

The Skeleton and the Mummy: Kohut, Kohler, and American Jewry's Search for Authenticity

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A Reform which seeks to progress without the Mosaic-Rabbinical tradition is a deformity – a skeleton without flesh and sinew, without spirit and heart.¹

Is Judaism to be but a sacred mummy or a fountain of life? Is it a bucket of stale water carried along from the Sinai wilderness, or a perennial spring flowing down from the rock at the bidding of the Moses-staff, still lifted by all those who, as heralds, voice the religious consciousness of the age?²

*T*hese mutually contentious statements exemplified the series of diatribes that Kaufmann Kohler and Alexander Kohut, two leading congregational rabbis in Manhattan, exchanged from their respective pulpits in the late spring and summer of 1885. The ostensible focus of this exchange was the authenticity of Orthodox and Reform Judaism, with Kohut defending the former and Kohler the latter. Indeed, a reporter for the *New York Times* characterized the debate as between Kohut, “who is a strong supporter of Orthodox Judaism,” and Kohler, “a warm supporter of the Reform doctrines.”³ This characterization was built in no small part on the way that Kohler himself periodically described Kohut’s position as Orthodox.

Such a characterization, though, is enigmatic. Less than a year earlier, Kohut, still living in Hungary, had been an outspoken critic of Hungarian Orthodoxy. Now, a few months after arriving in Manhattan, he was “recast” by Kohler as the leading defender of American Orthodoxy. This apparent confusion stems in no small part from a widespread use of the terms “Orthodox” and “Reform” as loosely applied appellations for the most traditional and progressive Jews in a given locale regardless of their specific religious outlook. What has been labeled Orthodox and Reform has varied widely from place to place. Consider, for example, the stark differences between German, Hungarian, and American Orthodoxy; and that such disparate religious figures as Isaac Leeser, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Moses Sofer were all labeled Orthodox. Consequently, Kohut was seen as an outspoken critic of Orthodoxy in Hungary and a defender of Orthodoxy in America. In fact, the two “Orthodoxies” bore little resemblance one to the other.⁴

In light of this taxonomic confusion, a closer look at the debate between Kohler and Kohut, in its more immediate American-Jewish context and its longer term European-Jewish context, can clarify and illuminate the subtleties of these terms; and, more generally, the conflicting notions of authenticity that divided Jewish thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic during the nineteenth century. Three aspects of this debate, in particular, are worthy of closer scrutiny: the vitality of “Rabbinism,” its relationship to “Mosaism” and its role in the survival and flourishing of Jewish identity amidst the challenges of the nineteenth century; the proper pace and rationale of innovation in Judaism; and the role of the rabbinate in the survival of Judaism.

Kohut and Kohler: Peas from Two Different Pods

Historians have generally presented Kohler as the champion of the radical tendency in American Reform Judaism, which was in the process of emerging as “classical reform;” and Kohut’s defense of Reform Judaism’s moderate wing at the dawn of the Conservative Movement.⁵ Yet this exchange was not merely a dispute over the future of American Jewry, but the latest incarnation of a larger debate that had begun across the

Atlantic half a century earlier. Nor was this a debate between proponents of Orthodox and Reform Judaism, but rather between two conflicting conceptions of religious innovation. Kohler's position echoed those who believed that innovations in Judaism should be justified either in terms of the *Zeitgeist*, or historically. Kohut, while no less well-versed in the rhythms of Jewish history and no less attuned to the *Zeitgeist*, nonetheless maintained the notion that any and all innovations in Judaism must be rooted in and justified according to *Halacha*.

As such, each position represented a particular understanding of "rabbinism" (the term for traditional Judaism that was in vogue among Wissenschaft scholars at the end of the nineteenth century). Kohler regarded Rabbinism as having been fashioned in response to past conditions that no longer prevailed, and thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, stagnant, outdated, and of limited use for his and subsequent generations of Jews. Like his counterparts and predecessors in the Reform Movement in Germany, he saw Rabbinism as a retreat from Mosaic Judaism, and, at best, a necessary concession to the circumstances of diaspora Jews living under foreign rule as outsiders and second-class citizens. Along similar lines, he regarded Orthodoxy as the epitome of stagnant Rabbinism.

By contrast, Kohut distinguished Rabbinism from Orthodoxy, regarding the former as still vibrant and a key element in the continued development of Judaism, and the latter as a nineteenth-century departure from the true spirit of Jewish tradition. For Kohut, rabbinic Judaism exemplified the viability and durability of Judaism, and its ability to adapt to any circumstance – especially those of the Jewish experience in the diaspora.

Kohut's and Kohler's respective outlooks reflected their European background and scholarly training. In some sense, the two were cut from similar Jewish cloth. Both were born in Central Europe, Kohler in Furth, Bavaria and Kohut in a small village near Kecskemét in Hungary. Both received a dual education that combined traditional subjects (Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Rabbinic literature) with secular subjects.

Beyond these similarities were certain key differences. Kohler was trained and mentored by Samson Raphael Hirsch, the founder and leading voice of Neo-Orthodoxy. Eventually, though, Kohler broke with Hirsch's Neo-Orthodoxy into the camp of Reform Judaism, and embraced and advocated a radical version of the latter.⁶ Kohut was trained and ordained at the Breslau rabbinical seminary by Zacharias Frankel, the founder of Positive-Historical Judaism.⁷

This, perhaps more than anything, underscores a telling difference between Kohler and Kohut. As one who had "jumped the aisle" from Orthodoxy to radical Reform, Kohler regarded the choice between adherence to tradition and a willingness to innovate Judaism as an either/or proposition, and as mutually exclusive positions – each precluding or at least significantly impeding the other. Kohut, on the other hand, had been reared in the centrist, moderate world of Positive-Historical Judaism, which did not see tradition and innovation as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary aspects of Judaism. From Breslau, Kohut would return to Hungary and lead two other centrist movements there – the left-of-center Neolog Movement and the right-of-center Status Quo Movement.⁸ Following his debate with Kohler, he would found another centrist movement in America – The Conservative Movement in Judaism. In other words, Kohler and Kohut were both armed with a similar intellectual arsenal, but brought with them different worldviews and understandings of the present and future state of Judaism to their new home in America.

The debate between Kohler and Kohut unfolded amidst the appearance of two rifts within the ranks of the Rabbinate in America. The first became evident in a comparatively minor debate between Isaac Leeser, the elder statesman and principle spokesman of traditional ("Orthodox") Judaism in America; and Max Lilienthal, a leading American Reform rabbi.⁹ Using his newspaper, *The Occident*, Leeser identified and criticized the role of Reform rabbis in leading Reform Judaism away from Jewish tradition. "Let it not surprise you," he wrote in the *Occident* in 1854, "that so many systematic attacks are made upon the remains of our

ancient learning by persons whose greatest pleasure is to decry what they do not understand and to despise everything ancient as though every day must bring forth a new system of wisdom."¹⁰

In response, Lilienthal reiterated the differences between the reformist and traditionalist, as they had been defined across the Atlantic. In an essay in the weekly *Israelite*, Lilienthal took Leiser to task:

Your party's [outlook] rests on the medieval principle of authority, the reform party on the acknowledgment of reason, as declared by the spirit of the age. Your party is founded on the unlimited belief in tradition, the reform party on the results of critical and historical investigation. Your party claims equal right and title for all our biblical, traditional, and rabbinical codices; the reform party denies this.¹¹

This exchange attracted relatively little attention, but, in retrospect, anticipated several of the core issues in the debate between Kohut and Kohler, notably the role of rabbinic Judaism and the rationale of reform. In addition, like the debate between Kohut and Kohler a generation later, the exchange between Leiser and Lilienthal was virtually devoid of *ad hominem* attacks. Rather, it was a heated but civilized exchange between two rabbis who respected one another despite their ideological and theological differences.

This would prove to be crucial in the debate between Kohut and Kohler, not least of all because, unlike the earlier exchange, the debate took place amidst greater tensions within the ranks of Reform Judaism itself. As Rebeka Bettelheim Kohut, Kohut's second wife, would later recall:

The Kohut-Kohler controversy will someday loom as one of the most significant controversies in American Jewish History. The Hungarian rabbi ... fixed the plane for the discussion so high that personalities were banished, the conflict becoming one of principles.... It would not have been hard to stir up passions and crown

fanaticism king. But Dr. Kohut's fair-mindedness was disarming; it banished invective and made it possible for two men of differing opinions to cross swords in a manner befitting their dignity and character.... That dangerous possibility in scholars' arguments, pedantry, was, happily, missing.¹²

The tensions within American Reform were triggered by Kohler's arrival in the United States during the 1860s. Kohler brought with him not only a more radical version of Reform Judaism, but also a scholarly demeanor that was superior to that of any other rabbi in America at that time. This, along with his powerfully charismatic skills as an orator, allowed him to move the Reform Movement in America in a more radical direction during the 1870s and early 1880s – all the while marginalizing the more traditional wing of the Reform rabbinate, who were seemingly powerless in the face of Kohler's European scholarship and pedigree.¹³

This sense of helplessness came to a head in 1883 during an incident known as the "Trefa Banquet." This epithet refers to the annual dinner meeting of Reform rabbis in Cincinnati, Ohio, at which the menu included shellfish – defined as "trefa" or unkosher by Jewish tradition. For radical reformers such as Kohler, who had long since jettisoned ritual obligations such as the dietary laws, this was not a problem. For the more traditional, conservative wing of the Reform rabbinate, however, this affront to their religious sensibilities prompted them to walk out from the dinner and eventually break with the movement. When Kohut, a world class scholar, arrived in New York in 1885, these conservative reformers recruited him as their spokesman to challenge Kohler's leadership. Thus the stage was set. As Kohut's son, George Alexander Kohut, would later describe: "His arrival in New York was the signal for the rallying of the conservative forces of American Jewry; and it was not before long [*sic*] that he was assailed by the radical wing. A series of lectures on 'Ethics of the Father' ... clearly set forth his conservatism."¹⁴

Though Kohler and Kohut were both skilled orators and accomplished scholars, Kohut had certain advantages in this debate from the

outset. He was a more accomplished and sophisticated scholar than Kohler; Kohler, though accomplished, was not a fully mature scholar when he engaged Kohut, but was as yet more driven by idealism and homiletics than by rigorous academic exploration and inquiry. In fact, this exchange would be his incentive to further develop his abilities as a scholar. Only several decades later, when he was working on the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, would his scholarly ability be as well-developed as Kohut's was in 1885.¹⁵

Moreover, Kohut's position – that traditional Judaism needed to be adapted to the challenges of the age – was easier to defend than Kohler's position, which called for a complete overhaul of Judaism. Finally, by the time he arrived in America, Kohut had already been involved in rabbinic debates for nearly two decades, defending his religious outlook in Hungary against the often vicious attacks of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Hungary; for Kohler, by contrast, the exchange with Kohut was his first real foray into the realm of public debate.

The Debate

The debate between the two rabbis originated as a series of sermons from their respective pulpits. Kohut presented his critique of Kohler's radical Reform on seven successive Saturday afternoons at Ahavath Chesed, the Upper West Side synagogue where he was rabbi. Kohler delivered his retorts on the following Saturday mornings at Temple Emmanuel, on Manhattan's east side. All of these sermons drew large crowds that packed the two houses of worship to capacity – not surprising given the reputations of Kohut and Kohler as two of the best orators and scholars in the Jewish world.

Kohut presented his point of view as a weekly commentary on a chapter of *Ethics of the Fathers* [*Pirkei Avot*], an early rabbinic collection of ethical and moral aphorisms, which are traditionally studied one chapter per week during the weeks between Passover and the Festival of Weeks, and then again a chapter at a time over the summer. In 1885, the Festival of Weeks fell on 20 May. Kohut's first sermon took place on the

second Saturday after this festival. These sermons were then serialized in the *American Hebrew*, a leading Jewish weekly newspaper published in New York City. Kohut's sermons appeared first in June, and then again beginning on August 6. Eventually, Kohut's side of this debate was published privately as *Ethics of the Fathers*, and promoted as the latest in a long series of rabbinic commentaries on this much-studied text. Thus Kohler and Kohut never squared off face to face. Rather, each presented his point of view, and then responded to the other's rejoinder.

The opening salvos of this debate followed the conventional array of contentions between traditionalists and progressives. Kohut introduced his initial argument by reiterating the core claim that had defined traditional Judaism since the high Middle Ages – namely, that authentic Judaism required an acceptance of Rabbinic Judaism. Commenting on the opening verse of *Ethics of the Fathers*, Kohut noted that “the chain of tradition continued unbroken from Moses ... down to the latest times. On this tradition rests our faith, which Moses first received from God on Sinai. On this foundation rests Mosaic-rabbinical Judaism today.” He then threw down the gauntlet to Kohler and other like-minded radical reformers who questioned this notion, adding: “...and on this foundation we take our stand. He who denies this ... disclaims his connection with the bond of community that unites the house of Israel...”¹⁶

This direct challenge to the possibility of authentic Judaism existing apart from Rabbinic Judaism – one of the central pillars of Reform Judaism – was the principle impetus for Kohler to respond. And respond he did, by decrying the “new rabbi of renown who, with laudable courage and independence, gives free utterance to his rigid conservatism, baldly challenging Reformed Judaism by the open declaration that he who disowns the statutes and regulations of Judaism on principle has forfeited the name of Jew...”¹⁷ Kohler rejected Kohut's prerequisite, claiming instead “the name of ‘Jew’ for all who, while standing on the platform of reformed or enlightened Judaism, discard on principle all ritualism of the past and seek for better and more adequate forms of religious devotion and life....” Kohler hammered this point home by adding categorically

that "Judaism is a living faith, not a religion confined to dead letters of a scarcely readable parchment scroll."¹⁸

Having each drawn a clear line in the sand, however, both Kohut and Kohler qualified their respective positions. Immediately after challenging the legitimacy of Reform Judaism, Kohut made it clear that his rejection of Reform did not mean that he was championing the views of Orthodoxy. On the contrary, he dissociated himself from the sanctimonious Orthodox intolerance he had encountered in Hungary, and regarded Orthodox intolerance that condemned any and all deviation from Orthodoxy's narrow standard as not only inauthentic but as a real threat to Judaism: "Does fraternal hate still rage today and party contention storm? ... Do not our Orthodox as well as our Neologians still fan the flames of animosity against each other – unholy flames that are destroying the very life of Israel?"¹⁹

Indeed, Kohut was determined not to allow this sort of narrow-mindedness to make any inroads in the New World:

But let us guard carefully against heresy-hunting. We believe that we represent true Judaism. But let us not excommunicate the leaders and members of other congregations who maintain a different standard. While we may deplore the fact that each swings his censor of separate religious views, let us realise that everyone must strive after truth in its own manner.²⁰

On the contrary, Kohut regarded Orthodox intolerance as inconsistent with the standards and behavior that the rabbis exhibited through the ages:

Let us learn tolerance from the rabbis of old, so often unjustly decried as intolerant.... How much that is good and humane is practised by the Reformers. Our *false* Orthodox (sincere and honest Orthodox is tolerant) who are so ready to use harsh words and who would deny the Jewish name to everyone who differs from them in opinion, should judge with greater leniency the Jewish heart....

Kohler qualified his position along similar lines. Unlike those who not only themselves rejected rabbinic Judaism but condemned any Jew who still remained loyal to its strictures, Kohler allowed for the possibility that, while he had no affinity for “Rabbinism,” others might. Thus he conceded, a firm embrace of Reform Judaism did not necessarily require the total elimination of traditional Judaism. On the contrary, he offered “all respect and honor to the man who conscientiously adheres to every minute ordinance of the Talmud.... I can fully sympathize with the rabbi whom love and piety prompt to spare no effort in trying to uphold this past in the face of modern progress and enlightenment.”²¹

This juxtaposition of a hard and fast distinction that Kohler and Kohut drew between their respective points of view, on the one hand, with an unwillingness to reject the rival position entirely reflects the position in which each found himself as he participated in this debate. As a defender of a radical Reform Judaism, Kohler faced criticism from the right, that is, from proponents of more moderate reformist positions, who regarded his complete rejection of Rabbinism as too radical. He also faced an even more challenging critique from those Jews who rejected any form of Judaism – Reform or otherwise – as antiquated and irrelevant. Of particular note in this regard was Felix Adler’s Ethical Cultural Movement, which rejected entirely any and all differences between Jews and non-Jews – a position that Kohler did not accept. By accepting the practices of those Jews who still found meaning in religious observance, Kohler dissociated himself from Adler’s “godless” ethical cultural movement.²²

Kohut, in Hungary and now in America, found himself situated between an Orthodox unwillingness to adapt Judaism in any way and a Reform Judaism that had cut itself off from the standard that had regulated the balance between continuity and change in Judaism for centuries: the Halachic process of legal discourse. Thus Kohut regarded Orthodox and Reform as twin inventions of the nineteenth century, each of which had deviated from the authentic traditional Judaism of past ages:

Were Moses ben Amram or Moses ben Maimon ... to rise from the graves and contemplate our modern Judaism, they would neither recognize the narrowness of Orthodox nor the Mosaism of the Reformers as being of the essence of the religion which they had taught. They would say, "You who seek only the spirit, lose thereby the kernel of religion ... while you, who take only the husk, the shell, can for that very reason never penetrate to the kernel." How, then shall we find the pure and true Judaism? Only by the happy reconciliation of both aspects.²³

It was this dual criticism of Orthodox and Reform Judaism that formed the heart of Kohut's argument against Kohler's radical Reform Judaism. Kohut objected not only to Kohler's rejection of the mandatory observance of commandments. Like his aversion to Orthodoxy, Kohut objected to Reform Judaism's extreme position. In Kohut's estimation, Reformers like Kohler, no less than proponents of Orthodoxy, had introduced into Judaism an either/or choice between an unyielding commitment to the practices and customs of old and a complete rejection of these customs and practices.

Kohut, by contrast, regarded the choice itself, in both its Orthodox and Reform manifestations, as a deviation from a tradition that not only allowed but expected its adherents to strike a usable and sensible balance between tradition and innovation. In this, Kohut echoed the teachings of moderate reformers and moderate traditionalists in Europe, who had defended this very sort of balance as the most authentic form of Judaism. Typical of this position, and instrumental in shaping Kohut's religious outlook, was Solomon Judah Rapoport, the rabbi and leading scholar of Prague during the 1830s and 1840s.

Like Kohut, Rapoport's moderate, centrist religious outlook has made it difficult to categorize him. At times he is associated with Orthodoxy, other times he is seen as a precursor to Conservative Judaism. More accurately, he is best understood as a critic of Orthodoxy and Re-

form. Wary and critical of the nascent Reform and Orthodox Movements, Rapoport contested both the Reform Movement rationale of legitimizing changes in terms of the *Zeitgeist*, and Orthodox Judaism's wholesale rejection of innovation. Instead, he pointed to the legitimate means that, in his view, prior generations of Jews had employed to introduce innovations in Judaism:

Were there some matter among our customs or laws that stood in need of reform or renewal, it would be reformed or renewed with the passing of time. Should the process of reform proceed gradually and its consummation delayed, we could not accelerate the process by force.... It is not surprising therefore that with the passing of time the presidents of the rabbinic courts and the heads of the academies allowed themselves on occasion to enact some religious reform when they perceived that this was necessary for the strengthening and the preservation of the Torah... But even in such cases they did not allow themselves to make even the smallest correction on any part of the written or oral law. They introduced changes so that no commandment would be transgressed.²⁴

In other words, for Rapoport, as for other religious centrists, traditional Judaism had internal methods that introduced religious innovations gradually and within the strictures of existing legal precedents. In this way, Rapoport believed, Judaism maintained a workable balance between maintaining the integrity of tradition and adapting that tradition, gradually, to the needs of the age. Kohut echoed this sentiment:

If "progress" is to be evidenced by destruction and not by construction; if it merely means the giving up of ancient and venerable customs ... and offers nothing in their place, then every well-meaning Jew will call such "progress" retrogression.... In the impetuous haste to abolish time-honored Jewish customs, our historical visions become blurred, and we are apt to lose sight of the

distinction between the significant and the insignificant,
the more and the less important....²⁵

Kohut reiterated this balance in his debate against Kohler as Judaism's golden mean. As he attempted to impress the importance of this balance in his listeners and readers, he wondered whether "it will be my good fortune to have your sympathy in my religious attitude – that of Mosaic-rabbinical Judaism, freshened with the spirit of progress, a Judaism of the healthy golden mean."²⁶ Kohut's golden mean meant avoiding extreme positions. In this respect, he regarded Orthodoxy and Kohler's Reform as equally flawed and ultimately self-destructive forms of Judaism. "Even the most Orthodox," he contended, "cannot affirm that he confines himself strictly to the intellectual attitude of the ancients.... Whither would this blind letter-worship lead us? ... We would be a foolish and a stupid people, indeed...." In other words, Kohut argued, claiming that Judaism never changes and can never change – "every innovation is forbidden by the Torah," the mantra of Orthodox Judaism since its inception in the early nineteenth century – was an aberration of and a departure from traditional Judaism.

By the same token, Kohut suggested, Reform Judaism had departed from that tradition in the other direction. "Looking at the reverse side of the picture," Kohut stated, "Reform claims to cleave to the spirit, removing all non-essentials. Whither does *this* conception lead us? ... Simply to the position ... that the Biblical truths, historical as well as ethical, were merely abstract ideas. Thus the Day of Atonement or the Sabbath is only the supremacy of mind over matter. Passover is the idea of abstinence ... Before all this spirit, the body disappears...."²⁷ Innovation untrammelled by tradition would render Judaism too diffuse and abstract, just as too little innovation would stultify Judaism.

At the heart of Kohut's critique was the underlying assumption that the customs and practices of Rabbinic Judaism – which Kohler referred to as "Rabbinism" – was and remained a positive element in the survival and development of Judaism. Kohler took issue with this assumption above all others. He regarded "Rabbinism," at best, as a necessary tool of

Jewish survival; at worst, an impediment to Jewish spiritual development that would cripple the Jewish people spiritually and religiously. Rejecting Kohut's defense of traditional Judaism, Kohler lamented the fact that "conservative Jews cling tenaciously to every law and tradition of the past, denying the very title of Jew to anyone who denies on principle." Kohler contrasted the antiquarian outlook of Kohut and his followers with the enlightened worldview that he tried to instill in his followers: "But, as Reformed or enlightened Jews, we humbly ask: 'Can we or ought we to observe all these obsolete and meaningless practices of the past, or ought we replace them by forms more adequate to the age?'"

Kohler justified this point of view first by invoking a mantra that European proponents of Reform Judaism had cited for decades: the notion that religious reform was an inherent part of Judaism, and that the early generations of rabbis were themselves religious reformers. He asked: "May we believe that, as the Mosaic law has been substituted by Rabbinism, so will Rabbinism be replaced by a higher and purer shape of religion..." He then answered his own query:

We behold in mosaism the result of a struggle ... between lofty prophetism and Hebrew idolatry; the work of priestly compromise between and national and impure worship of the deity and sublime ethical world-embracing and spiritual monotheism. Only in this light we find the justification for so many shortcomings and frailties under which the mosaic law labors.... The rabbis transformed the laws given to a people embedded in a national soil into regulations for a religious sect scattered over the wide globe. Under their hands mosaism thickened into a hard crust to protect the imperilled life of the jew ... amidst this process of incrustation it deepened jewish piety ... investing every jewish household and each step of life with religious sanctity and purity. All this was due to the regenerative power of reform....²⁸

In this way, Kohler conceded that, until a certain point, Rabbinic Judaism had been a positive and constructive element in Jewish History. As the circumstances and context in which Jews lived changed, however, what had been constructive became constricting. "In many great respects," he argued, "rabbinism was an improvement upon mosaism, but once petrified into thousands of minute statutes and regulations, its healthy growth was checked...."

Yet Kohler insisted that casting Judaism aside entirely, as Adler and the Ethical Culturalists advocated, was not an acceptable course of action. On the contrary, he argued that his was the surest way to insure Judaism's survival. His reforms, he claimed, furthered Judaism along the progressive path that it had embarked upon in antiquity.

"No," he claimed, "rabbinical-mosaical Judaism is dead but, far from degrading it, we wish to lay it like the broken tablets of the law ... alongside the better system of religious life which we are anxious to build in consonance with the demands of our age ... we want a living and working religion ... the dead ritualism of the past will never be able to cope with the living issues of the age...."²⁹

In response, Kohut reiterated his contention that "We cannot maintain Judaism without tradition. Without the oral teaching we cannot comprehend the written out of which it developed."

It was this point – the vitality of Rabbinic Judaism – that opened an unmendable breach between the religious outlooks of Kohler and Kohut. It is worth noting that this irreconcilable disagreement rested not only on disparate religious views but also on differing attitudes toward cultural enlightenment. Kohler's rejection of Rabbinic Judaism was tied to his belief that the difficulties Jews had faced in the past, which had necessitated the nurturing insulation of rabbinic Judaism, were no longer necessary in the age of civic equality. Particularly in America, he argued, the Judaism of bygone days was out of sync with the reality of the present, and disruptive to the possibilities that lay ahead for American Jews:

Must we, after having dropped the obsolete observances of by-gone days, after having for thirty-five years in this country worked for the emancipation from the yoke of Mosaic-Traditional Judaism, again bend our neck to wear it in order to be complete Jews, in the sense of Orthodoxy? ... Mosaic-Rabbinical Judaism is retrospective. It has not the courage to stand on its own feet. It subsists in the merits of our fore fathers....”

Kohut understood the new openness of the Age of Emancipation and American society differently. While sharing Kohler’s celebration of the unbridled and unprecedented possibilities that lay ahead for Jews in America, Kohut did not regard such possibilities as a reason to abandon Judaism. Rather, he regarded America as a place where traditional Judaism could flourish. Kohut, in this regard, believed that Kohler and like-minded Jews had confused the opportunity to enter mainstream society with the obligation to enter mainstream society. “Alas,” Kohut suggested, “in certain Jewish circles ‘wisdom and understanding’ are identified with the non-observance of the mosaic law, and with the disregard of the religious ordinances which have been the very life of Judaism.”³⁰ Kohler could not accept this appraisal, asking of Kohut: “Has Reformed Judaism come upon a sandbank so that we require Talmudical Orthodoxy to set us afloat again, or are we still strong enough to stand at the helm and steer American Judaism toward its lofty goal?”³¹

Given the distance between their outlooks, it is not surprising that Kohut and Kohler not only disagreed on larger conceptual issues such as the optimal future of Rabbinic Judaism, but also interpreted and invoked individual elements of this tradition very differently. For example, typical of the Reform critique of traditional Judaism, Kohler regarded the Rabbinic aphorism “Build a fence around the Torah” as the cause of endless accretion of no longer useful customs and practices that tainted Judaism’s once pristine nature. “The Jewish people,” Kohler argued, had a

high mission as a people of God in the midst of abominable superstitions.... This alone explains the attitude of

Mosaism toward slavery, polygamy, retaliation and bloody penalties.... All these laws, however, Rabbinical Judaism transformed into walls of a fortress and citadel around the Jews to shield them in their exile against absorption in the multitude of nations. Seclusion and distinction became the prominent feature of every Jewish rite.³²

Kohut, not surprisingly, regarded this aphorism in a positive light, not only as a means of preserving and protecting Judaism but also reinvigorating it. Indeed, Kohut regarded this notion as emblematic of the way that Rabbinic Judaism could be adapted to help balance tradition with the ideas and expectations of the nineteenth century, specifically with the need for greater inclusion of women in the synagogue:

Since the time of Ezra, our women have been separated from the men in our houses of worship. Why? In order that the proprieties of the synagogue should not be disturbed through unbecoming conduct. But where reverence, piety, and religious fervor are found in men and women, shall I strive against it? Our women, indeed, are far more pious than our men. I believe that if I could win over our women to attend the Friday night service in the temple, I am sure that the men would soon follow ... and from coming to seek their wives, they would remain to seek their God. Here you have a modern interpretation of building a fence around the Torah.³³

In no small sense, Kohut's and Kohler's dissimilar appraisal of the future of traditional Judaism informed their assessment of the decline of Jewish observance in America. Kohler attributed this decline to the bankrupt nature of Rabbinism. Kohut disagreed, blaming the growing disaffection of American Jews not on Judaism but on the shortcomings of the American rabbinate. Kohler, for his part, regarded the American rabbinate during the 1880s in high esteem. Writing several months before his debate with Kohut, Kohler noted that American Reform rabbis, in particular, were highly attuned to the needs of American Jews:

Born and raised in America, they stand in closer relation to the people and their demands, and are better fitted to build up than those who, having imbibed either the skeptical and critical notions of the hypocritical and apologetical views prevalent in the German universities and theological seminaries, have only new fermenting elements to add to the still chaotic state of our religious affairs.³⁴

Kohut took issue with this point of view, claiming that the declining religious interest among American Jews reflected the poor quality of American rabbis:

Mosaic-rabbinical law, which has preserved judaism through the centuries, cannot in our day have degenerated into something of a base character. If ... it has degenerated, this degeneration is not to be charged to the Law but to its expounders.... No rabbi worthy of the name would willingly assume the role of a Ham uncovering the nakedness of his father. If he finds fault, he will reverently cover it and not expose it to the world. Perhaps what he deems faulty is not faulty at all.... And you, more fortunate sons of happier times, in a country of liberty, acknowledging the beautiful religion of your fathers – you accept no witnesses, you listen to no voice but your own, and would enunciate *your* teachings as those of Judaism!³⁵

Moreover, Kohut suggested, rabbis like Kohler were conspicuously out of tune with the needs of their followers, often not being sensitive enough to the low levels of education and understanding of many of their congregants:

Because of the differences of intelligence and education in the members of our congregations, how often are our plainest words misunderstood? Distorted teachings and heretical doctrines are poisonous elements that will ruin

the strongest body. The young, eager to learn, may easily become inoculated by these poisonous teachings and die – be lost to Judaism forever.³⁶

The inability of rabbis to reach their congregants, Kohut continued, reverberated into the Jewish home, whose deficiencies Kohut also blamed on the mediocre example set by rabbis: "If religion is neglected among our congregations, if the home life is not what it should be, the fault is largely to be laid at the door of our rabbis, who have failed to urge sufficiently the claims of Jewish life."³⁷

Not only the inability of rabbis to lead properly, Kohut argued further, but the chronic lack of uniformity had an equally adverse affect on American Jews. This lack of uniformity, Kohut posited, was due to the lack of religious authority and proper rabbinic training:

Who is to blame for the fact that Judaism of the new world is characterized by so many dissimilarities and differences? I believe that the fault is mainly due to the rabbis ... the religious dissensions which prevail in our midst seem to have their source in that we recognize no authority in matters of religion. Every *hazan* plays *rav* ... preaches what he pleases, acts just as it suits him – and so long as the membership is sufficient to guarantee the support of the temple, no one cares....³⁸

All of these shortcomings Kohut blamed on rabbis who were more interested in being liked than in taking a stand. "It is questionable, Kohut argued, "whether congregations would welcome an uncompensated rabbi, unless he were a reform rabbi ... Only the Reform rabbi, who makes religion of easy performance and who never makes use of the rod of rebuke...."³⁹

For Kohut, the antidote to this problem was simple: American rabbis have to learn to defend Judaism against more popular sentiments that eschew tradition: "Only when the rabbis of this country shall be moved by a common endeavor for wise moderation, un-affrighted [*sic*] at the 'backwards' cry ... only when conservative progress rather than ungov-

enable speed shall characterize our religious movement can the outlook of Judaism be hopeful....”⁴⁰ He urged his rabbinic colleagues to strive “to reconcile the views brought about by changed conditions with the teachings of the sages.... Such scholars may we be! May it be our ambition to strengthen, not to abolish; to remove lax religious views and to preserve the ancient Jewish spirit.”⁴¹

By the end of the summer 1885, the debate between Kohut and Kohler was over, but the fallout was only beginning. As Rebeka Bettelheim Kohut recalled, “It was an interesting dispute and led to many fierce side-encounters between protagonists of both factions. So ably did [Dr. Kohut] state the case for traditional Judaism that the Reformers for the first time fell back to entrench themselves. For the first time they felt the necessity to meet the arguments of a strong opposition.”⁴² Within a year, Kohut would lead an exodus of like-minded rabbis out of the ranks of Reform Judaism, who would found a new Rabbinical seminary – The Jewish Theological Seminary – and a new brand of American Judaism: Conservative Judaism. Kohler convened a conference of like-minded radical reformers in Pittsburgh, who hammered out a new manifesto that would dominate Reform Judaism for a generation – the Pittsburgh Platform. Yet neither the debate nor the ensuing denominational split upended the mutual admiration and collegiality between Kohut and Kohler. When Kohut died prematurely several years later, Kohler was among the most laudatory elegists, celebrating his departed colleague as distinguished master, an ornament of the Jewish community, and diadem in the crown of Jewish tradition.

More importantly perhaps, the public debate and the delineation between the positions of Kohut and Kohler coincided with the influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. These Jews, most of whom knew little or nothing of Reform Judaism, would soon find in Kohut’s brand of Halachic-based innovation a form of Judaism that would help many among them, and even more among their children, to adapt to the changing conditions of the American Jewish scene. When the children of these immigrants would come of age, the ranks

of the Conservative Movement would swell, allowing Conservative Judaism to challenge Reform Judaism as the leading Jewish denomination in America.

Indeed, it is worth pondering why Kohut's brand of traditional Judaism resonated among East European Jews. Perhaps it stemmed from the mimetic approach to Judaism that Kohut embraced, an approach that, more recently, scholars such as historian Haym Soloveitchik and sociologist Menachem Friedman have identified as the predominant form of traditional identity among these Jews. Kohut, knowingly or not, expressed this mimetic approach in his defense of traditional Judaism against Kohler's critique:

We have enjoyed a religious training and arrange our households according to the ritual ordinances. We observe our parents and grandparents living in the same sphere of ideas, and we note that they live happily and contentedly under the same restraints dictated by religion. We emulate their example. On Friday night we assemble the children around our tables to greet the Sabbath angels ... we converse with the younger generation on religious topics ... and awaken their enthusiasm for Israel's sorrows and joys. We are happy in the religious atmosphere that prevails....⁴³

Kohut's image of the future of American Judaism was, in this sense, more attuned to the needs of first- and second-generation immigrants:

When we have a Judaism thus strengthened from within and without, in a representative and authoritative manner, working harmoniously for the future, we shall have founded the new Jerusalem ... (84) if you are true in the freedom-breathing of the present to the fundamental teachings of the past, you will be paving the way for a glorious future that shall witness the holy cause of religion served, not only with a broad culture but with a warm heart as well.⁴⁴

In the end, though, it was neither Kohut's traditionalism nor Kohler's reformism that prevailed. Ultimately, it was the co-existence of the two that satisfied the central need of American Jews – multiple options, a crucial element in preserving Judaism in an age of religious volunteerism.

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Notes

¹ Alexander Kohut, *Ethics of the Fathers* (New York: privately printed, 1920, hereinafter Kohut, *Ethics*), 7.

² Kaufmann Kohler, "Are We Progressing or Retrograding?" *The American Hebrew*, 12 June 1885, 67.

³ "Orthodoxy and Reform: The Controversy between Kohut and Kohler," *New York Times*, 28 June 1885, 8.

⁴ On Kohut in Hungary, see Howard Lupovitch, "Navigating rough waters: Alexander Kohut and the Hungarian roots of Conservative Judaism" *AJS Review* 32:1 (2008), 51ff; On the term Orthodoxy and the difference between Orthodox and traditional, see Michael K. Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: the Invention of a Tradition" in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 24, n. 3.

⁵ The two most recent discussions of this debate are in Naomi Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of 19th Century American Rabbis* (New York UP, 2008), 105ff; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Wayne State UP, 1995), 267-68.

⁶ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 266ff.

⁷ Lupovitch, "Navigating Rough Waters," 54.

⁸ For a description of Neolog and Status Quo Judaism see Lupovitch, "Between Orthodox Judaism and Neology: the Origins of the Status Quo Movement," *Jewish Social Studies* 9:2 (2003), 123ff.

⁹ Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said*, 96ff.

¹⁰ *Occident* 12 (October 1854), 328-29, quoted in Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said*, 97.

¹¹ Max Lilienthal, "The Spirit of the Age," *Israelite* (December 1856), quoted in Cohen, 103.

¹² Rebekah Bettelheim Kohut, *My Portion: An Autobiography* (New York: Arno Press, 1925), 83-84.

¹³ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 270-71.

¹⁴ *The Jewish Encyclopedia* VII (Funk and Wagnalls: New York, 1906), 538.

¹⁵ Joshua Haberman, "Kaufmann Kohler and his Teacher Samson Raphael Hirsch," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 43 (1998), 79-80.

¹⁶ Kohut, *Ethics of the Fathers*, 3.

¹⁷ Kohler, "Are We Progressing or Retrograding?" *The American Hebrew*, 12 June 1885, 66.

¹⁸ Kohler, "Progression or Retrogression," 19 June 1885, 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²¹ Kohler, "Progression or Retrogression," 19 June 1885, 84.

²² Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 265-68.

²³ Kohut, *Ethics*, 12-13.

²⁴ Solomon Jehuda Leib Rapoport, *Tokhahat meguleh* (Frankfurt am Main, 1845), 2-3; quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 3rd edition, (Oxford UP, 2011), 212-13.

²⁵ Kohut, *Ethics*, 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²⁸ Kohler, "Backward or Forward," *American Hebrew*, 26 June 1885, 105.

²⁹ Kohler, *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰ Kohut, *Ethics*, 113.

³¹ Kohler, 67.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ Kohut, *Ethics*, 17.

³⁴ Kohler, "Concerted Action in Sabbath-School Reform," *The American Hebrew*, 23 January 1885, 164.

³⁵ Kohut, *Ethics*, 64-65. Italics in original.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴² Rebeka Bettelheim Kohut, *My Portion*, 84.

⁴³ Kohut, *Ethics*, 54-55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

