

Chapter Two

Temple Israel and the Modern Synagogue Society: The Conservative Quest for Legitimacy in Portland, 1913-1919

We have already demonstrated how the first Jews of Portland could reconcile social mobility and traditional religious practice. This community chose to integrate socially and economically without altering the religious service. However, this consensus was challenged in 1913, when a group of individuals who had attained a higher economic and class standing attempted to create a Conservative institution that would also modernize the religious service. These individuals had attained greater economic prominence than the rest of their immigrant community and sought to augment this status with a modern religious service. These individuals, many of whom moved to Portland from other communities, created the Modern Synagogue Society, a religious institution that advocated changes to the religious service. However, their liberal religious practices were not welcomed. Religious modernization was a foreign concept to Portland's Jewish community, and its members strenuously objected to the institutionalization of such reforms. As this new temple gained membership and became a threat to the existing institutional structure, organized opposition increased. Even though many Jews in Portland did not identify with Orthodox practices, Portland Jewry reaffirmed its disdain for religious modernization and refused to legitimize this institution. Hence, Portland's Jews rejected Conservative Judaism at the very moment that the movement experienced rapid growth elsewhere in the United States.

Why did Conservative Judaism not succeed in Portland yet emerge in other cities? Through an examination of the early history and practices of the United Synagogue, one can certainly conclude that its religious practices were not particularly appropriate in the

case of Portland. The United Synagogue was formed in February 1913 to combat what its leaders perceived as a crisis in American Judaism. As East European Jews began to acculturate more dramatically into American society, many Orthodox institutions adopted many of the liberal religious practices of Reform institutions. Many Orthodox leaders feared that these religious changes could spiral out of control and that Orthodox shuls would soon resemble Reform institutions. Dr. Solomon Schechter, the first president of this new organization, sought to avert this crisis.

Schechter's new organization championed a philosophy that certain religious reforms were acceptable and practical, while many of the changes made to Reform temples were excessive and unjustifiable. The United Synagogue felt that religious modernization to the extent of Reform temples left Judaism without much of its tradition. It was thus the goal of this organization to find the proper balance of tradition and tolerance for religious change that would maintain Judaism's tradition and at the same time satisfy Jews who desired religious change. To do this, the twenty-two charter congregations of this organization joined Schechter in, "a work on which, in my humble opinion, depends the continuance and the survival of traditional Judaism in this country."¹

This crisis was clearly implied in the constitution of the United Synagogue of America. The goals of the organization are articulated below:

RECOGNIZING the need of an organized movement for advancing the cause of Judaism in America and maintaining Jewish tradition in its historical continuity, we hereby establish the United Synagogue of America, with the following ends in view.

To ASSERT and establish loyalty to the Torah and its historical exposition,
To FURTHER the observance of the Sabbath and the Dietary Laws,

¹ Abraham Karp, *A History of the United Synagogue of America 1913-1963* (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1964). 7.

To PRESERVE in the service the reference to Israel's past and the hopes for Israel's restoration,

To MAINTAIN the traditional character of the liturgy, with Hebrew as the language of prayer.

To FOSTER Jewish religious life in the home, as expressed in traditional observances,

To ENCOURAGE the establishment of Jewish religious schools, in the curricula of which the study of the Hebrew language and literature shall be given a prominent place, both as the key to true understanding of Judaism, and as a bond of holding together the scattered communities of Israel throughout the world.²

While the United Synagogue hoped on one hand to check the excesses of Reform Judaism, they still legitimized several changes to the religious service. One of the first changes approved by the United Synagogue was to promote, like Reform temples, a more decorous atmosphere. In addition, the service was conducted in unison, and congregational singing and responsive readings were added. Many of these readings, as well as sermons, were conducted in English. Conservative synagogues also shortened the service and generally invited men to sit with women. They also placed heavy emphasis on youth activities, as the synagogue came to become a "synagogue-center", offering social programs in addition to religious activities. While these changes proved to be minor when compared to the practices of Reform institutions, they were still drastic to those who were not familiar with religious change.

These religious changes were also quite fluid, as members of institutions could choose for themselves which religious changes they found acceptable and which they found excessive. The United Synagogue did not seek to impose one set of beliefs on its member institutions, but rather to unite institutions with a wide range of beliefs. According to Schechter, the United Synagogue targeted for membership all "congregations as have not accepted the [Reform] prayer-book nor performed their

² Ibid., 9-10.

religious devotions with uncovered heads.”³ He also noted that the new organization “must extend over the whole of America, and be so far-reaching and far-extending, as to come in touch with the work of the whole of Israel.”⁴ Dr. Cyrus Adler, who served as President of the United Synagogue from 1915-1917, concurred, arguing that, “There are roughly 1800 Jewish congregations in the United States, of which 185 belong to the Reform wing of American Jewry. But the 1600 congregations remaining outside the fold of Reform, offer us a promising field in which to work.”⁵

The United Synagogue thus saw itself as a unifying force that would promote the conservation of traditional Judaism. Solomon Schechter spoke of this idea of unity in his address at the first meeting in 1913. “Let me premise that this United Synagogue has not been called into life with any purpose of creating a new division.” Thus, Schechter did not envision Conservative Judaism as a competing force with Orthodox Judaism. Rather he saw Conservative Judaism as unifying the diverse religious practices of those Jews not already identified with Reform. He continued:

While it will, as its name implies, unite us for certain purposes, which we deem sacred and indispensable to the welfare of Judaism, it is not our intention to enter into a feud with the existing parties. Life is too short for feuds, and the task before us is so great and so manifold, that we must spare all our faculties and save all our strength for the work of a positive nature...⁶

Schechter and others linked to the United Synagogue truly believed that they could unite American Jewry under the heading of Conservative Judaism. However, in order for Schechter to realize his dream, he would have to unite Jews with very different sets of beliefs. On one hand was a group of Jews that legitimized the religious reforms of the

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 8,9.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

United Synagogue as practical and justifiable. Such congregations had already introduced religious changes and were more able to identify with the United Synagogue's tolerance for such changes. However, to those congregations that had not introduced religious changes, identification with United Synagogue was far more difficult.

While the United Synagogue sought to unite these groups within their organization, such unity raised serious problems. These problems were articulated by an editorial appearing in *The Canadian Jewish Times* of Montreal.

...Dr. Schechter said that the organization about to be formed should aim to serve all those positive elements in Judaism that are common to Conservative and Orthodoxy... It is evident from his lucid expression that he regards the Conservative as different from the Orthodox... But if there is such a difference between Conservative and Orthodox, Dr. Schechter, sooner or later, will be forced to choose between the two, and the United Synagogue at the outset of its career must prepare to meet an internal division which is likely to disrupt it later on... A United Synagogue of America is possible only if congregations adhering to the same principles and customs unite for common action. It cannot succeed as it has been organized without compromises, and compromises are impossible in religious organizations.⁷

By legitimizing those institutions that recognized the validity of some religious modernization, the United Synagogue risked alienating members of institutions to whom this religious change was unacceptable.

This alienation is exactly what happened in Portland with the introduction of the Modern Synagogue Society in 1913. To this traditional Jewish community, it was not acceptable to impose upon them the notion that certain religious changes should be tolerated. To them, modern Orthodoxy had never included liturgical change, and there had never been a reason to consider changing this constant in their lives. Even though Portland was home to a growing population of Jews who did not observe the laws of

⁷ Ibid., 13.

Orthodoxy, the community was still strong enough to prevent this organization from gaining legitimacy.

Despite Portland's sentiments toward an institution advocating religious modernization, Portland was introduced to Conservative Judaism in 1913. Max L.



Figure 2-1. Max Pinansky. Photo from Maine Historical Society.

Pinansky, an East European Jew who had recently arrived in Portland from Boston, brought with him the concept that certain changes within the synagogue service were practical and justifiable. Boston was home to Reform congregations that advocated religious modernization, as well as one of the charter members of the United Synagogue, Congregation Mishkan Tefila.⁸ Pinansky formed the Modern Synagogue Society in 1913 and this organization exposed Portland to religious modernization for the first time. While it gained the support of

some of Portland's more prominent Jews, it was never able to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Jewish community as a respectable religious institution.

The Modern Synagogue Society, later known as Temple Israel, seems to have started in 1913, with services first held in the home of Max Pinansky.⁹ Pinansky was born in East Boston in 1887, he graduated from Harvard University in 1909 and began practicing law in Boston. He would go on to achieve much in his life, including service as a Municipal Judge and State Senator. Pinansky was a very effective public speaker

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Coe, *Maine, a History*, Vol. 3 (1928), 40; Benjamin Band, *Portland Jewry: Its Growth and Development*, (Portland: Jewish Historical Society, 1955), 29.

and was highly sought after in such a role.¹⁰ On a visit to Portland, he met Annie R. Bernstein, and the two were married on January 15, 1913.¹¹ The date on which Pinansky founded Temple Israel is unclear, but by the end of 1913, Pinansky was already the superintendent of the Temple Israel Sunday School. It appears as if Pinansky began to create a Conservative Jewish organization in Portland immediately upon his arrival. His organization modernized the ritual within the synagogue, although it did not officially align with the United Synagogue until 1919. While there had been no precedent in Portland, Temple Israel reduced the number of prayers in the service and chanted many of them in English rather than Hebrew.¹² Most importantly, and perhaps most controversially, Temple Israel invited men and women to sit together. Clearly, these reforms flew in the face of the established norms of the community.

Yet interestingly, many of Temple Israel's members were also members of Shaarey Tphiloh, and the new institution sought unity with the mainstream religious organization in Portland. On January 20, 1915, Max Pinansky, along with David Schwartz and Mark Levine addressed Shaarey Tphiloh's board about the new society. They asked the board of directors to "collaborate with them to improve the condition of Yiddishkayt in Portland."¹³ These tolerable relations could be attributed to the dual membership of those addressing the meeting. For example, David Schwartz was a wealthy Jew who was a member of both organizations. By September, however, relations already appear to be strained. The board took no action on the request for

¹⁰ *Modern Maine*, 184; Coe, *Maine, a History*, 40; William David Barry's description of Max Pinansky Collection. (All from Maine Historical Society Collection).

¹¹ *Max Pinansky Obituary*, Portland Press Herald (April 12, 1951).

¹² Band, 29.

¹³ Shaarey Tphiloh minutes, 1/20/15

collaboration, and David Schwartz resigned from Shaarey Tphiloh on September 5, 1915. Certainly members of Shaarey Tphiloh realized that this new organization and its view of religious modernization posed a threat to their place in the community, and relations between the two were not as amicable as they had been in January.

Largely as a result of its lack of acceptance and its radical break with accepted norms, Temple Israel retained a small membership in its early years. The organization is first listed in the *American Jewish Yearbook* in the 1916-1917 edition. Max Pinansky is listed as the secretary and contact and the address given is 17 Quincy Street, likely the home of Pinansky at that time. The Temple at that point had a Ladies Aid Society.¹⁴ Temple Israel was quite tied to Pinansky and he appears to be the driving force behind it in the years prior to 1918. However, Despite Pinansky's enthusiasm, his organization did not seem to grow significantly until the end of World War I. In the 1919-1920 *American Jewish Yearbook*, Temple Israel appears to be a much stronger institution than it was in 1917. It held its Sabbath services in English and also had a men's club, while its Hebrew school consisted of two classes and 40 students. In addition, by 1919, Temple Israel boasted the services of a rabbi.¹⁵ Clearly, this institution had gained a base of support that was far greater than its base of support prior to the war. Why was it able to grow in these years?

The change in the ideology of the United Synagogue ushered in at the end of World War I may have played a role in this growth. Whereby before 1918 the United Synagogue had hoped to unite American Jewry into one religious movement and did not

¹⁴ *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol 18, (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1917); *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol 21, (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1920).

¹⁵ *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol 21, (Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee, 1920).

wish to create division, the postwar United Synagogue understood the problems with this task and instead sought to promote its own concept of Judaism. Abraham Karp describes this shift in philosophy: “The early task of the United Synagogue had been to prove the viability of Traditional Judaism in the American milieu. Now the post-War American scene gave it the opportunity to display the vitality of Conservative Judaism.”¹⁶ This new philosophy gave Conservative Judaism the chance to win supporters on its own merits without focusing on unification with institutions that did not want to change the liturgy. Dr. Elias L. Solomon, president of the United Synagogue from 1918 to 1926, stated in his first presidential address the new resolve of the organization:

...[W]e must strengthen and expand our organization which aims to perpetuate traditional Judaism in this country... Judaism in America could, with proper care and cultivation, develop into a form which we believe would compare favorably with any phase in previous times... The form of Judaism which will eventually evolve... will be that for which the seminary stands, of which Professor Schechter was the great exponent, and which the United Synagogue represents.¹⁷

As was predicted in the editorial in the *Canadian Jewish Times* in 1913, the United Synagogue, was forced to choose between Conservative and Orthodox religious practices. The time had come, and the United Synagogue chose to support several types of religious modernization rather than push for unity.

Another reason that may explain the growth of Temple Israel following World War I was the developing upper class of Portland’s Jews. Portland Jewry found that it boasted a small number of relatively wealthy individuals, and this may have been related to Portland’s role as a prominent port during World War I. Trade through Portland increased during the war years, and because of the increased importance of waterfront

¹⁶ Karp, *History*, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

property, it is possible that those Jews involved in real estate suddenly found themselves on the verge of wealth.¹⁸ Many of these nouveau-riches may have desired to augment their economic status by identifying with a religious institution that was more progressive than that of their poorer neighbors.

Most of the membership of Temple Israel consisted of individuals with this newfound wealth and status.¹⁹ One such individual, Jacob Rosenberg, was born in Russia in 1866. The son of Judah Rosenberg, a peddler, he lived at 11 Vine Street for a period of his youth.²⁰ Rosenberg became quite wealthy during World War I and was heavily involved in real estate. He owned the Riverside amusement park and was quite powerful within the Jewish community.²¹ Rosenberg was also one of the original members of the board of directors of the Shaarey Tphiloh synagogue following its inception in 1904, where he remained until his resignation on October 1, 1916.²² He was then re-appointed to the board of directors on November 3, 1917 and was replaced again on December 15, 1917.²³ It is not known if Rosenberg was involved with Temple Israel while he was also a member of Shaarey Tphiloh, and there is no mention of Rosenberg until 1919 when he was acting as president of Temple Israel.

David Schwartz was also economically stable. He owned many buildings in the Jewish district and along the waterfront, including buildings on Middle Street, Vine

¹⁸ Portland City Guide (Portland: Forest City Printing Company, 1940), 37, 39, 40, 61-62. Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data 1585-1984* (London: University Press of America, 1990), 50-51, 68.

¹⁹ In addition, because there were only a few Germans among the Portland Jewish community, the anti-German sentiment present during the war may not have been applicable to Portland's Jews. This may have led to greater economic opportunity.

²⁰ 1880 Census; 1879-81 city directory.

²¹ William Cohen, interview by author, Portland, Me., 12 February 2000; Myer Marcus, interview by author, Providence, RI., 19 February 2000.

²² Band, 31.

²³ Shaarey Tphiloh minutes.

Street, and Deer Street.²⁴ He was an original member of the Shaarey Tphiloh board of directors, and along with Rosenberg was one of the most visibly wealthy members of the community. He was a member of Temple Israel by 1915. Dr. Elias Caplan was also affiliated with Temple Israel and was also one of the elite members of the Jewish community. It is interesting to note that like Pinansky, Caplan was not originally from Portland. He arrived from Des Moines, Iowa in 1911 and became the second Jewish physician in Portland. Caplan, too, was a member of the original board of directors of Shaarey Tphiloh, formed Degel Zion, a Zionist organization, and was the first president of a new B'nai B'rith group. He was also the first president of a veteran's club, indicating that he participated in the war effort and thus was not an active member of Temple Israel for all of the years 1913 to 1918.²⁵

Dr. John L. Davis was the first Portland Jew to graduate from college, graduating from Bowdoin College Medical School. In 1927, he became the first president of the Jewish Home for the Aged. Davis was also a member of Temple Israel. Mark Levine, a member of Degel Zion owned a clothing store in Monument Square and was also a member by 1915. Finally, David Beckelman, an insurance salesman, was also a member of Temple Israel. All except for Davis were also founders of the B'nai B'rith Israel Lodge in July 1916.²⁶ Thus, while Temple Israel did not attract a very large following, it maintained a solid base among those Jews who made up the economic elite of Portland Jewry.

²⁴ This information is available through the 1924 Portland City Clerk's tax assessment. David Schwartz owned many buildings in 1924, including the building that was at one point used as Congregation Beth Judah.

²⁵ Band, 53.

²⁶ Band, 41. William Cohen.

Serving alongside the B'nai B'rith Israel Lodge, Temple Israel linked the wealthier members of the Jewish community at a time when country clubs and other organizations of status were closed to prominent Jews.²⁷ The small nucleus of wealthier Jews instead joined Temple Israel and afforded it its core of membership. Thus, one component of the appeal of Temple Israel may have been its association with affluence rather than any ideological belief promoted by the organization.

The growth of Temple Israel was perhaps best demonstrated in the hiring of the first Jewish Theological Seminary ordained rabbi in Portland. In 1918, Temple Israel welcomed Mordecai M. Kaplan, then of the United Synagogue of America, to assist the organization with its development.²⁸ Then in 1919, the temple hired the services of its first rabbi, Rudolph Lupo, a 1919 graduate of the JTS. However, by December 1919, Lupo had relocated to Flint, Michigan.²⁹ In a December 30, 1924 letter to Cyrus Adler, President of JTS, Lupo wrote, "I think I have done my fair share of work in small, unstable communities and I deserve finally to be recommended to a position where I could be of better service to our cause and where I would have prospects for a more secure position."³⁰ Clearly, Lupo had little in the way of job security in Portland and barely stayed long enough to assume the pulpit.

²⁷ The Cumberland Club was closed to Blacks and Jews as late as 1970. Only when several Jews complained to the Portland City Council that this club should not receive a liquor license while practicing exclusion did they begin to admit Jews. Maine's summer resorts had also been notorious for excluding Blacks and Jews, but this began to change in 1956 with the resort discrimination law. The Ku Klux Klan was also active in Maine in the early twentieth century. Edgar Allen Beem, "The Jewish Identity," *The Maine Times*, 24 February 1984, p. 3.

²⁸ Band, 29.

²⁹ Letter found in records of Lupo, Ratner Center archives, written 12/29/19 indicating a new address for the Rabbi.

³⁰ Letter to Cyrus Adler from Ratner Center archives, 12/30/24

Little is known about Lupo's time in Portland, other than that it was extremely brief and filled with controversy. Ben Band argues that Lupo was forced to leave because of internal dissent within Temple Israel and strong external community pressure. The description of internal dissent, although brief, is the only information that we have explaining the downfall of Temple Israel. Band believes, although he provides no evidence, that members of Temple Israel were divided on basic ideological questions, including the issue of whether to align with the Reform or Conservative movements, and that Lupo was unable to build consensus. These pressures, according to Band, resulted in several confrontations between the rabbi and his congregation.³¹

However disruptive the dissention from within, the external pressures indicated clearly that Temple Israel had not gained respect as a legitimate religious institution in the eyes of the Portland Jewish community. Band notes that Rabbi David Essrig of Shaarey Tphiloh refused to associate with Lupo in any capacity, and that the issue came to a head over a meeting about a proposed purchase of a new building for the Portland Hebrew School, which Essrig refused to attend if Lupo was present.³² Lupo left Portland at some point in 1919 and Temple Israel was dissolved.

The abrupt nature of the demise of Temple Israel leaves one with many questions. The organization had developed a rather significant following, and its members were among Portland Jewry's most economically established. Why would they give up their cause just as their numbers were growing? Why would the loss of one rabbi who lasted only a few months convince this organization that it could not survive? The answer seems to lie in the reaction of Rabbi Essrig and others to the presence of this institution.

³¹ Band, 30.

³² Ibid.

By refusing to associate in any manner with Rabbi Lupo, Rabbi Essrig emphasized that despite the great deal of respect within the community for its members, Temple Israel never gained legitimacy as a religious institution in Portland.

Temple Israel may have faced such difficulty in gaining legitimacy in Portland because it was perceived as an outside organization imposed onto the Jewish community. Several of the members of Temple Israel, including its founder, were not from Portland, and these individuals attempted to create their own institutions with leadership structures distinct from the rest of the community. However, individuals with different beliefs could create successful institutions elsewhere. What was it about Portland that prevented outside ideas from gaining legitimacy within the community? Perhaps it was the fact that Portland was smaller and more homogenous than most other cities. Because Portland's Jews were so similar and the community was so small, there was no place for competing belief structures. The community was cohesive enough to reject such an invasion, and this may have been a key reason that Pinansky's organization could not gain legitimacy in Portland while Conservative institutions were flourishing elsewhere in America.

To Portland's homogenous community, this foreign organization was seen as a threat to the existing institutional order. Portland's Jews were already loyal to their own institutions, and there was no reason to accept an institution that challenged the power of the existing synagogues. Temple Israel was tolerated when it was only a small group of Shaarey Tphiloh members meeting together in a member's house. However, once it sought to gain legitimacy as an institution, relations between the two organizations soured. These tense relations culminated with Rabbi Essrig, representing Shaarey Tphiloh, refusing to acknowledge Rabbi Lupo in any capacity. Temple Israel proved to

be a threat to the existing institutional order, and the latter proved strong enough to prevail.

In hindsight, it is clear that the notion of religious modernization had not gained institutional legitimacy, and therefore, the leaders of Temple Israel were forced to dissolve their organization. However, the end of Temple Israel did not necessarily mean the end of Conservative Judaism in Portland. Rather, the leaders of the Conservative movement in Portland sought to find another way to gain respect in the eyes of the community. As Lupo was scorned and left town, another organization was also striving to gain legitimacy. However, this organization, Adas Israel, was a breakaway faction of Shaarey Tphiloh. Its members, including the former rabbi of Shaarey Tphiloh, were already established members of Portland's Jewish community. In early 1920, this group, together with some of the former members of Temple Israel, purchased a new building for their congregation. In time, most of the former members of Temple Israel joined this new synagogue and pushed for religious modernization within the context of a local Orthodox institution. Thus, the failure of Temple Israel indicated that religious change could not be accepted if introduced in a Conservative institution. Instead, the leaders of Temple Israel sought to introduce reforms slowly in an institution that already had religious legitimacy. The next chapter will detail how Adas Israel modernized, and the difficulties it faced in its reforming agenda.