THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF AMERICAN JEWRY

AMITAI ETZIONI

The American Jewish Community is often analyzed by distinguishing the theological or social or economic differences of the groups that go to make it up. But the religious institutions of this community have been examined less frequently. Investigators have usually assumed that Jewish religious life is more or less “congregational” and that control of it rests in the hands of local leaders. Over the last eighty years, however, each of the three branches of Judaism has developed—as have the Baptists and even the Congregationalists—a rather extensive national structure of institutions. It is a commonplace to note that strongly hierarchic religions can control and affect the religious life of their members in many ways; and though Jewish institutions are very far indeed from being neatly ordered parts of one hierarchic structure, yet the institutions do exist, and it is worth examining them to understand the ways in which they affect the religious life of their members.

Superficially, the organizational make-up of the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements are quite similar. Each has a so-called lay organization of congregations; each has a professional association of rabbis; and each has a rabbinical school which serves as a spiritual and, to some degree, organizational center of the movement. But the influence exerted by these institutions varies quite considerably within each of the three groups.

In the examination of the influence of these institutions on Jewish religious life, an inquiry which deserves many volumes, we choose to focus on one central issue: the degree to which the national institutions support more traditional as against more innovative forms of religious expression and ritual. Following the Jewish tradition, we see in the continuous observance of the various Jewish rites a central indicator of the degree to which each movement is “traditional,” whatever its theology may be.

Rabbis and laity often use the term “right” to refer to what we call here traditional, and “left” to what we refer to as innovative. But since “left” and “right” are used also to designate differences in theology, and since a person who is, let us say, “left” in ritual might be “right” in theology, these terms seem to add more confusion than clarity and hence will be avoided. We will characterize groups as more or less traditional, or innovating, keeping “traditionalistic” to refer to the most traditional groups.

Of course, there are in all three movements individuals whose religious behavior varies a great deal; our concern here is with the effects national Jewish institutions have on general trends toward traditionalism or religious innovation. Hence we will necessarily have to make generalizations, not doing full justice to the special position of Rabbi X.
in movement Y, or even to this or that group of three to six congregations which follow a course different from the rest of their movement.

O F ALL the national religious Jewish institutions, the Conservative institutions are the most elaborate and most centralized; their effect is somewhat similar to the effect that is often attributed to a hierarchical religion: the institutions support the traditional elements of the religious movement, countering the secular pressures of the laity; they generate a traditional "party line"; they tend to support the rabbi in conflicts with the congregations when the issue is one of tradition versus change. Conservative institutions are succeeding increasingly in their endeavor to make the rabbi the movement's representative; he is encouraged if he successfully supports its traditions and is himself supported if—while serving the cause prudently and wisely—he clashes with the laity. Of course even religious organizations are not composed of saints: personal loyalties, sympathies, and cliques play a role. But since, as we shall see, the "higher ups" tend to be more traditional in their position toward religious behavior than those lower down the scale, and since they have a personal commitment to the success of their view, these personal ties and cliques often lend support to the policy which they favor.

The Conservative institutional framework has three tiers: at the top is a charismatic leader who also serves as the organizational head, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary; the second level consists of the faculty of the Seminary; and the third, of two national organizations, the professional association of Conservative Rabbis (the Rabbinical Assembly) and the lay organization of the congregations (the United Synagogue of America). Formally, these three organizations—the Seminary, the Assembly, and the United Synagogue—are autonomous, equal in standing and rights. But formal relationships have a way of adjusting themselves to the needs of particular situations. In practice, it is clear that the Seminary is the dominant institution of the Conservative movement.

Rabbis, board members, and worshippers in Conservative synagogues are quick to tell you, with an admiration that is mixed with a trace of annoyance, that the Seminary is actually Orthodox. Members of the Rabbinical Assembly point out that to all intents and purposes the service in the Seminary is Orthodox (while there is no mechizah, men and women are not seated together); that the Seminary chapel uses an Orthodox and not the Conservative prayerbook; and that the rabbi of the chapel and the pattern of his service are both Orthodox. Finally, while there are "all kinds" of faculty in the Seminary (even the head of the "innovative" Reconstructionists), the majority, and in controlling authority, are quite Orthodox in their personal religious life. This generally traditional orientation of the Seminary affects the outlook and activities of the other two organizations and so comes to color the quality of the entire Conservative movement in various ways.

The first of these is through the personal influence of its leader, which goes much beyond the boundaries of the Seminary. Secondly, the Seminary has a monopoly on the training of Conservative rabbis; as a highly effective educational institution, it often succeeds in instilling its spirit into its graduates. Moreover the leaders of both the Rab-
binical Assembly and the United Synagogue are also Seminary graduates and hence have the usual indebtedness and respect students feel for their masters. But not less important than these factors and more frequently overlooked is the "institutional" influence the Seminary wields over the other Conservative organizations. The fact that the headquarters of both the Assembly and the United Synagogue are in the buildings of the Seminary (which is not the case with either the Reform or the Orthodox movements) illustrates this informal subordination.

This is not to imply that the Rabbinical Assembly is without influence in "higher circles" or never "talks back to authority." There is constant grumbling among the Assembly's membership, the rabbis, about what some of them consider excessive control from above. A young rabbi, who examined the minutes of the national meetings of the Assembly, found that at every single meeting of the Assembly this complaint was expressed in one covert way or another, frequently in the argument over some "verdict" laid down by the Seminary authorities in matters of Jewish rites. But never did the grumbling amount to more than a decision to appoint a committee to study the relationships between the Assembly and the Seminary. Rabbis are even reluctant to mention, much less to use, the big club they hold over the Seminary: the fact that they head the local drive for funds by which the activities of the whole movement are financed. The money goes to the Seminary, which then grants a small part of it to the Assembly. Thus the informal subordination of the Rabbinical Assembly is even better illustrated in its subdued grumbling than in its overt acceptance of the Seminary leadership and guidance.

Of the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue the former is the more powerful. It is, in fact, the most powerful professional association of rabbis in America; many of its members fondly refer to it as "our labor union," for in addition to enforcing an ethical code, the association maintains a welfare program for its members and, to some degree, also controls the allocation of pulpits among them. Congregations are free to choose any rabbi who fulfills their special needs, but they are expected to do so through a placement commission. The commission is composed of representatives from the Seminary, the Assembly, and the United Synagogue, and is situated in the Seminary. If the slate of available rabbis it provides is rejected, another one is supplied; but each slate is accompanied by efforts to convince the congregational representatives of the necessity of retaining rabbis the commission believes are both suitable for the congregation and within the movement's tradition. These efforts often result in sending the congregation a somewhat more traditional rabbi than the congregation would have itself selected. The single most important member of the commission is the executive director of the Rabbinical Assembly—currently Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, a graduate of the Seminary who works in close cooperation with it.

The Assembly's influence lies in the control it can exert over its own members, the rabbis: the majority of Conservative rabbis will not accept invitations from congregations without the approval of the placement commission. For rabbis who are in great demand, getting approval is mainly a matter of good form; they know it is very likely to be granted. Asking for it is in conformity with the rules and habits of
their association. For young or less popular rabbis the gaining of approval is more significant. To move from one congregation to another without such approval—and rabbis often move from five to eight times in the course of their careers—means that a rabbi loses the commission’s support for his next move.

It is true, of course, that at present there is a general scarcity of rabbis, and among the Conservatives in particular (this is documented in a fine study of the “rabbinical labor force” by Eli Ginzberg). Thus, practically every rabbi, with or without the Assembly’s or the commission’s support, can find a pulpit, at worse a small pulpit in the South, or become a chaplain in the armed forces, in a prison, or in county hospitals. But rabbis, like ministers and other professionals, prefer to serve large congregations in big cities close to centers of Jewish and cultural life. Appointments to these pulpits, to the degree that the Assembly controls them, provide the informal sanctions and rewards which help the Assembly to enforce its “line” and discipline. This is not to imply that all the “plum” pulpits are controlled by the commission. The older, larger, richer congregations of the bigger cities tend to be independent in spirit and to carry considerable weight in the movement. Hence, when they want to get a certain rabbi, let us say a rabbi who would build some national reputation for himself by writing articles in Jewish magazines and delivering speeches at national conventions, they are likely to get him. Moreover, the rabbi who builds up such a reputation, by virtue of it, gains considerable independence of the various sanctions and controls. Still, the majority of the rabbis, and it seems an ever increasing number, “play it safe” by getting at least the approval—if not the assignment—of the Assembly; and many congregations, it seems in growing numbers, go through the placement commission, hence the Seminary and the Assembly, in their search for a rabbi.

Like many associations which control attractive positions, the Rabbinical Assembly is a rather exclusive organization. Only graduates of the Seminary, advocates of the proper mixture of tradition and innovation, are assured automatic membership. Though quite a few graduates of the rabbinical school of Yeshiva University (Orthodox) serve Conservative congregations, only a limited number of them have been accepted by the Assembly. Non-Seminary graduates are now requested to take some courses in the Seminary before applying for membership, and when they are interviewed about their religious positions they cannot appear too Orthodox (they are embarrassed if they wear a headcover during the interview), nor too un-Orthodox (recently a rabbi was rejected because he said that his wife shopped on Saturday). In general, however, to be accepted they must hew closer to the line of the Seminary than even the average Conservative rabbi.

The Assembly has a code which its members are required to follow, a code supported by such formal sanctions as suspension of placement privilege and even expulsion. Two items of the code read as follows: “Members of the Rabbinical Assembly may negotiate only through the offices of the placement commission.” “At no time will a member of the Rabbinical Assembly submit his name, or even indirectly cause his name to be submitted, as a candidate without the prior approval of the commission.” Some additional ten items spell out the other “don’ts” which are intended to
strengthen its influence over the rabbis, the pulpits, and, through both, over the religious tendencies of the movement.

The United Synagogue of America is the weaker sister of the Assembly, and the second arm of the Seminary. It is, presumably, an organization of the congregations. More accurately, however, it is an organization for the congregations that was founded by the Seminary and is run by a rabbi according to rules and standards formulated under the active leadership of the Seminary faculty. In part its function is to increase lay cooperation in maintaining the proper religious orientation. (A congregation was recently suspended for not following the ruling against Bingo in the synagogue; and another was not accepted as a member because its members' children write in its school on Saturday.)

The relatively weak position of the congregational organization is reflected in its “Standards for Synagogue Practice” - the code to direct lay leaders. Considerably influenced by the “employees,” the rabbis, and their representatives in the Seminary court, these “standards” explicitly recognize the superior authority of the rabbis in all “spiritual” matters - and there seem to be no others. The first article of the “Standards,” which were adopted in 1957, reads: “The United Synagogue of America recognizes the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly of America as its authority on Jewish Law.” (As we shall see, the parallel article in the constitution of the Reform congregations stresses the autonomy of these congregations.) The second reads: “Each congregation shall look to its rabbi, by virtue of his election as spiritual leader of the congregation, as its authority on all matters of Jewish law and prac-

But this pattern is not typical of Jewish religious organizations in America. In the Reform movement the institutions of rabbis, laity, and school are less centralized; and the movement in general concerns itself somewhat less with the struggle of tradition and innovation and considerably more with a commitment to “social action” and a struggle over Zionism.
Unlike the Conservative movement, one building does not house all three Reform organizations: the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (its rabbinical school, otherwise known as the College); the Central Conference of American Rabbis (otherwise known as the Conference); and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (its organization of congregations, otherwise known as the Union). Moreover, the Reform movement not only does not consider its rabbinical school its central authority but operates under the dual authority of the rabbinical and the lay institutions. The stronger of these two, again unlike the Conservative movement, is the lay one.

Historically, the Conservative Seminary developed long before the Conservative movement. It served as the basis of the Conservative expansion that came with the Americanizing of the East European Jews at the turn of the century, and it has always been the single source of Conservative rabbis. But the Reform College is the result of a recent merger of two schools (the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati and the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York), and until this merger rabbis could receive their training in either institution. Reform lacks, in other words, the centralizing strength of a common training place of all its spiritual leaders and hence a source of common tradition. (It remains to be seen whether the recent merger will change this.)

Partly as a result of this lack and also in part because the College is not led by as strong a personality as heads the Seminary, and because the organization of congregations (the Union) has separate headquarters, the staff members of the Union, though many of them are rabbis, are more inclined to give their allegiance to the Union's "line" and to its leader, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, than to the rabbinical association or to the College. The fact that the president of the Union, the many heads of its divisions, and many members of its commissions and committees are rabbis, does not mean that the Union is strongly affected by the Conference (the Reform rabbinical association) the way the Conservative United Synagogue is affected by the Rabbinical Assembly, or that the Union is not predominantly "lay" in outlook and line. Because of the rapid turnover of the leadership in the Conference, and the continued leadership and stability of career in the Union, because of the considerable lay interests of the Reform rabbis in general (human rather than narrowly religious matters, and some other factors too complicated to be pursued here), the Union—staffed with rabbis as it may be—is still an organization of the laity, responsive to its positions and needs, not an organization for the congregations by rabbis. Yet the Union's influence in itself is comparatively small, in part because of its constitution and due to the formal structure of its constitution whose preamble reads:

Nothing contained in this Constitution or the By-Laws shall be construed so as to interfere in any manner whatsoever with the mode of worship, the school, the freedom of expression and opinion, or any of the other congregational activities of the constituent congregations of the Union.

This clearly limits the Union's ability to control the congregations.

Article VIII is now under criticism by the Union leadership precisely because it obstructs the development of a guide for the congregations. Without taking any position regarding an innovation-tradition issue, Rabbi Eisendrath, speak-
ing for the Union, has made a strong appeal for the guide:

Hats on, hats off: rabbis robed, rabbis unrobed; *avc Atorah, sans* Atorah; one day Rosh Ha-Shana and two days likewise; Ashkenazic pronunciation and Sephardi likewise; kosher kitchens in Reform social halls—all this and ham and bacon too...some may call this the “free development of the religious idea” and bless it with the sacrosanct shibboleth of “autonomy, autonomy, autonomy” — but with a candor borrowed from and a courage inspired by [Isaac Mayer] Wise, I too call it “anarchy, and utter chaos.”

Any such guide would require a change in Article VIII so as to increase the role of the national organization in the local organization’s life.

Despite the absence of a central authority in the Reform movement, there is an influential source of traditional or neo-traditional tendencies in the local congregations and their leaders. There is, in fact, a long tradition among some Reform congregations to be more “right” than the Reform national organizations.¹ The rightist tendency of these congregations is reflected in their inducing rabbis to re-introduce such “rituals” as Bar Mitzvah and the observance of the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah (in some cases under the explicit threat to go Conservative “otherwise”) and their attempt to return to more traditional American Jewish patterns, such as having the main service on Friday, using Hebrew instead of English, and so on.

The Reform movement has about six hundred congregations, of which half

¹ Nathan Glazer suggested that the development of the Conservative movement can be traced to a protest of rightist Reform members against the leftist leadership concentrated around the College in the 1880’s.
Reform rabbis and leaders.) Despite such objection, Union leadership wields its influence and guidance on questions of social action with the full support of the rabbinical association—and the institutional leadership will probably put through a strong social action program such as, by now, is traditional in the Reform movement. In the other two movements, social action stirs relatively little interest, among other reasons because it is felt to be "Reform business."

Zionism is another major issue in the Reform movement. Rabbis, board members, and other leaders all talk with considerable pride of Reform’s internal struggles concerning the American Council for Judaism, an anti-Zionist organization that drew most of its members from the Reform. "They cannot get any more anti-Zionist rabbis," a major Reform leader said. "All they can do is check that the rabbi we send them is not an adherent Zionist who will talk about Israel all the time." To Conservatives and to the Modern Orthodox, on the other hand, Zionism is not such a central issue; both movements take a practically unanimous (and basically positive) position. Thus, in summary, the Reform leadership is less centralized than the Conservative leadership and somewhat less active in regard to the religious issues of "right" and "left," exerting its influences more clearly on the secular issues of social action and Zionism.

The framework of the Orthodox organization is also very different. In the first place, it offers almost no centralization at all. There are four main rabbinical organizations (many rabbis are "free lancers"); many more Yeshivot, all of which train rabbis; and no one central organization of congregations. Finally, there is no central authority that regulates these institutions and associations.

Modern Orthodoxy (which represents the more innovating part of Orthodox Jewry) offers the most centralized elements of the Orthodox movement and resembles somewhat the Conservative organization. Yeshiva University serves as its spiritual and organizational center. The majority of the members of its rabbinical association (the Rabbinical Council) and most of the association’s leaders are graduates of Yeshiva and work in close contact with its masters. The Union of Jewish Congregations of America, however, Modern Orthodoxy’s parallel to the United Synagogue, is less

2 It should be noted that many of the students at the rabbinal school of Yeshiva University never intended to become practicing rabbis in the first place, like their predecessors in European Yeshivot.
tied to this spiritual center than its Conservative counterpart and draws rabbis and leadership from sources other than Yeshiva. The most striking difference between this segment of the Orthodox movement and the Conservative movement lies in the degree of control their respective rabbinical associations can impose. A Modern Orthodox rabbi can readily attain a gratifying pulpit without the support or consent of his rabbinical association or the Yeshivot. Because of the strong tendency to leave the pulpit for non-rabbinical positions, few sanctions can be applied. Hence, whatever “line” the Yeshiva supports, it brings to that “line” much less influence than do its counterparts in Conservative or even in Reform Judaism.3

To what effect, then, is the limited institutional power of the Modern Orthodox movement used? Yeshiva University, like the Seminary, is more traditional than the rabbis, and the rabbis that it produces are more traditional than their congregations. It is a commonplace among the Modern Orthodox rabbis that most of them cannot eat in the homes of the presidents of their congregations, or even of the more devoted members, because the latter do not observe Kashruth to a degree their rabbis consider satisfactory.

While the Yeshiva, like the Seminary, serves to counter lay pressures, there is a crucial difference in that, while the Seminary is instrumental in moving the Conservatives to the right, the Yeshiva—

3 To some degree, Modern Orthodoxy, again unlike the Conservative movement, also contains a separation of spiritual and administrative leadership under the respective guidance of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, a professor at Yeshiva University, and Dr. Samuel Belkin, its president.
servative rabbis are under different kinds of pressures. Each of them must be a super-administrator in order to run efficiently the various activities, institutions, and associations which make up most modern congregations; in addition, each must direct, or at least participate in, a large number of "social" activities that have little or no religious meaning. The strains that these requirements impose on the rabbis are sometimes exaggerated—the new generation of rabbis in particular is much more aware of these problems and much more able to deal with them. Nevertheless, most of the graduates of the College, the Seminary, and the Yeshiva tend to identify with their teachers and masters. Many, at least for a few years, hope to be religious scholars, or "intellectuals" (quite a few try to remain affiliated with their educational institutions in order to realize these aspirations). Rabbinical education as often as not rather deliberately prepares its students for the pulpit as it was or ought to be and so increases the crisis that ensues upon graduating and getting out into the congregational world.

One should not be too hasty in pointing out the undesirable effects of such training. Congregations pressure the rabbi toward the direction of social administration; the educational institutions train him in the opposite direction, toward scholarship and spiritual aspirations—with the result that between these diametrically opposed approaches a rabbi often has to compromise. Of course, if the gap is too large a compromise cannot be reached; if the strain on the rabbi is too great he may even leave the rabbinate. (Training that is too far removed from "reality" supplies one reason why about two-thirds of the

4 Published in The Jews, edited by Marshall Sklare. The following comments are based in part on this study.
graduates of Yeshiva University's rabbinical school do not hold pulpits.)

Yet once the rabbi is "out there" in the congregation, despite the official policy of the Conservative and the Reform bodies that he is the final authority on Jewish law, the institutional leaders are more inclined to help him reach a "proper" compromise with the congregations, that is, in line with the movement's tradition as interpreted by its leadership and institutions—though the need to reduce conflicts between the rabbi and the congregation is also taken into account. But even in the centralized Conservative movement, the support—which concerns not only questions of tradition versus innovation but those of "intellectual" rabbis versus administrative and "social" ones—is far weaker than that given by any church-like religion.

An analysis of the role of the rabbi suggests the same general conclusion which emerges from the analysis of the interplay among the various institutions which constitute the national framework of the three movements: the general trend is toward a more traditional (or neo-traditional) pattern of Jewish religious life, but not toward a traditionalistic one. The Reform movement, with the exception of a hard core of "Classical Reform" congregations, seems to be moving in the more traditional direction; the Conservatives in toto are becoming still more traditional. Modern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, tends to accept some of the innovative patterns introduced by the other two movements, with only a small segment sticking to a militant, traditionalistic line.

The role the national institutions of the three movements plays in this trend toward a more traditional Jewish life varies from movement to movement. In the Reform the major driving force seems to be at the moment a grass root movement, led by the young new Reform congregations. Among the Orthodox, where the institutional structure is the weakest, the grass-root movement is in the less traditionalistic direction. The institutional structure is playing a limited anchorage role, attempting to reduce the drift in the innovative direction. It is among the Conservatives that the institutional structure exerts itself most, in leading the movement, despite some congregational resistance, in the more traditional, and in my book hence more Jewish, direction.