

ture movement. Founded by Felix Adler, the son of Samuel Adler (the rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El in New York), Ethical Culture held that one did not need God or Jewishness to be an ethical person. This competing movement was causing affluent, assimilation-inclined German-born Jews to abandon Reform synagogues and flock instead to Adler's secular alternative.

Faced with this challenge, a group of leading Reform rabbis convened in Pittsburgh in 1885 and issued the first Reform statement of principles—the Pittsburgh Platform—which declared that a Jew could be modern and ethical while still affirming God and Jewishness.

#### **Four years later, Wise created the Central Conference of American Rabbis. What was its purpose, and why did he use the word “Central”?**

By 1889 several regional rabbinic organizations had been created in the United States. Wise, based in Cincinnati, wanted to organize a Midwestern association of rabbis—though his true aim was to consolidate the American rabbinate into one larger body which could provide a support system, fellowship, and learning opportunities for all rabbis. Reaching out at first to rabbis in the Midwest—hence the name “Central”—he quickly succeeded in recruiting alumni of his college, Midwestern rabbis, and rabbis across the United States who broadly supported the Reform Movement. By the time the CCAR met for the first time in Cleveland in 1890, it had clearly emerged as the voice of the Reform rabbinate in America.

One of the CCAR's first orders of business was to create a Movement-wide prayer book that would help a distinctly American Reform rabbinate provide religious guidance and assert a greater leadership role among Reform Jews. The strategy worked: By the 1890s, a large number of the UAHC-affiliated congregations had adopted the *Union Prayer Book I* as their liturgy, making it a unifying force in the emerging Reform Movement. Subsequent CCAR prayer books and other liturgical works continued this tradition, most recently, *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (2007).

#### **How else did the CCAR exert influence?**

In the early 1900s, a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the Central Conference began to speak out forcefully on social justice issues, particularly for the rights of workers, even as rabbis had to contend with the displeasure of anti-union owners and managers sitting in the pews. At the time, the movement known as American Progressivism—which focused on social reforms intended to improve the life of the ordinary worker—was on the rise, and Reform rabbis became increasingly convinced of its compatibility with Judaism. Often they advocated for social justice in concert with Christian clergy, who preached what was then widely called “the Social Gospel.”

Here again, women congregants also helped pave the way to enable rabbis to speak truth to power. The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (now Women of Reform Judaism), founded in 1913, recognized that the rabbis were in fact championing one of their own causes—addressing the needs of working women, particularly in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. And following World War I, Jewish women, who tended to view war as a great injustice, joined forces with the majority of Reform rabbis in advocating pacifism.

But the most contentious issue in the Reform Movement concerned Zionism. In opposition to what had been the prevailing view since the original Pittsburgh Platform, a faction led by the charismatic Rabbi Stephen S. Wise began to give primacy to the idea of “Jewish peoplehood.” This more ethnic understanding of Jewish identity, interwoven with the historical religious experience of the Jewish people, collided with the earlier Reform notion, articulated in the Pittsburgh Platform, that Judaism held a universal worldview of God. As antisemitism rose around the world and violence against Jews intensified, first in Russia and then in Germany, the tension between these conflicting views reached a tipping point. It became apparent that the old belief in lofty ethical monotheism had to be tempered by the practical need to help oppressed Jewish communities around

the world. Thus, in 1937, in Columbus, Ohio, the CCAR issued a new statement of Reform principles—the Columbus Platform—which emphasized the Jews' specific religious experience. This was a huge shift from the universal ideas espoused half a century earlier. Whereas the Pittsburgh Platform opened with “We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the infinite,” the Columbus Platform began with the affirmation that “Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people.”

#### **Did later Reform platforms also encompass dramatic shifts in perspective?**

Unlike the earlier platforms, the CCAR's 1976 “Centenary Perspective”—named to coincide with the American Bicentennial—was not intended to be a response to specific ideological or theological threats, but rather to serve as a snapshot of the Movement in the last quarter of the 20th century. However, under the guidance of Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, a new and fundamental question about the nature of Reform Judaism crystalized: “How can a Reform Movement rooted in the idea of personal autonomy hold itself together when it incorporates so many diverse theological perspectives and religious practices?” Rabbi Borowitz's answer: “Make the tent large enough to accommodate as many views as possible.” He concluded the platform, “... Yet in all our diversity we perceive a certain unity and we shall not allow our differences in some particulars to obscure what binds us together.” This same approach was reflected in the Central Conference of American Rabbis' 1975 prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, which afforded Reform congregations a larger variety of Reform services from which to choose, many of which diverged theologically.

By the end of the 20th century, however, some rabbis were beginning to wonder if upholding personal autonomy as the ideal was weakening Reform Jews' sense of Jewish obligation. If throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century Reform Jews in America had grappled with the question: “How