

*for files - United States -  
1910-1912-1914*

# Pioneers of the Conservative Rabbinate:

## Reports from the Field by Graduates of "Schechter's Seminary"<sup>1</sup>

*Jack Wertheimer*

A decade after his arrival at the reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Solomon Schechter charged his students to meet the challenge of the day: "to organize new congregations and to raise the old ones from the sloth of indifference and the vice of strife into which they have fallen."<sup>2</sup> From our present vantage point some eighty years later, it requires considerable imagination to reconstruct the daunting task faced by early graduates of "Schechter's Seminary" as they ventured into congregational life. How did they define their goals when there were virtually no other Conservative congregations and no United Synagogue to offer models and legitimation? How did early graduates of JTS fare? Who were their allies and antagonists? What, in short, was the experience of those who took up Schechter's challenge to remake American synagogue life?

A series of letters written in the decade beginning in 1910 by recent graduates to their former professors at JTS brings to life the tribulations of pioneering Conservative rabbis. Writing to the "fountainhead" institution from the margins of Jewish society, these first Conservative rabbis express frustration with philistine congregants and uncouth board members, such as the synagogue president who "wipes his nose with a tablecloth and who, despite

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Mr. Tim Hanssen for his helpful assistance in the preparation of this documentary essay.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Abraham J. Karp, "The Conservative Rabbi—'Dissatisfied But Not Unhappy,'" *American Jewish Archives*, November 1983, p. 211.

his holy horror of reform, keeps his shop open on the Sabbath.” They lament the destructiveness of H.U.C.-trained “goyim” and obstructionist Orthodox *lamdanim* and *maggidim*. And they confide unhappiness over their thwarted ambitions and painful isolation, living as they did in the cultural backwaters of America. Most frequently, they ventilate to their distant correspondents about the difficulties of introducing innovative liturgical and educational practices that would, in their estimation, make the synagogue more attractive to American-born Jews. There is much evidence in these letters of a significant distance between Seminary graduates and their laity, a gap that has characterized relations between folk and elite in the Conservative Movement from its inception to the present.

Since these letters were not part of an ongoing correspondence but were intended to serve a particular end, the tone of each letter is often determined by the occasion of its writing and the motive of its author: some letters were written to inform of a recent success and thus express self-congratulation; most were written by rabbis seeking help in finding a better pulpit, and therefore they present an overly gloomy portrait of synagogue life that would justify such a change. In some instances, ambitious men chafe at the limited opportunities afforded by their congregations; several writers can barely conceal their envy of former classmates who have found more desirable pulpits in or near large cities, such as Philadelphia (Max Klein), Newark (Charles Isaiah Hoffman), or New York (Jacob Kohn). Others despair that their present placement will ever amount to anything: C. David Matt, for example, worries because his “congregation is poor and has not that hearty ambition in that direction which enables me to hope for much advancement,” a profoundly erroneous judgment of Adath Yeshurun Synagogue of Minneapolis, which has been a dynamic institution for much of the century.

In this early period, let us note, rabbinic placement was usually arranged by faculty members, and particularly was in the hands of the Seminary president. There was as yet no Rabbinical Assembly or any other apparatus outside of the Seminary to arrange for pulpit placement. Thus ordained rabbis found themselves in the awkward position of still requiring help from their former teachers: in their letters, not surprisingly, they simultaneously offer proud renditions of their accomplishments while regressing to their former status as students still beholden to their professors for help in landing a better job. As these letters attest, the well-known ambivalence of Conservative rabbis toward their alma mater surfaced quite early in the century.

An additional ambivalence appears in their self-characterizations. Although they shared Solomon Schechter’s profound antipathy toward Reform Judaism and its rabbinic exponents, their relationship to Orthodoxy was confused. Aside from using the terms Orthodox and Conservative interchangeably, some viewed themselves as essentially traditional rabbis who differed from their immigrant counterparts solely in their level of Americanization and fluency in the English language. Others, such as Herman Rubenovitz, began to lobby as early as 1910 for the creation of a distinctive “Conservative principle”

and program as “the starting point of counter-reformatism.” Largely because of the efforts of these pioneering rabbis, the graduates of “Schechter’s Seminary,” the institutional and programmatic contours of Conservative Judaism were far more sharply defined by the end of the decade.

### Document 1: Finding a Pulpit

Source: Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-23-10

Beaumont, Tex. August 30, 1910

Dear Prof. Friedlander [sic]:

I beg to inform you that Congr. Emanuel of this town elected me for a term of two years with a salary of \$1500 per annum and all my moving expenses paid. The *goyim* [Heb.] of the H.U.C. wrought untold harm in this community and the members hailed me with joy when I told them that I live up to the principles of conservative Judaism. There is a large orthodox element here, about 50 families, but they are less observant than the reform, inasmuch as they have no synagogue, no teacher, and hold services only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur [Heb.]. They have not even a kosher [Heb.] butcher shop and the half dozen families who observe the dietary laws must import meat from Houston, Tex. The town is a charming place and it is built for the future. My members, though provincial, at least understand English and in this respect they are more advanced than my former congregants in Toledo. Unfortunately they employ the Union *Tehina* [Heb.—i.e., the Reform Union Prayerbook], still they conceded to me to have the traditional *Kol Nidre* and *musaf* [Heb.] on Yom Kippur [Heb.]. There is plenty of room for improvement and they seem to be willing to undergo a little counter reformatism. The weather is here at present very hot, but there is no winter so to speak of and that will counterbalance the discomfort of summer. I thank you very much for your effort in trying to secure a position for me. Let us hope, that God will grant me rest for a number of years and I will be able to exert an influence for good. With kindest regards and wishes of *ketiva v’hatimah tovah* [Heb.], I am

Yours appreciatively,  
Samuel Rosinger

[Ed. Note: Rosinger was ordained at JTS in 1908.]

Response:

September 8, 1910

Dear Rabbi Rosinger,

I beg to congratulate you on your election as a Rabbi in Beaumont & to wish you success wherever you turn. Much as I regret the necessity which has

compelled you to accept a position with such an advanced ritual, I still hope that by constant teaching and your own example you may succeed in bringing back your congregation which has been led astray by its former leaders into the fold of conservative Judaism.

Reciprocating your Rosh Hashanah [Heb.] wishes, I am, Yours sincerely  
I.F. [Israel Friedlaender]

### Document 2: An Early Failure

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-6-18 (Washington, D.C.)

Rabbi Louis J. Egelson  
1306 Belmont St.  
Washington, D.C.

November 21, 1910

Dr. Joseph Jacobs,  
Registrar, Jewish Theological Seminary,  
531 W. 123rd Street, New York City

Dear Sir.—

It is not my present intention nor has it for a moment entered my mind in the past to shirk the obligations I took upon myself as a student. I do desire to make some definite arrangement looking to the discharge of my financial debt to the Seminary, but I am afraid that I can not do so just at present, and for this reason, which I would not like to have generally known. It is very likely that I will soon make a change in position. My congregation is now facing a crisis that every orthodox congregation has faced, is facing or will face. There is a movement toward conservatism on foot which I am responsible for, and which threatens to bring about a rupture in the congregation itself. A conscientious man cannot bear to have people call themselves orthodox, when their orthodoxy consists merely of consigning the women to the gallery during service, of reciting prayers in Hebrew which they do not understand, and of maintaining disorder during the service. In my congregation of almost two hundred members there are not ten who refrain from work on the Sabbath. Many of the men on the Board of Directors do not maintain the proper adherence to the dietary laws, and yet they persist in calling themselves orthodox and will lend no assistance to any movement that will bring the younger people in closer touch with the synagogue. I denounced the congregation on Kol Nidre night rather severely and pleaded for the inclusion of some English in the service on the High Holidays so that the younger people could recite *some* prayers. The older people, many of whom have long since given up Sabbath observance, raised their voice in holy horror and gave next to unholy sentiments and declared that I wanted to reform them.

Of course if some of my suggestions are not adopted by the majority of the congregation, my position becomes an untenable one.

As soon as it will be possible for me to make a definite payment monthly or otherwise, I shall apprise you of it by check.

With kind regards to you and to the members of the faculty, I am,

Yours very sincerely,  
Louis I. Egelson

[*Ed. Note:* Born in Rochester, New York, in 1885, Egelson was ordained at JTS in 1908. At his first pulpit, Adas Israel in Washington, D.C., Egelson introduced a number of changes in synagogue ritual such as English readings in the Friday evening service. After delivering a High Holy Day sermon in 1910 entitled “Some Weeds of Orthodox Judaism,” which characterized particular Jewish folk practices as “superstitious baggage of an outmoded past,” Egelson came under pressure to resign for his Reform ideas. With the exception of a brief stint serving a congregation in Greensboro, North Carolina, Egelson spent the rest of his career working for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. See Stanley Rabinowitz, *The Assembly: A Century in the Life of the Adas Israel Hebrew Congregation in Washington, D.C.* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1993), pp. 305–313.]

### Document 3: The Establishment of an “Old Boys Network”

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A–2–31

Rabbi Nathan Blechman  
Congr. Children of Israel  
Athens, Ga.  
April 12, 1910

My dear Prof. Schecter [sic],

Some months ago, I was invited to deliver the address at the annual mass meeting of a charitable society of Atlanta. The meeting took place in the largest Orthodox Synagogue, and I took advantage of the occasion to make some private propaganda for the Seminary. After some months of correspondence, I find that my missionary work has been so far successful, and that they have determined and taken the necessary steps, to obtain one of our graduates, as you will see from the enclosed letter.

The conditions in Atlanta are about the same as those of Rochester when I went there four years ago. The community has over 5000 souls, and this congregation is the largest and most prosperous next to Dr. Marx’s [Reform] Temple. It is a modern, strictly Orthodox, Russian congregation. They have a beautiful building seating about 1500. They also have a Rav of the old school. They want a young man who will be capable of appealing to the young generation. Pulpit ability will count for a great deal. They want a Rabbi who will be able to draw the young men and young women back to the synagogue by successful and attractive pulpit discourses. In addition they demand a man of organizing ability, one who can organize and conduct a Jewish school on modern principles.

The field is a pioneer field and the Rabbi will probably have to overcome the opposition of the older nonprogressive element. It therefore requires a man of ability, enthusiasm, and faith in himself and orthodox Judaism. It also requires a man of tact to get along smoothly with an older colleague representing a different outlook on Judaism. But for the man who believes in the work and can make good the first year, there is a fine future assured. The congregation is one of large prestige and has a position of leadership in Atlanta. The people are about ripe for a modern Rabbi, and would give great honor to one who fulfilled their expectations. I feel that it would not be difficult to find the proper man in this year's graduating class. . . .

If you will write me, giving the name of the gentleman who would suit best, I will communicate it to the congregation. . . . I remain,

Faithfully yours  
Nathan Blechman

[*Ed. Note:* Blechman was ordained by JTS in 1906.]

#### Document 4: Defining a "Conservative Principle"

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-23-21

231 Madison Street  
Louisville, Ken.  
June 1, 1910

Dear Dr. Schechter:

I have received your very kind letter, and will act in accordance with your advice. Instead of summarily declining to accept the position for another term I have accepted it provisionally. As to the Philadelphia position, my attitude toward it will in a large measure be determined by your opinion. I am gradually freeing myself from the Asher-incubus.<sup>3</sup> By this I do not mean to say that I am today less certain of my doctrinal position or that I am less loyal to traditional Judaism, but I am coming to realize as a result of two years' experience that more may sometimes be accomplished with a so called conservative congregation than with one styling itself orthodox. Of course there are certain elements of the ritual upon which I would insist,—e.g. that the Bar-Mitzvah of boys precede any confirmation ceremony that may be in vogue; that congregational singing be introduced based on the hymnal compiled by Mrs. Schechter; that the prayer-book to be published under the supervision of Seminary authorities, whenever it appears take the place of the Jastrow prayer book; and finally, that the study of Hebrew be made obliga-

<sup>3</sup> Rubenovitz alludes here to the influence of Rabbi Joseph Mayo Asher, a homiletics professor at JTS who died in 1908. In his memoirs, Rubenovitz described the British-born, Kovno-educated Asher as "a modern in every other respect and endowed with great keenness of intellect," whose "ultra-Orthodoxy" prevented his approving a sermon that Rubenovitz delivered at the Seminary which referred to Deutero-Isaiah. See Herman and Mignon Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, MA: Nathaniel Dame and Co., 1967), pp. 21-22.

tory upon every child in the religious school at least twice during the week. Such a program would secure for us a considerable measure of control over the coming generation, and might well become the starting point for a process of counter-reformatism. I should, however, decline to take up work in any congregation in which the prevailing sentiment is pronouncedly hostile toward the Conservative principle. I believe that Rabbi [Charles Isaiah] Hoffman's work in Newark, though beset with many difficulties, has been decidedly worthwhile, and that his congregation will yet be saved for conservative Judaism. I also believe that if Jacob Kohn were to have occupied the pulpit at the Sixty-fifth St. and Madison Avenue Synagogue of New York his influence would gradually have asserted itself and effectively stemmed the reform tendency, but in the hands of a man who is weak and yielding this position will, I fear, ultimately be lost to us. It is likewise a great pity that in Philadelphia, which offers such a splendid field for conservative Judaism the Seminary should have been so inadequately represented during the past few years.

You will undoubtedly be pleased to learn that we have now formally organized a Louisville Branch of the Seminary, and that it is in the hands of good people. I think that a program of educational work carried on by the Seminary branches under the auspices of the Seminary, a species of Seminary-extension, would tend to make of them rallying-points for the conservatively inclined of all congregations, and would then spread Seminary influence. Unfortunately people of one congregation are so timid about associating themselves with the activities of another, however much they may approve of these activities in their heart, that a more neutral meeting ground becomes desirable, and such a meeting ground our Seminary branches might possibly become. I would be greatly obliged if you would kindly send me a copy of the constitution of a Seminary Branch upon which one might model our own. If there be no such copy available at the Seminary kindly inform me where I can secure one, since I think it desirable to have some uniformity among the Branches. . . .

Has anything more been done in the matter of the Conservative Union?<sup>4</sup> If so I should very much like to be informed of it.

With kindest regards to the members of your family, and with best wishes for a most successful and most inspiring Commencement, I remain

Very faithfully yours  
Herman H. Rubenovitz

[*Ed. Note:* Herman Rubenovitz was ordained at JTS in 1908. After a two-year stint in Louisville, he assumed the pulpit of Boston's Mishkan Tefila, where he remained until his retirement in 1947. With his wife, Mignon Levin Rubenovitz, he published a book of correspondence and memoirs, entitled *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, MA: Nathaniel Dame and Co., 1967), which sheds light on the early growth of the Conservative Movement.]

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to a "Union" of Conservative synagogues. Rubenovitz played a role behind the scenes in the creation of the United Synagogue, which was launched by Schechter in 1913.

## Document 5: "Saving a Little Piece for Saturday"

Source: Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-1-1

Moses J. S. Abels  
Rabbi  
Temple Beth Emeth  
Wilmington, Del.  
September 5, 1911

Prof. S. Schechter,  
New York, N.Y.

Honored Teacher:

. . . In compliance with your orders, I went to Richmond. I arrived there early on Thursday in order to have ample time to thoroughly survey the situation, for I had a lurking suspicion that the place was not for me. Hence I wanted to be careful. Having already made one leap in the dark by going to Wilmington, I desired to avoid another. Repeated changes do me no good—a rolling stone gathers no moss.

Despite the fact that a committee met me at the station and I was taken to the finest hotel in town—probably because of my strong letter which preceded me—I saw at once that the place would not suit me. It seemed to me that by changing from Wilmington to Richmond I would simply be jumping from the frying pan into the fire. The President asked me to "make a speech" on Friday and "leave a little piece" for Saturday morning and "another big piece" for Sunday morning, and by way of bargain throw in a "Yiddish speech" Sunday afternoon. However, disregarding this vulgar bargaining, I obeyed your orders and despite adverse circumstances made an effort to do my best. That I impressed them favorably you can judge from Mr. Hirshberg's letter. But while Richmond is an excellent position—for it will pay \$1800.00—for a beginner who is willing to do pioneer work, as far as I am concerned I have already spent three years with congregations which are still in the formative stage, and unless I can change for an established congregation with a decorous service, I would rather stay where I am. It is true that Richmond pays a considerably larger salary than Wilmington, but salary while of great importance is not of prime consideration with me. What I want is a *future*, and I can only have a future if I identify myself with a congregation composed of intelligent, more or less Americanized, Jews—something along the line of [Max] Klein's, or [Charles Isaiah] Hoffman's or [Jacob] Kohn's congregation. I cannot and will not go to a congregation composed of the riff-raff of a Southern town. Sir Moses Montefiore's congregation of Richmond, Va., consists mainly of the cheapest sort of Jews—pawnbrokers, barbers, shoemakers and even some ex-jail birds (several of the leading members have served terms in the penitentiary for selling "dope" to the negroes). The only gentleman is Mr. Hirshberg, who corresponded with you, and he sends his children to the [Reform] Temple. So do all of the so-called better element. Even the President's daughter sings in the Temple choir (Dr. Calish).

In my brief career in the ministry, I have had ample occasion to observe conditions in the smaller communities, and I am more than ever convinced that had it not been for the radical Rabbis the Jewish congregations would never have drifted to radical reform. Even today many a member of the old generation goes to Temple under protest, because he has to remove his hat, etc. It is therefore, I believe, the duty and function of those who are opposed to radicalism and who are inclined to battle against its pernicious influence to go to places where they can be of some account by acting as a bulwark against further reforms and not to bury themselves alive in congregations composed of the cheapest and most vulgar ignoramuses. After all, it should be borne in mind that outside of New York or Philadelphia, with but rare exceptions, the main distinction between orthodox and reformed is a social one and nothing else.

No one who has imbibed the spirit of the Seminary will for a moment dispute the fact that our problem is to preserve Judaism in America, but I fail to see how one can do more towards preserving Judaism by being the Rabbi of a congregation whose President is a little vulgar pawnbroker, who wipes his nose with a tablecloth, and who, despite his holy horror of reform, keeps his shop open on the Sabbath and even goes marketing while on the way back from the synagogue with the Rabbi (as was the case last Saturday), than by being connected with a congregation whose President is a gentleman of influence and respectability (in Richmond the President of the Board of Education), and who despite his reform has never kept his immense business open on the Sabbath.

My congregation here in Wilmington is virtually no congregation at all, because its membership is so small, and yet any Wilmington Jew will admit that more has been accomplished for Judaism and the Jews since my arrival here than during the 30 preceding years of the existence of the Jewish community. But had I instead of going to the Temple been identified with the Russian congregation here I would not have been able to stay here two weeks, and I haven't had a bed of roses even where I am.

If all this talk sounds too presumptuous [sic], I hope you will forgive me, but I feel somehow, owing mainly to lack of opportunities, that my life is a failure.

As I have not as yet received an official call from Richmond, I shall at present wait for developments, as Mr. Hirshberg advises.

Thanking you for all the trouble you have taken on my account, and with heartiest wishes for a Happy New Year, I am

Your pupil,  
Moses J.S. Abels . . .

[*Ed. Note:* After his ordination at JTS in 1908, Abels wandered through a series of congregations until he came to New York, where he was rabbi of Temple Beth El in Cedarhurst (1923–1928), then Temple Emanuel in Brooklyn (1928–1936), and then became a staff member at the American Jewish Committee (1936–1943). He was active in several rabbinic organizations, including the Rabbinical Assembly.]

**Document 6: The View from the Top**

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-5-9

The United Synagogue of America  
531 West 123rd Street  
New York  
November 23, 1917

Dear Dr. Adler:

Pursuant to our last conversation I beg to analyze the conditions that are responsible for many of the Seminary graduates changing their positions.

There are few communities that desire to maintain the principles of Traditional Judaism, and at the same time, realize the value of decorum and the English sermon in the service, and of modern methods in inculcating the principles of our faith in the hearts of the coming generation. Generally speaking, the congregations that call a Seminary graduate may be divided into two classes. On the one hand there are congregations, the leading members of which, have reform tendencies but to "Satisfy the Orthodox" are willing to accept what they believe to be a compromise. They expect a rabbi to satisfy both parties. As each side refuses to think clearly on the problem the result is usually that the rabbi fails to satisfy either party. Naturally, each side strives for leadership in the management of the congregations, and their political differences very often make the position of the rabbi impossible.

On the other hand, there are the larger number of congregations that feel naively that there is something wrong with the synagogue. There are small attendances at the services and the finances are running low. The expedient of engaging a high priced and loud voiced cantor has been exhausted. While there may be a few members who understand the needs of the situation, the majority still regards the congregation as a business institution and gauges its success by the balance in the treasury. The calling of the English speaking rabbi is a business venture. They are, therefore, disappointed when they find that he has failed to replenish the treasury. His attempts at introducing decorum are branded by the opposition—there is always an opposition—as reforms. Before the results of his educational endeavors become manifest his position is made intolerable.

In either case, what is necessary is education. The members of the congregations must be taught to understand the problem Judaism is facing and the way in which progress may be made towards a solution. Education, and I may add, inspiration, will help the congregations realize what they need and then the Seminary will appear to them in a new light. They will see that it stands for something definite and positive, for what they themselves stand. There [sic] relations with the Seminary graduates will then be based on truth and mutual understanding.

This work can be done only by one agency, the United Synagogue. Interchange of thought at the conventions, literature and other forms of propa-

ganda, the activities of the various committees—all will help bring light to the Jews of America. It is a slow process, but I believe it is the only one that really strikes at the key of the situation.

Perhaps I ought to add that the Seminary might help in this wise. The source of strength of the rabbi is largely his educational activities. If he understands how to cope with the problems of the education of the child, the adolescent and the young man and women he may be able, by a proper exercise of tact, to make his value to the community manifest before the waves of ignorance and prejudice engulf him. It is a deplorable fact but the average Seminary graduate does not know how to deal with practical communal problems. I venture to doubt the practicability of the students taking courses in the School for Communal Work. It might be well to consider the advisability of establishing a regular course treating adequately the problems of communal endeavor, religious education and pastoral theology.

With kind regards, I am,

Faithfully yours,  
Samuel M. Cohen

[*Ed. Note:* After his ordination at JTS in 1912, Cohen served as a rabbi in Kansas City. In 1915 his congregation splintered over the decision to join the United Synagogue, an affiliation he endorsed. Two years later Cohen was appointed the first supervising director of the United Synagogue of America and eventually he became its executive director. By the time of his retirement in 1944, Cohen had helped establish over 150 Conservative congregations.<sup>5</sup>]

## Document 7: The Principles of the United Synagogue

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-4-7

Jewish Welfare Boards  
United States Army and Navy  
Chattanooga, Tenn.  
October 16, 1918

Dear Doctor Adler -

Mr. B. Cassell, president of my congregation, has discussed the matter of your recent letter with me. I suggesting [sic] that he make an early reply; he declares that their joining the United Synagogue was discussed at a recent directors' meeting. The only difficulty seemed to be an apprehension that the organization is made up of men bent on instituting innovations in Judaism. I answered that the principles of the United Synagogue are purely orthodox, and that we are no more responsible for the vagaries of individual members

<sup>5</sup> For more biographical information on Cohen and a select number of other Conservative rabbis, see Pamela S. Nadell, *Conservative Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988).

than is our own synagogue for the fact that most of *its* members do not keep the Sabbath. And, of course, I expatiated once more on the work actually being done for American Israel. He was, at the time, still awaiting literature for further enlightenment.

Since I am the first man to represent the Seminary in this community, I feel that I ought also at this time to report to you my general impressions of it, as a rabbi. Chattanooga gives a man better opportunity for a variety of experiences than any other city of its size I know of. All Jewish activities are represented here. It shares, however, that lonesome affect on a young preacher which even its present association with camp life cannot wholly eradicate; it possesses too few metropolitan advantages. In common, also, with most Southern towns, it seems to limit the possibility of the extension of a man's reputation to a small radius only. In fact, no ambitious man could consider it a stopping off place for more than a year; as for myself, any early opportunity in a northern and metropolitan city, particularly if it be near my home, I shall readily grasp.

For the people here I have in general much praise, particularly for those gentlemen you have already seen. I have been well treated and believe myself to have won a good measure of success with them.

On my arrival in the South you may recall that I expressed my readiness in any available way to aid the cause of the United Synagogue and the Seminary in this territory. If such an opportunity be accorded me I shall be quite glad of it.

I am,

Respectfully yours,  
Abraham Burstein

*Response:*

October 27, 1918

Dear Rabbi Burstein:

I had your letter of the 16th. I had sent to Mr. Cassell all of the publications of the United Synagogue. As these did not reach him, I am having duplicates sent. You are entirely right in explaining the duty of the United Synagogue. Certainly it is not made up of men who desire innovations. Your own report as to the work in your community is extremely interesting and I think it is very well for you that you are having this experience. I do not know of any better position that is now available. The one in Cleveland, your home town, is still unfilled, as the people there seem quite incapable of making up their own minds. There would be no point in my saying anything to them about you, because they know you and beside I have said everything that I could say.

Believe me with kind regards and assuring you that I am always pleased to hear from you, I am

Very sincerely yours,  
Cyrus Adler

[*Ed. Note:* After his ordination in 1917, Burstein represented the Jewish Welfare Board. He served in a number of pulpits as well as in the chaplaincy, including stints with the Jewish Theatrical Guild of America and the New York Department of Correction. He was a prolific author of Jewish books, particularly for young people, and he edited a number of Jewish periodicals, including the *RA Newsletter*.]

### Document 8: "What Our Seminary Needs Is Advertising"

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-13-2

Rabbi Abraham E. Halpern  
B'nai Amoona Congregation  
St. Louis, Mo.  
May 16, 1918. Sivan, 5, 5678

My dear Dr. Davidson,

In your last letter you asked me to tell you from time to time of my work. I am sure you will be pleased to know that I have been re-elected for a term of three years at a big increase in salary. I have worked quite hard this year and I am pleased with the result. The membership has increased considerably, the congregation is progressing and everything looks very promising.

The congregation is one of the oldest orthodox congregations in the West and has always had a good name. Its services are quiet and orderly, and since I came I instituted congregational singing, and they are now something like the Seminary services which I always enjoyed as a student.

We originally had a big Schule down town but all the members moved West and they bought a small church which is used as our temporary synagogue, and now we have begun to build a new Synagogue on the site next to the present building. The building that we have now will be used as a school only, and there will be an advantage in the fact that I will be separated from the Schule and will not be in the basement, as is generally the case with Schools in a Synagogue.

With the completion of our new Schule I expect to accomplish good work, and I hope to make orthodoxy popular in this city, which I am sorry to say was very unpopular especially amongst the younger folks. I am going to work hard to make it one of the outstanding conservative congregations in the country. The West has been, I think, a little neglected and the Hebrew Union College has had an open field to work, and this makes it a little harder for our men; but I am sure that in time things will be different.

What our Seminary needs is advertising. I have read more about the new Rabbinical College than I ever read about our Seminary. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Rabbinical College is new, but nevertheless the people talk about it. I should suggest that our Seminary ought to have a little more publicity. Let the country know what we are doing and that our institution is

very much alive. Why should the Rabbinical College<sup>6</sup> be known as the *only* Orthodox Seminary? This is not true. The fact that some of our men occupy conservative and semi-reform Synagogues cannot change the Seminary. I could not see anything un-orthodox at our Seminary while I was there. All I can say is that the Seminary even strengthened my own convictions. I often wanted to answer the papers who call the Rabbinical College the only Orthodox seminary, but I held back because I did not know how you would feel about it, but I do not think that it should go unchallenged. I hope my suggestions are not impertinent in any way, it is because I love the Seminary that I am prompted to write in this way.

With kindest regards to all members of the faculty, and best wishes for a happy Yom Tov, I am

Sincerely yours,  
Abraham E. Halpern

*Response:*

May 21, 1918

My dear Rabbi Halpern:

I was very glad to receive your letter with the cheerful news of your reelection and the considerable increase in salary. I hope that you will continue in your good work which will reflect upon you and the Seminary.

That part of your letter in which you speak of the Rabbinical College was certainly of interest to me and to the other members of the Faculty to whom I showed your letter. I also showed it to Dr. Adler and it is with his knowledge that I say that you have no hesitancy in publicly stating, should the opportunity arise, that the claims of the Rabbinical College to being the only Orthodox Seminary in this country is a downright falsehood.

As to your question whether the Seminary is taking any steps to give more publicity to its work, I also may say that I have it on good authority that such steps will be taken in the near future. I am glad that you have as lively an interest in the Seminary as you ever had and I assure you that the Seminary never loses sight of its graduates.

It is perhaps this idea that brings me to remind you that it is very important for you to settle the matter of your secular diploma. Do not delay it any longer. I believe that if you made an effort you could get it this summer and then you could have your mind free for your work.

<sup>6</sup> In 1915 Bernard Revel merged Etz Chaim Yeshiva with the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RJETS). The new entity was known as the Rabbinical College of America into the 1920s and then was renamed REITS. Thus Halpern was lamenting what he regarded as inordinate attention given to Yeshiva at the expense of JTS. See the *Jewish Communal Register of 1917-18* (New York, 1918), p. 1201. My thanks to Professor Jeffrey Gurock of the Bernard Revel School of Judaica, Yeshiva University, for clarifying this point.

With kindest regards from myself and the other members of the Faculty, I am

Yours very sincerely,  
[unsigned; presumably Israel Davidson]

[*Ed. Note:* Halpern was ordained in 1917 and immediately was called to the pulpit of Congregation B'nai Amoona of St. Louis, where he served with great distinction for over forty years.]

## Document 9: The Conservative Rabbi as Zionist Leader

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-14-16

Congregation Bnai-Abraham  
Alfred Kahn, Rabbi  
Butler, Pa.  
October 2, 1919

Dear Dr. Adler

I presume you know of my present pulpit in this city. I have been occupying this pulpit since last April, and have met with considerable success in my work as Rabbi of this community of which I am the first incumbent. Being new to the city of Pittsburgh, I have kept in close touch with the moderate orthodox Jewish circles therein and have made the acquaintance of many of them. Through the medium of the Zionist organizations, I was able to appear before the Jewish public on several occasions, and I believe, I have made a very favorable impression. Some of the Zionist leaders have asked me to become the Educational and field director of the Zionist forces of Western Pa but I told them I preferred to stay in the ministry. An opportunity has now presented itself to me to take charge of all the conservative Jewish elements in this great metropolis of steel, coal and iron. An invitation has already been extended to me by one of the prominent & interesting parties of this newly organized congregation to speak before them at the earliest opportunity at my disposal, which will be most likely after all the holidays.

I have also received definite information, that Rabbi Samuel Cohen has been working for the United Synagogue of America in that city and has succeeded in getting this institution to join the organization. He has also influenced them to resolve to get a Rabbi who shall lead the congregation and help the perfection of the movement to unite as one body all the Jews of moderate orthodox inclinations & propensities; the gentleman with whom I have been in constant correspondence did tell me when I met him in Chicago at the time of the Zionist convention that they had come to the same conclusion and had intimated to him that in the beginning they would pay me the same salary of \$3000 per annum that I am receiving here in Butler.

Recently there has been an exodus of Jewish families of considerable

dimension due to strikes and general industrial unrest & paralysis. Hence I want to prepare myself for any eventualities. I have my doubts whether the people would be in a financial position to renew my contract with increased salary as they had promised when I accepted a contract only of one year's duration. . . . The Jewish families of this city are mostly Yiddish speaking and I have lectured to them both in Jargon [Yiddish] and in English. Some of my intimate friends that I have found here, have told me only this week, that they would do all they could to help me secure this pulpit in the larger city. They all expressed themselves very friendly to me that I ought to carry [sic] my ability—efficiency and leadership[—] to a larger Jewish community where the people will understand an English sermon written in a style that is up to the highest standard of literary excellence and beauty.

Now Dr. Adler, I need not tell you of the difficulties I encountered before I secured this position. Of course, I shall never forget the aid, help and cooperation which you were kind & generous enough to extend to me to find a desirable & payable pulpit, but somehow or other, so far the wheel of fortune has not turned or revolved in my direction. Of course I pray to the One on High that the coming New Year of 5680 shall be one not only of Peace, Happiness and plentifulness for us, but for all the Household of Israel who are now enduring the after glow of this colossal war, the pangs of Messiah.

Of course there is a possibility that this congregation may desire more than one candidate before they make a definite decision. Therefore Dr. Adler, will I be asking too much of you, if in case, the said synagogue makes inquiries about my character and my service in the Rabbinate, that I will be accorded the same consideration which you have always shown me in the past. . . .

Sincerely yours,  
A.H. Kahn [Alfred H.]

[*Ed. Note:* Kahn was ordained at JTS in 1915.]

### Document 10: Gauging the Prospects of a Congregation

*Source:* Records of JTSA, R.G. 15A-20-11

Adath Yeshurun Synagogue

C. David Matt, Rabbi

Minneapolis, Minn.

August 18, 1919

Dr. Israel Davidson,  
Jewish Theological Seminary,  
New York City,

Dear Dr. Davidson:

As I promised in my letter of the 15th inst., I want to tell you something of my status and of my congregation here in Minneapolis, so that you may know whether such pulpit(s) as you think of recommending are likely to be

suitable. I am not writing to Dr. Adler direct as I have in the past made the situation known to him, and I want to put the information at your disposal so that you need not look up old files.

I have been in Minneapolis for seven years this coming Holy Days. During that time I have been pitted against two very able Orthodox Rabbis, one of them acknowledged as pre-eminent *lamdan* [Heb.] among the Rabbis of his class; also against a Maggid, who has a strong following, especially among the older element. In addition I have had the influence and personality of Dr. S.N. Deinard to contend against, and you know how popular he can make himself, and does make himself. In addition, he is such a good mixer, and makes the average Orthodox Jews feel that he is so much one of them that it is very hard for them to see any difference between Conservative Judaism and Reform. Yet in spite of that I have been able to make my congregation grow, become a factor in the city, and make its influence felt in many, many ways.

However, my congregation is in the wrong section of the city. It is in a non-populous district, and the Jews of the neighborhood are becoming fewer instead of more numerous. Many of my own members are moving into the neighborhoods where the Reform temple is at present and where it intends to build, and as we see no prospects of our removing to that neighborhood for some years, I must confess I see very little prospects of the congregation's growing. That of course involves the unlikelihood of my own growth. Financially, the congregation is poor and has not that hearty ambition in that direction which enables me to hope for much advancement, and tho [sic] I have been as unworldly as even a good Rabbi should be it is a case of *matai e'eseh gam anokhi l'vayti* [Heb.] [When shall I also provide for my own house? (Genesis 30:30)].

That is why I have written asking that I be kept in mind if some desirable pulpit turns up. I feel that I have done some hard pioneer work for the Seminary and for its principles in this portion of the country. That St. Paul, Minn. and Des Moines, Ia. have or had our Alumni as their Rabbis I think is due to me, and it is merely a matter of time before other neighboring cities follow suit. All along I have tried to bring credit upon the Seminary, and I feel that if being mentioned for a larger field where the prospects for the Rabbi personally, as well as for the work he has to do, is a recognition of past achievement, then without seeming too modest or too conceited I have a right to present myself for such preferment.

I want to mention just one more fact. As to the personality of many of my congregation I have only the highest praise. There are among them men who have taken the leading part in every communal undertaking, and if I ever assume another charge I hope to find men of a similar calibre among my new flock. That is why I have in the past, when opportunity to make a change came along, been discriminating. You see I was in the position that I did not have to make the change, and that there was much in my present position that was likable. So any change had to be distinctly an improvement—hence I have stayed here.

I hope I have made the matter a little clear. I might add that I now receive, until September 1, 1919, \$2100 a year; after that \$2500, and my income is about \$500, though it hasn't been as much as that in the past.

Trusting I have not wearied you by this megillah [Heb.], and thanking you in advance for anything that may come of this correspondence, I am,

Sincerely yours,  
C. David Matt

*Response:*

August 21, 1919

Dear Rabbi Matt:

Thank you very much for your explicit letter of August 18th. It puts your position entirely in a different light and I can see that this is not the time of the year for you to make any changes, even if you were ready for it. It is a case that should be handled rather leisurely and with much fore-thought.

I may assure you again of my hearty sympathy and readiness to be of service to you.

Very truly yours,  
Registrar [presumably Israel Davidson]

[*Ed. Note:* Matt served Adath Yeshurun Synagogue for another eight years. Contrary to his pessimistic reading of the situation in 1919, Adath Yeshurun prospered and has remained one of the preeminent Conservative synagogues. After leaving Minneapolis, Matt, who was ordained in 1913, served congregations in Buffalo and Philadelphia.]

*Jack Wertheimer is the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In his capacity as director of the Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism he is presently organizing and editing a three-volume history of JTSA.*