

Faith and History

Essays on Prayer, Exile, and Return



Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits

FAITH AND HISTORY
ESSAYS ON PRAYER, EXILE,
AND RETURN

EDITED BY

Zev Eleff

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In loving memory of
RABBI ELIEZER AND MRS. SALI BERKOVITS, z”l

*We are eternally grateful for their many years of guidance
and friendship. We are confident that the publication of
Faith and History: Essays on Prayer, Exile, and Return
will inspire a new generation as they inspired us.*

*Howard N. z”l and Jacqueline Gilbert
Stephen J. and Elizabeth Landes
Jack and Ana Berger*



In loving memory of

HOWARD N. GILBERT, z”l

*devoted student of the Rabbi,
outstanding attorney and counselor,
life-long learner, creative philanthropist, and loyal friend.
He is greatly missed.*

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Introduction

In July 1950, Congregation Aath Jeshurun of Roxbury called Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Berkovits to its pulpit. The Jews of the so-called Blue Hill Avenue Synagogue in the Boston neighborhood were eager to welcome the forty-one-year-old, Romanian-born, German-trained scholar. Since 1906, worshippers at the Blue Hill Avenue Synagogue had prayed in “probably the finest structure of its kind in New England.”¹ The founders were a small wealthy group of modern-leaning Jews. Well before midcentury, those well-heeled congregants had moved on, resettling in more affluent Boston suburbs. They were replaced in Roxbury by a larger circle of devout, working-class Jews at Aath Jeshurun. This second iteration practiced a more traditional form of Judaism but also appreciated modern scholarship and culture.² They also held deep convictions and commitment to the Zionist cause. Their views comported with the Orthodox Jews that Berkovits had previously led in Germany,

1. Gerald H. Gamm, “In Search of Suburbs: Boston’s Jewish Districts,” in *The Jews of Boston: Essays on the Occasion of the Centenary (1895–1995) of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, 1995), 144.

2. *Ibid.*, 148.

England, and Australia. Eliezer Berkovits, then, was a very good match for this Boston-based congregation.

The Berkovitses – Eliezer, Sali, and their three sons – moved into a modest-sized, second-floor apartment on 8 Montana Street in September 1950.³ In Boston, Berkovits told a journalist that he wished to “give traditional Judaism ‘a modern Orthodox expression.’” This term, Modern Orthodoxy, was not yet in vogue but Berkovits must have anticipated its utility.⁴ He was very impressed with Boston. He marveled at the neighborhood streetcars and the “modern trains” that pulled in and out of South Station and the “uniform good quality and hygienic preparation and handling of food obtainable, even at the railway station.”⁵ Owing to the progressive inclinations and technological prowess in the United States, Berkovits believed that his avant-garde academic credentials and philosophical background would suitably and ably “translate [Judaism] into the language of our times.” Unlike him, most of Berkovits’ congregants did not hold college degrees. But they understood his accessible sermonic stylings and told their college-bound children to pay attention to their rabbi’s diction and directions.

Eliezer Berkovits took stock of his new surroundings. He delayed his start at the Blue Hill Avenue Synagogue by a few weeks so that he might study his flock, the “various phases of the Roxbury community.” More open to cooperation among different streams of Judaism than other Orthodox elements, Berkovits “hope[d] to work with all positive Jewish forces” and desired to “influence those who have drifted away from active religious forms of life.”⁶ Most specifically, he hoped to reacquaint his coreligionists with the core values of prayer and negotiate the tension of Jewish life in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Rabbi Berkovits did not publish or preserve his sermons from his seven-year sojourn in Boston. However, newspaper articles from the

3. “Cong. Adath Jeshurun to Install Dr. Berkovits as Rabbi on Sunday,” *Jewish Advocate*, February 8, 1951, 5.

4. See Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 171–72.

5. “Roxbury Rabbi-Elect Saw Nazi Pogroms, London Blitz,” *Jewish Advocate*, September 10, 1950, C37.

6. *Ibid.*

local Jewish press confirm that Berkovits carried through with his intentions. For instance, reports highlighted his lectures on Religious Zionism, the priorities of education, and the challenge of Jewish living in a modern society.⁷ The descriptions of the University of Berlin-trained philosopher in this period paint him more like a sociologist, perhaps an anthropologist. In op-eds and popular-styled articles, some reproduced in these pages, Berkovits grappled with the fears of fast-paced technology and media. He worried about the chasms this caused between older Jewish immigrants and their modern children. He sympathized with his fellow Jews who found it difficult to find meaning in prayer amid political and social upheaval.⁸

Berkovits the communal leader did not emphasize metaphysics or other complex formulations of academic learning in his commentary. In these more “accessible” moments, Berkovits dwelled on the “human existence,” something that he would have described as “philosophical anthropology,” since it mainly drew on Jewish concepts and cultural tools rather than his considerable philosophical range.⁹ To be sure, proof texts from the Torah, Talmud, and other canonical sources were also a major feature of Berkovits’ writings. His philosophical writings, even the most technical and learned types, bring together the worlds of philosophy and Torah. His popular pieces are likewise anchored in Scripture; his sacred citations are reinforced by Berkovits’ social observations and common-sense reasoning. But, in contrast to his academic works that placed Berkovits in dialogue with contemporary philosophers and scholars, his popular-styled output was addressed to his fellow Jews. A gifted writer, Berkovits expertly balanced erudite learning with accessible prose, even if, as I imagine, the exercise of withholding the copious footnoting he deployed in his other work sometimes pained him. Nonetheless, the utility of this approach was one of the few points at which Berkovits found

7. See, for example, Eliezer Berkovits, “Failure in Our Hebrew Schools?” *Jewish Advocate*, February 25, 1954, 15.

8. All these qualities are captured in Eliezer Berkovits, “Has God Bungled Creation?” *Jewish Advocate*, September 26, 1957, C1.

9. Eliezer Berkovits, *A Jewish Critique of the Philosophy of Martin Buber* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1962), 38.

agreement with Martin Buber; it was also shared by his contemporary and leading American Orthodox figure, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.¹⁰

This had worked very well for Berkovits before his arrival in Boston: themes related to Zionism, Exile, and prayer abound in published versions of sermons he had delivered at the United Hebrew Congregation in Leeds, England.¹¹ If his Boston talks resembled the ones delivered in Britain, then they were certainly filled with biblical references and citations from the Talmud and Jewish medieval philosophers.

Berkovits left Boston in 1958 to serve as professor of philosophy at Hebrew Theological College (HTC). The school was in the process of relocating from Chicago's West Side to more suburban Skokie, and Berkovits was part of HTC leadership's plan to reenergize the entire institution.¹² To an alumnus, President Oscar Z. Fasman wrote that "I think I have one definite achievement in the educational field of the Yeshiva by having brought to the Faculty Dr. Eliezer Berkovits. He is an excellent man in the field of philosophy, he is genuinely pious, and what is very important from our point of view is the fact that he is a wonderful teacher who holds the interest of all the students in his class."¹³

That last point about Berkovits' reputation is, as Fasman relayed, "very important." Berkovits was not just a first-rate philosopher. He was a master educator and thought leader. In short order and in his new Chicago environs, Berkovits regained his footing as a public scholar and teacher. In this capacity, Orthodox Jews in Chicago seemed to appreciate him as much as his congregants back in Boston. The Religious Zionists of Chicago (Mizrachi) reminded its members that "Chicago Jewry is fortunate to have the services of such a scholar teaching at the Hebrew

10. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. Michael S. Berger (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2005). See also Alex S. Ozar, "The Emergence of Max Scheler: Understanding Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's Philosophical Anthropology," *Harvard Theological Review* 109 (April 2016): 178–206.

11. E. Berkovits, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Oxford: The East and West Library, 1945).

12. See Oscar Z. Fasman, "After Fifty Years, an Optimist," *American Jewish History* 69 (December 1979): 167.

13. Oscar Z. Fasman to Uri Miller, May 28, 1958, Uri Miller File, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

Theological College.”¹⁴ In September 1969, Berkovits was one of the founders of the Skokie Orthodox Congregation, soon after renamed Congregation Or Torah. At Or Torah, Berkovits served as the “Ritual Chairman” (before the congregation hired a rabbi) and helped shepherd the young congregation.¹⁵ Beyond Chicago, Berkovits was sought after to provide religious and social commentary. In 1966, the Council of Orthodox Jewish Congregations in Baltimore, Maryland, invited him to speak on “What Is the Jewish Tradition in Today’s Movement for Civil Rights.”¹⁶ To an Orthodox leader in Minnesota, Fasman wrote of the great utility of Berkovits’ writings on behalf of his tradition-bound faith community:

Under separate cover I am sending you the best criticism that has ever been written on Reconstructionist thinking. The author is Dr. Berkovits, the head of our Philosophy department. The statement that it is the “best” is not mine alone, but is the declaration of a philosopher in the Reform movement, Rabbi Emil Fackenheim. You might want to keep this article with you, in case there are a few intellectuals in your audience who will raise some theoretical matters.¹⁷

Just as in Boston, Berkovits in his Midwestern climes embraced the chance to serve as a poignant spokesman of his faith and a public

14. “City-Wide Cultural Program,” *Sabbath Voice* 25 (March 14, 1969): 1.

15. See, for example, Congregation Or Torah Minutes, Resolution on February 1970, Congregation Or Torah, Skokie, IL. In the board minutes, Berkovits took a very strong stance against a “certain individual who has not conducted himself in a manner befitting membership in or attendance at this Congregation.” Berkovits “pointed out that halachically, if such an individual were to persist in attending services the members of the Congregation could and should ignore the individual, even to the point of not counting him for purposes of a Minyan.”

16. “Old Business,” in Meeting Minutes of the Council of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, October 10, 1966, Council of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, Box 1, MS-144, Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore, MD.

17. Oscar Z. Fasman to Lewis N. Ginsberg, October 20, 1960, Lewis Ginsberg File, Hebrew Theological College Archives. Fasman was referencing Eliezer Berkovits, “Reconstructionist Theology: A Critical Evaluation,” *Tradition* 2 (Fall 1959): 20–66.

educator. In like manner, Berkovits remained a courageous commentator on behalf of Orthodox Judaism and Religious Zionism in the final stretch of his career, upon settling in Israel in the 1970s.¹⁸

Descriptions of Eliezer Berkovits as an “anthropologist” and “social commentator” may come as a surprise. This part of Berkovits’ oeuvre is different from his better-known philosophical treatises on ecumenism, theodicy, and the limits of change in Jewish law.¹⁹ Both types demonstrated deep Torah learning. Yet, Berkovits’ more familiar work was the stuff of rigorous philosophy. Many of these writings appeared later in Berkovits’ career and, within some circles, marked him a “radical.”²⁰

It’s not just Berkovits’ later works that stand in contrast to his philosophical anthropology on prayer and modern life. Even before then, of all his work produced in the 1950s and 1960s, scholarly readers are best acquainted with Berkovits’ erudite defense of Judaism against the charges of British historian Arnold Toynbee and his critical essays of Jewish philosophers Martin Buber, Hermann Cohen, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, and Franz Rosenzweig.²¹ Embracing his role as a phalanx-like defender of Orthodox Judaism and undaunted critic of the non-Orthodox, Berkovits soon after collected these trenchant analyses into a book, for which he was unanimously awarded the 1975

18. See, for example, Eliezer Berkovits, “Like All the Nations?” *Jerusalem Post*, May 4, 1976, A29.

19. For one of the best assessments of Berkovits’ thought, see Steven T. Katz, “Eliezer Berkovits and Modern Jewish Philosophy,” *Tradition* 17 (Fall 1977): 92–138.

20. Shalom Carmy, “Eliezer Berkovits’ Challenge to Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 12 (2004): 193. For some sources on Berkovits’ so-called halakhic radicalism, see Chaim E. Twerski, “The Limiting Factors of Halacha: The Other Side of the Coin,” *Academic Journal of Hebrew Theological College* 1 (November 2001): 80–106. See also Marc B. Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1999), 190–92.; and Gil Graff, “Halakhah as *Torat Hayyim*: The Values-Conscious Visions of Eliezer Berkovits and Emanuel Rackman,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18 (2019): 330–42. Also, Rahel Berkovits, “*Torat Hayyim*: The Status of Women in the Thought of Eliezer Berkovits,” *Shofar* 31 (Summer 2013): 4–15.

21. For his critique of Toynbee, see Eliezer Berkovits, *Judaism: Fossil of Ferment?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

National Jewish Book Award's prize for Jewish thought.²² Other learned readers, as David Hazony has pointed out, gained a firm appreciation of Berkovits' notion of moral philosophy through his pathbreaking tome, *God, Man and History*, published in 1959.²³

Hazony's collection of Berkovits' "Essential Essays" captures the latter's philosophical energies, ranging from his views on Jewish law to post-Holocaust theology, Jewish morality, and Zionism. Hazony's volume remains an excellent resource; I trust that this book complements the "Essential Essays." In particular, the present volume reintroduces readers to the anthropological side of Eliezer Berkovits. Like all his work, Berkovits' Torah stands out as the marquee element of his thought. Torah was the primary material Berkovits wished to convey to his readers. But whereas the audience of his major philosophical works were fellow scholars, Berkovits wrote his philosophical anthropology for a smart but wider audience in mind. This, I believe, is borne out in the pages before you. This book's chapters are mostly drawn from the middle years of Berkovits' scholarly career: as a rabbinic leader in Leeds, Sydney, Boston, and then as a public intellectual in Skokie. Interested readers should review the bibliographical section of this volume for more detailed information.

This volume is arranged in three sections. The first engages Berkovits' thoughts on the synagogue and prayer. The first essay, "From the Temple to Synagogue and Back," blends history and rabbinic tradition to offer, ultimately, as Berkovits described it, a "psychological" critique of the postwar American Orthodox synagogue. The section's other chapters are drawn from a pamphlet Berkovits authored a few years later for Yeshiva University's "Studies in Torah Judaism" series. Berkovits, applauded by the series' editors, "fill[ed] an urgent need in our effort to establish a rationale of Torah Judaism."²⁴ Reviewers described Berkovits' psychological approach to prayer as "Heschelian," an ironic

22. Eugene B. Borowitz, "1975 National Jewish Book Awards of the JWB Jewish Book Council," *Jewish Book Annual* 33 (1975–1976): 267–68.

23. See David Hazony, "Introduction," in Eliezer Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2002), xxiv–xxv.

24. Sam Hartstein, "Publication of 2 New Studies in Our Series 'Studies in Torah Judaism'" press release, August 23, 1962, Yeshiva University Records, Public Relations People

description given Berkovits' scathing critique of Heschel that would appear two years later.²⁵ Nonetheless, the comparison rings true. Both Berkovits and Heschel stressed the role of prayer to help the worshipper become more "God-ward" or "God-centered." For Berkovits, and in keeping with his Holocaust theology, prayer ought to be used as a tool for human improvement and introspection rather than a chance to ask God to intercede.²⁶

This volume's second and third sections, on Exile and Return, are, of course, interrelated. To be sure, these chapters do not represent Berkovits' most concrete statements on Zionism or the role of Zionists residing outside of Israel. This is probably best captured in the final chapter of his *Faith After the Holocaust*.²⁷ Instead, these chapters analyze how the notions of Eretz Yisrael and *galut* have affected Jewish living – for all Jews. Along these lines, Berkovits was concerned with how the unprecedented political freedoms accorded to Jews in the United States seemingly released them from maintaining connections with their Jewish identities and with Israel. Even worse, to Berkovits, was the effect of modern media and technology, and their confluence with American consumer culture. "The traditional or historic forms of Jewish living have been caught in a process," worried Berkovits, "of continually advancing disorganization, and the vacuum thus created has been invaded by living practices based on the one-day wisdom of newspapers and magazines,

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- Collection. Box 117, Folder: Stitskin, Leon, Yeshiva University Archives, New York, NY.
25. Chaim Feuerman, "Review of *Kaddish and Prayer*," *Tradition* 7 (Winter 1964–1965): 126. For Berkovits' criticism of Heschel, see Eliezer Berkovits, "Dr. A. J. Heschel's Theology of Pathos," *Tradition* 6 (Spring–Summer 1964): 67–104. While Berkovits' critical essays (mentioned above) seem to always carry with them severe tones, his review of Heschel was particularly sharp. See Todd Berman, "Berkovits, Heschel, and Heresy of Divine Pathos," *Tradition* 54 (Fall 2022): 50–90; and Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 156–57.
26. On Berkovits' Holocaust theology, see Zev Eleff, "The Content and Context of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits' Faith," in Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2019), 175–90; and David Hazony, "The Man Who Saved God from the Holocaust," *Shofar* 31 (Summer 2013): 54–73.
27. Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust*, 147–61.

on mass-produced thinking and streamlined feeling, on the standards of taste of the motion picture industry and the values of the TV screen.”²⁸

Here and elsewhere, Berkovits believed that the antidote would come, owing to his efforts at HTC and fealty toward Yeshiva University, in the training of Modern Orthodox rabbis.²⁹ These well-attuned rabbinic leaders, hoped Berkovits, could reconnect the intergenerational divide of an older European-born generation that felt the urgency of Jewish living and Zionism, and a young, American-raised generation that lacked the experiences and resolve to activate their religious identities. Without the old guard, he feared, American Jews lacked the substantive models to move forward, particularly in their connections with the “secular” elements within the State of Israel:

In the present situation, its premises – when applied to the American scene – do not point to the road to Zion. And all talk about Zionist education and cultural links with the Jewish State, about Jewish pride and self-interest, will not induce American Jewry to seek its redemption in Israel. It will support Israel; it will take genuine pride in the achievements of the Jewish State and rightly so; it will well appreciate its self-interest in the state’s security and well-being; it will send visitors as well as money to Israel; it will even organize Hebrew classes; yet America will still be no *galut*. The paradoxical situation has arisen that in the phase of Zionism’s triumph, its reason for the rejection of the *galut* have conditioned hosts of good Zionists to reject the idea of *geula* in Zion for themselves.³⁰



28. Eliezer Berkovits, “Jewish Living in America,” *Judaism* 2 (January 1953): 70–71.

29. See Eliezer Berkovits, “A Contemporary Rabbinical School for Orthodox Jewry,” *Tradition* 12 (Fall 1971): 6–7.

30. Eliezer Berkovits, “The Galut of Judaism,” *Judaism* 4 (Summer 1955): 230. On Berkovits’ concern over the secular-religious chasms in Israel, see Berkovits, “Like All the Nations?” *Jerusalem Post*, May 4, 1976, A29.

I am grateful to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and Aryeh Grossman of Koren Publishers for inviting me to collect a volume of Eliezer Berkovits' writings. Koren's Ita Olesker supported this work through the very earliest stages and provided critical technical and editorial guidance. Together, Ita and I made sure that the text of each chapter conformed to Koren's style guide and issued slight editorial changes, while preserving the integrity of Eliezer Berkovits' writings and ideas. All modifications from the original works fall into three editorial categories: correction of obvious errors, insertion of paragraph breaks, and standardizing of transliteration and citations. This includes the use of the Koren Tanakh translation, sponsored by the Magerman family, that does much to improve the felicity of the text for modern readers. I am grateful to Yeshiva University for granting permission to reprint *Prayer* (1962), a pamphlet in its Studies in Torah Judaism series.

Thanks, as well, to Rabbi Dov Berkovits for inviting me to participate in a conference in September 2022 that commemorated his father's thirtieth *yahrzeit*. The opportunity to think afresh about Eliezer Berkovits' "anthropology" helped solidify this volume's contents and the themes of this introduction.

My understanding of Eliezer Berkovits' ideas and writings deepened while serving as professor and provost of Hebrew Theological College, a division of Touro University. In this way, and many others, Rabbi Berkovits' "home institution" remains a supporter of his legacy and teachings. Berkovits never taught at Gratz College in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, where I now teach and serve as president. I hope this volume will catalyze a new effort to learn from and about Berkovits in the Greater Philadelphia area. Finally, as always, my wife, Melissa, and our three darling children – Meital, Jack, and Adir – stand as the guiding force in my life. I pray that our children will learn much from the pages that follow.

Zev Eleff

January 2023/Tevet 5783

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Section 1

Prayer

From Temple to Synagogue and Back

One of the most far-reaching transformations in the history of Judaism was undoubtedly brought about by the destruction of the First Jewish Commonwealth and the Babylonian Exile that followed. It may be described as Judaism's way from the Temple to the synagogue. In accordance with Jewish teaching, the Temple was not to be rebuilt anywhere outside Jerusalem. Since the Temple service could not be practiced anywhere outside the Holy City, a new type of religious service had to take its place. The political conditions of the people effected the emergence of the synagogue. What was originally the makeshift arrangement of the *mikdash me'at*, the "Little Sanctuary," was turned into one of the most significant triumphs of Israel's religious genius. Thus, the great contribution of the Babylonian Exile to religious history was evolved. What were the salient features of the transformation which was accomplished by the creation of the synagogue?

The Temple service was a national institution, maintained by the State. The people paid for it, but they themselves were not actively associated with it. The daily sacrifices were offered by the priests on behalf of the people. The priests were the God-appointed representatives of the people. While the priests went about their duties in the Temple,

the people pursued their daily tasks in the fields, in the workshops, in business and trade. God was worshipped professionally by a caste reserved and trained for the task. The average citizen was not expected to be familiar with the Temple ritual. In general, the people were the *am haaretz* and ignorant of the Torah. It was “the lips of the priests that kept knowledge.”

It is of course proper to add that long before the destruction of Jerusalem there were developments afoot which pointed to new paths. There was, for instance, the institution of the *maamadot*, the daily assemblages of selected groups of men who met in prayer during the offering of the sacrifices in the Temple; nor were the priests the exclusive repositories of the knowledge of the Torah all the time. The decisive change, however, did not occur till the Babylonian Exile.

Of necessity, in Babylon prayer replaced the sacrifice. In its manifold consequences this development amounted to a major religious revolution. The sacrifice could only be offered by the priest; prayer was expected of everyone. Indeed, the delegation of one's duty to pray to a priest is unimaginable. Every Jew now became actively associated with the religious service. Looked at from the point of view of the people, in the Temple the divine service was mere ritual; in the synagogue it became a personalized religious endeavor. Religion turned inward toward the realm of individual commitment. Hand in hand with the growth in inwardness went the democratization of religious life. The priestly caste, the professionals of religion, lost their central significance. Every Jew was called upon to pray and to read the Torah in the synagogue.

No doubt, in the days of the Temple, too, the people took an intense interest in the service. Especially for the Holy Days they would come to Jerusalem from all parts of the country. But in the courtyards of the Temple they were *onlookers*; they were an audience, and the priests, the performers. In the synagogue, the audience was transformed into the praying community.

With deepening inwardness and religious democratization in the synagogue, Judaism became more and more the responsibility of the entire people. The “professionals” having been dispensed with, the knowledge of the Torah became a national obligation. The vicarious Temple service could rely on “the lips of the priests that keep knowledge”;

the personalized responsibility of the religious democracy of the synagogue laid the emphasis on general education in the entire domain of Judaism. Thus, the *Beit HaKnesset* led to the *Beit HaMidrash*; the house of meeting became inseparable from the house of study.

It was unavoidable that a new type of a religious leader should arise. As the synagogue differed from the Temple so did the rabbi from the priest. The rabbi did not belong to a caste or a class; he was not a professional. In contrast to the priest, there were no religious duties for the rabbi which were not equally binding on all Jews. If the rabbi distinguished himself through his piety, he achieved something that was expected from every one of his fellow Jews. His learning and knowledge of the Torah might have rendered him outstanding, but only because he realized an ambition which he shared with all the people. The rabbi did not prepare himself for the rabbinate; like any other Jew, he prepared himself for the task of living in accordance with the Torah. For many centuries he was not salaried but earned his living like any other Jew, through farming, as an artisan or in trade and commerce. He most certainly was not a clergyman but the most representative layman of his community. He was the teacher who guided his fellow Jews along the path which they all had to follow together.

Such were the changes that shaped the historic image of Judaism since the days of the first Exile. For many centuries, and for the longest period of its history, Judaism has been Synagogue Judaism.



In modern times, and especially in this country, a turning away from the synagogue to a religious institution that is known as the temple has become a mark of progress. As I have indicated, compared with the Temple of old, the rise of the synagogue undoubtedly meant a radical transformation in the forward movement of Judaism. Does the modern temple lead beyond the synagogue or is it closer to the Temple of old? Does it bring the inherent motives of Judaism to more significant realization than the synagogue or does it show greater affinity to the spirit that prevailed in the Temple service of the distant past? Only the answer to this question can decide whether the temple of our days represents

religious progress and is not a throwback to a more primitive form of religious practice.

If language and style are indicative of the spirit that is within a man, as indeed they are, one ought to say that the terminology, the vocabulary, that the modern temple has adopted makes it suspect of regression from the people's religion of the synagogue to the clericalism of the Temple of old. We no longer speak of the *shul* but of the sanctuary; it is no longer the *Beit HaMidrash* but the chapel (Webster says s.v. *chapel*: "...LL. *capella* orig., a short coat [cappa]; later, a reliquary, chapel [because the building where St. Martin's cloak was preserved came to be called "capella"]"). There is no room in the temple for the modest *shulhan* of the synagogue; we have the much more dignified altar instead. Everything in the temple seems to have added semantic weight. One does not pray in the temple, one worships; a temple Jew does not look for a *Minyan* to say Kaddish, he visits a chapel to recite a memorial prayer. No one ever sings in the temple but chants. The examples are manifold. The style of the modern temple seems to be reserved for the specific domain of piety. Everything seems to be consecrated and dedicated and set apart from everyday human interest and concern.

This is no mere affectation but reveals the essential quality of a certain type of religiosity. Modern Temple Judaism is indeed a thing apart from everyday human existence. As in days of yore, Temple Judaism is almost completely limited to the immediate precincts of the temple. It is an island of piety set in an ocean of secularism and materialism. The piety of the temple is unsupported by a living religious reality outside it. The holiness of the sanctuary does not go beyond the symbolic presentation of the idea in bricks and mortar. The altar is the elevating symbol of a sacrifice which is required of no one and which no one is prepared to offer. In these circumstances, style has to be pitched to a high note of solemn dignity. Temple Judaism cannot do without an inspirational vocabulary and consecrated props. Unrelated as it is to a living reality, all its religious emotions and thoughts have to be artificially induced by symbolic architecture and effect-producing interior decoration, by suggestive terminology and synthetic decorum. Everything is stimulated from without, nothing seeks expression from within. Everything is premeditated solemnity and mediated devotion.

On the other hand, the style of the synagogue is matter of fact; its accoutrements are essentially functional and not symbolical. This is due to the fact that the synagogue is an outgrowth of Jewish living. The divine service of the synagogue Jew takes place more outside the synagogue than inside it. The *Beit HaKnesset* is indeed a house of meeting, not really different in kind from other buildings; for wherever a Jew may find himself, he knows he is in the presence of God. In the *shul* too he is only continuing his life as a Jew. To pray to God together with the community is a task not essentially different from other tasks; for everything a man does is done in God's presence. A synagogue is not a sanctuary but the convenient place for the community to assemble for prayer. Whatever sanctity there is in the synagogue is in the living community and it originates chiefly in the life Jews lead outside the synagogue. Since the Torah is read in public, it is useful to have a *shulhan*, a desk on which to place it. As to the altar, it has no place in the synagogue. Sacrifice is not a symbolical concept as it was in the Temple of old and as it is in the temple of our days, but is part of the daily discipline and practice of Jewish living. As Philo already said, the altar of God is the soul of man.

Compared with the Eternal Light of the Temple, even the *ner tamid* of the synagogue is only a functional object. As the phrase indicates, the Eternal Light is charged with the symbolism of eternity, which is thought to be most adequately expressed by expensive artistic design. The *ner tamid* of the synagogue, on the other hand, is a modest little lamp that serves as a reminder of the light which was kept burning nightly in the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Since it has no function beyond recalling memories of the past, the *ner tamid* is hardly ever noticed. It is certainly no symbol of eternity. It is not through "meaningful" lighting fixtures that Synagogue Judaism seeks contact with eternity.

Even such an exclusively "religious object" as the *aron hakodesh* is essentially functional in the synagogue. In the temple we speak of the Holy Ark, which is usually dramatized by the richest forms of deepest symbolical significance. Little edification indeed may be derived from the actual "reading of the law"; but exquisite design and meaningful artistry of the Holy Ark are extremely helpful in creating a devotional atmosphere. The *aron hakodesh*, however, should not be confused with the Holy Ark. The concern of the praying community is with the living

word of the Torah. What need, and indeed what use, for Holy Ark symbolism beside the breath of the living spirit of the Torah! The *aron* is not an archaic Ark, which is useless from a practical point of view. The *aron* is a chest or a box, in which people keep all kinds of useful objects, books, clothes, jewels, and so forth. It has been set aside in the synagogue to place the Torah in it for safekeeping till the next occasion of reading and study. As the grammatical form proves, *aron hakodesh* is not the holy chest but the chest of the holy. In the synagogue, an empty *aron* is useless; in the temple, the inspirational effect of the Holy Ark symbolism would remain potent even if the “Scrolls of the Law” were exchanged for a copy of the by-laws of the temple congregation.



Undoubtedly, Synagogue Judaism does associate the idea of holiness with objects and buildings. However, as the phrase by which these objects are known itself indicates, the *tashmishi kedusha* receive a degree of holiness from the use to which they are put. As the tools of a purpose that aims at the sanctification of all life, they become consecrated through usage and not through glittering dedicatory exercises. The longer they serve the more venerable they become. The creation of an atmosphere of devotion by means of clever architectonic ideas is unnatural in the synagogue. But if such an atmosphere, a *genius loci* as it were, should exist, as well it may and often does, it could only be as the lingering on of the accumulated memories of the religious life of preceding generations. The sanctuary, the chapel, the altar, and so forth, of the modern temple are appointed to convey a message of sanctity to hesitant hearts. They are at the height of their effectiveness when they are still new; wear and tear undermines the dignity of these kinds of symbols.

The *Alte Shul* was the pride of a Jewish community, which would surround it with love as if the old building were a living being. In our days, an old temple is shunned as casting a reflection on the social status of those associated with it, as if they could not afford something newer and better.

In this connection it may be appropriate to make some observations on the subject of religious art as well as religious symbolism.

Notwithstanding the efforts that are being made to bring beauty to temple buildings and their interior appointments as well as to bestow artistic value on the religious objects used in the temple, the results are often disappointing and at best of questionable quality. And how could it be otherwise? Beauty is truth because, as Plato saw it long before Keats, it mirrors in the world of material objects a vision of the soul. It is always an ideal, a truth, alive first in his soul, that the artist attempts to impart to his material. Religious art stems from a religious vision, from a religious faith that is intense enough to long for expression. In Judaism the expression of the vision was sought preeminently in living. The aesthetic needs of the Jew were better satisfied in the dynamism of beautiful deeds than in the static harmony of beautiful forms. Nevertheless, it was unavoidable that the spirit that used the *tashmishei kedusha* should become reflected in them in aesthetic form, as well.

Wherever the vision of the soul touches the world of things, beauty is born. The art of the synagogue, which had a long and significant history in the old Jewries of Europe, made visible the reality of religious inwardness in the life of the Jew. But whence is genuine religious art to come in the modern temple? Where is the religious vision, where the overflowing religious faith straining for artistic expression, where the religious reality from which new artistic concepts may emanate? Of course, for money one may always buy the services of outstanding architects and reputable artists. But unlike the cathedral builders of the Middle Ages, these modern temple builders are not as deeply inspired by faith that the religious truth which dwells in their souls could stimulate them to creativity in the field of religious art. Occasionally, they may incorporate in their designs some abstract idea of a personal metaphysics, which may even be admired by the initiated members of the congregation as one admires a museum exhibit. At best, the architects and the artists will copy; they will imitate old synagogue motifs or new church designs. Alas, only all too often the final impression is that of expensive glitter and tinsel. When a modern temple grows old it becomes indeed a shabby thing.

Not altogether dissimilar is the value of temple symbolism. Great religions often cannot do without symbols. When the spirit of man

beholds a supreme reality which it cannot name articulately, symbols may be justified. Even though their status in Judaism is questionable, man's need for them may be readily acknowledged. When the religious person has exhausted all his resources trying to express the truth he knows, he may use symbols to hint at the transcendental being which he cannot or dare not address in a manner commensurate with its essence. The symbols of the temple, however, stand in a religious vacuum no less than its art. They do not point from the highest rung of religious awareness at that which lies beyond our reach but hint timidly at what ought to be expressed in human life and which the modern Jew does not care to bring to realization. The sanctuary, the chapel, the altar, the eternal light, the Holy Ark, the entire "consecrated style," are substitutes for religious living. As temple art is mainly tinsel, so are temple symbols essentially make-believe.

The symbols of the temple are calculated to evoke devotional reaction from the worshipper; the tools of sanctification in the synagogue, however, reflect the living purpose of the spirit that uses them. Symbolism proposes to elicit religious meditation from without; sanctification proceeds from within man to the external world of objects and places. The one is as distinct from the other as is religious ritual from religious living. It is of the very essence of the ritual that it employs places, objects, and gestures attempting to make an impact on the realm of the spirit. Religious living, on the other hand, begins in the innermost recesses of the spirit of man and strives to impart its purpose to the realm of outside reality. Temple Judaism, unsupported as it is by religious living outside the temple, is ritualistic. In essence it is nearer to the cults, charms, and incantations of primitive religions than to the revolutionary transformation that the synagogue accomplished when it made Judaism the possession of all Israel.



The ritualistic nature of Temple Judaism finds its clear manifestation in the most significant feature of temple architecture. The basic architectural difference between temple and synagogue is that whereas the synagogue has a center, the temple has none. In the center of the synagogue

stands the *shulhan* or *bima*, the place for the *shaliah tzibbur* as well as for the reading of the Torah in public. It is natural for the praying community to organize itself around a central point. It is in the midst of the people that the word of God comes to life and it is from its midst that the prayer of all ascends. The *shaliah tzibbur* is not “leading us in prayer”; he is the unifying focus through which the numerous individual prayers are woven into the prayer of the community. The synagogue is essentially a *round house*. The Temple in Jerusalem was a long structure. The courtyard faced the sanctuary, the sanctuary looked toward the Holy of Holies. The more important points of interest were in front of the less important ones. This was a natural arrangement, as it is always where the few perform for the many, as in the theater, the lecture hall, the political meeting place. The stage, the dais, the platform are logically in front of the spectators. In all these cases the “long house” is the structural sign of the inner purpose.

So it was in the Temple of old, where the priests performed their duties on behalf of the people; and so it seems to be in the temple of our own days. The place of worship has reverted from the “round house” to the “long house.” The important points of interest have been moved to the elevated platform in front of the congregants. It is there that, like some mystery cult, the essential parts of the service are enacted by the initiated functionaries of the temple. The congregants are in the main audience; as in the Temples of old, they have once again become onlookers. It is true that the professionals of the cult make desperate efforts to encourage the onlookers to become participants. However, participation remains forever vague, colorless, and superficial. It dies away completely as soon as the goading and coaxing directives from the “platform” come to an end. The religious democracy of the praying community of the synagogue, with its immediacy and great moments of spontaneity, is lost. The ugly interruptions of the temple service by the continuous announcing of the pages in the prayer book, decorously performed by the religious experts on the platform, has become part of an ideology. It is indicative of the secrets of a ritual with which only the initiated few may be familiar.

There is no way from the temple to the *Beit HaMidrash*. As in times of Jewish antiquity, once again the religious officials have become

the repositories of all knowledge about Judaism. The religious experts of the modern temple are known as rabbis, which however is a misnomer. Judged by their functions and specific status, they are much closer to the priests of bygone days than to the rabbis of the synagogue. They are the professional keepers of the mysteries; they are like intermediaries, long since abolished in the synagogue, between the people and their God. It was unavoidable that the modern temple should have revived the archaic custom of clothing its functionaries in priestly vestment. In the synagogue the rabbi wears the *tallit* like anyone else in the congregation; in the temple the religious functionary is marked out by the clerical garb. Unlike the rabbi, he is not one of the community, but one set apart from the rest of the people.

One hears a great deal these days about Judaism being a way of life. The truth of course is that for the overwhelming majority of modern Jews, Judaism is not a way at all but ceremony reserved for specific occasions. It is not the case that the modern Jew – as he likes to flatter himself – is anti-ritualistic. On the contrary, he is ritual-struck. With a sense of self-righteous superiority, he cuts himself loose from the traditions of his people and from the faith of his fathers; but with what childish self-forgetfulness does he not delve into the mysteries of the secret ritual of his lodge! The same Jew who unperturbed by his abysmal ignorance of all things Jewish, easily dismisses religious practices as mere ceremony, will with a deep sense of gratification deck himself out with masonic insignia and perform the prescribed ceremonial with a solemnity and earnestness worthy of a Corybant. Our temples, too, are the veritable breeding grounds of new-fangled ceremonies and rituals. Never before have Jews indulged so intensely in candle lighting as they do today. A candle-lighting ceremony never lets you down. Numberless are the variations of the initiation-of-new-members ceremony as well as of the installation-of-new-officers ritual. No self-respecting temple will be without the dedication-of-the-first-year-students-of-the-Hebrew-School celebration.

The consecration service ritual is usually prepared, rehearsed, and enacted by the modern Jew with hardly less devotion than that with which his ancestors were wont to observe the Sabbath or, perhaps, even Yom Kippur. Except that with the modern Jew it all starts and ends in

the temple. It is all solemn and symbolic but unrelated to real life and therefore superficial – a mere phantom.



Is, however, our analysis not belied by the religious revival which seems to be sweeping American Jewry? Unfortunately, all the characteristic marks of faith and piety are lacking in this revival. In all our magnificent temples one would look in vain for the “broken spirit” and the “contrite heart,” without which one may hardly find one’s way to God. There is no convincing sign of the modern Jew’s willingness to submit to God, of his preparedness to accept the *ol Malkhut Shamayim*, the yoke of the Kingdom of God, which is to be established on this earth. The religious concepts of *yirat Shamayim* and *ahavat Hashem*, of the fear and the love of God, are foreign to him. One discerns very little respect indeed for the authority of the spirit and the relevance of its standards for the life of man. The modern Jew’s revived interest in Judaism is sociological and psychological; it has little to do with religion proper.

Strangely enough, the reawakened interest in Judaism is often a sign of assimilation. Within the climate of American culture, religion has become a sign of respectability. For some mythical reason an atheist is not considered a trustworthy citizen. And so Jews, caught by the fever of conformity, remembered that they too had a religion. Since, however, to have a religion is essentially a matter of social convention, it is sufficient to have it symbolically, without going to all the trouble of making it a way of life in earnest. One respects conventions in order to show that one belongs to the class of “the right people,” but to overdo it would be in bad taste. It is an observation worth pondering that whereas in the ghettos of former days one could occasionally meet a convinced *apikoros*, in American Jewry one hardly ever comes across a genuine atheist. We are all believers, because religion is no longer for us a matter of vital conviction but a mere mark of social status. We are as religious as we are inclined to conform to the standards of our middle-class mass culture. We shall be justified in looking for religious revival when American Jewry will produce its own articulate atheists. It will be a sign that religion has ceased being a matter of indifference and has

gained sufficient interest to be worthwhile rejecting. Our present affirmations are of little religious significance. We do not confess God but give a nod to the social convention that it is proper to confess a God, some God, any God.

Psychologically our religious revival is to be a cure-all for our anxieties. Religion has become a substitute for the couch of the psychoanalyst. It is expected to give us peace of mind, to bring us happiness, to guarantee us good health, and to assure us of never-ending prosperity. This religion is not God-oriented but man-centered; man is not required to serve God, but God is meant to serve man. It is the typical religion of a comfortable middle class. We have everything now: jobs, professions, homes, cars, insurance policies; and we also *have* a God.

It is useful to have a God; one can never tell when one may need Him. Our religion is a prop for our prosperity and comforts. No one is concerned with the word of God; no one listens and no one obeys. The function of our awakened piety is to confirm us in our habits and our customary way of thought. We believe in God, but we also limit His authority. We prescribe for Him how to act toward us. Truth for Him is what *we* hold to be true; right what *we* consider right. He can ask of us no more than what we ask of ourselves. Most important of all, He is to be considerate; in no way may He inconvenience us or interfere with our comforts and pleasures. The essential quality of this religiosity is that man does not practice what he believes but believes what he practices. We believe in God after having shaped Him in our image. It is a religion cut to measure to suit us. It is not a way of life but a means to affirm to ourselves our own way of living. And since our way of living is basically secular, it is the misuse of the sign of the spirit in order to lend security and dignity to the materialism of our concept of life. It is religion without any significant spiritual content. It represents a rejection of the authority of the spirit and an attempt to transform it into a magic force to be harnessed to the drives of our self-seeking.

The quality of our religious revival illustrates the motivating impulse behind the regression from synagogue to temple. Because the main function of religion has become a confirmation for us of our way of living, and since no interference with our life practices may be tolerated, Judaism has been relegated back to the precincts of the temple

From Temple to Synagogue and Back

and limited to specific observances of specific occasions. Because the authority of the spirit is rejected, one may admit only symbols of the spiritual. Since the modern Jew is concerned only with the effects of the symbols, all that is left is ritual and ceremony. Before there may be any new religious growth in our midst, we shall have to find our way back to the position which was attained by us when we moved on from the Temple to the synagogue. We have a long way to go.