourses, which he prevailed upon his congregation to publish regularly.<sup>44</sup> He prepared a special liturgy for Sunday mornings which did not include Sabbath prayers; Feldman maintained that the Sabbath morning service remained the central time of worship for the Jewish day of rest at Keneseth Israel.<sup>45</sup> Still, the Sunday services, Krauskopf claimed, had indirectly improved the attendance on Sabbath morning by simply bringing Judaism back into people's lives.<sup>46</sup>

Krauskopf applied his organizational capabilities to education, revamping the Religious School program, establishing a Post-Confirmation class and a weekly study class for young men and women.<sup>47</sup> Yet Krauskopf's most important contribution to



the Jewish community did not only affect Philadelphia. He saw the dearth of information concerning Jews and Judaism printed in English, and was struck by the lack of a Jewish publishing agency. He called for a society to "familiarize American Jews with the ethics of Judaism, the history of the Jewish people, and the writings of Jewish ministers."<sup>48</sup> He helped found the Jewish Publication Society of America on June 3, 1888, and, through his persistence, the Society flourished.

Feldman considered Krauskopf to be an "indefatigable community worker."<sup>49</sup> His senior served as the ambassador for Jews to the non-Jewish community in the cities where he served. Krauskopf had organized, in 1892, the Personal Interest Society, a forerunner of later social service agencies.<sup>50</sup> He formed the Liberal Ministers Conference of Philadelphia in 1893.<sup>51</sup> He urged establishment of a model kitchen for the city's poor in 1894.<sup>52</sup> He represented the Secretary of Agriculture in 1900 to investigate agricultural education and conditions of farming in Europe, when he witnessed first-hand the plight of Russian Jews.<sup>53</sup> He was astonished at the enthusiasm with which the people worked at farming and visited the Jewish agricultural school in Odessa.<sup>54</sup> This trip inspired him to found the National Farm School (in 1896), an institution which would welcome all students, regardless of creed.<sup>55</sup> Krauskopf, as president of the school, contributed his energy to sustain its operation.

Feldman credited Krauskopf with shaping his religious thinking and values. He included in his brief biography

Krauskopf's own summary of his creed, encapsulated in a lecture on October 28, 1894:

"I believe in the love of man and in the love of God. I believe in service human and in service divine ....While proudly acknowledging my Israelitish descent, and my and the civilized world's indebtedness to Judaism, and while eager to maintain my historical identity with that people and faith, still I believe that all people are my brethren....I believe in extending the hand of religious fellowship to all who believe as I believe....I believe in obedience to the laws of God as written in our hearts, to the laws of nature as inscribed in the universe, to the laws of man as enjoined in the codes and scriptures. I believe in a weekly Sabbath for rest, recreation and worship ....I believe that virtue and sin will ultimately meet their reward. I believe in the supremacy of reason over faith, or inquiry over credulity. I believe in forms and ceremonies, when they are accessories to awe and reverence, when they stimulate the mind to right thinking and the heart to right feeling, and the hand to right doing....I believe that happiness is the highest good, and that peace and good will are the best means for its attainment."<sup>56</sup>

What made Feldman even more accepting of Krauskopf's guidance was, undoubtedly, the latter's reversal of his position regarding Jewish nationalism. Krauskopf opposed political Zionism until he visited Palestine in 1914 and observed the work accomplished by the Jewish settlers.<sup>57</sup> He declared himself a Zionist in a public speech, pledging his cooperation to the cause.<sup>58</sup> He had, at the very least, accepted the thesis of restoring Palestine as a Jewish homeland for those who would make it their home. This was Krauskopf's position when Feldman arrived in Philadelphia; it must have encouraged the young assistant in his own convictions which he had held since childhood. This great Rabbi, therefore, was a mentor and a model for Feldman in a complete sense. He had immigrated from across the Atlantic and transformed himself into an American Reform

rabbi. He had established a pattern of effective use of the pulpit, of organization and programming, of publishing, of community service, and of local and national leadership. Feldman, as his assistant, derived much benefit from his elder and teacher on a professional level.

Furthermore, Feldman and Krauskopf had a close personal relationship, as demonstrated by this letter to Sybil Krauskopf during one of her husband's periods of illness: "I beg to assure you that I stand ready to do everything that is humanly possible, and that I am capable of, to relieve the Doctor during this period, of any and all worries and responsibilities. Dr. Krauskopf has frequently spoken to me as a father would a son. I would, were I to see him, speak to him as a loyal son would his father, and urge him, not only for the sake of his public interests, nor for the sake of the Congregation, but for his own sake. . .to do all in his power to cooperate with his physicians in regaining his health."<sup>59</sup> The intimacy of their relationship must have made Feldman feel quite at home in Philadelphia.

#### Rabbi Feldman in Philadelphia

Krauskopf fell ill several times during the first two years of Feldman's service at Keneseth Israel. A special meeting of the Board of Trustees was called, during one instance, in November, 1920, for the purpose of redistributing the work of the congregation.<sup>60</sup> Feldman assumed more pastoral and organizational duties in addition to his regular responsibilities in education and preaching. Guest rabbis were invited

to preach during Krauskopf's absences to ease the burden on Feldman's shoulders. In 1923, Krauskopf took a period of leave to raise a Jubilee Fund for the National Farm School.<sup>61</sup> The Board authorized Feldman to obtain assistance for the upcoming High Holydays.<sup>62</sup> Krauskopf again became ill in that year, and never reassumed his post as senior rabbi. He died on June 12, 1923, leaving the congregation temporarily under Feldman's leadership.

Rabbi Feldman played an integral role in keeping the "wheels in motion" at Keneseth Israel. He made a number of innovations of his own. He instituted a Friday evening Vesper Service at 5:30 p.m.<sup>63</sup> He suggested and helped found the Men's Temple Club in May, 1923.<sup>64</sup> He managed this group closely, always searching for interesting speakers to address the club. He urged the Board of Trustees to elect the rabbi to be an ex-officio Board member.<sup>65</sup> However, when the Board agreed to elect the rabbi as an honorary member of the congregation, he did not press the matter. He was prepared, as he told one congregant, to wait for "a more propitious time."<sup>66</sup>

The congregation, immediately after Krauskopf's death, designated Feldman acting rabbi until September, 1924.<sup>67</sup> When this great duty fell to him, Feldman expressed his resolve to master the situation to Dr. Julian Morgenstern:

I am under no illusion as to what my present election means. I don't think it means that I am to pose at once as Dr. Krauskopf's successor. It means, I suppose, that I am given the greatest possible opportunity to qualify for that responsibility and distinction. It means that I am to give to the Congregation the very best that is in me, to prove my metal, and to make good. All of this, of course, makes me

very humble, and for the moment I am a bit overwhelmed with the significance of the action taken. I shall, of course, try to live up to the expectations of my friends in and without the Congregation, and of the expectations of my teachers at Hebrew Union College.<sup>68</sup>

Feldman continued his dedicated service to Keneseth Israel, and there is no doubt that his performance in his post satisfied the membership. Dr. Julian Morgenstern assured Feldman that he was held in high regard, but that the congregation might seek as Krauskopf's successor a rabbi who had already established himself in another city as an outstanding leader and ambassador to the non-Jewish community.<sup>69</sup> Feldman discovered in February, 1924 that Keneseth Israel would look for a senior rabbi outside the congregation. This disappointed and disheartened him, so much so that Dr. Morgenstern sent him a lengthy letter of consolation. Morgenstern urged him to accept the post as associate rabbi under the successor and to cooperate fully with his new senior and with the congregation.<sup>70</sup> He encouraged Feldman to remain there until another position he would want opened up, adding these words of praise: "...you are young; have been in the pulpit only six years, and have in that time achieved much, and risen high, to a position of dignity and honor, even as associate Rabbi of Keneseth Israel. You may be well proud of all that."<sup>71</sup>

On April 8, 1924, Rabbi William Fineshriber of Memphis, Tennessee was chosen to follow Krauskopf as senior rabbi.<sup>72</sup> Feldman confided to Morgenstern his outlook regarding the coming year: "Much of my happiness in the work next year will now depend upon the attitude Fineshriber assumes. My attitude



now is one of watchful waiting. I am determined to meet him more than half way, and to give him every possible cooperation."<sup>73</sup> Dr. Stephen Wise had already advised him to "think of the work, the congregation, the privilege of service to a community, and in all sweetness and graciousness put everything else aside excepting the resolve to work as hard and faithfully and serviceably as you can."<sup>74</sup> Feldman accepted his counsel and remained in Philadelphia for another year as Fineshriber's associate.

Feldman took part actively in the community affairs of Philadelphia during his five years there. He was founder and president of the Federation of Jewish School Teachers of Pennsylvania, Delaware and vicinity in 1923-1925.<sup>75</sup> He served, in 1925, as president of the Board of Jewish Ministers of the city and as head of Har Sinai B'nai Brith Lodge #8.<sup>76</sup> He sat on the Board of Directors of the Federation of Jewish Charities in Philadelphia in 1923-1925.<sup>77</sup> He maintained contact with the Zionist movement through Young Judea, for which he held, in 1920-1925, the posts of president and honorary president.<sup>78</sup>

Closely connected with his position at Keneseth Israel was his association with the National Farm School. He participated in the determination of policy as a member of the Executive Board.<sup>79</sup> He resigned from the Board after accepting his new post in Hartford in June, 1925.<sup>80</sup> His resignation letter, however, elicited this response:

Your faithful attendance at the Board meetings is a record in itself, and your intimate association with our beloved Founder, coupled with your own personal aptitude, enabled you to bring to the deliberations the benefit of keen insight and an always helpful counsel.



We, your associates, will miss you at these monthly conferences, but we are confident that you will still serve with us, even though circumstances remove you geographically from our midst. We hereby elect you an honored member of our National Board to represent your newly adopted city of Hartford and the State of Connecticut in general, and we sincerely trust that you will consent to serve in this capacity.<sup>81</sup>

The Board of the Farm School had appreciated his participation and hoped that he would maintain his connection from his new location.

Feldman, while still in Athens, accepted the task of editing a translation of the sermons of Zevi Hirsch Masliansky, the great Yiddish lecturer and preacher of New York's Lower East Side. He worked on this project while in the midst of his service at Keneseth Israel; his schedule must not have allowed him many spare moments. He completed the revision in July, 1922, but the publication committee was required to wait until the original translator was satisfied with the credit given him on the title page before it authorized printing the work.<sup>82</sup> The Hebrew Publishing Company issued the collection, in five volumes, in April, 1927.<sup>83</sup> Feldman had contributed to the translation "a modern language and an enlightened, broad spirit."<sup>84</sup> He had, through his work, made accessible to the American Jewish community a major facet of his early life in New York.

This period of internship provided Feldman with a variety of experiences. He had lived among Jews in a small suburb of New York City, assisting one of the great rabbis and Zionists of his time. He led a congregation in a small, isolated Jewish community in Georgia, proving to himself and to his congregants

that he possessed the ability necessary for rabbinic leadership. Finally, he served one of the first graduates of Hebrew Union College, a radical Reform rabbi who had developed a formula for a successful and fruitful career. Feldman wisely absorbed what Dr. Joseph Krauskopf had to give him. Years later, characteristics that Feldman had attributed to Krauskopf--a courageous preacher, an effective organizer, an energetic community worker, and a rabbi with strong religious values--others would attribute to Feldman.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "NOW SERVE THE LORD YOUR GOD AND HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL"

1925-1968

...to serve God and to serve His people Israel constitute the principle tasks of the rabbinate...But, one might ask, why "serve Israel?" Well, I would say because this is where we start from...to build, to construct, to achieve, we must start at the root...And so it is with Israel that we begin...we begin where we are born, where we are reared. It is from there that it is possible for us to reach into the world. We serve mankind by serving Israel and through the service to our people we reach out for mankind. Because we are primarily a religious people, our religion is the unique aspect of our collective life as a people. We start, therefore, from self, from us...In this sense the rabbinate offers the greatest opportunity for service to our people.<sup>1</sup>

I took a congregation that was, as I said, provincial. I set myself a kind of design for service. I knew what I wanted and what I hoped that congregation would be. In spite of resistance--and there was resistance--I kept at it slowly, patiently, tactfully, and it seemed to me that the good Lord was on my side. The point is that by staying with it, I was able to fashion the congregation into an image that I had seen. Today we have, I think, a congregation that is no longer provincial, that is broadly Jewish, and that is eager to do better and larger work.<sup>2</sup>

...he never thought of his ministry as a "job". To him it was a way of life, a dedication. He never received the salary he should have, because he wouldn't ask for it...He could have gone elsewhere, earned more; but he loved Hartford, he had built this Temple in its pres-

ent prominence, and he was the most highly respected Jew in the state. Money? What for? He was doing what he wanted, where he wanted--money wouldn't have improved his lot.<sup>3</sup>

Feldman's teachers at Hebrew Union College and his mentors in the field had deeply influenced his thinking. Feldman developed, based on their instruction, his own formula for service to God and Israel--and he made his congregation his laboratory. It was at Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, Connecticut that he put his ideas into action. He educated a generation of Jews in New England. He literally fashioned a congregation in his image.<sup>4</sup>

Feldman believed in nurturing a community over a long period of time. He held strongly that a minister could carry through his program "only when the lay leadership of the congregation is the leadership he has reared and taught from youth onward."<sup>5</sup> He stressed that the congregation is a voluntary association, and that the rabbi cannot make demands; the rabbi can only guide and encourage, lead and stimulate.<sup>6</sup> "You start by educating some men and women in the congregation to have them understand your goals and be sympathetic; in time you involve and engage their cooperation; and when the time is ripe and propitious, you move in. It is an evolutionary process."<sup>7</sup>

Feldman arrived in New England at a time when congregants viewed the rabbi as the Temple's hired man--a kind of parish cleric whose time and energy rightfully belonged

to them.<sup>8</sup> Feldman, however, created the image of a rabbi as a leader of great visibility in the community as the Jew, the spokesman for the Jewish community.<sup>9</sup> After only three years in Hartford, Feldman propounded his view of the rabbi to his congregants:

He is a public servant, the community's servant, to be sure, but he is not a menial. He serves as the teacher, as the guide, as the leader...He works with human beings, amidst human lives, upon human souls and hearts. His task is... to inspire, to interpret, to give and indicate the direction of human lives! And if there be any results in the wake of his endeavors, they are not immediate and they are seldom discernible except after the lapse of long periods of time, if then....I have believed it to be my duty to serve, as a Jew, not alone my congregation, but the community and to lead others to a like service.

And with references to my immediate congregation, I never believed that the Rabbi is a parish priest. Rather, he is a community's guide.<sup>10</sup>

While he stressed the role of the rabbi in the non-Jewish community, Feldman still cautioned that the congregation should be the central concern of its spiritual leader: "True enough, a congregation has not the moral right to restrict or restrain a Rabbi in his public service, but it does have a claim upon his time....It has a right to expect him to keep his vineyard....Our first duty... belongs to our own congregations. Their sick have a right to have their own Rabbi with them....The children of the Religious School have a right to instruction from their Rabbi."<sup>11</sup>

Feldman characterized the rabbi as a figure who participated in the lives of human beings, who is always surrounded by people, yet necessarily alone: "...many people fail to realize, that the post of Rabbi is not only the most formal one conceivable, but by the same token also the most lonely....People find it difficult to conceive this aloneness of the Rabbi because he is almost always surrounded by folks....But though always surrounded--he dare never be just an individual as others are. He is always the Rabbi, he is always the Synagogue....What does this aloneness do to him? In an ideal sense, it creates a fusion of man and Rabbi. The Rabbi must always be the Rabbi and his approach to all problems, people, institutions is of necessity one always colored by the fused totality that is his....it is sometimes difficult to preserve this fusion. But it must be preserved and by himself--alone."<sup>12</sup>

Although rabbis may be separate from their congregants, they nevertheless participate in the trials and joys of their members. They must remain in touch with the people they serve. Feldman insisted that a rabbi can give personal attention to Temple members in a smaller congregation. He pointed out, however, that the size of a large congregation imposes inescapable limitations.<sup>13</sup> He reflected on this problem in 1962:



I now have a large congregation of more than twelve hundred families. The intimacy I had with the members of the congregation thirty-odd years ago, when the congregation was very much smaller, is much reduced. I cannot now say that I know personally, or by name all or most of the members of my congregation. I have not been in most of the homes of my congregation. There was a time when I knew every child in the Religious School by name....Today I do not know by name most of the members of my confirmation class, and I know very few of the children in the lower grades. I do practically no social calling. Oh, there are a few intimates one develops in the course of the years, but even then the pleasure of spending an evening with them comes very, very rarely.<sup>14</sup>

Feldman did find compensations in a large congregation: better facilities for programming, adequate budgets for improved programming, better music for services, and more staff members to carry our activities.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, there is a marked difference, claimed Feldman, between a large congregation in a small community and a large congregation in a large community. The concerns of a rabbi in a large city differ from those of a rabbi in a small city. Feldman saw a "rootlessness in a metropolitan community like New York, which is a collection of neighborhoods having no stability; people constantly move in and out."<sup>16</sup> One rabbi told Feldman that "in order even to maintain the membership level of his congregation, he had to get a hundred new members every year!"<sup>17</sup> In such a Temple, "when a child enters the Religious School in the kindergarten or the first grade, chances are that the rabbi will not confirm that child; the parents will have

moved away....In contrast, even in a large congregation in a smaller community, it is reasonable to assume that a child entering...Religious School...will be confirmed and probably married by the rabbi."<sup>18</sup>

Feldman stressed that the rabbinate, as a profession, calls for techniques and procedures: "There are right ways and there are wrong ways of performing one's duties. There are rules; they are not just ironclad rules and one may not be too dogmatic about them. They can't be, because we are dealing not with machines, but with people...of diverse temperaments, of diverse intelligence, of different dispositions, people with whom we deal under all kinds of circumstances and tensions and moments in their lives."<sup>19</sup>

Such was Feldman's outlook on the rabbinate: gradual education of a community, service inside and outside the congregation, tending to needs of members as first priority, the rabbi as a leader alone, and the need for skill in dealing with congregants regardless of the size of the community or Temple. It was this outlook that manifested itself in Feldman's 43 years of service as Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, Connecticut.

#### The Call To Beth Israel

Feldman visited Hartford, with his wife, in the Spring of 1925. The members of Beth Israel received them warmly and the Temple Board soon offered Feldman the position of

rabbi.<sup>20</sup> He accepted and waited patiently for confirmation.

A letter to Mr. Isidore Wise, President of Beth Israel, reflected Feldman's excitement and satisfaction with the news that he would soon be moving: "I have just received your Night Letter, informing me of your Congregation's ratification of the action of your Board in calling me to the pulpit of Beth Israel....I accept the call humbly, reverently, and prayerfully. From what I have seen, there is much work to be done, and I rejoice at the opportunity, and from the people I have met while with you the other day I am delighted at the prospect of working with so splendid and wholesome a group, and both Mrs. Feldman and I look forward, with a great deal of pleasurable anticipation, to our life in your very charming city."<sup>21</sup> That "very charming city" was to be the Feldmans' permanent home.

Feldman was encouraged by the fact that he had the unanimous support of the Board and the Congregation.<sup>22</sup> He intimated to Judge Solomon Elsner, a leader in the Temple (and later in the UAHC), that he looked forward to having Elsner's constant counsel whole-hearted support, and friendship.<sup>23</sup> Upon hearing that his move was official, he immediately requested from Elsner information regarding the congregation: the religious school curriculum, a

membership list, and an idea of the Temple budget.<sup>24</sup> His subsequent arrival in Hartford was heralded in the Hartford press, where Feldman "hardly knew himself" in the listing of his curriculum vitae and in praise heaped upon him.<sup>25</sup> Feldman moved in the summer to his new home and a new task-- a task that would keep him occupied for several decades.

#### Feldman As Administrator

Feldman played a vital role in the "workings" of his congregation. A 1945 draft of Beth Israel's By-Laws divided the rabbi's duties into several categories: recording marriages he performed; recording conversions at which he officiates; delivering an annual message to the congregation at the annual meeting; performing lay and religious duties as directed by the Board of Trustees; and acting as spiritual leader of the Congregation, performing religious duties usually performed by a rabbi.<sup>26</sup> The By-Laws declared the rabbi a non-voting member of the Congregation who would be privileged to attend meetings of the Board of Trustees.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the rabbi chaired the Ritual Committee and sat on the Music Committee.<sup>28</sup> The Board appointed Feldman to consult with other planning groups as necessary.

Feldman recognized that the congregation alone possessed the authority to make decisions, although the rabbi's guidance and thinking in such matters have weight:

"His ability to be persuasive and his skill and talent in dealing with his people, in guiding them to accept his point of view and to agree with him, are also important factors. He just cannot lay down the law--he has not the right to. If he does, and his people refuse to accept, he either resigns or submits to the right of his people to disagree with him. In such situations, there is one ingredient which is primary...sechel, just common sense, tactfulness, courtesy, and the inexhaustible patience of the teacher educating the people to his point of view."<sup>29</sup>

Feldman assumed certain administrative duties; he considered the Religious School, ritual matters, adult education and youth work as part of the rabbi's spiritual domain.<sup>30</sup> He emphasized the importance of working through congregational committees assigned to these areas of concern.<sup>31</sup> He saw working with committees as an opportunity "to develop allies who will be delighted to carry the ball for you."<sup>32</sup> Feldman felt that it was easier to indoctrinate committees, as smaller groups, than to try to indoctrinate the complete Board or the whole congregation.<sup>33</sup> He valued highly attending Board meetings:

In the first place, the rabbi then has firsthand knowledge of what is going on in the congregational administration. Moreover, the rabbi can contribute his knowledge of what is going on in our Reform movement and in other congregations. After all, that is why they send the rabbi to conferences and conventions. Then also, the rabbi has a greater knowledge of congregational life than the average layman on the Board has. He is aware of trends and



tendencies; if certain matters come up, the rabbi is in a position to discuss them, to impart information. Such discussions have value. Even if he does not know every member of his congregation by name, the rabbi has more information about most of the members than any Board member has....they have learned over the years that they can trust my judgement in such matters, and that I do not abuse the privilege. <sup>34</sup>

He felt strongly, however, that he should stay out of certain matters completely:

...(the rabbi) ought not to meddle in the business and housekeeping affairs of the congregation. He should leave those to the laymen. First, they are very jealous of their duties and their prerogatives. Second, these problems are headaches which the rabbi ought not to court. I have had a friendly agreement with my people for over thirty years that they take care of the business affairs of the congregation, and I take care of the educational and spiritual affairs. I do not meddle in their affairs; they keep out of mine....In the long run they know more about business matters than I do, so I let them have their way in this regard, unless they violate some religious or moral law. Then of course, I do step in. In the matter of dues, for instance, if they should try to be severe with somebody where I know there is need and trouble in the family, I say to them: "I have reason to believe that this ought not to be. Leave it alone."<sup>35</sup>

Feldman wanted only the right to attend Board meetings, not the right to vote. He realized that his vote would become decisive only in the case of a tie, and "if the rabbi has any common sense, he is not going to use his vote; he can split the congregation that way, and that is not what he is there for."<sup>36</sup> Feldman felt that a rabbi should shun divisive tactics:

...It is natural for the rabbi to have personal



preferences as to whom to work with, but it is suicidal for the rabbi to make these preferences known. Avoid Congregational politics like a plague! No matter who comes out on top, remember that the two fellows who have been fighting each other will play golf together and will drink and dine together the day after, but the loser will never forget or forgive the rabbi who helped to defeat him. So stay out of it. You have to work with whomever the people choose for leadership. Also, you will be called upon to minister to those whom you oppose, and you may not be able to be really helpful if they have come to view you as an opponent or an enemy.... If you've been there long enough, you will be consulted about some matters confidentially. But do not get mixed up in the politics of a congregation.<sup>37</sup>

#### Feldman and the Board of Trustees

Evidence indicates that Feldman put his "Temple Board" philosophy into practice. The minutes of Board meetings 1945-1959 illustrate the partnership that existed between Feldman and his lay leadership. He confined his activities, for the most part, to ritual and educational matters. The Board granted him a leave of absence--for whatever reason--every time he asked. He recommended families for membership, forwarded contributions to Temple funds, encouraged donations to good causes, and advocated new projects. He suggested, in 1946, that the Board look into building a community house as an addition to the Temple.<sup>38</sup> The "dream" came true eight years later, when Beth Israel dedicated its new Meeting House. He asked the Board to allow him a Rabbi's Discretionary Fund to draw upon without

coming to the Board--a fund he could use to answer charitable appeals and then report to the Board.<sup>39</sup> His request was approved unanimously.<sup>40</sup> He urged in 1947 that a resolution be published in the Temple Bulletin that no parties be given on Friday night. The "Sabbath Resolution" was, in and of itself, a sermon:

"Whereas the Sabbath has always been a source of strength and inspiration in the life of our people inspiring the saying: 'Even as Israel has kept the Sabbath, so the Sabbath has kept Israel';  
 "Whereas Temple Beth Israel continues this noble tradition by conducting Sabbath services which are rich with a poetic liturgy, sacred music, and a spiritual message;  
 "Whereas we feel that thru the Sabbath services we succeed in recapturing something of the beauty and holiness of the Sabbath institution, thus helping to preserve the spirit of Judaism;  
 "Be it therefore resolved that this Board of Trustees of Congregation Beth Israel earnestly requests every member of the Temple to refrain from holding any social affair or party on Friday night. If, after attendance upon service at the Temple, friends foregather in each other's homes, we believe that to be in the spirit of the Sabbath, and carries over into the home something of the joy and friendliness which are of the Sabbath a part...dinner parties of any other social gatherings held during the hours of worship not only detract from the sacred spirit of the Sabbath but actually intervene with the desire of many Jews to attend religious services on Friday night....Friday night is Temple night and should be dedicated to worship and instruction."<sup>41</sup>

Feldman tried to help the congregation in times of hardship. He noted that there would be difficulty in balancing the Temple budget in 1933, during the depression, due to "numerous requests for reduction in dues and

some loss of membership."<sup>42</sup> He evaluated the crisis and proposed a solution in a letter to his president, Isidore Wise:

I am not unmindful of the fact that most of those requests are due to sharp shrinkages in the incomes of the writers and that many of them are prompted by real hardships. I know it from my own experience, for the savings, small as they were, which over the years I was enabled to accumulate, have not remained unaffected.

In view, however, of the present situation, with which the Congregation is confronted, may I suggest that I shall be willing to have the Board at its budget meeting consider a reduction of my salary for the year of 1933. I do not specify the amount because I am entirely satisfied to leave that to their judgment and sense of fairness. In upwards of seven years of my service here, I have found the Board always to be fair in their dealings with me and I have no reason to believe that they would be otherwise now.<sup>43</sup>

It was this spirit of cooperation that enabled Feldman to lead and guide his congregation. His ability as an administrator, his learning and his competence won him the respect of his Board. The Trustees had confidence in Feldman's judgement, deferring to him on all matters in his realm while listening to his counsel on "business affairs" of the congregation. It is no wonder that, in 1955, Beth Israel members elected Feldman life rabbi. He had gained authority through his knowledge and talent, so that, in many cases, "when Feldman wanted something, he got it."<sup>44</sup>

### The Rabbi's Annual Messages

As stated earlier, the By-Laws of Beth Israel required Rabbi Feldman to deliver a message at the annual meeting of the congregation.<sup>45</sup> Each message dealt with programs, activities and recommendations for the future.<sup>46</sup> Yet Feldman always included in his remarks a spiritual religious note. It was in these addresses that Feldman educated and indoctrinated the whole of Beth Israel's membership on his ideas regarding the synagogue, the rabbi, and Reform Judaism. The annual message constituted Feldman's major opportunity as "administrator" to speak to the congregation. He devoted his remarks, throughout his 43 years at Beth Israel, to impressing his philosophy upon his members, leading them on his path for congregational life.

He spoke proudly of his partnership with the congregation. Feldman told his members that, while lecturing Hebrew Union College, "I thought and spoke of you with pleasure, because I was able to tell the rabbis of tomorrow how you and I have existed in amity for these many years, and how together we transformed a small congregation with little activities and small programs into a dynamic organism, one of the larger and more influential congregations in the United States of America."<sup>47</sup>

Feldman devoted several messages to defining a

"Jewish congregation." He suggested a six-point definition in his 1949 address: 1) A rallying point for Jews qua Jews in a non-Jewish environment; 2) An institution which provides educational facilities to Jewish children and adults "where they would be enabled to learn whence they derived as Jews, what they represent as Jews, the kind of life they should lead as Jews and because they are Jews; 3) A place for public Jewish prayer and worship, the members acknowledging, by their affiliation, the need for prayer; 4) An institution whose purpose it is to preserve the Jewish religious traditions and "such of the traditions and practices of Jewish life as the needs require"; 5) An assemblage of religiously-minded and religiously-motivated Jews who band together to exemplify those ideals and concepts of Jewish democracy which individual Jews should practice, so that no Jew who seeks religious education, religious worship or Jewish fellowship will be excluded; and 6) A "propaganda unit" of the religion (like a branch of the Vatican), whereby all members become "active missionaries" for Judaism.<sup>48</sup>

Feldman related his messages to world events and social conditions. He expressed his deep concern, in 1932, for the troubles and privations of some members due to the depression, concluding that "through the universal effect of the economic situation a new sense of pity and an understanding of the heart and needs of the less fortunate seem to have been born."<sup>49</sup>



Feldman portrayed the synagogue as a "refuge from the storm," a place for serenity and calm, while World War II raged in Europe.<sup>50</sup> Religion could give assurance to those feeling increasingly the pinch of war. People could not afford to absent themselves from the synagogue when fears and anxieties from the war news were leaving many on the verge of hysteria.<sup>51</sup> Later in the war, Feldman enunciated the important lesson to be learned from the mass murder of Jews in Europe:

...If we fail to do everything possible of a defensive nature--we are doomed. That is what German Jewry did. It failed to take precautions. It failed to build defenses, to stir and arouse a sympathetic public opinion which might have stemmed the tide which engulfed them and the rest of Germany. They merely looked on, and insisting that it was not serious, they did very little. They refused to take the threat seriously. They chose to believe that what did come to pass could not happen to them...Hitler and his accomplices publicized their intentions widely. And still the Jews of Germany refused to believe that all this spelled DOOM for them.<sup>52</sup>

Feldman charged his congregation to accept the obligation, as Jews in a free America, to be the saving remnant of Israel.<sup>53</sup> He mourned the loss of East European Jewry--the great reservoir of Jewish piety, learning, spirituality and devotion. He declared that "American Jewry has a new responsibility...a new opportunity to make a contribution to the future of Judaism."<sup>54</sup> Jews in America could strengthen their chances for survival by increasing the vitality, numerically and spiritually, of the American Synagogue.

In these messages, Feldman guided the members of Beth Israel through times of pain and anguish and times of achievement and joy. He shaped for his congregants the image of the Jewish congregation and the rabbi. He delineated a philosophy of Reform Judaism. He spoke at the annual meetings as part of the community, as a member of the Beth Israel family, and--most importantly--as a shepherd, a bearer of comfort and wisdom, and a leader.

#### The Synagogue That Feldman Built

In terms of how he looked after detail--he is responsible for the designing of our sanctuary. There was an architect, of course, but he specified every single detail down to the stained-glass windows, down to exactly what symbols were going to be drawn into plaques on the building.<sup>55</sup>

The magnificent edifice which houses the Congregation Beth Israel was a product of Dad's painstaking research, love of symbolism, sense of dignity and history, and a close cooperation with the architect. Everything in the Temple, from each marble pillar, to the ark containing the sacred scrolls (Torahs), to the brass door knobs with the six-pointed Star of David on each one, had been carefully selected from drawings and pictures and A.J.'s imagination. He knew what he wanted and planned carefully for whatever the congregation couldn't afford in 1933, when the cornerstone for the Temple was laid. He knew then that he wanted a large meeting house, which he ordered sketched into the original drawing of the entire complex; he knew then that he wanted a small chapel to abut the main sanctuary, and this too was included in the master plan for the building. However, in 1933, the additional plans were set aside until some benefactor might fulfill Dad's dreams.

Eventually, his plans for the meeting house and chapel were realized, and the structure which

stands today is and shall remain a living monument to the man who planned and directed its construction.<sup>56</sup>

Feldman gave serious thought to all aspects of designing a new House of Worship for Congregation Beth Israel. He wanted it to represent American Jewry architecturally. He reasoned, "We Jews are people from the Orient, but also a people that has spent the greater part of its history in the Occident."<sup>57</sup> Jews brought their faith to the West from its place of origin and inspiration in the East. Feldman found an architecture that reflected "East meeting West" in the Byzantine type.<sup>58</sup> However, because this was a synagogue, Feldman wanted to indicate attachment to the larger Synagogue, the people of Israel. The building was designed as a duodecagon, twelve-sided, each side representing a tribe of Israel.<sup>59</sup>

Jewish symbols were included in every facet of design. Stained glass windows depicted the tribes of Israel, great figures from Jewish literature and Scripture, and ideals of Judaism.<sup>60</sup> Nine arches in the Temple are decorated with symbols of the festive occasions of the Jewish year.<sup>61</sup> The entrance arches frame, in the center, the two tablets of the Decalogue.<sup>62</sup> There was a reason for every symbol included in the synagogue.

Feldman designed the new sanctuary in the early 1930's, at a time when Zionism was gradually becoming less objectionable to Reform Jews. Still a Zionist, he wanted to link the synagogue to Palestine. He wrote the Hebrew

University in Jerusalem, asking the authorities if they could send an ancient Palestinian relic that had been excavated.<sup>63</sup> Dr. Judah Magnes, then President of the University, sent a block of stone excavated from the Third Wall of Jerusalem, built by King Agrippa I in the first century.<sup>64</sup> The stone was built into the pulpit-desk, so that the Sefer Torah or printed Bible would be read "upon the soil from which they came."<sup>65</sup> That Feldman was able to commemorate the connection between Jews and Palestine demonstrates the respect he commanded in his congregation. It also may reflect that he had subtly convinced his members that Zionism was, in a cultural sense, not incompatible with Reform Judaism.

Many of Feldman's colleagues congratulated him on the dedication of the new synagogue in 1936. The letters heap compliments upon Feldman's ability as a leader and upon the congregation itself.<sup>66</sup> Feldman, however, did have to wait until the 1950's before the funds became available for a new Meeting House and a Chapel.<sup>67</sup> He meanwhile impressed upon his congregants that the additional facilities were desperately needed. The community had tripled between 1925 and 1950, and the school building and Temple were no longer adequate for housing Temple programming. It was time, as Feldman said, to "go forward".<sup>68</sup> The Meeting House and Chapel were both completed by 1955. The synagogue of Feldman's dreams - a building he meticulously

designed - had become reality.

Beth Israel's Spiritual Foundation:  
Feldman's Conception of Reform Judaism

Men like Dr. Kaufman Kohler and Dr. Joseph Krauskopf had influenced Rabbi Feldman's views on Reform Judaism. The former molded his theology; the latter shaped his ideas on religious practice and on Reform in action in a congregation. Feldman had, from his own background, developed a deep sense of K'lal Yisrael, the communal ties between all Jews. However, and this cannot be emphasized enough, Feldman's particularistic concerns enhanced his liberal approach to Judaism. He saw nothing inconsistent between Zionism and Reform Judaism; there was no conflict between Jewish nationalism and the mission of Israel.<sup>69</sup> He considered this absence of contradiction part of the uniqueness of Israel. The controversy simply was not a problem for him.

Therefore, Feldman was able to assimilate, without obstruction, what he had learned from Kohler and Krauskopf. He established rigid standards of Reform observance, stressing the right of each congregation to create its own nusach.<sup>70</sup> When strangers came to Beth Israel, Feldman wanted them to recognize it as a Reform temple. He asked the Membership Committee to inform applicants that "they are joining a Reform synagogue where some of the traditional practices have been abandoned, where new practices have been



introduced, and where further changes may occur as the need becomes apparent."<sup>71</sup> Feldman, to promote a better understanding of Reform among members, wrote his Guide for Reform Jews in 1953.<sup>72</sup> Every new member received the pamphlet upon joining the Temple.<sup>73</sup> When congregations all over the country requested copies of the Guide, Feldman revised it for distribution in 1956.<sup>74</sup>

Feldman clarified, in no uncertain terms, his stand on Reform in the Guide. He did not intend the work as a "Code", for a code has no place in Reform Judaism.<sup>75</sup> However, he added, "neither is Reform Judaism an incoherent, anarchic, nebulous matter. Reform Judaism has a clearly defined position, and in the course of the decades it has freely developed into a recognizable pattern, not dogmatic ....nevertheless it has conviction, it has direction, and it has voluntarily accepted prevailing practices."<sup>76</sup> The Guide, Feldman explained, was his modest effort to list the prevailing practices of American Reform Jewry. There were, of course, variations which had every right to exist in a liberal setting.<sup>77</sup> Yet, he still attributed to Reform an identifiable pattern of observance.

Reform's main contribution to Jewish life was the decision to keep Judaism forever contemporary and responsive to the needs of successive generations.<sup>78</sup> In order to alter practices that were no longer useful, Reform Jews would make the change immediately rather than wait for the halachic

process to take effect.<sup>79</sup> Reform in the United States, claimed Feldman, "has saved Jews for Judaism in America by making it possible and proper to be religious Jews without strict and undeviating conformity to the minutiae of traditional practice."<sup>80</sup> Feldman pointed out that Reform innovations--late Friday evening services, mixed choirs, reading prayers in English, confirmation, men and women sitting together--have been adopted by Conservative and many Orthodox synagogues.<sup>81</sup> However, Feldman wanted Reform to remain distinct from Orthodoxy and Conservatism.<sup>82</sup>

Feldman stressed that "all religious Jews share the same ethics and all have the same Sabbath and Holy Days and Festivals."<sup>83</sup> Reform made changes primarily in the area of ritual and ceremony. Feldman focused on a long list of Reform minhagim in his Guide, indicating practices added and abolished. Reform had largely eliminated, or declared nonessential, a number of traditions: tephilin, tallit and yarmulke; dietary laws; Pidyon Haben; chupah, ketubah and breaking a glass for a marriage ceremony; the get for divorce; chalitzah, annulment of a levirate marriage; covering mirrors, tearing of garments at the time of mourning; circumcision and ritual bath for conversion; the extra day for festivals; and the observance of the Ninth of Ab, commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples.<sup>84</sup> He enumerated Reform's innovations in Jewish life: the atarah, or stole decorated with Jewish symbols, worn by Reform

rabbis; confirmation on Shavuot; a wedding with a double-ring ceremony; accepting civil standards for divorce and a lost spouse (agunah); and a detailed etiquette for the synagogue, urging congregants to come on time, follow the prayers, refrain from talking during the service, and give personal reactions on a sermon to the rabbi.<sup>85</sup>

What is impressive about this Guide is that Feldman cast these practices in a positive framework. Although he adamantly denied the necessity of some customs, he advocated the active observance of Judaism in all facets of life. He encouraged home celebration of holidays and recitation of prayers, public and private, outside the synagogue. He believed in responding to the imperative, "Thus says the Lord," and, in his Guide, he established a system with which to make an appropriate Jewish response. Feldman's Reform Judaism included some of the richest traditions of the Jewish heritage--a set of practices which offered the American Jew a Jewish way of life.

Nevertheless, especially in the 1960's, there were those who objected to some of Feldman's principles regarding practices permitted in a Reform congregation. He described, in 1962, the process by which Reform began to lose its distinctiveness: "In the process of local competition, many Reform rabbis and congregations began to compromise until, in many areas, there developed confusion as to what Reform really was; there are areas today where Reform, Reform

congregations, and some Reform rabbis are neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring--just utterly colorless and bland."<sup>86</sup> In 1966, two years before his retirement, Feldman had reason to address the issue of "drawing the line" on ritual in a Reform congregation. Some members of Beth Israel, evidently, felt it to be within limits to request adoption of "traditional" customs on a case-by-case basis. Feldman set them straight, however, in his annual message. He said he would not change Beth Israel's minhag to please the in-laws or grandparents who disapprove of Reform.<sup>87</sup> He could have performed a "traditional" ceremony, but not in the pulpit of Beth Israel where certain standards ruled.<sup>88</sup> He maintained, "As a religious liberal, I can adjust in matters which I believe to be unimportant. But when it is suggested that in the pulpit of the Reform Temple there is no standard which everybody must respect--I draw the line and reject the presumption that Reform is all things to all men or anything to any man, or a kind of weather-vane Judaism!"<sup>89</sup>

Feldman enunciated his views in 1966 to publicize his stand and to re-educate his congregants on the nature of Reform. He told his congregants that he raised the issue "in the hope that this address may reach all the members of the congregation and that those who should have this brought to their attention will read it and ponder it, and hopefully, be guided by it."<sup>90</sup> He could not tolerate those who joined

Beth Israel and remained uninformed about Reform so as to ask the congregation to "revert to Orthodoxy."<sup>91</sup>

Reform, however, was moving towards tradition. Apparently, there were those in the congregation who did want to bring back some Jewish traditions out of principle. One Beth Israel confirmand chanted when he became Bar-Mitzvah in 1969.<sup>92</sup> Feldman, then Rabbi Emeritus, was very pleased that he had done so, but it is likely that no Bar-Mitzvah could have chanted while Feldman was rabbi.<sup>93</sup> Rules dealing with many rituals, including chuppah and yarmulke, changed once Feldman left. Reform Judaism was becoming, perhaps, less crystallized, while exhibiting greater flexibility. It may be that Feldman could not fit into the new scheme of Reform Judaism; he certainly did not approve of the trend towards incorporating traditional observances. Nevertheless, he had standardized, as much as possible, his version of Reform Judaism so that he could unite his congregants around an established set of practices and customs. He demonstrated highly effective leadership in doing so, because he was able to educate and captivate members of three generations of Jews. Feldman guided Beth Israel until the forces of society rendered inevitable changes in American Judaism, based on renewed awareness of roots and ethnicity. Although some members may not have agreed with his brand of Reform late in his career, they still could not help but respect Feldman for his principles.



### Feldman As Preacher

...the rabbi's role as preacher derives largely, in modern times, from the Reform movement.... Do not minimize the Protestant influence on the beginnings of Reform....We took some of the best things they had just as they took some of the best things we had....It has come to pass, that the principal inducement to synagogue attendance is frequently not worship in terms of prayer or communion with God, but, judged at its best, instruction imparted from the pulpit.<sup>94</sup>

I said when I came to Hartford that my pulpit would be...completely Jewish...and entirely free.... My pulpit is Jewish in that from it I preach consistently the message of Israel. You know, of course, that I do not interpret this message narrowly or provincially. I believe that our Judaism is adequate for all the situations of life, that it is capable of satisfying all human needs, that it is, alike, challenging and consoling, inspiring and life giving. I preach this all-inclusive message week after week and year after year; and I apply it to all circumstances and conditions even as I square it by the challenges of human thought and experience. Through my pulpit I bring Judaism's interpretation of men and events, of books and plays, of science and social experiences....I have preached with a sense of responsibility which is rightfully attached to the pulpit utterance, and have spoken with a sense of consecration which the exalted position and sacred occasion require.<sup>95</sup>

One of Dad's most outstanding traits was his ability to express himself in any given situation. His published sermons, speeches, book reviews, and books are mute testimony to his facility and ease with words, both written and oral.<sup>96</sup>

Feldman once wrote that he saw the rabbi's role primarily as the "darshan, the preacher, the maggid maisharim, a proclaimer of rules of righteousness and the ethics of our historic faith in relation to all kinds of social situations and problems."<sup>97</sup> Feldman taught Judaism when he preached.

He imparted his personal faith and his views on morality, founded upon the heritage of the Jewish people. He applied religion to all facets of life. He aimed, through his preaching, to maintain Judaism's vitality.

As a proclaimer of rules and righteousness, Feldman expressed his faith and his interpretations carefully. He recognized that how he delivered his message--voice, word choice, tone--was important. He advised rabbinic students to prepare their sermons with the congregants in mind:

"...Don't talk down to them! But, also, strive diligently to be accurate, to be intelligible, to be informative and--if you can make it--to be inspiring."<sup>98</sup> Feldman tested the clarity of his language by reading his sermons to his wife before he delivered them.<sup>99</sup> She would suggest possible shifts in stress to create the desired effect, as well as changes in delivery, such as toning down his style if necessary.<sup>100</sup> Helen Feldman, as her husband's resident critic, made certain that the congregation would understand what he was saying.

Years earlier, Feldman had worked to eliminate all traces of his Russian accent. Ella Norwood explained his reasons for doing so:

Dad felt that a leader of people in his adopted country must be worthy of those people who would follow him. This meant a perfect understanding of their language, a perfect pronunciation of their vocabulary. For hours each day, he stood before a mirror and practiced his r's, his ch's and the tongue-twisting techniques involved in eliminating the guttural sounds which

were part of his own native tongue.<sup>101</sup>

By the time he reached Hartford in 1925, Feldman had completed this process of correcting his English speech. It benefitted him throughout his career, for he always impressed his listeners with his oratorical ability. Had he not learned to speak "like an American," he might not have had such great success in this area. He was, in fact, so successful that congregants would express amazement when told that Feldman had lived in Russia for the first twelve years of his life.

Writing sermons was an art to which Feldman seriously attended. He noted the dangers in transforming words on a page into vocally-expressed ideas:

...a sermon is not an essay made vocal. It is not an academic dissertation. It has to appeal to the ear as well as to the mind and heart. The preacher's idea has to register with an audience that can get it only by having its attention arrested quickly and held as the argument is developed by the speaker. The audience is not reading what the preacher says-- it can only listen.<sup>102</sup>

He cautioned against overusing quotations of "authorities" to support the points of a sermon. Occasional, brief citations of authorities could be useful, but "the less you quote, the easier it is for the listener to understand you."<sup>103</sup> He thought that trying to impress congregants with a great diversity of reading was in bad taste.<sup>104</sup> Extensive quoting was inadvisable and distracting.<sup>105</sup>

Feldman believed that a text-based sermon did not have to follow a rigid pattern regarding the place of the text:

"As to when to introduce a text--if you have one, I would say to you that you do not have to begin your sermon with it....In my experience, there are times when I begin with an exposition of the context in which the text is found. At other times I do not introduce my text until I am well in the middle of my sermon. And there have been times when it suited my purpose better to discuss all that the text suggested to me and then clinch my argument at the end of the sermon by introducing the text. It depends on my subject and how I want to develop it."<sup>106</sup>

His ability to make a sermon out of any aspect of life experience was impressive. His daughter commented, "He would reach back into the past to illustrate a point. Or he would recall a magnificent scenic view from one of his many vacation trips, and from a remembered clump of trees or an unusual rock formation he would weave a beautiful sermon. He was at heart a mystic, but he was also a man who loved symbols. He could find symbolic meaning in a dead tree leaning against a healthy sapling."<sup>107</sup> He preached on everything "under the sun" that might exude a message. A man told Feldman, following the 1963 annual meeting of Beth Israel, that he did not come to a meeting to hear a sermon by the rabbi. Feldman forcefully responded in his 1965 message:

If the "message" which I am required to bring is considered a priori an objectionable sermonic effort, what am I to speak about? . . . Am I to compile statistics which can be interpreted variously

according to the mood and disposition of anyone who is interested? But that is hardly the function of the rabbi.

You see, at the mention of a statistic, I am prone to get a sermon out of it, because everything in life, every fact, every situation ...is related to human behavior and duty, and, it is out of such materials that my sermonic mind builds sermons.<sup>108</sup>

He concerned himself with the tone of preaching. He told rabbinic students, "There is a time for chastising, and there is a time for comforting and reasoning. There is a time for inspiring your people, a time for exalting the mood, the heart, the faith of your people, a time for speaking to the heart of the people."<sup>109</sup> He declared that the preacher "who is always saccharine", who never chastises, is not worth his salt; but, he added, the preacher who is always angry in "a storm of righteous indignation" is not "a real help to the people of so many diverse strains and needs."<sup>110</sup> One could infer, from Feldman's reputation as a first-rate orator and preacher, that he knew when to reprove and when to console.

Feldman did not preach any sermon without a foundation. He maintained that a rabbi must preach his religion, Judaism, and his beliefs. It was, of course, his own understanding of the Jewish religion that Feldman advocated from the pulpit and imparted to his congregants:

When I say "I believe in God"... and "God is a God of righteousness," and so on ...I think I am preaching authentic, historic, traditional Judaism. Now you may have another notion about it; but I am still preaching what I know to be



and what appears to me to be unquestionably Judaism....I have a positive God-idea within the framework of historical Judaism--that is Judaism to me....Judaism is a growing, expanding, developing, conceptual understanding of the meaning of life and the duties of life....we have lived long enough to have, let us say, certain patterns of understanding of God or of other concepts, and one can speak within this framework or modify any idea and still remain within the fold....I try to keep it (what I believe) within the framework of historic Judaism.<sup>111</sup>

The types of sermons Feldman delivered greatly depended on the times. He remembered how he preached in the days of his early rabbinate, and how the tone of his sermons--especially regarding faith--changed:

In those days we were in the backwash of the period of rationalism that carried over from the end of the nineteenth century until just before World War I... we were trying to defend religion, and tried to give it rationalistic content. We argued about religion. Our sermons concerned "Why I believe in God," "Why I believe in immortality"....I have checked it with colleagues, and it is true not only in Judaism but also in Protestantism--that the people after two world wars are mentally and emotionally tired and fatigued. They expect the rabbi, when they come to the synagogue or when they talk to him to tell them what he believes....They don't want to know the arguments.... They ask: "Do you believe?" And if you tell them that you do believe, they are satisfied because of their confidence in you as an educated man....and they are satisfied that there are valid reasons for such belief.<sup>112</sup>

Feldman preached from life and faith. He proclaimed "rules and righteousness" based on Judaism. He chastised and comforted. He interpreted the ethical traditions of the Jewish people in light of his own concerns and those of his congregants, in order to lead them on a path of honesty and integrity.

### "What To Preach About"

Feldman treated a variety of themes in his sermons at Beth Israel. He imparted many of his ideas to rabbinic students when he lectured at Hebrew Union College on Homiletics. One such series of talks in 1958 was published under the heading "What To Preach About"; Feldman explained to future rabbis his philosophy of preaching and of choosing themes.

"The Friday evening service is lecture-centered, whereas the Shabbos morning service is Torah-centered."<sup>113</sup> This was Feldman's basis for a "preaching schedule." He gave his major effort to preaching on Friday nights while devoting his Shabbos morning sermons to a text from the weekly Torah or Haftarah portion.<sup>114</sup> He delivered sermons only thirty-or-so weeks a year, claiming that he and the congregation needed a rest from preaching.<sup>115</sup>

He formulated guidelines for selecting subjects for sermons and how to treat those subjects: 1) Preach your conviction born of study that is continuous and of thinking that is honest and courageous, but vary your themes to prevent boring or becoming bored yourself; 2) "Vary your style and you will necessarily vary your themes." Keep the congregation in suspense so that no one will know in advance how you will treat your announced theme; 3) Do not use the pulpit as an editor uses his editorial page. A Rabbi should teach and define Judaism--there must be a uniquely Jewish

flavor to what a Rabbi says. Always look for the Jewish sanction, the Jewish thought regarding social or economic problems, and apply these Jewish ideas to life. Speak in the area in which a Rabbi should be competent--Judaism.<sup>116</sup>

Feldman kept a pad of paper in the breast pocket of every coat, so that he could write down any remark, impression or idea that he wanted to use in a sermon.<sup>117</sup> He collected these notes and arranged them into seven categories: 1) Holy Days and Festivals; 2) General Themes; 3) The weekly Sidros; 4) Series of Sermons; 5) Christian-Jewish Themes; 6) Patriotic Themes and others; and 7) Sayings of the Fathers.<sup>118</sup> He found themes in books, periodicals, newspapers, and congregational bulletins.<sup>119</sup> He spoke on contemporary problems, which he felt were the issues that truly troubled and perplexed congregants.<sup>120</sup>

To portray themes with a Jewish flavor, Feldman suggested reading the Midrash and Commentaries to find the depth of meaning in biblical verses.<sup>121</sup> He considered the Bible the most "helpful homiletic stimulant," in which "every conceivable type of human experience, of personal problem is touched on."<sup>122</sup> He loved the Bible, and felt that all Rabbis could help their people by loving the Holy Scriptures and by perfecting their skill in using it.<sup>123</sup> In fact, a woman asked Feldman, at the end of his first year in Hartford, to preach on the books of the Bible beyond Genesis through Deuteronomy. She told him that she wanted to hear

more than the "same stories" with interpretations that did not often vary.<sup>124</sup> Feldman acted upon his congregant's request, and preached in succeeding years on books from the Prophets and the Writings, choosing one book each year.<sup>125</sup> He broadened his preaching considerably by taking this woman's suggestion.

He looked upon the High Holydays as the only time some people may be exposed to Judaism for the whole year; it was Feldman's only chance "to give them something Jewish, something religious, something spiritual to think about."<sup>126</sup> He did not want to miss that opportunity. He therefore concentrated on theologic themes and religious concerns on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

In a sermon entitled "A New Year--Wherein 'New'?", he spoke of "renewing" our lives by putting old concepts into practice: "Religion. . .the reaching out of man toward God, and permitting Him to enter our lives, is not a new concept. But how tremendously unique it would be were men and women in the mass to demonstrate the validity, yea, the reality of Religion in daily life!"<sup>127</sup> He outlined his theology on a Rosh Hashanah morning in "How I Think of God," declaring "I believe God is....I am as certain of His existence as I am of my own existence."<sup>128</sup> He delineated his complete creed in his Yom Kippur sermons of 1931. Listing the subheadings of these two messages offers a complete picture of the type of theology Feldman wanted to impart to his congregation:

- 1) I believe in God--God as the absolute reality, the Author of all.
- 2) I believe in Revelation--that God makes Himself known to man.
- 3) I believe in the spiritual nature of man--that man, as a part of all life, is created of God.
- 4) I believe in freedom of will.
- 5) I believe in the efficacy of prayer, prayer being "an unburdening of one's soul."
- 6) I believe in retribution--that sins are punished and merit rewarded.
- 7) I believe in heaven and hell in our lives, on earth.
- 8) I believe in immortality--that we are part of God's essence at birth and at death.<sup>129</sup>

Concerning the place of the Jew, his self-image:

- 1) I believe in the uniqueness of the Jew--the Jews are a chosen and "choosing" people.
- 2) I believe in the Bible as an inspired book--"It is the literature in which the Jew recorded his religious experience and aspiration," an authentic record of the spiritual development of the Jew.
- 3) I have no quarrel with science as a Liberal Jew--"Science deals with processes and not purposes."
- 4) I believe in the value of ceremonial--rituals help us grasp abstract truths of our faith. "So long as a ceremony is helpful, so long as a symbol conveys an idea, so long as a ritual challenges me. I shall hold on to it."
- 5) I believe in the coming of a Messianic Age--an age of justice and peace.<sup>130</sup>

Not only did Feldman share his theology on Yom Kippur; he recognized the importance of setting a mood for the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. In "The Day of God," delivered on Yom Kippur Eve, he spoke first of theology, and then stressed the need to strive to be holy.<sup>131</sup> He viewed Yom Kippur, therefore, as symbolic of the Jew's attempt to purge his soul of all that is unworthy and unholy.<sup>132</sup> He acknowledged that Yom Kippur's monition to us is that we should be at our own best, and that by living by high standards we



can attain holiness, and, thereby, approach God.<sup>133</sup> In "The Day of Man," delivered the following morning, Feldman concentrated on the human, the social message of Yom Kippur, which he identified as the heightening of man's dignity and humanity.<sup>134</sup> He stressed the theme of forgiveness, the need to square accounts with one another.<sup>135</sup> He then took forgiveness to an extreme, asking his congregants to imagine that if all people confessed their wrongs and forgave one another--that such a day would truly be a Day of Man. He saw in man the possibility of such progress, so long as man's conscience remains awake and stirring.<sup>136</sup>

Feldman's holiday messages dealt with the themes of the particular holiday, using a central prayer, verse or symbol as the basis for his sermon. He spoke on assimilation, light, Israel's heroes and the Christmas tree as opposed to the Menorah for Hanukkah.<sup>137</sup> On Purim, he delivered sermons entitled, "The Obligations of Jewish Womanhood," "Some Christian Friends of the Jew," "'There is a People'," "Is Jewish History a Record of Suffering Only?", and "Learning from Our Enemies."<sup>138</sup> On Passover, he used "Who Knows One?" for six successive years (1933-38), using the answers given in the Union Haggadah.<sup>139</sup> On Shavuot, he usually addressed the confirmands; consequently, each sermon took the form of a charge to the students to remember Judaism and to continually identify themselves as Jews.<sup>140</sup> He delivered, in 1968, his last confirmation

charge as Senior rabbi of Beth Israel. In this sermon, "The Jew I Want to Be," Feldman presented a perspective on the role of Jews in history. He declared that he was optimistic about Jewish survival because the Jews have been an eternal and triumphant people.<sup>141</sup> The Jews have survived the fall of other great civilizations because "as a people, we never did sit back fatalistically, we never turned the other cheek. We believe, and always have believed, that we have an active, dynamic role to play in the world....This role is not one of power politics or of mighty arms. Ours has been and is the armament of faith.... Ours has been the sword of the spirit. . .the skills of informed minds, of dedicated souls."<sup>142</sup> He exhorted the congregants "to keep Jewish life positive, affirmative" so that Jews could continue to outlive the enemy and live with purpose and zeal.<sup>143</sup> He called on the congregation to have faith in God and in the people Israel. "We have a destiny; we have a mission; and ours will be the ultimate victory."<sup>144</sup>

Feldman addressed a variety of topics in his lecture-sermons on Friday night. He devoted some of those talks to events and personalities, including Louis Marshall, Ahad Ha'am, Baruch Spinoza, Emma Lazarus, Theodor Herzl, Sir Moses Montefiore, Baron de Hirsch, and Moses Maimonides.<sup>145</sup> Other sermons dealt with informative topics. For example, he gave a scholarly analysis of the "Lord's Prayer" in a 1927 sermon, pointing out the Jewish roots of the prayer in Biblical and

Rabbinic literature.<sup>146</sup> He denied the claim that Christianity brought spirituality into the world; instead, he proposed that Israel influenced the spirituality of Judaism and Christianity.<sup>147</sup> He evaluated the views on Christian-Jewish relations expressed in an official symposium in his 1929 message, "Christian and Jew: Is Better Understanding Possible Between Them?".<sup>148</sup> He contended that the ill-will between Christians and Jews was primarily due to the injustices of Christians against Jews.<sup>149</sup> He proclaimed that the Jew bears no ill-will to the Christian, but that the opposite was not true. He cited instances and examples of ongoing prejudice against the Jewish people in the United States in the realms of business, jury service, and academics.<sup>150</sup> He exclaimed in conclusion, "I do not want to be tolerated! I expect to be met and treated as an American and as a human being....The Jews constantly took the initiative. The time has come...for the gesture and initiative to come from the other side!"<sup>151</sup>

He believed strongly in democracy and the implicit freedom in American life, and spoke on these concerns. In "The Church and Clergy in Politics," delivered in 1928, Feldman affirmed that Church and state must be "forever separated," declaring this principle "so sacred...as to transcend any other so-called moral issue that may ever confront the American people."<sup>152</sup> However, he asserted that there is no middle ground between right and wrong, and that

some issues--slavery, collective bargaining, justice--are moral.<sup>153</sup> If there are moral issues to be raised in connection with political life, is it not, Feldman asked, "clearly the duty, not to speak of the right, of the clergyman to use his personal influence in the community on the side of the Right as he sees it?"<sup>154</sup> In "'America First'--In What Sense?", Feldman analyzed the meaning of a phrase expressing Americanism and, possibly, chauvinism.<sup>155</sup> He cited the connotations of the phrase which were exclusive in nature--which referred to preserving America for Anglo-Saxons or for some other group.<sup>156</sup> He identified these as non-American definitions of the phrase, and proposed his own interpretation: "America First" means devotion to the ideal of unity; to living in a country of various peoples and respecting each other's best; to recognizing moral and human values as superior to material things and wealth; and to regarding highly the dignity of man.<sup>157</sup>

Feldman did, of course, address concerns unique to the Jewish people. One poignant example is his 1929 sermon "Kiddush Ha-Shem," in which he discussed Shalom Ash's treatment of anti-Semitism and Jewish martyrdom.<sup>158</sup> He talked of Ash's reproduction of the seventeenth century persecutions of Jews in Russia, and attempted, in some small measure, to capture and define the depth of faith that found expression in "sanctification of the name": "Kiddush Hashem means living and dying for a conviction....to have a faith

so abiding as to choose martyrdom for it, rather than surrender of it or treason to it!"<sup>159</sup> Feldman encapsulated the pleadings of a Rabbi speaking to the people in Ash's tale: "Save the body if you can, but, above all, and at every cost, let your soul remain your own."<sup>160</sup> In contrast to Jewish martyrdom, Feldman observed around him "a generation grown and growing who flee from the values of Faith and the sanctions and guidance of Religion, but who for all their ready criticism are adrift, are floundering, because they have produced nothing, and have found nothing to replace the values they have discarded."<sup>161</sup> He then interpreted the concept of kiddush hashem in a modern context: "This is kiddush hashem! It is to live in the certainty of God's reality, and to demonstrate it by life! It is to feel close to Him and know His presence; to... rise and reach out towards Him. To know Him and to feel that at one with Him we are insuperable, invulnerable. This is to live al kedushath hashem--for the sanctification of the Name, and even to die in and for such faith is to rise triumphant over death!"<sup>162</sup>

Feldman preached Judaism. He interpreted social concerns and moral issues through his faith and his view of the Jewish religion. He did so effectively, and spread his words of spiritual guidance through the publication of his sermons early in his career. Sermons may not wield great influence over congregants except when delivered by the



most accomplished and charismatic preachers. However, in Feldman's case, it is evident that he took the pulpit seriously. He worked hard to make certain that the congregants understood what he was saying. He responded to feedback from congregants on his sermons and occasionally incorporated their ideas into his preaching. That Beth Israel published his sermons even early in his career; that the Central Conference of American Rabbis chose Feldman to deliver the Conference Sermon after less than twenty years in the rabbinate; and that Hebrew Union College invited him to lecture to rabbinic students on preaching, speak highly of Feldman's ability and competence as a preacher. The pulpit provided him with an important medium through which he could guide, spiritually and practically, the lives of his congregants.

"One who makes his prayer a fixed task,  
it is not a genuine supplication"  
(Mishnah Beraknot 4:4)

...we must not emulate the orthodox practice of reading the service, especially the Hebrew portions of it, as though we had a hot potato in the mouth or were competing with the auctioneer at a tobacco sale....Less haste, more kavanah and attention to perush hamilloth would obviate the mechanical, inelegant form that is sometimes indulged in.<sup>163</sup>

Shun the ministerial voice like a plague!...Never, never read the service twice with the same inflection, emphases and interpretations....I mean that you emphasize the meaning of a prayer differently each time you read it. This can best be done not by reciting, but by talking, talking to God and talking to Him in love, with concern and anxiety.

Pray when you read the service. Pray, do not read it and do not declaim it.<sup>164</sup>

Feldman approached worship with reverence and sincerity. He believed in praying with "intense enthusiasm born of a joyous, earnest faith."<sup>165</sup> He tried to establish the proper mood in the sanctuary for instilling his congregants with intense reverence and awe.<sup>166</sup> He affected the atmosphere of worship through his own reading of the prayers, which, as seen above, he attempted to vary from one service to another. Moreover, he had control over several primary ingredients in the worship service. He had designed the sanctuary, the place of worship, and the building certainly must have awed worshippers during the time of prayer. He served as chairman of the Ritual Committee, which made recommendations to the Board of Trustees regarding worship procedures. In a 1951 Board meeting, Feldman presented a set of suggestions from the committee regarding standardization of certain aspects of decorum and innovation of new customs meant to enhance the prayer services:

- 1) The Rabbi will invite mourners, when they rise for the Kaddish, to say the Kaddish with him and will invite the congregation to make appropriate responses.
- 2) The congregation will be invited to join in singing the Borchu, Shema, Vaanachnu and "On That Day."
- 3) The opening of the service is too cold. The congregation and choir will sing a hymn so that there will be participation immediately. The Rabbi suggested that the Music Committee prepare a list of hymns that could be sung.
- 4) For the concluding hymn, Adon Olam, Yigdal, Sholom Alaychem, and Ayn Kay-lo-hay-nu will be

used more frequently. On the second Sabbath of the month, Lecha Dodee will open the service. A translation and transliteration should be printed so as to be pasted in the back of the book.

- 5) Hymnals should be put in the box in the pew noiselessly.<sup>167</sup>

Feldman's recommendations were intended to precipitate more involvement by the congregation and to create more warmth in worship. The Board, in this instance, agreed with the Rabbi and implemented his suggestions.

Many of Feldman's dealings with his Board concerned the realm of worship, especially the planning of special services. He developed a program of children's services on High Holydays and Festivals (in which Feldman participated), college-homecoming Sabbaths, musical presentations, guest speakers and preachers, Parents' Sabbaths (on the weekend of Mother's Day) and commemorations of Beth Israel anniversaries (for the Temple facilities and for members).<sup>168</sup> He attempted to generate, through these celebrations, a feeling of community, so necessary in a large congregation.

While Feldman did arrange a variety of worship experiences, he did not give in to the temptation to follow the current fads:

...recently some Rabbis became "creative" in children's services, high school and college youth services, pageants in lieu of services, dramatics in place of worship. Latterly I have heard of "Social Clinics." Some of our brethren, Jews and Protestants, who were at one time engrossed with one or another of these and some with all of these, tandem, have now dropped them. The latest is mental healing, psychiatry, psychotherapy, etc....Any one

of these, by itself, without a persistent God-consciousness, without a warm faith, is only a hypodermic treatment and has no lasting effect.<sup>169</sup>

Feldman believed in sincere, genuine worship. He viewed prayer as a conversation with God, a dialogue rooted in personal faith and communal experience.<sup>170</sup> Feldman urged every rabbi to add to worship devotion and purpose, for "these, each Rabbi must have; it is part--and a most essential part--of his emotional and intellectual equipment for service."<sup>171</sup>

"Blessed were ye in your coming here;  
God bless you as ye go forth."  
(Deuteronomy 28:6)

...the particular aspect of our ministry to which I want to address myself now is that of invocations, benedictions, and other prayers outside of the formal ritual. This is an American custom--to ask clergymen to offer invocations and benedictions and special prayers on all kinds of occasions....Let us realize that a prayer is a conversation with God....It is not a conversation with people by way of God....It is a prayer to God, and it must begin with the basic assumption that God, the Yode'a hakol, the Omniscient, does not need to be informed by us.<sup>172</sup>

Invocations and benedictions offered a rabbi a major opportunity to be visible in the community. Not only did rabbis deliver these brief prayers in the synagogue; communal organizations constantly requested rabbis and ministers to ask a blessing at luncheons, meetings and important events. Without having to prepare a sermon or full-length talk, a rabbi could make an appearance--and an impression--upon Jews and non-Jews outside his congre-

gation.

Feldman stressed that invocations and benedictions should not be long; at times, only one or two sentences would be appropriate.<sup>173</sup> "I have known rabbis," said Feldman, "who, when asked to give an invocation rather than to make a speech, felt highly offended. Now, I have the notion, since I believe in prayer, that it is no mean privilege to commune with God."<sup>174</sup> It did not matter to him that he was only offering a prayer; for Feldman, there was no only about it.

He usually wrote a fresh prayer for each occasion.<sup>175</sup> He admitted that, after many years, he would either prepare something just beforehand or offer an impromptu prayer.<sup>176</sup> Feldman did compile a collection of one-hundred closing benedictions, published in 1948 by Bloch Publishing. This collection was intended to provide a greater variety of scriptural verses for rabbis to use on different moods and occasions.<sup>177</sup> He saw the end of each Friday night worship service as the time for such benedictions. Feldman instructed the user of his collection, "Most of the verses given here could be used by the minister without modification or they could be used as texts for closing prayers in accordance with the mood of the service and the content of the sermon"<sup>178</sup> Many of these benedictions, while appropriate primarily in the synagogue setting, could probably have served as prayers in the larger community. This col-



lection demonstrates that Feldman took seriously every opportunity for prayer, and that he recognized the value of using the Bible as a source for communion with God.

For everything there is a season  
Ministering at Life-Cycle  
Ceremonies

...Remember that the Rabbi does not only preach He officiates. Remember that he has an altar, not only a pulpit....he does consecrate marriages, he does invoke blessings, he does confirm children....<sup>179</sup>

I am thankful for the privilege that has come to me--as to every Rabbi--to touch lives, to instruct youth, to consecrate great moments in the experiences of others....<sup>180</sup>

...(Feldman) spoke each Friday to a large congregation and was involved in life-cycle events unto the third generation of members of the Congregation.<sup>181</sup>

During the fifteen years of Rabbi Feldman's service, we have shared together joy and sorrow, hopes and disappointments....<sup>182</sup>

These statements reflect the extent to which a rabbi has contact with congregants at significant times in their lives. The rabbi establishes standards for conversion, marriage, funerals, confirmation and Bar/Bat-Mitzvah. Members of the Jewish community expect the rabbi to be present at these crucial moments; they defer to the rabbi's authority and seek spiritual guidance on matters of status and rites-of-passage. This places rabbis in a position which greatly enhances their leadership, because they have many golden opportunities to directly affect and influence

their congregants. They actively rejoice with and extend comfort to their people.

Feldman outlined his guidelines for life-cycle events in his Guide for Reform Jews. Some of the customs which he abolished have previously been mentioned. However, he did advocate the practices of circumcision (which he viewed as a religious obligation), naming children (at the first services attended by parents), confirmation (later Bar/Bat-Mitzvah additionally), religious marriage (in addition to civil), a simplified but complete set of mourning customs, and a formal ceremony for conversion.<sup>183</sup>

Feldman himself had always accentuated the confirmation ceremony at Beth Israel because it was Reform's contribution to the Jewish life-cycle. He prepared extensively for this ceremony each year. He published a number of his efforts in Confirmation: Twenty-five Confirmation Services in 1948. A simple glance at the themes of these ceremonies reveals how Feldman used the confirmation liturgy itself to teach, to guide, to impress upon the confirmands important Jewish values. He based one complete service on the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism," the Columbus Platform.<sup>184</sup> He converted a pamphlet he had written, "Contributions of Judaism to Modern Society," into a full confirmation ceremony, covering several significant themes: The God-Idea of Judaism, moral discipline, the Bible, the Sabbath, philanthropy, education, the democratic ideal,

and the Kingdom-of-God idea.<sup>185</sup> He responded to the pressing issues of the times in 1942, titling the service "In a World at War."<sup>186</sup> He proclaimed beliefs (God, Peace, Torah, Worship, Good Deeds), highlighted what must be preserved (Homes, Country, Schools, Synagogue) and what inspires us (Our Jewish Forefathers, Our American Forebears, Good People of all times).<sup>187</sup> He dealt with all aspects of Judaism in "The Matter of Being a Jew": history; what Judaism teaches about God, Man and Israel; and "Mitzvos" including holiness, responsibility and ritual.<sup>188</sup>

What is important about these services is that Feldman intended them to leave a Jewish imprint upon his confirmands. He desired to embellish this rite-of-passage with a cohesive series of readings that would provide confirmands and worshippers with an overview of their religion. In short, he believed the ceremony should have meaning and should reach the students emotionally. Therefore, he confirmed from the ninth grade, not the tenth. He explained his rationale: "In discussing this with psychologists and pedagogues of repute, I find that the ninth grade is the emotional transition period before the children become super-sophisticated. In the tenth and eleventh grades, you won't reach them emotionally. Now if it is a question of having them for a few more years of instruction and then confirming them on the basis of education and knowledge, and losing the emotional warmth and impetus, I prefer to

have the emotional part as the more enduring recollection and experience."<sup>189</sup>

He was prompt at weddings: "The community knows now that when Feldman officiates, the ceremony will start 'on the dot'."<sup>190</sup> He recommended that rabbis keep a record of every marriage ceremony they perform, because such records are, legally, vital statistics under the heading of "Church Records."<sup>191</sup> He would marry two Jews who came to him whom he deemed compatible after meeting with them. However, he took a rigid stand against mixed marriages:

When two people came to Dad with a request that he marry them, he always asked the same question: "Are you both Jews?" If one was not, he explained that he did not approve of a "mixed marriage." He urged them to reconsider their decision. "Marriage between two people is difficult enough when there are no discernible differences," he would say, "but even an unobserving Jew and a non-practicing Christian can run into real problems when it comes to raising a child."<sup>192</sup>

Feldman looked with disdain upon new customs that had developed in America in time of mourning. He called the "Jewish wake" on the evening prior to the funeral "an unmitigated monstrosity which we should discourage," a ritual intended to "eliminate from the home anything connected with death."<sup>193</sup> He frowned upon having a "lodge service" immediately before or after the religious service, for lodge rites would detract from the spiritual efficacy of the Jewish funeral.<sup>194</sup> He did not object, apparently, to holding a lodge service at another time. Feldman

attempted to strengthen many Jewish mourning practices.<sup>195</sup>

He had instituted a 5:45 p.m. daily vesper service at Beth Israel, urging mourners to attend.<sup>196</sup> If a family desired a home service, he would arrange for it. In fact, he wrote a "Mourners' Service" for three nights to be used in a house of mourning.<sup>197</sup> He described it as "a radically unorthodox service, with strong emphasis upon the belief in immortality and the meaningfulness of the kaddish among Jews."<sup>198</sup> His whole purpose, at the funeral service and afterwards, was "to comfort, to strengthen the family in its bitter hours of grief."<sup>199</sup> "...any fool can tear the hearts out of mourners at a funeral. That is not our job," he declared. "I consider that if I draw tears at a funeral service, I have failed in my consoling aim and purpose."<sup>200</sup> Feldman had developed his own aims for dealing with congregants in mourning; through the creation of liturgy, counseling, and genuine concern, he strove to attain those goals.

Many rabbis receive fees for officiating at weddings and funerals, whether for members or non-members. Feldman took a firm position that no member of the congregation owed him anything but a "thank you" for any service he rendered as rabbi.<sup>201</sup> He preferred not to ask for a fee, and never established a fee-schedule for either of these ceremonies.<sup>202</sup> "If, in token of their appreciation, they want to send me a gift," he once explained, "that is their



privilege. If they do not send any, there will never be a mention made by me or anybody in my behalf... There have been very, very few instances when they failed to send an 'honorarium'; people are pretty thoughtful about it. But if they do not, I would degrade myself to make any suggestion on that score."<sup>203</sup>

Feldman recognized the importance of life-cycle ceremonies. He retained and advocated the rituals which, he thought, still had meaning for his congregants. He imbued all rites-of-passage with Jewish themes, concepts, and modes of expression. He involved himself, as rabbi, in the lives of his fellow Jews. The fact that he did not ask a fee for these ceremonies indicated his sincerity and his desire for selfless service. It was not simply that he served his people, but the way he served them, that gained him respect as a leader among Israel.

#### Shepherd and Flock: Feldman as Pastor

...the rabbi is the pastor or shepherd of the group who acknowledge his leadership or who call upon him in the spirit of confessional, and in hours of anxiety.<sup>204</sup>

I have learned...that to bring hope to one soul, faith to one child, courage to one human being, healing to one broken spirit, cheer to one disconsolate heart, even though it be only one--is worth a lifetime of effort!<sup>205</sup>

...please appreciate the fact that seeing he is never off duty, every service he (the rabbi) renders is one in which he stands alone, alone with the child sent by a parent to straighten out an inner conflict, alone with the husband or wife discussing a domestic difficulty and asking

for aid, alone with the youth asking for help and guidance, alone with the ailing seeking reassurance...<sup>206</sup>

Feldman maintained ongoing contact with his congregants through pastoral duties. He visited hospitals and counseled with a deep sense of caring.<sup>207</sup> Although he realized that these functions had not always been exclusively rabbinic, he did not belittle their importance:

While bikkur cholim, visiting the sick and nichum avelim, comforting the bereaved, are mitzvos which are incumbent upon all Jews, the expectation--indeed the demand--that the rabbi visit the sick, the shut-ins, the bereaved in his congregation, and generally call upon his members and their relatives, however remote, who are not members, was not known to the rabbis of other generations....It became part of our professional obligation as a contagion caught from the Christian clergy, whose pastoral duties often take precedence over most other duties. Whether we like it or not, it is expected of us and only in rare instances dare a rabbi utterly neglect this aspect of his professional work. And the smaller the congregation, the more carefully he should apply himself to this phase of his work.

Being with people--in their joys and in their sorrows, in their illnesses and in their trials--does tend to bring the rabbi and his people closer to each other, and it does create blessed ties and friendships between them. But people being as they are, Heaven help the rabbi who neglects such duties! It (these duties) has rewards, although it can also be insufferably irritating and distressing.<sup>208</sup>

In this field of pastoral work, congregants look to the rabbi as a bearer of comfort and a concerned individual. However, they also view the rabbi as a problem-solver who counsels from a foundation of belief in God and in Judaism:

...We are called upon to serve people in great crises of their lives. They reach out to us. They plead for a warm, reassuring word, a comforting, sustaining assurance. Cold logic, rationalism, scientific formulae, psychologic and philosophical argot--are of little avail to them. The people want certainty, such certainty

as comes with honest faith. In their hours of agony the people will seize hold even upon the proverbial straw, and not only the simple folk, but the most hard-boiled, the most sophisticated, too. We must not give them straw or broken reeds. They crave and need the strong rod and staff of faith.<sup>209</sup>

Feldman was deeply concerned about the lives and well-being of his people. "He was a compassionate moderator and listener, at the same time capable of maintaining an objective viewpoint and thereby being able to strike a neutral pose in helping to solve a problem."<sup>210</sup> He dealt with many types of relationships: parents having problems with children; husbands with wives, and vice versa; young people with parents, with contemporaries, with teachers, and with themselves.<sup>211</sup> People would turn to the rabbi in their despair, and, said Feldman, "the wise and cautious rabbi can be helpful."<sup>212</sup> He stressed the need to keep all counseling in the strictest confidence, and he cautioned against dabbling in psychology without adequate training.<sup>213</sup> He offered this advice: "Be a good listener, and then when it is indicated, refer cases to those who have the necessary knowledge and skill to handle them."<sup>214</sup>

Feldman seems to have counseled effectively; often he was able to cut through the heart of a problem to help save a couple's marriage or to see a congregant through a crisis.<sup>215</sup>

Pastoral work helped Feldman as a leader in that it

kept him in close touch with his people. When Feldman asked himself, "What has the rabbinate done to me?", pastoral duties figured significantly in his evaluation: "It has forced me into a conscious detachment whilst it thrust me into every human relationship....It has given me an appreciation of men and women and children, of their problems, their weaknesses, their qualities and their potentialities ....It has taught me patience and forgiveness, generosity and humility."<sup>216</sup>

"As you teach, you learn" (Midrash Tehillim 11):  
Feldman as Teacher

...I place a very high estimate upon the title "Rabbi " ....Even though the modern Rabbi is also a darshan or maggid,...the fact is that the title which our alma mater conferred upon us, at least in my days, was מורנו ורנן. The emphasis was upon teaching which must be anteceded by learning....We are supposed to be at home, so testifies our semichah, in Bible, Mishnah, Gemara, Halachah and Aggadah; in Rabbinic commentaries, Jewish theology, Jewish history, Hebrew and cognate languages. This is our field.<sup>217</sup>

I teach Judaism as I understand it. I am not there as the autocrat of the pulpit--I am there as the rabbi sharing such knowledge and faith and beliefs as I have. They (the congregants) may accept; they may not accept it. But in Hartford they have put up with me for thirty-seven years.... they know where I stand on the composition of the Bible....they are quite aware that I am not a fundamentalist.<sup>218</sup>

...the modern American rabbi became, in a special sense, the educator on the level of the congregation. It became his duty to organize a congregational school, to determine its curriculum, to act as its superintendent or principal, to organize adult education classes, to teach and to get others to teach. And that is quite a chore.<sup>219</sup>

Dr. Samuel Grand, in his 1966 survey of Beth Israel's Religious School, called Feldman "the master-builder of Beth Israel for more than four decades," who, "in the midst of a long and distinguished career of religious leadership," had been "a pioneer of Jewish education, both as an author of textbooks and as a great teacher of young people and adults."<sup>220</sup> Feldman had developed a full educational program for his congregation. He was always teaching, while at the same time, he was engaged in continuous diligent study.

Feldman maintained that a rabbi must be an authentic Jewish student to be an authority on Judaism.<sup>221</sup> He recommended to rabbinic students that they get as much learning and skill in Jewish scholarliness as possible in the early years of their careers.<sup>222</sup> He encouraged students to build up a library and to familiarize themselves with Jewish scholarship.<sup>223</sup> "No year should pass," he declared, "during which some new Jewish knowledge has not been acquired or some such knowledge had not been repossessed."<sup>224</sup> He did not, however, deemphasize the need to keep informed on the issues of the day:

I do not mean to say, and I hope you will not understand me as saying, that the rabbi should abandon the general, creative, so-called secular literature, to leave that to the lay and himself read only shass and meforshim and Midrash and Judaica in original texts. No, I have no such understanding or such suggestion. As an educated and cultured man, the rabbi should be au courant with contemporary thought and literature. But, and this is the point I am driving



home and perhaps over-emphasizing, he ought not to neglect the especial vineyard entrusted to his care....Remember Hillel's dictum: "Do not say, When I have leisure I will study; thou mayest never have the leisure."<sup>225</sup>

Feldman made a habit of reading in the morning and late at night; he reserved those times for learning and for keeping au courant.<sup>226</sup> He also "forced himself" to study by conducting adult classes: "Sometimes I would have only three or four people come to a class, but I insisted that there should be an adult class--not altogether because I wanted to impart Torah to them, but because I wanted to compel myself into the discipline of study. And I would pick subjects which required me to dig; the less I knew about a subject, the more I welcomed it, because it meant that I would concentrate on some theme or thesis under the severe pressure of the active rabbinate, and study, and gain some proficiency in that particular field."<sup>227</sup>

Feldman, during the years 1958-1962, taught several specialized courses in Beth Israel's "Institute on Judaism," its program for adult education. Each course dealt with values in the Bible"

"Enduring Values in the Book of Genesis"--A Preface to History.

"The Birth of A Nation"--Ideals and Values in the Biblical Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.

"The Relevance of the Bible"--on the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.<sup>228</sup>

These courses did not have a large attendance, but

those who came genuinely wanted to learn.<sup>229</sup> He shared teaching duties with his assistant and qualified members. Feldman also provided educational programming through the Temple auxiliary groups, especially the Men's Club and Sisterhood. Beth Israel invited guest speakers several times a year, including (during the period 1958-1962) Rabbi Jacob Shankman, Rabbi Jerome Malino, and Rabbi Murray Rothman.<sup>230</sup>

He was always actively involved in operating the Religious School. He created curricula and schedules for all grades, down to the themes for each lesson, in his early years in West Hartford.<sup>231</sup> Feldman explained in 1962 "...when the school was smaller, I myself prepared the curriculum, selected the textbooks, gave in-service training to teachers, hired teachers, worried about substitutes. I supervised, directed, visited classes, arranged and often rehearsed entertainments. With the passing of years and the growth of the congregation and the School (when I came to Hartford in 1925, we had seventy-five children in the School; as of last Sunday, we had 1,150) I acquired help."<sup>232</sup> Feldman wrote to experts in Reform Jewish education of his day--Emanuel Gamoran and Abraham Franzblau--regarding the delegation of duties in running the School between the rabbi and congregation.<sup>233</sup> Gamoran advised him to refer policy-making decisions to a Religious School Committee, and to determine curriculum and textbooks

in consultation with the educational staff.<sup>234</sup> Franzblau provided a complete list of the rabbi's duties in the school.<sup>235</sup>

Because the enrollment at Beth Israel increased so rapidly, Feldman delegated responsibilities to others:

...as needed, and as I got assistance, I released the reins. First, I trained the man who is now Director of Education. As my confidence in him grew, and after four or five years, I really let go the administration of details to him. Today, we see eye to eye. I often say we "conspire" together....we evaluate many changes. We have added grades and multiplied classes, and introduced Hebrew in every grade from kindergarten on.<sup>236</sup>

Dr. M. Delott Garber, the Religious Education Director, was, for about 25 years, Feldman's "agent" in the School. Feldman had said, in 1940, "I would in passing, caution Rabbis against the too-ready surrender of the school to non-Rabbinical educators, and against the Rabbi's personal dissociation from intimate contact with the school."<sup>237</sup> Evidently, Feldman felt that because he had trained Dr. Garber and met with him frequently, he was not totally relinquishing control of the School. This seemed to be the case. When Dr. Samuel Grand recommended, in his 1966 study of Beth Israel's School, that the Temple hire a full-time educational director, Rabbi Feldman supported the retention of Garber in some capacity, and he declared that Grand, in his study, should have

specified what a full-time director (replacing Garber) at Beth Israel would do.<sup>238</sup> Feldman was simply not sure what this would add to the School.<sup>239</sup> The Committee voted to employ a full-time director, and Feldman then said he hoped the Committee "realized how Dr. Garber was not just a time-server, but a faithful servant who gave of himself far beyond the line of duty."<sup>240</sup> Feldman believed in working with the Religious School Committee, whether he agreed or disagreed with its decisions. Yet he made certain that, always, the members knew where he stood.

Feldman still involved himself in the Religious School late in his career, when there were over 1000 pupils enrolled at Beth Israel:

...All education policy decisions are subject to my consent. Changes of textbooks may be recommended, but I examine them before we decide. I have never given up my own teaching part in the Religious School....I know that I am one of the few of the elder rabbis who continue to do this kind of teaching....I used to teach both eighth and ninth grades on weekdays. But since I have an assistant now, he teaches the eighth grade and I teach the ninth grade, which is our confirmation grade. I personally supervise confirmation; I organize and direct the confirmation service....I deem this teaching very precious because it is...almost the only personal contact with I have with the boys and girls since the School has become as large as it is.<sup>241</sup>

He was involved in choosing textbooks which he considered appropriate for Beth Israel's Religious School:

If it is a book on Jewish history and if it

presents the subject on the proper level for a particular grade; is intelligible to children; does not overplay, let us say, the martyrologies, and concentrates more upon the affirmative aspects of the Jewish story--things that the children can glory in and be happy about--why, of course that is what we want.

If it is a textbook, let us say, in modern Jewish history, we want to be sure how modern Jewish history is interpreted. I want to be sure that Israel is part of the picture, for Israel is part of Jewish life and I want the story presented sympathetically and with understanding.

If it deals with the holidays, then we will examine it to see whether it is presenting a Reform liberal point of view.<sup>242</sup>

Feldman instituted Hebrew instruction at Beth Israel with a group of parents who wanted it. The Board told the rabbi: "All right, you can use the building, but we have nothing to do with it. Just you and they."<sup>243</sup> The parents initially paid for the teachers themselves, until the Religious School Committee absorbed voluntary Hebrew into the regular education program.<sup>244</sup> The goal of the Hebrew instruction was to teach students to read and understand the prayers, and Feldman was not, in 1962, happy over the results.<sup>245</sup>

Feldman recognized, early in his rabbinate, the possibility of introducing new elements of Jewish observance and Jewish living through children in the Religious School. He recalled how he trained his congregants to hold seders in their homes:

...at Pesach time, I discovered that there were practically no sedorim being given....I decided that it was futile to try to teach the old-timers....So I concentrated on the children.



One of the first things I did was to abolish the children's Seder, the "Sunday School Seder," which was used as an excuse for not having Seder at home.

Well, there was a little commotion and excitement about it, but I stood my ground and we didn't have a "Sunday School Seder." The following year, I started early, hammering at the children. I had seventy-five children that year in the school. The week after the Seder, I asked how many had attended. Nine hands went up, and two of those were of my children. Last year (1961) after Pesach was over, I asked how many had gone to Seder and I don't think there were ten, both in Saturday and Sunday sessions, who had not gone. How did it happen? Only by concentrating on the children. I shamed the parents through their children. Today, anyone who doesn't have a Seder, or is not invited to a Seder, is *declassé*....

Now you will say that I did take an authoritarian attitude when I said that they wouldn't have a children's Seder. Yes, in a sense it was authoritarian. I confess to you now that I wasn't sure whether I could get away with it. I did. They might have forced me to have a children's Seder. But I tried it and ...it was not done in an offensive way....I explained to them, "Consider. You bring your children here. I tell them about having Seder at home yet none of them has one there. This is embarrassing to all concerned because there is a double-standard set up--there is a conflict between the home and the School. It causes the child to be confused." This they could understand. The net result is, after these years of continuous indoctrination, 246 that we have given the Seder status and dignity.

Through adult education, study, and continued control of the Religious School, Feldman disseminated Judaism as he saw it and maintained contact with his congregation as a teacher. He heightened the awareness of his congregants to what their religion could offer them as a way of life. He taught two generations of Jews what it meant to be part of a K'lal Yisrael.

### Feldman and Temple Auxiliaries

The rabbi, as teacher and minister, will of course be consulted by them (auxiliaries) from time to time. But... keep clear of their political affairs....never presume to dictate policies for procedures to them. The rabbi should counsel with these organizations, and can develop a rapport with them. Be a counselor to them in religious, educational, and cultural matters, but give them the opportunity to feel that they are competent and capable to administer the affairs of their organizations. They are very jealous of their autonomy....<sup>247</sup>

The situation is somewhat different when dealing with youth groups. This is the domain of the rabbi because it is in the educational field, and here the rabbi's judgement should have weight. Also, it should have weight because of his interest in the youth program and its activities, his concern for young people, and his friendly, non-stuffy spirit in dealing with the youngsters.<sup>248</sup>

Feldman advocated a "hands-off" policy towards the internal affairs of Temple groups. He was, however, very much involved in the programming of all congregational organizations. He primarily participated as the "educator/lecturer/book reviewer" who would speak to the group on some pre-determined topic. Yet he did, in some instances, bring a group to life ex nihilo, much as he had at Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia when he founded the Men's Club. Finally, when he noticed that one organization was foundering in membership or enthusiasm, he offered his assistance to infuse the group with new vitality.

He believed in maintaining a special relationship with the Men's Club at Beth Israel:

The Men's Club, remember, consists of the men who are the actual and potential leaders of the congregation. If you make a special effort, from the time you arrive in the community, to cultivate them, to work with them, to develop them as a kind of private cabinet in the discussion of congregational affairs and of your hopes and your plans for the congregation, you will find that the men will respond to you. In time these men become members of your Board of Trustees, and some of them the officers of the congregation.<sup>249</sup>

The Men's Club calendar included a Father-and-Child Hanukkah Party, an annual picnic, a yearly dance, monthly meetings (with speakers), and educational programs (Torah Convocations and Sunday Morning Breakfasts). Feldman suggested speakers for the monthly meetings, and he and his assistant rabbi--or some outside lecturer--would deliver an address at Torah Convocations (annual "retreats" for study and discussion of religious themes).<sup>250</sup> Yet Feldman's most clever contribution to Men's Club activities was a unique innovation on Sunday mornings. One Beth Israel confirmand recounted, "I used to go every week with my father to the Men's Club breakfast. Feldman had the 'Golden Bagel,' a bagel sitting before him on a stand. If you could stump Rabbi Feldman, you got the golden bagel...You could ask him a question on anything and he would answer succinctly and to the point."<sup>251</sup> This discussion group drew about 75 men for what Feldman called "honest probing" of world affairs and their effects on Jews in the Hartford area, the country and

abroad.<sup>252</sup> Business and politics were taboo subjects unless the questions related to Judaism.<sup>253</sup> Questions ranged from the nature of Jewish life, history, and practices to the possibilities of life on other planets and, if so, the religious implications.<sup>254</sup> These "Ask the Rabbi" sessions allowed Feldman to informally spend time with congregants and discuss matters about which they were concerned. He called it "one of the most stimulating experiences" in his teaching career.<sup>255</sup> It gave him a chance to stretch his mind and--as he demonstrated by never losing the golden bagel--he was equal to the challenge.

Feldman took part in a number of Sisterhood programs. He delivered lectures at Torah Convocations, gave book reviews, and worked with the group to sponsor an annual institute on Judaism for public school teachers.<sup>256</sup> He led study sessions on the Bible, and urged the women to participate in the religious and cultural life of the congregation.<sup>257</sup> He wanted Sisterhood, as an organization, to encourage attendance at Saturday morning services and intensive Jewish study.<sup>258</sup> He expressed his appreciation, in writing, to leaders of Sisterhood upon completion of dedicated service.<sup>259</sup>

Feldman cautioned rabbinic students that Sisterhood is "the most sensitive" group and that one should not "always argue with the 'girls'; so just leave them alone

and make them feel that you are available to them, always in a helpful and tactful way."<sup>260</sup> Feldman made that statement at a time when, generally, men served on the Board of Trustees and women stayed in Sisterhood. This may have been characteristic of Feldman's time, but later developments in Reform congregations would bring women out of all-female circles and into the mainstream of congregational leadership.

There were two other organizations for adults within Beth Israel. First, the Tarbuth League was a Jewish cultural club for young adults with which Feldman worked closely during his early years in Hartford.<sup>261</sup> The league's purposes were "to stimulate, develop and express the religious, cultural and humanitarian interests and desires of its members, to uphold the aims and ideals of Judaism; and to cooperate with the Congregation Beth Israel of Hartford, Connecticut in its various activities."<sup>262</sup> Second, the Marrieds Club was formed by Feldman at the request of young married couples of the Congregation.<sup>263</sup> Feldman indicated to one couple in 1945 that he would sponsor such a group if there was sufficient interest for a fellowship of young marrieds.<sup>264</sup> When the group formed, the officers asked Feldman and his wife to serve on its executive committee.<sup>265</sup> The Marrieds Club remained "a social and educational affiliate" of Beth Israel,<sup>266</sup> regarded by Feldman as "an important adjunct" of the



congregation.<sup>267</sup>

Feldman identified two major elements in youth programming: the educational and the social.<sup>268</sup> Youth groups are worth cultivation because "their members, too, are future leaders" of congregations.<sup>269</sup> Feldman, while the only rabbi at Beth Israel, did "the best he could" with youth work.<sup>270</sup> When he knew he was getting an assistant, he created a Youth Advisory Council, to which he invited representatives of each congregational group interested in youth activities.<sup>271</sup> The group became a well-budgeted, independent organization which planned various youth programs and allocated funds through the congregation and its auxiliaries.<sup>272</sup> The junior rabbi took charge of the council, consulting with Feldman when necessary.<sup>273</sup>

Feldman spoke to the Temple youth directly at "ask the Rabbi" sessions twice a year.<sup>274</sup> Otherwise, he had limited contact with Temple youth, except for participating in the Youth Advisory Council from time to time. One member remarked that there were always youth directors who took part in planning programs, adding that Feldman did not seem to be as oriented towards youth late in his career as he had been earlier in his rabbinate.<sup>275</sup>

Feldman managed to somehow involve himself in the affairs of each auxiliary group within Beth Israel. He watched these organizations closely, advising them on

programming, serving as "the program" himself, and supporting the existence of these groups by showing enthusiasm and appreciation. He participated, he contributed, but he allowed each group its measure of freedom.

Senior and Assistant:  
Feldman as Teacher  
and Colleague

What do I expect of my assistant? I expect him to be a gentleman--a gentleman in the social sense of the word and also a gentleman in relation to the senior rabbi, just as he has a right to expect me to be a gentleman in relation to him. I expect a junior rabbi to come with the expectation of learning from the experience that I have accumulated over the years....I stand ready to teach him everything that I possibly can. I expect him, of course, to undertake certain duties which are allocated. I would not be happy with an assistant who is halting in his Hebrew! I would like an assistant who, in preparing sermons, reads not only sociology and psychiatry, but also looks into midrash occasionally. In other words, just as I try to keep my preaching Jewish, just as I feel as to myself that I am not acting the role of an editor of the Atlantic Monthly, but that I am a rabbi and that whatever I say in the pulpit should give an interpretation of what Judaism has to say on any given subject, so would I expect from my assistant that he would be a rabbi in the pulpit....There is the awareness that I am there as a friend, as a father or a brother if they wish it, but always as a colleague. I expect also that, as to my assistant's bearing and conduct, I will not need ever to apologize for him. Of course you know what is involved in that also--let me call it "personal and reciprocal loyalty." I subsume all of these under the heading of "gentleman," a Jewish gentleman.<sup>276</sup>

Feldman led Beth Israel as its only rabbi for thirty years. Yet, as the congregation grew larger in

the 1950's he found that he could no longer manage the rabbinic duties alone. In 1955, Beth Israel hired Leonard Hellman, a Hartford native, to serve as "Assistant to the Rabbi" and share the ministerial responsibilities of the congregation.<sup>277</sup> Three other rabbis followed Hellman before Feldman retired in 1968: Samuel E. Karff (1958-1960), Norman D. Hirsh (1960-1962), and Nathan Hershfield (1962-1968).

Feldman delegated a full spectrum of responsibilities to his assistants: preaching, leading services, adult education, speaking to Temple auxiliaries, television messages, and pastoral duties.<sup>278</sup> Feldman's assistants, as mentioned before, took charge of youth programming and pre-confirmation classes. This training was most helpful, claimed Rabbi Hirsh, who, as a result of his "internship" with Feldman, felt "adequate to all the challenges" of his solo position in Seattle.<sup>279</sup>

Rabbi Karff, who spent time in the chaplaincy prior to assuming the assistantship at Beth Israel, reflected on his experience in Hartford just prior to Feldman's retirement. Aside from meeting his wife, Joan Mag, in Hartford, he had gained valuable experience serving with Feldman:

Inasmuch as the chaplaincy is an atypical rabbinic experience, my two years in Hartford were my rabbinic "baptism of fire." For those years, I am deeply grateful and much of that gratitude is due to you.

Despite the generation gap between us I was

able to find in you an inspiring model of a superb rabbi. Your love for the tradition, fierce Jewish pride, mastery of the art of communication, and scrupulous concern for the excellence of every phase of congregational programming have all left an indelible imprint upon me.

Your capacity to re-educate a generation of Jews to meet the challenges of a new hour, to be an effective but uncringing representative of our people in the larger community, and your accessibility to those in need have all tempered my understanding of the rabbinate and my appreciation of you....

Fortunately I have been graced with a good rabbinic experience. In addition to whatever talents I may possess and whatever mazel I have received, your launching was a most auspicious part of my rabbinic career.<sup>280</sup>

As Feldman had taken what his seniors had to offer, his assistants learned from him. He had succeeded in training other young rabbis, in serving as a model, as Stephen Wise and Joseph Krauskopf had done for him. Feldman was, to his assistants, not a taskmaster; he was a teacher, a brother, and a colleague.

This chapter has covered the many duties which Feldman performed as rabbi of Beth Israel. He served as administrator, architect, reformer, preacher, leader of worship, participant in life-cycle events, pastor, teacher, supervisor and colleague. Feldman shaped a congregation with patience and perseverance. He raised two generations of Jews in Greater Hartford, Connecticut, and touched the lives of three generations. Beth Israel's members looked to him for leadership and guidance in times of celebration and in times of depression and war.

Feldman may not have always "had his way." There may have been those who disagreed with him. Yet, he did not need the admiration and concurrence of every single member of his congregation to be effective. What he demanded--and received--was the respect of the people whom he served. He was a first-rate orator and teacher. He was a caring pastor. He did deeply love Jews and Judaism. He built Beth Israel into one of the largest Reform congregations in the country, and did so with a keen sense of organization and vision. He started at the roots and educated his people to observe Judaism, to serve their fellow Jews, and to reach out to all mankind. He had fashioned Beth Israel and the ideals of its members according to his designs--in his image.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### "SEPARATE NOT THYSELF FROM THE COMMUNITY"

1925-1977

The modern American Reform rabbi usually is, by virtue of his office and in accordance with his talents, capacities, and inclinations, one of the top-ranking leaders of the total Jewish community, and he participates in many activities in his role as a leader.

Further, depending upon the community in which he lives and functions and his own interests and inclinations, the American Reform rabbi often has a substantial measure of leadership in social movements in the community, both in Jewish life and in general life.<sup>1</sup>

The Rabbi must retain contact with all of Jewish life. Any Rabbi's aloofness from Jewish community interests is unforgivable. He may have other interests. He should. But first comes the Jewish community, ...only after Jewish life comes everything else.<sup>2</sup>

Another advantage of the ministry in a smaller city is indicated by the fact that in such a place the Rabbi can be and generally is an important factor in the life of the general and Jewish community, and if he is patient, persistent, diligent, and devoted, he can mold the community.<sup>3</sup>

Feldman "tended his own vineyard"--his congregation--with constant care and attention. He felt he owed it to his members to devote most of his time and energy to Beth Israel's activities. Yet, he saw great opportunities in Hartford for service on a broader scale. The rabbi could fill important leadership roles in the local Jewish community as an administrator, teacher and speaker.

The general community looks to the rabbi as the Jewish ambassador, the "symbolic Jew," and calls on Jewish spiritual leaders to represent the Jewish people and their views. Finally, a rabbi can assume positions of leadership on a national level. Feldman participated on all three levels of extra-congregational leadership: local Jewish community, local general community, and national (Jewish and general). His involvement in the affairs of his locality and his country--coupled with his leadership within Beth Israel--enabled him to affect lives, to attain some measure of notability, and to make a significant impact as an American Reform rabbi.

Beginning at the roots:  
Feldman as a Jewish  
communal leader

Now, especially in those communities which are not the metropolitan centers...if the rabbi considers himself not just a parochial priest but a K'lal Yisroel Jew in whom nothing Jewish is alien and to whom everything in Jewish life is significant, he will occupy a place in community leadership. So, according to his temperament, interests, and capacities, the rabbi can be an affirmative, vigorous, and constructive factor in the Jewish community. He should be that for several reasons. First, it is his duty as a Jew to set an example to his people by taking an active part in everything that is going on in the Jewish community, and to give encouragement to other Jews who are working in that field. Second, his Jewish education, historical perspective, and moral idealism are needed to give perspective to his fellow Jewish communal experience. Third, it is his duty to participate, because through cooperation with the Jewish community--I am speaking of the Reform rabbi now--he creates an image of both his congregation and the Reform movement. This image can be respectful and friendly. It is important generally, and can also be helpful to the rabbi's own religious work in and outside of his own congregation.<sup>4</sup>

While a rabbi could, ideally, fully participate in Jewish activities as a leader, Feldman knew that some communities limited a rabbi's influence. Larger cities tended to confine a rabbi's activities to a particular neighborhood or suburb. With a number of Jewish religious leaders in one area, no one rabbi could easily become the Jewish spokesman.<sup>5</sup> A smaller community, however, increases the likelihood that the Reform and Conservative rabbis would be the recognized leaders of the Jewish community.<sup>6</sup> The small city with a substantial Jewish population offers the rabbi "greater visibility and greater opportunity for leadership."<sup>7</sup> Greater Hartford was such a community; outside Beth Israel, Feldman joined organizations and accepted positions through which he served and led Hartford Jewry.

#### Feldman as editor of the Connecticut Jewish Ledger

When I encouraged and urged Samuel Neusner to publish the Ledger, I felt that if the Jewish community was to be coordinated and really organized, it needed an organ of public opinion that would serve as the clearinghouse for all the community.... I have continued my association with the Ledger because of my faith in the contribution the Ledger has made and is making in the building of a unified, harmonious, dynamic and effective Jewish community.<sup>8</sup>

When, in 1929, Feldman joined Samuel Neusner in founding an Anglo-Jewish newspaper in Hartford, he thrust himself into the limelight of the Jewish community. He incorporated the Ledger into his rabbinate, regularly expressing in his editorials the needs and views of Hartford

Jewry. Feldman left the publishing duties of the Ledger to Samuel Neusner. He clarified his role in the paper's first issue: "My interest in the publication is exclusively cultural and editorial, and...I have no financial or any other interest in it whatsoever, and...in no way do I assume moral or material responsibility for its management."<sup>9</sup>

Neusner spelled out the paper's policy, by which Feldman abided as editor, in 1929:

The Jewish Ledger comes into being because of the realization that the large constituency which it proposes to serve should have and would welcome a vehicle of expression, a journal of Jewish public opinion, a recorder of its life and events....

In response to this desire, we come to life. We mean to be All-Jewish in our point of view. We shall strive to guide our editorial and news policy by the rule of: "Nothing Jewish Is Alien To Us." Jewish life, despite its numerous variations, is essentially a unit, and it is this basic unity that we wish to emphasize. We do not mean to ignore differences of opinion. We shall welcome them when they are cordially and intelligently stated, but out of diversity a unity must be forged, albeit not a drab and monotonous uniformity....

We mean to be more than passive. We choose not to be negative. Affirmatively and positively we wish to stir and stimulate the Jewish soul and consciousness, to the end that Jewish life in this new age and in this locality may be vital and meaningful.<sup>10</sup>

The Ledger had three specific purposes: to represent the views of the Jewish community, to shape the character of Hartford Jewry, and to keep readers Jewishly informed.

Dr. Jacob Neusner, son of the Ledger's publisher, reflected on the effectiveness of the Ledger in achieving its aims after 31 years of operation:

We believe that a newspaper--any newspaper--has the power to create a community. The newspaper

brings out more than news about the city and the world. It brings to its readers a shared awareness of the city and the world....It endows the city with character, quality, and personality....With a newspaper, the city becomes more than just a crowded place: it achieves community.

If this is so, then the Connecticut Jewish Ledger helps in fact to create the Connecticut Jewish community....Through this newspaper, in part, the Jewish community finds its color and personality.<sup>11</sup>

If a newspaper has the potential to represent and shape a community, then anyone who assumes an editorial or administrative position on a paper automatically becomes a communal leader. The publisher and editor decide what events are of primary importance to their constituents and which are secondary. They shape many of their readers' opinions. They generate unity for the good of their communities. Samuel Neusner and Rabbi Feldman earned the respect of Connecticut Jewry; they guided their readers through many difficult times in the twentieth century.

After the Ledger had completed four years of successful circulation, Feldman concluded that "the Jewish Ledger ought to become a weekly instead of a monthly" to "take up for discussion events at the time of their occurrence instead of weeks later."<sup>12</sup> At that time (1933), the Nazi government was spreading propaganda that called for an immediate response from American Jews.<sup>13</sup> Feldman complained to Neusner, "we had no means of striking back at these when they were, to use newspaper language, 'still hot.' A weekly could deal with these promptly."<sup>14</sup>



Neusner agreed with his editor. On October 27, 1933, Feldman announced the new format:

With this issue the Jewish Ledger becomes a weekly newspaper instead of a monthly as heretofore. In making this announcement the Publishers and Editor are not unmindful of the greater opportunity for service which becomes theirs.<sup>15</sup>

The Ledger exerted even greater influence than before on Connecticut Jewry as a weekly. The policy change enabled Feldman to respond more often to the issues that faced the Ledger's readers as Jews and Americans.

Many of Feldman's editorials dealt with world affairs. He mourned Hitler's rise to power on the first anniversary of the Third Reich in 1934.<sup>16</sup> He noted that Hitler's anti-Semitic promises had solidified Jewish groups all over the world; we would survive this Hitler as we have outlasted previous Hitlers.<sup>17</sup> He questioned the humaneness of the German people who place thousands of people in extermination camps and "who use the corpses for industrial purposes, for converting them into soap fats and fertilizer!!!"<sup>18</sup> He met the release of Rumanian Jews for emigration to Israel in 1959 with mixed feelings, enumerating the ensuing problems of absorption and finance for such a rapid exodus.<sup>19</sup> In response to the execution of Eichmann in 1962, he expressed the hope that the world would not feel that the burden to remember had been lifted from its shoulders.<sup>20</sup>

Feldman feared that the Arab guerilla attack at the 1972 Munich Olympics would have little effect on the world's conscience.<sup>21</sup> He despised terrorism and its perpe-

trators. The Israeli rescue raid on Entebbe in 1976 elated Feldman because it was executed with speed and brilliance; however, he warned that a similar terrorist attack could recur.<sup>22</sup> He did not feel that planning rescue operations to free Jewish hostages was a desirable calling, and he hoped that hijackings and attacks would only add to the dedication of all people to the concept of freedom.<sup>23</sup>

Feldman wrote extensively on the events leading up to and following the creation of the State of Israel. He did not editorialize on politics or world problems from the pulpit. Consequently, he probably saved his Zionist pronouncements for the Ledger, where he could openly and comfortably state his views. In dozens of editorials, Feldman dealt with American policy towards Israel, politics within Israel, the response of the world to the plight of Jewish refugees, and Arab-Israeli wars.

He commended the 1946 Anglo-American Report for its objective, constructive decisions.<sup>24</sup> The Anglo-American Inquiry Committee assured the immediate immigration of 100,000 Jews to Palestine and provided for other Zionist gains.<sup>25</sup> He reproached the indifference of "Christian Civilization" at the failure of nation after nation to accept Jewish refugees.<sup>26</sup> This rebuke came while the refugee ship "Exodus 1947" was still afloat.<sup>27</sup> Feldman called for celebration when the United Nations approved the creation of a Jewish state in November, 1947. In fact, he

exclaimed, "WE are blessed by being THE GENERATION OF REDEMPTION."<sup>28</sup>

Israel's Sinai campaign in 1956 gave Feldman cause for anxiety. He identified the Egyptians as the real aggressors in the conflict and condemned the Security Council of the United Nations for offering help to Nasser.<sup>29</sup> After Prime Minister Ben-Gurion acceded to President Eisenhower's appeals for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and Aqaba, some American officials negated guarantees made to Israel.<sup>30</sup> Feldman prayed that Israeli faith in the United States Government was not misplaced.<sup>31</sup> On the fifth anniversary of the Six-Day War, he spoke of heightened Jewish self-pride and the good will and support of President Nixon.<sup>32</sup> However, the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War enraged him as he declared October 6, 1973 a "day of infamy" in Jewish history.<sup>33</sup> He was extremely grateful for the continued support of the United States during the fighting.<sup>34</sup> Feldman later hailed the Geneva Agreements on disengagement, mediated by Henry Kissinger, as the possible first step to a permanent peace.<sup>35</sup>

The treatment of Reform Judaism in Israel angered Feldman. He attended the dedication of the Hebrew Union College School of Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem in 1963.<sup>36</sup> In his editorial, "Bad Manners are not Halachic!", he criticized the lack of courtesy on the part of the Minister of Religious Affairs, who turned down an invitation to the event and attended, instead, a nearby meeting of Orthodox Jews.<sup>37</sup> Feldman mentioned, however, that most

officials were cordial and hospitable.<sup>38</sup> He felt it wrong to play up the rudeness of one official.<sup>39</sup> Still, he zealously defended Reform's integrity. A group of Orthodox Zionists, in 1964, claimed that Reform Jews were undermining Israel's religious unity.<sup>40</sup> Feldman blasted the group for stereotyping the Reform movement and for asserting that there was religious unity among Israelis, of whom only 20% were religious Jews.<sup>41</sup>

Feldman addressed developments within the Jewish community in his editorials. He urged unsynagogued Jews to affiliate with congregations in order to find spiritual refreshment and strength.<sup>42</sup> He despaired over the younger generations of Jews, which was misinformed as to the facts of Jewish life.<sup>43</sup> He reiterated in another editorial, that a bar-mitzvah celebration should be joyous, but solemn; lavish celebrations, he declared, displayed bad taste.<sup>44</sup> There was too much "bar" and not enough awareness of mitzvah in the modern-day observance of this religious occasion.<sup>45</sup>

All was not negative in the Jewish community, however. Feldman praised Jews who positively approached Judaism. He cited a credo by Sam Levenson, in which Levenson revealed his deep identification with his religion and his people.<sup>46</sup> Feldman used, in one column, the example of a Jewish man in Oregon who, when closing his store on Yom Kippur, ran an advertisement that read, "Sorry for the inconvenience, but we can't help it."<sup>47</sup> This epitomized the Jew who accepts his Jewishness without apology and stands erect, even

among non-Jews. Feldman believed that the American Jewish community could use more people with this attitude.<sup>48</sup>

Rabbi Feldman chronicled the attempts to unify American Jewry in the late 1930's and early 1940's. He did not believe that the American Jewish Congress was democratic, even though it was to hold elections in June, 1938.<sup>49</sup> No real unity had yet been achieved because the leaders could not set aside their differences and their vanity.<sup>50</sup> Once the elections took place, Feldman hoped that various Jewish agencies in America would coordinate their efforts.<sup>51</sup> He applauded the achievement of a united Jewish defense front between the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith and the Jewish Labor Committee.<sup>52</sup> This coalition, the General Jewish Council, elicited great hopes from American Jews, including Feldman. He hailed it as a welcome step in the creation of unity in Jewish defense against anti-Semitism.<sup>53</sup> However, the American Jewish Congress left the Council in 1941.<sup>54</sup> It was up to the remaining groups, separately or together, to defend Jewish rights in America.

Supporting national Jewish institutions was often a theme in the Ledger's editorials. Backing such groups often led to the alleviation of problems pressing American Jewry. In the years after World War II, Feldman encouraged Jews to commit themselves to maintaining national organizations: HIAS; the American Jewish Committee; the Anti-Defamation League; the Jewish Labor Committee; the American Jewish Congress; Hillel Foundation; the American Association for Jewish Education; Yeshiva University; Dropsie College; the



National Jewish Welfare Board; medical agencies; hospitals; and homes for the elderly.<sup>55</sup> These were commitments for all Jews, whether Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Zionist or Non-Zionist. This was the appeal of the Ledger's editor to American Jews to be strong, to unite at the grass-roots level, and to "save the remnant" of their people.<sup>56</sup>

Dealing with the non-Jewish community greatly concerned Feldman and his constituents. Anti-Semitism was always a major problem in this realm. Feldman advised readers on responding to discrimination and anti-Semitic attacks, recommending a case-by-case approach.<sup>57</sup> An answer was appropriate when it was apparent that non-Jews were generalizing from the particular and applying a stereotype to all Jews.<sup>58</sup> He cautioned that one responding to an anti-Semitic attack should know and use the facts fairly.<sup>59</sup> Yet, he urged that Jews, in fighting prejudice, should seek to prove their own worth through loyalty to and use of their heritage.<sup>60</sup>

The anti-Semitic demagoguery of one Christian demanded a forceful Jewish response. Father Charles Coughlin, with his radio program, his journal, Social Justice, and his affiliation with the anti-Semitic Christian Front, spread the scourge of anti-Jewish prejudice in America. Feldman launched his own counterattacks in his editorials of the late 1930's. He evaluated Coughlin's criteria for identifying "good Jews" and "bad Jews" in a pointed 1938 statement in the Ledger:

If good Jews believe in the Messiah, then they are

bad because they have not accepted Coughlin's Messiah. If good Jews believe in the Messianic Age rather than in a personal Messiah, and in Israel as a Messianic people, then they, too, are bad Jews. If good Jews are capitalists, they are bad. If they are paupers, they are also bad because they are a burden on the community. If they are successful, they are bad because they control whatever it is they control....If they protest against vulgarities and dishonesty of radio broadcasts, they are interfering with freedom of speech.<sup>61</sup>

Feldman wondered whether Coughlin and his associates considered themselves good Christians; whether they considered themselves men of good will; how they thought they would stand before the great Judge, and even whether they felt concerned about that Judge.<sup>62</sup> He believed that Coughlin and his followers would insist upon the rights of minorities only as long as these groups remained minorities.<sup>63</sup> In Feldman's eyes, Coughlin was "tearing down the structure of American life" and of civilization.<sup>64</sup> Feldman effectively utilized the Ledger to fight Coughlin and boost the morale of his readers.

There were other threats to the freedom of Jews in America: prayer in the schools, Christmas celebrations in which Jewish children were forced to take part, and quotas restricting the number of Jews accepted to college programs. The latter kept many Jews out of medical programs and other fields of study. Feldman stated his viewpoints on all of these problems, always advocating the stand that gave Jews--and all citizens--the most freedom.

One development in the twentieth century disappointed Feldman: the decline of ecumenism. He defended the principles behind Jewish-Christian dialogues in 1965 against

the attacks of Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.<sup>65</sup> Schneerson claimed that these dialogues were responsible for the growing rate of intermarriage. Feldman responded that such interchange was meant only to facilitate better neighborly relations.<sup>66</sup> The Six-Day War, however, cooled Jewish enthusiasm towards interfaith programs. Christians had resisted involvement in the 1967 War at a grass-roots level.<sup>67</sup> The non-Jewish community remained silent. Nevertheless, Feldman urged that Jews should still cement ties with the Christian community and seek opportunities for interchange.<sup>68</sup>

Feldman encouraged his readers to participate in local community activities. He called for citizens to contribute to various fund drives: United Appeal, Community Chest, Mental Health Fund, War Bonds, and the United Jewish Appeal. He applauded the completion of Hartford's Jewish Community Center in 1962, and urged support for the Hartford Old People's Home in 1937.<sup>69</sup> He congratulated prominent citizens on their achievements, including Abraham Ribicoff (on his election as Governor in 1958) and Rabbi Morris Silverman (e.g., on completion of 30 years at Emanuel Synagogue in Hartford).<sup>70</sup> Some editorials covered the Zionist affairs of Greater Hartford. In addition, Feldman commemorated special days of a national or international character, such as Independence Day and the United Nations Human Rights Day.<sup>71</sup> He highlighted, in his editorials on such occasions, the values of human dignity and liberty. No person, he felt, should be denied the right to be treated with decency.<sup>72</sup>

A small proportion of Feldman's editorials cast the editor in the role of spiritual guide. He did, in fact, serve as the community's rabbi on certain occasions. There was always a Feldman column commemorating a Jewish holiday. Most statements were appropriate for Jews of all major persuasions: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. He did not, however, lose the opportunity to include a "pitch" for Reform. He explained confirmation in a 1929 column as a logical and consistent extension of an old Jewish ceremony, the assumption of Jewish responsibilities by Jewish youth.<sup>73</sup> There were times when Feldman did conform to Jewish communal practice. He did not, as a Reform Jew, observe the Ninth of Av as a day of mourning, but he found meaning in the message of that anniversary. He pointed out that Jews have always mourned with hope--hope for a future redemption, a better day to come.<sup>74</sup> He cautioned that "when hope perishes in Jewish hearts, Israel is doomed."<sup>75</sup>

Feldman eulogized great Jews and great human beings. He praised Louis Marshall for enthusiastically serving worthy causes and for battling against injustices to his people.<sup>76</sup> He lauded the selfless devotion of Herman P. Kopplemann, a dedicated Jew and public servant (Connecticut Senate and United States House of Representatives).<sup>77</sup> His childhood comrade, Abba Hillel Silver, was hailed as a Jew who believed in the future of his people.<sup>78</sup> Feldman referred to David Ben-Gurion as a dreamer, a builder, a soldier and a statesman who lived a full and complete life.<sup>79</sup> He was touched by the passing of Jack Benny, a

Jew whose humor reached Americans of many faiths, and a Jew who never played down his origin.<sup>80</sup> Finally, he mourned the loss of great statesmen and distinguished Americans. Dwight David Eisenhower won Feldman's acclaim for his nobility of spirit. His death was a challenge to all Americans to be worthy of their heritage.<sup>81</sup>

Feldman's editorials elicited many responses--positive and negative--from his readers. He was never averse to printing a letter which cogently stated an opposing view. There were many letters he received throughout the years which did not deal with his opinions at all; recipients of Feldman's praise on the Ledger's editorial page often expressed their appreciation. Local figures, such as Rabbi Morris Silverman, and national leaders, such as Rabbis Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, thanked him for his tributes to them and their achievements.<sup>82</sup>

Feldman's service as editor provided him with the opportunity to serve Greater Hartford Jewry. He increased his public visibility through the Ledger, representing and shaping his community. Did he, in fact wield influence over all Jews in the Hartford area due to his editorials? It is difficult to answer with a "yes" or a "no." People who subscribe to a Jewish newspaper do not always read the editorial page. In general, those who read the editor's opinions are the people involved in the affair or controversy being covered.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, one can not help but imagine that an editorial that effectively dealt with the problems at hand would have boosted the morale of any Jew. An



expression of anger, resentment, or hope would have put into words what many Jews felt. In this way, Feldman ideologically and spiritually led his readers through nearly five decades (1929-1977) of the twentieth century.

#### Feldman in Jewish communal organizations

When you come into your first or any subsequent post, you may, at first, have to go in quest of your brethren outside of your congregation. Do it....Do not expect to become a General immediately. It is a privilege to be even a private in Jewish life....The United Jewish Charities, The Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Associations, the Zionist groups, the local Jewish paper, the Orphan Home, the Jewish Hospital and the Home for the Aged, the Sheltering Home and the Talmud Torahs--all have a claim upon the Rabbi and will present their claims to you sooner, perhaps, than you will expect them....My advice to you is to select several agencies to work with and to give evidence of interest in and concern for the others.<sup>84</sup>

Feldman offered the above counsel to rabbinic students in 1940. The names of some of the organizations may have subsequently changed, but not Feldman's essential message. He was able to show interest in many institutions by simply writing an editorial. He did, however, involve himself in several major Jewish groups in Hartford. He served on the governing boards of the Hebrew Home for the Aged, the Hartford Jewish Federation, Mount Sinai Hospital of Hartford, the American Jewish Committee, and the Hartford Jewish Community Center.<sup>85</sup>

There were many meetings which Feldman missed due to obligations to Beth Israel. Nevertheless, he made significant contributions to the agencies he served. He gave

lectures at the Hebrew Home for the Aged.<sup>86</sup> He led discussions on current books at the Jewish Community Center.<sup>87</sup> It was at his urging, in fact, that local rabbis could participate in the Hartford Jewish Federation. Feldman advocated rabbinic involvement in a July, 1945 letter to Edward Suisman of the Federation:

I have a strong feeling that in setting up the Federation, the community should return to its former practice of designating the active Rabbis of the community as either honorary Vice-Presidents or honorary Directors, with the privilege of participating in the meetings. After all, not all the Rabbis would utilize the opportunity to participate in the deliberations of the governing body of the community. But those who would, by reason of their knowledge of Jewish life, as well as by reason of their spiritual authority, have something to contribute of which the Federation should not deprive itself.

Moreover, it would represent a gracious acknowledgement on the part of the Federation of the primacy of the Synagogue in Jewish life. After all, the Rabbis who are active in community life should not be required to keep in touch with the organized life of the community by way of backdoor gossip, but should be in a position where they have the information at first hand and could, with dignity, make their contribution to the councils and life of the community.<sup>88</sup>

Several months later, the Board of Directors of the Hartford Jewish Federation included Rabbi Feldman.<sup>89</sup> His statements had not fallen on deaf ears.

#### Feldman's relationships in the Jewish community

Feldman, of course, cultivated friendships and cooperation with Jews outside Beth Israel as editor of the Ledger. He encouraged Reform rabbis to maintain such contacts:

Some of my happiest experiences have come from contact with the orthodox synagogues and Rabbinate.

Establish cordial and reverent relationships with them, and let your conduct be a demonstration of good fellowship and good Jewish citizenship and fraternity, always with full regard for traditional Jewish proprieties. You need never surrender your Reform autonomy of action. There may come a time when you may have to insist upon respect for your practices and point of view. But remember that as a liberal you can afford to be more liberal and, certainly, if good-will is to be cemented between Jews and Christian, should we be very diligent in promoting good-will between Jew and Jew regardless of our differences. With some exceptions the key to the situation is in the hands of the Reform Rabbi.<sup>90</sup>

This likewise applied to the Conservative community. Feldman fostered a cordial relationship with his colleague and Conservative counterpart, Rabbi Morris Silverman. Their correspondence reflected the utmost cooperation and courtesy. It seems, however, that their association was better characterized as polite competition. The two rabbinic leaders respected each other and congratulated each other on special achievements.<sup>91</sup> Both of them were leaders on a local and national level. Both were active in the Jewish and general communities in Hartford. Feldman, however, seemed to occupy the position of the Jewish ambassador and representative. Silverman was an extremely close second to his Reform colleague; yet, there could only be one "number one."<sup>92</sup>

Feldman also took an interest in the Reform community of Connecticut. In the late 1950's, a group of young couples met with him to discuss the feasibility of breaking away from Beth Israel and forming a new congregation in nearby Newington. The group felt that there were enough Jews in the Newington area to warrant such a move. Moreover, these couples wanted to participate in creating a

vital new congregation of their own. Feldman agreed to help, and he immediately enlisted the aid of his Board of Trustees. Beth Israel's leaders provided financial support and appealed to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations for assistance. Temple Sinai was founded as a result of hard work by the nucleus group of families, supported by Feldman and his Board. Rabbi Marc Brownstein became Sinai's first rabbi and a frequent seeker of Feldman's advice. Feldman and Brownstein developed an especially close relationship, demonstrated when Sinai conferred upon Feldman, in 1962, the title "Honorary Rabbi." He was a mentor to the pioneering families of Sinai and to their new spiritual leader.<sup>93</sup>

Service to the Jewish community was fundamental to Feldman's rabbinate. He felt that this work affected the greater whole--the well-being of humankind:

Never mind saving the world from the top down. The world will be improved as individual cells, as units become strong and consecrated and inspired. You and I, each of us, have one tiny sector of the Jewish line of endeavor to care for. We should concentrate there, in our respective communities and congregations and synagogues....I see no way for the individual Jew who wants to contribute to the world's redemption through justice to do so except as he goes through Israel to the world, and through the synagogue into life. We must start from the Jewish community.<sup>94</sup>

The Jewish ambassador:  
Feldman in the general  
community

Within the general community of Hartford and within the State of Connecticut Rabbi Feldman has labored indefatigably and has been a constructive and respected leader in innumerable worthy causes of the widest extent and beneficence.<sup>95</sup>

...it is the function of the modern rabbi, in a very real sense, to be an "Apostle to the Gentiles," the Jewish ambassador, so to speak, to the non-Jewish community. He is the representative not alone of his congregation, but truly of the household of Israel.<sup>96</sup>

He didn't just lend his name to various boards of directors, committees, fund drives, service organizations; he worked actively as chairman, spokesman, or advocate, always attending meetings, often settling disputes or ticklish problems by getting to the core of a dilemma and suggesting the solution or plan of action.<sup>97</sup>

The Hartford area was conducive to frequent contact between Jews and Christians. Local citizens served together in all types of community organizations and institutions: social welfare agencies, lodges, clubs and committees. A rabbi in such a community would work with Christians of every variety and in every walk of life. Moreover, when the rabbi speaks in the smaller community the whole community listens.<sup>98</sup> This was the case with Feldman; he was a leader whom Hartford area residents respected and admired. He realized, in his rabbinate, the potential for dedicated service to the community-at-large.

Feldman believed in cultivating warm personal friendships with Christian clergy.<sup>99</sup> He would send a new minister a note of welcome upon his arrival, invite him to his home and visit him if he had occasion to do so.<sup>100</sup> He participated in pulpit exchange with Christian ministers when it was a true exchange--when a Christian clergyman spoke at Beth Israel on Friday evening, and Feldman spoke at that minister's church on a Sunday morning.<sup>101</sup> He advocated



holding "Institutes of Judaism" for Christian clergy to educate them on Jewish points of view. Such programs, he hoped, would generate understanding between Jewish and Christian spiritual leaders.<sup>102</sup>

Ella Norwood described her father's closest associations among local Christian clergy:

His relationship with the Christian clergy in the area was also a phenomenon worth mentioning. For many years the local press made reference to "the Triumvirate" which existed in Hartford County. They were referring, of course, to Rabbi Feldman who was the unquestioned spokesman for the Jewish community; to Archbishop Henry J. O'Brien, a very close friend, and, of course, the Catholic spokesman; and to Bishop Walter H. Gray, who represented the Episcopal Church. These three men were of the same generation: outspoken, leaders of their people, compassionate and understanding of the community's spiritual needs, possessing a quality which is rare in the present generations of men. That quality, for lack of a better word, is courtliness. Without knowing any of these three men, a stranger meeting them for the first time sensed the dignity which was innately a part of them....these men respected the decency which they felt was inherent in every man--they at least gave every man the opportunity to display his best side.<sup>103</sup>

Feldman's warm relations with these two colleagues must have engendered a spirit of cooperation among their members and among the whole Hartford community.

Feldman welcomed visiting groups from churches to Beth Israel because these visitations, he felt, would enhance Jewish-Christian ties in his locale.<sup>104</sup> He encouraged extensive use of the media to create Jewish visibility, especially radio and television. Feldman and his assistants appeared frequently on WTIC-TV in Hartford and spoke on various radio programs. They spoke on a wide range of

topics; what was most important, however, was the coverage and attention given to Hartford Jewry through such appearances.<sup>105</sup> The associations Feldman created through this work were valuable to the Jewish cause.<sup>106</sup>

Politics, for Feldman, was a tenuous area of activity. He thought that contacts between clergy and public and governmental officials were important. He never turned down Connecticut's governor, the Hartford mayor, a senator or a congressman for an appointment, no matter how hectic his schedule. When an official position involving the Jewish community had to be taken, he was called to draft or look over the Governor's official statement.<sup>107</sup> While he did involve himself with politicians, Feldman kept out of partisan politics. He would never reveal his political leanings or indicate the candidate of his choice. When he voted, he considered issues and candidates, not political parties.<sup>108</sup>

Rabbi Feldman contributed to a great variety of local civic and religious organizations. He used several criteria to determine to which ones he would devote his time:

first, whether I have time for the specific request that comes in; second, whether I happen to be interested in that subject; and third, whether it would serve the Jewish cause for me to be present. You will find, at first, that even if you have to go without sleep, it is best to accept everything. Then after a year or two, you can start cutting down. It is most important to make your contacts with the community, and to do this quickly.<sup>109</sup>

The long list of agencies which Feldman served is impressive. He participated in a club of ministers and rabbis

beginning in 1931.<sup>110</sup> He was involved in activities at Hartford Hospital, participating in building dedications and instructing nurses in pastoral care and the needs of the patient.<sup>111</sup> He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Julius Hartt Musical Foundation, the governing body of the Hartt College of Music.<sup>112</sup> Feldman chaired the curriculum committee at one time, and he prepared and read citations for patrons of the Foundation at public ceremonies.<sup>113</sup> The Hartt College awarded him an honorary degree in 1953. He was a founder of the University of Hartford; he was even asked to suggest possible mottoes for the school before its creation in 1957.<sup>114</sup> Feldman was active on the Board of Regents of the University of Hartford (1956-62, 1964-70).<sup>115</sup> He organized and developed the program for the inauguration of Vincent Brown Coffin as the university's first Chancellor in 1959.<sup>116</sup> He spoke at various events connected with the school, and gave invocations or benedictions on special occasions. He was a committed and dedicated worker throughout his association with the University of Hartford.

Rabbi Feldman felt there was another academic institution in Hartford worthy of his time:

Another manner of contact with the Christian community in which the rabbi can be useful in creating a good image and warm, friendly relationships is to keep in touch with any colleges or seminaries in the community. Cultivate the seminary people; visit the seminary occasionally. The time may come when they will ask you to lecture on some Jewish subject at one or another session of the school. And remember that when we deal with seminaries, we are not talking just to the twenty or thirty people that may be sitting in front of us. They are teachers of teachers, they are going to be ministers, and the impact that

we make upon them is going to carry over to the thousands when they accept their posts and get out into the field. So it is a very important assignment that comes when an invitation is extended to speak before any of the classes. Under the auspices of the Jewish Chautauqua Society we now have at our Hartford Theological Seminary a permanent assignment, which I have taken for many years. I teach a two-semester course in Judaism--"Jewish Religious Life and Its Forms." It is an elective and the class meets at night.<sup>117</sup>

Feldman assumed the duties of this resident lectureship in 1954 and continued teaching into the 1970s.<sup>118</sup> Comments regarding his contributions reflect his competence and effectiveness as a teacher. John F. Priest, the Academic Dean of the Seminary, thanked him for his work in 1967:

I would like first of all to express my personal appreciation and the appreciation of the Foundation for the continuing contribution you have made over the years in offering the course Jewish Religious Life and Its Forms. Many students, both present and past, have expressed to me their gratitude for the opportunity of taking this course. I sincerely hope that you have found it rewarding and not just an onerous chore. Further, I would hope that your busy schedule will permit you to continue the offering in the years to come.<sup>119</sup>

The Reverend Dr. Russell Henry Stafford, President of the Hartford Seminary Foundation, heaped praises upon Feldman in his reports to the Jewish Chautauqua Society, declaring that "from every point of view, as a scholar, and as a person, Dr. Feldman is of the greatest value to us and we cherish his association with us."<sup>120</sup> Feldman unquestionably made an impact on the students and faculty of the Hartford Theological Seminary through his teaching and his dealings on a personal level.

He affiliated with Connecticut Masonry through Level

Lodge #137 A.F. and A.M. beginning in November, 1931. At that time, he was voted a Life Member and a month later he was appointed Chaplain of the Lodge.<sup>121</sup> He continued in that post into the 1970s, serving in 1964-65 as the Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Connecticut, A.F. and A.M.<sup>122</sup> He received the Brotherhood Award from the Level Lodge in 1967; Secretary of State Ella Grasso called it "a worthy tribute to one who has dedicated his life to the principles of the Brotherhood of Man."<sup>123</sup>

Some communal institutions appoint local clergy to serve in a ministerial or pastoral post. Feldman served as Chaplain for the United States Veterans Hospital in Newington, Connecticut, and held the same position in the Connecticut State Police and Connecticut State Guard.<sup>124</sup> He received his first promotion in the State Guard in 1946, as recorded by Joseph P. Nolan, a Colonel in the Guard:

1. In accordance with the provisions of G. O. #2, which permits the promotion in grade of chaplain after three years of service in the Connecticut State Guard, it is recommended that Captain Abraham J. Feldman, Chaplain, be promoted to the grade of Major, Chaplain, Connecticut State Guard, effective May 3, 1946.
2. Captain Feldman by his strict attention to duty, his marked ability, and his high standing in his church and community well merits the distinction recommended.<sup>125</sup>

After his 1946 promotion, Feldman continued his service to the State Guard and ultimately earned the rank of Colonel on November 1, 1954.<sup>126</sup>

Rabbis may be called upon to lead religious services at various local institutions. Student Rabbi David Aaron recalled this aspect of Feldman's rabbinate as realized in



Hartford's Institute for Living,

a well-known institution for mental patients, those who are mentally disturbed and in the psychiatric ward. Feldman donated his time on major holidays and did services there. In his later years, when he wasn't driving, I would drive him to the Institute and stay with him and participate in the service with him. The next day in the mail I got a thank-you note--just for driving. The note told me how important this task was. He went home that night and wrote it, and he meant everything. He did not speak flippantly. He did services there because he felt it was necessary.<sup>127</sup>

Through his participation in community life, Feldman gained a reputation as a distinguished and pre-eminent citizen in the Hartford area. He achieved sufficient distinction to become involved in the Hartford Rotary Club. This was, according to Feldman, a significant community group:

I know that some years ago there was a good deal of sneering and derision about belonging to service clubs--Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions. Don't sneer at these! Remember that membership in those clubs is on a leadership basis. In the Rotary Club, for instance, of which I am a member and a past president, there can be only one man chosen for membership from any occupational classification, and he must be a top man in his category....When you become a member of a Rotary Club, you are in contact weekly with the outstanding leaders of education, industry, government--in every walk of life.<sup>128</sup>

He spoke, for thirty-seven years, at Rotary's annual Thanksgiving meeting. His message was always printed for the community and, eventually, it was broadcast on two of Hartford's radio stations on Thanksgiving Day.<sup>129</sup>

In those addresses, Feldman spoke of gratitude, service, self-examination and partnership with God. In his 1963 message, entitled "What are we 'Gathering In'?", he interpreted the full meaning of "ingathering." It did not only refer to

the harvest of physical and material things:

"Ingathering" may refer to all that comes to us as the result of intelligent planning and diligent work. "Ingathering" comes also as a result of daring hopes and noble objectives....I am not thinking and talking of day-dreaming, of wishful thinking. I am thinking and talking of dreams and visions which we intend to materialize through planning and planting, through education and toil, through united efforts....

He referred to the outbreaks of prejudice in the South as harvests of "hate and blood and tears." He cited, as a contrast, the harvest of health, education, scientific discovery and the arts in the State of Israel, and urged that we might, in America, prepare a harvest of moral dedication and blessing.<sup>130</sup>

Thanksgiving reminded human beings that they should continually complete the work of God in the world--that they should use their God-given capacities to perfect society.<sup>131</sup> Feldman believed that, through acknowledging that we are co-workers with God, we would automatically enhance our lives and our conduct. Our goals would be ennobled and our desires purified and exalted. We would be capable of resisting evil and changing it into good and blessing. Thanksgiving can serve, in this way, as a corollary to the awareness of God: "...if we set the Lord before us, we must be thankful!"<sup>132</sup>

These addresses, noted Ella Norwood, were of extreme importance to Feldman. He was

tremendously flattered that his fellow Rotarians thought so highly of his messages that they recalled him year after year, for thirty-seven years, to deliver an inspirational talk at Thanksgiving. This was the biggest, best attended meeting of the year. He knew it and was thrilled by that knowledge. The other item of note is that Dad worked

as hard on this speech as he did on his High Holyday sermons--sometimes harder. He viewed his Rotary address as a rare opportunity to inspire his fellow Rotarians; he wanted their respect and felt the need to earn it each year; and he loved their unrestricted praise each year.... Near the end of his life, when Hartford Rotary honored him by inviting the women of his family to attend a surprise award-giving dinner in his honor, and by electing him to a life-membership in Rotary, he was moved to tears. He loved them, and they reciprocated in kind. In the land of New England Yankees, this was ecumenism at its fundamental best.<sup>133</sup>

The fact that the leaders of the Hartford community held Feldman in such high regard testifies to his achievement of high status among local citizenry. Feldman was the Jewish ambassador in Rotary, and, perhaps, a "leaders' leader" among the prominent men and women of Hartford.

Two additional examples will illustrate the esteem which the Christian community of Hartford had towards Feldman. First, a group of Christian clergy and lay leaders met on June 14, 1935, to express their desire to donate a gift to Beth Israel's new edifice in honor of its rabbi.<sup>134</sup> The Reverend Dr. John Milton Phillips, Pastor of the First Church of Christ, read the committee's statement:

Rabbi Feldman, in the ten years of your rabbinate in Hartford, you have won for yourself a place not alone in the love of the Jewish community, but in the hearts of the Christians as well. It is the desire of certain individuals and churches to give tangible evidence of their esteem for you as a man, and their appreciation of the ennobling influence which you have radiated as a leader and public servant. We have therefore collaborated in this memorial gift which bears with it our love, and our prayers that your years in Hartford may be many, and your ministry fruitful in all good works.

It is our desire that with this money you will establish in the holy sanctuary of your new synagogue some object that may remain there permanently

as an emblem of the friendship now existing in Hartford between the Jew and the Christian....

This is our answer to the pagan anti-Semitism which is burning so cruelly in some parts of the world. Anti-Semitism brings grievous suffering to the Jew, but it destroys the very heart of Christianity with its Law of Love. We want none of it here. You by your life among us have helped to remove such a dire possibility far from us by creating goodwill. In doing this you have served the Jew well; you have served the city well by making it a more brotherly and harmonious town; you have served Christianity by helping to preserve the high idealism of its faith.

We will not forget, and may those who come after us never forget, that the Jew and Christian are brothers, children of the One Eternal God.<sup>135</sup>

The money donated by this committee was used for installing a stained-glass window with an inscription identifying it as a gift from Hartford's Christian community.<sup>136</sup> This presentation was a noble gesture of fellowship and sincerity. This Christian committee, in its own words, "gave tangible evidence" of its respect for Rabbi Feldman.<sup>137</sup>

Beth Israel's spiritual leader did not forget the Christian religious community in its time of need. On January 3, 1942, the Meeting House of the West Hartford First Church of Christ (Congregational) was destroyed by fire. Feldman immediately offered the Beth Israel building to the Church for Sunday services, free of charge, for as long as needed. For twenty-two months during World War II, members of the Congregational Church worshipped at Beth Israel.<sup>138</sup>

Feldman's generous and neighborly offer highly impressed members of the Church. One individual wrote the rabbi a personal note, expressing

sincere and grateful thanks to you and to the worshipful members of your synagogue for the privilege extended us to hold services in your beautiful consecrated building.

Kindnesses of that sort tend to destroy racial barriers and I am sure that our members will long hold you in grateful remembrance for your spontaneous offer of help at our time of distress.<sup>139</sup>

The new Meeting House of the Congregational Church was dedicated on September 21, 1948, and on September 28th, identical bronze tablets were unveiled and dedicated at the Church (in the morning) and at Beth Israel (in the evening, on the eve of Sukkot, the Feast of Booths).<sup>140</sup> When Feldman delivered his remarks at the Temple, he spoke of the service as

an unusual experience. So far as I know yours is probably the only church edifice in Christendom that has erected the kind of testimonial to a Jewish congregation which you have so graciously and joyously dedicated in your sanctuary today; a testimonial which...is intended to proclaim a truth which the world so sorely needs, and has needed for so long, to grasp and live by. It is the truth that neighborliness, comradeship, friendship, love of God and love of man are not only praiseworthy but are actually practicable and possible where there is a will to achieve them.... It is good to learn, as many of us did out of this experience that we have had together, that there is no Jewish God and there is no Christian God; there are only Jewish and Christian conceptions and definitions of God....you have identified our Temple as a house of prayer for all peoples.<sup>141</sup>

The record of Feldman's service in the Hartford community speaks well for itself. He sought to engender fellowship and cooperation between Jews and Christians. He devoted time and energy to communal institutions and agencies. Service to all of Hartford citizenry was an integral facet of his rabbinate. "Being the chaplain of the Fire Department," said Rabbi Samuel Karff, "and a first-rate Rotarian gave him



as much nachas as preparing a textual Saturday morning sermon. And the reputation he enjoyed in the larger community was as much a source of delight to him as the love he received from many of his congregants."<sup>142</sup>

Beyond Greater Hartford:  
Feldman in the national  
limelight

In organizations and programs of national scope, both Jewish and secular, he has been an indefatigable and constructive worker and leader, and has come to be widely recognized as a man of clear thought, broad sympathies, far-reaching vision and creative power. Nothing Jewish, nothing American, nothing humane has ever been foreign to him. The range of his understanding, the breadth of his knowledge and the depth of his Jewish loyalties have been revealed again and again in seventeen little volumes of sermons and addresses. In a consecrated and fruitful ministry of twenty-three years he has come to be regarded as one of the ablest and most effective servants of God in the ranks of the American Rabbinate, and as one of the outstanding and faithful sons of his Alma Mater, one who has realized in rich measure the high purpose of service and leadership for which the Hebrew Union College trained him and sent him forth, and in whom and in whose service and achievement it has always had cause greatly to rejoice.<sup>143</sup>

The preceding statement by Dr. Julian Morgenstern testifies to the extent of Feldman's "reach" as a leadership figure in the United States. Morgenstern based his words on truth; the record of Rabbi Feldman's service on a national scale serves as adequate confirmation. The spiritual leader of Beth Israel came into contact with some of the outstanding leaders in American life through his affiliation with national organizations and councils. An examination of Feldman's activity in these groups will demonstrate that he, in fact,

exerted significant authority and influence at a national level. He may not have had the fame of his colleagues Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise; however, he did make an impression on Jews and non-Jews alike throughout the country.

#### The Central Conference of American Rabbis

And now I want to conclude...with the advice that you form the habit of attendance upon the meetings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis immediately after your ordination, and thereafter arrange your time, your vacations, etc., so as to be able to attend these conventions regularly....

Most of us are professionally isolated. Most of us in our bailiwicks are lords of the manor, as it were. Most of us in our communities are treated with the courtesy and deference due our office. We are likely to become too solemn, too pontifical....

It is a wholesome experience, therefore, for all of us, to come together as comrades to discuss problems which concern us all, to learn what is happening elsewhere in congregational life, to find out how other men meet their problems which are not unlike ours, and how they face and resolve difficulties which are not so very different from those with which we are struggling. We can learn much from each other. And we can profit greatly from knowing each other and from retaining personal contacts not alone with our own generation of Rabbis but also with the older men and with the younger men who continue to appear in the Rabbinate even after our own ordination.

I think that the men who do not frequent the meetings of the Central Conference of American Rabbis lose much and I believe also that we their colleagues are the losers by reason of such chronic or prolonged absences.<sup>144</sup>

Rabbi Feldman was a loyal and active member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). He contributed to the work of numerous committees and participated in discussions on important topics at Conference conventions. His colleagues thought of him so highly that they selected him

to serve as Vice-President (1945-47) and President (1947-49) of the CCAR.<sup>145</sup>

While chairman of the Committee on Religious Education, Feldman tried to provide some direction and goals for the committee's work. In 1932, he summarized all previous CCAR efforts in the field of education, and made recommendations for future committee programming: 1) Include practical presentations at the CCAR conventions; 2) Deal with youth and adult education; 3) Publish a bulletin on committee proceedings and decisions; 4) Establish a "Religious Education Day"; and 6) Strive for continuity from year to year.<sup>146</sup> This approach was viewed favorably by Rabbi Samuel Blumenfield, an education specialist in Chicago:

Your historic survey and analysis of the work of the Committee on Religious Education is most timely, for it shows clearly that as yet no persistent or systematic effort was made by the Conference to deal with the problem of Religious Education adequately.

I thoroughly agree with you that the Committee of Religious Education should become a clearing house for various educational efforts. However, I believe that although most rabbis are not experts in the technique of education, many rabbis should have a philosophy of education; and therefore, it is also the task of the Committee on Religious Education to present from time to time the opportunity for adequate discussion on some of the fundamental principles of Jewish education.<sup>147</sup>

During the following two years, Feldman planned programs for the CCAR conventions which dealt with important aspects of Jewish education, including new developments in the field.

He was involved in the affairs of the Committee on Church and State and the Committee on International Peace.<sup>148</sup> He reported on the proceedings of the Synagogue Council of

America, primarily during the 1950s.<sup>149</sup> He presided over that organization in 1955-57. In 1933, Feldman made a study, at the request of Dr. Morris Newfield of Birmingham, Alabama, of the various rituals being used in Reform and Conservative congregations. This list was aimed at identifying which rituals had used material from the Union Prayer Book.<sup>150</sup> Feldman suggested, in 1937, that the CCAR publish a book with a large format for easier reading when it revised the Union Prayer Book. Although Rabbi Isaac Marcuson, CCAR Secretary, doubted the demand for such a book, the CCAR did eventually publish a large-print edition of the newly revised Union Prayer Book.<sup>151</sup>

Feldman served on two CCAR committees that produced important additions to the Conference's list of publications. He and James Heller, Louis Witt, Ed Calisch, Israel Bettan, Sam Cohon and Abba Hillel Silver, under the editorship of Solomon Freehof, revised the Union Prayer Book in 1940.<sup>152</sup> As a member of the Liturgy Committee, Feldman contributed to the revision of the Rabbi's Manual, selecting introductions to the Kaddish and preparing notes for the Manual.<sup>153</sup>

As a speaker and participant in discussions, Rabbi Feldman made notable contributions to the convention proceedings. In 1933, he commented on "secular nationalism" in a discussion entitled "God--In Jewish Literature and Life." Feldman propounded the view that the Jewish people could not have survived were it not for the continuous stress laid on the religious factors of life. He added,

"I, too, believe in Jewish nationhood, but mere secular Jewishness, stripped of the spiritual content and religious significance of Jewishness, fails to stir me."<sup>154</sup>

Rabbi Feldman had the honor of delivering the Conference Sermon in 1934. In that address, he spoke of Korach's rebellion, in which one group of Israelites had separated themselves from their brethren. Feldman compared this to the tendency, in that decade, of some Jews to exclude themselves from certain definitions of Jewishness.<sup>155</sup> He declared that without "people," what was left of Judaism was merely "ethical monotheism." Liberal Jews had made the blunder of divorcing peoplehood from religion.<sup>156</sup> Feldman urged that the Reform wing correct this error by expressing sympathetic cognizance of Palestine in a revision of the Pittsburgh Platform's fifth paragraph.<sup>157</sup> The Guiding Principles of 1937 included the changes that Feldman had suggested. People and religion were thus united in American Reform.

Feldman further defined his position on Israel in a forum at the 1950 convention entitled "Israel and the American Jew." He raised three main points:

- 1) The American Jew will remain American, and the Israeli Jew will remain Israeli.
- 2) It is natural for Jews to be concerned with what is transpiring in Israel. We can help rebuild, but politically, we must be onlookers. We must not meddle.
- 3) We should give aid in the realms of religion, culture, finance and protection. We should not dictate policy.<sup>158</sup>

In 1954, Feldman delivered the Conference Lecture, "America and the Jew," on the occasion of the Tercentenary



celebration of Jewish settlement in America.<sup>159</sup> He highlighted Jewish contributions to American values--our spiritual concepts that society adopted. Among these were the right to individualism, freedom as a divine right, the right of citizens to choose their rulers, the responsibility of the community to educate its children, and philanthropy as a social obligation.<sup>160</sup> He credited America with making the Jew free and with fostering the dynamic expansion of Judaism in the United States.<sup>161</sup> The Jew had given--and received--in America.

The 1940s proved turbulent for the CCAR. It was a decade of controversy, fragmentation and jubilation. The Conference had, in 1937, taken a turn towards Zionism--at least, towards a stance sympathetic to the Jews engaged in rebuilding Palestine. Tensions between Zionists and non-Zionists in the CCAR mounted over the ensuing years. A 1942 CCAR resolution supporting the creation of a Jewish army sent the non-Zionists into action. A letter dated April 15th, 1942 called for a meeting of "Non-Zionist Reform Rabbis"; it was signed by twenty-three men.<sup>162</sup> Rabbi James Heller, President of the Conference, was deeply disturbed. He saw no reason to call a meeting when dissent could just as well be expressed within the ranks of the CCAR. He pleaded for unity among all Reform rabbis, Zionist and non-Zionist, expressing his sentiments in a letter to all CCAR members.<sup>163</sup> The non-Zionists, however, held their meeting in Atlantic City in June, 1942. 95 rabbis attended

to voice their disagreement with the Zionist program, which called for a Jewish army, unrestricted Jewish immigration into Palestine and a Jewish state.<sup>164</sup> The American Council for Judaism was subsequently formed, solidifying the polarization of the CCAR's two extreme factions. Feldman had aligned himself with Heller; he agreed that Conference unity was of primary importance, superseding Zionist and non-Zionist concerns.<sup>165</sup>

Feldman was, nevertheless, a Zionist. When he was nominated for the post of Conference Vice-President, his selection was almost blocked by American Council proponents. It was not a direct personal slight towards Feldman; rather, it was due to the desire to place a neutral Reform rabbi in a CCAR leadership post.<sup>166</sup> Rabbi Emil Leipziger, Chairman of the Arbitration Committee, felt that the new Vice-President should not be a Zionist. He tried to make it clear to Feldman that there was no malice intended in his position.<sup>167</sup> The Herzl Zion Club alumnus, however, was furious. Feldman saw no connection between his Zionism and his attitude towards the opinions of his colleagues. He indicated to Leipziger: "Should I ever get to the Presidency, I would be the President of the C.C.A.R. and labor to keep it great. I respect the opinions of my colleagues even when I differ from them....I hope that my colleagues will be as fair to me as I have striven to be fair to them at all times."<sup>168</sup>

Feldman did become the CCAR's new Vice-President in 1945, serving under President Abba Hillel Silver. Silver

turned the gavel over to Feldman two years later, paying tribute to his Herzl Club comrade:

Abe Feldman has been among the most loyal members of our Conference. He has occupied many important offices in the Conference. He has earned this great distinction, first, by the merit of the service which he rendered, but more than that, by the quality of the man that he is....he is a man of amiability, of patience, of tolerance as well as of strong convictions. He is the type of man that will give us who will follow him most faithfully a leadership which we always reached for in selecting the men to head this great religious body.<sup>169</sup>

The new President immediately stated his views on the nature of the Conference:

Ours is a unique organization. We are, I think, the most democratically constituted body to be found in the United States. You can't "fix" things in the Central Conference. Every one of us knows life. We are independent men, we are individualists, and yet together we work and serve and strive for a great cause. We are dedicated men. We are Liberals. Liberals not only in theology, but Liberals in social vision and social passion. We are, I think, the most all-Jewish group that I have encountered, all-Jewish in the full meaning and glory of the phrase Klal Yisroel.<sup>170</sup>

In the post of CCAR President, Feldman put into action his passion for K'lal Yisrael. On September 30, 1947, Feldman wired President Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall, urging them to instruct the United States delegation at the United Nations to support the majority report of the Palestine Committee (UNSCOP).<sup>171</sup> Zionist rabbis and lay leaders asked Feldman to issue statements regarding Palestine in his position as CCAR President. He refused to make any declarations that might offend some members of the Conference.<sup>172</sup> He did, nevertheless, share his joy at the

declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948. He sent this telegram to his predecessor, Abba Hillel Silver:

In this great moment of the beginning of the fulfillment, I salute you and bless you for your effort, your skill and your vision.<sup>173</sup>

There were, at that time, other concerns to which Feldman had to attend. The upcoming CCAR convention was to be held in Kansas City in June. There was, however, a snag--of a moral nature. Kansas City's downtown hotels would not serve blacks, many of whom would be gathering for the convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>174</sup> Rabbi William Rosenblum of New York City informed Feldman that some rabbis would protest this racial discrimination by absenting themselves from the CCAR convention.<sup>175</sup> The Conference President thought it wise to protest by "having the President of the Ministerial Alliance of Kansas City, who is a Negro, address our Convention; by inviting them to attend our sessions, by bringing out a ringing resolution on the subject; by my addressing the NAACP...."<sup>176</sup> Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg felt that a boycott of Kansas City altogether would prove futile--that it would be more helpful if the Reform rabbis came to Kansas City.<sup>177</sup>

CCAR members gathered in that city for the 1948 convention. Feldman spoke, in his "President's Message," on the important matters of the day. He commemorated the creation of the Social Action Commission (of the UAHC and CCAR); the one-hundredth anniversary of German Jewish immigration; the

sixtieth anniversary of the Jewish Publication Society, founded by Joseph Krauskopf; and the inauguration of Dr. Nelson Glueck as President of Hebrew Union College.<sup>178</sup> He hailed the Supreme Court's decision in favor of Church-State separation in the "Vashti McCollum Case." He called for the united action of Jews and Christians to strengthen the religious loyalties of American citizens.<sup>179</sup>

He mentioned, of course, the development of May 14, 1948: the declaration of the State of Israel. Feldman considered this event

one of those which is bound to have far-reaching influence upon the course of subsequent Jewish history and, come what may, the date will be forever memorable. Jewish history and Jewish life will never be as if this event had never happened.

For most Jews, and for the great majority of the members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, May 14, 1948 was an experience of deep emotional and spiritual moment.<sup>180</sup>

He despaired over the bloodshed that followed May 14, but he had faith in the capabilities of the Jews to resist Arab attacks.<sup>181</sup> Feldman recommended that the Conference authorize him to send greetings to Dr. Chaim Weizmann, President of Israel, and David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister.<sup>182</sup>

Feldman pleaded with his colleagues to terminate the disputes that had created tension in the ranks of the Reform rabbinate in the 1940s:

It seems to me that in the presence of the fait accompli, the half-century debate on the subject of Zionism should now come to an end. After all, the government of the State of Israel is not your government or mine. The democracy of Israel in Eretz Yisroel will forge its own political destiny. We shall help them where and when we can,



and rightfully so. They will have our prayers, our ardent wishes for wisdom and understanding, for skillful and noble statesmanship, for the blessing of God upon their will to righteousness and their architecture of justice. They will have our aid whilst they need aid, and our brotherly support as they require it. But the political controversy amongst us should now be adjourned! We have been, we are, we shall remain, Americans. As Americans, we shall continue to give to our beloved United States the same full measure of devotion we have ever given it. As American Jews we shall continue to build our Jewish life here and jointly with our neighbors of every faith, God willing, we shall make our contribution as Jews and Americans, to the spiritualization of life in this country, to the preservation of American democracy, to the establishment of justice and righteousness, peace and security for us and our children and our children's children, and all the children of men.<sup>183</sup>

He tried, as head of the Conference, to be fair and even-handed in dealing with his colleagues. He adopted a policy of rotating committee chairmanships which, said Rabbi Julius Mark of Nashville, would greatly enhance his reputation as CCAR President.<sup>184</sup>

Rabbi Feldman stepped down from his post in 1949 to be succeeded by Dr. Jacob Marcus. The retiring president turned over the gavel with these parting words:

Before turning over this gavel to my very dear and beloved friend whom you have chosen as your president, I want to say first to all of you what I have said on several occasions, that I can never find words that are adequate to express the measure of my gratitude for the honor that you have conferred upon me during these several years and for the opportunity which you have given me to serve as your president. I shall never forget the statement that Rabbi Freehof made when he became president: that in coming into the presidency one is assured of something which no power under heaven can deprive one of--the honor of being a past president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis....I am the eleventh. During these two years that I have served you as president you have given me much. For that I am thankful.<sup>185</sup>

The Union of American  
Hebrew Congregations

The Union is our national congregational body. The rabbis, like the laymen, are members of the Union. Do not let anybody tell you, as some of your baalebatim may have the effrontery to tell you, that the Union is only for the laymen and, therefore, at conventions only the laymen should participate or even attend. The rabbi is part of the congregation. The Union is a union of congregations, and when a congregational delegation comes to a convention of the U.A.H.C. it is the congregation that it represents. A delegate, be he rabbi or layman, attends as one of the people, as one who is concerned with Jewish religious life, and as one who is identified with the particular congregation which he represents. Go when you have the opportunity; it is good to be in touch with the movement on its national scale.<sup>186</sup>

This attitude was borne out by Feldman's record of participation. He served on the board of the Union's Department of Synagog and School Extension (1932-41), on the Executive Board of the Union (1945-49), and on the UAHC Board of Trustees.<sup>187</sup> He represented the Union admirably; specifically, his involvement in Union Cavalcades earned him high praise. Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg of Kansas City, writing to Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, UAHC Director, lauded Feldman's contribution to a 1946 Union program at Congregation B'nai Jehudah:

It gives me unusual pleasure to inform you that Dr. Abraham Feldman has done a notable work in Kansas City. In fact, he has taken the town by storm. His fine personality with his profound scholarship has left an appropriate impression upon our community.

In every address he has delivered before the many groups that we arranged, he has emphasized the Union with its great program and the enterprises of the affiliated organizations. Kansas City is more Union-conscious now than it has ever been.<sup>188</sup>

Rabbi Morton C. Fierman of the Temple echoed Mayerberg's accolades:

All I can say at this point is that I am sorry Abe had to leave after three days. We were delighted to have him with us. He contributed much to the morale of the congregation as well as to the morale of the rabbis. His genial good humor and graciousness have endeared him to our people. We hope that we shall have the opportunity of bringing him here again.<sup>189</sup>

It was on the Union's Committee on Ceremonies that Feldman gained the most national influence. It was not that his name became a "household word"; it was that the fruits of his labor and creativity were adopted by numerous congregations throughout the country. He composed two rituals that were distributed throughout the Union. First, he dramatized the appearance of Elijah the prophet at the Passover Seder in a "Ceremonial for Opening the Door for Elijah at the Seder." Second, he promoted close ties between family members in an original ceremony for "Shabbos Ovov," Parents' Day, the Sabbath prior to Mother's Day.<sup>190</sup>

The most important example of Feldman's work on the Ceremonies Committee was merely a piece of cloth. It was, however, a piece of cloth that many Reform rabbis would add to their pulpit attire. Feldman described his new creation in a memorandum to his colleagues:

1. In recent years, Rabbis have begun to wear robes in their pulpits....The style of robe which is recommended is what is technically called a "Pulpit Gown" with wide velvet panels facing down the center of the front, meeting at the center....
2. To offset the severity of the pulpit gown, to add a contrasting effect, and to distinguish between the use of the robe by clergy of other denominations and that of Rabbis, the committee has agreed to recommend the use of a Rabbinical stole, which

while not a tallith, is to simulate it.

The Rabbinical stole is to be made of white silk with black stripes and silk fringes. (Where the wearer of the Rabbinical stole may desire to use the traditional tzitzis, special arrangements for that may be made with the manufacturer). The stole is to have an embroidered collar, the design being: a Mogen Dovid on the nape of the neck, branches of palms on the two sides, and at the point of each side of the collar there is to be a crown with Hebrew lettering; on the right side the letters are to be "Kaf" and "Taf" which are the initials of "Keser Torah", and on the left side - "Kaf" and "Kaf", the initials of "Keser Kehunah."

The embroidery is to be either of silk or bullion thread.<sup>191</sup>

The "stole" was designed and ready for manufacture in 1938.<sup>192</sup>  
By 1945, 99 congregations had adopted the "atoro."<sup>193</sup> Feldman's efforts, or at least the resultant product, touched many sectors of Reform Jewry.

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

Let me also suggest--with no intention to offend--that you do not, after graduation, alienate yourself from this College. Your opportunity for continuing contact will be through the Alumni Association, which meets annually at the time when the Central Conference meets. Our Alumni Association is important to the institution. It is the medium through which the College authorities reach the men whom they have trained and prepared for their lifework. But when I speak of continuing contact with the College I mean more than just coming once a year to a meeting of the Alumni Association. I urge that you maintain a personal, intimate, lively interest in this institute.<sup>194</sup>

Rabbi Feldman devoted much of his time to his alma mater, the Hebrew Union College. He served as historian of the Alumni Association (1933-40) and edited the Alumni bulletin, a publication of "the finest type and nature."<sup>195</sup> He was President of the Alumni (1946-48) when Dr. Nelson Glueck was

chosen to succeed Dr. Morgenstern as College President.<sup>196</sup>  
 Yet, Feldman's primary contributions to the College during his rabbinate were pedagogic in nature. He was a Visiting Professor of Homiletics in Cincinnati (1958) and New York (1959). He addressed students concerning the rabbinate as a profession as Alumni Lecturer in 1940 and 1962.<sup>197</sup>

Some of the responses to his talks are noteworthy. The late Rabbi Joseph Narot, a student in 1940, thanked Feldman personally:

May I take this opportunity to tell you again what a pleasure it was getting to know you. The men are still talking about your lectures and the "speshul" session we had with you in our bumming-room. We have the lasting and clear-cut impression of a man who possesses the qualities that all of us may well emulate: a genuinely Jewish neshamah, warmth, deep faith, and not only a very firm rooting in the language, literature, culture and religious heritage of our people, but also the ability to give vivid and inspiring expression to them.<sup>198</sup>

Dr. Glueck commended Feldman on his lectures in homiletics in 1958:

It was wonderful having you here and I don't recall any time when I have heard comments more glowing after an Alumnus visited as in the past days. Not only did you give the boys practical information from your rich experience but you were so gracious and so solicitous that these things too evoked frequent comment.<sup>199</sup>

Dr. Samuel Sandmel, after hearing feedback on Feldman's lectures at the New York campus in 1959, passed on the praise to West Hartford:

I was in New York last week and your ears would have burned at all the glowing things that I heard from both faculty and students about your series of lectures.

We are most grateful to you for your willingness to serve us as graciously and as beneficently as you do. It is a pleasure to be able to call on so gifted and loyal an alumnus.<sup>200</sup>



Through service on governing boards and as a visiting lecturer, Feldman aided in the smooth operation of the College-Institute and educated a new generation of rabbis. He had returned triumphantly to his alma mater, as a distinguished member of his profession.

#### The World Union for Progressive Judaism

We have been informed by Dr. Marcuson that you have accepted the appointment as President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and it is now our privilege to welcome you as a Vice-President of our Governing Body ex-officio.

It gives me particular pleasure to do so and I feel confident that you will be interested in our work and that we shall have the stimulus of your active co-operation.<sup>201</sup>

Lily Montagu, with these words, welcomed Feldman into his new position with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ). The CCAR President had one major concern: keeping informed on the Liberal Jewish community in Israel. This was important to him so that, in his dealings with the Central Conference, he could adequately represent the interests of the World Union.<sup>202</sup> He formulated thirteen questions to be answered by the leaders of Israel's Liberal congregations; the replies were detailed and informative.<sup>203</sup> Serving in this WUPJ post brought Feldman into contact with Liberal Jews all over the world. He became increasingly aware of the needs of Israel's "Reform" community, and transmitted this concern to his congregation. The Beth Israel Religious School, almost yearly, donated money from the "Kind Deeds" fund to the World Union and to the Leo Baeck School in Haifa.<sup>204</sup>

When Dr. Meir Elk's synagogue in Haifa was damaged in 1950, the Beth Israel Board of Trustees immediately sent \$100 for repairs and relief.<sup>205</sup> Rabbi Feldman had truly widened the scope of his congregants' concern for their fellow Jews. This awareness that all Jews are responsible for one another was part of Feldman's upbringing; it stayed with him and manifested itself in his affiliations with organizations like the World Union.

#### The National Jewish Welfare Board

Feldman attended to the spiritual needs of Jewish men and women in the American Armed Forces through his participation on the National Jewish Welfare Board. He served on the NJWB's Board of Directors and as chairman of the Religious Activities Committee.<sup>206</sup> He became, in 1950, the vice-chairman of the Division of Religious Activities. One of his main tasks in that post was to supervise the publication of prayerbooks and inspirational pamphlets for Jews in the Armed Services.<sup>207</sup>

He demonstrated his greatest loyalty and leadership ability as a rabbi and a chaplain to the Armed Forces on his trip to the Far East in 1954. He made the trip at the request of the United States Department of Defense, visiting Korea, Japan, Okinawa, the Philippines and Guam.<sup>207</sup> He conducted a series of Torah Convocations for Americans stationed in those areas, speaking on various topics of Jewish interest.<sup>208</sup> One serviceman at Yokota Air Base, Japan, praised the "reformed" Rabbi from West Hartford in

a letter home:

The services are being held at Yakota Air Base, and we have a guest speaker, he is Rabbi Abraham Feldman, of Temple \_\_\_\_\_ in Hartford, Connecticut. He is an elderly man, and his speaking reflects many years of worldly experience. As he is a Reformed Rabbi, he speaks with a very broad and liberal background....he is possessed of so great a Tolmudic [sic] background, that even the so-called sages of Orthodox Judaism have quickly learned that this is a man who knows of where he speaks...and the attendance has been growing steadily with each ensuing day. As a matter of fact, so brilliant has his discourse been that many of the Christian Chaplains have started to attend the services so that they too may benefit from what Rabbi Feldman had to say.<sup>209</sup>

Feldman performed his duties to the satisfaction of the Jews stationed in the Far East, the NJWB, and the Air Force. He had provided spiritual and intellectual edification for Americans located far from their homes.

#### The Synagogue Council of America

This organization, comprised of representatives of the major rabbinic and congregational bodies in America, was intended to unite American Jewry in furthering religious interests which the constituent groups had in common.<sup>210</sup> Feldman held the SCA presidency in 1955-57, when internal tensions in the ranks of organized Orthodoxy made the Council's work difficult.<sup>211</sup> Feldman was able, however, to engender progress in Jewish-Christian cooperation.<sup>212</sup> Feldman assumed the chairmanship of the International Affairs Commission of SCA upon leaving the presidency, dealing with problems facing the world Jewish community.<sup>213</sup>

### The Zionist Organization of America

Rabbi Feldman was active in Zionist affairs primarily on a local and regional level. He did have contact with Abba Hillel Silver, once ZOA President; in fact, Silver's resignation from the chairmanship of the Zionist Emergency Committee in 1944 greatly diminished Feldman's faith in ZOA.<sup>214</sup> Feldman, nevertheless, stood by his Zionist convictions. He was recognized locally in 1954 for his steadfastness. Judge Selig Schwartz of the Connecticut Zionist Region informed him of the forthcoming honor:

At our statewide banquet scheduled Sunday, November 28th in Hartford, you will receive special recognition for your lifelong splendid service and devotion to the Zionist cause which made Herzl's dream come true.

Concrete evidence of appreciation of our Region will be shown to you.<sup>215</sup>

Although he was not extremely active, Feldman did speak out in favor of Zionism throughout his rabbinate. He did not reach the highest echelons of Zionist leadership, but he remained a supporter of efforts which would actualize Theodor Herzl's dreams.

### The National Conference of Christians and Jews

Rabbi Feldman participated in this organization's activities primarily in Greater Hartford. He served on the Executive Board of the Hartford Round Table and on the Religious Advisory Board of NCCJ's local branch.<sup>216</sup> He received the Greater Hartford Chapter's Annual Certificate of Recognition in 1967 for his "consistent demonstrations of community service and high citizenship" and "devotion to the principles

of the National Conference and the public good."<sup>217</sup>

His local work brought him into contact with Dr. Everett Clinchy, the NCCJ National Director. Feldman corresponded with Clinchy in the late 1930s regarding local Hartford affairs and the diatribes of Father Charles Coughlin.<sup>218</sup> Clinchy indicated that he felt Coughlin was getting too much attention, especially from Jews; only a small percentage of Christians were actually listening to his addresses with any regularity.<sup>219</sup> This episode demonstrates that Feldman associated with leaders at the national level through his service in Hartford. This certainly enhanced Feldman's status as a leader.

Connecticut Advisory Committee,  
United States Commission on  
Civil Rights

Feldman was appointed to this Committee in 1958 and assumed the chairmanship in that year.<sup>220</sup> He served for several years in this capacity, supervising activities and the preparation of reports. He consulted the national office of the Commission on a regular basis, and his work won acclaim from fellow citizens and rabbinic colleagues. Dr. Maurice Eisendrath read the product of Feldman's committee with enthusiasm:

I have read with the utmost interest and appreciation the 1961 Report to the Commission on Civil Rights submitted by the State Advisory Committee of which you are Chairman. I detect therein not only your vigorous and far-sighted leadership and viewpoint but also, I believe, the clarity of expression for which you are deservedly known. This is one of the most informative and



well prepared studies of its kind that I have seen. Congratulations on a fine piece of work.<sup>221</sup>

#### National Recovery Administration

Feldman took charge of the NRA campaign in 1933 in the Hartford area. He organized a Speakers' Bureau by sending letters to the rabbis, priests and ministers of the community, receiving in return many positive replies.<sup>222</sup> Charles B. Whittelsey of the Hartford Chamber of Commerce commended Feldman on his contribution to the cause:

I want to let you know how truly appreciative I have been of the help you have given to me and to this office, in connection with the work involved under the National Industrial Recovery Act.

It would have been impossible to have brought this work to a successful fruition without your aid. It is one thing to volunteer your services when a venture has proved itself a success, but it is quite another matter and a really commendable act, to be one of the several who were willing to take the project, formulate plans of operation for it and push it through to a successful conclusion.<sup>223</sup>

Feldman continued his affiliation with the NRA as Chairman of the NRA State Adjustment Board, a forum for those dissatisfied with working conditions and relations with employers. He was required to serve without compensation, and hours spent at meetings depended on the caseload.<sup>224</sup> The years 1934 and 1935 were busy for the Rabbi of Beth Israel, as he devoted much of his time to Adjustment Board hearings. Again, this position required Feldman to stay in touch with the national office, making certain that Connecticut's NRA Adjustment Board remained in line with overall NRA policy. The main work took place at a local and regional level.

### The White House Conference on Aging

Feldman participated in the Conference at the local and national levels. He helped in planning Connecticut programs and gave invocations and benedictions at local functions.<sup>225</sup> He was chosen by the national Conference Chairman, Arthur S. Fleming, to chair a "subsection" or discussion group on spiritual well-being at the national meeting in late 1971.<sup>226</sup> In addition, Feldman gave the benediction at the last session of the Conference in Washington. President Nixon, who had missed that portion of the program, acknowledged Feldman's words several weeks later:

It was most thoughtful of you to send me a copy of the benediction which you offered at the closing session of the White House Conference on Aging, and I am deeply grateful for your prayers in my behalf and in behalf of all those upon whom I depend for counsel and advice in guiding the affairs of our nation. I share your hope that our people, and the people of all the nations of the world, may know the fulfillment of their dreams for peace, justice and prosperity for all mankind in the years to come.<sup>227</sup>

### Feldman and National Politicians

As previously stated in this chapter, Feldman believed in cultivating relationships with political leaders. His papers include regular correspondence with Congressman Herman P. Kopplemann and Senator Abraham Ribicoff.<sup>228</sup> The letters are not only congratulatory in nature. Many deal with crucial issues of the times, including matters that affected Jews in America and other parts of the world.

There were even United States Presidents who were aware

of Feldman's existence and achievements. Ella Norwood intimated that President Truman referred to her father as "that little man from Connecticut"; Truman, holding his hand shoulder-high to indicate Feldman's 5'4" stature, would add, "he's a helluva guy."<sup>229</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt acknowledged Feldman and his Temple on the occasion of Beth Israel's centenary. Roosevelt's letter reiterated the freedom of American life at a time "when liberty of conscience has been suppressed over large areas of the earth." He expressed the hope that the centenary commemorations would "inspire all who participate with a renewed appreciation of the strength and power that have their source in the everlasting reality of religion."<sup>230</sup>

#### Feldman as Author

Feldman published at least twenty-six books and numerous pamphlets during his lifetime. Some of his efforts have already been mentioned: Confirmation--Twenty-five Confirmation Services, Reform Judaism--A Guide, What to Preach About, and One Hundred Closing Benedictions. His lectures on the rabbinate at his alma mater in 1940 and 1962 were published and entitled, respectively, The Rabbi and His Early Ministry and The American Reform Rabbi--A Profile of a Profession. He compiled the essential elements of his annual messages to the congregation in the volume Words of My Mouth in 1970.

He published at least thirteen volumes of his early sermons in Philadelphia and West Hartford. His liturgical

contributions were The Mourner's Service and a small devotional guide for Reform Jews entitled In Time of Need.<sup>231</sup> He offered a detailed account of the planning and design of Beth Israel's sanctuary in A Modern Synagogue.

Two of Feldman's works proved useful for educational purposes. The American Jew--A Study of Backgrounds was a short history of the roots of American Jewry. Feldman intended it to be used in high school and adult study groups.<sup>232</sup> He wrote A Companion to the Bible as a text for an adult group studying the Bible.<sup>233</sup> He told, in this book, why he felt the Bible should be read and gave information and analyses regarding the divisions of the Bible.

One pamphlet written by Feldman should be noted here. The Committee on Unity for Palestine, a Zionist group comprised mainly of Reform rabbis, asked Feldman in 1944 to compose a short discussion of his Zionist convictions.<sup>234</sup> The brief work, entitled Why I Am A Zionist--A Reform Rabbi's Viewpoint, was an open expression of Feldman's Zionist stand. He offered a concise summary of his viewpoint at the end of the article:

I have merely put down why I am an enthusiastic and convinced Zionist; why I, a religious Jew, a Reform Jew, one who is moderately informed in the history of the Jew and in the religion of Israel, believe that Zionism is an essential part of Judaism. I have suggested why I cannot understand how a good Jew can be indifferent to Palestine reborn.

If I were to sum up the whole matter in a sentence, my answer to the question "Why are you a Zionist?" is this: I am a Zionist because I am a Jew, a Reform Jew, believing in the mission of Israel, a Jew who sees in the Jewish homeland the possibility and assurance of the greater unfoldment of the spiritual genius of Israel.<sup>235</sup>

Feldman's involvement in national organizations and in endeavors with a potentially national scope constituted a major facet of his rabbinate. He was, first, the spiritual leader of his congregation; next, a prime figure in the Greater Hartford area and in Connecticut; and finally, a worker for national groups and causes, either as a national official or a regional representative. The contacts he made with national figures, as well as the fruits of his work, won him some measure of acclaim throughout the country.

#### Abraham Feldman as a Human Being

One aspect of this rabbi has not yet been explored in any detail: Feldman as a person, at home and at his job. Although he noted that the "rabbi" and the "human being" fuse into one person, there were still characteristics which Feldman the man, the Jew, brought to the rabbinate.

When he arrived in Hartford and met with his Board, Feldman enumerated several demands meant to preserve some privacy for himself and his family:

First, that my intimate circle of friends, people with whom I can really relax and let my hair down-- I had hair then!--might not necessarily be members of the congregation, and that I would find congenial spirits in the community with whom I would socialize. I told them that I intended to serve the congregation in every way as a rabbi, but that there were personal choices I would make and that I wanted no comeback on that score. And second, that I wanted them to realize that my family was my family and not the congregation's, that my children were not the property of the congregation, and that we--Mrs. Feldman and I--did not intend to let the congregation meddle in the upbringing of our children.<sup>236</sup>



Friends and family were important to Feldman, due in no small part to his background. Rabbi Benjamin Friedman said of Feldman: "He wanted to be loved so he loved others. It was in his nature to love. His parents, his brother and sisters were loving persons."<sup>237</sup> Feldman kept in touch with his family throughout the years, even though age differences and distance kept them apart.<sup>238</sup> He strongly believed in maintaining happy and healthy family relationships. In Ella Norwood's words,

His children and grandchildren adored him as a loving, devoted father and grandfather who had played an active role in their lives. His wife was help-mate, sweetheart, counsellor, sounding board--she was the major factor in his life-long devotion to service.<sup>239</sup>

The Feldman home was the domain where the rabbi became father and husband. Rabbi Feldman knew that a good home life was essential to his rabbinate. He apparently had that--and it was a Jewish home. Ella Norwood remembered that

we lit the Sabbath lights every Friday evening before dinner, went to Temple services more-or-less regularly (Dad and Mom went every Friday night and Saturday morning); we observed the major and minor holy days and festivals at home. Special prayers were recited by Dad; often special foods were prepared by Mom....All of this was part of my home, nothing special or unusual, a very precious memory to me as I grew older. But Dad was correct that he had "done a job" on me--had he ever!<sup>240</sup>

The correspondence between Feldman and his daughter Joan's father-in-law, Albert F. Mecklenburger, contained discussions of family matters, including a 1941 exchange of opinions on the plans of Albert's son Jerome and Joan

to marry.<sup>241</sup> Mecklenburger was a Jewish leader in Chicago; consequently, the letters dealt with problems of Jewish life. For example, Feldman, in a letter of January 22, 1945, indicated his views regarding the Silver-Wise controversy in the Zionist ranks in America.<sup>242</sup>

There are other traits which Feldman possessed that won him respect and admiration. He had good wit and charm, and was always able to carry on a lively and stimulating conversation.<sup>243</sup> He had a keen sense of etiquette which no one could criticize. He was a perfectionist, and stood firm on his standards. Some congregants remarked, "What he did was right--whether it was wrong or right."<sup>244</sup> This type of assertiveness was probably a key to Feldman's leadership, because a good leader cannot afford to be "wishy-washy." Rabbi Herman Snyder described Feldman as a man of "equal tendencies, never blowing hot or cold--a calm person." He was liked, in general, by his colleagues. They respected him for his service, his knowledge and his personality. He was considered a credit to American Jewry and to the rabbinate.<sup>245</sup>

Feldman developed a pattern of leadership beginning from Beth Israel and extending to the national scene. He associated himself with the work of Jewish, ecumenistic and secular causes. The sphere of Feldman's influence was located primarily in the Greater Hartford area. His participation in Jewish communal life and in general communal activities made him a major figure locally. He dealt with

national leaders from some of those local positions which he held, and from his editorial post on the Ledger. His two years as CCAR President brought him national distinction, probably more than other capacities in which he served, because he was actually the top leader and spokesman for an organization with members spread across the United States. His leadership may not have affected a majority of Americans. It did, however, affect many Jews and non-Jews even beyond Hartford. Therefore, Feldman was, for the most part, a leader in Hartford and environs, a leader for many years among his rabbinic colleagues and, several times in his career, a national leader.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"WHO IS HONORED? HE THAT

HONORS MANKIND"

(Avot 4:1)

### Summary and Conclusion

Abraham Feldman, in many ways, epitomized the American dream. He was born in Russia at a time when persecutions of Jews constituted the rule rather than the exception. Life was modest in nature for him, especially when his family was forced to move from Kiev to Minsk. Yet, he was sustained by diligent study, Zionism, and the hope that he would soon follow his father to America. He arrived in the United States not long before his thirteenth birthday, and rapidly adapted to life on New York's Lower East Side. He showed competence and determination in his first employment. Like his fellow Zionists, Abba Hillel Silver and Benjamin Friedman, Feldman chose to devote his energies and loyalties to entering the American Reform rabbinate. He saw this career as a medium through which he could serve his country and his people and make a respectable living. He was a successful student at Hebrew Union College who adopted Reform Judaism--as viewed by his teachers--while clinging to his love and concern for the totality of the Jewish people.

His first years in the rabbinate taught him formulae for success. He served under Stephen Wise and Joseph Krauskopf, two of the greatest leaders in the history of American Reform Jewry. One rabbi impressed upon him the value of speaking his mind; the second provided him with a total paradigm for the rabbinate--a pattern of organizing, working in the community, preaching and serving both Jews and non-Jews. Feldman learned from both rabbis that Zionism and Reform Judaism could be reconciled. He could, as a Reform rabbi, love Jews and love Palestine. Yet, his love extended to all people, so that he would serve in both the Jewish and general communities.

Abraham Feldman shaped Congregation Beth Israel of West Hartford, Connecticut. He patiently educated his people, touching the lives of at least three generations of Jews. His congregants knew him as an excellent orator and teacher, an effective administrator, a sincere pastor and one with deep convictions. Feldman emulated his mentors at Hebrew Union College and in the field when it came to theology, a philosophy of Reform Judaism, and the causes to which he devoted his attention. By the time he returned to his alma mater to speak about the rabbinate, he had developed his own paradigm for the profession. He retired from Beth Israel in 1968 leaving his personal stamp and image on the congregation.

In the community, Feldman was a concerned Jew and an outstanding American citizen. His addresses to Rotary in



Hartford on Thanksgiving testified to his high status among local citizenry. When he delivered one of those talks, Feldman was representing Hartford Jewry as the "Jewish ambassador." At the same time, the general community was recognizing him as the prime advocate of democracy and freedom in Greater Hartford. In his positions of national leadership, especially the CCAR presidency, Feldman strove to be fair to people of all types and viewpoints. He was one of the most distinguished members of the CCAR in terms of his overall record of achievements.

What was significant about Feldman's career? First, he was an immigrant Jewish boy, who came from a family of modest means, that successfully ascended to a higher position in society. He was a man of great ambitions; his colleagues saw him as one willing to work hard to achieve and advance himself. They watched as he completed a long process of acculturation while at Hebrew Union College--a process that transformed him into a rabbi with Jewish and American interests.

Second, he learned how to incorporate the Jewish culture he loved into his profession. Feldman remained a dedicated Hebraist, Yiddishist and Zionist throughout his life. He saw the people Israel as a total community from his youth. He propounded the view, therefore, that "all Jews are responsible for one another"; this applied to Reform Jews as well as Orthodox and Conservative. Through-

out his rabbinate, he transmitted to all this awareness of K'lal Yisrael, whether in his editorials, in sermons or addresses to his congregants, or in talks before the Central Conference.

Third, Feldman excelled in nearly every aspect of his rabbinate. He was an efficient worker, a fine organizer, a highly-acclaimed preacher, and a firm believer in the foundations of Reform Judaism as he had formulated them. He was viewed by congregants and colleagues as a caring individual who sincerely devoted himself to causes and to serving others.

Was Feldman as great a leader as men like Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver? There is no real answer to this question. Comparisons are invidious and would accomplish little for this evaluation. Wise and Silver may have held more positions of national leadership than Feldman. Some national leaders, Wise and Silver excluded, had little influence in their own locale. This was not the case with Abraham Feldman. He was considered a model citizen and a representative Jew in Greater Hartford. It was that recognition that made him worthy of national leadership. Within the major circles of his activities--Hartford and the Central Conference--Feldman possessed a high degree of visibility and notability. His accomplishments, in and of themselves, earned him the reputation of a devoted Jew and American. His dealings with Jews and non-Jews alike won him praise--as a human being who served humankind and as an American Reform rabbi.

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