The Founding of NFTY and the Perennial Campaign for Youth Engagement

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In November of 2014, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) announced an ambitious five-year agenda detailing its highest priorities for the upcoming years. One of the key elements of this plan (known officially as the Union's "2020 Vision") focuses on ways to "engage, educate and inspire a new generation" of Reform Jewish leaders. This initiative, known as the Union's "Campaign for Youth Engagement," aspires to bring about "a significant increase in the number of Jewish youth engaging in Jewish life." It is, as described by the URJ's website, an "investment in the future."[1]

The advent of the URJ's "Campaign for Youth Engagement" happens to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of NFTY, the North American Federation of Temple Youth (originally the National Federation of Temple Youth), the first national association of synagogue youth in American history. The factors that spurred a range of Reform Jewish luminaries—rabbis, educators, and lay leaders—to establish NFTY back in 1939 are essentially the same as those that have launched the contemporary campaign. NFTY, like so many American Jewish innovations, is a programmatic response to a persistent concern that the American synagogue might become irrelevant to the rising generation of Jewish youth. Fear that Jewish youth were deserting the synagogue and abandoning their heritage is a familiar theme in the American Jewish experience.

The establishment of NFTY in 1939 provides an illuminating case study of how Reform Jewish leaders sought to address the perennial challenge of transforming Jewish youth into synagogue-loyal adults. This essay seeks to provide a historical reconstruction of the factors that ultimately led to the founding of NFTY after many years of discussion and debate.[2]

Recruiting Jewish Youth

Growing disaffection among Jewish youth has been a topic of concern

since the very onset of a modern, organized, and self-conscious movement to Reform Judaism. Michael A. Meyer, in his *Response to Modernity*, has observed that the early pioneers of German Reform "worried about increasing Jewish indifference among the younger generation."[3] In America as well, Jewish reformers repeatedly insisted that if the synagogue did not actively address the needs and interests of Reform Jewish life, it would be increasingly difficult to stem the tide of ignorance and indifference that seemed to be overtaking so many in the younger generation.

In November of 1824, several dozen Jewish citizens in Charleston, South Carolina, were deeply concerned about the future of Jewish life in the New World. These pioneers of American Reform fretted over the attenuation of their Jewish youth who, they sensed, found the traditional Spanish-Portuguese liturgy and ritual in the community's synagogue, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), alienating and irrelevant. "As members of the great family of Israel," they groused, we "cannot consent to place before [our] children examples which are only calculated to darken the mind, and withhold from the rising generation the more rational means of worshiping the true God." They also believed that their young people's lack of Jewish literacy made them easy prey for Christian proselytizers. For these reasons and others, the Charleston reformers believed that modernization and liberalization of the worship service would allow their children to relate to the synagogue and would concomitantly reignite the interest of "the younger branches of the congregation" in Jewish life and learning.[4]

Not too many years after the establishment of the Reformed Society of Israelites in Charleston, concern over the future of Jewish youth prompted Rebecca Gratz (1781–1869) and a cadre of dynamic Jewish women to establish a "Hebrew Sunday School" (HSS) in Philadelphia. Just like the Charleston reformers, Gratz and her energetic colleagues were increasingly concerned about the level of Jewish ignorance in the younger generation. If Jewish youth had little knowledge of their heritage, they would not be inclined to support the synagogue as adults. Moreover, these young people would have no way to withstand the onslaught of Christian missionaries who sought to coax them out of the synagogue and into their churches. Gratz and her colleagues believed the HSS would engage their youth and furnish them with the knowledge

they needed "to defend their Jewish beliefs … refute evangelists and … be the religious equals of their Christian neighbors."[5]

As early as 1854, Dr. Max Lilienthal (1815–1882) called for the creation of "good books for our Jewish youth." Jewish boys and girls in America were not studying "Talmud and midrash," Lilienthal declared, and they would not be able to understand this literature that was, he averred, "full of incomprehensible fables and legends." Noting that Christian groups were investing huge sums of money in children's literature, Lilienthal urged American Jewry to pursue a similar course and develop tools that would foster within Jewish youth "a love of religion and all our moral duties."[6]

In 1874, Lilienthal launched a children's magazine titled *Hebrew Sabbath School Visitor*. This weekly periodical was part of the popular efflorescence of juvenile magazines that began appearing in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The proliferation of juvenile magazines similar to Lilienthal's marked yet another new attempt to stem the disaffection of Jewish youth that worried so many rabbis during this particular epoch.[7]

In America during the last half of the nineteenth century, many thought the confirmation ritual was one successful programmatic technique for securing the future loyalty of synagogue youth. One needs only to read the glowing assessments of American Jewry's confirmation ceremonies during this period to discern the positive effect they had on the confirmands as well as their proud parents. In a jubilant affirmation of confirmation written in 1875, Isaac Mayer Wise boasted that "the [R]eform movement in this country, making the Shabuoth confirmation day, reinstated it again, and made of it a holiday in the strictest sense of the term. We cannot tell how the day is celebrated everywhere, but we know how it is celebrated in Cincinnati." According to Wise's account, in the three Cincinnati synagogues wherein confirmation ceremonies were held, "multitudes" participated and "all standing-room was occupied." The entire Jewish community, Wise insisted, was "in motion, the promenades [were] alive with smiling countenances, black eyes, blazing gems, silk, broadcloth, etc." It was, Wise gushed, "as though the golden age had suddenly come back upon us." The most important benefit of the confirmation phenomenon was, of course, the effect it had on the young people. The confirmands "rejoice … over the achievement won

and the knowledge gained … [and] the child … is himself or herself re-confirmed and re-attached to Israel's sacred cause."[8]

Similarly, the enhancement of Hanukkah celebrations at this same time—particularly the advent of Hanukkah youth pageants, young people's commemorations, and the intentional commercialization of the "Festival of Lights" as an annual opportunity to attract young people to the synagogue—became a significant trend. An 1898 article in the *American Israelite* provided readers with examples of how Hanukkah celebrations were successfully drawing throngs of young people, together with their parents, into the synagogue in numerous towns, including Las Vegas, New Mexico; Mount Vernon, Indiana; Pensacola, Florida; Newport News, Virginia; Tacoma, Washington; and Columbus, Ohio. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Hanukkah became the vehicle for engaging Jewish youth. As one historian recently observed, the revival of Hanukkah toward the end of the nineteenth century "countered the common perception that young Jewish people felt alienated from religious life." In contrast to the indifference that many young people exhibited toward synagogue services in general, "hundreds of Jewish young adults donned costumes for the Hanukkah revival, a uniquely exciting event."[9]

Yet, despite these innovations and efforts, the American Jewish community faced ongoing challenges in its effort to keep young people involved in the life of the synagogue. Toward the end of the century, American Jews took worried note as children of newly arrived Eastern European immigrants appeared to be abandoning the synagogue in alarming numbers. The first American-born Orthodox rabbi, Henry W. Schneeberger (1848–1916), asserted in 1892 that the task of keeping Jewish youth connected to the American synagogue was "the burning problem of our day."[10] Many Reform rabbis shared Schneeberger's concern over the rising generation of Jewish adults. As one reformer conceded, "our houses of worship are deserted." In 1885, more than two dozen rabbis expressed their views to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC)[11] as to how the movement could "assure to the rising generation of Jews such Jewish teaching as will more surely tend to create in them an active interest in Jewish affairs and an earnest participation in the intellectual and moral life of the Jewish community." At the famous Pittsburgh Rabbinical Conference held later that same

year, Kaufmann Kohler pointedly told his colleagues that much more needed to be accomplished. To ensure an American Jewish future, Kohler noted, the rabbis would need to "foster Jewish life, awaken Jewish sentiment, and train the Jewish minds and hearts."[12]

Rabbi Louis Witt (1878–1950) colorfully illustrated the severity of this problem in 1923, when he described how American freedom frequently lured Eastern European Jewish youth away from their religious traditions, leaving them estranged from synagogue life:

> For it is so easy for liberty to turn into license! So easy to discard a burden that is after all so heavy and hoary with tradition, so rigid and austere as a discipline! In the Ghetto the Jew was also free, but only within the limits of the Torah: now he is free without any limit—except the policeman! In many a home on the [Lower] East Side may we witness this menace of liberty, this tragic cleft between the old and the new, the parent poring over a "Chumesh"—(Pentateuch), rebuking his son for playing truant from "Schul" in order to attend a prize fight, hearing himself chided by his own flesh and blood as a "greenhorn," yet having no other recourse than the wailing cry, "Amerikane Kinder"! Is it any wonder that the pious old grandmother in Zangwill's play, "The Melting Pot," laments in the bitterness of her soul "A Klog zu Kolombusen!"—a curse on Columbus![13]

With the end of World War I and the return of many Jewish Doughboys to their home communities, fears over the rampant indifference of young people toward participating in the synagogue and Jewish life in general intensified. The attenuation of Jewish youth unsettled leaders from every segment of the Jewish community and, within the Reform movement, the challenge of encouraging young people to engage with the American synagogue and assume a leadership role in American Jewish life became an even more critical concern.

Non-Jewish Models of Youth Engagement

Not surprisingly, American Jews looked to their Protestant neighbors to see if they could find successful examples of youth engagement that could be adapted to suit the needs of the American synagogue. After all, churches, too, wanted to keep their young people involved. Although

examples of church activities designed to meet the needs of young people, like singing classes and youth choirs, begin to appear after the onset of the American Sunday school movement, the great successes of the YMCA and the YWCA played a decisive role in fostering an interest in Christian youth work during the last half of the nineteenth century. Theodore L. Cuyler (1822–1909), an eminent Presbyterian minister, was among the first to establish a prayer group aimed specifically at young people in his church in the late 1870s. Cuyler's concept for his youth prayer groups instituted three important characteristics that would influence the growth of youth work in American churches and eventually in synagogues, too. First, his prayer groups welcomed both young men and women. Second, he believed the groups needed to meet on a weekly basis. Finally, he insisted that the young people themselves, not adults, should prepare their own weekly devotionals.[14]

Cuyler's idea piqued the interest of another minister, Francis Edward Clark (1851–1927), who founded the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor in 1881. Clark, a Congregationalist minister, had been active in his church as a child, and he believed that children deserved the opportunity to participate in religious life. He insisted that if young people were not given an opportunity to assume their rightful place within the church, it was unreasonable to expect them to become active churchgoers in adulthood. The Society of Christian Endeavor became wildly popular. Within two years of its founding, there were fifty-six societies and, amazingly, by the dawn of the twentieth century, 67,000 youth-led Christian Endeavor societies had been organized worldwide, boasting a total membership of more than four million. These societies captured the headlines of many American newspapers, and the worldwide conferences the organization sponsored captured the nation's attention. The Jewish Endeavor Societies that began to appear in the 1890s (mentioned below) were clearly a direct outgrowth of the Christian Endeavor Society juggernaut.[15]

The impetus to organize Jewish youth also grew out of the new educational and psychological ideas being popularized at this very time by New York intellects such as William Chandler Bagley (1874–1946), William Heard Kilpatrick (1871–1965), George S. Counts (1889–1974), and John Dewey (1859–1952). These progressive ideas stressed the importance of fostering the emotional, physical, and spiritual

development of young people. Youth organizations such 4-H Clubs, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, and many others all trace their beginnings to the early decades of the twentieth century.

It is interesting to note that the founders of Reform Judaism's youth movement were fully aware of the fact that church youth clubs, YMCAs, scouting groups, and modern educational theories had influenced their thinking about a Jewish youth movement. In announcing their decision to establish a national association of temple youth in 1938, the leaders of the UAHC conceded: "Whether we acknowledge it or not, the general non-Jewish field of youth work has been the pattern of our development."[16]

Early Interest in Youth Work

The idea of establishing a youth auxiliary in the synagogue that was separate and distinct from the classroom experience may be traced back to the late 1880s. In fact, only three years after its founding, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted a resolution proposed by Rabbi Joseph Silverman (1860–1930) in 1892 that called upon the newly established rabbinical conference to begin planning for the establishment of "congregational societies for young people."[17] The CCAR subsequently explored the idea of producing a young people's edition of its new liturgy, the *Union Prayer Book*, which, the rabbis believed, would become "a serviceable means of training [the movement's] youth for active participation in Congregational worship."[18]

In July of 1901, Boston's Adath Israel (known today as Temple Israel) hosted a symposium that focused on contemporary topics of interest to Reform Jewry. Two of the papers concerned the community's urgent need to engage its young people in the synagogue. Adath Israel's rabbi, Charles Fleischer (1871–1942), spoke about the need to support Jewish students on the college campus and Mr. Herbert H. Kahn, a lawyer from Indianapolis, told his audience that the American synagogue must resolve to extend itself toward Jewish young people if it hoped to keep them in its fold as adults. Indifference to the problem, he said, would be disastrous:

> The Temple cannot expect something for nothing, and if she deserts the Jewish youth at the time when he needs her most, if she leaves him to go his own way, she cannot expect him, on the day of his graduation, a mile out of the religious course,

> suddenly to turn at right angles and make a straight cut for the Temple![19]

A cadre of young Reform rabbis, many of whom were trained at Hebrew Union College (HUC), began to take a keen interest in youth work in the early decades of the twentieth century. J. Leonard Levy (1865–1917), for example, the spiritual leader of Congregation Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh, made a special effort to attract young people to his synagogue. In an essay titled "Give the Child a Chance," Levy described his efforts to provide the young people in his congregation with opportunities to lead worship services. "Find some way in which to press the child into the service of the Temple; and, if this can be done," Levy asserted, "I feel sure that the regeneration of Jewish life would not be far distant."[20]

At this very same time, the CCAR's Committee on Social and Religious Union began to focus attention on what was being called "the leak on top"—the synagogue's inability to sustain the involvement of young people. In their 1914 report, committee members suggested two major innovations to their colleagues in the CCAR. First, they urged rabbis to change the impression that confirmation was the end of religious education. Second, committee members reiterated the importance of the idea that some members of the CCAR had been advocating for more than two decades: synagogue "clubs" for young people. These "clubs," the Committee on Social and Religious Union concluded, should be "self-governing wherever possible." The rising generation would be "stimulated by the pleasure of participation in the club work," and this experience would provide young people with a new reason to remain involved in synagogue life.[21]

It is important to note that these happenings were concomitantly influenced by the pioneering Jewish youth work initiatives that were just beginning to take place in New York. "Young People's Synagogues," composed of youth from various congregations, were established on the Lower East Side, in Harlem, and even in Philadelphia. The worship services in these synagogues were Americanized to suit the needs of a younger generation of Jews. Prayers and hymns were in English, and young people were encouraged to lead the prayers themselves. The local press also took note of a similar initiative known as the Jewish Endeavor

Society. This project offered lectures on a variety of topics relevant to the interests of young people. Yet another such highly successful innovation was the "Young Israel" movement, which offered education classes and meaningful traditional worship services in English in an effort to keep young Orthodox Jews raised on the Lower East Side involved in Jewish life.[22]

Finally, after World War I, "clubs" or "societies" for young people—particularly the "boys" returning home from military service—increasingly began to crop up in synagogues throughout the country. Although the concept of synagogue youth auxiliaries outside of the Sunday school may be traced back to the late 1880s, it was only after World War I that the number of these "clubs" seems to have reached a critical mass. According to the *American Jewish Year Book*, by 1927 there existed more than four hundred of these congregational "youth societies." These auxiliaries differed radically in form and activity, and there was a growing sense that Jewish young people would be energized if these disparate temple youth groups were organized into a unified national association. Ultimately, the efflorescence of these "youth auxiliaries" in Reform Jewish synagogues would provide the movement with the building blocks it needed to establish a national federation of temple youth in the late 1930s.[23]

The Founding of NFTY

In the early 1920s the first calls for the establishment of a national conference of temple youth began to be heard. It was at this time that young, American-born rabbis began to specialize in youth work. As we will see, some of these "youth rabbis" had themselves been participants in a Young Judea chapter, or a Jewish Endeavor Society, or a Zeta Beta Tau (ZBT) fraternity, or even in the Boy Scouts, and these experiences inspired them to create a similar youth apparatus for their synagogue youth.[24]

Rabbi Samuel Schulman (1864–1955) was one of the first Reform rabbis to urge the UAHC to focus its institutional energies on youngsters. From early in his career, Schulman took interest in young people. He was a prominent advocate for improving the quality of Reform Jewish education, especially for elementary school students. In 1911, when the UAHC established a Department of Religious School Publications, Schulman was appointed to the Board of Editors. The

scope of this department's work widened considerably over the years and, by 1917, the CCAR had begun a formal partnership with the Department of Religious School Publications that would address not only the dearth of Jewish textbooks but the broad Jewish educational challenges that many Reform synagogues were confronting. This UAHC/CCAR partnership ultimately led to the establishment of a Joint Commission on Jewish Education, which focused its energies on a broad range of educational initiatives, including youth activities. Schulman was a member of this body from its beginning, and he urged that greater attention be given to the educational needs of synagogue youth. On account of his role on the Joint Commission, Schulman would play a pivotal role in NFTY's founding.[25]

Samuel D. Schulman
(1864–1955)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

In 1919, Schulman, then serving as the rabbi of New York's Temple Beth El, wrote to another young colleague, Lee Levinger (1890–1966), urging him to consider becoming the director of the 92nd Street YMHA, a post that had recently opened. Youth work is "the best work for a young minister today," Schulman told Levinger, "the revival of Judaism [in America] will come, if it come [s*ic*] at all, from our youth."[26] With hundreds of young Jewish men returning to their homes from their stint in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), Schulman believed that the time had come for the Reform movement to act if it hoped to retain the interest of this rising generation of American Jews.

Soon calls for the UAHC to act began to intensify. In 1923, the twenty-eighth Council of the UAHC met in conjunction with the fifth Assembly of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) and the first Convention of the National Association of Temple Brotherhoods (NFTB).

One of the featured sessions these delegates attended was titled "The Call of the Synagogue to the Jewish Youth of America." The first speaker at that conference was Rabbi Louis Witt (1878–1950), who, like Schulman, was a member of the Joint Commission on Jewish Education. Witt, who was serving at the time as the religious leader of Congregation Shaare Emeth in St. Louis, Missouri, grabbed the audience's attention by bluntly declaring that a more appropriate title for their session would actually be "The Unheard and the Unheeded Call of the Synagogue to the Jewish Youth of America." To expose Jewish young people to "the spiritual potencies of our history," Witt exhorted his listeners, the synagogue "must organize our youth." "What more urgent enterprise," he asked rhetorically, "can this Golden Jubilee Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations undertake…?" Felix Warburg (1871–1937), chair of the session, echoed Witt's appeal. "No Jew will become a disinterested Jew if you somehow awaken in him a sense of responsibility to do his part for the future of Judaism."[27]

Joseph L. Baron
(1894–1960)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

It was at this same time that Joseph L. Baron (1894–1960), a young rabbi who was then serving a pulpit in Davenport, Iowa, drafted a plan that would eventually become the blueprint for the overall structure and function of NFTY. Baron was thirteen years old when his family emigrated from Vilna to New York City, where he immediately involved himself in a range of youth activities that would shape his future interests. After completing high school, Baron took courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary while he was enrolled at Columbia University, where he earned his bachelor's

(1914) and master's (1916) degrees. He was actively involved in New York's Bureau of Jewish Education, which was led by the charismatic pioneer of Jewish education, Samson Benderly (1876–1944). Yet it was Baron's involvement with the Zionist youth organization Young Judea that ignited his deep passion for youth work in the synagogue. Baron was impressed by Young Judea's ability to empower its members and inspire them to assume responsibility for engaging their own peers in the organization's overall mission. He was similarly impressed by Young Judea's structure of affiliated clubs that met periodically in larger conventions, as well as by the organization's emphasis on helping young people create their own community and identity. After matriculating at HUC in Cincinnati, Baron became a Young Judea leader, organizing chapters in Cincinnati and elsewhere. So, by 1920, when Baron completed his rabbinical studies at HUC, he had already amassed a considerable reputation as a capable Jewish youth worker.[28]

Baron quickly realized that young people in small Jewish communities like the one he was serving in Davenport connected with the synagogue much faster than those in large Jewish centers like New York. He also quickly recognized that local synagogues needed to offer their young people more than just a classroom education. Baron observed how the young Jews in his community never associated with one another unless they were together in the synagogue. These young people, he wrote, were "ashamed of their Jewishness," which led them to date and marry non-Jews. Concern for the future of Jewish life convinced him that Reform Jewish youth desperately needed to experience the value of Jewish community and the benefits of a modern religious life that the synagogue could offer. Relying on his many years of experience with Young Judea and his related youth activities, Baron outlined a plan that would enable the synagogue to become an influential factor for young people at a time in life when their "instinct[s] awaken, when their group consciousness develops, [and] when their idealism and sociability and tastes mature." If the synagogue could foster these ideals, he concluded, it could become one of the "forces of modern Jewish life and leadership."[29]

Baron's plan for the establishment of a national Jewish American youth movement, originally titled "Clubs for Religious Education," was first presented to the Chicago Rabbinical Association in 1924. The plan proposed that the Reform movement organize "a system of

clubs"—both those that already existed in Reform synagogues as well as new ones that would need to be established—that would "meet in a national conference and establish a larger superstructure." This national organization, he wrote, would not only exist to provide young people with "Jewish associations" but more importantly it would also impart a sense of "religious idealism" and "provide the opportunity for Jewish service to its members" so as to be "a positive influence on [their] religious growth." It was these qualities, Baron noted, that would distinguish the synagogue "system of clubs" from all earlier attempts at youth engagement.[30]

Baron outlined a series of specific advantages that his system of synagogue clubs would bring to the rising generation:

- The "burden of responsibility for leading these clubs would be on the young people themselves and not on teachers or adult leaders."
- The clubs would be voluntary, not compulsory.
- The clubs would nurture the "social nature" that sparks the interest of young people.
- The clubs would teach Jewish "habits" and not just theories. The youth would learn Jewish living by experience.
- The clubs must "allow for the development of personality" with the intention of encouraging future leaders for the synagogue.
- The clubs must radiate "a freer, a more joyous atmosphere" than the classroom.

Baron's concept was stunningly farsighted. At a time when the "young adults" meant people fifteen to twenty-one years of age, Baron proposed that the movement concentrate its efforts on "juveniles"—i.e., high school youth. His plan even included a motto that captured the essential components of a synagogue youth movement: "Torah, Avodah, and G'miluth Hasadim"— Jewish learning, Jewish worship, and Jewish philanthropy. For Baron, this plan was "the hope for a Young Israel!" He concluded his plan with an enthusiastic exhortation:

> Jewish youth … want adventure, want romance, [they] want the heroic. The classroom, as a rule, does not provide for it. It speaks of spiritual values and abstract ideas that are quite remote, often unintelligible, and certainly not gripping. To enthuse the young with the idea of helping in the creation of

> a new people, to invest them with immediate duties toward that end, to show them where Judaism is not academic but vital and urgent and immediate, —that is a means of arousing souls and installing new fervor in dry bones…. And perhaps because of this, it will strike with force into the sensitive heart and thirsty soul of our youth.[31]

Rabbi Tobias Schanfarber (1862–1942), the president of the Chicago Rabbinical Association, forwarded Baron's proposal to Dr. David Philipson (1862–1949), the chair of the Joint Commission on Jewish Education.[32] Philipson, in turn, asked Rabbi George Zepin (1878–1963), director of the UAHC's Department of Synagogue and School Extension, to send Baron's plan to Samuel Schulman. In transmitting Baron's ideas to Schulman, Zepin admitted that Baron had recommended these ideas to the UAHC long before 1924! Schulman, too, liked Baron's plan, and he promptly invited his younger colleague to attend an upcoming meeting of the Subcommittee on Youth Education to discuss his ideas at length. In circulating Baron's plan to the members of his subcommittee, Schulman strongly endorsed Baron's basic concept, offering a few thoughts of his own.[33]

In February of 1925, the Subcommittee on Youth Education voted to bring Baron's plan to the Joint Commission for formal approval. On 10–11 March 1925, the commission accepted Baron's recommendation and authorized Shulman and the subcommittee "to proceed with carrying out the policies mentioned [in Baron's plan and to] … acquaint the country at large with its conclusions."[34]

Coincidentally, while Baron's plan was circulating through the leadership of the Joint Commission on Jewish Education, another highly influential individual was taking practical steps in an effort to launch a national conference for Reform Jewish youth. Jean Wise May (1881–1972), the daughter of Isaac Mayer Wise, with the backing of the New York chapter of NFTS, had organized a regional youth conference in January of 1924. This successful gathering led to the establishment of the "Union of Temple Young Folks' League of New York State." In December of 1924 she sent a copy of the constitution of the newly created League to Zepin. May's message to Zepin was subtle but clear: If the UAHC was not going to take the lead in attending to the needs of Reform Jewish youth, then NFTS would!

Reina Hartmann
(1880–1953)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

The initial successes of the Union of Temple Young Folks' League of New York State emboldened May. Appealing to the executive board of NFTS on 18 January 1927, May asked if the national sisterhoods would sponsor the creation of a national "Federation of Young Folks' Temple Leagues." The Reform synagogue, she said, seemed to have forgotten its youth. "We're taking it for granted that by some wizardry they would slip into our adult groups, without an idea of their purposes, or without a whit of training for such a monstrous job."[35] May insisted that the future of American Judaism depended on its winning the "minds and hearts [of our youth]," and doggedly urged the UAHC to "kindle the spark that shall set aflame [their] hearts and minds" by helping them to see that Judaism is "alive, warm, and adventuring."[36]

Despite all of these developments, the leadership of the UAHC showed little enthusiasm for spearheading the establishment of a national youth conference. Had it not been for a handful of NFTS stalwarts coupled with the financial backing of NFTS itself, Baron's ideas could have languished in an ongoing netherworld of deliberation. Taking up May's appeal in 1927, NFTS established a national committee on Young Folks Temple Leagues with corresponding local committees in each of the local sisterhoods. Reina Hartmann (1880–1953), a future NFTS national president, and Thelma Sachar (1906–1997) assumed responsibility, together with May, for NFTS's youth initiatives. With the support of NFTS's organizational prowess as well as its philanthropic backing, Reform Judaism's drive to establish a national association of temple youth persisted.[37]

In 1931, NFTS provided the UAHC with the funds it needed to engage a Director of Youth Activities who worked under the direction of the Joint Commission on Jewish Education. Throughout the 1930s, the director had a daunting assignment: He was expected to (a) help Reform rabbis in their efforts to create youth clubs in their synagogues; (b) persuade UAHC congregations that "youth work was a definite obligation of the congregation"; (c) provide these fledging clubs with programmatic direction and counsel; and (d) visit "as his time permitted" individual youth clubs.[38]

At this same time, there were other young rabbis in the CCAR who, like Baron, believed that the future of the Reform synagogue and of Reform Judaism in general depended on the creation of a youth organization. Rabbi Philip D. Bookstaber (1892–1964), for example, who understood the value of youth organizations from his days in the Boy Scouts, delivered a major address at the 1931 meeting of the CCAR wherein he warned his colleagues that Reform Judaism desperately needed to establish a national youth conference if it hoped to dissuade young people from abandoning the synagogue.[39]

By the mid-1930s, the UAHC estimated that there were nearly three hundred "youth clubs" in the Reform movement. The Director of Youth Activities and NFTS worked collaboratively to organize these groups into statewide associations that would meet once or twice a year in a regional conference. These programs were highly successful, and participants returned home with a genuine enthusiasm that their parents and rabbis could not overlook. Pressure mounted on the UAHC to assume responsibility for organizing "young people [in] Reform Synagogues into a national society."[40]

The UAHC's Board of Managers was scheduled to meet in Cincinnati on 11 May 1938. In an effort to pressure the board, Reina Hartmann asked her distinguished rabbi, Louis L. Mann of Chicago's Sinai Congregation, one of the nation's most venerable pulpits, to write a letter calling on the Union to assume responsibility for establishing a national association of Reform Jewish youth. In a letter to UAHC President Robert Goldman, Mann urged the Union to "form a NATIONAL FEDERATION OF TEMPLE YOUTHS, [*sic*] to parallel the work of the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods." Hartmann may have given Mann the name of the future

organization when she solicited her letter of support. In any event, Mann's letter may be the first time that an "official" name for the soon-to-be-established youth conference appears in writing.

In his written response to Mann, Goldman confirmed that the Union was now taking the matter seriously. Hartmann came to Cincinnati to address the Board of Managers and, according to Goldman, advocated for the idea of a national youth organization "strongly and ably." The UAHC was now ready to act decisively; a resolution was being prepared for adoption by the Union's board at its next meeting in June of 1939. In the meantime, a committee consisting of Union and NFTS leaders had been charged with the task of developing "a satisfactory and practicable plan" for the establishment of a national youth conference. In fact, "it is possible," Goldman informed Mann, "that a meeting of Youth representatives will be called in connection with the next meeting of the Council to be held here in January." As soon as this plan was ready, Goldman wrote, it would be approved by the board.

It is difficult to document why the Union's leadership remained so ambivalent about taking the lead in the campaign for a national youth conference in Reform Judaism. There are, however, a few clues that provide us with some tentative explanations. Clearly, funding this initiative was a serious challenge for the UAHC, particularly during the years of the Great Depression. In fact, had NFTS failed to provide the financial backing that these various forays into youth work required, it is quite possible that NFTY would never have come into existence.

In addition to the issue of funding, it seems that the Union was also concerned that "certain safeguards" be established before it would agree to create the national youth association. A "safeguard" appearing in the minutes has to do with institutional control. The UAHC leadership insisted that despite being funded by NFTS, the Union itself must be authorized to "retain control of the Department of Youth Work … act as the advisor of this new society, and … promote Youth Work throughout the country."

The thirty-sixth Biennial Council of the UAHC was scheduled to meet in Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday through Thursday, 15–19 January 1939. It was decided that on the preceding Shabbat, the UAHC would convene "The First National Convention of American Liberal Jewish Youth." Youth group presidents, delegates, and visitors were invited

to participate in this historic convocation. A special preconvention publication was issued by the Union concerning the significant role young people play in the future of Jewish life. These essays were written by distinguished rabbinical leaders such as Rabbis David Philipson and George Zepin, as well as by young rabbinical students, such as Phillip Finkelstein and Arthur Lelyveld.

NFTY's inaugural convention in Cincinnati drew 192 young attendees. There were 71 registrants from Cincinnati and 121 "out-of-town delegates and visitors." This historic event began with a Shabbat morning worship service held at Rockdale Temple (K.K. Bene Israel), the oldest Jewish congregation west of the Alleghenies. The delegates reconvened for lunch at the Sisterhood Dormitory on the campus of HUC and, after lunch, "the first convention session was called to order shortly after 2:00 PM in the Hebrew Union College Chapel, by Mr. Robert P. Goldman [1890–1976], President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations."[41]

Today's NFTYites would be dumbfounded by the nature of the program back in 1939. Essentially, the delegates spent two days listening to lengthy addresses delivered by rabbis. Two of the speakers were prominent national figures—Rabbis Samuel Schulman (1864–1955) and Julius Marks (1898–1977). The young delegates may have been better able to identify with the speeches delivered by two recently ordained rabbis, Eugene J. Sacks (1912–1999) and David Polish (1910–1995), who were more or less contemporaries of the attendees. In any case, instead of the interactive programs that typify NFTY programming today, the first NFTYites spent days listening to long and thoughtful disquisitions on the theme of youth and synagogue, prepared by prominent rabbis as well as by their peers.

One discussant, Robert Desberg from Cleveland, Ohio, was asked to comment on Rabbi Sacks's presentation. Interestingly, the young Clevelander told the convention that he hoped the young people would reintroduce "many colorful ceremonies inadvertently omitted from Reform Judaism." He also noted that Reform Judaism needed to become "more dynamic." There was no benefit, Desberg asserted, in asking students to recite a worship service that they knew by rote. He recommended services that "arouse contemplation and stir imagination." Desberg exhorted his peers to commit themselves to reviving Reform

Judaism through the new organization they had come to establish:

> Reform Judaism has too long neglected its youth. It is significant that this is the first Youth Convention…. In youth there is a great potential source of religion; it wants to be religious, indeed it cries out for some good reason "why should I remain a Jew?" True, the youth of today is poorly informed of his race, history, culture and philosophy. Yet the desire remains…. Let us resolve this desire by making our religion more appealing, by reviving the old customs, and let us give it new vitality by making it modern in application.[42]

Another of the youth delegates, Lenore Cohn of New York City, delivered a truly noteworthy address to the conventioneers. "It is with the highest aims of religion in mind," Cohn began, "that we have formulated a program for youth. All that we can do, and must plan to do, is inspired by religion." In her impassioned oration, Cohn appealed to her contemporaries to ensure that their new organization would assist youth in their innate hope to make the world a better place in which to live. Anticipating what would ultimately become one of NFTY's programmatic hallmarks, Cohn expressed her hope that the new national association would engage in social action. She challenged her Reform Jewish contemporaries to work for peace, for justice, for the betterment of human relations. In a moving conclusion, she spoke to the adults in the room:

> Do not be afraid, my temple-minded friends, that we will become agnostics and leave the Synagogue to die a noble death…. [W]e will not forget our past…. Our good will, peace, social justice, philanthropy programs, immature and ineffective as they may seem at times, are making a definite and distinct impression upon us, our neighbors, and the recipients of our efforts…. All I ask is that the Synagogue supply us with a leader, a basis for a program, and adequate meeting facilities. We will do the rest.[43]

The first convention's program concluded shortly before 5:00 PM on Sunday, 15 January, at which time an ad hoc executive committee appointed officers and outlined a plan to compose the organization's bylaws. By the time this post-program meeting adjourned at 7:00 PM, NFTY—the first national federation of synagogue youth auxiliaries in American history—had been officially established. An idea that had

gestated for more than two decades had been brought into existence in less than forty-eight hours.

In the concluding lines of his keynote address to the young delegates at NFTY's founding convention, Rabbi Schulman predicted that if the fledgling youth organization successfully fulfilled its mandate, not only would young people continue to attend synagogue, but, more importantly, these youth would cause the synagogue "to live anew."[44]

To assess the accuracy of Schulman's assertion, one merely needs to quantify the percentage of NFTY alumni who today occupy leadership roles—both lay and professional—in the Reform movement, or consider the transformative influence that NFTYites have had on Reform Jewish liturgy, music, education, and social action initiatives. This accounting would unquestionably validate that assertion that for seventy-five years NFTY has persistently found new ways to foster "wholehearted loyalty to the synagogue & Jewish ideals."[45]

There can be little doubt that when NFTY commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of its founding, in 2039, historians will assess the role NFTY played in Reform Judaism's overall execution of its current "Campaign for Youth Engagement." It is difficult to imagine how "a significant increase in the number of Jewish youth engaging in Jewish life" can be attained without a strong and vibrant role for NFTY. As the oldest national association of synagogue youth, NFTY remains to the present day what its founders anticipated: an extremely valuable programmatic initiative that has the potential to meet the perennial challenge of engaging yet another rising generation of American Jews. If that potential is realized between now and NFTY's centennial, it will unquestionably revalidate Jean May's deeply felt belief that, once established, NFTY would become an essential educational tool enabling Reform Jewish youth "to brighten the path of humanity through a Judaism, alive, warm, and adventuring."[46]

Documents

A significant collection of primary source materials documenting the history of NFTY is now preserved at The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA), located on the historic Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC–JIR). To view a selection of NFTY documents from the AJA's collection, please visit http://americanjewisharchives.org/exhibits/.

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Notes

[1]"2020: A Clear Vision of the Future" on the Union for Reform Judaism website, accessed on 15 January 2015 at http://2020.urj.org/key-cohorts.html#2.

[2]On the history of NFTY, see Richard J. Goldman, "The History of the Reform Jewish Youth Movement: America and Europe Since 1880," term paper, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1968, AJA; Jonathan Krasner, "Dreaming Dreams and Seeing Visions: NFTS and the Early History of the National Federation of Temple Youth," in *Sisterhood: A Centennial History of Women of Reform Judaism*, ed. Carole B. Balin, Dana Herman, Jonathan D. Sarna and Gary P. Zola (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2013), 206–246; Edwin Cole-Goldberg, "The Beginnings of Educational Camping in the Reform Movement," *Journal of Reform Judaism* (Fall 1989); Ben Zeidman, "Motivations of the National Federation of Temple Youth, 1939–1949," accessed on 17 March 2015 at http://www.nfty.org/_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&itemid=7920&destinaion=ShowItem.

[3]Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101–102.

[4]Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788–1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 114.

[5]Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 121.

[6]*Israelite* (29 September 1854): 94.

[7]Ariel C. Boxman, "The *Hebrew Sabbath School Visitor*: A Critical Analysis of the Weekly Educational Magazine for Jewish Children, 1874–1893," rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 2012, AJA.

[8]*American Israelite* (11 June 1875): 4.

[9]Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 63–64. Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 136–137.

[10]See Schneeberger's essay, "The Rabbi and the Young People," *American Hebrew* (8 April 1892): 182.

[11]The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) became the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) in 2003.

[12]Sarna, *American Judaism*, 150–151.

[13]See Rabbi Louis Witt's address titled "The Call of the Synagogue to the Jewish Youth of

America," *Proceedings of the 28th Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations*, (22–26 January 1923), 9318.

[14]Donald E. Pugh and Milford S. Sholund, "A Historical Survey of Youth Work" in *Youth Education in the Church*, ed. Roy B. Zuck and Warren S. Benson (Chicago: Moody Bible Press, 1978), 59.

[15]See David E. Adams, "The Development of Youth Ministry as a Professional Career and the Distinctives of Liberty University Youth Ministry Training In Preparing Students For Youth Work," Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993, 32, 40–42. See also, Jason Lanker, "Francis E. Clark" in *Protestant Educators* (An Online Project of Biola University's Talbot School of Theology), accessed on 1 March 2015 at http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/protestant/francis_e_clark/; and Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America Youth, Family and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). Inventory of the Christian Endeavor Society Records at Western Theological Seminary, accessed on 1 March 2015 at http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1208&context=collection_registers

[16]For quote, see *Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations*, Sixty-fifth Annual Report (1 November 1937–31 October 1938) and the Thirty-Sixth Biennial Council (13–19 January 1939), 31. See also Krasner, "Dreaming Dreams and Seeing Visions" in *Sisterhood*; David Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, & Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) and Marilyn Wessel and Thomas Wessel, *4-H An American Idea, 1900–1980* (Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council, 1982).

[17]*American Hebrew* (15 July 1892): 345.

[18]*CCAR Yearbook* 8 (1897/98): xliii–xliv. The following year this issue arose again when a paper considering this topic was delivered by Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf at the CCAR meeting in Cincinnati. See "How Can We Enlist Our Young Men in the Service of the Congregation?" *CCAR Yearbook* 9 (1899): 147–160.

[19]See Charles Fleischer, "The Temple and the College," *American Israelite* (1 August 1901): 4–5.

[20]*Jewish Criterion* 33, no. 21 (29 December 1911): 5.

[21]*CCAR Yearbook* (1914): 75, 78.

[22]Rabbi Louis Witt of St. Louis makes explicit how much he was influenced by these early experiments in youth engagement. See Witt's address to the UAHC, Op. Cit., 9317–9322. See Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 125–126, 345. On Young Israel, see also Yaakov Kornreich, Joel Saibel, Deborah Hart Strober & Gerald Strober, *Young Israel at 100: American Response to the Challenges of Orthodox Living, 1912–2012* (New York: National Council of Young Israel, 2012).

[23]David Philipson to Samuel Schulman, 20 March 1924, MS-90, box 17, folder 2, AJA.

[24]Joseph L. Baron, Lee Levinger, and Philip Bookstaber had themselves been involved in youth clubs/activities of one sort or another. See infra.

[25]Report of the Director of Synagogue and School Extension, *Proceedings of the UAHC* (December 1911), 6860–6861. Annual Report of the Board of Editors of Religious School Literature, *Proceedings of the UAHC* (1 November 1916–31 October 1917), 8070–8073,

8320, and the Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the UAHC (July 1921), 8916, and the Annual Report of the Commission on Jewish Education, *Proceedings of the UAHC* (1 November 1922–31 October 1923), 9488–9489, 9553.

[26]Samuel Schulman to Lee J. Levinger, 4 December 1919, MS-90, box 21, folder 7, AJA.

[27]*American Israelite* (18 January 1923): 5. *Proceedings of the 28th Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations* (22–26 January 1923), 9317–9322.

[28]Bezalel Gordon, "Baron, Joseph Louis," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd edition, vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 172. Thomas August, "Joseph L. Baron and the American Zionist Movement," unpublished article. My thanks to Dr. August for granting permission to cite from his article.

[29]See Joseph L. Baron, "Clubs for Religious Education," MS-90, box 17, folder 2, AJA.

[30]Ibid. Reform rabbis organized themselves into the Chicago Rabbinical Association. Tobias Schanfarber (1862–1942), rabbi of Chicago's Kehilath Anshe Maariv (KAM) Congregation, was the association's president. See *The Reform Advocate* 63 (4 March 1922): 107.

[31]Joseph L. Baron, "Clubs for Religious Education," MS-90, box 17, folder 2, AJA.

[32]See George Zepin to Tobias Schanfarber, 3 December 1924, MS-90, box 17, folder 2, AJA. One member of the Chicago Rabbinical Association, S. Felix Mendelsohn (1889–1953), was a member of Schulman's Subcommittee on Youth Education. Upon receiving a copy of the Baron plan from Schulman, Mendelsohn assured Schulman he had already heard the details of the plan the preceding year when Baron shared his thoughts with the Chicago rabbis. Mendelsohn assured Schulman that he was "heartily in favor of the whole idea." See S. Felix Mendelsohn to Samuel Schulman, 4 January 1925, MS-90, box 17, folder 3, AJA.

[33]It is interesting to note that when NFTY is established in 1939, membership does include those who have finished high school. Baron persists in recommending that the organization be aimed at high school students only. See Samuel Schulman to Members of the Subcommittee on Youth Education, 18 December 1924, and Joseph L. Baron to Samuel Schulman, 24 December 1924, MS-90, box 17, folder 2, AJA.

[34]See Report of the Joint Commission on Jewish Education (10–11 March 1925), 13, MS-90, box 17, folder 3, AJA.

[35]Jean Wise May, Report of Committee of Young Folks' Temple Leagues (31 October 1928), 68, MS-73, box A-1, vol. 2, AJA. The League's constitution outlined several key objectives: (a) "promote the knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture"; (b) "promote the welfare of the Jewish people"; (c) "stimulate [intergroup] cooperation"; and (d) "cooperate with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations." See also Krasner, "Dreaming Dreams and Seeing Visions," in *Sisterhood*, 209.

[36]Jean Wise May, "Youth Demands a Living Faith," *Topics & Trends* 2, no. 3 (March–April 1937): 3, MS-73, box K-3, folder 2, AJA.

[37]On Reina Hartmann (a.k.a., Mrs. Hugo Hartmann), see R. Pamela Jay Gottfried, "Reina Hartmann" in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, accessed on 1 March 2015 at http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hartmann-reina. On Thelma Sachar, see her obituary in the *New York Times* (7 February 1997), accessed on 17 March 2015 at http://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/07/classified/paid-notice-deaths-sachar-thelma-h-horwitz.html. Her husband, Abram L. Sachar (1899–1993), is best known as the

founding president of Brandeis University but, in the early 1930s, he was building a national reputation as a dynamic youth worker who directed the B'nai B'rith Hillel on the campus of the University of Illinois.

[38]See *Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations*, Sixty-fifth Annual Report, (1 November 1937–31 October 1938) and the Thirty-Sixth Biennial Council (13–19 January 1939), 31.

[39]"Conference of Youth Groups Urged to Halt Drift from Synagogue," *American Israelite* (22 October 1931): 1.

[40]Robert P. Goldman, Memorandum and Report on the Advisability of Organizing a National Federation of Jewish Youth, Proceedings of the Executive Board (17 June 1939), 33, MS-266, box 1, AJA.

[41]Official Proceedings of the First Youth Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 14–15 January 1939, 10, MS-266, box 1, folder 1, AJA.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Op. Cit., 14–18. The quotation is on p. 18.

[44]Official Proceedings of the First Youth Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 14–15 January 1939, 8, MS-266, box 1, folder 1, AJA.

[45] *The Jewish Youth* Circular Letter, no. 3 (February 1925): 1, MS-90, box 17, folder 3, AJA.

[46]Jean Wise May, "Youth Demands a Living Faith," *Topics & Trends* 2, no. 3 (March–April 1937): 3, MS-73, box K-3, folder 2, AJA.