

ship losses would continue if Movement leaders did not aggressively reach out to non-German Jews and modify congregational practices so that greater numbers of American Jews perceived Reform as the mainstream of American Judaism, not merely a German-Jewish version.

In response, the Union, under its new president, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, expanded its programs and encouraged the formation of more congregations to attract the unaffiliated. Reform congregations also instituted changes, reinstating Jewish practices that had been rejected, among them bar mitzvah ceremonies and the wearing of head coverings during worship. In addition, Reform leaders softened their resistance to the notion of Jewish peoplehood, no longer insisting that they were Americans who practiced Judaism solely as a *religion*. In the 1930s, terms expressing Jewish peoplehood, such as *Klal Yisrael* (the community of Israel) and *Am Yisrael* (the people of Israel), began to appear in Reform publications. Such changes did not become mainstream until well into the 1950s and 1960s, after the establishment of the State of Israel, but they marked the beginning of a 30-year effort to make the children of Eastern European Jews feel comfortable in Reform congregations.

### **When did Eastern European Jews truly become comfortable in Reform congregations?**

The big shift occurred after World War II. As the grandchildren of German Jewish immigrants and the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants served together in the armed forces, they discovered, to some surprise, that they had much in common. In the U.S. military, Jews confronted antisemites who did not differentiate between German Jews and Eastern European Jews any more than Hitler differentiated between one Jew and another. The wartime experience of these 20-year-old Jews served as a strong bonding force. Whereas beforehand the two groups had belonged to separate Jewish country clubs and urban eating clubs, after the war the old preconceptions about the “other” broke down and the rate of “intermarriage” between German Jews and Eastern European Jews soared. By

the 1960s, half the members of Reform temples were of Eastern European background, leading, in decades to come, to an infusion of more traditional practices into the Reform Movement.

### **How did more traditional practice become normative in Reform Judaism?**

Remember, Reform congregations are democracies and autonomous. Nothing in Reform Judaism says, “You cannot consider this or that Jewish practice.” So if 50% of Reform congregants grew up in traditional synagogues listening to a cantor chant the liturgy and the other 50% were raised in temples with a professional choir, the congregation which never had a cantor would hire one—and keep the professional choir. Similarly, if the majority of ritual committee members wanted to observe *Tashlich* on Rosh Hashanah, traveling to a body of water and throwing in pieces of bread representing one’s sins, even if Reform Jews had never followed this custom before, the congregation would adopt it now. And if the majority of the congregation wanted *tallitot* and *kippot* available, they would be offered at services. Not everyone would have to wear them, of course—the hallmark of Reform is individual autonomy—but very little of Jewish tradition lay outside the boundaries of Reform Judaism.

This is how, by the 1970s, bar mitzvah had become the norm rather than the exception in Reform congregations (with bat mitzvah added for girls), and how Confirmation began to lose its status as the most significant lifecycle ceremony for Reform Jewish teens.

### **How else did World War II impact the UAHC and its congregations?**

With the introduction of the G.I. Bill, Jews, like all veterans, were offered low-cost college educations and home loans. As a result, Reform Jewish families joined America’s mass migration from the cities to outlying areas, sparking a synagogue building boom in suburbia. In the period from 1945 to 1965, the number of Reform congregations doubled, from about 300 to 600, and with this upsurge the Union of American Hebrew Congregations’ mission expanded as

well. Until World War II, the Union’s primary functions were to support the Hebrew Union College and to publish educational materials for Reform Sabbath schools. After the war, the Union took a more active role in helping to create and strengthen Reform congregations, in creating youth (NFTY) and camping systems to strengthen the Jewish identity of the emerging baby-boomer children, in establishing a voice in the nation’s capital through its Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and in supporting the worldwide expansion of Reform Judaism through the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

In addition, this environment of post-war prosperity led to the growing professionalization of North American synagogues—staff increases, expanded facilities, and new architectural styles. The staff of a prewar synagogue likely included a rabbi, a part-time or volunteer educator, and an office secretary. After the war, with the influx of so many children in temple religious schools, full-time Jewish educators became a necessity. And the demand for professional cantors was so great, HUC’s new School of Sacred Music couldn’t train them quickly enough. Before World War II, the sanctuary dominated the synagogue building, but in the postwar period the majority of square footage was allocated to religious school classrooms, office complexes, social halls, and kitchens.

### **Did the ’60s protest movements also transform Reform synagogue life?**

Yes, in a different way. The protest culture in opposition to the Vietnam War and in support of the growing women’s movement encouraged synagogue members to question the established order. People were suddenly asking, “Why can’t we sing along in services?” or “Who says that I have to wear a tie and jacket in synagogue?” Women began to question, “Why do women only sit on the *bimah* at the Sisterhood Shabbat?” or “Why can’t women be temple presidents?”

The Reform Movement adapted to the changes in America far more quickly than the Conservative Movement. Compare: HUC-JIR ordained Rabbi Sally Priesand in 1972; but in the mid-1970s if