

What other congregational innovations emerged in the 1880s?

During this time, as thousands of Eastern European Jews were landing on American shores, it was not uncommon for Reform Jews of German descent to make their congregations less inviting to the Yiddish-speaking newcomers. One of the more significant changes was eliminating the bar mitzvah ceremony. This custom, dating from the late Middle Ages, had probably emerged to celebrate a Jewish child's coming of age at a time when life expectancy was short and many children did not live to age 13. Later in Eastern Europe bar mitzvahs gained popularity because boys were being conscripted into the army and their families wanted a ceremony that would allow them to affirm their faith before leaving home. Reform Jews therefore regarded the bar mitzvah ceremony as outdated and easily expendable. They replaced it with Confirmation of high school-age boys and girls—another Protestant practice.

What led to moving Sabbath services from Saturday to Sunday morning?

It's a myth that Sabbath services were moved to Sunday. In reality, Sunday morning became the time when Reform rabbis chose to deliver their weekly address as a way of attracting more people into the synagogue. Remember, the traditional Sabbath service took place on Saturday morning, but most Reform leaders owned businesses and worked on Saturdays, which

resulted in a paltry turnout. A Friday night service was introduced to see if people would show up after work, and while this proved somewhat successful, it did not fully solve the attendance problem. So the synagogue leaders initiated adult education lectures on Sunday mornings featuring the rabbi's sermon. Throughout America, the great rabbinic preachers spoke eloquently and dramatically for about 20–40 minutes each Sunday, drawing big crowds of Jews, and often non-Jews as well. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise's orations at the Free Synagogue in New York, for example, were so well attended, they were often scheduled at Carnegie Hall.

These Sunday sermons were preceded and followed by hymns, and some congregations added weekday prayers before the sermon as well.

In these early Reform congregations, who "called the shots"?

The lay leadership, dominated by wealthy, influential, and powerful men who owned and operated brokerages, retail stores, and other business establishments. At the time, the few rabbis and *chazanim* (cantors) were not regarded as authority figures, but treated as employees with particular skills. Often rabbis had to sign synagogue contracts requiring adherence to strict rules. Synagogue minutes indicate that some rabbis had to dress a certain way; were required to unlock the building and heat up the stove in the sanctuary before the worshipers arrived; and had to promise

not to worship at another congregation, because doing so would suggest that he did not respect his employers.

In 1873 Rabbi I. M. Wise established the first umbrella organization of synagogues, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). Did the Union's founding synagogues have much in common?

They were quite different from one another. Some were from the East Coast and most from the Midwest; some were already Reform, some quite traditional. What they shared was a common goal: to help create and fund a seminary that would produce English-speaking American rabbis. So they assessed every member belonging to a Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now Union for Reform Judaism/URJ) synagogue one dollar per year to fund the creation and maintenance of HUC. This was the precursor to the URJ's Maintenance of Union Membership system still in place. To this day, 138 years later, the first plank in the Union for Reform Judaism mission statement still affirms financial support of the Hebrew Union College, and almost half of the funds the URJ collects from our 900+ affiliated temples goes directly to support HUC-JIR (representing about one-third of HUC's income).

The 1930s has been said to be a "reforming" decade in Reform synagogue life in North America. Why was it so consequential?

In one way the 1930s was like the decade we're in now, when economic downturn accelerates change. When the Great Depression hit, many congregations didn't have money to pay the utility bills or the rabbi's salary, prompting synagogue leaders to self-assess, asking themselves, "Why don't we have more money? Are we losing potential members to the Conservative Movement?" This also led to increasing scrutiny of the national bodies of the Reform Movement, reaching a climax at the 1941 UAHC Council (an earlier name for the Biennial), when Rabbi Louis Mann of Temple Sinai in Chicago delivered a stinging speech accusing the Union of being asleep and little more than "a religious mail-order business." Mann warned that member-

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1. Do you agree that "the supreme challenge" facing the Reform Movement today is "the changing attitude toward affiliation and membership...that people are less committed to organizations of any kind"? If you agree, how do we tackle this problem? If you disagree, what do you think is the "supreme challenge" and what needs to be done to address it?
2. Do you agree that one of the best ways to make the Reform synagogues and the Reform Movement less vulnerable to economic downturns is to stop depending on membership dues and religious school fees? What are the best alternatives?
3. Are you optimistic that the Reform Movement in North America can adapt to "the new realities" (e.g. financial, demographic, aversion to affiliation) because "we always have" in the past? Explain.

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