

FROM SYNAGOGUE TOWARD YESHIVA

Institutionalized Cult or Congregations of the Learned?

EMANUEL RACKMAN

THE synagogue was once a building where men met to pray and study; today it is an "institution," often more social than religious. The rabbi was once a scholar-saint; now he is usually a "professional," a clergyman. Thoughtful Orthodox Jews in America have tried to resist the modern transformation of the rabbi into a religious functionary, but, paradoxically enough, they have often found themselves adding momentum to the new trend in the very act of seeking to reverse it. Orthodoxy, however, has shown a deeper appreciation of the true meaning of rabbi and synagogue in Jewish tradition than have Conservatism and Reform. Setting its face resolutely against the present cult of synagogue and minister in Jewish life, it is trying to recover for the rabbi his old primacy as teacher and man of learning, and through him and the Jewish school to restore Jewry to its old role as a "nation of priests and a holy people."

In its earliest beginnings (in Babylon) the synagogue was nothing more than a facility for group worship, a makeshift substitute, presumably, for the Temple which had been

THE boom in synagogue building is perhaps the most striking feature of the postwar American Jewish scene. (Last December and February William Schack discussed its architectural and aesthetic side.) EMANUEL RACKMAN here questions the whole tendency of American Judaism to exalt communal worship and the preaching rabbi over traditional Jewish learning and the teaching rabbi. Author of *Israel's Emerging Constitution* (1955) and a regular contributor to these pages, Rabbi Rackman heads Congregation Shaaray Tefile in Far Rockaway and teaches political science at Yeshiva University. His article "Can We Moderns Keep the Sabbath!" appeared in our issue of September

destroyed. But the synagogue did not disappear with the Temple's restoration. On the contrary, during the days of the Second Commonwealth there were four or five hundred synagogues in Jerusalem alone, and a chapel for prayer was added to the new Temple itself. The synagogue of that day was owned by the city or village in which it was located and governed by the city's seven democratically elected elders. Title to the building was vested in the inhabitants of the city; the elders might sell or otherwise dispose of it only in the presence of the assembled citizenry, and provided that another house of worship had been made ready to take its place and the proceeds of the sale had been earmarked for the purchase of more sacred objects.

To "operate" it, this synagogue-building only needed the help of ten men whose job it was to be available at all times for a religious service when any worshipper came for prayer. Sometimes the community also provided a cantor and sexton; very rarely did it provide a rabbi. Though he might use the building as a member of the community, the rabbi was never a synagogue functionary. (In this connection it is interesting to note that the Israeli Ministry of Religions recently published a volume on synagogue matters in that country which, while it deals with everything from architecture to cantorial music, makes no mention at all of the rabbi.)

But the synagogue was not only a house of worship. Lectures and sermons were delivered there; it served as a school building for young and old, and as the courthouse where oaths were administered; notices of lost and found articles were posted in its halls. It was the place in which punishments were meted out, charity distributed, and the

dead eulogized; public affairs were debated inside its walls, and travelers would find food and lodging there; occasionally it also provided the place for holding the circumcision ceremony.

The synagogue was indeed a "center"—but not a center where the secular-social rubbed shoulders uneasily with the ritual-religious as today; the social life of the community was also its religious life—religion and society were almost indistinguishably one. And what was the role of the rabbi in all this bustle and hum of activity? A strictly unofficial, almost casual one. Even when a rabbi participated in these functions—and his presence was in fact indispensable to some of them—he usually did so as a volunteer. And indeed the voluntary character of the rabbi in historic Judaism is one of its noblest features.

The rabbi's role in classical Judaism was determined primarily by a need felt very early on to prevent the surrogates of God from exploiting their position for personal aggrandizement. Abraham, Judaism's first teacher, suffered no man to feel that he "had made Abraham rich." All institutional religions of course face this problem, but Judaism was perhaps the first to recognize it and take steps toward its solution. The rabbi, however, came into prominence rather late in Jewish history. Originally it was the priests and levites who acted as religious ministrants, and though the Bible provided for the support of the priestly classes through the institution of the tit. " and heave-offering, the Talmud hedged round all statutory gifts and taxes with so many conditions and restrictions that their delivery was in effect voluntary. A Jew was required to set the tithe gifts aside, thus learning the discipline of self-denial, but if he chose to let them rot, there was no one to stop him. Priests and levites were even prohibited from helping farmers at the harvest, lest the farmer feel morally bound to "pay" his helpers directly with the appropriate offerings.

But this was not the only measure taken to limit priestly power and privilege. Perhaps

in reaction against the funerary role of Egypt's priests and their intense preoccupation with the dead, and fearful of priestly exploitation of the gullibility of the bereaved, Israel's priests were so completely excluded from participation in the funeral rites that they were considered unclean if they so much as ventured into a room where a corpse lay. The only corpse of a non-relative that they were permitted to touch was that of a nameless, heirless pauper. Fear, too, of the extensive land holdings of the Egyptian priesthood—whom even Joseph could not expropriate—may have been behind the Torah's denial to the priestly caste of any share in the Promised Land. The fact that the priests were also expected to act as judges in matters of family law restricted their right to marry. Subsequently the Talmud imposed some of these same disabilities on lay judges who were not of the priestly caste. The priests did, however, get some benefit from animal offerings, but they could hardly grow rich on this since the gifts had to be eaten almost at once and under very restricted conditions.

A further safeguard against the evils of priestly privilege was the fact that Judaism was an exoteric rather than an esoteric religion, in which the law was promulgated, taught, and interpreted by all. Would that every man in the camp of Israel were a prophet, exclaimed Moses.

But in the course of time these safeguards proved inadequate to the task for which they had been designed. Particularly in the exercise of their judicial function, the priests contrived to overcome their legal disabilities, and we find them being denounced over and over again by the Prophets for aligning themselves with the rich and against the poor. Nor did they remain content with priesthood alone, but attempted to usurp political power as well. Moses, in assigning the priestly office to his brother Aaron and the "secular," military leadership to his disciple Joshua, had implicitly declared his opposition to a merger of these two functions. But perhaps the most serious consequence of the growth of priestly power and influence was that it led the priests to neglect

their duty as custodians and expounders of the Law. It was mainly for this reason that the rabbi came into prominence, inheriting not only the responsibilities of the priest but his disabilities as well. From the beginning, the rabbis were clearly determined to guard against the tendencies that had corrupted the priesthood; they especially made it clear that learning was of the essence—a bastard with learning, they declared, ranked higher than an ignorant high priest. Moreover, the rabbis refused to arrogate to themselves even the few privileges which the priests had enjoyed. They ruled that no one must profit by his pursuit of Torah. If the rabbi did perform a ritualistic service, he could lawfully be compensated only for the time he had given and for the loss he had sustained by being taken away from his non-rabbinic vocation, whatever it might be. The same rule also applied to cantors or readers of the Law, who, because their service to the congregation was rendered on the Sabbath, could only be paid for such time as they spent in preparation prior to the Sabbath.

Centuries before the Protestant development of the idea of a non-professional clergy, Judaism was putting it into practice. This idea found its most vivid expression later on among the Jews of Eastern Europe. Every Jewish community in East Europe supported at least one rabbi, but in each there were scores of others, also ordained and equally learned in the Law, who chose not to make the Torah their “trade.” The yeshiva student, preparing himself for the rabbinate, looked forward to nothing better than to devote his life to study for its own sake (*Torah li’smah*), rather than for the sake of a livelihood.

The Talmud mentions no fewer than a hundred rabbis who were artisans by profession. In fact, the Talmudic rabbi was “the true successor of the Judean prophet and the Pharisaic scribe, retaining absolute financial independence.” During the Middle Ages, rabbis occasionally were able to become influential advisors or counsellors in the courts of kings, but their more learned colleagues

did not on that score hesitate to deny them rabbinical authority. Generally, the Jews objected to the office of “chief rabbi” (a creation of the state), and they regarded holders of the office as government agents seeking to strengthen royal control. The claim of a rabbi to leadership, they felt, should derive from his learning and personal piety, and on these points they preferred the judgment of the people (sometimes expressed through elected representatives) to the judgment of the state. The Jewish community was always democratically organized—even by modern standards. Men of wealth and learning, of course, were prominent among community leaders, but there were carefully established voting procedures, and the lay leaders who chose the rabbi reckoned only with piety and scholarship. Moreover, while sanctions, whether of a religious or secular nature, could be invoked against the rabbi for malfeasance in his judicial character, his *spiritual* authority was based principally on popular confidence. There was no trace of the professional or charismatic priesthood in the rabbinate.

Even more unequivocally than Protestantism, Talmudic Judaism rejected the distinction between laity and clergy. A rabbi could do nothing prohibited to a layman, nor could he ignore any of the obligations binding on the layman. In his official capacity, he had no greater powers than any layman learned in the Law—that is, he could give instruction in a particular situation, but always on the basis of his knowledge of the Law. Rabbis seldom conducted religious services—even a funeral was not regarded as a service. Daily and Sabbath services were led by laymen—cantors or readers. Very often the rabbi did not even attend the synagogue: a quorum of men would come to his house and pray there. Nor did rabbis ever *solemnize* marriages, for marriage in Judaism was not a sacrament requiring a cleric’s participation. The groom and the bride and the witnesses were the only necessary parties—provided they knew what to say and do during the ceremony. The only power entrusted to the rabbi which was denied the layman was the

power to ordain other rabbis, but the latter's competence extended to matters of Jewish law alone and a rabbi's authority ultimately depended on its acceptance by the community. Even in litigation the parties to the suit might stipulate that the judges need not be ordained rabbis or scholars, and in general many a layman would resolve questions of Jewish law for himself, trusting to his own familiarity with the sources.

Everywhere we look, then, we find that for almost two millennia to be a rabbi meant nothing—or nothing else—than to be a pious Jew learned in the Law. Like any one else, a rabbi might lead the services, but this would be determined by his singing, not by his position. Similarly, he might deliver sermons, but only because he was a skilled preacher. His principal functions, and the only ones for which his ordination constituted *prima facie* evidence of qualification, were to teach the Law and to resolve legal questions for those who *voluntarily* sought his guidance. To help him fulfill these functions a community or a congregation might retain him in an official, salaried capacity, but even then he regarded it his major responsibility to establish a school—a yeshiva—in which he himself taught. Of course, the rabbis to whom historic religious questions were referred, or whose religious decisions—*responsa*—had a vital bearing on community affairs, sometimes became involved in the political, social, and economic strife of the community. But their major role remained that of the teacher. While the best of their students may have become rabbis who in turn founded new yeshivas or succeeded to the leadership of the already existing ones, the majority of the students, returned—whether ordained or not—to Jewish community life, taking their place as learned citizens. And they, too, devoted their leisure time to study.

The change that has occurred in the rabbi's character and function in modern times was preceded by a change in the nature and place of the synagogue in Jewish life. Diaspora Jewry was always faced with

the problem of what constituted the "Jewish community." Was it all the Jews living in a particular city, or only those who made up a given congregation? In the United States, where one could choose not to affiliate himself with any religious group at all, it was inevitable that the congregation should replace the community at large as the nucleus of Jewish organization, for only through the positive act of joining a congregation did one identify himself as a member of the Jewish community. The synagogue thus became the focal point, almost the determinant, of community membership, instead of the simple community facility it had been.

With the synagogue now so important, the American rabbi found himself responsible for its success, which was conceived in terms of its ability to "make Jews" out of more and more people—that is, to increase its membership. As the head of an institution, the rabbi's duties became more numerous, the talents he required more diverse, his motives more worldly, and his Jewish learning less impressive. As a professional group, rabbis measured up to other professionals in versatility and erudition, but unfortunately they found themselves reduced to ministers who were forced to covet the loyalty and good will of the laymen they served. Public relations became an integral part of their job, and pastoral work and social service an integral part of public relations. The sermon became their principal instrument of attracting attention and support; membership drives and building expansion were necessary for greater emoluments of office; even schools for the young became bait for congregational membership. Everything seemed to be subsumed under this one overriding, tyrannical responsibility of public relations.

That the synagogue in America has become an institution catering more to social than to religious needs does not mean that it is performing a function entirely inconsistent with its traditional character. After all, it is not at all the social role *per se* of the synagogue that is the trouble, but the feebleness of the over-all religious purpose and meaning that should suffuse the syna-

gogue's social functions. Moreover, according to Jewish theology, the preservation of the Jewish people *qua* people is itself a religious value—a point Marshall Sklare overlooks in his excellent study, *Conservative Judaism*—and the modern synagogue helps to do that. What demands criticism, however, is the damage done by the modern synagogue to the role and personality of the rabbi, who is the sole surviving carrier of the religious heritage in most congregations. And it seems distressingly clear also that the synagogue is dropping Jewish law overboard like so much ballast in order to save itself as an institution. To sanction driving an automobile on the Sabbath because more and more worshippers living in suburban areas find it impossible to walk to *shul* is to sacrifice the Sabbath to the synagogue.

To prevent the institutionalized synagogue from turning Judaism into a temple cult and the rabbi into a public relations man, Orthodoxy today is transferring its prime emphasis from the synagogue to the school—preferably to a yeshiva. This shift of emphasis is in part a kind of holding operation, aimed at recreating an elite of scholars who will preserve Judaism through a period of agnosticism and non-observance. But the more immediate hope of the program is to train a substantial body of people literate enough in Torah to demonstrate by their way of life that a fully traditional Judaism can stand up to the intellectual and emotional challenges of our day. Such a program represents a clear-cut departure from the aims of those reformers who made the synagogue and its rabbi the Jewish counterpart of church and minister. If a significant number of Jews do not respond to this attempt to restore them to their traditional role of active participants, as a “holy people” of scholars, in Jewish religious life and leadership, if they are content to remain a passive, more or less ignorant flock superintended by their pastor in a narrowly limited religious sphere, and “superintending” him in all other spheres, then Judaism must eventually find itself transformed into an esoteric body of doctrines: in other words, it will become the very kind of

religion that it repudiated so forcefully in its own beginnings and throughout its history.

The question of primacy as between synagogue and school is not a new one in American Jewish community life. There have been occasions when American rabbis even opposed the establishment of Jewish day schools in their communities for fear that these yeshivas would reduce the registration of their own Hebrew schools and thus deflate synagogue membership. Today, however, though the day schools seek the cooperation of neighboring synagogues, they do not hesitate to assert their superiority to them in the hierarchy of Jewish institutional life.

B seminary in America will soon graduate one hundred rabbis every year, and even if many Conservative synagogues employ these new rabbis, at least half will almost certainly enter the teaching profession or Jewish social service. Hundreds of such teaching rabbis will be available for supplementary work as spiritual leaders of small neighborhood synagogues in every section of the country, and it will be to their interest to encourage the process of decentralization and to resist the transformation of their own modest synagogues into mammoth enterprises. As leaders of small synagogues, they will be able to maintain closer relations with their congregants, and because the size of the membership, it is hoped, will no longer be the measure of rabbinical “success,” they will be free to exert a much more challenging and effective spiritual influence than the rabbi who must say nothing that will offend his congregation. They will be volunteers serving in the synagogue without pay or at token salaries—a fact which will eliminate the pressure, this time from the rabbi's side, for the large membership needed to provide him with a “professional's” salary. Instead of using the school maintained by the synagogue as bait for membership, these new rabbis will be free to persuade parents to give their children the best, most extensive

Jewish education available, such as no synagogue school can hope to provide.

The tendency toward small synagogues is already evident in America. Orthodox leaders seek to establish such synagogues wherever a minimum of ten families desire it. Moreover, it is Orthodoxy's hope and aim to fill these synagogues with men and women whose background in Torah will be virtually on a par with the rabbi's, even though they are engaged in business, medicine, law, engineering, accounting, or what have you. There are already several modern Orthodox synagogues in New York which boast a dozen ordained rabbis in their lay membership and scores of others who have spent ten or more years studying in yeshivas.

The conflict between the rabbi as scholar and the rabbi as preacher was resolved for a long time among American Jews in favor of the preacher. A generation ago the distinguished pulpit orator was called to the largest congregation and commanded the highest salary. But in our own day there has been a renewed tendency (fostered partly by the fact that so many congregants are college graduates) to esteem a rabbi for his learning rather than for his eloquence.

Among the Orthodox, rabbinical leadership is passing out of the possession of the rabbis of the big synagogues into the hands of those who direct the institutions of learning. And it is the avowed purpose of the heads of the yeshivas to train Jews expert in Bible and Talmud. If he is not to forfeit his leadership, the Tabbi who stands at the head of a congregation made up of such members must be a scholar himself. These congregations, in keeping with their orientation toward learning and scholarship and away from the institutionalized cult, are rebelling against the practice of making the synagogue an exclusive center of American Jewish religious life. The synagogue's displacement of the home would be as fatal to Judaism as its displacement of the school. Ideally, the synagogue is the place in which one seeks personal communion with God, and discovers one's identification with *klal*

Yisrael, the community of the Jewish people. But there is a whole range of religious experience and obligation which is embraced by the home and the home alone. This crucial side of Jewish life is fast being forgotten in America as more and more homes are de-Judaized and the synagogue clumsily strives to substitute for them.

There is one real hazard in the shift of primacy from synagogue to school. Will it only hasten and promote the divorce of Jewish law from the needs of contemporary life? Will it end up by making Jewish law entirely a matter for schools and academies and unworldly scholars remote from the actual lives of American Jews? The modern synagogue, with all its faults, is part and parcel of the people's life. Can we say the same of the Jewish academy?

It remains to be seen if the yeshiva movement can cope with this danger. The ultimate authority to change and develop Jewish life rests with the people—with all those who are committed to a belief in the divine origin of the Law. Rabbis, as I have pointed out, derive their authority as interpreters of the Law from the people, but this authority can only be conferred by a public literate enough to recognize who is worthy of it. As more and more yeshiva graduates come forward who are both Judaically literate and worldly enough to fill positions in all walks of life—who, that is, are qualified to appreciate the demands of Jewish law as well as the needs of life in the present—a Jewish "general will" may develop, and from this general will those "scholar saints" who possess the religious penetration to perceive the unity of life and Law can derive their authority as the Law's doctors. Such men have appeared in the past. They rose to prominence not because they were rabbis of synagogues or presidents of rabbinical associations or heads of great fund-raising campaigns. Most often they were both rabbis in the communities and teachers in the seminaries. Orthodox Jewry the world over has thus far succeeded only in transferring leadership from the preacher to the scholar; it has still to produce such "scholar saints."

Now that the passion of the postwar American Jewish community for building “fine edifices” has almost exhausted itself, it may not seem petulant to suggest that the architecture and décor of synagogues are not as important as their spiritual organization. The Talmud, which prescribes meticulously for every phase of personal and social living, is relatively permissive with respect to the establishment of synagogues and the hiring of religious functionaries. Perhaps the Talmud recognized that synagogues are only a

means, and divine law does not attempt to fix means in the same way as ends. Precisely for this reason Judaism is not saddled with fixed institutional patterns for church and clergy. And in an age when so much of the antipathy to religion is an antipathy to its bureaucratization and institutionalization, the Jewish rabbinate, by taking up again its old non-institutional role as teacher, can demonstrate how Judaism favors the modern point of view on this as on so many other matters.

THE KHAZAR POET

LEO HABER

The Khazars, a pagan people who lived between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, were converted to Judaism about 740 C.E., following the lead of their king, Bulan U. History says that the king examined Christian, Moslem, and Jewish scholars before choosing the mother religion. The Khazars were wiped out by the Count of Kiev in the 10th century.

We are a nation of Jews; of Jews, I repeat,
 converted by the harmful views of a
 demented king
 who for himself seeks no wing of bird or
 libation.
 An odd man, froward, wayward, dignified,
 intellectual;
 not deified (as I've already said) in the way
 of his forebears,
 but tears an idol worshipper to shreds
 and would flay a fool sooner than a regiðide.
 Be my lovely bride, he drooled to the
 witches' Sabbath.
 And the land really stood still far and wide!
 Even the court poets stopped to chant chill
 hymns,
 the mealy-mouthed, wary sons of bitches!

Don't believe the slick story that he asked
 three men of the cloth
 to state their case and then chose to cleave
 to the one
 that the others would have as their very own.
 That tale has grown with the years, flavored

and spiced;
 yet to me a baleful one that savors of a poet's
 enticing plot
 to justify the ways of kings to sots.
 He merely chose an abstract God, an
 intellectual triumph,
 unseen, unheard, unheralded, shod of all
 intermediaries,
 bereft of all issue, no saints, no ikons, no
 living tissue,
 nothing that a peasant's hand or a poet's
 mind sees and can touch;
 fettered only in phylacteries.

He also chose the hind pursued by the
 wolves of the world.
 Even now the rude Count is at the gate,
 bloody battle flag unfurled.
 Is it self-hate, self-laceration—
 that he should choose to mingle his fate
 with the game and not with the hunter!¹
 Let us have a scientific name for this odd
 pleasure.
 With these Jews it's such a common state.

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