

*The Fanatical Dr.
Kaufmann Kohler: A
Reform Rabbi Writes about
the “Purging” of Three
Hebrew Union College
Professors for Being Zionists*

A TRANSLATION FROM THE 1907
YIDDISH NEWSPAPER *DER SHTERN*

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The following translation is an editorial from a short-lived Yiddish, Zionist newspaper, *Der Shtern* (*The Star*), published between 1906 and 1907 in Philadelphia. *Der Shtern* was a mix of news and editorials covering events of importance for the Zionist movement. The author of the editorial, Rabbi Max Raisin, was unusual as a Zionist writer. A recently ordained Reform rabbi, Raisin had attended Hebrew Union College (HUC) with his brother, Jacob, where the pair formed a unique duo in that they were Zionists, Hebraists, and learned in Jewish texts at a time when most HUC students were none of those things.¹

The subject of the editorial was HUC President Kaufmann Kohler's forcing out of three professors in 1907 for being Zionists. This episode is well known in the historiography of Reform Zionism.² And

1 Michael A. Meyer, "Two Anomalous Reform Rabbis: The Brothers Jacob and Max Raisin," *The American Jewish Archives Journal* 68 (2016): 1–33.

2 See for example: Herbert Parzen, "The Purge of the Dissidents: Hebrew Union College and Zionism, 1903–1907," *Jewish Social Studies* 37 (Summer-Autumn, 1975): 291–322; Naomi Cohen, "The Reaction of Reform Judaism to Zionism," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (1951): 361–394; Michael A. Meyer, "A Centennial History of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion," in *Hebrew Union College–Jewish*

while Raisin's editorial does not provide new facts, it does provide a fascinating window into the Zionist movement and the College at this moment in history. Raisin forcefully argues for the compatibility of Reform Judaism and Zionism, citing a number of leading Reform rabbis who were Zionists as proof that the two were not irreconcilable. The bulk of the editorial, though, is devoted to Raisin's evisceration of Kohler's presidency. Raisin repeatedly accuses Kohler of being a fanatic who is trapped in old ways of thinking and will destroy HUC through his small-mindedness. He praises Kohler's predecessor Isaac Mayer Wise, despite Wise himself being anti-Zionist. According to Raisin, Wise's commitment to *lehrfreiheit*, academic freedom, was a model of leadership in modern times, while Kohler "lives in a previous era, and he does not have the slightest inkling of what moving forward means."

While the editorial argues that the professors were forced out solely for being Zionists, the historical record suggests there were other factors involved in the professors' resignations. Ego, salary, and career advancement all seemed to have played a part. The professors—Henry Malter, Max Margolis, and Max Schloessinger—were apparently not unified in their actions, nor were the circumstances of their resignations entirely similar. Malter's resignation letter does not even mention Zionism; he was upset with his salary, and he seemingly expected the board to reject his resignation and offer a pay increase.³ Margolis, who had served as an assistant professor at HUC before leaving to become a professor of Semitic languages and eventually head of the Semitics Department at the University of California, was also upset about money. Even before his resignation, Margolis had applied to other positions, had disagreed repeatedly with Kohler over his strict control of the faculty, and—as some evidence suggests—had sought the presidency of HUC for himself.⁴ Rabbi David Philipson, a member of the HUC board at the time, explicitly refuted the idea that Zionism was the cause of the professors' being pushed out:

Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years, ed. Samuel Karff (Cincinnati, 1976), 61–67.

3 Meyer, "Centennial History," 65; Cohen, 375.

4 Meyer, "Centennial History," 66.

Because of Dr. Kohler's well-known and constant opposition to the Zionist movement, and because of the avowed sympathy with these professors with that movement, it was made to appear by the professor's party that they were forced out owing to their Zionism. But this was not the case. The issue was really loyalty to the President of the institution, particularly on the part of one of the professors [Margolis]. There was a purposeful undermining of the presidential authority. Either president or professor had to go.⁵

Despite the historical evidence suggesting other factors were involved, the response to the events at the time was exclusively on the professors' Zionism. *The Reform Advocate*, for example, editorialized that although academic freedom was important, "Harmony is more imperative than academic freedom"; and because Zionism was not in harmony with the principles of Reform Judaism, it was correct that Kohler forced out the professors because of their Zionist beliefs.⁶

The three professors had all expressed Zionist sympathies at a time when the board of the College, with Kohler's support, officially took an anti-Zionist stance, affirming that "America is our Zion."⁷ Anti-Zionism was a significant part of Kohler's general commitment to creating a more ideologically pure seminary than existed under Wise. He also banned the wearing of traditional religious garb in the seminary chapel, and he changed the curriculum, eliminating the study of modern Hebrew and prioritizing subjects he believed informed the rational spirit of Reform Judaism.⁸

The clash between Kohler and the professors reached its zenith over a sermon that Margolis gave in the HUC chapel. Margolis never explicitly promoted Zionism, but he made his sympathies clear. In a sermon about Moses, he preached about the prophetic promise of Israel's return to The Land: "In the diaspora, the Jewish soul is capable only of submersion.

5 David Philipson, "History of the Hebrew Union College, 1875–1925" in *Hebrew Union College Jubilee Volume* (Cincinnati, 1925), 44.

6 "A Convenient Fig-Leaf," *The Reform Advocate* (6 April 1907).

7 Cohen, 375.

8 Meyer, "Centennial History," 56–58.

It may assimilate to the ideals of the environment, but it is too weak to assimilate them to itself. True and wholesome assimilation can only take place where the Jewish soul is free, and the Jewish soul can only be free in its own soil.... There will be a return. [Israel] shall be restored to their patrimony.”⁹ A public scene occurred after the sermon. Kohler claimed that Margolis was teaching ideas subversive to Reform Jewish principles and directly challenging his authority. Margolis claimed that Kohler was infringing on his academic freedom. The dispute was brought to the board and eventually led to Margolis’s resignation.¹⁰

Raisin watched all of this play out from a distance. He had graduated from the College before Kohler took over. He had unsuccessful stints at congregations in California, Philadelphia, and Louisiana before settling for eight years at a congregation in Meridian, Mississippi. While he initially struggled with his congregational work, he achieved some degree of success as a Hebrew writer. His first book, published in 1905, was a biography in Hebrew of Mordecai Manuel Noah, a proto-Zionist leader of American Jewry who attempted to set up a safe haven for Jews near Buffalo, New York, in 1825.¹¹ Raisin’s book was published in Warsaw and had appeared in the influential Hebrew journal *Ha-Shiloah*. Raisin’s choice for a subject was no accident. The story of Noah’s unsuccessful “kibbutz” was not well known and by bringing attention to it, Raisin was consciously creating a history of Zionist ideologues in an American context.¹² Raisin’s commitment to Zionism and Hebraism sets the context for his attack on Kohler, who he believed to be an enemy to Jewish national and cultural aspirations.

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9 Max Margolis, “The Message of Moses,” *The Maccabean* 12 (February, 1907): 45.

10 Cohen, 379–380.

11 On Mordecai Manuel Noah, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981).

12 Meyer, “Two Anomalous Reform Rabbis,” 11.

Der Shtern

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MAX RAISIN

Zionism and The Cincinnati Rabbinical Seminary

There is an old Roman saying: "Whomever the Gods choose to destroy, they first drive insane." This folk saying might be apt for Dr. Kaufmann Kohler and his supporters who now oversee the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the seminary that trains Reform Rabbis in America. Dr. Kaufmann Kohler has been so belligerent against the Zionist movement that he has handled recent events at the College in a crazy manner. Only someone insane would remove three of the best and most productive professors at the College because they are Zionists. Of course, we can only pity a person who is so muddled in his thinking. It is however a great pity that because of his fanaticism, the Seminary itself is at the point of being destroyed. Even with all its faults, the institution has been a boon to American Judaism since its inception 23 years ago. The seminary has created the best English language sermonizers and community leaders. It has also given us several of the most important and effective workers for Zionism in America. This institution will, however, certainly be destroyed if Dr. Kohler remains its leader.

In what way has the President of HUC most recently exhibited his bizarre behavior? His intemperate response to three Zionist professors at the College was extraordinary. He publicly took issue with them not as an individual, rather, acting explicitly as the President of Hebrew Union College and self-declared head of Reform Judaism in America. Kohler insists that Reform Judaism cannot be Zionist, and those who work devotedly for the Reform movement cannot in principle have any relationship with the Zionist movement. He claims that the platform of Reform Judaism is anti-Zionist. The founders of the movement permanently removed the phrase, "May our eyes behold your return to Zion with mercy," from its siddur. Our Cincinnati Seminary asks angrily, "How can a contemporary civilized Jew wearing a frock with a top hat, who can elegantly waltz and do the two-step in a real American way

suddenly think of becoming an Asiatic [i.e. a Zionist] and move to a corner of the world among wild Arabs? How can an American Jew simultaneously be an American patriot and a passionate Zionist?" This of course is silly. We who understand the essential tenets of Reform Judaism know that a Reform Jew can in fact be a good Zionist and need not convert to Orthodoxy. We have seen some of the best Reform Rabbis become the most devoted Zionists; for example, the late Dr. Gottheil, the Rabbi of Temple Emanuel, and Rev. Dr. Jastrow, the never-forgotten Rabbi of Philadelphia, were both renowned Zionist leaders. We also find well-known Reform Jews among contemporary Zionist leaders such as Prof. Gottheil, Dr. Max Heller, Dr. Stephen Wise, Dr. Magnes, as well as the three professors of Hebrew Union College whom Dr. Kohler in his Jesuitical tactics¹¹ forced to resign. We also know that it is not at all necessary for a professor of the Cincinnati Seminary to swear by the holy ark that he is not a Zionist.

Up until four years ago when Dr. Kohler was selected as President, the practice of the College had been to be neither for nor against Zionism. Zionists and anti-Zionists lived under one roof in peace and tranquility. Those were truly "messianic times" at Hebrew Union College. People respected each other, professors as well as students, it was a time when the words of Isaiah were fulfilled, "They shall neither hurt nor destroy." Dr. Wise, the founder and long-time president of the College, although a fiery anti-Zionist, nonetheless understood that intellectual freedom was the most important condition for the development of an academic institution. As long as Professors and students devoted themselves to their academic duties, he never interfered with their beliefs. Dr. Wise was so widely honored, that even his enemies respected him. He was, above all, a man of truth and justice. He did not believe in the Jesuit rule: "The ends justify the means." He was convinced that Judaism—both Orthodox and Reform—can only be successful through the power of truth in the everyday life of Jews. Did not our sages say this hundreds of years ago, "Truth is the seal of G-d."

1 The word "Jesuitical" normally refers to someone being overly legalistic. But here Raisin uses the word to mean something closer to authoritarian. Given the Jesuits' historical role in the persecution of Jews, Raisin is probably using the term to derogatorily hint at Kohler having the role of Inquisitor.

Unhappily for the College, Dr. Wise's successor is quite a different sort of person. Dr. Kohler is very much the opposite of Dr. Wise in tact and manners. Wise was liberal; Kohler a fanatic. Wise understood what the times demanded, what progress meant, while Kohler lives in a past era, and does not have the slightest inkling of what moving forward means. Wise was completely Americanized. His life and work were essentially about Americanizing Jews and Judaism. Kohler today, at age 65 or older, is the same yeshiva boy he was when he came to this country from Posen 40 years ago not knowing a word of English.

Kohler has not Americanized and will apparently die as a "*Herzogtimer*,"²² although he has been in this country for decades. His ideas are old-fashioned and impractical. His logic "smells of the garlic" from his earlier yeshiva days. He is a student of the first Reform Rabbis in Germany whose theology and liberalism were based on the "mission" principle. The mission of the Jews, the older Reform Rabbis explained, was to spread God's ideals among all the nation. This was the reason Jews were spread over the whole world. "God makes righteousness for Israel to spread to all the nations," one of the Talmudic sages declared. Jews are not a nation, rather a religious society, a community of religious people. In Germany they were German, in France, they were French, etc. The fact that Jews were oppressed, beaten and persecuted at every step needed to be endured because [through this suffering] humanity in fact "progresses." The Jews should be content with the blows they receive because this is their mission. They were to be the goat for Azazel [a scape goat] for the elevation and nobility of humanity.

From the early 19th century these German Reform Rabbis construed these beliefs as law from Sinai. We cannot fault them for their stubborn fanaticism. The times were different. Jews in Germany were newly emancipated from their dark and isolated ghettos. Their eyes were still blinded by the so-called light of freedom. They were still hoping that

2 הערצאגטוימער (Herzogtimer) comes from the German word for "duke" (herzog) and refers to the rulers of the German states before German unification. The implication is seemingly that Kohler, like the dukes, has no vision for greater purposes.

they would ultimately be recognized as people and that the rights they had been granted on paper would be carried out in their daily life. We can understand why Jews were so enthusiastic to join battles for the freedom of Germany and Hungary in the revolutions of 1848. This is the same reason that young Jews in Russia are sacrificing themselves for freedom now. The mistaken beliefs are the same. We, however, have the right to demand that a man like Dr. Kohler have the insight to see these mistakes of the past because he has seen the Jewish struggle in Bismark's Germany, the Dreyfuss affair in France, and the terrible murders and pogroms in Russia and Romania. We have a right to demand that a college President exercise at least a little logic and fair-mindedness when he makes decisions about a movement as important as Zionism. We can expect that a man of his learning and his standing as the head of a rabbinical seminary recognize, even when he is against the movement, that Zionism is a high ideal that strives to improve the bitter condition of our unfortunate brethren. Zionists continue to plan and act, while for their opponents, attacks and curses suffice. They do nothing at all to alleviate the horrible conditions of their fellow Jews.

But Kohler is as rigid as mummies that ancient Egyptian magicians embalmed and laid on pyramid shelves. He doesn't see the truth, nor does he feel the necessity to seek the truth. As I have noted, he still lives in the past. We can therefore understand the current controversy in Cincinnati; and why such learned people as Dr. Margolis, Dr. Malter, and Dr. Schloessinger were forced to resign. If Kohler were not such a rigid fanatic, these terrible mistakes would not have come to pass. If he truly understood what his office demanded, he would never have raised the question of whether Zionism and Reform Judaism are compatible. What can we expect from a man who as his first act as College President forbade students from learning Ahad Ha-Am's "At the Crossroads," and declared all of the "New Hebrew" literature a waste of time? One cannot truly expect anything different from such a man. We can only pity him as well as the institution under his supervision. As the Romans said: "Whomever the gods seek to destroy, they first drive insane."