

Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman:
A critical study of his life and career

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DIGEST

The aim of this thesis project is to provide a critical study of the active life and noteworthy career of Rabbi Ferdinand Myron Isserman.

Chapter one provides a brief biographical overview of Isserman's life. It includes material relating to his family, education, early years as a student-rabbi and career as a rabbi in Philadelphia, PA; Toronto, Canada; and St. Louis, MO.

Chapter two is devoted to Isserman's extensive writings. Through a study of his books, sermons, radio broadcasts and editorials, this chapter examines the issues that Isserman addressed throughout his career.

Starting with his earliest days as a student rabbi in Johnstown, PA, chapter three describes Isserman's work for social justice. This chapter focuses on his involvement, successes and struggles in this field while providing some of Isserman's reasons for engaging in these activities.

Chapter four highlights Isserman's work and accomplishments in interfaith dialogue and his work as a prominent leader in interfaith issues. The chapter includes a brief history of interfaith work in the United States and the Reform movement before bringing attention to Isserman's successes in bringing large numbers of clergy and worshippers together for study, worship and the pursuit of social justice.

In the early 1930's, Isserman distinguished himself by raising awareness of the impending calamity that ultimately befell European Jewry in Nazi Germany. Isserman took note of the looming disaster at a very early stage in the reign of the Third Reich. Chapter five focuses on Isserman's insights and the work that he did to alert the world to the dangers that he saw in Germany.

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Chapter 1 – Biographical Overview

This chapter will explore Ferdinand Myron Isserman's life by providing a biographical overview. It will include material relating to his early years, his family, his education and his career as a student at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and as a young rabbi in Johnstown and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Toronto, Canada; and St. Louis, Missouri.

The Early Years

It is the custom among some Jews to name a newborn baby after a living family member whom the parents would like to honor. Among other Jews, the custom is to name the child after a deceased relative as a sign of respect and a tribute to the memory of the loved one. For both groups of Jews, the hope is that the good qualities of the person whose name is selected will be inherited by the baby to whom the name has been given. Following one of these customs, Ferdinand Myron Isserman was named after his grandfather, Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman. Due to contradicting records, it is unclear whether Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman was living or deceased at the time of Ferdinand Isserman's birth.¹ However, it is clear that Ferdinand's parents hoped he would inherit his grandfather's knowledge and one day follow his footsteps in the rabbinate.

¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Thirty Years in the Rabbinate*. Sermon, March 21, 1952. The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. Manuscript Collection 6, Box 18, Folder 7. From this point on, all materials from the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati Campus of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion will be noted: "AJA. *Manuscript Collection Number, Box Number, Folder Number*." According to this sermon delivered by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman, his grandfather died three days after he was born. According to a family genealogy of Rabbi Meyer Isserman [Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462, his grandfather died a few months before he was born.

Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman, also known as the *pickeler rebbe*,² was an Orthodox Rabbi. For twenty years he served as the Rosh Yeshiva,³ director, of the Hebrew College of Learning in Kovno, Russia,⁴ the same city where he was born (b. 1829?)⁵ and died.⁶ According to some, Rabbi Meyer Isserman was considered a leading Talmudist of his age.⁷ While teaching and directing the school in Kovno, Rabbi Meyer Isserman used methods of the Musar Movement which stressed ethical study and conduct. The movement also encouraged its followers to engage not only in religious study, but also in the daily life of their community. As we will see later in this thesis, Ferdinand M. Isserman's rabbinical calling seems to have been influenced by his knowledge of his grandfather's career. In fact, the same day that Ferdinand's father received notice of his father's death, he received a letter from his father with suggestions on how to rear Ferdinand. After reading the letter, Ferdinand's father "...expressed the hope that the mantle of the rabbinate which [his] grandfather was compelled to release would fall upon [his son's] shoulders."⁸ Ferdinand's parents clearly hoped that their newborn son would one day become a rabbi.

² Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. Nd. AJA. Nearprints Box 2.

⁴ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

⁷ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Thirty Years in the Rabbinate*. St. Louis: March 21, 1952. AJA. 6,18,7.

Ferdinand Myron Isserman was born on March 4, 1898 in Antwerp, Belgium. He was the third of eight children born to Betty Brodheim and Alexander Isserman.⁹ Ferdinand had two older brothers, Leopold and Morris and five younger siblings, Abraham, Jacob, Rose, Emily and Sidney (in order of birth).¹⁰ According to some records, Ferdinand's father was in the importing business¹¹ and the records suggest that he primarily dealt with diamonds.¹²

Little has been written about Ferdinand's mother, Betty Brodheim. She was born on February 26, 1872,¹³ making her about a year and a half younger than her future husband, Alexander. According to a speech that Ferdinand Isserman delivered in 1967, his mother was educated in a convent in Vienna.¹⁴ In 1906, Isserman's mother followed his father's plan. She organized the family's move to the United States by selling most of their belongings and purchased tickets on the S.S. Vaterland of the Red Star Line.¹⁵ According to Isserman, his family's intentions were to move from Antwerp, Belgium to St. Louis, Missouri. After arriving in New York, "...the plans were altered and instead [they] came

⁹ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462. In 1978, Leopold Isserman, Rabbi Isserman's oldest brother, compiled a family tree for Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and his descendants that lists Alexander as Ferdinand's father. In "A Biography and Synopsis of His Life" compiled by Ruth Isserman and stored at the AJA, it is recorded that Ferdinand's father was Abraham.

¹⁰ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

¹¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6, 17, 7.

¹² Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

¹³ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

¹⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Clergy Man of the Year Award*. St. Louis: February 3, 1967. AJA. 6, 6, 15.

¹⁵ -----, *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6, 17, 7.

to Newark, New Jersey.”¹⁶ The Issermans remained in Newark. In 1914, Ferdinand graduated from Newark’s Central High School.¹⁷

Student Life

After graduating from high school, Isserman began the journey on the path towards the rabbinate – a path that Isserman’s parents and grandfather, from the time of his birth, hoped he would choose. He applied to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, matriculating in September 1914.¹⁸ Isserman indicated that his mission was one which was supported not only by his parents, but also by his brothers who worked to support him financially while he was at HUC.¹⁹ In a valedictory speech near the end of his career, Isserman recalled gratefully “...how one brother of mine, no longer with us...worked and went to school studying law at night that I might be able to enter the Hebrew Union College.”²⁰ Isserman also recognized the role that Rabbi Solomon Foster, Associate Rabbi of B’nai Jeshuron, played in his matriculation at the College. It is likely that Foster was the Isserman family’s congregational rabbi and that through their membership, the two developed a relationship.²¹ Isserman credited him with making his matriculation possible and for helping to give him “...standing with the faculty on...arrival there.”²²

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6.6.13.

¹⁸ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6.6.13.

¹⁹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

²⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. Nd. AJA. Nearprints Box 2. The brother was most likely his older brother Morris who died in May 23, 1947.

²¹ Although membership records could not be located which verified that the Issermans were members of Foster’s congregation, B’nai Jeshuron, there were family members who were connected to B’nai Jeshuron until 2007. In 2007, Laura (Miller) Isserman, Ferdinand M. Isserman’s sister-in-law, died. The officiating

Isserman entered HUC with 15 other students²³ and began the course of study which was supposed to take nine years. However, due to his summer studies, he was able to complete his studies at HUC in eight years.²⁴ In 1917, Isserman earned a Bachelor of Hebrew degree from HUC. He received a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Cincinnati in 1919.²⁵ In sermons, addresses and correspondence, Isserman recalled the many lessons he learned while in these institutions as well as the professors who were most influential in his life. At the University of Cincinnati, he wrote about Professors Harry Lewis Wieman²⁶ and Max Poll.²⁷

Professor Poll was a member of the German Department. It was Poll who introduced the play, "Nathan the Wise" by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to Isserman.²⁸ In a letter to University of Cincinnati President, Walter C. Langsam, Isserman writes, the play "...had

rabbi at the funeral was Rabbi Michael Friedman of B'nai Jeshuron. E-mail correspondence with Friedman. February 12, 2008.

²² ---, Correspondence with Mr. Anton Kaufman, November 24, 1926. AJA. 6,5,13.

²³ ---, *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6,17,7.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6,6,13.

²⁶ "Weichert, Charles K. "Harry Lewis Wieman, 1883-1964." Submitted to the members of the Delta Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa on May 21, 1964. University of Cincinnati Archives. c/o Kevin Grace. Harry Lewis Wieman (1883-1964) was a University of Cincinnati alumnus and faculty member. Wieman was first appointed as an instructor in Natural Sciences in 1905. After completing his Ph.D. degree at the University of Chicago in less than two years, he returned to UC where he would serve as an instructor in biology, assistant professor, associate professor, professor and head of the department until his retirement in 1948. "... Wieman was widely known for his researches in cytology, embryology and experimental morphology and for his textbooks on general zoology and embryology."

²⁷ Zeydel, Edwin H. "Max Poll, 1859-1937." Biographies File. University of Cincinnati Archives. c/o Kevin Grace. Max Poll, a German immigrant, taught at Harvard University for ten years before moving to Cincinnati to become the chair of the German Department at the University of Cincinnati. He was eulogized as one who "...belonged to that old school of teachers who were also inspirers, to whom human associations and influences were even more important than books."

²⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand. *Correspondence with Walter C. Langsam*. Nd. AJA. 6,5,14. The play is a plea for religious tolerance. The main character, Nathan, is believed to have been modeled after Moses Maimonides.

a profound influence in my thinking and moved me consequently to do graduate work...to make comparative religions my major study..."²⁹ Professor Harry Lewis Wieman was in the Zoology Department. In an address, Isserman says that it was he who "opened my eyes to the mystery and majesty of the theory of evolution and how subsequently I learned that it could be blended beautifully with the concepts of Judaism."³⁰

At Hebrew Union College, Isserman found Moses Bottenwieser, Gotthard Deutsch, and Julian Morgenstern to be among the most influential professors. Bottenwieser and Deutsch "...were prophetically oriented more so than other members of the faculty and had a great impact on all the students."³¹ It was from Bottenwieser and Deutsch that Isserman learned that "...the basis of Reform Judaism [was] the teachings of the prophets of Israel and [these teachers] emphasized their social message."³² Later in his life, Isserman worried that the message of Israel's prophets, which was so essential to him and his rabbinate, was not being conveyed to the students of the seminary.³³

According to Isserman's wife, Ruth, it was Professor Julian Morgenstern who opened the door to Biblical Criticism for Isserman and other students. Biblical Criticism influenced

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. Nd. AJA. Nearprints Box 2.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

³³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Dr. Nelson Glueck*. April 10, 1967. AJA. 6.4.9. In the letter, Isserman writes to Dr. Nelson Glueck, President of the College that he missed in his report "...that it is the duty of the rabbi to relate the teachings of the prophets to the situation of the community." Isserman noted that the pastoral training of the rabbi was replacing the "prophetic spark."

much of Isserman's writings³⁴ and his work. Ruth Isserman wrote that "As a result of this type of schooling, [my husband] reached beyond the walls of the Temple to the community at large, as he interpreted the Bible, the Old Testament, to Christians as well as Jews."³⁵

Isserman was an active member of the UC and HUC community. He was involved in clubs, sports, politics and much more. At the University of Cincinnati, Isserman was on the debate team³⁶ and a "star player" on the basketball team.³⁷ Isserman received two Varsity letters from the University of Cincinnati. He also played for the HUC Basketball team and was the team captain.³⁸ In 1920-21, Isserman served as the President of the Literary Society of HUC.³⁹

While fulfilling the responsibilities of his Literary Society position, Isserman wrote a news brief⁴⁰ for *The Hebrew Union College Monthly* which almost resulted in his suspension and expulsion from the College. In the brief, Isserman wrote that the Literary Society was soliciting funds from the alumni and also included a list of speakers that was submitted to Dr. Kohler for approval.⁴¹ This news brief followed a note from the Board of Governors to the Literary Society stating that students were not permitted to solicit

³⁴ In *This is Judaism*, Isserman expands on the influence of Biblical Criticism and how it has allowed Prophetic Judaism to thrive.

³⁵ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972, Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6,6,13.

³⁸ Bloom, Isaac. *Correspondence with Isserman*, October 30, 1919. AJA. 6,4,15.

³⁹ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6,6,13.

⁴⁰ Rosenberg, Samuel, ed. *The Hebrew Union College Monthly*: "The Literary Society" by Ferdinand M. Isserman. November 1920. Volume 7, No 1. Cincinnati, OH. Pg 22-23.

⁴¹ Ibid.

funds without the permission of the College.⁴² Members of the Faculty and Board of Governors also felt that Isserman's report forced Kohler into a difficult position because it made his rejection of any speakers a public matter. Isserman was brought before the Faculty and charged with accusing the President of the College "...with illiberality and an intention to restrict mental freedom."⁴³ Isserman denied that this was his intention.

While the faculty could not prove it, they felt that Isserman was being dishonest. In a faculty meeting three days later, Professor Lauterbach gave a presentation "against the retention of Isserman"⁴⁴ as a student. In addition to the issues raised about the HUC Monthly news brief, Lauterbach argued that Isserman did not share the same ideals or principles of the Faculty, College, or institutions of the movement. He also shared that it would be a disservice to ordain Isserman with his ideas of a "...new social order, which are not held by the vast majority of the organizations whom the College represents."⁴⁵ Lauterbach goes on to say that Isserman, "...by his attitude and his indiscreet utterances...has hurt the prestige of the college."⁴⁶

Four faculty members voted that Isserman should be asked to withdraw or they would expel him. Five faculty members voted against this. It is interesting to note that some of those who voted against Isserman's dismissal were the faculty members who influenced Isserman's ideology and may have supported the "new social order" to which Lauterbach

⁴² Bloom, Isaac, *Correspondence from Board of Governors*, December 2, 1920, AJA 6, 4, 15.

⁴³ HUC Faculty Minutes, Sept 1917 to June 1921, Pg 33, AJA, MS Collection 5, Box B-3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, Pg 36, December 10, 1920.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

makes reference and Isserman attempts to spread. This new order was one that called for justice and democracy and challenged some of the existing powers. According to the minutes of the faculty meeting, Isserman's supporters were Professors Buttenweiser, Neumark, Deutsch, Marcus and Grossman.⁴⁷ Marcus felt so strongly about this decision that he even indicates in his diary that he would never vote to expel Isserman.⁴⁸ A few weeks later, Marcus writes that there was a joint meeting of the board to decide Isserman and Rosenberg's fate. According to Marcus, Buttenweiser and Neumark "...fought like tigers for the boys."⁴⁹

Along with some statements, the faculty delivered their decision to the Board of Governors who "...unanimously disapprove[d] of the action and recommend[ed] that the faculty be requested to suspend the student..."⁵⁰ Isserman knew that the charges were serious. He was eventually given the opportunity to defend himself⁵¹ and succeeded in his own defense. On March 14, Isserman made his plea and was put on probation for the remainder of the year.⁵² While Isserman did not change his style and continued to advocate for issues that Lauterbach would define as a "new social order," he avoided further confrontation by following the demands of the College and abiding by their rules.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Diary Aug 1917-March 1924*. January 4, 1921. AJA 210, 14, 4.

⁴⁹ Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Diary Aug 1917-March 1924*. January 22, 1921. AJA 210, 14, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 49.

⁵¹ Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Diary Aug 1917-March 1924*. March 12, 1921. AJA 210, 14, 4. In his diary, Marcus indicated that Rosenberg had resigned from the College while Isserman continued to fight his case. Marcus predicted that Isserman would be put on probation by the Board.

⁵² Marcus, Jacob Rader. *Diary Aug 1917-March 1924*. March 14, 1921. AJA 210, 14, 4

During the following school year, 1921-22, Isserman served as the President of the student body. So, while he may not have found favor with some members of the faculty, he certainly had the approval of the student body. In addition to serving as a representative of the students at different college events,⁵³ Isserman addressed some of the needs of the students. One issue that Isserman took up dealt with the use of towels in the dorms and how they were distributed to dorm residents. Isserman recommended a new policy to Acting President Dr. Julian Morgenstern which was later adopted.⁵⁴ In 1921, Isserman was responsible for a petition which was sent to the Board of Governors requesting that "...a gymnasium be included in the proposed Dormitory."⁵⁵

It appears that during the school year and summers, Isserman was engaged with social welfare work.⁵⁶ In the HUC Faculty Minutes from December 10, 1920, Professor Jacob Z. Lauterbach mentioned Isserman's work with the Jewish Settlement in Cincinnati, the Wise Camp in Cleveland, and the Jewish Orphan Asylum in Cleveland.⁵⁷ Though exempt as a theological student, Isserman volunteered for the Infantry and served the US Army stateside.⁵⁸ "...[W]hen the war was over, [Isserman] was in officer's training school at Camp Grant, Rockford, IL."⁵⁹

⁵³ *Program from Kaufmann Kohler Banquet*, June 1, 1921, AJA, 6.4,15.

⁵⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Dr. Julian Morgenstern*, AJA, 5, A-12, 17.

⁵⁵ -----, *Petition stapled to Correspondence with Isaac Bloom*, November 28, 1921, AJA, 6.4,15.

⁵⁶ Lashman, L. Edward, *Correspondence with Isserman*, January 7, 1920, AJA, 6.5,14. In a letter dated January 7, 1920, L. Edward Lashman, Superintendent of the Jewish Orphan Asylum in Cleveland, OH, responded to a letter from Isserman in which he indicated that he would "consider the position as summer governor at the Home."

⁵⁷ Faculty HUC Minutes: September 1917 to June 1921. Hebrew Union College File. AJA Manuscript Collection 5, Box B-3.

⁵⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Scrapbook 1930-1972: Some Outstanding Achievements of Rabbi Isserman*, AJA, Rare Documents File.

⁵⁹ -----, *Correspondence with Frank L. Weil*, April 1, 1942, AJA, 6.6,7.

In addition to this work, Isserman also served as a student rabbi in a number of small pulpits. In 1917, Isserman conducted High Holy Day services for the first time for a community in Bridgeport, Connecticut.⁶⁰ The following year, Isserman served the Jewish community in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The members of the congregation liked the work that he did and wrote to the College requesting that he return the following year. Isserman did return but, this time, due to some apparently stinging comments he made regarding the steel workers' strike and the congregants' "social sinfulness"⁶¹ during one of his sermons, a letter was sent to the College requesting that Isserman not return to Johnstown the following year. Instead, Isserman served a congregation in Bloomington, Illinois⁶² and during his senior year, served a bi-monthly in Paducah, Kentucky.⁶³

As a final requirement for ordination, Isserman wrote his thesis on a protégé of Moses Mendelssohn, David Friedlander. Friedlander was an eighteenth and nineteenth century maskil.⁶⁴ As the title of his thesis⁶⁵ suggested, Friedlander was an emancipator, a theme which Isserman's wife, Ruth, later recollected "resonated throughout Isserman's career."⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. Nd. AJA. Nearprints Box 2.

⁶¹ Isserman, Ferdinand. *Valedictory Sermon*. March 8, 1963. AJA. 6.21.6. The steel workers' strike and Isserman's comments will be further described in the "Areas of Involvement" section of Chapter 3.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Announcement*. Nd. AJA. 6.6.13.

⁶⁴ Maskil means "enlightened one" and refers to someone during the Enlightenment period who was able to integrate science and religion. They used reason and logic to defend their religious beliefs.

⁶⁵ The title of his thesis is *David Friedlander an Emancipator*. It is interesting to note that on April 6, 1921 on page 77 of the Faculty Meeting Minutes in the AJA, Isserman's thesis topic was approved. At the time, Isserman's topic was "The Ethical Book Sefer Hayashar and its Significance in Ethical Literature." It is unclear when and why Isserman changed topics.

⁶⁶ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

Isserman graduated HUC in 1922. Although there were fifteen students who began with him in 1914, there were only five in his graduating class.⁶⁷ Upon his ordination, Isserman received a number of job offers. During the intervening years, the congregation in Johnstown, Pennsylvania must have concluded that it actually wanted a rabbi who would speak his mind and not toe the line, because that congregation offered Isserman a position. Temple Israel, the congregation he had been serving in Paducah, also made an offer.⁶⁸ Later in life, Isserman reflected that he "...dreaded the thought of going to a small community and...cherished the opportunity of becoming an assistant to a distinguished rabbi in a big city."⁶⁹ A third offer was made by members of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia, PA.

Congregation Life

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Isserman began his rabbinic career serving as an assistant rabbi at Congregation Rodeph Shalom, a charter member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC).⁷⁰ It was there that Rabbi Foster,⁷¹ "...delivered the installation charge and formally

⁶⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. March 5, 1948. AJA. 6, 17, 7. Four of the other five ordinees were Dr. Stern of Montreal, Rabbi Stern of Oakland, Dr. Markowitz of Philadelphia, and Dr. Starrels of Albuquerque. The fifth was not listed in his sermon.

⁶⁸ Gruenebaum, J. J. *Correspondence with Isserman*. June 6, 1922. AJA. 6, 6, 11. J.J. Gruenebaum, secretary of the Temple, sent Isserman a letter stating there was a meeting at the Temple and he had been "...instructed to offer [Isserman] our pulpit for the ensuing year, at a salary of \$3600 per year."

⁶⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6, 17, 7.

⁷⁰ Olitzky, Kerry M. *The American Synagogue: A Historical Dictionary and Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. The UAHC is now known as the URJ – the Union for Reform Judaism and is the umbrella organization serving Reform Jewish communities in North America.

⁷¹ Rabbi Solomon Foster from B'nai Jeshuron helped connect Isserman to HUC in Cincinnati.

introduced [him] to [his] first congregation."⁷² At Rodeph Shalom, Isserman was the Assistant Rabbi to the Rev. Dr. Harry W. Ettelson⁷³ from 1922 to 1925.

While at Rodeph Shalom, Isserman's duties were not excessively demanding. He served as the principal of the Temple's school. He also started a graduation program in which students continued their religious studies post-Confirmation and marked their graduation at the end of their senior year in high school with a special Shabbat morning service. In his last year, they celebrated the second annual graduation with a graduating class comprised of six students.⁷⁴ It appears that Isserman may have participated in the forming of the Rodeph Shalom High School club, part of whose purpose was "...to advance the spiritual, intellectual, recreational and social interests of the members..."⁷⁵

Since Isserman's rabbinical duties were far from demanding,⁷⁶ he had time to further his academic career. Isserman enrolled in courses in Talmud and post-Biblical Hebrew Poetry at Dropsie College. Inspired by his professors at both the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College, Isserman also "...majored in comparative religion, and after two years received [his] master's degree."⁷⁷ Reflecting back on her husband's life, Ruth Isserman noted that the master's degree

⁷² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Mr. Anton Kaufman*, November 24, 1926. AJA. 6,5,13. This took place on the eve of September 21, 1922.

⁷³ AJA. *Isserman Finding Aids*, Manuscript Collection #6, "Biographical Sketch."

⁷⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Second Annual Graduation of the Rodeph Shalom Religious High School*, May 16, 1925. AJA. 6,6,13.

⁷⁵ -----, *Proposed Constitution for Rodeph Shalom High School Club*, N.d. AJA. 6,6,13.

⁷⁶ -----, *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*, March 5, 1948. AJA. 6,17,7.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

...had a profound effect on his ecumenical activities. He became very aware of the things we had in common with our Christian friends and the things where we differed. I believe his ability to become close friends with so many of his Christian colleagues was the result of the understanding he became aware of from these studies.⁷⁸

Reminiscent of his time at HUC, Isserman's work at Rodeph Shalom was not without controversy. In 1923, Isserman invited the well known writer, Ludwig Lewisohn,⁷⁹ to speak to the congregation's high school students. It is probable that it was Lewisohn's Zionist fervor which prompted Rodeph Shalom's Board of Directors to cancel the forum at which he was to speak. Though Isserman expressed interest in appealing this decision to the board, he was not given the opportunity.⁸⁰

After leaving Rodeph Shalom, Isserman reflected on some of the controversies in Philadelphia. In a letter, Isserman wrote that he "paid the price" at the congregation because of his "...desire to see the justice of the prophets applied in the field of economics."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

⁷⁹ Lewisohn was a Jewish critic who spoke out against Jewish assimilation. He was also a proponent of Zionism and wrote books on both Judaism and Zionism. His most famous work during his lifetime was *The Island Within* which focused on Jewish identity and assimilation.

⁸⁰ Fox, Charles Edwin. *Correspondence with Isserman*. February 20, 1923. AJA. 6,6,13.

⁸¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Simon Miller*. February 1, 1927. AJA. 6,6,4.

On June 6, 1923, Isserman married Ruth Frankenstein of Chicago.⁸² The two met while Isserman was still studying at HUC and working for Sigma Alpha Mu as a traveling secretary. During one trip to the University of Illinois in Champaign, Isserman met Frankenstein who was a freshman.⁸³ The year following their wedding, they gave birth to their first of two children, Irma Betty Isserman on October 24, 1924.⁸⁴

In February 1925, the Board of Rodeph Shalom decided that they only needed the services of one rabbi. Isserman therefore submitted his resignation "...to take effect when [he] shall have accepted a call to another pulpit, or at any other time that the Congregation may designate."⁸⁵ Isserman was soon offered a rabbinic position elsewhere and delivered his "Farewell Sermon" on June 6, 1925. Though his farewell remarks are optimistic and describe his excitement for the work which lay ahead, it is not difficult to discern in the sermon intimations of Isserman's bitterness toward some of the congregation's leaders. In his farewell sermon, he writes, "I at this time cannot but express my regret that the courtesies usually extended by a congregation to a departing rabbi are to be denied me. I am consoled by the thought that some of your leaders who

⁸² Rubin, Rabbi Alvan D. *St. Louis Globe Democrat*. Nd. AJA. Isserman Nearprints, Box 2. Ruth (Frankenstein) Isserman was born in Chicago, IL. She was the daughter of physician. Ruth Isserman was quite accomplished in her own right, and, with the encouragement of her husband, in 1939 opened Camp Chickagami (<http://www.indiana.edu/~chicka/>). Ruth Isserman served as the director of the camp until 1962.

⁸³ Isserman, Ferdinand Jr. *Personal Interview*. 24 February 2008 and Internet. <http://www.indiana.edu/~chicka/ruth.shtml> "About Ruth." February 24, 2008. As a traveling secretary, Isserman would travel to various college campuses and would report to Sigma Alpha Mu, a Jewish fraternity, about the different opportunities that were available to them on the various campuses.

⁸⁴ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman*. 1978. AJA. Genealogy files 462.

⁸⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Charles Edwin Fox*. February 19, 1925. AJA. 6.6.13.

are responsible for this. do not represent your spirit and your kind feeling for me. It is another example of representative government which fails to represent.”⁸⁶

Regardless of these feelings. Isserman expressed his appreciation for the freedom he was given. “You disagreed at times but listened to me. You were shocked at times, but gave me my hearing and you helped me formulate my philosophy of life and Judaism.”⁸⁷ This freedom of the pulpit was important to Isserman throughout his career and was something he would request during sermons upon arriving at a new congregation.

Toronto, Canada

Isserman next served as the rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, Canada from 1925-1929. It was there that he gave birth to his second child, Ferdinand Isserman, Jr. who was born September 9, 1928. As the only rabbi of the congregation, Isserman was able to apply what he had learned and was able to raise awareness concerning issues he wished to address.

First, there were changes in regards to practice by the congregants. Isserman began a Sunday morning lecture service. According to Isserman, this was the first of its kind in Canada.⁸⁸ Isserman was “...somewhat apprehensive as to how these services [would] be received.”⁸⁹ Fortunately for his career, they were adopted by the congregation and he

⁸⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*. June 6, 1925. AJA. 6,11,3. In the sermon, Isserman writes that he does not want “a tragic quality to be the dominant motif of [his] remarks.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*. June 21, 1929. AJA. 6, 12, 1.

⁸⁹ -----, *Correspondence with Dr. Nathan Krass*. November 4, 1927. AJA. 6.5,13.

continued these during his tenure in Toronto. In addition to changing the day of the service, the wearing of hats during worship services at Holy Blossom also became optional during Isserman's tenure.⁹⁰

While Isserman was in Toronto, he led the congregation in new directions that reflected his progressive ideas. For instance, he supported the drive that resulted in giving women all the privileges of membership at Holy Blossom.⁹¹ Isserman "...also organized the Men's Club, introduced the Temple Bulletin and organized High Holy Day Services for the religiously unaffiliated."⁹² One reason for some of these changes may stem from the Isserman's belief that the message and lessons of Judaism were universal and that if this message was to be spread, more people needed to know about it and learn it. Through his work at Holy Blossom, he was ensuring that there would be more people with whom the message could be shared.

Isserman wanted to have an effect on the beliefs of his congregants. Though not popular at the time, Isserman was a Zionist who heeded the message of Rabbis Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver. As a Zionist, he felt that it was important for other Jews to be Zionists as well. He desired to teach his congregants that Zionism can be a part of Reform Jewish thought and took a number of steps to teach them this message. For example, Isserman invited Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver to lead a lunch for some of his

⁹⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*, June 21, 1929. AJA. 6, 12, 1.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Anshan, Mark S., Jane Herman, Judy Nyman, Rabbi Yael Splanky, editors. *A Synagogue for these Times: The Installation of Rabbi John Moskowitz as 12th Senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple*. Toronto, Canada: Holy Blossom Temple, 2000.

congregational leaders who were non-Zionist, in hopes that Rabbi Silver would be able to "arouse their interest in the Zionist movement."⁹³

In 1928, Isserman delivered a sermon at Holy Blossom on the role that Judaism's prophetic ideals should play in the life of the congregation. Subsequently, excerpts from that oration appeared in the Temple's bulletin. The young rabbi told his congregants that "A synagogue is judged only by the measure in which it stimulates its members to live to practise [sic] the prophetic ideals."⁹⁴ To Isserman, this meant being involved in life outside the Temple walls and helping to create a world which Judaism's prophetic exhortations advocated.

Isserman practiced what he preached. During his tenure in Toronto, Isserman worked on behalf of social change and progressive ideals. For example, after seeing the wounds on one of his students and hearing about corporal punishment in the schools from other students, Isserman became involved in an effort to abolish corporal punishment in the Toronto public schools. Unfortunately for Isserman, and many students, he was unsuccessful in this campaign because he was seen as an American outsider and because he was unable to recruit those with the power and influence at the time.

Isserman's work beyond the walls of the synagogue continued. As someone who believed in an enduring peace, he was looking for ways to celebrate peace and help to move others

⁹³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver*, March 16, 1926. AJA, 6,9,5.

⁹⁴ Holy Blossom Temple. *Holy Blossom: Toronto Hebrew Congregation Weekly Bulletins*, 1928-9. March 10, 1928. AJA. Nearprints, Box 2.

in this direction. Armistice Day⁹⁵ does not go unobserved during Isserman's career. In fact, he arranged for the first inter-denominational Armistice Day service in Toronto.⁹⁶

Another important achievement by Isserman while in Canada was his initiation of the first pulpit exchanges. The following well known exchange will be further explored in Chapter 5. In February of 1928, Isserman arranged for the first known pulpit exchange between a rabbi and a minister in the history of Canada and the British Empire.⁹⁷ The Rev. E. Crossley Hunter, a minister of the St. Carlton United Church of Canada, who had been attending services at Holy Blossom, suggested the exchange.⁹⁸ Hunter spoke at Holy Blossom and that night, Isserman spoke at his church. The services were so well attended that when Isserman went to speak at the church, there was no place to park and the police parked his car for him.⁹⁹ According to the traffic police, more than 5,000 people were turned away that night.¹⁰⁰ Isserman was pleased with the exchange and in a letter wrote, "Both services made a very splendid impression on the community and helped towards breaking down some of the prejudice in our city."¹⁰¹

Just over a year after moving to Canada, Isserman was recommended to be the rabbi at Ohabai Shalom, also known then known as the Vine Street Temple and now known as

⁹⁵ Armistice Day is the anniversary of the end of World War I. It is celebrated on November 11 and observes the armistice, peace agreement, signed between Germany and the Allies.

⁹⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Scrapbook 1930-1972: Some Outstanding Achievements of Rabbi Isserman*. AJA, Rare Documents File.

⁹⁷ *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman*, May 8, 1967. AJA, 6,26,9.

⁹⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Twenty Years in the Rabbinate*, November 1, 1942. AJA, 6,16,4.

⁹⁹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

¹⁰⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Twenty Years in the Rabbinate*, November 1, 1942. AJA, 6,16,4.

¹⁰¹ -----, *Correspondence with Sigmund Samuel*, February 10, 1928. AJA, 6,7,1.

The Temple, in Nashville. A former member of his Paducah, Kentucky congregation approached Isserman to see if he was interested in filling the Nashville congregation's vacant pulpit. Isserman politely declined the opportunity saying "It happens that I have here in Toronto as big an opportunity as I want for some time to come..."¹⁰² Within a few years, however, his feelings would change. Isserman later wrote, "I found that the boundary line between the United States and Canada was not an imaginary one. It was a wall, and I frequently was lonely, missing American contacts and the American way."¹⁰³ After 3 years in Toronto, Isserman accepted a new pulpit in St. Louis, Missouri: Temple Israel.

St. Louis, Missouri

In September of 1928, Isserman read "...on the front page of one of the Toronto newspapers a very small item about the tragic death of [Rabbi] Leon Harrison."¹⁰⁴ At the time, Isserman did not realize the impact this man's death would have on his future. When the search for a new rabbi began, the leaders of Temple Israel in St. Louis "...made it clear that they wanted a scholar, orator, a man inclined to interfaith, ecumenical and social issues and who must be very liberal."¹⁰⁵ As a result of an endorsement from the renowned New York rabbi, Stephen S. Wise,¹⁰⁶ Isserman was

¹⁰² ----, Correspondence, September 8, 1926, AJA, 6,9,5.

¹⁰³ ----, *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*, St. Louis: March 5, 1948, AJA, 6,17,7.

¹⁰⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*, St. Louis: March 5, 1948, AJA, 6,17,7.

Rabbi Harrison, the Rabbi of Temple Israel in St. Louis, suffered a tragic death in the subways during a trip to New York City. After falling onto the tracks, he was hit by one of the trains.

¹⁰⁵ Tabscott, Robert. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. "Commentary," April 10, 1997, AJA, Nearprints, Box 2.

¹⁰⁶ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA, Rabbi Wise told the rabbinic search committee that Isserman was the most promising of the young rabbis.

invited to speak.¹⁰⁷ By that point in time, Wise and Isserman had developed, at a minimum, a collegial relationship that began in 1922 or earlier. The first record of correspondence between the two is a congratulatory note that was sent from Wise to Isserman on the occasion of his rabbinical ordination.¹⁰⁸ Over the next few years, their relationship would develop and Isserman would ask Wise for advice and invite him to speak on various occasions at his Temple.¹⁰⁹

Isserman accepted an invitation and spoke on May 21, 1929. The following day, Isserman was offered the job at Temple Israel in St. Louis. Julius Glaser, a member of the Temple Board, sensed Isserman's hesitancy, which Isserman attributed to his fear of following in the footsteps of Rabbi Harrison. Glaser reassured him by stating, "You are not coming here for a year, but for your life. We shall take care of you."¹¹⁰ After the initial hesitancy, he accepted the post. Glaser was right. Isserman moved to St. Louis just before the stock market crash of 1929¹¹¹ and remained as the Temple Israel Rabbi until 1962. From 1963 until his death in 1972, Isserman served as the Rabbi Emeritus.

Years later, in 1956, Isserman delivered a sermon that reflected on what the members of Temple Israel wanted when they invited him to come to St. Louis. Isserman contended that the people wanted sermons which evaluated morally the lives they and the

¹⁰⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6, 17, 7. The invitation was extended by the Temple Israel Brotherhood for a program at the Chase Hotel in St. Louis.

¹⁰⁸ Wise, Rabbi Stephen S. *Correspondence with Isserman*, June 13, 1922. AJA 6, 10, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. December 27, 1923. AJA 6, 10, 4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

community lived.¹¹² Isserman not only delivered these evaluative sermons, he modeled the behavior he thought was moral. Isserman's career in St. Louis was dedicated to social action. He continually urged his congregation to support causes that he believed were moral and just.

Isserman's commitment to social justice was noted by Henry Kohn, President of the American Jewish Society for Service, many years later when he spoke at the dedication of the Isserman Auditorium at Temple Israel. Isserman¹¹³ "...has been a doer as well as a fervent preacher, a prophet...[and] a forthright leader..."¹¹⁴ Some of Isserman's work was exemplified through the different committees on which he served and through different organizations he either created or helped to create. For example, Isserman was the co-founder and chairman of the Social Justice Commission in St. Louis.¹¹⁵ board

¹¹² It was his Yom Kippur Morning Sermon during which he addressed the Seventieth Anniversary of Temple Israel.

¹¹³ The Isserman Auditorium is located in the Temple Israel Building located at #1 Rabbi Alvan D Rubin Dr. at the corners of Ladue and Spoede Roads in Creve Coeur, MO.

¹¹⁴ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life.* AJA.

¹¹⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand, M. *Address by Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman at the Opening Session of the Unemployment Seminar.* May 26, 1931, AJA, 6,12,7. In the opening address of the first seminar of the commission, Isserman described the formation of the group and its mission..."Both of us [Dean Sidney Sweet of Christ Church Cathedral and Isserman] believe...that religion has a message for business and for industry, and that religion is interested in building a social order in which the present maladjustments will be eliminated, in which the spectacle of vast wealth and opulent luxury on the one hand and that of abysmal poverty and want of even the essentials of life, on the other hand, be done away with. In our discussions we considered the need, above all things, for enlightenment on vast public issues and on matters relating to social justice. We knew that in this community there are many ministers who share the hope of religionizing [sic] our social order...In order that we might have the advantage of the best knowledge that this community affords on matters of economics and sociology, we have invited the representative of Washington and St. Louis Universities to join us in launching the Social Justice Commission...As a result of our collaboration, the Social Justice Commission was launched which contains individuals from almost every religious denomination in the city of St. Louis. We thus managed to establish a holy alliance, the alliance of religious leaders and university scientists, an alliance which we hope will prove of service and of value to our community." The St. Louis Social Justice Commission's work will be further explored in chapter 3.

member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.¹¹⁶ charter member of the St. Louis Planned Parenthood Association,¹¹⁷ Chairman of the Jewish Welfare Federation Campaign,¹¹⁸ and served as the Vice Chairman of the National Conference on Religion and Race. Isserman founded, co-founded and/or was involved with many of these organizations because he believed their missions complemented his Jewish values. As we will see later, Isserman believed that it was important for the rabbi to be involved in the community and communal organizations.

Isserman was resourceful when trying to determine the issues that were facing the community. For example, in 1950, he contacted the United Way and asked them what the most pressing need in the city of St. Louis was that was not being met. When he was told a nursery was needed for black mothers where their children could be left while they worked, Isserman recruited Mrs. Herbert Schiele, President of the Temple Israel Sisterhood and other members of the Temple to help to organize and raise funds for the Nursery Foundation. After raising the funds, they founded the first interracial school in St. Louis.¹¹⁹

It is interesting to note that Isserman was also interested in government service and ran for a seat in the Missouri State Assembly on the Democratic ticket. Although he was unsuccessful in his bid for election, Isserman remained actively involved in community

¹¹⁶ *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman*. May 8, 1967. AJA. 6,26,9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Fine, Morris and Milton Himmelfarb. *American Jewish Yearbook*. Volume 74. New York: American Jewish Committee and Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973. p 556-57.

¹¹⁹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

affairs for the entirety of his career.¹²⁰ When summarizing Isserman's life and his work, Rabbi Alvan D. Rubin – Isserman's successor – noted that "Rabbi Isserman's life was dedicated to breaking down religious prejudices and to making people face up to the problems involving society."¹²¹ Washington University Chancellor William Henry Danforth offered a similar evaluation of Isserman's career: "...he served the cause of racial justice [and] improved relations between people of all faiths and education. He was able to bring people from all walks of life to resolve conflict and develop sensible, workable solutions to difficult problems..."¹²²

As Rubin and Danforth both pointed out, in addition to pursuing justice, Isserman was involved in interfaith work in order to help people of different faiths understand their similarities so that they could work and live together. In this area, Isserman continued the legacy that Rabbi Harrison had established in St. Louis.¹²³ Upon his arrival in St. Louis, he quickly became acquainted with his colleagues in the clergy. He built strong friendships with many of them regardless of their theological differences. Isserman helped found the St. Louis Seminar of Jews and Christians and served both as vice-chairman and co-chairman of the group. He participated in pulpit exchanges and established an annual seminar in which he, along with the Temple Israel Brotherhood, invited Christian clergy to a one day Institute of Judaism. During the Institutes a variety

¹²⁰ *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman*. May 8, 1967. AJA. 6,26,9.

¹²¹ Rubin, Rabbi Alvan D. *St. Louis Globe Democrat*. N.d. AJA. Nearprints, Box 2.

¹²² Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

¹²³ *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman*. May 8, 1967. AJA. 6,26,9.

of speakers, many from HUC, came to teach Christian clergy and religious educators about Judaism.

In 1947, as part of this interfaith work and in order to reach other Jews, Isserman began hosting a weekly radio program. For more than 22 years on Sunday mornings, Isserman spoke "...to a large audience in Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, Iowa and the surrounding communities about modern interpretations of passages from the Bible."¹²⁴ According to one research group, 60,000 radios were tuned in every week.¹²⁵

In 1954-1955, American Jewry celebrated the Tercentenary of the first known Jewish settlement in the United States. Isserman served as the chair of the St. Louis committee for the Tercentenary and on Thanksgiving Day in 1956, dedicated a flagpole with a "...sculptured stone base"¹²⁶ at the entrance to Forest Park.¹²⁷

In addition to his work beyond the synagogue walls, Isserman was busy with the operation of the Temple as well. With his urging, the congregation eliminated assigned

¹²⁴ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972, Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

¹²⁵ Gervich, Sara. *Sixty Thousand A Week is a Good Congregation*. Interview. April 10, 1969. AJA. Isserman Nearprints, Box 2.

¹²⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Felix Frankfurter*. October 9, 1956. AJA. 6,4,6. "The base consists of a curve of stone which tapers from a height of seven feet down to a few inches. On it have been carved a model of the ship which brought the first Jews to New Amsterdam three hundred years ago, and some of the noblest biblical verses suggesting the four freedoms, illustrated in stone..."

¹²⁷ Forest Park is an almost 1300-acre park on the west side of St. Louis. It was a popular spot which many residents of St. Louis flocked to on hot summer nights in order to cool off by sleeping next to the lake. Today, according to the AAA guide, it is a "popular spot for picnicking, jogging and bicycling." The park is also home to a number of golf courses, museums and the St. Louis Zoo.

pews.¹²⁸ While he was there, the Temple also "...replaced its long-standing policy of minimum dues, allowing members the opportunity to pay what they could afford."¹²⁹ Isserman recognized that by doing away with both of these practices, it "...not only enabled everyone to join our congregation...[it] ceased to bar people in humbler circumstances from worshipping in accordance with the teachings of Reform Judaism."¹³⁰ For Isserman these changes helped show that all members, regardless of their circumstances, were equal – a central theme in his career.

Isserman was also responsible for changing Jewish ritual and practice at Temple Israel. Though there were no Bar Mitzvah ceremonies during the first 50 years of the Temple's existence, while Isserman was rabbi, they were introduced. Realizing that the Bar Mitzvah ceremony "extends a religious privilege to a boy which it denies to a girl" and that this "...violates a basic principle of reform,"¹³¹ he again prohibited them in 1960. The same year that Isserman retired, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony was revived.¹³² Another change for which Isserman was responsible was the abolishment of congregational Passover seders. Isserman abolished them so congregants would conduct seders in their homes.¹³³

¹²⁸ Ferdinand M. Isserman *Scrapbook, 1930-1972*. "Holy Blossom Brotherhood Bulletin." October 1952. Volume 12, No 1. AJA. Rare Documents File.

¹²⁹ Olitzky, Kerry M. *The American Synagogue: A Historical Dictionary and Sourcebook*. Greenwood Press: Westport, CT: 1996. pg 199.

¹³⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Sentiments and Memories*. 1962. AJA. 6.21.5.

¹³¹ -----, *The Seventieth Anniversary of Temple Israel*. September 15, 1956. AJA. 6.20.2.

¹³² Olitzky, Kerry M. *The American Synagogue: A Historical Dictionary and Sourcebook*. Greenwood Press: Westport, CT: 1996. pg 199.

¹³³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Scrapbook 1930-1972: Some Outstanding Achievements of Rabbi Isserman*. AJA. Rare Documents File.

Isserman's work at Temple Israel was not easy. Over the years, he faced a number of challenges. Isserman later noted that he confronted formidable challenges when the temple built its new facility, the "Temple Israel House" in the midst of the Depression.¹³⁴ In a sermon he delivered in 1948, Isserman said that "There were some in the community who did not believe that the Temple should be building during the depression, and they called Temple Israel House, 'Isserman's folly.'"¹³⁵

One of the uses of the Temple Israel House was to give the Religious school a permanent home so that the temple would no longer have to house its school at the YMHA and YWHA. Isserman felt that at the "Y," a religious school student community could not be developed because there were always other non-religious school students who were using the facility. When funds allowed, Dr. Sam Rosenkranz was hired to direct the religious school.¹³⁶ Rosenkranz, a former student of the Temple religious school, had pursued work in the field of education and brought progressive techniques to the school. According to Isserman, the religious school was one of the first to produce films.¹³⁷

Travels

While serving his pulpits, Isserman was given the opportunity to do some extensive traveling abroad. In 1926, while he was at Holy Blossom, he took a summer tour.

¹³⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Sermon*. St. Louis: March 5, 1948. AJA. 6,17,7.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman*. May 8, 1967. AJA. 6,26,9.

Isserman wrote that one of the highlights of the trip was his visit to the Holy Land.¹³⁸ In 1930, he spent part of his summer in Russia.¹³⁹ In 1933, 1935 and 1939, Isserman spent time in Germany. During the 1933 trip, he also visited Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, France and Austria.¹⁴⁰ In 1955 and 1956, Isserman and his wife went on what they called their first "world tour" during which they visited over 15 different countries.¹⁴¹

While parts of the trips may have been relaxing, Isserman worked during each trip. During his three-month world tour, which was paid for by Temple Israel in appreciation for 25 years of service, he "...stud[ied] Reform Judaism at first hand in all parts of the globe."¹⁴²

Isserman's trips to Germany resulted in a number of sermons, radio broadcasts and pamphlets which warned the world of the fate of the Jews under Hitler and Nazi. Isserman's trips and these publications will be investigated in chapters 2 and 5.

In 1943, Isserman traveled to North Africa as a Chaplain for the American Red Cross. Isserman chose to volunteer with the Red Cross for a number of reasons. First, he felt that the work he would be doing for the Red Cross would be similar to that of the work he would do for the Army or the Navy. Second, he would be guaranteed overseas duty which, as an Army or Navy chaplain, he was not guaranteed. Finally, one of the benefits

¹³⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence*, September 8, 1926. AJA. 6,9,5.

¹³⁹ -----, *Conditions of the Jews in Russia and Poland as Observed by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman this Summer*, 1930. AJA. 6,12,5.

¹⁴⁰ -----, *Statement Sent to the United Jewish Appeal Headquarters*, September 4, 1934. AJA. 6,13,8.

¹⁴¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. Nd. AJA. Nearprints Box 2.

¹⁴² Straussner, Melvin. *Remarks*, March 4, 1955. AJA. 6,19,6.

for Isserman of volunteering with the Red Cross was that there would be a limited tour that would allow him to return in a timely manner to St. Louis.¹⁴³ While serving in the Red Cross, Isserman created the Town Hall Meeting for the soldiers of North Africa. At the end of his term with the Red Cross, he returned with many stories and reassurances for the parents of soldiers in his congregation. Isserman wrote about his experience as a chaplain and field director in, *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*,¹⁴⁴ which will be explored in the next chapter.

The Emeritus Years

During the first of his years as Rabbi Emeritus, Isserman served as the guest rabbi of Ohel Leah in Hong Kong.¹⁴⁵ Isserman understood that his role there was to help the congregation to make the transition from an Orthodox synagogue to a Reform Temple.¹⁴⁶ Isserman introduced a number of reforms in his first few months including the use of the Union Prayer Book and an organ, men and women sitting together and Confirmation.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Rabbi James Heller*. February 18, 1943. AJA. 6.5.6.

¹⁴⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*. New York, NY: Whittier Books, Inc., 1958.

¹⁴⁵ Fine, Morris and Milton Himmelfarb. *American Jewish Yearbook*. Volume 74. New York: American Jewish Committee and Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973. p 556-57.

¹⁴⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Rabbi Norman Gerstenfeld*. July 24, 1963. AJA. 6, 4, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Sidney Hermant*. July 17, 1963. AJA. 6.4.14.

Within a few months, Isserman noted that "Seventy-five percent of the members are resentful of the changes..."¹⁴⁸ Some criticism found its way to the local paper, the *China Morning Star*, which Isserman responded to under his pen name "King David."¹⁴⁹ Realizing that he did not want to put up with the continued aggravations for the remainder of his contract, Isserman resigned as guest rabbi of the congregation in August.¹⁵⁰ Isserman indicated that the obstacles he faced in this congregation were greater than he expected and that it was not the type of work he wanted to do in his retirement. Due to the fact that the High Holy Days were so close and he knew they would be unable to acquire a rabbi to conduct services, Isserman remained for the High Holy Days and also led a series and services on Radio Hong Kong.¹⁵¹ The series on Radio Hong Kong was brought to an abrupt end after Isserman shared one of his sermons in which he preached on human equality.¹⁵² According to Isserman's son, leadership in the British colony did not want the Chinese to believe they were equals of the British and therefore terminated Isserman's radio series.¹⁵³

Following his brief stint with the congregation in Hong Kong, Isserman worked as the Jewish Chaplain and Assistant Professor of Religion for the University of the Seven Seas

¹⁴⁸ -----, *Correspondence with Rabbi Edgar Fogel Magnin, August 7, 1963(?)* AJA. 6.5, 17.

¹⁴⁹ -----, *Correspondence with Editor of South China Morning Star, June 5, 1963*, AJA. 6.5.8. Isserman responds to the criticism for using an organ at the Confirmation service. According to the June 2, 1963 Confirmation Program (AJA. 6. 5, 9.), there were 8 students in the first confirmation class: 2 sets of siblings, 6 girls and 2 boys.

¹⁵⁰ -----, *Correspondence with Bernard Covit, August 5, 1963* AJA. 6.2,11.

¹⁵¹ -----, *Correspondence with D.E. Brooks*, AJA. 6.5.8.

¹⁵² The sermon is titled, *The Things We Have in Common*, and is briefly described in chapter two.

¹⁵³ Isserman, Ferdinand Jr. Personal Interview. February 24, 2008.

from 1964-1965.¹⁵⁴ During the 100-day cruise, Isserman taught three courses in Bible, Judaism and Hebrew.¹⁵⁵ While he seemed to enjoy his work and the experiences on the ship, Isserman wrote that there were "two deplorable incidents, [which bothered Isserman] all of which are due to inept and incompetent administration."¹⁵⁶

The first incident involved a Dean who was intimate with one of the students on board the ship. President Ray Nichols¹⁵⁷ expelled both the Dean and the student. Another Dean on board the ship subsequently shared the name of the student involved which resulted in further discussion of the incident. For Isserman, this meant there were two inappropriate actions by the administration -- the intimate relationship and the lack of confidentiality. This led Isserman to a unfavorable opinion of the University's Administration.

The second incident was ignited by the President who ordered the Oceanography professor to return home mid-semester to write his curriculum. Had he left, students would have been at risk in their home institutions of not being able to get credit for the class for the semester. Isserman believed this to be unfair and unjust to the students and professor. When the professor was about to be forced from the ship, Isserman got involved in order do what he believed was the right thing. With his understanding of maritime law, Isserman created a plan that allowed the professor to stay on board and

¹⁵⁴ Fine, Morris and Milton Himmelfarb. *American Jewish Yearbook*. Volume 74. New York: American Jewish Committee and Jewish Publication Society of America. 1973. p 556-57.

¹⁵⁵ *American Judaism*. UAHC Press, Summer 1965. Vol. XIV, No 4.

¹⁵⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Sylvan Lebow*. February 23, 1965. AJA. 6,10,2.

¹⁵⁷ Ray Nichols, who had been elected to serve as the first President of the University in 1961, was formerly a speech professor at Whittier College. (Internet. http://www.semesteratsea.com/aboutus/historyofship_58to69.html February 18, 2008).

finish the semester.¹⁵⁸ From this incident Isserman concluded that the students and their needs were not the highest priority of the administration and was disappointed with the administration and its work. From this experience late in his life, we see one of the values that was important to Isserman throughout his entire career -- justice.

Isserman did not return to teach again with the University of the Seven Seas, but did plan on returning to the seas as a chaplain on a number of cruises. In the spring of 1967 he had to cancel a trip in order to receive an award in St. Louis from the Religious Heritage of America. Isserman was named the Regional Clergyman of the Year by the Religious Heritage of America at its first regional awards dinner.¹⁵⁹

In the fall and early winter of 1967, Isserman served as the chaplain aboard the SS Statendam of the Holland-America line.¹⁶⁰ He arranged to serve as the chaplain on a

¹⁵⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Sylvan Lebow*. February 23, 1965. AJA. 6,10,2. "The professor got on the ship and was in the quarters of the crew when it sailed from Yokahama. After the dean of the ship discovered him on ship, the ship was stopped and he was going to be put off on the pilot boat. In case he did not want to go, about 10 German sailors had been delegated to put him off by force. The students on learning of this, gathered in the purser's square. I was busy with Japanese Prince Micasa, who was visiting the ship, when I saw 5 Nazi-like sailors with heavy ropes. I asked the purser to take the ropes away. This he did as a German ship did not want the responsibility of having pushed an American professor off their ship, who was threatening to commit suicide if they did so. As a result of my leadership among the students and medical personnel of the University and the ship and the maritime law, which states an ill man must be taken to his next destination, he was put in the infirmary and allowed to remain on board. After a day or so he asked to be permitted to return to his classes and resume his teaching and give examinations to his 30 pupils."

¹⁵⁹ Price, Sterling L. *Correspondence with Isserman*. January 20, 1967. AJA. 6,6,11. Isserman received many congratulatory letters including the following from Sterling L. Price, Minister of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis, "We need men of your spiritual and mental stature and I only wish that more of your life and philosophy could have rubbed off on me. You have never hesitated to help men because of their race, color or creed. Your Father, God, was sufficient for whatever their need may have been and you were never too busy to be that vehicle through which His Love and Spirit could work."

¹⁶⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Joseph Fletcher*. AJA. 6, 4, 1.

cruise around South America in the fall of 1969 on the same boat, but due to his doctor's advice, Isserman canceled his trip.¹⁶¹

Following his tour with the University of the Seven Seas in 1965, Isserman traveled with his friend and colleague, Bishop Scarlet, to Israel. In the fall, Isserman was appointed by the Governor of Missouri to a four man library commission¹⁶² of the State Library Board to the State Senate."¹⁶³ Through his work on this commission, he helped to strengthen existing libraries and start new libraries throughout the state of Missouri.

On March 7, 1972, Isserman died after a long illness and slow deterioration that often left him unconscious of the things that were going on around him.¹⁶⁴ According to his son, the start of this long illness was most likely a series of minor strokes that, at the time, were not recognized as such.¹⁶⁵ He was survived by his wife Ruth, children Irma Betty Isserman and Ferdinand Jr., and grandchildren Jeffrey and Betsy Gertz and Nancy, Richard, Kathi and Susan Isserman.¹⁶⁶

Conclusion

Throughout his life and career, Isserman was a leader in the communities in which he lived and served. He distinguished himself from his peers and colleagues in many ways

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² -----, *Correspondence with Sigma Alpha Mu Fraternity, Inc.* October 16, 1968. AJA. 6,9,5.

¹⁶³ -----, *Correspondence.* AJA. 6,6,5.

¹⁶⁴ 726.

¹⁶⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand Jr. Personal Interview. February 24, 2008.

¹⁶⁶ Isserman, Leopold. *Family Tree of Rabbi Meyer Isser Isserman and Frume Gute Struhl Isserman.* 1978. AJA. Genealogy Files 462.

as seen in this chapter and was able to play an influential role in the lives of many. The following chapters will further expand on some of these actions and provide a more in-depth look at his work, beginning with his writings and the messages he shared with others through them.

Chapter 2 – Isserman's Writings

Isserman was a prolific writer. He wrote several books including: *Rebels and Saints*.¹⁶⁷ *This is Judaism*.¹⁶⁸ and *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*.¹⁶⁹ Isserman also wrote newspaper editorials. In October 1932, his weekly editorials began to be published in *The Modern View: A Weekly Journal of Modern Jewish Life and Thought*. On the cover of the first edition, an article announcing and welcoming Isserman's weekly column stated, "We feel sure that no one could disagree with us when we state that Rabbi Isserman ranks, and rightly so, with the leading Jewish authors of the present day."¹⁷⁰ These editorials continued the tradition he started years earlier in Toronto when submitting editorials to local newspapers as well as papers in neighboring cities.¹⁷¹

In addition to books and editorials, Isserman wrote hundreds of topical sermons for his congregations and for local religious and civic groups. He spoke in churches, at rallies, and he also hosted a weekly radio show. One of his many radio sermons, "Jewish Jesus and Christian Christ" produced more than 5000 requests for copies, the largest single response to a sermon delivered on the noted broadcast, "The Message of Israel."¹⁷² This

¹⁶⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Rebels and Saints*. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1933.

¹⁶⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *This is Judaism*. Chicago: Willett, Clark and Company, 1944.

¹⁶⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*. New York: Whittier Books, Inc., 1958.

¹⁷⁰ *The Modern View: A Weekly Journal of Modern Jewish Life and Thought*. October 1932. AJA. Ferdinand Isserman Manuscript Collection #6.X-285.

¹⁷¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Scrapbook of Editorials of Ferdinand M. Isserman in the Canadian Jewish Review from August 1925 to January 1929. AJA. Nearprints. Box 2.

¹⁷² *Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman – May 8, 1967*. AJA. Ferdinand Isserman Manuscript Collection #6. Box 26. Folder 9.

chapter will investigate each of the four areas of Isserman's writings – his books, editorials, sermons and radio addresses.

Isserman's Books

Rebels and Saints: The Social Message of the Prophets of Israel

Early in his career in St. Louis, Isserman was asked by the editor of *Front Rank*¹⁷³ "to write a series of articles on the social message of the ancient prophets of Israel."¹⁷⁴ This series of articles became the foundation for Isserman's first book – *Rebels and Saints*. Isserman began his book by defining prophecy and by explaining the origins of the prophets of Israel. Isserman noted that "Judaism is the revolt of the prophets against semitic religion."¹⁷⁵ He wrote that in their efforts "...to remould [sic] and to recast the ritual, the religious emphasis, and the religious philosophy of a people,"¹⁷⁶ the prophets created Prophetic Judaism of which we are the heirs.

When defining prophecy, Isserman began by providing a definition based on the Hebrew translation of the word for prophet, *navi*. It means "to speak forth." The prophets were "forth-tellers." Isserman wrote, "...they spoke boldly and forthrightly on spiritual and moral issues."¹⁷⁷ Isserman also explained that the prophets followed a difficult path. In order to fulfill their mission, "The prophets denounced everything that was sacred to

¹⁷³ *Front Rank* was a Christian periodical that was published in St. Louis.

¹⁷⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Rebels and Saints*. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1933. pg 7.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 9

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 20.

him."¹⁷⁸ The prophets were at odds with other members of their community and often felt alone. However, the prophets, "Standing with God....had the courage to face their fellows with their new ideals."¹⁷⁹ This was their task, as "God-conscious men, [who were] sensitive to spiritual values, [it was their responsibility to profess publicly] the moral and spiritual truths that they perceived."¹⁸⁰

Understanding the role of the prophet and knowing that Isserman believed that the modern-day rabbi was the "...heir of the prophets and must attempt to carry out their functions in modern society...."¹⁸¹ it is easy to see why Isserman defined himself and his rabbinate according to these beliefs.¹⁸² Fortunately for Isserman, he was not alone in this endeavor. He had a number of teachers and role models who influenced his thinking about prophetic Judaism. Of his professors at Hebrew Union College, he credited Moses Bottenwieser, professor of Biblical Exegesis, for introducing him to the prophets of Israel and Gotthard Deutsch, professor of history, for introducing him to prophetic living.¹⁸³ Once Isserman entered the active rabbinate, it was Rabbis Stephen S. Wise, Samuel H. Goldenson, Harry Ettelson, and Abba Hillel Silver who, through their "prophetic ministries,"¹⁸⁴ influenced him and helped Isserman to form his personal beliefs and his professional identity.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 18.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 19.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 21.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 7.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 9.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

While Isserman did not devote an entire chapter to him, in his introductory chapter, Isserman identified Nathan, from the Second Book of Samuel as “the father of the prophetic movement.”¹⁸⁵ In the Second Book of Samuel, Nathan helped David understand that he had strayed from God’s teachings and that he had committed injustices. “Nathan became a moral teacher and a truth-teller,” Isserman asserted, “...boldly accusing a powerful ruler of moral perfidy at the height of his career.”¹⁸⁶ As Isserman proceeded, he outlined the careers of seven different prophets and interpreted their message for a modern-day audience.

Isserman described how each of the prophets was responsible for helping to shape Judaism. For example, Isserman argued that the prophet Amos was a “spiritual pioneer, monotheist and prophet of social justice”¹⁸⁷ who “...sow[ed] the seed for the development of ethical monotheism.”¹⁸⁸ Hosea, on the other hand, transformed Amos’ God from a “God of vengeance” to a “God of love” who taught that “Redemption and not retribution must become the animating spirit of our penal code.”¹⁸⁹

One prophet who today’s reader might be surprised to read about in this book is Jesus. If asked, few Jews would include Jesus as one of the prophets of Israel. However, it is likely that in conceiving the book Isserman anticipated that many of his readers would be non-Jews and this would present him with a rare opportunity to teach them about Jews

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 22.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 35.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 41.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 54-5.

and Jesus. It is also possible that Isserman had Jewish readers in mind when he decided to count Jesus as one of the Jewish prophets. After all, considering Isserman's background in comparative religion and his belief that Jews should not be illiterate when it came to matters on Christianity, he may very well have chosen to include some information for Jews about Jesus and the role he played. In any case, Isserman's chapter on Jesus resembles those that pertain to the other prophets, though he also takes time at the beginning of this chapter to define the Jewish view of Jesus and to commend Jesus for helping to propagate the ideals of the prophets and synagogue.

Above all, Isserman contended that he hoped his book on the prophets would help others to "...never forget that the social message [of the prophets] is modern."¹⁹⁰ Isserman sent his book to friends and colleagues who he thought would enjoy reading it. After sending a complimentary copy of his book to Albert Einstein, the famous scientist thanked Isserman for the courtesy and noted that had he been able to read Isserman's book in his youth, he "might not consider [the Hebrew prophets]...relics."¹⁹¹

This is Judaism

Isserman's second book, *This is Judaism*, was written as a response to friends and students¹⁹² who wanted to know the fundamentals of Reform Judaism. As Isserman

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 152.

¹⁹¹ Einstein, Albert. *Letter*, 13 April 1934. In *Ferdinand Myron Isserman Scrapbook 1930-1972*, AJA. Rare Documents File. Translated by Sonja Mekel on October 23, 2007.

¹⁹² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *This is Judaism*. Chicago: Willett, Clark and Company, 1944. In the Foreword written for the first edition, Isserman writes, "Members of my congregation, pupils in my confirmation classes and Christian friends have frequently asked for a book which would state the principles of Reform Judaism. *This is Judaism* is an answer to such questions."

indicated in the Foreword to the book's fourth edition. *This is Judaism* was used as a text in confirmation classes, study groups, theological seminaries and universities.¹⁹³ We also know that when Isserman taught with the University of the Seven Seas, he used *This is Judaism* as a text for his class.

This is Judaism contains three sections. The first part of the book described the beginning of Judaism as rooted in history and outlines Isserman's belief in and acceptance of biblical criticism.¹⁹⁴ To help his readers, Isserman first shared his conclusions about the Torah which he has come to know and understand. These conclusions, he wrote, were vital to understanding the foundations of Reform Judaism and its literature. According to Isserman, some of the most important fundamentals include the notion that (1) "...the Torah is the work of many men over many centuries, (2) ...many of the stories are not historical, but teach...beliefs about God and man, and... (7) Torah is not the literal word of God, but does set forth God's will as understood by deeply religious men."¹⁹⁵

Throughout *This is Judaism*, Isserman provided the reasoning for these conclusions. Isserman began by exposing his readers to the principles of literary and biblical criticism. Before moving on, Isserman defined the Torah by explaining that Reform Jews believed that the Torah is "a book which demonstrates the way of life that God intended for humanity."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Ibid, ix.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, vii.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 13.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 25.

Isserman continued by discussing the historical beginnings of Judaism as shaped by the prophets. Interestingly, many of the prophets who are mentioned here are the same prophets whom Isserman included in his *Rebels and Saints* volume. Once again, Isserman described the lives of each of the prophets he included in the volume and identified their individual contribution to the development of Judaism.

One prophet included in *This is Judaism* but not in *Rebels and Saints*, was the prophet Micah. Isserman highlighted Micah for his definition of religion. He quoted Micah 6:8¹⁹⁷ and also returns to Micah 4:4¹⁹⁸ to help his readers to understand how we can create world peace through world justice. Isserman continued describing other prophets, expiating on the authorship of the various prophetic books and identifying each prophet's distinctive role in the shaping of Judaism.

In Part II of the book, Isserman "...outlines the fundamental tenets of prophetic religion..."¹⁹⁹ He began by describing the universality of religion and how every major civilization known to man created some sort of religious doctrine. He then shared what Judaism has to offer:

"Two dominant characteristics of the Jewish belief in God distinguish it from other ideas prevalent in the ancient world in which the prophets lived. They are expressed in the words 'ethical monotheism.'

¹⁹⁷ "...What does Adonai request from you? That you do justice, love goodness and that you walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

¹⁹⁸ "But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid." (Micah 4:4). On page 48 of the book, Isserman wrote that the prophet "...was saying that sufficient food and a home for every man and his children are the prerequisites to peace, for men who are thus satisfied will be immune to agitation for war. The price of world peace is world justice."

¹⁹⁹ *This is Judaism*, vii.

‘Monotheism’ means belief in one God. ‘Ethical’ means concern with relationships of righteousness among human beings.”²⁰⁰

Isserman then distinguished how this approach differed from other religions, most notably, from Christianity. The end of this chapter dealt with topical issues of religion. Isserman explained how Jews understand miracles in the Bible, prayer, immortality and the concept of the messiah. In each area, Isserman provided background information for the novice and continued to add depth for the student of religion working towards distinguishing the beliefs of Reform Judaism from other denominations and religions.

The final section of *This is Judaism* “...dealt with the application of prophetic religion to life. Here Isserman presented Reform Judaism’s attitude and point of view on various social issues.”²⁰¹ Isserman also described the practical application of the message of the prophets to religious ceremonies and holidays. He described the ritual and liturgical changes that the Reform movement made and elaborated on current practices in his congregation and in other congregations that he observed or heard about. He also provided some background historical information and added material delineating his perspective concerning various changes that, in his opinion, still needed to take place. For example, Isserman observed that many Jews no longer observed or paid attention to Shabbat. He wrote, “There is no question but that a strengthening of the Sabbath would bring about a strengthening of the spiritual values of prophetic religion”²⁰² and in an earlier section, that, “If Chanukah celebrations are to be successful, parents must devote

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 95.

²⁰¹ Ibid, vii.

²⁰² Ibid, 163

much effort to them."²⁰³ In these two statements, he shared what he believed to be problems in the movement that could be corrected with hard work.

In the final section of the book, Isserman focused on several social issues that the world and Reform Judaism were confronting. He described issues such as labor rights, peace and intermarriage and provided historical details relating to these topics. Isserman also incorporated his own beliefs into this section. For example, he included his thoughts on race relations, Zionism and democracy. It is interesting to note that Isserman persistently justifies his own views on these issues by anchoring them in the teaching of the prophets. For example, in addressing the matter of "race relations" in America, Isserman supported his own belief that all human beings are equal regardless of race with a quotation from the prophet Malachi, "Have we not one Father? Has not one God created us all?" According to Isserman, American Jews have been enjoined to work for racial equality by the prophet Malachi and therefore he concluded that "Judaism sanctions no racial bigotry or discrimination, no assumptions of racial superiority or inferiority."²⁰⁴ While this was Isserman's personal point of view on this topic, he simultaneously indicated that he was fully aware of the fact that many of his co-religionists were not putting these teachings into practice.

²⁰³ Ibid, 160

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 182.

Isserman concluded the book by describing the role of the modern rabbi. According to Isserman, it is the rabbi's role to "...interpret God's will to the people."²⁰⁵ This is exactly what Isserman did through this book and in his sermons.

A Rabbi with the American Red Cross

Though Isserman hoped to write another book during his retirement, illness prevented him from doing so. He did, however, successfully publish a third volume titled: *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*.²⁰⁶ From March 1, through August 31, 1943 the Board of Temple Israel granted Isserman time to serve as a rabbi for the American Red Cross during World War II. Though Isserman would have preferred to serve as a military chaplain on the front lines, he was unable to do so. While a specific reason could not be determined, it may have been on account of his age or on due to the relatively short amount of time that he as a congregational rabbi could have devoted to the work. Isserman found that working with the Red Cross would allow him to serve close to the action – something he was interested in doing. Isserman also found the Red Cross to be welcoming though he would only be able to serve for a period of 6-months.

Although we will be dealing with Isserman's work in Germany during World War II in a subsequent chapter of this thesis, in this section we will briefly describe

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*. New York, NY: Whittier Books, Inc., 1958.

Isserman's association with the American Red Cross, which *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross* details in depth.

In the book's preface, Isserman explained that he "...volunteered to go overseas as [he] desired to be under fire for [his] country, whose blessings [he] had enjoyed. In many wars, others had risked their lives for [his] liberty."²⁰⁷ Isserman felt that it was his turn to pay others back for this freedom and he had a desire to leave his mark in this arena. Though he was supposed to begin his work in Great Britain, Isserman ended up serving in North Africa.²⁰⁸ As a club director with the American Red Cross, Isserman had a "...ringside seat both on the battlefield in Tunisia and at headquarters in Algiers."²⁰⁹

Isserman hoped that his book would "...bring to its readers a sense of the dignity in many war situations of the American soldier....an awareness of the importance of the home population to the armed forces in time of war and an appreciation of the invaluable and gentle ministry carried on by...Red Cross representatives."²¹⁰

In the beginning of the book, Isserman described his indoctrination to the American Red Cross which he received in Washington DC. During his orientation training, Isserman learned that it was his responsibility to help "...build morale and spirits of soldiers."²¹¹

He took to heart the message that the American Red Cross "...frequently stressed that we

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 7.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 26-7. Isserman was supposed to go to Great Britain on a clipper plane. However, at the time, there were no seats available on the plane. Isserman was asked if he would go to North Africa and he jumped at the chance.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 7.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 7.

²¹¹ Ibid, 22.

were to be free to use our ingenuity, that we should not hesitate to be pioneers, to blaze new trails...²¹² In his work as the club director for the Red Cross, Isserman instituted and served as the moderator of the "Town Hall Meetings," which became a regular weekly feature for both officers and enlisted men.²¹³

The Town Hall Meetings were weekly lectures that were led by "...war correspondents, authors, historians, diplomats and Allied Army officers."²¹⁴ According to George Korson, who wrote *At His Side*, the story of the American Red Cross during World War II,

"...the Red Cross Town Hall met the distinct need among intelligent United States Army officers and enlisted men for the kind of thinking stimulated by free discussions. For those men who had little or no conception of what the United States was fighting for, this project opened new horizons. It made them far less susceptible to enemy propaganda...and lent significance to their sacrifices."²¹⁵

Freedom of speech was a requirement for these programs which were usually followed by lively discussions and sometimes ice cream. The first Town Hall Meeting was held on June 7, 1943. Fred Painton of Reader's Digest delivered a lecture titled, "Why Battles are Boring," to over 200 officers and, at the conclusion, was met with a standing ovation.²¹⁶ Isserman would serve as the moderator for these meetings which would be offered twice weekly – once for officers on Monday evenings and once for the enlisted men on Friday evenings.²¹⁷ The book also described Isserman's voyage by boat across the Atlantic to North

²¹² Ibid, 26.

²¹³ Ibid, 15.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 17.

²¹⁵ Korson, George. *At His Side*. New York, NY: Coward McCann, Inc. 1945.

²¹⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi with the American Red Cross*. Pg 16.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

Africa, his experiences in Tunisia, Algiers, Cairo and Palestine, the work he did for the Red Cross and, when requested, the assignments he performed for the army as a rabbi/chaplain.

For example, Isserman led religious services and funerals in North Africa where he recalled that there were sometimes no Jewish chaplains available.²¹⁸ Isserman, also confirmed an English soldier. The soldier's mother had died when he was eight and his father did not give him religious training. The soldier therefore felt he was inferior and in danger. Isserman and another chaplain,²¹⁹ confirmed the soldier on the spot. The soldier then left, according to Isserman, without fear.²²⁰ The Jewish Welfare Board, who was responsible for the placement of Jewish chaplains, demanded that the American Red Cross order Isserman to cease from performing rabbinic duties.²²¹ Isserman, with the approval of his supervisor, continued to perform these duties in emergency situations because he believed that it was the right thing to do and he followed his conscience.

Isserman's Editorials

Throughout his career, Isserman contributed commentaries and editorials to a number of papers. Sometimes he wrote letters to the editor in response to articles that had been

²¹⁸ Ibid. 50.

²¹⁹ Chaplain Louis Werfel.

²²⁰ Ibid. 309

²²¹ Ibid. 50-51. Isserman claims that this was due to "jurisdictional disputes and rivalry."

published. At other times, he was a regular contributor and his numerous editorials were published by various newspapers on a weekly basis.

One newspaper which Isserman served as a regular contributor was the *Canadian Jewish Review*. From August 1925 through January 1929, he regularly contributed articles on topics ranging from American politics to evolution. While he did not limit himself to writing editorials about issues which were facing his own local community, Isserman often chose to use these local issues as jumping-off points for larger discussions. For example, in November 1925, Isserman wrote about the history of pulpit exchanges between Jews and Christians. This was written in advance of his February 1928 pulpit exchange with Reverend E. Crossley Hunter of the St. Carlton United Church of Canada. In the editorial, Isserman explained why he believed exchanges of this nature were important. "I want Jews to appreciate the beauty of Christianity. I want Jews to know the good causes it supports. I want Jews to know that there are beautiful souls in Christian pulpits...Just as we want Jews to recognize the beauty in Christianity, so do we want Christians to recognize this beauty in Judaism."²²²

In another editorial written earlier that same year, Isserman took note of the struggles that Liberal Judaism in England faced. Making reference to his own rabbinical experiences, Isserman recognized the successes between the Orthodox and Liberal Jews in America.²²³

²²² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Scrapbook of Editorials of Ferdinand Myron Isserman in the 'Canadian Jewish Review' from August 1925-January 1929*. "Shall Rabbi and Minister Exchange Pulpit?" AJA. Nearprints. Box 2.

²²³ In the editorial, Isserman is taking the position that the chief Rabbi should allow Rabbi Israel Mattuck to attend the conference of Anglo-Jewish preachers. Isserman comments that the Orthodox and Liberal Jews

He concluded his editorial by arguing that, "The chief Rabbi should emulate the example of his American confreres, and give recognition to Liberal Judaism."²²⁴ In addition to *The Canadian Jewish Review*, Isserman "...had his articles accepted by a number of the country's leading publications including 'The Nation' and 'The Survey'."²²⁵

After his move to St. Louis, Isserman became a regular contributor to *The Modern Voice*, a weekly Jewish newspaper. In his first week of regular contributions, Isserman laid out a prospectus that specified what he believed his role should be as an editorial contributor:

Even as the function of the news columns of a periodical is to present all the news that is fit to print without bias or prejudice, so the function of the editorial page is to present definite, clear-cut opinions about the news. An editorial page must be biased, but not prejudiced. It will invariably suffer from the limitations of the individual or individuals who are in charge of it. But it must present without fear honest, thoughtful reactions to living vital issues...I shall endeavor to publish my reactions to the Jewish and religious scene, to the vital, ethical and spiritual problems which clamor in our days for analysis, for discussion and for solution. I lay claim to no omniscience, nor do I believe in editorial infallibility. I shall welcome, I shall encourage dissenting views.²²⁶

Throughout his tenure with the paper, Isserman never hesitated to express his point-of-view. Since *The Modern View* was a Jewish journal, Isserman also tackled questions about religious practice that were being discussed in the Jewish community. For example, following the High Holy Days, there was discussion about Temple Shaare Emeth in St. Louis and their passing of a plate during the High Holy Days to collect funds. In this

in America have been successful because they "...have learnt to respect one another despite their differences of opinion. They have recognized that their bond of union far overshadows their petty theological and dogmatic differences." (Ibid. October 23, 1925).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ *The Modern View*. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, October 13, 1932. Vol. 65, No 9.

²²⁶ *The Modern View*. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, October 20, 1932. Vol. 65, No 10.

editorial. Isserman provided background information about collecting funds on holidays that was both historical and religiously oriented before saying that there should be no reason to take offense at this practice. Isserman both defended the passing of the plate and justified it.²²⁷

Another issue that Isserman addressed was the effects of having a Christmas tree in a Jewish home. Isserman argued that, "It tells the [Jewish] child subconsciously that Jewish ceremonies are inadequate and inferior and that perhaps Judaism is also. This is what Christianity is trying to do...teach that it is an improvement on Judaism."²²⁸

Isserman wrote about a variety of other issues affecting the St. Louis community. Missourians, Americans and world Jewry. In October 1932, Isserman applauded Bishop William Scarlet of the Protestant Episcopal Church for welcoming "...colored and white peoples" to services.²²⁹ In December of 1932, he made an appeal for the United Relief Drive to raise almost 4 million dollars for 82 religious institutions.²³⁰ Continuing his efforts for justice and fair treatment of all, in January 1933, Isserman advocated on behalf of child labor laws in an editorial column.²³¹ It was not uncommon for Isserman to address issues of racial justice, child labor, social justice, economic justice and interfaith

²²⁷ The Modern View, "Passing the Plate on the High Holy Days" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, October, 20, 1932. Vol. 65. No. 10.

²²⁸ The Modern View, "The Psychological Effect of a Christmas Tree in a Jewish Home" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, December 15, 1932. Vol. 65. No. 18.

²²⁹ The Modern View, "Fighting Race Prejudice in Religious Sanctuaries" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, October, 27, 1932. Vol. 65. No. 11.

²³⁰ The Modern View, "Let Conscience Be Your Guide" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, December 1, 1932. Vol. 65. No. 16.

²³¹ The Modern View, "Child Labor in Missouri" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, January 26, 1933. Vol. 65. No. 24.

relations. In fact, many of the articles made reference to the work he was doing in the greater community in these very areas. In some instances, he would also include portions of addresses he delivered and, beginning in January of 1933, Isserman began addressing the topic of the Jews in Germany and their fate.

Throughout his editorials that dealt with German Jewry and Hitler, Isserman repeatedly warned his readers about the fate of the Jews in Germany. In the beginning, Isserman recognized the potential problems that the Jews were facing, but seemed confident that, in the long run, German Jewry would continue to thrive. In fact, in his first editorial of 1933, Isserman asserted that Hitlerism and anti-Semitism were both on the decline in Germany.²³² However, after his first visit to Germany in 1933, he immediately concluded that he had been wrong and that the Jews of Germany were in grave danger. In March 1936, he wrote, "My observations then, plus my confidential contacts...in Germany convinced me that the Nazis were deadly sincere...and that...the Jews of Germany were condemned to death."²³³

In regard to Germany, Isserman also published editorials in other local papers. Immediately following his 1933 trip to Germany, Isserman wrote a column for the *St. Louis Star-Times* in which he described the condition of the Jews of Germany and their

²³² The Modern View, "What Gives Us Hope for 1933?" by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, January 5, 1933, Vol. 65, No. 21.

²³³ The Modern View, "As I Saw Jews on My Second Visit to Nazi Germany" by Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman. St. Louis, MO: The Modern View, March 5, 1936, Vol. 72 No. 5.

dark future.²³⁴ These editorials, along with other pamphlets, will be explored in greater depth later in this thesis.²³⁵

Throughout his life, Isserman continued to contribute articles to the local press. As previously noted, he periodically responded to other columns or wrote editorial rejoinders to those who challenged his point of view. In one letter to the editor that he contributed during his retirement, Isserman addressed a critique that was published in the *South China Morning Post*. Isserman, who was working to help Ohel Leah Synagogue in Hong Kong bring reforms to their congregation, had been criticized for instituting many of these innovations. Isserman wrote the following response under his *nom de plume*, King David: "The criticism of Ohel Leah Synagogue for the use of an organ at its confirmation service represents fossilized thinking, and indifference to, or ignorance of, the biblical tradition on which Judaism is based...Its use in enhancing worship of modern Jews is natural."²³⁶

Isserman's Sermons

In numerous inaugural and farewell sermons, Isserman insisted that the modern rabbi was the spiritual heir of the Biblical prophets. Just as the prophet exhorted the Jews of yore, so too should the contemporary rabbi use the sermon as a clarion call for justice.

²³⁴ Isserman, Rabbi Ferdinand M. Clippings from St. Louis Star-Times August 8-14, Inc. "St. Louis Rabbi Looks at the Germany of Adolf Hitler" August 8-14, 1933. AJA. X-284.

²³⁵ This analysis can be found in Chapter 5.

²³⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Letter to the Editor of South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, June 5, 1963. AJA. 6,5,8.

righteousness and deeds of loving kindness. Isserman made just such an argument in 1929 when he delivered his farewell speech to Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia:

It was with the belief that the rabbi is the heir of the prophets, that he stands where stood Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, that I entered the rabbinate seven years ago. It was thus that I defined the duties of the rabbi when I came to you four years ago. And this conception of the rabbinical office I have always held before me. The sermons that I preached from this pulpit were aimed not to please, not to win acclaim, but to speak out my heart and my convictions. On more than one occasion my friends in this congregation have urged me not to preach on certain subjects, not to advocate certain causes because they were not popular. Much as I longed to heed their advice and retain their good will, I always placed duty to my office above every consideration, and at times, against their advice and even strenuous objections, I advocated certain policies and expressed certain attitudes.²³⁷

Isserman remained loyal to this philosophy throughout his career. He spoke on controversial topics that were important to him and to the members of the congregation. He shared his thoughts and beliefs. He spoke out on issues of the day, and refused to equivocate or avoid controversy. Isserman delivered sermons that risked harming his relationships because he hoped that he would be able to convey his values and beliefs to others so that it would effect a change in their beliefs and actions.

For more than 40 years, Isserman wrote and delivered a wide variety of sermons. Some of these sermons addressed issues that clearly meant a great deal to him personally. For example, the first sermon that Isserman delivered at Hebrew Union College as a student dealt with themes he would refer to throughout his life – justice, equality and peace for

²³⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*, June 21, 1929. AJA. 6.12.1.

all humankind. The Torah portion that Shabbat morning was *Kedoshim*²³⁸ and Isserman spoke on the Holiness Code.²³⁹ Isserman equated holiness with Americanism and asked that America support all movements who "...seek to ameliorate human suffering and misery."²⁴⁰ Isserman asserted that the United States must be a haven for the persecuted and oppressed as well as an advocate for peace around the world.²⁴¹

In a sermon that reflected on the first seven years of his rabbinate, Isserman said, "I have tried to become the voice of justice, the voice of peace in the community."²⁴² In order to fulfill his self-defined role as a modern-day prophet, Isserman's sermons frequently exhorted the community to act justly and to pursue peace. For example, in January 1925, Isserman visited the Eastern State Penitentiary²⁴³ and then spoke to his congregation about his experience. He took listeners on a mental tour of the penitentiary and described the unfortunate conditions the prisoners faced on account of overcrowding, lack of funding, lack of opportunity to better themselves and an inability to earn money for those they cared about on the outside. It is clear from the content of this sermon that Isserman felt compelled "...to champion the oppressed and dispossessed, to give tongue to those who are inarticulate, to be lips for those who cannot speak and to hearken to the call of

²³⁸ From the book of Leviticus, chapters 19 and 20.

²³⁹ The Holiness Code is a list of laws, both ritual and ethical, that God commands the Israelites/Jews to follow in order to be a "holy" people.

²⁴⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Sermon, May 7, 1921, AJA, 6, 21, 10.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*, June 21, 1929, AJA, 6, 12, 1.

²⁴³ The Eastern State Penitentiary opened in October 1829 and, at the time, was the most expensive and high-tech prison. The mission of the prison was to "change the behavior of inmates through 'confinement in solitude with labor.'" Though it was considered controversial at the time, it apparently met with success and over 300 prisons world-wide based their floor plans on Eastern State's radial model. The historic prison was home to famous inmates such as Al Capone and "Slick Willie" Sutton. (Internet, <http://www.easternstate.org/> February 11, 2008).

those wrecked by weakness and folly."²⁴⁴ Isserman continued to preach on topical issues during his tenure at Holy Blossom in Toronto. His sermons dealt with a wide range of social concerns such as corporal punishment, blasphemy laws²⁴⁵ or immigration laws.²⁴⁶ On some occasions, these topical sermons dealt with issues that were currently being passionately discussed while at other times he waited and reflected on issues. Isserman provided historical information and content so that his listeners could use their own reasoning skills and draw the same conclusions that he himself had made and would share with them. For example, in the sermon on immigration laws, Isserman talked about the history of immigration while providing motives that led to immigration. He then talked about the contemporary problems of immigration and shared his opinion that Canada should open her gates and allow the determined number of immigrants to enter each year.

Isserman dealt with equality and segregation in his sermons and guided congregants towards the understanding the "the equality [sic] of all people is basic to our faith."²⁴⁷ For example, Isserman delivered a sermon in 1953 dealing with the suit against the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education which is now known colloquially as "Brown v. Board of Education." In the sermon, Isserman began with a personal story meant to emotionally connect with his congregants. He then provided the historical context by

²⁴⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Visit to the Eastern Penitentiary*. Sermon. January 10, 1925. AJA, 6, 11, 3.

²⁴⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Should the Blasphemy Laws be Repealed?* Sermon. March 25, 1927. AJA 6, 11, 6.

²⁴⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Canada's Immigration Problem*. Sermon. November 4, 1928. AJA, 6, 11, 8.

²⁴⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Equal But Separate: An Analysis Into the Ethics of Segregation*. Sermon. January 16, 1953. AJA 6, 19, 1.

starting with Plessy V. Ferguson²⁴⁸ and made his way to contemporary problems. Finally, Isserman provided the Jewish understanding that separation and inequality are contrary to Jewish principles and that schools should be integrated.²⁴⁹

Finally, in regard to justice, Isserman also advocated the pursuit of economic justice. During the Great Depression and afterwards, Isserman felt that Judaism had much to teach employers and the unemployed. In one sermon, Isserman advocated government grants so that non-profit organizations could hire people to do work for the benefit of the community while having a positive effect on the city.²⁵⁰ These initiatives were supported by Justice Louis Brandeis and the CCAR, who advocated unemployment insurance, and by others who called on the government to help create jobs.²⁵¹ In this sermon, Isserman advocated for programs which would later also be adopted under the Roosevelt Administration. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt helped create the Public Works Administration. Interestingly, the mission of the Administration was to do the same work which Isserman had called for in these sermons. Isserman's call for these services, years before the government program was initiated, demonstrates one of the skills that he had throughout his career. Isserman was aware not only of his community. He was aware of national and international politics and efforts. Through reading and communication with others in his social network, he was abreast of cutting edge policies and ideas. This often made him the most knowledgeable in some areas and assured his comfort in sharing these

²⁴⁸ In 1896, the Supreme Court made a decision in Plessy V. Ferguson that racial segregation was constitutional as long as the principle of "separate but equal" was maintained.

²⁴⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand. M. *Equal But Separate*. Sermon, January 16, 1953. AJA 6, 19, 1.

²⁵⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Is There a Remedy for Unemployment?* Sermon, November 28, 1930. AJA 6, 12, 5.

²⁵¹ Ibid

ideas and beliefs with others. In another sermon on economic justice, Isserman shared prophetic teachings with employers in hopes that they would treat their employees ethically and justly by not underpaying them.²⁵²

Isserman also spoke on topics that were not related to social justice issues, such as belief in God²⁵³ or the principles of Reform Judaism. For instance, in a sermon titled “What Reform Jews Believe: A Summary of the Institute on Reform Jewish Theology Today,”²⁵⁴ Isserman summarized the conclusions of the Institute which he planned.

Isserman described that the Institute was comprised of a number of roundtable discussions on God, prayer, revelation, the mission of Israel, and Reform Jewish ceremonial practice. Each roundtable wrote their conclusions, some of which are shared in the sermon. Isserman wrote that he greatly enjoyed the three-day conference because he was able to learn to love God better and to think about theological issues with colleagues. By sharing his experience, Isserman hoped that others would also think about some of these topics and issues. He wanted them to wrestle with their theology also.

Isserman also shared Jewish beliefs on topics about which he wanted members of his congregation to wrestle. Isserman spoke on Jewish beliefs on Birth Control,²⁵⁵ the

²⁵² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Judaism's Message to the Employer of Labor*. Sermon March 3, 1929. AJA 6, 12, 1.

²⁵³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Belief in God*. Sermon January 31, 1925. AJA 6, 11,3.

²⁵⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *What Reform Jews Believe: A Summary of the Institute on Reform Jewish Theology Today*. Sermon. March 24, 1950. AJA 6,18,3.

²⁵⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Birth Control Becomes Respectable*. “Excerpt sent to *Birth Control Review*, 1929. AJA 6,12,2. In this article, Isserman outlines the reasons that he thinks birth control is a positive thing.

problems of intermarriage²⁵⁶ and immortality.²⁵⁷ In each of these sermons, he followed his pattern of providing background historical information, Jewish beliefs and his own opinion.

In other sermons, Isserman helped members of the congregation to define both Judaism and Reform Judaism. In a sermon titled, *This is Judaism*, Isserman defined Judaism:

Judaism is the belief in one God, who is the father of all mankind, in whose reality all human beings are one, who is the creator of the universe, who has endowed man with the power to choose between good and evil, and has assured man of the ultimate triumph of the good. 'Hear, O Israel....' that is the basic of the Jewish faith...²⁵⁸

In his sermon, *The History, Moral and Spiritual Significance of the Shema Yisroel – the Watchword of Israel's Faith*, Isserman teaches about the *Shema*.²⁵⁹ He also does this with other prayers that are part of the Jewish liturgy. For example, he delivered a sermon on the meaning, history and significance of the *Kaddish* prayer.²⁶⁰ There are also other sermons which teach the fundamentals of Judaism and explicate key Jewish teachings such as the verse from Micah "to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God."²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Book of Ruth and the Problem of Intermarriage*. Sermon February 14, 1930. AJA 6, 12, 3. Isserman describes the problem of not being able to perpetuate Judaism if we allow intermarriage. Later in his career, he seems to have changed his mind when he recognizes that non-Jewish spouses will commit to raising their children as Jews.

²⁵⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Belief in Immortality*. Sermon. February 21, 1925. AJA 6, 11, 3.

²⁵⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand, M. *This is Judaism*. Sermon. March 14, 1941. AJA 6, 16, 1.

²⁵⁹ Often considered the most important prayer in Judaism, the *Shema*, traditionally recited twice daily, proclaims that God is one. The first line, which is the statement that Isserman refers to in this sermon, is Deuteronomy 6:4.

²⁶⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Meaning, the History, the Significance of the Kaddish and the Jewish Belief in Immortality*. Sermon. April 6, 1934. AJA 6, 13, 7. In this sermon, Isserman refers to the Mourner's Kaddish which praises God and is recited in honor and memory of deceased family members.

²⁶¹ Micah 6:8.

Isserman spoke out very early in support of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine and he often taught his congregation about the history of the Middle East and about current events in that part of the world.²⁶² After Israel declared its independence in 1948, Isserman regularly provided his congregants news reports on events that were occurring in that part of the world.²⁶³

Another topic which was frequently discussed by Isserman was Jesus and Christianity and their relationship to Judaism. In one of his better known sermons, *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ*, Isserman taught that Jesus was himself a Jew.²⁶⁴ He then used this opening to teach about how Judaism and Christianity differed and what they had in common. When addressing this topic, it was Isserman's hope that he would be able to "bring about a closer fellowship between neighbor and neighbor..."²⁶⁵

Isserman also delivered sermons that were based on themes or lessons he found in contemporary plays, literature or novels. According to Isserman, these modern texts constituted excellent grist for the sermon mill:

Very frequently laymen refer to the fact that rabbis review books from the pulpit. This is an inaccuracy. In developing a sermon around a book, the aim of the rabbi is not to discuss its literary qualities, but rather to comment upon the ethical and the spiritual idea of the author. In traditional homiletics, the Bible was the only book from which the

²⁶² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Over There, A Palestinian [sic] Plea*. Sermon. May 9, 1925. AJA 6,11,3. In this sermon, Isserman describes why we should support Palestine and give generously.

²⁶³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Report on Israel*. Sermon. March 16, 1956. AJA 6,20,1. In this sermon, Isserman describes the desire for many of a Judaism like that of the Reform movement and also describes the sense of Nationalism that he sees there as it was exemplified in the youth who spoke of serving their country by enlisting in the army.

²⁶⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ*. Sermon. February 6, 1949. AJA 6,18,1.

²⁶⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Sequel to a Jewish View of Jesus*. December 13, 1924. AJA 6, 11, 2.

preacher was to select the theme. The modern who recognizes the human authorship of the Bible will unhesitatingly draw his text from an important, challenging modern book as well as from a dramatic significant biblical tale.²⁶⁶

During his career, Isserman delivered dozens upon dozens of sermons that drew their lessons from contemporary literature. Isserman's first sermon of this type may have been written in 1922 when E. Temple Thurston's²⁶⁷ version of the Wandering Jew²⁶⁸ was making its second debut in the local theatre. Isserman provided an in-depth analysis for listeners so that they could properly understand the Jewish dimension of the portrayal and not rely on Thurston's misinterpretation of Jews and Judaism.²⁶⁹ In the sermon, Isserman taught his listeners about the mistakes that were made in the production and also educated them on what was correct and should have been seen or heard. Later, Isserman used different books to talk about topics such as intermarriage between religions,²⁷⁰ Israel²⁷¹ and marriage between races.²⁷² In each of these sermons, as with many of his other sermons, Isserman talked about the book or movie, the main issue, the historical context of the issue, Jewish beliefs on the issue and his own personal beliefs. It is interesting to

²⁶⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Citadel*. January 14, 1938. AJA, 6,15,1.

²⁶⁷ Ernest Temple Thurston (1879-1933) was an Irish playwright and author who wrote 40 books, many of which were made into motion pictures.

²⁶⁸ The "Wandering Jew" is based on a character from a verse in Matthew, 17:28, who is sentenced to walk the earth after taunting Jesus on his way to be crucified. It was first performed on Broadway in 1921.

²⁶⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Wandering Jew*. Sermon. 1922? AJA 6,10,12.

²⁷⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Intermarriage: A Sermon suggested by Elias Tobenkin's 'God of Might.'* Sermon. April 11, 1925. AJA 6,11,3. In this sermon, Isserman shares his objections to intermarriage. His "...first objection against inter-marriage is that the chances for happiness in married life are decreased where the husband and wife come from different religious environments. Happiness in married life is a difficult though great achievement. It is in its finest sense the harmony of two souls. The attainment of such harmony must be exceedingly difficult where the early social and religious environment of man and wife were different...But yet, the initial objection stands that intermarriage between people of differing environments and faith is less apt to be successful."

²⁷¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Jewish Renaissance in Palestine*. Sermon October 25, 1924. AJA 6,11,2.

²⁷² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Marriage Between Races: Suggested by the Motion Picture 'Pinky.'* Sermon. March 10, 1950. AJA 6, 18, 3. In the sermon, Isserman talks about loving your neighbor as yourself and all being created by God as equal. Isserman therefore explains that it is permissible in Judaism to marry someone of a different race.

note that when Isserman gave his personal belief, it was always grounded in the Jewish beliefs that he shared. While in some sermons he mentioned Jews who believed differently than he did, he often made the assertion that their beliefs contradicted Jewish teachings.

Isserman customarily delivered a series of sermon-lectures that lasted anywhere from 3-5 weeks. This allowed him to go into greater depth on one topic without worrying about time constraints which he faced when giving one sermon on a specific topic. In October and November of 1955, Isserman gave a series of sermons titled, "Know the Torah." In this five-part series, he dedicated a sermon to each of the five books of the Torah and a theme he found in each one.²⁷³ It is possible that Isserman may have borrowed this idea from Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof who had done this in Pittsburgh.²⁷⁴ Isserman and Freehof had worked together years earlier when Isserman was a student and basketball player at the College. There, Freehof served as the Faculty Advisor to the team during Isserman's senior year.²⁷⁵ Another series delivered that same year dealt with the basic elements of Judaism. Titles for that four-part series included: *The Jewish Belief in God*, *The Bible in Judaism*, *The Jewish Belief in Prayer*, and *The Jewish Conception of Man and the Immortality of the Soul*.²⁷⁶ Much earlier in his career, Isserman led a series on "The Five Leading Jews of the Nineteenth Century."²⁷⁷ As seen in the sermon, Isserman chose these individuals because of the impact they had on society and on Judaism. Each

²⁷³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Know the Torah* Sermon series. October 14, 1955 – November 25, 1955. AJA 6,19,7.

²⁷⁴ Zola, Rabbi Gary P. *GPZ Note*. Chapter Two First Draft. December 2007. Email to Daniel Schwartz.

²⁷⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Letterhead*. Remarks to the Student Body. Fall 1921. AJA 6, 4, 15.

²⁷⁶ AJA 6,19,6.

²⁷⁷ AJA 6,12,6. January 30, 1931-February 13, 1931.

of the individuals was able to help advance Judaism and its ideals in the larger society. By talking about these individuals, Isserman was also able to teach about Judaism and the values and ideals that he strived to teach. For example, when talking about Abraham Lincoln and the Biblical Moses, Isserman described their quest for liberty while also sharing the message of the prophets. This was the case for all of Isserman's leading Jewish figures – he was able to teach about each one, their contributions to Judaism and Jewish thought.

For many years, at the end of the month of December, Isserman customarily shared with his congregation his list of the top five outstanding events that occurred over the year that was ending.²⁷⁸ In March of 1934, Isserman spoke on "the four essentials for happiness." He concluded that they were: faith, love, work and play.²⁷⁹ Isserman also gave a sermon on the top five living American most likely to achieve a place in history's Hall of Fame. In 1933, they were Jane Addams, Orville Wright, John Dewey, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Eugene O'Neill.²⁸⁰ Isserman chose these individuals because he felt that "...they represent[ed] the finest achievements of American civilization"²⁸¹ and because their

²⁷⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Five Outstanding Events of 1933*. Sermon. December 29, 1933. AJA 6,13.6. That year they were: 1. Closing of the banks which temporarily paralyzed the financial life of our nation. Second, the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, symbolizing an experimenting and a groping for a new cooperative democratic society. Third, the challenge to democracy, to internationalism, world brotherhood, occasioned by the rise of Hitler, and the formulation of the Nazi philosophy. Fourth, the end of the noble experiment of prohibition, and the challenge to America for nobility, and character in the era of repeal. And fifth, the collapse of the economic and disarmament conferences and the League of Nations, indicating that rugged individualism must be abandoned internationally even as domestically.

²⁷⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Four Essentials for Happiness*. Sermon. March 9, 1934. AJA 6,13.7.

²⁸⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Five Living Americans Most Likely to Achieve a Place in History's Hall of Fame*. Sermon. April 21, 1933. AJA 6,13.5.

²⁸¹ Ibid

wide-spread impact that each of them had which would affect and be passed on to future generations.

The last topic to which Isserman devoted much thought and many sermons was that of the fate of Germany and Europe under Hitler. Isserman delivered sermon after sermon concerning the history of Germany, Hitler, the fate of the Jews, his visits to Germany, the sights of Germany and also suggestions of what could be done about Germany. In a subsequent chapter of this thesis, we will examine in greater depth Isserman's sermons dealing with Nazi Germany.

Isserman's Radio Addresses

Ferdinand Isserman spoke to an audience that transcended the walls of Temple Israel in St. Louis. For over 22 years, he broadcast Jewish programs over the airwaves to Missouri and the surrounding states. According to one source, over 60,000 radios were tuned into his program every week.²⁸² The show began during Isserman's tenure as President of the St. Louis Rabbinical Association. Isserman approached the station manager "and asked him for some time for a Jewish religious program. He offered [Isserman] 15 minutes of time every other week. [Isserman] offered this time to every rabbi who was a member of the Association. None of them was interested, so [Isserman] took the program [himself]."²⁸³ Due to his success, the station offered Isserman the time

²⁸² Gervich, Sara. *Sixty Thousand A Week is a Good Congregation*. Interview of Ferdinand Isserman on April 10, 1969. AJA Nearprints, Box 2.

²⁸³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Report on 23 Years of Broadcasting Over station KSD from 8:15 to 8:20 on Sunday, commencing on 1/14/47 and ending 3/23/69*. AJA 6,26,4.

slot every week. Isserman would broadcast every week for 22 years except for six weeks when he was running for the Missouri State Assembly.²⁸⁴

At the beginning of each show, there was a melody played that Isserman first heard in Philadelphia at Rodeph Shalom. It was written for the three-fold benediction and was, by congregants in St. Louis, affectionately called the Isserman-Kriegshaber Benediction after Stella Kriegshaber, the organist at Temple Israel for many years.²⁸⁵ At the end of the program, Isserman closed with the "Three-Fold Priestly Blessing. 'May the Lord bless thee and keep thee. May the Lord let His countenance shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. May the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace. Amen'"²⁸⁶ During the radio address, Isserman spoke "about modern interpretations of passages from the Bible."²⁸⁷

Many of Isserman's radio messages were drawn from his sermons and his newspaper editorials. For example, Isserman addressed topics such as Germany, integration and Social Justice in the work place. Isserman also talked about his life and his work on his radio broadcasts. When he worked for the University of the Seven Seas, he mailed in tapes of his shows. On November 8, 1964, he described his experiences on the boat with almost 200 undergraduate students.²⁸⁸ Isserman did not want to end the relationship he

²⁸⁴ Gervich, Sara. *Sixty Thousand A Week is a Good Congregation*. Interview of Ferdinand Isserman on April 10, 1969. AJA Nearprints, Box 2.

²⁸⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Report on 23 Years of Broadcasting Over station KSD from 8:15 to 8:20 on Sunday, commencing on 1/14/47 and ending 3/23/69*. AJA 6,26,4.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life*. AJA.

²⁸⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Radio Broadcast, November 8, 1964. AJA 6,10,1.

had with many listeners who heard his show. He therefore continued to send the weekly tapes while he was in Hong Kong and elsewhere. In addition to the weekly Torah portion, when Isserman was abroad, he informed his listeners about his life and the areas where he was working and traveling.²⁸⁹

Upon his retirement, Isserman received many congratulatory letters including the following comment that suggests how important this weekly radio broadcast was to people throughout the region:

Dear Rabbi Isserman, I heard your farewell broadcast over station KSD last Sunday, and wish to add my thanks and good wishes to the many you will probably receive, for the wonderful messages you have given through the years. While I am not Jewish, I have often listened to your broadcast and was impressed with the spiritual quality of your messages. You have done much good during your years on the air, and I know it must give you a wonderful sense of satisfaction to have helped so many.²⁹⁰

While Isserman was on station KSD for 22 years, he spoke periodically on other local stations and, also, on the national radio program hosted by Rabbi Jonah Wise of Central Synagogue in New York called, "The Message of Israel." On this particular broadcast, Isserman delivered his sermons, "The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ" and "The Things We Have in Common" which, according to David Wise²⁹¹, producer of *The Message of Israel*, "was the most popular one preached by anyone over the program."²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Radio Addresses. August 26, 1963. AJA 6,21.6. In August of 1963, he sent tapes from Hong Kong titled, "About Hong Kong" and "More About Hong Kong"

²⁹⁰ Matthiesen, Anna. Letter. March 26, 1969. AJA 6.5.17.

²⁹¹ Internet. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E4DA103AF933A15754C0A9629C8B63> February 20, 2008. David Wise was Rabbi Jonah Wise's son. Rabbi Jonah Wise was the son of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise.

²⁹² Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis St. Louis, MO 1929-1963: A Biography & Synopsis of his Life.* AJA.

This sermon, which highlighted the beliefs and values that the three major religions shared, was one which Isserman adapted for numerous places and occasions. In fact, he delivered a version of this same talk at one of the American Red Cross Town Hall Meetings that he oversaw during World War II.

Conclusions

There is a great deal of information that can be gleaned from Isserman's writings. As seen in this chapter, his writings tell us about his beliefs and values. They tell us about the issues that were important to him and to his rabbinate. And they tell us what he believed were the responsibilities of the rabbi.

From his writings, it is clear that Isserman is guilty of the accusation with which he was charged by a member of the Faculty at Hebrew Union College. Isserman tried to create a "new social order" and he felt that he could do this through his work in the rabbinate. Isserman's vision was shaped by his Jewish beliefs and the messages of the prophets of Israel. He believed that there should be equality, justice and democracy for all and that it was his responsibility as rabbi to work to make this vision become a reality. In fact, while the topics of many of his addresses are different, if one peels back the different layers, one will find his vision at the roots of many of his works.

Words were not enough for Isserman. In order to create this new social order, action would also be necessary. The following chapters describe some of Isserman's actions to fulfill this vision, beginning with his work for social justice in chapter three.

Chapter 3 – Social Justice Work

From his earliest days as a student-rabbi in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, Isserman worked for social justice. He was known for speaking with striking steelworkers and then, on the following Sabbath, delivering a sermon that stressed the importance of supporting those who were on strike - even if his congregants did not agree with his message. During his career, Isserman helped to resolve a number of strikes and used his political strength to prevent others. He founded commissions on social justice in St. Louis and for the CCAR. This chapter will focus on Isserman's interest in social justice activity. We will analyze his involvement in various civic concerns, and we will identify his successes and his struggles as he worked to advance social justice issues.

Background

As Michael Meyer points out in his book *Response to Modernity*, in the beginning of the 20th century, the Reform rabbinate and later the movement moved "...from prophetic idealism to applied social justice."²⁹³ Meyer writes that the rabbinate was influenced by two other movements in the United States at the time: The American Progressive movement and the Christian Social Gospel.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995. Pg 286.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

The American Progressive movement worked to make "American society a better and safer place to live."²⁹⁵ The Progressives worked to improve working and living conditions and to "...make big businesses more responsible through regulations of various kinds."²⁹⁶ The Progressives also sought "...to make the world a more democratic place."²⁹⁷ One way in which this was manifested in the United States was through the battle for the right of women to vote.

The Christian Social Gospel movement had a similar mission and focused on improving "...the lives of the impoverished and the disenfranchised."²⁹⁸ The movement, "founded by men like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch in the late 1800's to early 1900's,"²⁹⁹ drew meaning and purpose for their mission from the social teachings of Jesus. They believed that Jesus' social teachings were the mission of the church and that it was their duty to act upon them by applying Jesus' teachings to their lives and actions and to the betterment of the general society. This meant, as Gladden described it, "applied Christianity,"³⁰⁰ which sought moral and ethical equality and democracy.

The Christian Social Gospel's "attention to the message of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah made Jewish Reformers feel that liberal Christianity and Reform Judaism were now

²⁹⁵ Internet. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/timeline/progress/progress.html>. December 23, 2007.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Edwards, Wendy J. Deichmann and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, editors. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Back cover.

²⁹⁹ <http://mywebpages.comcast.net/pastorbob/theologicalpapers/socialgospel.htm>. December 22, 2007.

³⁰⁰ Ibid

drawing on common values for a common American cause.”³⁰¹ For the Reform movement, since it had heavily emphasized the prophets and their message, the transition to “applied social justice” seemed to be a natural step. The Reform rabbinate would differ in a variety of ways from their counterparts. Unlike the progressive movement, the foundation for the Reform rabbinate was religious. Reform rabbis relied heavily on the prophets for helping them to understand their mission. And, unlike the Christian Social Gospel, the Reform movement was “...not interested in ‘saving the souls of our Jewish workers... [Rather, it was] interested in giving eloquent testimony...to the truth of One God and One Humanity, among whom there must not be extortion, overreaching or oppression of any sort...”³⁰²

One of the first American rabbis to call for social justice in the Reform movement was Kaufman Kohler when he delivered a paper to the famous Rabbinical Conference that met in Pittsburgh in November of 1885. In it, he called upon his colleagues not to allow the rabbinate to “confine itself to religious instruction and mere preaching...[but to] awaken and foster the spirit of mutual help and elevation...[and to] face the great social questions and problems of today.”³⁰³ During the course of that rabbinical colloquium, Kohler’s brother-in-law, Emil G. Hirsch, authored the first official statement on social justice, which was incorporated into the principles that the rabbis meeting in Pittsburgh adopted. These “principles,” known popularly as the “Pittsburgh Platform” of 1885, declared: “In full accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation, which strives to

³⁰¹ Meyer, 288.

³⁰² Israel, Edward L. *As To Social Justice and the Central Conference Rabbis*. 1929. Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion Library. HN 40 J5 I 8.

³⁰³ Ibid

regulate the relations between rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."³⁰⁴

Following these statements, there is little attributed to the CCAR in regards to social justice work. There were papers presented at CCAR conferences that contained elements calling for social justice, but little was done in an organized fashion. This changed in 1908 when David Philipson, president of the CCAR called upon the Conference to support "those who are struggling to abolish Child Labor."³⁰⁵ This social consciousness aroused others in the Conference who, in the following year, took up other issues such as the instruction of the blind and deaf, the necessity for reformation in prisons, and the problems of the Jewish working man.³⁰⁶ During the conference in 1909, Solomon Foster, who, as we saw in chapter 1 was instrumental in Isserman's acceptance and warm welcome to HUC in Cincinnati, presented a paper titled, "The Working man and the Synagog [sic]," in which he described the conditions of industry on the East Side of New York. His paper included an appeal that his rabbinical colleagues join together to advance social and economic justice causes. The CCAR, so moved by his paper and the work that others subsequently did, created a standing committee called "The Committee on Synagog [sic] and Labor" and appointed Foster the first chairman.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ CCAR. *Declaration of Principles*. Pittsburg: CCAR, 1885.

http://ccamet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=39&pge_prg_id=3032&pge_id=1656. December 23, 2007.

³⁰⁵ Israel, Edward L. *As To Social Justice and the Central Conference Rabbis*. 1929.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

Interest in this area continued to grow, possibly as a result of the work that rabbis were doing in their own communities, but also surely influenced by the general trends in America set by the American Progressive movement and the Christian Social Gospel. In 1914, the committee on Synagog [sic] and Industrial Relations reported on the principles it had formulated at the CCAR's request. In that report, the problems of industry were outlined and endorsements for reforms were made. Some of these reforms included the prohibition of child labor, the endorsement of a minimum wage and promoting the rights of employees and employers to organize.³⁰⁸

In 1918, when the CCAR met in Chicago, the Commission on Social Justice was given new life. The CCAR adopted a new set of principles that called for industrial changes that would promote the goal of economic justice. These changes included the endorsement of an eight-hour work day, a day of rest, safe and sanitary working conditions, an end to child labor, the right of workers to organize and negotiate and more.³⁰⁹

In 1923, the CCAR worked together with the UAHC in the creation of a joint Social Justice Commission. This initiative was met with some resistance by some rabbis and laymen who believed that "...economic situations [were] too complex and involved for moral judgments..."³¹⁰ However, in 1925, the UAHC Social Justice Commission adopted

³⁰⁸ Ibid

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 9.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 13

the CCAR's platform thus making this concern a significant priority for both the rabbinate and the laity.³¹¹

In 1928, a new set of principles was adopted by the CCAR that addressed many of the same social and economic problems that the 1918 principles addressed. However, there were also some new developments in this statement which contained 17 different topics related to social justice concerns. Three of the new topics that Isserman addressed in his career were lynching, civil liberties and unemployment.³¹²

Isserman's Influences

From Isserman's sermons, writings and his various communal activities, it is possible to identify some of the individuals, organizations and experiences that influenced Isserman's thinking about social justice issues and helped to shape his convictions. In many ways, Isserman was a product of his time. As seen through two of his three published books,³¹³ his sermons and radio addresses, the teachings of the Hebrew prophets and Reform Judaism's notion of "Prophetic Judaism" played a large role in shaping his rabbinate and his religious perspective.

Isserman wrote that it was Rabbi Solomon Foster who played a large role in his acceptance to HUC in Cincinnati. Foster was the rabbi of B'nai Jeshuron in Isserman's hometown. Though uncertain, it is probable that Isserman's family was a member of the

³¹¹ Ibid. 13.

³¹² Ibid. 16.

³¹³ *Rebels and Saints and This is Judaism.*

congregation and that this is where Isserman and Foster began to develop their relationship. If this is the case, then it is possible that while growing up, Isserman heard some of Foster's messages calling for social justice. As mentioned above, it was Foster who, in 1909, presented a paper to his CCAR colleagues on the conditions of the working man in industry on the East Side of New York and the injustices he faced. In light of the fact that Foster served as one of Isserman's mentors, it seems likely that Foster inspired his young protégé by stressing the role that social justice should play in the American rabbinate.

At HUC, Isserman was inspired by Professors Moses Bottenwieser and Gotthard Deutsch. Bottenwieser, a Bible professor, introduced Isserman to the writings of the Hebrew prophets. From him, Isserman learned about the vision that each prophet espoused as well as how each prophet's vision and work helped to shape the development of Judaism. Bottenwieser also taught Isserman the importance of relating the ideals of the Hebrew prophets to modern issues and communal life.³¹⁴ It was Gotthard Deutsch, however, Isserman's history professor at HUC, who – in Isserman's recollection – genuinely embodied the ideals of the Hebrew prophets.³¹⁵ In addition to the lessons learned in class, Isserman may have also learned about prophetic living and standing up for one's beliefs from Deutsch's activities outside of the College. One exemplary incident occurred in January of 1917 when Deutsch, an active member of the People's Council for Democracy and Peace, along with other group members "...disrupted a meeting

³¹⁴ Isserman, Ruth. Retrospect Rabbi FM Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis. St Louis, MO 1929-1963. A Biography & Synopsis of His Life. AJA.

³¹⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Rebels and Saints. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1933. Pg 9.

organized to protest against German War atrocities. After front-page coverage in the *Cincinnati Post* identified Deutsch as a member of the group and dean of the College, some members of the HUC Board of Governors were upset with the negative publicity and called for disciplinary action.³¹⁶

Later that year, a second incident occurred in a court when a judge was trying to determine whether Deutsch could be a character witness at a citizenship hearing. The judge asked Deutsch which side of the war between the United States and Germany he would like to win. Deutsch, a pacifist with connections to both countries, refused to answer the question. The *Cincinnati Press* and national speakers covered the incident. One speaker proclaimed that Deutsch was engaged in traitorous activities.³¹⁷ His actions and the publicity resulted in some members of the Board of Governors arguing for Deutsch's dismissal.³¹⁸

The Hebrew prophets and notion of prophetic living inspired much of Isserman's work. They were his justification for most of his professional activities. When talking about social justice issues, he often quoted the Hebrew prophets. For example, when referring to civil rights, Isserman often cited the words of the prophet Malachi. "Have we not one father; Has not one God created us all?"³¹⁹ In Isserman's opinion, Malachi's assertion captured a basic principle of Judaism, viz., all human beings are equal in the eyes of God.

³¹⁶ Meyer, Michael A. *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion: A Centennial History, 1875-1975*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976. Pg 78-81

³¹⁷ Dobbert, G.A. *AJA*. "The Ordeal of Gotthard Deutsch." *AJA*, Cincinnati, OH: 1968. Vol. XX No. 1. Pg 130.

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, 129.

³¹⁹ Malachi 2:10

and that certainly included African Americans.³²⁰ This was also the case for many of the other rabbis who were working for social justice especially in the early 1900's when the notion of Prophetic Judaism was being influenced by the American Progressive movement and the Christian Social Gospel as described above.

In addition to his mentor, Solomon Foster, and HUC professors Bittenweiser and Deutsch, Isserman later acknowledged that four prominent Reform rabbis also served as social justice role models for him: Stephen S. Wise, Samuel H. Goldenson, Harry Ettelson and Abba Hillel Silver. Isserman had worked with all four of these rabbis while he served on the CCAR Social Justice Committee.³²¹

Stephen S. Wise, one of the most prominent American rabbis of the 20th century, was widely known as a progressive activist and a towering proponent of numerous social justice issues. According to one biographical sketch, Wise "pioneered in interfaith cooperation, social service and civic leadership."³²² He worked to abolish child labor, helped to set up community chests and fought for workers' rights. Wise was also a proponent of the "free pulpit." In Wise's opinion, it was the native right of every rabbi to express his moral conscience from the pulpit without being censured or punished by the synagogue's Board of Trustees. Rabbis deserved the right to preach freely on salient subjects without fear of losing their position. We know from a recommendation from Wise to members of Temple Israel that he thought highly of Isserman, his work and

³²⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Negroes are our Brethren*. Sermon, November 23, 1944. AJA 6,9,6.

³²¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Rebels and Saints*. St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1933. Pg 9.

³²² AJA. Wise Finding Aid. Manuscript Collection #49. "Biographical Sketch."

abilities. From correspondence we know that, at a minimum, the two had a cordial working relationship with each other.

Goldenson and Ettelson were connected to Isserman through their work in Pennsylvania. Goldenson served as the rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh while Isserman was in Philadelphia. Like Wise, Goldenson campaigned for social justice and civic reforms and his sermons reflected "the moral and universalistic outlook of the prophets of Israel and [stressed] the ideals of personal goodness as preliminary step toward solution of the larger problems of human society."³²³

Isserman was Harry Ettelson's assistant rabbi at Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. According to Isserman, Ettelson's rabbinate epitomized the values of Prophetic Judaism. While in Philadelphia and later in Memphis, Ettelson was involved in interfaith work. He convened an interfaith clergy group that met regularly to exchange ideas.³²⁴ Ettelson regularly participated in pulpit exchanges with local Christian clergy and he was known as an eloquent advocate for the principles of brotherhood among Jews and non-Jews both in Philadelphia and Memphis. Over the course of his rabbinate, Ettelson was involved in a variety of civil and civic affairs and it is clear that Isserman modeled much of his rabbinate on that which he learned during his apprenticeship with Ettelson.

Abba Hillel Silver and Isserman most likely were first introduced when they were students at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Since Isserman arrived at the school in

³²³ AJA, Goldenson Finding Aid, Manuscript Collection # 81, "Biographical Sketch."

³²⁴ <http://www.mifa.org/content/historyawake.html> December 23, 2007.

September 1914 and Silver was ordained in 1915, the two young men undoubtedly became acquainted during that time. While Silver was known for being involved in numerous issues of social concern, he earned a national reputation for the central role he played as the leader of the American Zionist movement during the 1940s. It was Silver who, in the fall of 1947, advocated on behalf of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). In spite of the fact that Isserman and Silver corresponded with one another infrequently, it is clear that Isserman confided in Silver and asked him for advice and counsel. For example, in 1935 Isserman wrote to Silver and asked if he should agree to address a meeting of Father Charles Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice.³²⁵ Coughlin, a Catholic Priest, was also known as the "Radio Priest." His weekly radio broadcast which began on the "discourses on the life of Christ and the lessons of the Bible, became after 1930 almost exclusively political in content."³²⁶ Isserman was inclined to participate in the meeting because of Coughlin's shared message on the need for changes in the economic patterns of the United States. As will be explained later in this chapter, Isserman was reluctant because of Coughlin's reputation for being anti-Semitic and anti-government.³²⁷ Isserman also solicited Silver's opinions on sermon content. In 1926, Isserman invited Silver to come to Toronto and teach about Zionism to his non-Zionist and anti-Zionist board.³²⁸ Isserman's personal papers suggest that he regarded Silver highly.

³²⁵ Mayer, Emil. *Western Union Telegram*. April 14, 1935. AJA 6.6.8. In the telegram, Mayer informs Isserman that Silver advises speaking at the meeting as long as Isserman makes it known to Coughlin and others that he is not a member of the party and he is present because of his belief in the importance of social justice.

³²⁶ Brinkley, Alan. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York: 1982. Pg 83.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Correspondence. March 16, 1926. AJA 6.9.5.

From the topics that we will be looking at in the remaining portion of this chapter, it is clear that each of these four men played an influential role in helping Isserman to shape his beliefs and guide his professional endeavors in the area of social justice. Through their work, each acted as a model for Isserman in the work that would subsequently define his own rabbinic calling.

Areas of Involvement

Isserman was involved a variety of social justice initiatives throughout the course of his career. There were times when his position on various issues aligned with the views that were being espoused by other Reform rabbis and the CCAR. There were also times when he took his own path and advocated positions on social justice issues that were both notably progressive and distinctive.

As was noted above, and as historian Lloyd Gartner underscored in his essay titled "American Judaism, 1880-1945," until World War II, the Reform Movement's social justice initiatives focused mainly on labor issues, particularly the rights of workers.³²⁹ At the beginning of his career, it appears that Isserman did not stray far from the issues which the CCAR and its members were addressing. For instance, during his second year as the student-rabbi in Johnstown, Pennsylvania in 1919, Isserman delivered a sermon on

³²⁹ Kaplan, Dana Evan, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*. "American Judaism, 1880-1945" by Lloyd P. Gartner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pg 52-53

Shabbat Shuvah which resulted in a letter being sent to the College requesting that Isserman not be sent back to the congregation.

This was Isserman's second year as the student-rabbi in Johnstown and, after completing his first year of service, the congregation had requested that the school send him back.

While there, Isserman learned of the steel strike that was taking place against The Cambria Steel Company in Johnstown that was part of the greater strike in the steel industry in 1919.³³⁰ Following a tour of the town which took him through the neighborhoods of the striking workers, Isserman decided to walk down the street and speak to the striking steel workers, who had failed in their attempts to unionize. The workers told Isserman that they had been regularly compelled to work 12-hour shifts. The workers also told Isserman that every other week, when the night shift switched to the day shift (or vice versa), the workers were actually expected to work a 24-hour shift! During Sabbath services, when Isserman delivered his sermon, he described the conditions that these workers endured and said that he "did not believe that such exploitation of labor was in keeping with the basic principles of Judaism."³³¹ Isserman also told members of his student pulpit that they should be sympathetic to the workers on strike. Those who ignored the plight of the steel workers, Isserman chastised, would face

³³⁰ Brody, David. *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919*. J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia: 1965.

³³¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6, 10,10. Though dated Cincinnati 1922, I believe, based on a comment in the text that he has been in St. Louis for 34 years, that this should actually be dated 1966 or later and that it was most likely not written in Cincinnati since Isserman did not live there at the time.

"Shabbat Shuvah" literally means the "Sabbath of Repentance." It is the Sabbath that falls between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur and is named for the Haftorah portion that is read in synagogues on that Shabbat. The Haftorah portion comes from the book of Hosea and calls upon the Jews to return to God's words and teachings.

“something for which they should repent on this Sabbath of Repentance.”³³² Isserman believed his congregants weren’t following the prophetic vision and need to return to God’s message. Therefore, for him, the topic and his call to be more sympathetic to the strikers who were fighting for employee representation were both appropriate.

Isserman preached to his student pulpit about the importance of protecting the rights of the steel workers, and he urged them to be promoters of economic justice. While he may very well have been influenced by the CCAR social justice platform adopted earlier in 1918, he was surely inspired by efforts of Stephen Wise. In Isserman’s notes about the events, over 35 years later, he highlights the fact that this was the very year that Wise had “...championed the cause of the strikers”³³³ in the great steel strike that began in September 1919 and ended unsuccessfully in January 1920.³³⁴ So, while Isserman’s words may have seemed brash, and his admonishments were certainly unappreciated by many members of his student congregation, his actions were aligned with those of Stephen Wise and others who spoke out on the great steel strike of 1919.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Brody, David. *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1965. The National Committee which represented the various unions “adopted a set of twelve demands to serve as the basis for negotiations. (1) Right of collective bargaining; (2) reinstatement of all men discharged for union activities with pay for lost time; (3) eight-hour day; (4) one day’s rest in seven; (5) abolition of 24-hour shift; (6) increase in wages sufficient to guarantee American standard of living; (7) standard scales of wages sufficient to guarantee American standard of living; (8) double rates of pay for all overtime after 8 hours, holiday and Sunday work; (9) check-off system for collecting union dues and assessments; (10) principles of seniority to apply in the maintenance, reduction and increase of working forces; (11) abolition of company unions; and (12) abolition of physical examination of applicants for employment. (pg 100-101).

The following year, Isserman's student pulpit for the High Holy Days was in Bloomington, Illinois. There too, Isserman's sermon on Shabbat Shuvah called for justice and freedom of speech and resulted in a letter of dissatisfaction being sent to the College.³³⁵ Isserman wrote that his topic that evening was based on the "...witch-hunt of the attorney-general [Alexander Mitchell] Palmer...who was determined to cleanse the nation of its radicals and liberals..."³³⁶ Palmer believed that the nation faced a real danger from the American communist and anarchist groups. In order to rid the United States of this threat, "...Palmer decided upon deportation as his solution...as early as June, 1919."³³⁷ This policy could have helped Palmer accomplish his goals because "...90 percent of the members of the American Communist and anarchist organizations were foreign born."³³⁸ Isserman wrote that many were deported or hounded and that on Shabbat Shuvah he "...stood in the pulpit and expressed [his] protests against the persecution of liberals and the assaults on freedom of speech."³³⁹ In this sermon, Isserman was speaking about a topic that was dividing the nation. As Coben writes, "most American enthusiastically approved the raids"³⁴⁰ in which the "radicals" were arrested because they believed it was helping strengthen the country. Others, like Isserman, vehemently disapproved of them and Palmer's actions because they felt, as stated above, that it was a violation of freedom of speech.

³³⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6, 10,10.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Coben, Stanley. *A. Mitchell Palmer: Politician*. Columbia University Press, New York: 1963. Pg 217.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6, 10,10..

³⁴⁰ Coben, Stanley. *A. Mitchell Palmer: Politician*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963. Pg 229

Following the receipt of the letter by the College, Isserman was called before the Discipline Committee of the HUC faculty. Fortunately for Isserman, Deutsch was the chair of the committee. Isserman told the committee that his sermon was "...a defense of social and religious ideals of the prophets and a plea for more enlightenment and more tolerance for economic and political dissenters."³⁴¹ Isserman then shared his sermon with Deutsch whose response, according to Isserman, was "That is what we teach you to preach..."³⁴² The charges were subsequently dismissed.

Knowing Deutsch's history and his influence on Isserman on prophetic life, one has to wonder if Isserman would have been so lucky had another member of the faculty been chair of the committee. Had one who was not as "liberal" served, it is possible that further action may have resulted. After all, later that year, Professor Jacob Lauterbach, when presenting against retaining Isserman as a student, referred to this letter and Isserman's ideals of a "new social order"³⁴³ as support for his argument to dismiss Isserman.³⁴⁴

Freedom of speech, especially from the pulpit, remained an important principle throughout Isserman's career. As mentioned earlier, he may have gleaned this value from Wise and his idea of the "free pulpit." After his ordination in 1922, Isserman called upon each congregation he served to grant him freedom of the pulpit. He insisted that the

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Faculty HUC Minutes, Sept 1917 to June 1921, Pg 33, December 7, 1920, AJA Manuscript Collection 5, Box B-3.

³⁴⁴ Detailed information about this event can be found in the "Student Life" section of chapter one.

congregations he served permit him to fulfill his vision of the role of the modern rabbi -- "to teach ethical and spiritual truths"³⁴⁵ just as the ancient prophets did in biblical times.³⁴⁶ Fortunately for Isserman, each of his pulpits, for the most part, granted him this freedom.

While at Holy Blossom in Toronto, Isserman delivered a sermon and fought publicly for the release of Ernest V. Sterry,³⁴⁷ a weekly periodical editor, and for the repeal of the blasphemy laws in Canada. Sterry, because of comments in one article, was charged with libeling God. He was found guilty of an old law against blasphemy and punished. Isserman, in a sermon delivered at Holy Blossom, informed his congregation of the events and the law concerning blasphemous libel.³⁴⁸ He spoke of a Member of Parliament in England who had introduced a bill seeking to repeal England's blasphemy laws and suggested that Canada follow suit. He concluded by calling on his congregation to demand the release of Sterry and not to remain silent when they have the power to "undo

³⁴⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*. June 21, 1929. AJA 6, 12, 1.

³⁴⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Inaugural Sermon*. November 6, 1925. AJA 6, 11, 3. In his inaugural sermons, Isserman outlined what he believed his role to be and why a "free pulpit" was vital to this calling. "The rabbi must tear the mask of hypocrisy from those whose eyes are blinded. He must release from the dungeons the prisoners fettered by their own selfishness. He must liberate those that sit in the darkness of their own prejudices. Vigorously and boldly must he summon men to the calls of the higher life, the calls to disinterested service, the calls to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. He must be intolerant of injustice, and merciless towards integrity..." "The rabbi must be the articulate public conscience raising the danger signal and holding up the vision for Humanity. He must be voice for those who cannot speak. If the pulpit will not speak for the dispossessed, who will? If their voices are to be unheard and unheeded in the house of God, where will they be heard and heeded? The rabbis...must be the champion of the fallen and of those who have lost their way in the world. His hand should be the first to extend a helping hand to those cast up on life's tempestuous shore. He must not hesitate to plead unpopular causes when they seem bright to him, nor must he fear to stand alone when his cause seems just. Of his words he must...ask...are they right and just or not?"

³⁴⁷ Isserman prefers to spell the editor's last name "Sterry" while it also appears in other locations as "Steiry." In different articles, *Time* spells his name both ways. *Time Magazine*. "Atheist." Volume IX, Number 4, January 24, 1927. pg 16 and *Time Magazine*. "Blasphemy." Volume IX, Number 6, February 7, 1927. pg 26.

³⁴⁸ Section 198 of the Canadian Criminal Code.

this injustice."³⁴⁹ When reflecting on this event later in his life, Isserman wrote that Sterry's and his beliefs were not radical. Sterry was making the same claims about the Bible that Isserman's teachers taught at Hebrew Union College.³⁵⁰

Another issue which Isserman brought to his congregation in Toronto and to the greater community was that of corporal punishment in the public schools. After seeing the swollen hand of one of his students and learning that the student's teacher had strapped him, he began an inquiry among other students and other school districts in Canada and in other countries. Isserman discovered that teachers were not following the Ontario laws and were administering corporal punishment at their own discretion. In a public fashion, he called for the abolition of corporal punishment in the schools.³⁵¹ Isserman tried to gain the support of others in the community and even invited potential supporters to a forum.³⁵² He also petitioned the Board of Education, which had been compelled by public opinion to hear him out on the issue. The Board of Education ultimately dismissed the petition and Isserman failed to achieve his objective. He noted, however, that he "...made many friends, especially among school children, who cheered [him] when [he] was near their playgrounds..."³⁵³

³⁴⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Should the Blasphemy Laws be Repealed?* Sermon, March 25, 1927. AJA 6.11.6.

³⁵⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6. 10.10.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Isserman, Ferdinand M. Correspondence, Addressed to "Sir." February 10, 1928. AJA 6.4.8. The letter indicates that "there will be a meeting of the Committee for the elimination of corporal punishment" that will meet at the YMCA on February 14 and that Isserman "hope[s] you will find it possible to attend."

³⁵³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6. 10.10.

Working with a committee for social justice was not a new concept for Isserman when he petitioned the Board of Education in Toronto. In 1925, Isserman began working on the CCAR's Social Justice Committee. After his first year on the committee, the Conference President, Rabbi Louis Wolsey, did not reappoint Isserman. Instead, he appointed him to the Church and State Committee and to the Solicitation of Funds Committee. Through a series of correspondence, Isserman indicated that he was interested in serving on the Social Justice Committee and Wolsey responded that he wanted Isserman to serve on the other two and that it was his prerogative to appoint members to different committees. The exchange led to attacks of character in which each, in one way or another, wrote that the other was "deficient in a sense of social justice." Isserman resigned from both committees stating that he had no desire to serve under the current CCAR leadership.³⁵⁴ As a relatively new rabbi, crossing swords with the President of the CCAR was quite a bold move. With this exchange, Isserman demonstrated his courage to stand up for his beliefs. As one rabbi wrote, "Others may have worried that such outspokenness might scar their career permanently!"³⁵⁵ In the end, Isserman seems to have won since in a letter sent later that year, Isserman is listed as a member of the committee on Solicitation of Funds and the Social Justice Committee.³⁵⁶ Isserman would serve on that committee for the majority of his early career and in 1935, served as the vice-chair of the committee. In 1942, he helped form and served as chair for five years of the CCAR's Committee on Justice and Peace. This committee was created at the recommendation of the Commission on Social Justice who recommended that the Social Justice and International Peace

³⁵⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. and Rabbi Louis Wolsey. Correspondence. January 1-February 24, 1927. AJA 6,2,12.

³⁵⁵ Zola, Rabbi Gary P. Email to Daniel Schwartz, "Chapter Three" February 25, 2008.

³⁵⁶ Wolsey, Rabbi Louis. *Correspondence with Isserman*. March 12, 1927. AJA 6, 2, 12.

committees be combined.³⁵⁷ The new committee adopted the slogan, "The Work of Justice shall be Peace"³⁵⁸ and dealt with the issues of both commissions. At their first meeting, the commission constructed its mission based around the work of the eight committees that they created ranging from world reconstruction to civic reforms.³⁵⁹

Isserman moved to St. Louis just before the Great Depression which presented him and fellow Americans with countless quality of life and social justice issues to face and address. Isserman repeatedly drew on Reform Judaism's teachings about the Hebrew prophets and their ever-timely message. Isserman knew that the prophets emphasized "righteous conduct [and] ethical relationships between man and man." In fact, months earlier he had preached to his congregation about "Judaism's message to the Employer of Labor."³⁶⁰ Together with a fellow clergyman, Dean Sidney Sweet of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, Isserman worked to establish the Social Justice Commission of St. Louis. In an article written for *The Nation*, Isserman provided details about the Commission's founding, the reasons it was established, and details about the Commission's mission and activities:

In the spring of 1931, two clergymen in the city of St. Louis, apprehensive that as a result of the depression, the relation between employer and worker would become strained and might lead to clashes, and anxious to know better the causes and cures for industrial and commercial problems, felt the need of an organization which could act to mitigate the harshness

³⁵⁷ Marcuson, Isaac, editor, *CCAR Yearbook, Volume LII*, CCAR, Philadelphia, 1942, Pg 34.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 86.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 87. The eight committees were: International Relations and Peace Organizations; Race Relations; Social and Industrial Relations; Alien and Immigrant Problems; Civil Liberties; Agriculture and the Farmer; Civic Reforms; Conscientious Objectors; and World Reconstruction.

³⁶⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Judaism's Message to the Employer of Labor*, March 3, 1929. In the sermon, Isserman quotes from Isaiah 1:10-17 and Amos 5:21-24 before interpreting their messages and demonstrating how their "words and attitudes...made the prophets immortal."

of industrial conflicts, and which could also study the industrial problems and educate the public by giving publicity to such studies. After considerable discussion and thought, they organized the Social Justice Commission of St. Louis. Its membership was composed of twenty-five men, fifteen religious leaders and ten university professors, -- five each from St. Louis and Washington Universities, representing departments of political science, economics, sociology and law. Among the clergymen were an Episcopal bishop, a Roman Catholic priest, two rabbis, a Presbyterian, the leader of the Ethical Culture Society, several Episcopalians, several Congregationalists, several Methodists, and a Christian. All of them were leaders of well-known religious organizations. The following were declared to be the aims of the Commission: 'First, to encourage a public opinion that will be sensitive to the demands of social justice and that will insist on the application of its principles to concrete solutions; Second, to arrange for enlightened and impartial research and public discussion on vital social and industrial issues; Third, to investigate grave social and industrial abuses with the aid of experts, to make public the fruits of such investigation and, if possible, to propose remedies; and Fourth, to be prepared to serve in any capacity to promote the establishment of the principles of social justice.'³⁶¹

Isserman served as Chair of the Commission, and it seems clear that the Commission proved to be a vibrant force for social justice in greater St. Louis. For example, the Commission sponsored seminars on public issues which were well attended. The first such seminar took place on May 26, 1931,³⁶² and focused on the problem of unemployment. There were three sessions to the program. The morning session was at Sweet's Church, the afternoon session at St. Louis University and the evening session at Temple Israel.³⁶³

³⁶¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Nation*. "The Social Justice Commission of St. Louis -- an Experiment in Industrial Peace." Article submitted June 22, 1932. AJA 6,13,2. It appears that the article was not published in the Nation since the digital archive returned no results about Isserman during this period or about the Commission. (<http://www.thenation.com/archive/>)

³⁶² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Address by Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman at the Opening Session of the Unemployment Seminar in St. Louis, May 26, 1931*. AJA 6,12,7.

³⁶³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Nation*. "The Social Justice Commission of St. Louis -- an Experiment in Industrial Peace." Article submitted June 22, 1932. AJA 6,13,2.

Under the auspices of the Commission, Isserman was able to draw upon the lessons he learned from his rabbinic mentors and from the Reform movement in order to have a positive impact on the city. Isserman established a special mediation committee that, together with the Commission, worked to address contemporary issues of social justice and labor, unemployment and industry in the St. Louis area. The Commission's initial appeal came from a priest in Illinois whose congregants were Sanitary Milk Producers and refused to sell their supply to the Pevely Dairy Company because of "...an unfair contract submitted by the dairy to the farmers."³⁶⁴ The Commission initially met resistance from the Pevely Dairy Company which was not interested in using the services of the Commission. However, ultimately, the Commission was able to help end or prevent strikes in St. Louis. Some of these included a wage dispute between milk wagon drivers and the dairies,³⁶⁵ nut pickers and their employers, taxicab companies and drivers³⁶⁶ and railway employees and the Street Railways Company.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. "The milk wagon drivers and dairies were at logger-heads in a dispute over a cut in wages. The strike had been authorized and was set. A conference was called on the eve of the strike by both disputants...the Commission was invited by the dairies...to send two representatives to meet with them, prior to their meeting with union leaders. Among the dairymen there was a disagreement. The union was ready to arbitrate the wage-cut. The dealers were, with one exception. As a result of a discussion, in which the members of the Social Justice Commission showed how arbitration was possible and imperative, the one company opposed to arbitration yielded. The dairymen then suggested to the union leaders that the members of the SJC be invited to attend the joint conference. This they did, and there the decision to arbitrate was reached and all terms agreed upon." One member of the Commission acted as the arbitrator in the controversy while another prepared "economic data to assist the arbitrators in arriving at their decision."

³⁶⁶ Ibid. "The strike had been declared...Some violence had taken place when the Social Justice Commission stepped in. Its chairman called representatives of the union and operators to a conference with representatives of the...Commission. Both groups came to the conference.At...[a] second conference...both parties agreed to submit to arbitration. Three members of the Commission served on the board of arbitration and drew up the contract which is binding for two years...the strike commenced on Tuesday and was over by Thursday."

³⁶⁷ Ibid. "The cause for the difficulties was a proposed cut in the wages of its employees by the Street Railways Company. After...conferences no settlement was made and the union voted to strike on May 19th... Several days before the strike was scheduled, the Social Justice Commission invited both groups to meet and discuss their difficulties before them. The Union accepted the offer. The president of the Public service refused. In his refusal letter he stated, 'I deeply appreciate the caliber of the membership of the

In 1935, Isserman failed to heed the advice of at least one of his mentors when invited to speak on the subject of social justice at a meeting of the Nation Union for Social Justice (NUSJ). Founded in 1934 by Father Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic Priest who had a popular weekly radio show, the NUSJ promoted Coughlin's political and economic agenda. Father Coughlin invited Isserman to speak on "The Necessity of Establishing Social Justice," though Wise had warned him that Coughlin was "...our most dangerous enemy in all the world."³⁶⁸

Isserman justified his attendance and participation in a response to Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union in which he wrote that if he were invited to speak on this topic at any political meeting (i.e. a Republican or Democratic convention), he would accept the invitation even if he did not accept the principles of the movement.³⁶⁹ Isserman also received advice from other Jewish leaders. It seems that Isserman followed the

Social Justice Commission but it seems to me that in a matter such as the question of the cut in rates of pay to our employees, a committee of mediation, or a committee intending to make an effort to bring about an adjustment, should be composed of representatives of business, labor and banking, as well as religious and educational leaders.' At the conference with the union leaders and the members of the Commission, the union agreed to defer the strike to June 1st if the Public Service Company would agree to extend the contract until that time. A committee of the union conferred with the head of the Public Service Company and received from him a written continuation of the contract until June 1st. This was given to the union leaders, who called a meeting of their members who voted to defer the strike. Between May 19th and June 1st, conferences were held by the Public Service and union leaders with fruitful results so that the strike was averted." According to Isserman, because the commission was able "to help with the extension, [it] gave them time to work out mutual agreement and thereby prevented serious interruption of transportation service in this city."

³⁶⁸ Wise, Dr. Stephen S. *Correspondence with Isserman*, April 23, 1935, AJA 6.6.8. Wise wrote to Isserman in his capacity as the Honorary President of the American Jewish Congress. From the letter, it appears that the two may have also had a prior phone call in which Wise discouraged Isserman from participating.

³⁶⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union*, May 1935, AJA 6.6.8.

advice of Frank J. Prince, a staff member of the American Jewish Committee in New York, who wrote Isserman on behalf of Morris Waldman³⁷⁰ and Rabbi Stephen Wise for the American Jewish Committee.³⁷¹ Isserman sent a draft of his address to a number of respected colleagues for suggestions and heard overwhelmingly positive feedback. In his address, Isserman stated that he was not a member of the National Union for Social Justice and that through his participation, he only represented himself. He spoke about the long history of social justice in Judaism and then described the key ingredients to a program of social justice – “faith in democracy and liberty.” Isserman pointed out that in the struggle for social justice, the lack of funds was one of the most pressing concerns. Finally, he encouraged Coughlin to practice what he preached and to make his movement one that was democratic. He encouraged him to invite leaders from different faith backgrounds to form a steering committee, which Coughlin would chair and represent.³⁷²

Though he agreed to participate in the Detroit meeting, Isserman knew that there was the potential that his participation could cause more harm than good.³⁷³ He therefore took a

³⁷⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. “Morris Waldman.” Keter Publishing House, Ltd., Jerusalem: 1971. Vol. 16. Pg 249-250. Morris Waldman (1879-1963) was the executive director of the American Jewish Committee and was an accomplished social worker. Waldman was the director of the “Galveston Movement which was created to direct East European immigrants from the East Coast of the United States to less populous areas.” He also “traveled widely in the United States setting up federations of Jewish charities to coordinate local Jewish philanthropy.” In 1953, Waldman wrote an autobiography titled, *Not By Power* (International Universities Press, New York).

³⁷¹ Prince, Frank J. *Correspondence with Isserman*. Letter, April 16, 1935. AJA 6,6,8. “The points that we thought should be made follows: 1. That you are not a member of the Nation Union for Social Justice and that you are not the spokesman for Jews as such. 2. The historic Jewish advocacy of social justice, point out that social justice had been taught [sic] in the Temple for thousands of years. 3. That social justice is now the ideal and should continue to be the ideal of every religion. 4. Emphasize the imperative need to reaffirm the fundamental American doctrine of separation of Church and the State...” Prince also recognizes that this is “an opportunity of a lifetime, if we use it properly” and offers the services of a number of colleagues to look over it and offer suggestions.

³⁷² Isserman, Ferdinand. M. *The Necessity for Establishing Social Justice*. Address, April 24, 1935. AJA 6,6,8.

³⁷³ Israel, Rabbi Edward L. *Correspondence with Isserman*. Letter, April 22, 1935. AJA 6,6,8. In the letter, Rabbi Israel (Har Sinai Congregation - Baltimore, Maryland) writes, “I am primarily sorry for your sake

number of precautions in addition to accepting advice and critique of his address. To ensure that he was not misquoted, Isserman sent a copy of his address to a number of newspapers and agencies.³⁷⁴ Isserman also hired a press clipping service to send him all the clippings that included his name and the address.³⁷⁵ Isserman then responded to some of the articles that had misquoted or misinterpreted his remarks.

After all was said and done, Isserman received both praise and condemnation for his decision to sit on the same platform with Charles Coughlin. HUC President Julian Morgenstern praised Isserman and wrote that Isserman handled the task in an appropriate manner and that through his participation, he "served a very useful purpose."³⁷⁶ And, from the other side, Isserman received letters like the following anonymous letter, "It

because you are highly respected among certain liberal groups in this country and you are going to lose caste enormously among the very people whose opinions you respect and with whom you are in utmost harmony intellectually and spiritually...In this situation I would have tried to be tactful in my refusal...I would simply have stated that I was out of harmony with the entire structure of the movement....I feel certain that no matter what you may say at Detroit Wednesday night, you are going to be used as a catspaw [sic]."

Isserman and Israel's tenure at the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College overlapped for a few years. The two worked together when Israel chaired the CCAR Commission on Social Justice (Israel was the chair from 1923-1933). Israel was a "social justice activist and labor Zionist...[who] was a strong and consistent supporter of labor and served as a one-man arbitrator in the men's clothing industry in arguments with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America... Israel died suddenly on October 19, 1941 just after he was installed as the executive director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. (AJA, *Edward Israel Finding Aid*. Manuscript Collection #119. "Biographical Sketch.")

³⁷⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Jacob Landau*. Letter, April 22, 1935. AJA 6,6,8. Isserman sent his address to Jacob Landau of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and to the St. Louis Post Dispatch, the St. Louis Globe Democrat and the St. Louis Star-Times so that St. Louisans would "know exactly what I have said and not receive fragmentary reports of what may have come over the press wires."

³⁷⁵ Romeike Press Clippings. *Correspondence with Isserman*. Letter, May 14, 1935. AJA 6,6,8. The service says that they have over 300 clippings and they are requested payment for their services.

³⁷⁶ Morgenstern, Julian. *Correspondence with Isserman*. Letter, May 1, 1935 [Dict. April 20, 1935]. AJA 6,6,8.

almost seems impossible that a man of your standing would stoop so low as to sit on the same platform with 'a bigot...'...³⁷⁷

Isserman's role in the meeting does not appear to have had either a catastrophic or a beneficial result. While he was able to speak about social justice from a Jewish perspective, the recommendations he made to Coughlin and the 60,000 in attendance, which encouraged freedom and democracy, were not heeded. Eventually, Coughlin's organization failed because he was unable to deliver on a promise that he made in 1936. In the summer of 1936, he promised 9 million votes to their third party presidential candidate William Lemke. Lemke received less than one million which resulted in Coughlin feeling that the party was "discredited" and not a "political power." Coughlin then fulfilled the other part of his original promise and disbanded the party because he was not able to deliver the votes.³⁷⁸ Isserman on the other hand, continued preaching and lecturing to a variety of groups with great success and was able to work to correct other injustices.

For some of these injustices, Isserman focused on his own congregation and for others, he solicited help from his congregants in righting the injustices he saw in the community. Within the congregation and the Jewish community, Isserman noticed the economic injustices that Jews faced in joining and being a member of congregations. Isserman had seen his teachers, Stephen S. Wise and Harry Ettelson, address similar issues in their

³⁷⁷ A Missionary, *Correspondence with Isserman*, Letter, May 1, 1935, AJA 6.6.8.

³⁷⁸ Brinkley, Alan, *Voices of Protest*, Pg 261, *Radio Priest* by Donald Warren is another highly regarded book on Coughlin's work and the NUSJ.

congregations and, like them, he worked to abolish assigned pews and to move from minimum dues to voluntary offerings. Voluntary offerings allowed for all Jews to be a part of the Temple community regardless of the financial abilities. This approach to dues assessment enabled more people to join the temple and the congregation subsequently found that their annual revenues had actually increased. Abolishing the practice of assigned or family pews ultimately served to democratize the synagogue by eliminating divisions based on status, privilege and wealth in the temple's seating arrangements.³⁷⁹

Outside the congregation there were still other injustices to correct. One area in which Isserman appears to have been a pioneer is in the area of civil rights. In a tribute to Isserman after his death, Rabbi Julius Mark describes Isserman was a "battler for civil rights long before it became fashionable."³⁸⁰ Isserman insistently referred to the Torah and Hebrew prophets to validate his calls for equal justice under the law. In a statement prepared by the Synagogue Council of America,³⁸¹ during the time that Isserman was serving as a committee chair, the prophet Malachi is quoted, "Have we not one Father? Has not one God created us all?" in order to justify the moral imperative that called for racial brotherhood.³⁸² The statement also described the Biblical and Talmudic

³⁷⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Valedictory Sermon*. March 8, 1963. AJA 6, 21,6. The change in seating was one from family seating to free, unassigned seating. Jonathan Sarna has written an article on mixed, family seating, titled, "The Debate over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue." (Wertheimer, Jack. *The American Synagogue*. Brandeis University Press, Hanover: 1987).

³⁸⁰ Mark, Rabbi Julius. *Tribute to Ferdinand Myron Isserman*. AJA Ferdinand M. Isserman, Nearprints, Box 2

³⁸¹ The Synagogue Council of America is a council that is "composed of national congregational and rabbinical organizations of America...formed for the purpose speaking and acting unitedly [sic] in furthering such religious interests as the constituent organizations in the council have in common." (From *The Synagogue Council of America: Its Origin and Activities*. New York: 1931. AJA Synagogue Council of America Nearprint Special Topics Box 2).

³⁸² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Negroes are our Brethren*. November 23, 1944. AJA 6,9,6.

understanding that all men are created in the image of God and are therefore subject "to the same rights and are brethren in the sight of God and man..."³⁸³ In a pamphlet published by the Commission on Justice and Peace, which Isserman chaired, he also wrote that neither science nor religion can justify these prejudices.³⁸⁴

Isserman worked to advance civil rights in a wide variety of arenas. As noted above, on the national level Isserman helped to establish the CCAR's Commission on Justice and Peace. As the first chair of this commission, Isserman and his colleagues promptly planned an "Institute on Judaism and Race Relations" which was held in November, 1945. Isserman insisted that this type of seminar was needed because, as he himself noted, "...Racial justice must be a fore-runner of a just and enduring peace."³⁸⁵ In the advance publicity relating to the Institute, Isserman promoted the significance of the seminar. The publicity asserted that the Institute's participants would "...assemble...in order to relate the teachings of the prophets of Israel to the problems of race in the modern world."³⁸⁶ When the participants gathered, they divided into six round tables. The mission of each round table was to create a statement on their topic dealing with Judaism and Race Relations.³⁸⁷ At this conference, statements were prepared which were later

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M., chairman, *Fellowship Among All: A Message on Race Relations*. Commission on Justice and Peace, February 1945. AJA 6, 7, 1. "Prejudices based on differences in color are relics of a primitive age which neither the findings of modern science nor the teachings of high religion can justify."

³⁸⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Opening Statement of the Institute on Judaism and Race Relations*. November 25, 1945. AJA 6.17.2. The Institute was held at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York.

³⁸⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr of Union Theological Seminary*. Letter, October 3, 1945. AJA 6.3.2.

³⁸⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Letter*. AJA 6.3.3. The six topics were: 1. The Teaching of Judaism and Race Relations. 2. Science and Race 3. The Negro in the United States 4. Colored Races in the Pacific 5. The Law and Improvement of Race Relations 6. Propaganda and Race Relations.

presented to the CCAR. Eventually, these statements helped to define the CCAR's stance on race relations.

In preparation for the Institute, Isserman also tried to collect information from other rabbis who, like himself, had opened his pulpit to "Negroes." He wrote many rabbinic colleagues, including Barnett Brickner, Irving F. Reichert and Max Reichler.³⁸⁸ Isserman asked these rabbis to share their experiences so that he could include them in the Justice and Peace Bulletin that he planned to issue. Isserman's decision to invite "Negroes" to speak from Temple Israel's pulpit demonstrated on the local level that the temple's rabbi was an earnest and sincere advocate for civil rights.

Isserman's deeply felt interest in promoting racial equality expressed itself in other ways. In a statement written in support of the need to desegregate the public schools, Isserman wrote that "Temple Israel...played its part in preparing St. Louis for desegregation. It opened its pulpit to Negro preachers, invited Negro youth and children to meet its youth and children, opened its facilities...to inter-racial gatherings...and organized the St. Louis Nursery Foundation..." Though here Isserman credited the Temple for these achievements, elsewhere credit is given to him or he personally claimed responsibility for these steps. The St. Louis Nursery Foundation, which still exists to this day, developed after members of the Temple Israel Sisterhood and Brotherhood learned from the Negro Family Welfare Society that a nursery for working mothers was desperately needed. This

³⁸⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence*. Letters, February 23, 1945. AJA 6,6,15. Reichert is at Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco in California and Reichler is at Beth Shalom-People's Temple in Brooklyn, NY.

Nursery was established as an interfaith and interracial institution, the first such interracial school in St. Louis. Initially, the Temple Israel Sisterhood and Brotherhood supported the foundation. However, after three years, the "community chest voted to admit the Nursery to its organization"³⁸⁹ and the Foundation is now funded through them and an annual Book Fair.

Isserman's work on behalf of civil rights included his preaching, his newspaper editorials, and the many radio addresses he delivered on the topic of racial justice. Although he encountered resistance to his position, it is clear that he earned the respect and support of many others, and this encouragement enabled him to continue sharing his message. For example, after delivering a sermon on the topic of racial equality in December 1945, some congregants expressed their displeasure with the rabbi's crusading. However, the temple's president responded to these criticisms by expressing his full support for Isserman.³⁹⁰ On another occasion, the station manager at the radio station where Isserman's radio show was produced objected to the rabbi's decision to express his support for the principles of integration. Isserman defended himself by saying that all of the views he expressed had also been "expressed in the editorial pages of the [St. Louis] Post-Dispatch."³⁹¹

On a civic level, Isserman spoke in favor of passing a Civil Rights Ordinance. He appeared before the St. Louis Board of Alderman where he urged passage of the law

³⁸⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Crises in the Rabbinate*. Cincinnati, 1922. AJA 6, 10,10.

³⁹⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Judaism and Race Relations*. Sermon, December 14, 1945. AJA 6,17,2.

³⁹¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Report on 23 Years of Broadcasting over ration station KSD from 8:15 to 8:30 on Sunday, commencing on 1/14/47 and ending 3/23/69*. AJA 6,26,4.

"...so that we no longer humiliate and degrade fine upstanding Americans, men, women and children..."³⁹²

Isserman also lobbied for the passage of legislation that would eliminate restrictions in the law so that individuals could marry the person of their choosing, regardless of race. With the help of Missouri's Attorney General, Thomas Eagleton, a friend of Isserman's, and the support of Joseph Cardinal Ritter of the St. Louis Archdiocese, President Ludwig E. Fuerbringer of Concordia Seminary, and the St. Louis Rabbinical Association, Isserman was able to work with Missouri Senator John E. Down to rescind this law.³⁹³

Conclusions

Like many Reform rabbis of his era, Isserman was a passionate proponent of Prophetic Judaism as it had been taught in HUC and by the preceding generation of liberal rabbis. Nevertheless, Isserman did pioneer some noteworthy efforts on a national level. Certainly for the St. Louis community, like many American cities that tolerated many social injustices, Isserman's contributions were perceived at the time and subsequently recognized as pioneering. He was truly a leader who, as Lois Caplan wrote in 1998, "...pricked the social conscience of his congregants and occasionally annoyed them by

³⁹² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Statement of Isserman on Hearing of the Civil Rights Ordinance #62 before Committee of the Board of Alderman*. March 25, 1949. AJA 6. 18,1.

³⁹³ Sec 451.020, RSMo 1959. In the Isserman Manuscript Collection of the AJA, Box 3, Folder 10, there is a series of letters supporting Isserman's endeavors and letters which record Isserman's correspondence with the state officials.

his involvement with racial conflicts or as a labor mediator."³⁹⁴ In order to do this, Isserman drew on the lessons he learned at HUC and from his rabbinical mentors. As a representative of Prophetic Judaism, he anticipated that his role would frequently be controversial and unappreciated, yet time and again, he stood up to pursue justice through the path he believed to be just.³⁹⁵ While Isserman was able to affect change in the areas listed above because of his deeply felt commitment to the ideals of freedom, equality, brotherhood and justice, as we will explore in the next chapter, he was also successful in expressing these same ideals in the context of the interfaith work that occupied such a significant portion of his professional activity.

³⁹⁴ Caplan, Lois. *Religious Action Weekend*. April 1998. AJA Isserman, Nearprints, Box 2.

³⁹⁵ Tabscott, Robert. *St. Louis Post*. Commentary. April 10, 1997. AJA Isserman Collection, Nearprints, Box 2. "In his valedictory sermon at the Temple in 1963, [Isserman said]... 'I have never wanted to be a beloved rabbi, but rather an irritating rabbi, to stir into action, not to lull into complacency, to disturb, not soothe, to sanction, not retreat into an ivory tower, oblivious to human suffering and injustice, only as it affected Jews but as it affected humanity.'"

Chapter 4 – Interfaith Activities

Throughout his personal and professional life, Isserman was engaged in a diverse array of interfaith activities. He created and developed interfaith relationships and organizations, worked with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) and participated in pulpit exchanges. Isserman also delivered dozens of topical sermons and addresses that taught Jews about Christianity and Christians about Judaism. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of interfaith activity in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century. Subsequently, we proceed to describe some of the reasons that Isserman became involved. In order to analyze Isserman's perspective on interfaith work, we will examine two of Isserman's best known sermons in this area: *The Things We Have in Common* and *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ*. Finally, we will provide an overview of the various types of interfaith work in which Isserman was engaged.

History

Isserman's career was influenced by the values that evolved during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These values, which were stressed by his teachers, the Reform movement and American society, included community relations, universal ideals and Americanization.

Community relations developed in various ways. One effective manner was through interfaith activity. During the period surrounding Isserman's life, American Jewry

actively engaged in a variety of interfaith activities. In 1867, for instance, liberal Jews established relationships with (mostly) Protestant Christians, as a result of the formation of the Free Religious Association (FRA). The FRA first gathered on Memorial Day of that year, when Octavius Brooks Frothingham,³⁹⁶ a Unitarian preacher, convened the first meeting of the FRA in Boston. According to one source, at least 18 Jews attended this meeting,³⁹⁷ the purpose of which was to "promote a rational, non-sectarian approach to religion."³⁹⁸

Through their participation in interest groups like the Free Religious Association, other relationships with non-Jews began to develop. Pulpit exchanges between rabbis and Christian ministers began to take place around the country. In these exchanges, clergy would attend services at their partner's congregation and deliver a sermon. The first known pulpit exchange took place between Rabbi Max Lilienthal³⁹⁹ and a Unitarian minister of Cincinnati in 1867.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Octavius Brooks Frothingham[0] was "born in Boston, Mass. He graduated from Harvard in 1843, studied divinity there and was pastor of North Church, Salem, Mass., for eight years before leaving in a dispute over his antislavery activities. In 1859 he became pastor of the Third Congregational Unitarian Society in New York City. A theological liberal, he founded the Boston Free Religious Association in 1867 and headed it for 11 years. He published a biography of Theodore Parker, a study of New England transcendentalism, and a summary of his own religious thought, *The Religion of Humanity*." (Bowman, John S., editor. *The Cambridge Dictionary of American Biography*. "Octavius Brooks Frothingham." Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995. pg 256).

³⁹⁷ Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. pg 124.

³⁹⁸ Caruthers, J. Wade. *The New England Quarterly*. "Who Was Octavius Brooks Frothingham?" Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec., 1970), pp. 631-637. [http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0028-4866\(197012\)43%3A4%3C631%3AWWOB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0028-4866(197012)43%3A4%3C631%3AWWOB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N) December 28, 2007.

³⁹⁹ Rabbi Max Lilienthal was born in Munich, Bavaria in 1815. Lilienthal drew up plans, which were later rejected, to establish state schools for Jews in the Pale of Settlement. In 1845, Lilienthal emigrated to the United States and "conducted a private boarding school for a few years" before becoming a rabbi in 1849. From 1855 until his death, Lilienthal served as the rabbi of Bene Israel in Cincinnati. There he served as a

Associations like the FRA provided a venue for meaningful contact and dialogue between people of different religious faiths. Over time, individuals from differing religious backgrounds, began to recognize "their similarity of religious philosophy and social relations."⁴⁰¹ The recognition of these similarities helped create many proponents of a universal approach to religion.

Universal religious values became so popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that some religious leaders believed that liberal Judaism and Unitarianism were close enough in philosophy that two movements should consider uniting.⁴⁰² One rabbi, Solomon Sonneschein, the first Rabbi of Temple Israel in St. Louis, even gave serious consideration to employing a Unitarian minister.⁴⁰³ The universal approach also helped community relations because it allowed those who shared this value to become better acquainted with others who shared their vision and values.

However, in the early twentieth century, the rise of the immigrant Jewish population prompted anti-Jewish and particularistic activity in America. Numerous defense organizations arose in response to the increased anti-Jewish activity. In 1906, the American Jewish Committee was established "...to prevent infringement of the civil and

civic leader and was on "friendly terms with...Christian clergy." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. "Lilienthal, Max." Keter Publishing House, Ltd., Jerusalem: 1971. Vol. 11. Pg 2493-5

⁴⁰⁰ Sarna, 431.

⁴⁰¹ Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. pg 289.

⁴⁰² Ibid. One significant element was to this was that the Unitarians accepted the view of "Jesus as prophet rather than redeemer."

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

religious rights of Jews and to alleviate the consequences of persecution.”⁴⁰⁴ In 1913, the Anti-Defamation League was founded to “...stop defamation of the Jewish people...[and] to secure justice and fair treatment for all.”⁴⁰⁵ And, in 1927, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) was formed to “...counter...explosions of social hatred...[and] to promote brotherhood.”⁴⁰⁶ While Isserman subscribed to the mission of all of these organizations, he was known to be active in the NCCJ.

The defense groups served other purposes as well. In addition to defending Jews, some of them took on a third value of the period -- Americanization. These groups, their members and other influential individuals attempted to reverse the marginalization of Judaism by increasing its universalistic ideology. One such member was Rabbi Stephen S. Wise who declared that “Jews should reclaim Jesus as their own.”⁴⁰⁷ Some brought together interfaith groups for dialogues. The NCCJ also gave birth to National Brotherhood Day, later in 1947 to become Brotherhood Week, to address the social relationship issues which existed and to help expand the universal message.

These ideals shaped American life during this period and as we will see in this chapter, also shaped Isserman’s rabbinic career.

Isserman’s Background

⁴⁰⁴ Sarna, 433

⁴⁰⁵ Internet, <http://www.adl.org/> December 28, 2007.

⁴⁰⁶ Sarna, 266.

⁴⁰⁷ Meyer, 302. His ideas can be seen as early as 1913 when he wrote an article in *The Outlook*, titled, “The Life and Teaching of Jesus the Jew” (June 7, 1913).

Later in life, Isserman wrote that interfaith relations played an important role in the life of his family. As a result of his parents' upbringing, Isserman was familiar with non-Jewish families from his youth. Isserman traced the beginnings of his interest in interfaith activities to his mother, Betty Brodheim Isserman, who was educated in a convent in Vienna. Isserman's father, Alexander, was a businessman who was also regularly associated with non-Jewish business associates. As Isserman highlights in a speech, his father's primary business associate was a Catholic.⁴⁰⁸ It is clear that Isserman's parents associated with many non-Jews over the years and this familiarity influenced their son's attitude toward interfaith communication. However, while these childhood experiences may have influenced him, we know from his writings that his educational experiences in Cincinnati heavily influenced Isserman's interest in helping Jews and non-Jews learn more about one another.

According to Isserman's own testimony, one of the books that greatly influenced his life was read while he was a student in a German class taught by Professor Max Pohl at the University of Cincinnati.⁴⁰⁹ In Pohl's class, Isserman read *Nathan the Wise* by Gotthold Lessing which, according to Isserman, "...helped in the time of Lessing to break down the walls of religious intolerance, and to make for greater religious appreciation."⁴¹⁰ However, it was not the book alone that influenced Isserman's intellectual development. It was Max Pohl, with the help of Lessing's famous book, who actually taught Isserman "interfaith appreciation" and mutual respect. Pohl influenced Isserman's thinking by

⁴⁰⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Clergyman of the Year*. Acceptance Speech, February 3, 1967. AJA 6.6.15.

⁴⁰⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Nathan the Wise*. January 11, 1963. AJA 6.21.7.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

urging him (and his other students) to demolish "...the concept of superiority of [his] faith and the inferiority of that of others."⁴¹¹ *Nathan the Wise* as taught by Pohl, also helped Isserman to develop an appreciation, not just a tolerance, for other religions.⁴¹² This respect for other religious traditions became a noteworthy hallmark of Isserman's rabbinic career.

According to Isserman's wife, Ruth, her husband's interest in interfaith work was also influenced by another one of his teachers: Bible professor and later HUC President Julian Morgenstern.⁴¹³ Morgenstern taught Isserman "...that Judaism and Christianity came out of different cultures but had a common origin."⁴¹⁴ He also taught that "Democracy was inspired by the teachings of both Christianity and Judaism." Isserman's wife believed that, "As a result of this type of schooling, the Rabbi [her husband] reached beyond the walls of the Temple to the community at large..."⁴¹⁵

After Ordination from HUC, Isserman began his rabbinate at Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. While there, time permitted him to do graduate work at the

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid

⁴¹³ "Julian Morgenstern was born in St. Francisville, Illinois, March 18, 1881...He received a B.A. Degree from the University of Cincinnati in 1901 and was ordained as Rabbi at the Hebrew Union College (H.U.C.) in 1902...In 1907 Morgenstern was called back to Hebrew Union College as Instructor in Bible and Semitic languages. He was steadily promoted...and in 1922 [appointed] President of Hebrew Union College. He was the first native-born American and alumnus of Hebrew Union College to become its president...Morgenstern was also active as a scholar in the fields of Biblical Science and the History of Religion, particularly the History of Judaism in the Biblical period.(AJA, *Julian Morgenstern Finding Aid*. Manuscript Collection #30. "Biographical Sketch.")

⁴¹⁴ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect Rabbi FM Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis. St Louis, MO 1929-1963. A Biography & Synopsis of His Life.* AJA.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

University of Pennsylvania. Inspired by his studies at the University of Cincinnati and HUC, Isserman decided to study Comparative Religions and, two years later, he earned a master's degree in the field. At the University of Pennsylvania, Isserman learned about Judaism, Christianity, "Mohammedanism,"⁴¹⁶ Hinduism, Buddhism, Roman mythology and more. His M.A. studies at the University of Pennsylvania sealed a foundational interest in the study of religion and the ways in which religions interrelated. Isserman would build upon this basis throughout the course of his rabbinic career. His academic studies led him to embrace a deeply felt belief in the unity and brotherhood of all human beings. It was on account of these convictions that Isserman pursued interfaith work so actively during the course of his rabbinical career.

Interfaith Writings

During his career, Isserman delivered numerous addresses, sermons and radio broadcasts relating to interfaith relations and activities. Of these, two sermons in particular -- *The Things We Have in Common* and *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ* -- were widely distributed. Isserman delivered these sermons on numerous occasions in a variety of locations and he also distributed these two sermons in pamphlet form.

The Things We Have in Common was delivered on the radio, as a sermon at Temple Israel in St. Louis, at the 1937 International Assembly of Faith in London, before university students and as part of the World War II North African Town Hall Meeting Lectures. Isserman's sermonic proposition was that a fundamental unity exists among

⁴¹⁶ This is the term Isserman himself used in his writing when making reference to Islam.

humankind, and that the very same commonality exists among the world's different religions. The sermon exhorted listeners to focus on the things we have in common in order to create a spirit of universal brotherhood.

Isserman began his address by focusing on those things that divide us. He went on to note that we usually focus on these distinctions and ignore the things we have in common. He then turned to a discussion of Judaism and its concept of one God and the unity of God. He explained how the prophet's vision of one God also implies one humanity. Once he established this idea in Judaism, Isserman demonstrated how the other major religions⁴¹⁷ also preach the unity of God and the unity of humanity. Isserman then expiated his conviction that this is one of the important characteristics that all religions have in common. And if each and every religious tradition did indeed share this common fundamental conviction, then it followed logically from this realization that there could not possibly be inferior or superior races, peoples or religions. Isserman concluded his exhortation by making the claim that though we have different religious practices which should continue to exist, we share "...spiritual and ethical conceptions"⁴¹⁸ which bring us together.

This address and the concepts contained within it were important to Isserman. These ideals constituted the bedrock of his interfaith work. He repeatedly insisted that there was no one religion that was superior to another and that each different religion attempted to

⁴¹⁷ Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

⁴¹⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Things We Have in Common*. Address, University of Chicago, February 19, 1939. AJA 6,15,4.

foster a better life for its followers – spiritually, ethically and communally. Isserman noted that these beliefs were learned through the science of comparative religions. He credited his perspective on religion to the work he did for his master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania.

Isserman established relationships with people of differing religious faiths on the basis of his belief in the brotherhood of humankind and in his conviction that all religious traditions were of equal spiritual validity. Isserman built interfaith bonds by demonstrating his appreciation for the religious beliefs that others held and he developed personal relationships that fostered a spirit of mutual admiration and trust. These interfaith partnerships enabled Isserman to collaborate with leaders of all religious faiths on issues of social justice, as described in the last chapter, and on issues that concerned spirituality and religion, as will be discussed in this chapter.

The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ was also delivered on numerous radio programs, before the members of Temple Israel, and in a variety of other locations. As early as 1924,⁴¹⁹ Isserman preached about Jesus and taught the very same lessons which would eventually become a part of this sermon. Isserman was not the first to talk about what Jews and Judaism has to say about Jesus. One of Isserman's role models, Stephen Wise, delivered a famous and controversial sermon on Jews and Jesus even before Isserman addressed the topic. Wise also published articles with the same ideas as he did in the June 7, 1913 copy of *The Outlook*. Like *The Things We Have in Common*,

⁴¹⁹ On November 19, 1924, Isserman delivered a sermon at Rodeph Shalom titled, "Jesus, A Jewish Prophet," in which many of the same concepts were presented to his congregation.

Isserman's sermon on Jesus and Christianity was also published in pamphlet form and delivered to those who requested it or to those who Isserman thought should read it.

Isserman intended his address and pamphlet *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ* to be heard and read by Jews and Christians alike. It was intended for members of both religions because Isserman believed that in order to achieve the sense of brotherhood which both religions teach, it was necessary for both groups to understand their common roots and to work through the differences they faced.

The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ was an attempt by Isserman to allow his audience to accomplish this task. He began the address by informing everyone that Jesus was Jewish. He spoke about Jesus' upbringing and the message of justice, peace and good-will that Jews and Christians share in common. Isserman described how Jesus' birth as a Jew allowed him to share these universal concepts which led to "spiritual and ethical propinquity."⁴²⁰ Isserman then explained that the divide between Jews and Christians about Jesus is over the Christian concept of the messiah which Jews do not share. He described five differences⁴²¹ in regard to the messiah concept and followed by making sure that the reader knew that though Jews do not accept Jesus as the messiah, they do accept the ideals he taught because they are fundamentally based on Jewish tradition. Isserman concluded by describing how Unitarian practice is closer to that of Jews and

⁴²⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ*. 1948.

⁴²¹ The five differences that Isserman mentions are that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Lord and has divine qualities, Jesus will be resurrected, Jesus atones for the sins of others and Jesus is a mediator between humans and God. Isserman tells the reader that Jews reject all of these concepts and then provides the reason. When possible, he also conveys the Jewish concepts of these ideas.

that he rejoiced knowing that, through the Unitarians, "...men are coming closer to the teaching of synagogues."⁴²² This was important to Isserman because he felt that the Judaism had an important message to teach others. By learning these lessons, Isserman felt he was one step closer to realizing the prophetic vision.

By delivering both of these addresses on numerous occasions, Isserman fulfilled what he believed was one of the functions of the rabbinate. He served as a spokesman for Judaism and taught Jewish beliefs so that there would be an interfaith understanding that would allow for these teachings to be applied.⁴²³

Interfaith Involvement

Before his pulpit work, Isserman's interfaith activities were limited.⁴²⁴ It appears that the years in Cincinnati and Philadelphia played a large role in helping him grow an appreciation for and an understanding of interfaith work. Once he began to lead his own congregation, Isserman was able to take the skills and knowledge he learned and, along with the behavior he saw modeled by his mentors, become a leader of interfaith activity in the cities where he served.

In Toronto, Isserman recreated the same kind of interfaith activity that had been going on in the States since the nineteenth century. Reflecting back on his rabbinate in Toronto,

⁴²² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Jewish Jesus and the Christian Christ*. 1948.

⁴²³ CCAR, *CCAR Yearbook, Volume LXIII*. "The Rabbi and the Community" by Ferdinand M. Isserman. CCAR, 1953.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

Isserman believed was one of the most outstanding achievements of his work in Canada⁴²⁵ was the pulpit exchange he initiated. While in Canada, Isserman participated in a number of pulpit exchanges and, according to tradition, is believed to have arranged the first pulpit exchange between a rabbi and a minister in the history of Canada and the British Empire.⁴²⁶ In an editorial in the *Canadian Jewish Review*, Isserman wrote that pulpit exchanges are important so that everyone involved can learn more and appreciate the beauty of other religions.⁴²⁷

While Isserman exchanged pulpits on numerous occasions in Canada, records were not preserved of every exchange. One of the first that is on file in the American Jewish Archives is a pulpit exchange that took place on March 12 and 14, 1926 during which Isserman and the Minister from the Unitarian Church in Toronto both spoke in the other's house of worship about "A Religious Platform for all Humanity."⁴²⁸ It is clear that not everyone agreed with Isserman's choice to allow the exchange as later that month he published an editorial responding to allegations that he had desecrated the pulpit by allowing a Christian Minister to preach from it.⁴²⁹

One of Isserman's better known and highly attended exchanges was with the Reverend E. Crossley Hunter of the United Church of Canada. Hunter had been attending services at

⁴²⁵ Anshan, Mark S., Jane Herman, Judy Nyman, Rabbi Yael Splanky, editors. *A Synagogue for these Times: The Installation of Rabbi John Moskowitz as 12th Senior Rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple*. Toronto, Canada: Holy Blossom Temple, 2000. pg 29.

⁴²⁶ Biographical Data of Ferdinand M. Isserman. May 8, 1967 AJA 6.26.9.

⁴²⁷ Scrapbook of Editorials of Ferdinand M. Isserman in the "Canadian Jewish Review" from August 1925 - January 1929. November 27, 1925. AJA Isserman Nearprints.

⁴²⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. A Religious Platform for all Humanity. March 14, 1926. Sermon. AJA 6.11.5.

⁴²⁹ Scrapbook of Editorials of Ferdinand M. Isserman in the "Canadian Jewish Review" from August 1925 - January 1929. March 26, 1926. AJA Isserman Nearprints.

Holy Blossom and suggested the exchange.⁴³⁰ Isserman, who sensed that Hunter also had an appreciation for the teachings of the prophets of Israel⁴³¹ agreed to the exchange. According to Isserman, whose car had to be parked by a police officer because there was no parking available when he arrived, police estimated that 5,000 people were turned away when he went to speak at the church.⁴³² In the exchange, Hunter and Isserman recognized their similarities and their "...common loyalty to the same God."⁴³³ Their first exchange would lead to further exchanges between the two.

Isserman continued to participate in pulpit exchanges when he moved to Temple Israel in St. Louis. It is clear that these exchanges provided the rabbi with an opportunity to share the knowledge he obtained while earning his M.A. degree in comparative religion at the University of Pennsylvania. He repeatedly insisted that by sharing Judaism's message with others and by allowing Jews to hear the messages of Christian ministers, he was helping to bring the world closer to the prophetic vision of a world filled with justice and unity.

Isserman also participated in a variety of other activities which fostered interfaith relationships and enabled him to pursue his vision of a community that embraced a spirit of mutual respect and understanding among divergent religious denominations. Isserman was actively involved in the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Early in his career in St. Louis, Edward Clinchy, the head of the NCCJ, charged Isserman with

⁴³⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Twenty Years in the Rabbinate*. November 1, 1942. Sermon. AJA 6,16,4.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Farewell Sermon*. Sermon. June 21, 1929. AJA 6,12,1.

the mission of enlisting other clergy members and planning what Isserman described as one of "...the first civic seminar[s] of Christians and Jews in the United States."⁴³⁴ The two-day seminar was organized to minimize friction between religious groups and to teach each other about the differences in their respective religious beliefs so that they would not be misrepresented.⁴³⁵ To help him with the seminar, Isserman first approached Bishop William Scarlett of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri who had warmly welcomed Isserman to Temple Israel and St. Louis.⁴³⁶ Scarlett and Isserman then enlisted Archbishop John Joseph Cardinal Glennon of the Roman Catholic Church. Glennon assigned Monsignor John F. Spenser to represent the church and their work began.⁴³⁷ Through this work, they also started the first chapter of the Conference of Christians and Jews in St. Louis.⁴³⁸

Isserman's work in the NCCJ and the local St. Louis chapter helped him to develop relationships with clergy of all faiths in the St. Louis area. It also allowed him to share the message that he felt Judaism had to teach them. Through his work in informal conversations and addresses, Isserman was able to promote his deeply felt conviction that he could advance the prophetic teachings of Judaism by fostering a mutual respect for the basic ideals that all religious traditions promoted. In one sermon that he delivered at a NCCJ conference meeting, Isserman addressed the participants and described what he

⁴³⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi's Tribute to Bishop [William] Scarlett*. n.d. AJA 6,9,4.

⁴³⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Can Religious Prejudice Be Uprooted? Based on the St. Louis Seminar*. May 16, 1930. Sermon. AJA 6,12,4.

⁴³⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand, M. *A Rabbi's Tribute to Bishop [William] Scarlett*. n.d. AJA 6,9,4.

⁴³⁷ According to Ruth Isserman, Bishop Ivan Lee Holt of St. John's Methodist Church also worked with this group of three for the Conference. While Holt did work on the conference, Isserman's memoirs indicate that Holt's involvement began after the three had initiated their work.

⁴³⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Rabbi's Tribute to Bishop [William] Scarlett*. n.d. AJA 6,9,4.

would do and what he would expect from others if he were a Christian.⁴³⁹ In that same address, Isserman asserted his belief that Christians should teach the Scriptures in such a way that would not continue to distance them from Judaism "...or talk about Judaism in a negative way."⁴⁴⁰ Again, stressing his foundational conviction that all religious traditions merited equal respect and possessed equal religious validity, Isserman taught that in order for his vision to be accomplished, work by all involved parties was necessary. The task of achieving mutual respect and understanding could not be fulfilled by a one-sided effort.

Isserman found that through his work in the NCCJ, he filled a pressing need in his community. There were many who knew very little about Judaism. In 1936, Isserman established the "Institute of Judaism for Christian Clergy" in order to teach Christian clergy about Judaism so that these leaders of various Christian denominations could learn how to teach their own tradition without impugning Judaism. For more than 25 years, this annual one-day institute took place at Temple Israel, Christian Clergy, sometimes numbering over 300, attended the event during which they had the opportunity to learn from a Jewish scholar.⁴⁴¹

At the Institutes, there were usually three different lectures. Following each lecture, clergy participants would be able to enter into dialogue with the speaker. Clergy were free to agree or disagree and conversation was encouraged. Speakers were often visiting faculty members from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati or other Rabbis whom

⁴³⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *If I Were a Christian*. Delivered at the Symposium on Good-Will. December 2, 1932. AJA 6,13,3.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence*. n.d. [1955?]. AJA 6,7,7.

Isserman invited. However, on rare occasions, Isserman invited others, like Bishop Ivan Lee Holt,⁴⁴² to speak.

The topic of the first Institute held in 1936 was "The Talmud." It is unknown why Isserman chose this topic for the Institute. It is possible that Isserman, who was responsible for planning and choosing the topics, selected this in order to combat a popular myth at the time that "...the Jewish Talmud is filled with diabolical laws for the mistreatment of gentiles, or expressions of hatred."⁴⁴³ According to the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," the Talmud is mentioned as a diabolical tract. By bringing in scholars to teach about the Talmud and what it contained, Isserman would have been able to debunk this myth for some of the clergy who were present. Or, it is possible that Isserman chose this topic because of the importance that it had on making Judaism what it was in his day. If Christians knew nothing about the Talmud then they wouldn't be able to really understand contemporary Judaism. Whatever the reason, Isserman hoped that the Christian clergy would then share the lessons they learned with their parishioners. In subsequent years, the Institute focused on similar topics that sought to teach Christian Clergy about Judaism. The Institute's themes were chosen with the idea that they would be relevant to the clergy participants' work and ministry. For example, the topic of the

⁴⁴² Ivan Lee Holt was born in DeWitt, Arkansas, on 9 January 1886... He was ordained a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, [in 1909]...Holt spent ...twenty years serving as pastor of St. John's Methodist Church in St. Louis. In 1938 he was elected bishop and sent to the North Texas Conference...Throughout his career Holt was active in promoting Christian unity and interfaith cooperation...In addition he encouraged cooperation between Christians and Jews, and later, between Protestants and Catholics. (Internet. "Holt, Ivan Lee." <http://whmc.umsystem.edu/invent/2553.html>. March 13, 2008).

⁴⁴³ Jensen, Ellis, editor. *Speak Up for Good Will*. Revised Edition. New York: NCCJ, Inc., 1944. pg 45.

12th Institute was "The Judaism of New Testament Times"⁴⁴⁴ and for the 18th Institute it was "The Bible."⁴⁴⁵

In addition to exploring lessons of the Institute's topic, different leaders of the community were often recognized either by leading one of the three lectures that took place during the day or through a commemoration during the lunch sponsored by the Temple Israel Brotherhood. For example, at the 19th Institute, Isserman honored his friend and colleague Ivan Lee Holt as he prepared for his retirement in the Methodist Church.⁴⁴⁶ In 1960, for the 23rd Institute, Isserman honored US Senator Thomas Hennings for his civil rights work.⁴⁴⁷

These clergy Institutes became quite popular in the greater St. Louis metropolitan area. At one point, the Ministerial Alliance of St. Louis canceled its meeting because it conflicted with the date of the Institute. It seems that the Ministerial Alliance had little choice: many of its members wanted to participate in the Institute.⁴⁴⁸ According to one speaker, these Institutes had a "...tremendous influence in making for good-will and understanding."⁴⁴⁹ They were instrumental in helping Isserman gain the respect of the general community in St. Louis in the area of interfaith work and for helping to create the interfaith good-will that existed in St. Louis.

⁴⁴⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Program for the 12th Institute, February 21, 1949. AJA 6,7,5.

⁴⁴⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Program for the 18th Institute*, March 1, 1955. AJA 6,7,7.

⁴⁴⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Program for the 19th Institute, April 17, 1956. AJA 6,7,8.

⁴⁴⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence with Senator Thomas C. Hennings*, Letter, January 1960. AJA 6,7,9.

⁴⁴⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Correspondence*, Letter, January 22, 1952. AJA 6,7,6.

⁴⁴⁹ Ettelson, Rabbi Harry W. *Correspondence with Isserman*, Letter, February 28, 1945. AJA 6,7,5.

Isserman and Temple Israel also worked in other ways to create good-will with their neighbors. For many years, Temple Israel was located in downtown St. Louis on the corner of Kingshighway and Washington Ave. Two of the other corners were occupied by St John's Methodist Church and the Second Baptist Church. Isserman, along with the leadership of these two churches, Bishop Holt and Reverend Leon Robinson, started an annual dinner for their brotherhoods. The first such event took place on January 31, 1931.⁴⁵⁰ Though Temple Israel and Second Baptist Church moved away from what was once known as "Holy Corners," the dinners continued for a number of years.⁴⁵¹

Within the walls of Temple, Isserman also attempted to create an open and safe environment for interfaith activities and inter-religious understanding. In addition to the pulpit exchanges mentioned above, Isserman delivered numerous sermons which were meant to encourage his congregants to be emissaries of good-will and advocates of mutual understanding between the Jewish community and the Christian community. Many of these sermons dealt with the Jewish understanding of Jesus, the relationship between Jews and Christians, or the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Isserman honored different ministers and invited them to be pulpit guests. On one occasion, Isserman invited the newly consecrated Bishop Holt to address the members of Temple Israel before his departure from St. Louis. During his address, Holt asked that the members of Isserman's congregation pray for him. At the conclusion of the evening's

⁴⁵⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Address at the First Annual Fellowship Supper of Brotherhood of St. John's M.E. Church, Second Baptist and Temple Israel*. January 31, 1931. AJA 6,12,6.

⁴⁵¹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect Rabbi FM Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis. St Louis, MO 1929-1963. A Biography & Synopsis of His Life*. AJA.

worship service. Isserman demonstrated his willingness to respond to the bishop's request. The rabbi opened the ark and recited the three-fold priestly benediction.⁴⁵²

Throughout his career, Isserman worked toward the goal of making Jews and Christians protagonists and not antagonists.⁴⁵³ An understanding of other religions was not enough.

Isserman also wanted his congregants to have an appreciation for other religions.

Isserman would therefore explain the rationale behind his ideology. He wanted people to understand why religious communities other than Judaism deserved this respect.

Sometimes he communicated this message in the context of his weekly sermon. For example, in one sermon, Isserman identified a number of non-Jewish individuals who were true friends of the Jewish people. He described the work they did to help Jews or Judaism.⁴⁵⁴ Isserman delivered this sermon at the end of Purim in order to make his people mindful of the good deeds that the righteous gentiles have done instead of permitting them to dwell on the "nationalistic literature which focuses on the cruel and bad..."⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Twenty Years in the Rabbinate*. Sermon, November 1, 1942. AJA 6,16,4.

⁴⁵³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Introductory Remarks*. May 13, 1938. AJA 6, 15,2.

⁴⁵⁴ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Christian Friends of the Jews*. March 14, 1930. AJA 6,12,3. Four of the friends that Isserman included and described were, 1. Bishop Johannson of Traves who opposed the mob who sought to baptize [sic] the Jews by force and who brought about the execution of a number of crusaders for their crimes against the Jews. 2. At Cologne, Bishop Herman III told the Jews of the proposed attack upon them and urged them to vacate their homes, sheltered them and arranged for their departure from the city, thereby foiling the crusaders. 3. Reuchlin, a friend of Martin Luther, saved the Talmud from destruction. He saved Talmudic literature from a destruction decree. 4. Oliver Cromwell who succeeded in having it stated that the expulsion of the decree of 1290 offered no legal objection to the Jewish resettlement of England.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. The nationalistic literature here that Isserman refers to is the scroll of Esther which is traditionally read on Purim and which would traditionally serve as the focus of his sermon. [0]

While many of Isserman's interfaith initiatives were modeled after the initiatives of fellow rabbinical contemporaries, many of his interreligious activities were genuinely pioneering in the St. Louis area. In recognition of these efforts, Isserman was awarded the Clergyman of the Year Award by the Religious Heritage of America.⁴⁵⁶ Isserman was also recognized for his interfaith efforts by fellow clergy in St. Louis.⁴⁵⁷ Over the years, Isserman expressed his deeply felt gratitude for the many kindnesses that Christian clergy extended to him as a rabbi in the community.⁴⁵⁸

Conclusion

Throughout his career, Isserman dedicated himself to the task of building bridges between Jews and non-Jews -- especially between Jews and Christians. He subscribed to an ideology of universalism. He believed in the universal message of peace, in the unity of humankind, in brotherhood and in democracy. All of these principles, Isserman insisted, were tenets of the major religions. Isserman championed the values of the Prophets of Israel, which they taught centuries ago. This may have been due to the fact that Isserman felt that part of the success of his pulpit would depend on his ability to share these values so that he could be a harbinger of a "...closer fellowship between

⁴⁵⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Clergyman of the Year Award Speech*. February 3, 1967. AJA 6.6,15. The Religious Heritage of America was originally a not for profit interfaith religious lobby group that was established by philanthropist W. Clement Stone. The organization was influential in getting the phrase "one nation, under God," added to the US Pledge of Allegiance.

⁴⁵⁷ Price, Sterling L. Correspondence with Isserman. Letter. January 20, 1967. AJA 6.6,11. Minister Price of the Third Baptist Church in St. Louis wrote the following in congratulatory letter. "We need men of your spiritual and mental stature and I only wish that more of your life and philosophy could have rubbed off on me. You have never hesitated to help men because of their race, color or creed. Your Father, God was sufficient for whatever their need may have been and you were never too busy to be that vehicle through which His Love and Spirit could work."

⁴⁵⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Church, the Synagogue and the Future of Canada*. Sermon. June 16, 1929. AJA 6,12,1.

neighbor[s].”⁴⁵⁹ Throughout his career, he worked relentlessly toward this goal, which was always a core ideal in his overall vision of the rabbinate. Isserman was impressively successful in achieving his objectives, and he received broad recognition for his ongoing efforts in this field of endeavor. In addition to the awards he received, one of his most important legacies was the relationships he was able to establish in St. Louis. Through his work, Isserman laid the foundation in St. Louis for interfaith work and interreligious dialogue.⁴⁶⁰ As important as this work was to Isserman, it was but one important facet of his rabbinical interest. The rabbi who embraced the universal spirit was also an ardent defender of the Jewish people. His deeply felt commitment to the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God did not dissuade him from sounding the alarm on behalf of German Jewry from literally the very moment that Adolph Hitler assumed power. As we will see, Ferdinand Isserman warned the American Jewish community of the ominous threat that Hitler and Nazism posed for German Jewry. In contrast to those Americans who later maintained that they could never have anticipated the disastrous tragedy that the Nazi regime brought upon the Jewish people, Isserman seems to have immediately grasped the seriousness of the situation. He attempted to warn the St. Louis community and other communities about the impending disaster that awaited the Jews of Germany under the Hitler’s reign.

⁴⁵⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *A Sequel to a Jewish View of Jesus*. Sermon December 13, 1924. AJA 6.11.2.

⁴⁶⁰ Ehrlich, Walter. *Zion in the Valley: The Jewish Community of St. Louis*. Volume II: The Twentieth Century. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002. pg 408.

Chapter 5 – Nazi Germany

During the 1930's, Isserman made three trips to Nazi Germany. Following two of his trips, he wrote booklets: *Sentenced to Death, the Jews of Nazi Germany* (1933) and *I Revisit Nazi Germany* (1935). He also preached about his experiences and the plight of the Germans and the German Jews. The booklets, newspaper editorials, and speeches that Isserman delivered publicized the dangers that the Jews of Germany were facing years before the disastrous consequences of the Nazi regime appeared on the radar screen of most of the rest of the world. This chapter will focus on Isserman's concern for the plight of German Jewry during the Hitler regime through an examination of his work and the work of his contemporaries.

History

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party, was sworn in as the Chancellor of the then Weimar Republic. His party promoted a nationalistic and anti-Semitic ideology that stressed German racial purity and persecuted its opponents (i.e. communists and socialists) and those who they believed were not racially German, most notably, Jews. Within the first few weeks of being sworn in, Hitler targeted these groups and began stripping them of the rights that they previously enjoyed.⁴⁶¹ Some were arrested and confined in Dachau, the first concentration camp for

⁴⁶¹ For example, many of the political opposition groups were no longer free to assemble and party leaders were arrested.

political prisoners that was opened that same year. Following the death of President Paul von Hindenburg in August 1934, Hitler assumed dictatorial control of Germany.

Though a systematic and mechanized plan to annihilate the Jews may not have been conceived at this point, Hitler and the Nazi party did begin to show signs that they were planning to fulfill the program that Hitler outlined in an autobiographical and political treatise published in 1925, *Mein Kampf*.⁴⁶² Only months after becoming Chancellor in April of 1933, Hitler and the Nazis called for a boycott of Jewish businesses that some say was to last a week or a month. However, the boycott was unsuccessful in many places. This led to the creation of numerous laws targeting the Jews and revoking their rights and their ability to earn an income. For example, Aryan laws were restored which made being an Aryan a prerequisite for civil service positions.⁴⁶³ Jews were no longer allowed to be part of some of the trade groups and unions and they were prevented from working as doctors and lawyers.⁴⁶⁴ The Nazi regime quickly established Jewish quotas that effectively prohibited Jews from attending the public schools and universities.⁴⁶⁵

Early in the Hitler regime, there were those who concluded that the Jews would have no future in Germany under what eventually became Hitler's totalitarian regime. Because of

⁴⁶² *Mein Kampf*, which means "*My struggle*," is Adolf Hitler's autobiography that also contains information on the Nazi Platform. The book was published in two volumes. Volume 1 was first published in the Summer of 1925. Due to its success, a second edition of Volume 1 was printed the following year. The second volume of the set was published in December 1926. In the book, Hitler writes "...that between 12,000 and 15,000 Jews should have been gassed in World War I." (Friedlander, Saul. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. "Adolf Hitler." CD-ROM Version 1.0. Judaica Multimedia Ltd, Israel: 1997).

⁴⁶³ Ben-Sasson, H.H. *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976. pg 1018-19.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pg 1019.

⁴⁶⁵ Sachar, Howard M. *The Course of Modern Jewish History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Pg 516.

their knowledge of the Nazi agenda and its anti-Semitism, some American individuals and organizations began to respond in a variety of ways hoping that Hitler's regime would crumble or that they could help their fellow Jews. For example, shortly after Hitler's rise to power in March of 1933, the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America "...launched a boycott of German goods in the United States."⁴⁶⁶ In May of that same year, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise also called for a boycott. While the Jewish War Veterans were able to reach many, Wise, as leader of the American Jewish Congress, had a larger audience and greater influence. Stores who did not participate in the boycott were picketed by supporters and the boycott was successful in that it also spread to Jews in other countries.⁴⁶⁷ Wise was one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in America for many years and he attempted to focus the nation's attention on the events that transpired in this part of the world. He repeatedly warned Jews and non-Jews of the danger of the Nazis and Hitler.

However, there were other warnings too. Even before Hitler took power, the American Jewish Committee in the *American Jewish Yearbook* began to warn its readers of anti-Semitism and the Nazi party in the late 1920s and early 1930s. For example, in a 1928 report, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) took note of rising anti-Semitism in Europe and the exclusion of Jews from certain organizations.⁴⁶⁸ The report in 1931

⁴⁶⁶ "JWV Timeline - 1896 to the Present *Over a Century of Patriotic Service*"

<http://www.jwv.org/images/uploads/Jewish%20War%20Veterans%20Timeline.pdf> January 24, 2008.

⁴⁶⁷ Diner, Hasia R. *The Jews of the United States*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 2004. Pg 217.

⁴⁶⁸ Schneiderman, Harry, editor. *American Jewish Yearbook*. Volume 30. Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia: 1928. Pg 292-294. The yearbook contains a report on the condition of Jews in various countries around the world. In 1928, this section describes the increased "planned anti-Jewish propaganda." It also goes into detail about some of the anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish acts. "The Berlin section of the German Alpine Association, a sports organization, decided to expel from its membership all Jews.

stated that the anti-Semitism in Germany was a product of the "political strife" and also that the National Socialist Party and other groups had adopted anti-Semitism as part of their platform. While they reported that the anti-Semitism existed, the AJC's report did not foresee the impending dangers at this point. The report even stated that the Reichstag had not adopted anti-Semitism as part of their policy and, through an example of the defeat of an anti-Jewish bill, gave the reader the impression that, though there was a rise in the membership of the National Socialist Party, the anti-Semitism would pass.⁴⁶⁹ These reports were undoubtedly available to Isserman and his rabbinic colleagues. These initiatives and published articles brought a new awareness of the problems that Jews living under Hitler experienced. Some leaders, like Isserman, were therefore inspired to further investigate the situation on their own.

As time progressed, attempts were made to demonstrate public disapproval of the Nazi regime's restrictive policies toward the Jews. For example, in 1936, Berlin hosted the Olympics. Leading up to the start of the summer games, there were many individuals and groups who called for a boycott of the Olympics in order to demonstrate that America would not condone Nazi bigotry and propaganda. Americans received varying reports on the treatment of Jewish athletes. Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee, concluded that German Jewish athletes were being treated fairly and that this fair-treatment would continue. He therefore opposed the boycott and encouraged

including men prominent in public life, some of whom have been members for years." It also lists other ways in which Jews have been excluded from public life and how this has emotionally hurt the Jewish community. The same report also describes the victory of the Hungarian anti-Semitic party in municipal elections and the expulsion of aliens from Hungary, most of whom were Jews.

⁴⁶⁹ Schneiderman, Harry, editor. *The American Jewish Year Book* 5691. The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia: 1930. Volume 32. Pg 311-12.

Americans to keep politics out of sports.⁴⁷⁰ Other information coming from Germany contradicted Brundage's report. In contrast to Brundage's reassuring analysis of the situation, Jewish athletes were in fact not able to be members of the sports clubs which produced the Olympic athletes. Consequently, Jews would not be able to become Olympic team members for Nazi Germany. Organizations such as the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee supported the idea of an American boycott. In the end, the boycott was unsuccessful: many failed to back the initiative thereby diluting its effect. Despite the controversy, more teams competed in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games than had competed in previous years.⁴⁷¹ including an American delegation.

Isserman's Work

It appears that throughout his life, Isserman had an affinity for Germany and German culture. He spoke German, took classes in German, read German literature, and was greatly influenced by German culture. Prior to the rise in power of the Nazis, he traveled to Germany and, upon his return, spoke glowingly of German culture's beauty in sermons and addresses. This could be why, when Hitler came to power, Isserman had to see first-hand the effects that Hitler and the Nazis were having on Germany and the German Jews. Perhaps it was difficult for him to believe that the reported events could be happening in a society that he admired. Therefore, despite discouragement by his colleague Stephen Wise, Isserman decided to take his first trip to Hitler controlled Germany in 1933.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Internet. "The Movement to Boycott the Berlin Olympics of 1936."
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007087> January 24, 2008.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Wise, Stephen S. *Correspondence*. June 8, 1933. Louis I. Newman collection at the AJA. 109, 13, 6. In the letter, Wise writes to Isserman that he should not go to Germany because he has no business there and

Isserman would eventually take three trips to Nazi Germany and would report his findings to his Temple and to the greater community upon his return.

THE FIRST VISIT

In the summer of 1933, Isserman spent one month in Germany. The majority of his time was spent in Berlin where he met with a variety of individuals⁴⁷³ to investigate the reports he received about Nazi Germany. Following his visit, Isserman was able to draw five conclusions that he would share and expand upon in a pamphlet he subsequently published: *Sentenced to Death! The Jews in Nazi Germany*.⁴⁷⁴ In this publication, Isserman concluded that:

1. That there was no hope for the Jews of Germany – that the Nazi government aim was human extirpation.
2. That atrocities were being perpetrated on Jews, Catholics, Socialists, German Nationalists and other dissenters, and that these atrocities were ongoing.
3. That an economic death sentence has been passed upon the Jews of Germany.
4. That only the fear of hostile public opinion, especially in the United States and Great Britain was preventing and would continue to prevent a pogrom of all Jews in Germany.
5. That the Jews of Germany lived under a sentence of death.⁴⁷⁵

Isserman reached these conclusions because he was able to see impact that Nazi restrictions had placed on the Jews and had the wisdom to properly analyze all the information available to him. Though there were some who were physically abused, this

is more likely to endanger anyone with whom he has contact. He writes that the German government won't let him see what is really going on and that he should not be spending money there nor let them use him for propaganda. He also warns of coming back to the United State and sharing what he has heard as it still endangers individuals in Germany because there may be spies watching and reporting back what his contacts share with him.

⁴⁷³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Sentenced to Death! The Jews in Nazi Germany*. The Modern View Publishing Company, St. Louis, MO: 1933. In the preface, Isserman wrote that he met with "...government officials, Nazis, American and other newspapermen, university professors, and religious leaders of all denominations."

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

was not Isserman's main focus. Isserman understood that the laws that prevented Jews from working in their chosen professions and public service employment meant that many would have no income. This economic strangulation left individual families without any means of support. With the Jewish population impoverished, the community would not be able to support itself because it would be difficult to collect the necessary taxes needed to support the community. Isserman also saw that Jewish youth were being excluded from educational programs. He quickly realized that without an education and without a means of supporting themselves and their community, the fate of German Jewry was sealed.

Isserman knew that he had a challenge. In 1933, he wrote that a casual traveler would not have gleaned the information that he was able to collect. He wrote that the casual traveler would see Germany as a strong, peaceful nation and that most people would overlook the injustices that were taking place.⁴⁷⁶ It is possible that Isserman assumed his audience would be much like himself and would want to hear factual information in great detail. Therefore, when writing his pamphlet, he provided his readers with detailed information.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid. "The casual traveler in Germany may never have any inkling of what is transpiring behind the scene, nor of the reign of terror which exists. Outwardly everything seems calm and serene. Stores and shops are open. People are going about their business, seemingly, in the normal way. No evidences of disorder, no signs of brutality are to be seen in the streets. The sun still shines in Germany. The wheat ripens. The flowers bloom. But the tragedy of blighted lives cannot be seen by the tourist. He knows nothing about the silent boycott. He knows nothing about the midnight raids and arrests. He cannot peer into the cellars or armories of the Brown Shirts. He hears no screams. He sees no tortured bodies brought home in sealed caskets. He does not learn what is transpiring in concentration camps. He cannot feel the anguish of ostracized children or the hurt pride of devoted Germans who now bow their heads in humiliation because they are second-class citizens...No American tourist can express any opinion about Germany that has any value if he has been chaperoned by Nazis and has not received the confidences of the natives, who could, if they dared, speak the truth. The tourist enters no homes...Only by probing or probing beneath the surface can one learn the truth, and no tourist can do that.

Through his visit, pamphlet and addresses, Isserman fulfilled a role that he believed was incumbent upon his position as rabbi – a prophetic role. He knew that his task would be difficult and, because of Nazi propaganda, many would not believe him. Yet even at this early stage, he still attempted to share events with others, warn them and spur them into action so that his conclusions would not come to fruition.

By 1933, Isserman had clearly established his name and reputation in St. Louis. Despite the fact that his pamphlet was evidently readily available,⁴⁷⁷ the publication appears to have had little, if any, long lasting effect on the St. Louis community. As an example, the Jewish Federation board, which was comprised of a number of his congregants discussed whether or not they should participate in a joint committee to "...obtain necessary information on local Nazi activities."⁴⁷⁸ Though minutes were kept at this meeting, there are no references made in the discussion to Isserman's pamphlet that followed his visit to Germany, the publishing of his pamphlet or to the delivery of his numerous topical sermons.

THE SECOND VISIT

Germany and Germany's Jews remained on Isserman's mind during the early years of the Nazi regime and he continued to preach and teach on this subject. In 1934, Isserman traveled once again to Europe, though this time he visited Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, France and Austria. Isserman wanted to become better acquainted with European Jewish

⁴⁷⁷ Cohn, Robert A. *St. Louis Jewish Light*, "St. Louis Was Warned of Impending Holocaust in 1933, Hitler's First Year in Power," July 18, 1979. Not only was the paper published in booklet form by the Modern View and distributed to members of his congregations and others, it was also published in the weekly newspaper that was distributed to many more Jews outside his Temple community.

⁴⁷⁸ Cohn, Robert A. *St. Louis Jewish Light*, "St. Louis Was Warned of Impending Holocaust in 1933, Hitler's First Year in Power," July 18, 1979.

leaders, "...government officials, journalists [and] league of nation's representatives."⁴⁷⁹

During his travels, Isserman sadly realized that his dire prediction about the impending doom of German Jewry was about to become a reality.⁴⁸⁰

Isserman, now determined to find out more about the condition of his co-religionists, the progress of German civilization, the political state and the fate of his fellow Jews,

decided to visit Germany again in 1935. This trip, which some believed he was taking at considerable personal risk⁴⁸¹ was more difficult to coordinate. After being denied a visa in the local St. Louis German consul and the German Embassy in Washington.⁴⁸²

Isserman traveled to Paris in order to procure a visa from Germany.

During this second visit to Nazi Germany, Isserman traveled more extensively outside Berlin where he met with a variety of individuals -- just as he did during his first visit. He also was able to make a number of observations based on his visit which shed light on the grim state of affairs for Jews in Germany and for others living there as well. Having realized that his first pamphlet on the topic did not successfully alert the community to the dimensions of the looming disaster, he evidently decided to report his findings in a more universalistic fashion. Perhaps Isserman realized that if he reported on the sufferings that others endured at the hands of the Nazis and linked this information to the

⁴⁷⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Statement sent to the United Jewish Appeal Headquarters in New York*. AJA 6, 13, 8, September 4, 1934.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Isserman, Ruth. *Retrospect Rabbi FM Isserman 1898-1972. Emphasis. St Louis, MO 1929-1963. A Biography & Synopsis of His Life*. AJA. .

⁴⁸² Isserman, Ferdinand M. Correspondence with Louis Popkin, New York City. AJA 6,14.2. According to Isserman, he was denied a visa by the local consul and Washington embassy because of some addresses he delivered for the Joint Distribution Committee after his first visit.

oppression that Jews in Germany were suffering, his calls for action might be more effectively heard. Therefore, following his second visit, he published another pamphlet outlining his visit and thoughts.

Isserman's second pamphlet, *My Second Visit To Nazi Germany*,⁴⁸³ focused on the changes he saw which had occurred after his first visit. He described how the Nazis had been visibly overtaken by the "Brown Shirts." He also noted that there was a shortage of food in Germany and that many Germans appeared to be more forthcoming in expressing their discontent with the Nazi government. Isserman noted that others reported to him that they witnessed public persecution of Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Although the casual traveler would still not likely be aware of these conditions, he insisted that the journalists who were sending negative reports on the conditions in Germany were indeed sending factual information. Isserman concluded by warning his readers that not only were the Jews in mortal danger, but democracy and freedom were at an even greater risk. Ominously, he asserted that "...Nazism is a challenge to humanity..."⁴⁸⁴ Isserman understood that the Nazis needed to be stopped and the government overthrown if freedom and democracy were to endure and in order to safeguard Germany's cultural heritage.

At the end of the pamphlet Isserman expressed his views on the national debate concerning the proposed American boycott of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

⁴⁸³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Second Visit to Nazi Germany*. 1935. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath delivered a sermon title, "I Re-Visit Nazi Germany" at Holy Blossom in 1936/37. AJA 6.12.1.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid

Addressing himself to the American Olympic athletes, Isserman concluded that the decision to participate in the Berlin Olympics should not be in the hands of the American Olympic Committee. Instead, he called on each of the athletes to decide for him or herself whether to compete or not. A decision of this sort, Isserman opined, should be in the hands of the individual athlete, for if these athletes knew the true facts about the Nazi regime, Isserman believed they would unquestionably decide to boycott the games.

My Second Visit To Nazi Germany received wide distribution. Isserman delivered parts of it in sermons and radio addresses, submitted it to newspapers, had it published in *The Modern View* and printed copies of his essay so that it could be broadly distributed. While it is difficult to gauge the efficacy of Isserman's efforts, it is clear that Isserman's longstanding relationship with other clergy in the St. Louis area enabled him to share his message of concern with them and others in the community.

THE THIRD VISIT

In the summer of 1937, Isserman visited Nazi Germany for a third time. Though his personal records do not contain an explanation as to why he returned to Nazi Germany, it seems reasonable to assume that his 1937 visit was spurred by the very same motivation that prompted his earlier trips: he wanted to see what was occurring with his own eyes. This time, Isserman did not publish a booklet upon his return. He did, however, share his travel experiences with others through sermons and addresses. In these speeches, Isserman spoke about current events in Germany. He focused on the problems of Hitler's

rise to power⁴⁸⁵ and he also explained the nature of the disabling legislation that the Nazis instituted in a deliberate effort to economically destroy their foes. As with the pamphlet he produced after his second visit to Germany in 1935, Isserman tried to help his listeners to relate to the victims of Nazi oppression. Therefore in his sermons, while still giving an update on the events, he would talk about American values and topics to which his audience could relate. For example, in a sermon delivered on Thanksgiving weekend, Isserman spoke about why Americans should be thankful for their freedom and their faith in democracy. He did this by contrasting the restrictions in Germany on the press, in universities, in religion and in labor movements with the freedom that Americans enjoyed in these areas without fear of government intervention. In this sermon, Isserman also drew comparisons between Germany of 1937 and Germany during World War I. As was the case during the Great War, the entire German population was still suffering.⁴⁸⁶ Through this sermon, Isserman demonstrated some of his strengths. He looked objectively at a situation, made a judgment based on Jewish values and his own beliefs, delivered a message that resonated with his congregants, taught them about an important issue and helped listeners understand why it was important for them to act on the issue.

Isserman as a Social Critic

Though he was not the first rabbi in America to report on the calamitous situation that had enveloped the Jews of Germany, Isserman may very well have been the first

⁴⁸⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Hitler's Reichstag Address and Eden's Resignation*. Sermon. February 25, 1938. AJA 6, 15, 1.

⁴⁸⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Third Visit to Nazi Germany*. November 25, 1938. AJA 6, 15, 3.

clergyman to speak out on this issue to St. Louisans. He effectively shared his observations with others because he had been to Germany and he was, therefore, a reliable first-hand witness. These observations formed the basis for Isserman's call for action. He wanted the community to be aware of the situation in Germany so that they could take steps to oppose Hitler's bigotry. Isserman believed that as a rabbi he was duty-bound to speak out for justice and righteousness just as the prophets of yore had done. By calling the public's attention to one of the most oppressive regimes in human history, Isserman concluded that he was fulfilling his sacred rabbinic obligation to speak out in opposition to one of the most dastardly problems facing humanity in his own day.

When speaking about Germany, Isserman presented the subject as an aspect of current events. He talked about the economic extermination⁴⁸⁷ of the Jews and those who opposed the Nazi government. He informed his audience that the Nazis were removing the cultural contributions (i.e., books and music) of the Jews. He asserted that Hitler and the Nazis sought to remove all mention of Judaism and the Jewish people from civilization and memory.⁴⁸⁸

It was Isserman who informed his community about the 1933 Nazi boycott of Jewish professionals and merchants. According to Isserman, this boycott was to last at least one month and would have given the Brown Shirts the ability to kill Jews, pillage their homes

⁴⁸⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Fate of My Brethren in Germany*. Sermon October 20, 1933. AJA 6,13,5. Isserman wrote that "...unless there is a change in policy, it will be absolutely impossible for Jews to maintain themselves in Germany. That slow economic extermination is what the government calls its policy of 'humane extirpation of the Jews.'" He also describes the ban of Jews from theatre, art, music and a variety of guilds.

⁴⁸⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Cause of Anti-Semitism as Revealed in Hitler's 'My Battle,' the Program of the Nazi Party*. Sermon, December 8, 1933. AJA 6,13,1.

and destroy their businesses.⁴⁸⁹ Also according to Isserman, a friend of President Von Hindenburg was able to persuade him to intervene and curtail the original concept so that the boycott only lasted for one day.⁴⁹⁰ The one-day boycott took place on April 1, 1933 and along with the laws against non-Aryans that were created following the boycott, the economic life of many Jews was debilitated.⁴⁹¹

Due to the economic hardships imposed upon German Jewry by the new Nazi regime and in light of the fact that many Germany Jews plummeted into a state of despair, Isserman reported that news of Jewish suicides circulated during his initial visit. Upon his return to the United States in the fall of 1933, Isserman shared the alarming data that he believed one third of the Jewish deaths in the German Jewish community since April 1 had been suicides.⁴⁹² Isserman insisted that the economic despair the German Jews were experiencing was real. He claimed that one ominous indicator of the community's economic crisis was the fact that some Jewish communities were no longer able to provide support for their rabbi or for the cost of Jewish communal life.⁴⁹³ While this was a real danger, for Isserman, the greatest danger was that he believed that Nazism was a "...throw back to primitive tribalism, ethically and spiritually indefensible..."⁴⁹⁴

Isserman believed Hitler's ideology to be a catastrophic philosophy and he resolved to recruit others to combat this foe with him.

⁴⁸⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Sentenced to Death! The Jews in Nazi Germany*. The Modern View Publishing Company, St. Louis, MO: 1933.

⁴⁹⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *The Fate of My Brethren in Germany*. Sermon October 20, 1933. AJA 6,13,5.

⁴⁹¹ Ben-Sasson, H. H. *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976. Pg 1018-19.

⁴⁹² Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Sentenced to Death! The Jews in Nazi Germany*. The Modern View Publishing Company, St. Louis, MO: 1933.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

Though most of the discoveries that Isserman shared were often discouraging, he also took note of the few hopeful signs he encountered. He pointed out that some Christians had raised their voices in defense of Germany's Jews. Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber⁴⁹⁵ of Munich sent a letter to all his bishops calling for them to champion religious tolerance and combat racial prejudice.⁴⁹⁶ Isserman described these positive occurrences as "...rays of light in an otherwise drab situation."⁴⁹⁷ Another hopeful exception to the grim assessment came from Isserman's mention of the Reverend Martin Niemoeller.⁴⁹⁸ Niemoeller, a prominent Protestant minister, was considered a great hero by Isserman because he "...protested the pagan tendencies of the Nazi movement...[and because he] resented the attempts of the state to interfere with church worship, with church theology, with church practices."⁴⁹⁹ Niemoeller's actions impressed Isserman, who firmly believed

⁴⁹⁵ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "Michael von Faulhaber." Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc: Chicago. 2002. 15th edition. Volume 4. pg 699. Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber (1869-1952) was the Roman Catholic Archbishop in Munich during the Nazi regime. Faulhaber was known as an opponent of the Nazis. Faulhaber was also known to be a key figure in the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Nazis and was described by Rabbi Stephen Wise as "'a true Christian prelate,' saying he tried to protect Jews when he 'had lifted his fearless voice.'"

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ "Martin Niemoeller was a Protestant pastor born January 14, 1892, in Lippstadt, Westphalia... He was anti-communist and initially supported the Nazis until the church was made subordinate to state authority. In 1934, he started the Pastors' Emergency League to defend the church. Hitler became angered by Niemoeller's rebellious sermons and popularity and had him arrested on July 1, 1937. He was tried the following year and sentenced to seven months in prison and fined.

After his release, Hitler ordered him arrested again. He spent the next seven years in concentration camps in "protective custody"...Niemoeller was a pacifist who spoke out against nuclear weapons. He is best known for his powerful statement about the failure of Germans to speak out against the Nazis:

"First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me." He died in Wiesbaden on March 6, 1984." (Internet. "Martin Niemoeller" <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/niemoeller.html> February 18, 2008).

⁴⁹⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. The Crime and Creed of Martin Niemoeller, Christian Martyr. Sermon. March 11, 1938. AJA 6, 15,1.

that Judaism's commitment to the virtues of freedom and democracy were values that benefited all humankind.

Isserman repeated these beliefs as often as he could. He participated in roundtable discussions with up to 300 people in attendance⁵⁰⁰ and he spoke to local chapters of national organizations such as the St. Louis Council of the American Jewish Congress⁵⁰¹ and the Rotary Club.⁵⁰² He used every platform he had as a prominent and respected community rabbi to warn the public about the conditions he saw in Germany. He told his audiences that the crisis was not merely confined to the Jews of Germany. Hitler's actions were in actuality an attack on democracy, freedom and brotherhood, three values that Judaism promoted. As the Third Reich expanded, Isserman continue to warn others of the impending tragedies: "If we do not act, millions of innocent people, Jews, gypsies, liberals and others will die."

Isserman attempted to rouse the St. Louis Jewish community to action. The intensity of his rhetoric suggests that he was frustrated by the general lethargy he encountered over this topic: "Their pathetic plight challenges the conscience of humanity – and must sear the soul of every Jew. American Jewry – Awake!"⁵⁰³ Isserman, like his mentor Stephen S. Wise and many other pacifists, held on to these peaceful ideals until "...1935-36 when,

⁵⁰⁰ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Experiences in Germany that Cannot be Told in Public*, Notes, October 13, 1933. AJA 6.13.5.

⁵⁰¹ Isserman, Ferdinand M. Address before the St. Louis Council of the American Jewish Congress. May 16, 1934. AJA 6. 13, 7.

⁵⁰² Isserman, Ferdinand M. "Some European Impressions." Address at the Rotary Club. September 13, 1934. AJA 6, 13, 8.

⁵⁰³ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Statement sent to the United Jewish Appeal Headquarters*. September 4, 1934. AJA 6.13.8.

after the Nuremberg laws, they realized that the only hope for the Jews was war with Germany.”⁵⁰⁴ In 1935, Isserman called upon his fellow humans to stop the “...forces of darkness...and to save Germany and humanity from Nazism, militarism and chaos.”⁵⁰⁵ Years later, Isserman reflected on this change in his philosophy. He wrote that he entered the rabbinate as a pacifist and spent time thinking about “...whether God’s kingdom can be built at the point of a bayonet...Then came the rise of the Nazi power in Germany [and]...after much torment of the soul...I became a convert to their philosophy. All the nations of the earth must unite to restrain aggressors.”⁵⁰⁶

For Jews, he writes, “We must not allow ourselves to reply to the Nazi philosophy with a Nazism of our own...If we must go down, let us go down with world peace, internationalism, human brotherhood, social justice, inscribed upon our standards...”⁵⁰⁷ In an undelivered sermon for Kol Nidrei, Isserman called for American Jews to act like Jonah on the ship and to look out for the other nations⁵⁰⁸ who are or may be affected by the Nazis by helping to bring about new leadership in Germany.

Isserman himself was active in doing what he could to help his fellow humans. He worked to raise awareness and called others to act. Years later, in 1942, Isserman chaired the CCAR Commission on Justice and Peace and organized an institute in order to

⁵⁰⁴ Zola, Rabbi Gary P. *Comments on Chapter Five Draft with GPZ’s Comments*. “GPZ18” February 15, 2008. Email.

⁵⁰⁵ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Germany’s Rearmament and the Future of Europe*. Sermon. March 22, 1935. AJA 6.14.1.

⁵⁰⁶ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *My Thirty Years in the Rabbinate*. Sermon. March 21, 1952. AJA 6, 18, 7.

⁵⁰⁷ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *Sentenced to Death! The Jews in Nazi Germany*. The Modern View Publishing Company. St. Louis, MO: 1933.

⁵⁰⁸ Isserman, Ferdinand M. *What Can American Jews Do Now?* Undelivered sermon for Kol Nidrei. October 28, 1938. AJA 6, 15, 3.

"...prepare some statement in the light of prophetic teaching on the basis of a permanent peace."⁵⁰⁹ Isserman worked on this institute because he knew that, unlike the situation that occurred after World War I, if there was to be a lasting peace, it was necessary to create a just peace plan. Eventually, the program would have seven principles: "(1) the universal recognition of the sovereignty of God (2) the application of the Bill of Rights to all men, (3) the creation of an international organization through which all nations would co-operate (4) gradual universal disarmament and the establishment of an international police force, (5) placing at the disposal of all men the natural resources of the world (6) the institution of a world court (7) universal, international, and unselfish co-operation in rebuilding the war torn areas."⁵¹⁰ This was important to Isserman because it also fulfilled the prophetic role to which he aspired. In this Institute, he could help reshape and develop a nation so that democracy would succeed, freedom would prevail and the Jewish values he championed would be lived out.

Conclusions

Over the course of his career, Isserman believed that the role of the rabbi was to be an outspoken advocate and a champion of "Prophetic Judaism." In other words, it was the duty of the rabbi to call attention to the problems of contemporary society, to warn them against evil doings and to challenge them to right the wrongs they were committing. In his many attempts to raise the community's awareness of the mortal dangers that Jews and peace-loving peoples faced as a result of Hitler and the Nazi regime, Isserman

⁵⁰⁹ Isserman, Ferdinand. Correspondence with Arthur H. Sulzberger of New York Times. November 25, 1942. AJA 6, 6, 7.

⁵¹⁰ Jewish Press Service. *Rabbis to Draw Up Peace Program*. Independent Jewish Press Service News Bulletin. November 6, 1942. AJA 6.5.10.

believed he was fulfilling this important rabbinic role. Isserman recognized the impending crisis early, and herein we find a distinctive facet of his rabbinate. Due specifically to his strong interfaith background, Isserman was able to bring his concerns about Nazi oppression to the attention of both the Jewish and the general community. In doing so, he consciously attempted to remind the general community that the Nazi threat was far more than a narrow Jewish concern. In calling the general public to action, he insisted that Hitler's actions were a threat to the values that all Americans cherished. If Hitler and the Nazis had their way, it was humanity, not just the Jews that would be doomed.

Epilogue

This biographical study of the life and career of Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman may be viewed as a case study on the American Reform rabbinate during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. By reconstructing Isserman's professional activities and analyzing the values that captured his interest, we gain a greater understanding of nature of Jewish life during these years. The primary documents on which this study was based testify to the fact that Isserman's ideas played an influential role in the lives of his congregants and in the community at-large.

As a rabbi and a Jew, Isserman believed it was his duty to advocate on behalf of the moral precepts that were promulgated long ago by the Prophets of ancient Israel. He believed that, as an American rabbi, it was his obligation to actively promote the ideals of equality, justice and freedom. Due to his steadfast dedication to these ideals over the course of his career, Isserman won support from his congregants, his colleagues in the clergy and his fellow citizens.

Although more than three and half decades have passed since Ferdinand Isserman died, much of his work endures and his general vision of the rabbinate remains remarkably relevant. Many of the committees and organizations that Isserman helped to found still exist and continue to fulfill their original missions. The St. Louis Nursery Foundation, which Isserman helped to establish in 1947, still exists and fulfills an important role.

Various awards and lecture series have also been created to honor Isserman and further the work in which he was engaged. At Hebrew Union College, there is an annual award given to a student engaged in work which advances community relations.⁵¹¹ And, at Washington University in St. Louis, a lecture series focusing on social justice was established in Isserman's memory.

Isserman unquestionably believed that the American Reform rabbi was obligated to promote the universal ideals of that the prophets of yore exhorted. After Isserman's death, his wife, Ruth, hypothesized that her husband would have been displeased with those who might marginalize these values which he considered to be pivotally important. In a letter to Jacob Rader Marcus, written after Isserman's death in 1972, Ruth asserted that the "...emphasis on today's rabbis on traditions and ceremonies [come at the] detriment of the ideals of the Prophets of Israel."⁵¹²

This study of Isserman's life and career sheds light on many important topics: First, it provides the contemporary reader with a useful reconstruction of the life of one American Reform rabbi who lived during the first two-thirds of 20th century. Isserman's career deepens our understanding of the issues that he and his peers faced. This thesis also provides readers with a reconstruction of Isserman's professional evolution. We began with the shaping of Isserman's ideas about the role of the rabbinate at HUC under the influence of his teachers. His ideas about prophetic Judaism and the role the American

⁵¹¹ Internet. <http://www.huc.edu/academics/catalog/prize.shtml> "Academic Catalog: Prizes." March 13, 2008.

⁵¹² Isserman, Ruth. *Correspondence with Jacob Rader Marcus*. AJA Small Collections – 13167.

rabbi is obligated to play in upholding these values prompted him to become actively involved in social justice issues. While these initiatives caused conflict for Isserman early in his career due to his inexperience and youth, as he matured and became a seasoned professional, it seems that Isserman acquired professional skills and grew in personal maturity. This enabled him to become a very effective agent for social change – particularly in St. Louis. Because of this, Isserman was able to build meaningful professional relationships in the community.

Isserman's fervent belief that the rabbi was duty-bound to function as a modern-day prophet led him to bring a moral message to the Jewish community and to the general community. He did this through his publications, his preaching, and even as a radio personality.

Finally, Isserman played an important role in alerting the community to the Nazi catastrophe that was unfolding in Europe. Through his writings, his preaching and community initiatives, Isserman tried to awaken the general community to the impending crisis. Although none of his calls resulted in concrete action or a tangible program of activity on behalf of European Jewry, it is evident that Isserman understood the dimensions of the Nazi threat much earlier than many in the Jewish community and in the world. His publications and addresses on this topic testify to the fact that he was alarmed and, at the very least, he sincerely hoped and fervently tried to raise the community's level of awareness regarding the precarious state of European Jewry under the Hitler regime.

Although the Mission of Israel concept may not fuel the work of the American Reform rabbinate in the 21st century as it did a half century ago, this thesis provides readers with a case study on the life and career of one American rabbi whose professional achievements and interests testify to the fact that these convictions powerfully influenced and inspired Jewish religious reformers during the middle of the 20th century.

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