“A Little Dissension”: Pluralism, Power and Protest in a 1960s Reform Jewish Congregation

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Union Temple is, at 160 years old, the oldest Reform Jewish congregation on Long Island and one of the oldest in New York. It is an important congregation in the history of the city. And it is also mostly forgotten. Once among the largest and most well known synagogues in the nation, Union Temple has faded into the background over the last forty years, overshadowed by other grander, bigger or simply newer congregations.

The Temple’s experience is fairly representative of many American Reform congregations. Reform reached the height of its popularity in the 1950s and, at that height, Union Temple occupied an eleven story building and had almost 800 families on its membership rolls. It was the place of worship for some of the most powerful and well-known Reform Jews in New York City. However, like so many other urban congregations, Union Temple went into a deep decline in the 1960s, a decline that lasted for approximately forty years. The Temple now occupies only three out of the eleven floors it once owned and has only two hundred families, most of who do not attend or participate regularly. The congregation and the grandiose, beautiful and one might say ostentatious building that it occupies have been ravaged by the passage of time.

Because it has been so subject to the effects of time, Union Temple serves as an excellent “window” onto the past. In her overview of secular and faith based progressive movements, Organizing Urban America, Heidi Swarts points out that organizations, and in particular religious organizations, are “excellent arenas for observing the cultural processes whereby people adopt new political ideas and identities, enter civic life, and learn new ways to exert influence”(Swarts, xviii). This makes an old and large congregation like Union Temple an excellent prism through which to view multiple layers of the past. A case study of this institution sheds light on the larger history of American Jewry and its intersections with the cross currents
of American society in the twentieth century. Moreover, viewing the history of a large national movement like Reform Judaism through the experience of a single congregation like Union Temple achieves a “personalization” of that larger history. As Jeff Kisseloff, in his collection of oral histories from Americans who came of age in the 1960s, writes, “Sometimes the best way to tell a very big story is to tell a very small one” (Kisseloff, 5).

The very big story that Union Temple’s history tells best is that of the social movements and societal changes that took place in the United States during the 1960s. Pre-existing tensions among congregants came to a boil in 1964, when a young Rabbi became vocally involved with the Civil Rights movement. The congregation forced him out, and the issue of his departure brought everything going on in the contemporary world of the 1960s to a head within the Temple: the generation gap, changing ideas about the democratic process and protest, the place of religion in life and its interaction with politics, and the very tenets of Reform Judaism. Heavily influencing the conflict in the congregation were the emergence of certain notions of pluralism in American society that molded “back to roots” movements among more self-confident ethnic groups in the 1960s. In short, the issues of Union Temple in this decade exemplify the larger contemporary currents of American history.

Through a combination of primary documents found within Union Temple, oral history interviews conducted with congregants, contemporary, and modern secondary sources, this paper reconstructs the often fractured congregational history of the Temple from the 1960s, the decade that members of the congregation most often omit from their collective memory. This omission sheds light on the gap between the history of the movement’s leadership and the history of the movement’s congregations. This paper attempts to fill the historiographic gap that exists in the
records of Union Temple for this decade and also explain why and how a congregation can shape the narrative of their own past.

To understand the history of Union Temple, one must understand the history of the particular sect of Judaism – the uniquely American sect – to which it belongs. Reform Judaism is one of three main branches of Judaism practiced in the United States today. Dana Evan Kaplan, in his descriptive text, *American Reform Judaism*, describes Reform as "the first of the modern responses to the emancipation of Jews” (Kaplan, 7) in Europe, a response that came to the United States with Jewish immigrants from Western Europe, especially Germany. Reform differs from the other two branches of Judaism considerably. The differences stem from a basic disagreement over the level to which the Bible should be taken literally. According to Kaplan,

> “Orthodoxy is the branch of Judaism that believes in the literal transmission of both the written and oral Torah from God to Moses at Mount Sinai. It believes that as a consequence of that revelation all Jews must observe Halacha, Jewish law, as interpreted by the sages. Orthodoxy saw itself as the direct continuation of medieval Judaism, although the movement formed to protect traditional values from the corrosive effects of modernity. Conservative Judaism, which developed amongst those who thought that Reform Judaism was going too far, traces its origins to 1845”(Kaplan, 7).

In contrast, the central tenet of American Reform Judaism is that religion should strive to be relevant to the realities of everyday modern life. Therefore, “religious change is legitimate…. The guiding principle of the contemporary Reform movement is that it can adapt Jewish religious beliefs and practices to the needs of the Jewish people from generation to generation”(Kaplan, 8).

While it traces its ideological beginnings back to Germany, Reform Judaism as it is practiced in the United States is most definitely an “American” movement. It flourished in the relatively free environment of the U.S. (Kaplan, 10), particularly in the period after the Civil
War, when that flourishing had much to do with German Jews’ willingness to assimilate into larger American society through a modification of their religious practices. The Reform movement has historically “been a 'low tension' religious group, which sociologist Rodney Starl explains is a religious body whose beliefs and practices do not dramatically set it apart from its environment”(Kaplan, 4). For this reason, many older Reform styles of worship closely resemble those of Protestants, the group whose practices dominated the religious life of the United States. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this made the Reform movement tremendously appealing to Jews who wanted to participate in the everyday civic, economic and cultural life of America while still maintaining their faith. Today, after many changes and transformations, Reform is the biggest branch of Judaism in the United States.

Outside historical works on Reform Judaism begin with an 1858 publication by a Rabbi in Berlin and another work by an American rabbi towards the end of the century dealing with the history of his congregation in Spokane, Washington. Only a few more books on the subject were produced in the 20th century, most of them intellectual histories (Meyer, 475-476), or sourcebooks such as Gunther Plaut’s 1963 *The Rise of Reform Judaism*. The definitive work on the subject is Michael A. Meyer’s *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, published in 1988. In addition, there are more recent works, such as Michael Feldberg’s *Blessing of Freedom: Chapters in American Jewish History*; Ofer Schiff’s, *Survival Through Integration: American Reform Jewish Universalism and the Holocaust*; and Jacob Neusner’s *The Reformation of Reform Judaism: Judaism in Cold War America*. One of the more unusual books published – and also the one most relevant to a study of a congregation such as Union Temple – is David Kaufman’s 1999 work, *Shul with a Pool*, which explores the advent of “synagogue centers,” a phenomenon closely tied to shifting ideas in the post-war era about the
place and purpose of worship and religion in modern life. These works are augmented by the
tremendous resources of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, under the auspices of the
Hebrew Union College (HUC) in that same city.

The gap in the existing literature does not stem from a lack of data or dates; it stems
from a lack of connection between that history and the experiences of individuals and their
congregations. There is a wealth of information from documentation of the activities of the
Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the central administrative organization of
Reform Jewry since 1873, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), established
in 1889. But to trace the history of the movement through those institutions and their members is
like tracing the history of the United States solely through the activities of the White House and
the United States Supreme Court. This is a gap in the historiography, particularly in a constantly
changing movement such as Reform Judaism.

The history of Union Temple, which is relatively unexplored, also constitutes a
historiographic gap. In 1948, in celebration of their centennial anniversary, the congregation put
on a pageant recapping one hundred years of existence and a short history was written for the
event’s commemorative journal. The history was faithfully updated, though never in as much
detail as it was originally written, for each anniversary celebration that followed. In 1965, Rabbi
A Stanley Dreyfus, with the help of his wife Marianne (granddaughter of Leo Baeck, one of the
“saints” of Reform Judaism) added to that history by translating the old Board meeting minutes
of the Temple, which were recorded in German. They also organized scattered documents from
the original two congregations and documents relevant to the mechanics of their amalgamation.
However, other than those attempts, the history of Union Temple has remained largely
undocumented, lying about in the form of piles of dusty paper, books packed away in boxes and bound minutes locked away in a closet that stores Windex and paper towels.

In some ways, the lack of interest in these documents has aided their preservation. The Temple, from 1930 until 1969, annually bound their weekly bulletins, so that a record of Temple events as communicated to congregants exists in near perfect condition. Even more importantly, the Temple’s Board meeting minutes were typed up and annually bound from around 1860 all the way up to 1969. There is also a fairly large collection of photographs and correspondence, although those represent nowhere near as complete a record of the Temple’s history as the bulletins and minutes do. Last but not least, there are various very brief oral histories of the Temple from various congregants, recorded within the last two years.

It was from these oral histories that a gap in the history of Union Temple revealed itself. In telling the history of the Temple, interviewees (who included three congregants: one a member since 1946, retired Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus and current Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman) all omitted a specific time period and event from the Temple’s history. When, in their recitation, they reached the 1960s, they mentioned there was a rabbi who left on bad terms, and that something about the situation caused uproar; that after that event, various members resigned and the Temple began to go downhill. When asked to discuss this event in detail, even after the tape recorder had been turned off, each interviewee declined.

This silence prompted me to look to the bulletins for answers. From 1954 to 1964, a relatively young man named Alfred L. Friedman was the senior rabbi. From the bulletins, which include snippets of sermons, reviews of events and all sorts of miscellaneous information, he seemed to be a highly popular and very active pastoral figure. “He was a very charismatic man,” commented Gail Levine, a congregant who was confirmed by Rabbi Friedman in the 1950s. In
the last bulletin of May of 1964, he is listed as senior rabbi. But in the very next bulletin in September of 1964 (no bulletins were published during the summer months, a time of inactivity in most Union Temple), another Rabbi is listed as officiating at High Holy Day services. Rabbi Friedman disappeared from the Temple and spent the next twenty years of his career at Temple Beth Am in Framingham, Massachusetts.

This gap in the Temple’s public record was intriguing. It led me to search the Board meeting minutes, which are more revealing because they represent a record closer to a transcription of events, not a record edited for congregational consumption. I supplemented this research with an examination of old New York newspapers. It seems that in the year of his disappearance from Temple history – 1964 – Rabbi Friedman was active within and outside of the Temple. Throughout his time with the congregation he initiated significant changes to prayer and ritual and was also vocally involved in the Civil Rights movement. His sudden departure at the end of the year seemed inexplicable. But then, at the back of the minutes appeared a one of a kind document – a courtroom style, verbatim transcript of the annual congregational meeting on the night of May 25, 1964. This was the 115th congregational meeting of this sort, but for no other meeting does this type of transcript exist.

The transcript itself is remarkable. It vividly documents a revolt of more than half of the congregants present against the Board of Trustees, on behalf of the Rabbi, and then the rebuttal of the Board and other congregants against the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries are congregants who back the rabbi over a mysterious issue never revealed; the group consists of the younger members of the Temple, while the Board of Trustees and those who side with them consists mainly of the older members, some of them having been congregants for forty years. The transcript captures a meeting which devolved into nasty arguing, personal insults and the
realization that the Temple body was divided over not just issues of who should be a member of the Board, but how protest should be registered and what the values of Union Temple should be. The arguments are very much reflective of the debates going on in American society at large, the arguments that would lay the basis for a national cultural revolution.

This transcript is the key to a number of important and complex issues in not just the Temple’s history, but also the history of the Reform movement. In essence, the transcript gives us something of a cross section of a particular, many-layered moment in the history of the United States. It can, therefore, help fill the historiographic gap by shedding light on how an everyday congregation reacted to the changing views of the world outside of itself. In the case of Union Temple, the adoption of the changes that took place in the 1960s was painful and took decades to accommodate. How this time period is handled in contemporary retellings of the Temple’s past also sheds some light on what is a contested moment in the history of the congregation and Reform Judaism. But it can only be understood in context of American history and Reform Judaism, and Union Temple’s position in both of those discourses.

Reform Judaism encompasses a wide spectrum of religious practice, belief and opinion. Therefore Union Temple needs to be located on that spectrum. It is vitally important to discuss what “kind” of Reform congregation Union Temple was and how it got to be that way.

In 1824, a congregation in Charleston, South Carolina, founded in 1750, split over issues that would be the collective catalyst for the beginning of Reform Judaism in the United States. The dissenting members of the congregation called for readings in English and a shorter service. There was a call to get rid of "blind observance of ceremonial law" in order to get back to the "essential spirit of revealed religion"(Meyer, 229). This incident was the starting point for a connection between the formal Reform movement that would begin in Frankfurt Am Main,
Germany and a call for Reform in the United States. What would become American Reform Judaism was the unique result of a combination of American and German trends (Meyer, 235).

Those two trends coalesced in the form of Isaac Meyer Wise, a young man from Bohemia who arrived in America in the mid 1800s and would work both to spread the message of Reform and unite American Jews. "We are children of the nineteenth century,” stated Wise in 1884, “proud of our mother, and her motto shall be our watchword: emancipation of the mind, mental culture, redeems the human family from the misery of existence in all its forms” (Kaplan, 6). Wise sought to combine traditional Jewish values with modernity while maintaining the core theological tenets, if not the ritual tenets, of the faith.

Reform ideology under Wise, however, was in ways a push towards assimilation. He believed that in the U.S. "American Judaism could compete equally with other denominations and prove its worth. It was only necessary to show that the ancestral faith was well suited to American values." Wise, throughout his career, sought to answer "how Judaism could be related to the American Milieu," which is why he created his "Minhag [roughly translated as ‘practice’] America" (Meyer, 239).

The Civil War brought on prosperity for German Jews, a group situated mainly in northern industrial cities, which benefited from the wartime industrial boom. In the post-war period, “American Jewry was rapidly becoming both affluent and increasingly Reform"(Meyer, 252). In this atmosphere, Wise’s ideology won out. By 1879, I.M. Wise "had become nothing less than the titular spiritual head of all non-orthodox American Jewry"(Meyer, 263) and under his leadership, the first American rabbinic school was formed – the United American Hebrew College. While the rabbinic school was meant for all sects of Jews, the first graduating class was served shellfish at graduation. Shellfish is considered not Kosher, or unclean by Orthodox Jews.
To serve it with Orthodox Jews in attendance was either an unforgivable faux pas or a deliberate insult. After this fiasco, which came to be known as the “Trefa Banquet” (Trefa is a word for things not kosher), Reform Judaism became a truly separate and unique sect. It would, in the years that followed, develop into what Kaplan calls a “tripartite polity”: the congregations as represented by the UAHC (United American Hebrew Congregations), the four rabbinic schools of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), and the CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis), which represents the rabbinate.

In 1885, the men who helped form that tri-partite polity and the most prominent intellectual leaders of Reform Judaism, met in Pittsburgh to agree on a consistent standard of practice. While in Orthodox Judaism it is accepted that each community may have its own Minhag (or practice), Reform set out to establish universal standards of worship. The product of the 1885 meeting was the Pittsburg Platform. This platform, which was essentially an agreement on what the core tenets of the Reform ideology would be, marked the official beginning of Classical Reform. It “asserted Jewish religious supremacy and the continuing need for separate Jewish existence. At the same time it established Reform Judaism not on the basis of Biblical or Rabbinic law, but on a conception of God and morality anchored in, but also departing from the texts which first reflected it.” It "made Reform Judaism an entity unto itself"(Meyer, 269).

While the men at the Pittsburgh conference constituted the core leadership of Reform Judaism and were motivated by their deep belief in the ideological goals of Reform, a critical look reveals a deep will to assimilate in the realm of congregants. Many were motivated by “the practical benefits of adapting religious practices to the American patterns of living”(Kaplan, 10). This did not mean that those practicing Reform wanted to forget their religious and ethnic identity. Rather, they followed Reform ideology as a “pattern of response [to anti-Semitism]
based on belief in general American values as the best way to overcome anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish prejudice. Even in [the early 19th century] this pattern was accompanied by an almost devotional attitude towards America as the bearer of values of freedom and pluralism" (Shiff, 12).

If one were to walk into a Reform synagogue in the early 1900s, chances are it would be hard to differentiate between it and a Protestant congregation. The staples of an Orthodox service are the organization of the Temple structure – separate seating for men and women, distinctly non-western looking architecture; dress of congregants – all men would be wearing yarmulke’s (head coverings), tallit (prayer shawls) and phylacteries (small boxes filled with prayer and attached to the arms and forehead with leather straps); and language – the entire service would be in Hebrew.

In a Reform congregation, however, there was a pulpit with lines of pews in front of it, as in a church. Men would never wear yarmulkes or tallit (prayer shawls) and the Rabbi would have been wearing a priestly looking black robe. Seating was not divided by gender. And, most importantly, almost the entire prayer service would have been in English. “Some Reform congregations even experimented with switching their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday in order to conform...to the pattern of the Christian denominations" (Meyer, 89). Even more radical was Reform Judaism’s outright rejection of Zionism, the belief in the creation of and return to a Jewish homeland, eventually culminating in the creation of the state of Israel. Judaism is, like Christianity, a messianic religion. The arrival of the messiah is supposed to be accompanied by an end to the long Exodus of Jews from the ‘promised land.’ But Reform Jews required only "this happy land in which they already dwelled" – America (Meyer, 230).

In an ironic twist, reform Jews’ “devotional attitude” towards American pluralism actually resulted in a lack of pluralism within the congregation in terms of religious practice and
expression. This was particularly pronounced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when “Reform Temples served as citadels of Americanized Judaism, practiced by men and women whose socio-economic status and German cultural heritage set them apart from the multitude of their coreligionist arriving from Eastern Europe”(Meyer, 264). In their devotion to American pluralism, they homogenized themselves.

Union Temple formed in this atmosphere. Created from the amalgamation of two older Brooklyn congregations (Beth Elohim, founded in Williamsburg in 1848 and Temple Israel, founded in 1869), the new congregation came together in 1921, but did not finish construction on its grandiose new synagogue complex until 1926. According to the Board minutes from November of 1923, “The proposed building should have an auditorium seating at least 2,000, an assembly room or social hall seating 800 with kitchen and serving facilities, Rabbis studies, reception and committee rooms, 16 classrooms accommodating about 600, a Gymnasium and a swimming pool. This building as it is intended will cover our entire plot of about 30,000 square feet.” The congregation hoped, in these structures, to “safeguard the heritage of Israel, to preserve and perpetuate liberal Judaism and Jewish ideals among our members and their descendants.”

The idea of an all encompassing Temple house – a building with religious and community facilities - was part of a larger movement that, according to David Kaufman, incorporated turn of the century Christian progressive ideology into a physical structure that would replace the synagogue while still being a center of the Jewish community. It was, for second generation Reform Jews, something of a solution; a way to combine the identity of their parents with their more fleshed out American identity (Kaufman, 261).
The structure of Union Temple was designed to blend in the same way that Reform ideology was. The location for the structure was chosen because of its situation amongst some of the great civic monuments of Brooklyn: the central public library, Prospect Park, the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch. “The socially conscious Reform congregation would rise above its predecessor… moving ever further away from Brownsville to the border of fashionable Park Slope,” literally moving away from parts of New York identified with “shtetlach” or old country Jews who isolated themselves from society, and towards the posh, secular world of New York City. The architecture of the planned buildings purposefully emulated the architecture of the civic structures surrounding it, as if to “impress all with the importance and realization of our obligations as American citizens” (Minutes, Nov. 29, 1926, page 5). In an article in *The American Hebrew*, the Temple was described as “the last word in the modern policy of combining all forms of social activity with religious worship” (Kaufman, 261).

Unfortunately, only the inconspicuous looking community house with athletic facilities, classrooms and a theater was ever completed and inhabited by the now combined congregations in 1926. The never completed sanctuary – a massive, pillared Greco-Roman style affair – was left unfinished after the stock market crash of 1929.

In 1926, when Union Temple began holding services in its new congregational house, it was of the Classical Reform persuasion. Classical Reform Judaism refers to a very specific type of Reform practiced between 1885 and WWII, favored by German Jews, the largest nationality represented amongst the original Reform congregations in the United States. Classical Reform was ideologically focused on social justice as the core of the Jewish system of beliefs and the prophetic tradition. Adherents claimed they clung to the essence of Judaism, throwing off practices that they saw as irrelevant to the mission of ethical monotheism.
That was the ideological argument. Aesthetically and practically, "Classical Reform clearly intended to minimize the role of symbol and ritual" (Meyer, 280). The Union Prayer Book, which was (and in a very few congregations still is) the standard prayer book used by almost all Reform congregations, gives an excellent idea of what Classical Reform was all about. Published in 1890, it opened from left to right, instead of from right to left (a staple of any prayer book that utilizes Hebrew) and was not extensively revised until the 1970s. The prayer book’s "majestic prose and lofty poetry were intended to elevate the worshipper. Its prayers spoke of a transcendent Deity, who invoked "His" [the prayers were not gender neutral, as they now are] majesty and mystery while inspiring awe and reverence. The accompanying grand chorale works added to the formality seen as appropriate for a serious religious setting. Most of the prayers were in English and, and the aesthetics of the experience were clearly copied from the mainline protestant churches” (Kaplan, 80).

Classical Reform was the norm in Union Temple, as we can see in the record created by their weekly bulletins from the period before WWII. Union Temple began publishing these bulletins in 1929 and, as mentioned before, carefully preserved them in bound volumes up until 1969, when the Temple fell on harder times and record keeping was forgotten. Therefore there is an excellent record of the weekly events and goings on in the Temple for that thirty-year period. From these bulletins, we can see that children were “confirmed,” instead of having a Bar Mitzvah. Confirmation ceremonies are today optional for Reform youth and are usually completed a year after their Bar Mitzvah. The ceremony continues to resemble the Christian ceremony, with multiple Confrirmands all dressed in white, confirming their commitment to Judaism. A look at the ceremony program of 1932 shows a lack of Hebrew prayer mixed with what would today be considered a highly unusual choice of Music: at least seven classical pieces
were played, including a version of “Gloria” (a part of Catholic mass), followed by a rendition of Schubert’s “Hear us o Father,” Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” and a piece by Felix Mendelssohn, whose compositions, at least in the 1930s, seemed to be favorites for confirmation ceremonies. (Mendelssohn, although the descendant of the famous German Jew Moses Mendelssohn, was not Jewish. He is often associated with Judaism because of Richard Wagner and the Nazi’s condemnation of him as a Jew in the years after his death. He lived his life as a Christian and wrote a great many religious pieces in the context of that faith).

The aesthetics of religious observance were, obviously, a far cry from traditional. One of the hallmarks of this rejection of tradition in the practice of Reform Judaism was and is the lack of required head coverings and prayer shawls. In Union Temple today, many congregants wear or don’t wear their own eclectic mix of religious garments. But in Union Temple in the years before WWII, individual interpretation of Reform aesthetics was not acceptable. Rabbi Louis Gross, in a personal letter to the President of the Board of Trustees in 1929, wrote “I am rather sorry that you feel as you do with regard to guest rabbis wearing a cap on our pulpit. I don’t remember whether I explained to you that when I occupy the pulpit of a conservative rabbi, I have no compunction whatever about wearing a cap. I think I can wear a yarmulke (cap) or even eat kosher and still be a good Jew.” To this, the President responded, “I feel sure that our officers and Board of Trustees are of the same opinion as I am.” Gross, not long after this correspondence and a number of controversial incidents, was asked to hand in his resignation by the Board.

“The Episcopalians would call it very, very high church,” said Rabbi Stanley Dreyfus (rabbi from 1965 – 1979) in an interview on the Temple history in 2006. “Things were done in the right way and we tried to show that Judaism had its own dignified practice, sacred practices,
quite unlike what our neighbors up the street were doing. Shameful to behave that way, but there was a beauty and a dignity about the worship that meant a great deal to me."

It meant a great deal to many members of the congregation who were, as Rabbi Dreyfus was, dedicated to the aesthetics of Classical Reform. That dedication may have been the result of a practical drive to assimilate but it was also what Ofer Shiff would call a rejection of "particularistic practices.” American Reform Jews were against forms of practice that separated them rather than integrated them into the American community. This, obviously, did not mean that they wanted to dissolve their connection to the Jewish faith (they were, after all, members of a nominally Jewish organization). Members of the congregation suppressed what they thought to be “particularistic practices” in an effort to liberalize Judaism and embrace the pluralism of the United States. But they were not so liberal as to accept individual interpretations of tradition and ritual. This attitude would be of great importance in the years to come. In their devotion to what they perceived to be American pluralism, the congregation may have unwittingly striven for a sort of conformity that negated their professed support of said pluralism. The struggle over pluralism is central to the transformation of Reform Judaism and to the conflict that erupted in the 1960s in Union Temple. However, as the editors of a book called Issues of the Sixties rightly realized, if we want to understand the 1960s “we shall begin by looking back at the 1950s” (Freedman, 2).

The years following WWII were, for the United States and American Reform Jews, a boom time. "The 265 congregations of 1940…grew by 1955 to 520 congregations"(Kaplan, 20). By 1948, Benjamin Harrison could confidently write that "the American Jewish community, with its approximately five million souls, has become the largest and strongest Jewish community in the world"(33). As Ofer Shiff points out, American Jews felt that the United
States, in light of the horrors of the Holocaust, was truly the Promised Land. For Reform Judaism, the tragedies of WWII seemed to serve as an affirmation of their inclusion in American society through their part in the war effort. Events almost seemed to prove to them that they had chosen the right place, the right nation and that they, above all other Jews in the world, had a home in America.

This pride in and gratitude towards the American way of life permeates the literature of the period, as in a 1955 article on American Judaism by Solomon Freehoff: "If Reform had depended for its destiny upon the Old World where it was born, it would have no real influence on Jewish life. But there was America. It was here in the New World that it grew, became powerful, and maintains a dynamic strength"(Freehoff, 62). While later scholars would criticize Isaac Meyer Wise’s drive to Americanize Judaism, Freehoff positively interprets Wise as "reasonable, practical and American…Wise naturalized [Reform] as a citizen in the American Republic"(Freehoff, 358-359).

Union Temple echoed the tones of Freehoff. From the Board minutes, one gets not only the hard numbers of a rapidly increasing membership, budget and activities, but also a soaring sense of confidence in the Temple and its mission as a center of American Jewish life (not necessarily a center of American Jewish religion). The Temple social calendar was packed with dances, plays, building projects, classes, Bazaars, trips to football games and charitable dinners, done mainly through the brotherhood and sisterhood.

Hortense Hurwitz joined Union Temple in this important post-War period and was an active member of the Sisterhood and social life of the congregation. She would eventually go on to be president of the Board of Trustees, President of the Sisterhood and is currently serving as honorary president. Mrs. Hurwitz traces her ancestry to Austria, Germany and Alsace, the region
on the border between Germany and France. Her family settled in St. Louis and became prominent in local affairs; they helped found one of the largest Reform congregations in that city and even fought in the Civil War. In an interview in 2006, Mrs. Hurwitz recalled that when she arrived in New York in 1945, Union Temple was “one of the leading congregations in the nation…. The services were magnificent. Our Temple was known for the music we had here all over the country.”

Social prestige was an attraction of gaining membership in Union Temple and was also something that the congregation strove to project to the outside world. “We had a very prestigious congregation, a lot of professionals, business people, people with city, national and state positions, their professions were all highly thought of…Everything was fundraising and everything was very cohesive. People formed little social groups, There wasn’t a Saturday night or Sunday when there wasn’t a dinner party.” Membership was about community but it was also about announcing your place in American society.

Although he arrived in 1965, Rabbi Dreyfus was struck (and more than a little annoyed) with the social pretensions of the congregation. He described the Temple as “a very, very sedate, proper place where, on the high holy days, people dressed as if they were going to an affair of state…These were in those days very prominent very wealthy people who did what they wanted to do.” Dreyfus recounts one incident where a congregant “of a disruptive nature” arrived without socks on and was thrown out of services. There seems to be a constant concern with upholding a strict policy of decorum and aesthetics. Rabbi Goodman, looking back on the Temple from her place on the pulpit in 2008, noted that Union Temple truly “was in the mold of Classical Reform Judaism… the celestial organ, high church style, with the robes” (Goodman, 2007).
This was the character of the congregation that Rabbi Friedman joined in 1954. At the
time of his arrival, he was thirty-seven years old – very young for a rabbi of a congregation this
size. He held degrees from New York University and the HUC-JIR (Hebrew Union College –
Jewish Institute of Religion, the main Reform rabbinic school in New York City) and was
involved in a number of important civic and religious organizations, such as the New York
Board of Rabbis. When he took the pulpit at Union Temple, he tried to help mold the way in
which the congregation interacted with larger trends in Reform Judaism by reforming prayer and
ritual. He also attempted to change the way in which it interacted with the community outside of
itself.

This was apparent from his very first day on the job. As a formality, the
Rabbi was always offered an invitation to Trustee meetings. Rabbi Friedman, in the first few
months of his installment, attended them faithfully. At his first meeting he made a number of
recommendations that reflected changes in ritual and liturgy fomenting in the Reform movement:
the start of adult education courses, including a course in elementary Hebrew, post graduation
courses for students after their Bar Mitzvah, and the inclusion of a woman in the Friday night
ritual of candle lighting. All of those recommendations veer towards the inclusion of more
tradition, with an emphasis on Jewish education and rituals (women, in other sects of Judaism,
always light the Sabbath candles). Outside of religious matters, he suggested that teenagers be
given a space to “come, relax and enjoy each other’s company.” The idea of a space for
teenagers to meet was not well received. The Board insisted that there be a chaperone present if
there were to be such a space for them. In the end, Friedman made so many suggestions that the
Board asked him to type them up and submit the list officially.

From his very first encounter with the board, then, he seemed to be on a different page
than they. Rabbi Friedman had clear ideas about where Reform Judaism was and where Union
Temple needed to be. He would come to represent the growing tensions within the congregation as the world around them grew increasingly tense and anxiety ridden. Those tensions would come to a boiling point in the 1960s.

The very idea of the 1960s is now a cultural cliché; the decade is synonymous with rebellion, turmoil and social upheaval. It was an understandably anxious period in the history of the United States, characterized by the Cold War, Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, assassinations and violent liberation struggles around the world that overturned the placidity of the American 1950s. Contemporary works on current events, such as a 1966 tome entitled, The State of the Nation, include such cataclysmic phrasing as: “Never before in history could it be more truly said: we, the human race, are racing right up to Destiny's wire; the fearful Omega of ultimate doom awaits our fateful and final step”(ix). The author of that same work goes so far as to paint Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer as "writers of the apocalypse"(17) and focuses his exploration of the state of the nation on drug use, juvenile delinquency, and the rising tide of nationalism around the world threatening to throw off the balance of international power. These problems are conveyed as absolutely overwhelming and urgent: "The problems of the sixties will be so great that any excessive delay in our understanding of what is happening to our world could be disastrous"(2).

This same anxiety and upheaval also characterized the Reform movement and Judaism in the United States, inspiring a number of books and studies on the unsure state of American Jewry. In The Jew Within American Society, published in 1961, the author writes that third generation American Jews "acquire the habit of conformity….Surveys conducted in a number of universities all show that Jewish students are losing the distinctiveness that characterized the Jew on the campuses in former years"(Sherman,129). When you compare that
phrase with the words of Freehoff, who praised the “naturalization” of Judaism, a stark difference in attitudes towards conformity and assimilation appear. Jews were now no longer concerned with fitting in; they were now concerned with their “distinctiveness.” A famous 1964 article published in Time magazine entitled, *The Vanishing American Jew*, epitomized the fear of total assimilation. The tension between being American and being Jewish, as David Kaufman points out, had always been the central paradigm of the life of Jews in the United States. It seems that, in the 1960s, the paradigm was still central, but shifting.

For Union Temple, the sixties were the beginning of the end of what Hortense Hurwitz described as the “golden age.” Suburbanization and then “white flight” led to a changing neighborhood. These were merely part of a nationwide trend of urban exodus, a trend that hit Brooklyn and New York City particularly hard. According to national census figures, the population of Brooklyn in 1950 was 92.2 percent white. By 1970, that percentage had taken a drastic dive to 73.2%. For some comparison, the white population figure in between 1900 and 1950 had never changed more than 4%.¹ In New York City as a whole, statistics show an astoundingly rapid decrease in population: Between 1960 and 1980, the city lost almost a million people.²

An article in the *New York Times* from 1964, entitled “Negroes Deplore Hasidic Patrols,” catalogued the growing tension in the Crown Heights area around Union Temple. Rabbi Friedman was on the Mayor’s Committee on Religious Matters and worked to ask for additional police forces in the Crown Heights area as a way of stopping the vigilante patrols run by the Hasidim. He wrote a letter to the mayor asking for additional police forces so that the Hasidim would cease their independent patrolling. "The letter, sent by Rabbi Alfred L. Friedman of Union

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Temple of Brooklyn, declared that ‘fear is walking the streets’” (New York Times pg. 2, 4/28/1964).

In addition to changing the neighborhood from which Union Temple drew its congregants, suburbanization also pulled younger families out of the congregation and off to Long Island, leaving the Temple with a much older congregation than it had in 1940. By 1963, the Board was already citing a serious loss of revenues from the Hebrew school “due in part to the changing character of the neighborhood” (March 11, 1963). Suburban synagogues "lacked a controlling leadership of German lineage that espoused classical Reform. In suburbia, Reform was pre-eminently the creation of hitherto unaffiliated second - or third - generation American Jews largely oblivious to the long history of the Reform movement" (Meyer, 355). Union Temple, however, maintained that leadership. All of the tensions of the outside world and the tensions inside of Union Temple – a triangular tension between the Rabbi, Board and Congregation – would explode one night in 1964.

May of 1964 was a fairly tumultuous month across the world, although it was nowhere near as riotous as the months and years that would follow. The first ever student demonstrations against Vietnam were held in Times Square, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle and Wisconsin. Barry Goldwater received 75% of the votes in the Texas Republican Presidential primary, gearing up for the race against incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson. Two Civil Rights workers - Henry Hezekiah Dee and Charles Eddie Moore – were kidnapped and killed by the Ku Klux Klan. And in Lima Peru, 500 people were injured and 300 were killed in a riot during a soccer match against Argentina.

On the night of May 25, 1964, over three hundred members of the congregation of Union Temple met for the annual congregational meeting. These meetings were a standard tradition
during which the congregation elected the Board of Trustees and auxiliary committees reported on the events of the year past. However, what transpired that night was not the usual, quiet dinner session. What transpired was a passionate, violent and eventually traumatic argument between the Board, the Rabbi and the congregational body. It lasted until 2:30 in the morning.

“There was a little dissension. I’d rather not go into. But there was a dissension amongst the Board and the rabbinical contract - a little dissension.” That was how Hortense Hurwitz, one of the few congregants who was actually a member in 1964, described the meeting in a 2006 interview. But there is good reason to believe that there was more than a little dissension.

The 115th annual meeting of the congregation was unusual in a number of respects, right from the start. Originally, the meeting was to be held in the ballroom on the third floor, a large space. However, due to the unexpected number of people that attended (over 300), the meeting had to be moved down to the sanctuary. The Board of Trustees was seated on the pulpit, near the microphone, the congregants in the seats below. Although this may have been standard practice, a professional, secure voting company with official ballot boxes and outside counters was brought in for the election. The chairman of the meeting and president of the Board, Edward Elman, opened the meeting with a request that everyone take a seat quietly and, perhaps ominously, asked that everyone remember that “this is the sanctuary and we have reverence and respect for the place that we are in”(Transcript, 2).

After the congregation sang the “Star Spangled Banner” and Rabbi Friedman gave an invocation, the meeting commenced. Colonel Arthur A. Levitt, State comptroller of New York, past Temple President and long time congregant, began the meeting by announcing a resolution unanimously accepted by the Board of Trustees and accepted by Rabbi Friedman stating that the

3 This transcript was found in 1964 volume of the Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, kept in Union Temple, 17 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York.
Rabbi would be given a two year contract instead of the usual five year contract, and that the contract would include a ninety day cancellation clause, meaning that he could leave at any time with 90 days notice. The Board, to thank him for his service, would also be giving him a gift of $19,000.

A voice from the floor demanded that the Rabbi receive a five-year contract, as usual, and other voices from the floor seconded it. The Board asked the Rabbi to say a word addressing the congregation’s comments. Rabbi Friedman made the following cryptic statement: “The request which I made, and which was acceded to, was motivated by the circumstances over which I had no control. By that I mean the attitude of certain of the leaders of this Temple; and I would say that as long as there is a provision that I may terminate my contract within a period of ninety days that I could find no opposition to that amendment.” The Rabbi took his seat and did not clarify.

At this point, a man named Stanley Reiben, the same man who voiced the initial opposition to the Board’s resolution to give the Rabbi a two year contract, walked out of the audience and onto the podium, shouting “can you all hear me?” He was told to take his seat, but refused. Finally, with people shouting from the floor that he should sit down, and others yelling to let him speak, he was allowed to speak for three minutes (the congregation takes an official vote on this). Reiben said, “I am opposed to this motion not merely as an old acquaintance of the Rabbi but as a protest against this. Make no mistake – the congregation calls for a five year contract.” He states the actions of the Board do not “reflect upon a place where morality, where truth, where justice plays the part conscience should bring” (Transcript, 9-10).

Reiben was told he was out of time, and he returned to his seat. The Board proceeded to read a letter written by Rabbi Friedman, asking for the terms they outlined in their original
motion in regards to his contract. In the letter he wrote, “I will, therefore, oppose any effort, however well intentioned, designed to alter this arrangement at the forthcoming annual meeting of the congregation” (Transcript, 12). Clearly, he was forewarned about the possibility of protest on his behalf.

Even after the letter, the congregation still pushed to have an official vote taken on the motion (mainly they pushed through shouting). At one point, a man named Robert Port stood up and said, “I submit we vote for the five-year amendment because that is actually the sincere intention of Rabbi Friedman. He says he wants it five years.” Obviously, there was something going on here. Even if the Rabbi officially wrote a letter contradicting it, a large portion of the congregation seemed to truly believe that his letter didn’t reveal his real feelings.

The protest was so great that a vote was actually taken on whether or not the congregation would like to give the Rabbi a five-year contract or a two-year contract. The final vote – the Board initially resisted counting each vote, but the congregation protested – was 183 in favor of the two-year contract, 119 in favor of the five-year contract. Approximately forty percent of the congregation voted on behalf of the rabbi and against the motion proposed by the Board. That is a relatively large block of dissenters.

The issue seemed closed at this point, but, upon attempting to continue, Mr. Stanley Reiben again stood up and stated, “Since this Board of trustees is illegal and undemocratic… because they are not seat holders within the definition of the bylaws, I definitely want to case my vote against the trustees and the nominees” (Transcript, 17). Mr. Reiben stated that the actual members of the Board and the people nominated for election to the Board were all illegal. The level of disorder seemed to increase as voices from the floor complained that only the Board members were being allowed to use the microphone, while people voicing complaints
went unheard. At one point, someone shouted out loud enough for the transcriber to hear, “Don’t we have any rights? Are we in Moscow?” (Transcript, 18). Disregarding the shouting, the President of the Board told everyone that voting would commence. People began to stand up and place their votes.

As they did so, Mr. Sol Liebman stood up to ask if he could say something before people voted. President Elman allowed him to do so and gave him the microphone. Mr. Liebman stated: “I think we are entitled to know – we should know – the background that led to this conflict…. Some months ago there was a groundswell movement, which involved some matters of interest to everyone in this Temple. There were three phases of that activity” (Transcript, 19).

The first phase of the “groundswell movement” began with concern for Rabbi Friedman. After “learning from the Rabbi that he was not interested in projecting further any controversy that had to do with his part we immediately disbanded any organized effort in that direction” (Transcript, 19). Why the movement coalesced around the Rabbi, even if it could do nothing to help him, is extremely important.

There are three sources through which we can learn about Rabbi Friedman, none of which are entirely complete. He passed away in 1997 and his family is no longer in the Northeast. Many of the people he collaborated with, either within Union Temple or outside of it, have passed away or they are alive but are of an age where they can no longer remember the details of the events of almost fifty years ago. That leaves us with newspaper articles written about him, his actual sermons, and the bulletins and minutes of Union Temple.

From these sources – particularly the Board minutes – it becomes clear that Rabbi Friedman’s religious views did not sit well with the Trustees and older members of the congregation. He was much younger not only than most Rabbis of large congregations but also
much younger than most members of the Board of Trustees. He would have received his rabbinic training in the years when Classical Reform would have lost its sway within the realm of rabbinic studies and academia. Friedman’s ideas on Reform Judaism differed greatly from the norm in Union Temple, as shown by the substantial and not always well received changes he made to the ritual practice of the congregation; and at the root of those differences were differences between his basic background and worldview and that of many powerful members of the congregation.

To explore the ideology of Rabbi Friedman, we should begin with an exploration of his religious views. A comparison and contrast of confirmation ceremonies offers a neat view of the ideological position of Union Temple before and after Rabbi Alfred Friedman arrived. The 1954 ceremony was the last to be carried out under Rabbi Tedesche. As in years before the ritual is far removed from traditional Judaism and reflects a lingering attachment to the aesthetics of Classical Reform. The service featured students reciting speeches on subjects such as “Tercentenary of Jews in America,” “God Bless America,” and the recitation of a prayer for peace. The service ends with the recitation of Psalm 23 – the famous psalm most popular with Christians that begins “The Lord is my Shepherd” – and a musical piece by Mendelssohn. Even at this point in time, seventeen years after the 1937 platform attempted to inject tradition in Reform practice, the Jews of Union Temple couched their Judaism in American and even gentile terms. In stark contrast to that ceremony is the 1960 confirmation ceremony, carried out under the auspices of Rabbi Friedman. The opening hymn and almost all other songs are either traditional Hebrew songs of prayer or at least by Jewish composers. The Confrimands read selections from “Pirkei Avos” or “The Ethics of Our Fathers,” the most important chapter of the Mishna, or Jewish Oral Law, written in the 3rd century BC. And in place of Psalm 23 is the
“Declaration of Our Fathers,” followed by a closing hymn. Most notably, there is no more Mendelssohn.

Rabbi Friedman was obviously more interested in traditional Judaism than previous Union Temple Rabbis and most certainly more interested than the Board. He increasingly injected more Hebrew into the service and emphasized Torah study and “Jewishness” – not just “American Jewishness.” The Board did not hesitate to voice concerns over the changes he made to the liturgy. At a Board meeting in 1960, “an objection was raised to the amount of Hebrew in the services” by a number of Board members (Nov. 14) and at various times during his career at Union Temple, increasing in intensity after 1962, complaints were made about changing rituals, increased Hebrew usage and the length of Torah readings.

Two of his most significant and telling changes to the liturgy were very subtle and, ironically, did not cause a great deal of complaint. The first was a change in the pronunciation of Hebrew from Ashkenazi (the pronunciation favored by European Jews) to Sephardic (the official pronunciation of Hebrew as decided when the state of Israel modernized the language). This shows the Rabbi to be in the vanguard of changes in the Reform movement and in touch with the increasing bond with Zionism. The second change he made to the liturgy of Union Temple was the inclusion of the text of the Kol Nidre prayer in High Holy Day Services.

Kol Nidre is a beautiful and haunting prayer that is actually in Aramaic, not Hebrew. It asks for release from all promises that were made but could not be kept. For many hundreds of years, this prayer was used by anti-Semites as proof that Jews were liars and cheats who intentionally strove to free themselves from contracts. The lyrics of the prayer were kept out of the liturgy by many congregations because of the fear that the words would be misinterpreted once again and used as a justification of anti-Semitism. Rabbi Friedman reinstituted Kol Nidre,
showing his disregard for limited liturgy due to the prejudices and misinterpretations of gentiles. This was a definite shift from the assimilation aesthetics of Classical Reform.

To an American in 2008, it may seem strange to hear a man who wanted to inject greater religiosity and tradition into an organization as being painted as a liberal progressive. But that was almost certainly the ideological basis for changes that Friedman made to the practices of Union temple. The leadership of the congregation consisted of older men who came from a generation where being Jewish meant that you could only go so far in American society. They had, in Union Temple, carved out a space for themselves; a place where they could socialize and spend their time and effort on the Jewish community while maintaining a certain sort of decorum that would show the gentile community how modern, secularized and American they were. In other words, they were in Union Temple because they thought they had to be; Rabbi Friedman was there because he thought, as Jews, they should want to be. He came from a generation of Jews that were far more confident in their identity as accepted citizens of American society. They therefore felt much more comfortable with the idea of and even felt the need to reincorporate traditional Judaism into their practice.

The return to tradition in Jewish practice required feeling somewhat comfortable and proud of one’s ethnicity. And to be comfortable with ethnicity involves an acceptance of pluralism. Pluralism has always been a feature of American life in the sense that there have always existed, to one degree or another, a plurality of different groups with different beliefs and values; and that, constitutionally, those beliefs and values are protected. However, up until the mid twentieth century, those different groups mostly fell into the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. “The diversity of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant religions, therefore, continued to be perceived as various expressions of a shared religious heritage. Thus, de Tocqueville could accurately
remark in the 1830s that the multiplicity of sects in America all taught the same morality; Will Herberg (1955), echoing these sentiments in the mid-twentieth century, could observe that all the many denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism taught values that supported the ‘American Way of Life.’” (MacHacek, 147). Classical Reform Judaism was part of this sort of pluralism, one, which MacHacek refers to as the “‘assimilation’ model of American immigrant religion” (MacHacek, 147).

Union Temple, as a congregation that clung to Classical Reform, was an exemplar of that assimilation model, a model that became problematic in the 1960s. In his collection of documents on the Reformation of Reform Judaism, Jacob Neusner quotes an address made in 1966 to the Central Conference of American Rabbis by Rabbi Richard Levy:

"The Basic Problem concerning the synagogue and social action is that in most synagogues there is no social action…Social action usually means some sort of confrontation of the synagogue with the community…. Since so much of the purpose of the existing synagogue is concerned with presenting a favorable image before the community” it was almost impossible for congregations to take part in the Civil Rights movement, the sort of movement which, as Levy points out, one can’t simply donate money to but must become a part of” (Neusner, 167).

Levy was right to point out the role of the Civil Rights movement in the problematic nature of the synagogue and Reform Judaism in the 1960s. Rabbi Friedman was personally involved in the movement. Friedman was an authority on how congregations could form social action committees and wrote a widely read pamphlet on the formation of social action committees with activist Al Vorspan. In 1957, he founded the Union Temple Social Action Committee and encouraged each auxiliary group in the Temple to become involved and discuss social issues in society at large, not just those that pertained to Jews and Judaism. Examples of the activities that the Union Temple Social Action Committee attempted to address were inequalities in housing and the state of New York City public education. In his speeches,
Friedman often spoke on American political issues, particularly the issue of equality, saying, “We must be as concerned about Little Rocks as about Big Satellites' (Friedman, 1959). He believed that social action was necessary, even when it did necessitate a conflict between the synagogue and the surrounding community. The following is a speech in which he explains his feelings about religion and politics, made in 1962:

Some people take the view that politics and religion are like oil and water - that they just don't mix. Now, if by religion, we mean sectarian interests seeking to advance their own particular dogmas upon the body politics, I would agree that they should be kept apart. If, however, by religion we mean the application of universal moral and ethical teachings to the affairs of government, then I certainly do not agree that they do not mix. Indeed, the religious ideals we preach and teach are indispensable in the achievement of a decent and just society, it is, therefore, the duty and responsibility of Temple and Church people to be individually and collectively involved in the affairs of state (3) (11/2/1962).

Rabbi Friedman practiced what he preached. In 1964, he took part in a March on Washington that involved almost 2,000 people. "Religious leaders, union members and heads of the Civil Rights groups gathered near the Washington Monument in a blistering 95 degrees to hear their speakers. They went to Capitol Hill to see members of Congress, briefly joined theological students in a silent civil rights vigil at Lincoln Memorial and spoke with officials of the Departments of Justice, Labor and Health, Education and Welfare…’We march for the guarantee that no further crippling amendments dilute the civil rights bill as it is presently framed,’ the New York group's statement declared" (New York Times, 6/15/1964)

The Civil Rights movement was essential to the conflict in Union Temple. It “revealed the limits of the assimilation ideology” that Classical Reform and Union Temple typified. Movements such as the Civil Rights movement “not only demanded practical changes in public policy, they demanded a transformation of American national self identity; they insisted that there were diverse and legitimate alternative ways of being American”(MacHacek, 148).
It seems that Rabbi Friedman and the members of the congregation who supported him would fall into the group demanding a similar transformation. The conflict between the Rabbi and those members with the other, disapproving congregants and the Board of Trustees can be explained by what Yaakov Ariel describes as “an astonishing gap” between the ideals of the Reform movement as expressed by rabbinic leaders, and the attitudes held by the vast majority of members in the congregations...startling discrepancy between Reform theological posturing and congregational behavior”(Kaplan, 17). There was, in the case of Union Temple, a serious gap between the Board and a great number of congregants which would become a tremendous source of tension. In his implementation of tradition and commitment to social action, Rabbi Friedman seems to have unintentionally made himself the symbolic representative of that tension. As a relatively young, passionate and outspoken Rabbi, Friedman represented a new way of doing things that many congregants did not agree with.

But many congregants did agree with him. The vote was 183 against the Rabbi, but 119 for – a minority, but most certainly not a miniscule one. Therefore the group identity of the people who supported the Rabbi – and the identity of the others who did not – needs to be assessed. Sol Liebman, after explaining that a groundswell movement had coalesced around the Rabbi, also explained that Friedman refused to cause any trouble on his account. After his refusal to cause controversy, “the members [of the groundswell movement] designated a committee.” That committee was called the “Committee for Temple Reform.” Rabbi Friedman’s situation seems to have been the inspiration for the group’s formation, but it was not the only issue they wanted to challenge the Board on. The Committee drafted a proposal, signed by 76 congregants, most of them younger members involved in the Young Married Group and the Men’s Club, asking that five new associate trustees be elected to the Board in an effort to break up what
seems to have been a dictatorial administration of the Temple by older members of the congregation. This petition was the second phase of the “groundswell movement.”

Liebman, commenting on the committee’s motives in presenting this petition, stated “we may be wrong; but I certainly think we are entitled to a chance to be heard. We may have our own ideas as to what is good for the Temple. They may differ with yours; but as I respect yours I expect you to respect mine” (Transcript, 20-25).

We have already discussed one definition of pluralism, which is pluralism in the most literal sense, an outdated type of pluralism that the Board of Union Temple and adherents of Reform Judaism, clung to. Another definition of the world pluralism is “the recognition of alternative truth claims” (MacHacek, 150). In the 1960s a burgeoning “culture” of that type of pluralism developed. Members of American society began, “rejecting a culture of communitarian consensus in favor of a culture that placed a positive value on diversity and dissent,” (MacHacek, 148).

A rejection of communitarian consensus was necessary in order to justify standing up to the Board of Trustees. The older congregants, however, interpreted this protest as harmful to the harmony of the Temple. One such older congregant was Judge Emil N. Baar, a state Supreme Court Justice, long time member of the Temple, Board member, Trustee and past president. He was the first to rise in response to Mr. Liebman’s impassioned defense of the Committee’s aims at Reform.

“This is indeed not a pleasant task for me, I assure you. It is only because I have for thirty odd years dedicated myself, as did many others to this great institution with a hundred and fifteen years of tradition and leadership in Reform Judaism that I rise to speak…. Now, these are the things I’ve been told and they’ve been repeated here just a few minutes ago. Differences of
opinion, honest differences of opinion, we welcome that. Anybody does. Everybody should in this great country of ours; but when you speak of dead wood, which is the charge that has been heard of your present Board; that it’s encumbered with dead wood; that they’re elected not by a democratic process, when these things are said, when you sum it all up, what does it mean? What they’re trying to say to you is anything that you can do, I can do better. Put me in there” (Transcript, 25).

Mr. Baar’s next statement made the generation gap between the members of the board and the members of the Committee for Temple Reform clear. “I should like to ask these distinguished gentlemen – I should like to ask them where they were in the 1930s when we held this institution together with mucilage and strings. I should like to ask these gentlemen about this dead wood – where they were in the 1940s when we raised against all odds over $250,000 so that once and for all this institution might be debt free; and the great upsurge in our membership in the 50’s was not something we did by magic and mere chance… Where are these people, these self-anointed that came come in here and say you’re no good; we know what to do; out with you? Where is the humility in their souls that our religion teaches us to have? Where is the religiosity in that?”(Transcript, 25 – 29).

After Judge Baar, Mrs. Sidney Aaronson, wife to the president of the Committee for Temple Reform asked to speak. “Judge Baar, I’m sorry; but I have to say it; and I hope that you will re-examine it and see that this is not so…This is a form of protest. This is true. It is a form of protest against what the trustees did…. I think we ought to be respected for it, not be treated as we have been” (Transcript, 31-32).

Mrs. Aaronson’s statement hits the nail on the head, so to speak. The actions of the committee were a form of protest unlike any that had formerly been seen in the Temple. And
their protest began with their decision to defend the Rabbi. From that point, they found that there were other injustices in the Temple and that the treatment of the Rabbi was, in many ways, connected to those other injustices.

After Judge Baar’s criticism and Mrs. Aaronson’s rebuttal, the President tried to bring the meeting back to some semblance of normalcy and asked that the auxiliary reports be made. Football games, dinners with Gil Hodges as guest speaker, bake sales and the like were discussed until Leonard Cherlin, the President of the Young Married Group, rose to make his report. He announced that, “On April 15th the YMG had still another first. This was the awarding of a plaque to the couple of the year. The couple who had contributed most to Union Temple and progressive Judaism and our community received this plaque. It was the unanimous decision of the YMG executive committee that Rabbi and Mrs. Alfred Friedman by their exemplary activities within and without the Temple most merited this award.” Mr. Cherlin was, obviously, a major player in the group of dissenters and he was the only committee head to make a direct response to the night’s events. “As an aside to Judge Baar, I also take exception to the word ‘dead wood.’ As an aside, I wanted to say I think the point I am trying to get across is that I as one am opposed to absentee landlordism. I hold with the greatest respect the people on the Board, their officers, and the great work they put into the building of this Temple; but I said there was room for more, the young blood that is clamoring to be admitted within this holy circle so that we too can do our but and more to carry on tradition of Union Temple; and therefore I am saying that as an individual I intend to continue to work in every way possible to help extend and broaden the base of the leadership of Union Temple so that we can say that the leadership reflects all aspects, all factions, and it shouldn’t be factions but representative all of the people of Union Temple (Applause)” (Transcript, 42-43).
The third phase of the groundswell movement came in the closing moments of the meeting in the form of a signed petition presented to the Board as a legal challenge. The Board refused to read it out loud. “If we read it, we are accepting it” (Transcript, 57), said President Elman. The petition called for the following amendments: term limits, with no multiple consecutive terms; a nominating committee that does not include seated members of the board; a repeal of the rule that only seat holders (owners, a phrase from the time when people actually purchased their seats) can have a say in the Temple’s financial matters; and the end of unequal voting rights for congregants. There was a four-class system of membership. Each class paid a different amount of dues. Lower class members had fewer voting rights and so the petition sought to abolish the practice, a practice that automatically gave people with more money more power.

Unfortunately, in the end, the issues raised at this meeting were simply raised – not resolved. Judge Baar’s last act was to accuse the members of the Committee for Temple Reform of “soapbox oratory.” The meeting comes to a strange and awkward, tired close at 2:30 in the morning, with the proposal going unread and the issues unresolved, with sore feelings all around that would impact the next forty years of Temple history. Two weeks after the meeting, Rabbi Friedman resigned his position and moved to Massachusetts. It took four years for the Board to enact the motions called for in the Committee for Temple Reform’s petition, at which point it was too little, too late.

In the months following this meeting and Rabbi Friedman’s departure, the Men’s Club (the president of which was a member of the Committee for Temple Reform) was ordered to dissolve his social action committee and the Sisterhood was ordered to change its Social Action Committee’s name to the “Social Study Group.” In 1965, due to an article printed in the Men’s
Club bulletin under the same president so disliked by the board, it was decided that the Board would from now on review all auxiliary publications.

In that same year, Rabbi A. Stanley Dreyfus became Rabbi and served Union Temple until 1979, when he became director of placement of Rabbis for the HUC-JIR in New York City. He was a brilliant scholar who tried his best to work with a congregation that was, at that point, slipping away to the suburbs and or left with a bad taste in their mouths by the experience under Rabbi Friedman. He was, however, much more in tune with the Classical reform aesthetics of the congregation and so did not “cause trouble” in the way that Rabbi Friedman had.

The issues raised by Rabbi Friedman’s actions and the Committee for Temple Reform’s agenda were part and parcel of many of the issues troubling American society in the 1960s, particularly those regarding equal opportunity and equality. The actions and ideas presented by the dissenting speakers sound an awful lot like those of this group, described by MacHacek:

“Young, white, middle class Americans also began to challenge the imagined cultural consensus as being oppressive and restrictive….Those at the American cultural core were rejecting idea that being a good American meant conformity to a normative vulture and lifestyle; they asserted that being a good American sometimes means adopting the stance of an outsider and challenging the establishment” (148).

WWII and the optimism of the 1950s had supplied these dissenters with confidence in their identity and place in American society. The Civil Rights movement had “offered them the model for a new way of thinking about themselves” (Allitt, 98). Through their actions, the dissenters in Union Temple argued that being a good American and a good member of Union Temple meant supporting Rabbi Friedman and challenging the entrenched Board of Trustees.

What the conflict boils down to, then, is an argument between two groups with differing value systems. Their argument was centered on Kaufman’s aforementioned paradigm: the
seemingly ever present tension between being an American and being Jewish. The group represented by the Committee for Temple Reform was confident in their identity as Americans and therefore were more comfortable with embracing Jewish tradition and challenging authority, both within Union Temple and without. They saw no conflict between their proud membership in and simultaneous protest of an institution.

In introducing the various different Americans he interviewed for his oral history of the 1960s, *Generation on Fire*, Jeff Kisseloff writes that many activists of the 1960s saw their rebellion as “acting in the same patriotic tradition” as Washington, Jefferson and Adams. The rebellion of the 1960s “assaulted the most entrenched aspects of American life” (Kisseloff, 2) and justified those assaults with the understanding that one could love what America stood for but detest its actions, just as one could love what Union Temple stood for, but entirely disagree with the way it was run and the actions of its executive body.

The congregants who did not protest - those who were on or supported the Board - disapproved of Rabbi Friedman’s public protests and of the Committee for Temple Reform’s disruptive agitation at the annual meeting not because they were racists or even necessarily conservative. They were simply not as comfortable with changing ideas of pluralism or protest and had a different take on the shifting balance between being an American and a Jew. Ironically, from Kisseloff also comes an anecdote that best explains their side of the argument. Kisseloff described his own experience of watching anti-Semitism rear its ugly head when students in his high school attempted to protest the actions of the National Guard in the Kent States shootings:

In my Long Island high school, there was a riot when Jocks chanted ‘Kill the Jews,’ attacking a group of long-haired students (many of them Jews) who were attempting to lower the flag on the front lawn as a protest against the killings
An incident like that sheds some light on what older or more well to do Reform Jews might have feared would happen if they became involved in the heated struggles of the 1960s. The older congregants, particularly the members of the Board, had worked far too hard and far too long to become assimilated Jews with places of power in society to sacrifice everything in the name of someone else’s rights, to have to face the anti-Semitism they had worked so hard to escape all over again.

Hortense Hurwitz was most likely one of the congregants who felt this way. Her name is not on the petition drawn up by the Committee for Temple Reform. When asked about what happened in 1964, she called it nothing more than a “little dissension,” downplaying the severity of the event. One could argue that history and distance may have artificially magnified its importance. But that is unlikely. When Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman was engaged to be the first female Rabbi of Union Temple in 1992, she was forced to turn away a lesbian couple that applied for membership because the by-laws of the congregation had been written specifically to prevent same sex couples from receiving a family membership rate, thereby making it extremely expensive to be a gay couple in the congregation. Rabbi Goodman began to explore changing the by-laws, at which point a congregant from the time of Rabbi Friedman approached her and warned, “We had a Rabbi marching down in Selma and he almost tore this congregation apart!” There is little evidence that Rabbi Friedman marched in Selma, although it is entirely possible. The fact that she blew Rabbi Friedman’s involvement with the Civil Rights movement out of proportion is just as important as Hortense’s attempt to minimize the importance of the Temple’s conflict surrounding Friedman.

In his short essay on the “Peculiarities of Oral History” (1981), Alessandro Portelli
describes the importance of recognizing that oral history is narrative and that therefore one must analyze the relationship of the narrator to their narrative. The narrator has a “meaning in mind” when they tell their story; peculiarities such as the speed at which they speak, the words they use, and the amount of detail or lack of detail they employ in describing an event are all important. The narratives are subjective and therefore

[...] us less about the event as such than about their meaning.... They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did... The organization of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal about the speaker's relationship to their own history (99-100).

Portelli uses the example of the way in which members of the working class of Terni, Italy remembered - or rather misremembered - an event to demonstrate the “collective process of symbolization in myth making” (Portelli, 100). There is a certain sort of mythology that has built up around the involvement of American Jews in the progressive movements of the 1960s. It is indeed true that "since the 1960s and 1970s, public interest groups have proliferated along with the movements for feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, Central American solidarity, anti-nuclear weapons, peace and others. Although these have been secular movements, churches and religious activists were heavily involved in many of them" (Swarts, xx). For Jews, the most public area of involvement was in the Civil Rights movement. The history of Jews participating in the African American struggle for equality is well documented and rightfully so. What they faced in their support of the Civil Rights movement is vividly recounted in Melissa Faye Green’s *The Temple Bombing* (1996). After bombing the largest synagogue in Atlanta in 1958, "General Gordon of the Confederate Underground" announced over the Atlanta airwaves:

We bombed a temple in Atlanta. This is the last empty building in Atlanta that we will bomb. All nightclubs refusing to fire their
Negro employees will also be blown up. We are going to blow up all Communist organizations. Negroes and Jews are hereby declared aliens.

A great many Rabbis and congregants, especially in the American south, put themselves in harm’s way and continued to support progressive movements in the United States. According to Rabbi Goodman, whose father-in-law was a prominent Georgia Rabbi who marched with Martin Luther King Jr., Jews in Atlanta in particular, who faced the most tangible threat to their own safety, lined up in support of the movement like “ducks in a row” after the Temple bombing.

In the introduction to their Social Action guide for Reform Congregations, Al Vorspan and David Saperstein write, "In the days of the historic civil rights struggle, it seemed so easy to make a clear moral judgment on the big issues in American society. It seemed so easy to tell the good guys from the bad" (Vorspan and Saperstein, 3). But it was not so easy for many congregations. Many congregations did not fall into the ranks of support for Civil Rights. Temple Emanu-El, the largest and most powerful congregation in New York City, protested violently against the UAHC taking a stand on Civil Rights and political issues, going so far as to publicly request that the UAHC not fund what would become the Religious Action Center in DC. "Not surprisingly, their concerns were cloaked in lofty principle: the proper sphere of religion, the opponents contended, was belief, precept and individual conscience, not collective political action" (Meyer, 366). In 1967, Temple Emanu-El again led the protest against politicization of the UAHC when they went so far as to withdraw from the Union after the president of the UAHC denounced the American Government’s actions in Vietnam. Twenty five congregations followed Temple Emanu-El and removed themselves from the Union (Meyer, 367). Again, the conflict was not one of racism - it was really the result of differing views on how to balance being an American and a Jew. It cannot be an accident that these congregations like Emanu-El protested most loudly when the politics espoused by the UAHC were those that channeled the
movements that helped redefine American pluralism.

This tense period often seems to be downplayed in Reform Jews’ retelling of their shared struggles in the progressive movements of the 1960s. To explore some congregations’ resistance to change and the progressive movements of the sixties in no way denigrates the efforts of the thousands of Jews who did participate in these movements. Some authors, such as Faye-Greene, have given time to analyzing the motives of those who did not participate. But most of the literature on Reform Judaism tends to do exactly what the two aforementioned congregants did in their remembrance of the 1960s in Union Temple –minimize, omit or even misremember the history of the movement.

The conflicts that rose to the surface at the Annual Congregational Meeting in 1964 reveal a great deal about the relatively unexplored history of Union Temple, the oldest congregation in Brooklyn; but those conflicts, even more importantly, represent the tumultuous changes unfolding in Reform Judaism and American society at large in the 1960s, played out on an intimate scale. Today, Union Temple is quite a different place than it was in 1964. The Rabbi and Cantor are women; the most active committee is the Social Action Committee; and services are performed almost entirely in Hebrew. Rabbi Dreyfus, looking back on his years there said “I liked it the way it was. The décor. The way things were done. That doesn’t mean they were better, but they suited me better. Linda Goodman is a remarkable woman ….There’s some minhagim that I miss…Linda, as you will have noticed, doesn’t like a robe. I would no more have come into the sanctuary without a black robe, white robe, than I would have crawled in on my hands and knees.” In regards to these changes, Rabbi Goodman explained that “the Reform movement has undergone drastic changes, drastic changes in minhag, in music, in style of worship. Nobody wears robes anymore, rabbis don’t wear robes anymore - it’s not that priestly,
pontificating figure.”
Bibliography


