

TRADITION AND CHANGE

By Professor LEON ROTH

THIS imposing volume is a revealing record of the rise and development of the "middle-of-the-way" movement in modern American Judaism. It consists of three parts: the Origins of Conservative Judaism, the Philosophies of Conservative Judaism, and the Attitudes of Conservative Judaism; and it is made up by an ordered selection of original addresses and essays produced in the course of nearly a hundred years by the founders and maintainers of the movement from Isaac Leeser, Sabato Morais, Alexander Kohut and Israel Friedlaender, to those still living.

Wit and Eloquence

A prominent position is occupied throughout by Solomon Schechter, not only because he took a clear stand on all the important issues confronting the American Jewry of his time, and expounded it with wit as well as eloquence, but also and more particularly because he shaped the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and strove to make it the creative centre of what he was fond of calling the "High Synagogue" or "Catholic Israel."

The word "Catholic" bears the overtones both of age and all-inclusiveness, "High" those of tradition and ritual; and the Schechterian ideal for the seminary is well expressed in the "four tested standards" of its present Vice-Chancellor (page 274): "1. Scientific knowledge of the whole of Judaism; 2. Judaism as a Torah-centred culture or civilisation; 3. *Klal Yisrael* as a challenge to fashion ourselves into a centre around whom and through whom Jews of all shades of belief and opinion may experience their common kinship; 4. Innovation without regimentation."

What Conservative Judaism means is discussed in Part II (the "philosophies"); but it is

explained in the editor's introductory note that "by and large these philosophies are not systematic statements; they reflect the fluidity, the ambivalences and the 'life is stronger than logic' outlook which characterise the Conservative movement." Since one of the great forces in the Conservative movement, and more particularly in the seminary, of recent years is Professor Mordecai Kaplan, the inspirer and organiser of "Reconstructionism," it is fitting that much of this part of the book is taken up by his thinking, whether in his own words or in those of his followers. Yet an external observer may be permitted to express regret that other views are not given equal prominence. For example, one would have liked in this section something of the late Louis Ginzberg or Solomon Goldman; and why is Dr. Finkelstein represented in the whole volume by one address only, and that of 1927?

Forward Step

Part III gives us an insight into the possibilities of a traditional approach to tradition and is a most interesting step forward. It contains the Introductions to the Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook of the United Synagogue of America and to the Reconstructionist Prayerbook in which new lines of approach to the liturgy are described; inquiries into Halacha in general and into the law of the Sabbath, in which such questions as the use of the electric light and travelling to synagogue by car are treated as Halachic problems and discussed in the light of standard Halachic authorities; and a consideration of the basic premises and ends of Jewish education in the United States today. The whole volume is wound up by a selection of statements on Zionism.

There are many wise things in this important book, and the editor and compiler is to be congratulated on the skill with which he has selected and assembled so various a collection and, in a notable first survey,

introduced it. But its total effect is to leave the reader with a sense of inadequacy in the movement itself. The historical section (Part I), within its necessary limits, gives a clear idea of the development of the movement and its affiliations with similar movements



Solomon Schechter (1850-1915)

elsewhere; and the editor did well to reprint in translation a significant statement of Zechariah Fraenkel.

Fraenkel, the founder of the famous Monatsschrift and Principal of the Breslau Seminary, was one of the great Jewish scholars of the nineteenth century, and he was friendly disposed to the (German) Reform movement in its early stages. But just as Morais and Leeser in America took fright at the Pittsburgh programme, so did Fraenkel in Germany at the Frankfurt programme of 1845. Like them he raised the cry of a return to the study of original sources and established a tradition of scholarship the fruits of which are still with us.

But Fraenkel realised that, in order to be effective, scholars have "an important duty" in addition to that of research, and that is to "guard the sense of piety of the

people and to raise their spirit to the height of the great ideas." "The truths of faith," Fraenkel goes on to say (page 50), "must be brought nearer to the people so that they may learn to understand the divine content within them and thus come to understand the spiritual nature and inner worth of the forms which embody these truths." There are "essential truths" embodied in the forms of Judaism; and it is "a" task (I think we should have said, a principal task) of the scholar to make them clear to ordinary folk.

Systematic Statement

It is an account of these essential truths which we should have expected to find in the second part of this volume, that on philosophies; but here we meet with disappointment. There is too much "fluidity, ambivalence, life-is-stronger-than-logic outlook," too little "systematic statement." After all, it is just a systematic statement of essential truths which is meant by philosophy; and it is just this which in every generation we need and which we expect to receive from our rabbis. As Schechter himself observed, we cannot go on for ever worshipping the God of our fathers. The talk about history and the "scientific knowledge of the whole of Judaism" (!) is all very well in theory; but in practice it is apt to appear either as fragmented into scholastic pedantry or as generalised in empty rhetoric. What is needed, as this volume clearly recognises, is living spiritual food.

A striking passage from the late Milton Steinberg (pages 248-9) states the "first imperative" of the movement to be the "retrieval of God in Judaism." True; but the God to be retrieved is presumably the God of Judaism. Steinberg speaks of a "God-faith which enables us to comprehend the universe the more thoroughly; which invests it with meaning and purposefulness; which lends intelligibility and sanction to our ethical values; which stimulates us toward moral self-realisation and the broader service of our fellow-man; and which, last of all, enables us to see our Jewishness as a part of a cosmic design unfolding on all sides of us."

This is very fine, but as the expression of the *desideratum*. It is a statement of what we require,

not of what we are given. Steinberg writes that "thousands of American Jews, himself included," have achieved it. He does not show us how they did it so that we can judge whether they did it rightly, or how we in our turn can do it.

The contribution levied from the writings of Milton Steinberg is of especial interest for us in this country in view of the recent discussions of the alleged "anger" of our "young men." It touches on the problem of Jewish creativity. The word itself occupies a large place in these pages, particularly in those written under Reconstructionist inspiration; but Steinberg notes soberly that Jewish men of art and of letters, although they should respond to Jewish motifs, yet "if at all typical, fail to do so." He asks himself why, and goes on (page 258): "The answers are many. Ignorance of Judaism, psychic blockings against it, absorption in social issues so total as to leave room for nothing else, all these are episodes in the story.

"The nub, however, is that it must be so. Judaism is the secondary, ancillary civilisation of American Jews. . . . Whence it follows that the American Jewish community, for all its size and resources, cannot be expected to maintain itself culturally. To put it bluntly, it is going to have to live on the largesse of other, more intensely Jewish, Jewries."

Melancholy Reflection

The hint is clear; and it may well be that, if Judaism is indeed only a "culture," American Jewish creativity may have to live off that of Israel. But it would then hardly be natural and hardly American, and hardly in the full sense, creative. Reconstructionism seems to point to its own bankruptcy. Vicarious living is no solution; and perhaps the secret of the anger of the young men is that they resent being told constantly to be parasites on somebody else. But whether this is so or not, Steinberg's frank admission leads to a melancholy reflection. Has Conservative Judaism in America, even in its Reconstructionist shape, anything of its own to offer our generation? It was born of a negation (the negation of Reform). Now in its maturity it seems to see its spiritual life as the adventure of living elsewhere.

*Tradition and Change, The Development of Conservative Judaism. Edited by Rabbi Mordecai Waxman. New York: The Burning Bush Press, 1958. pp. x+477. \$4.50

"NOW," an Israeli girl said to me, "we're finding out what the real problems of life are." It was a surprising thing for her to have said, considering the career which lay behind her. After leaving school she had joined the Hagana, at a time when it was still illegal, during the British Mandate. Then and subsequently she had acted as an aide to certain officers who now hold very high rank indeed in the Army; she herself, after the War of Liberation, had remained in the Services, had attained the rank of major, had served in the south during the Sinai campaign, and after the campaign had been offered further promotion. This she had declined; she is now a student of sociology at the Hebrew University.

Right to Speak

Thus, when she spoke of "we" she was speaking for a whole generation of sabras, whose lives hitherto have been given to the service of the community and the State; she had earned in the hardest possible way her right to speak for this generation, not only in the rigours she herself had undergone but also in a tragic and intimate loss her family had suffered during the war. For these reasons another remark she made is worth recording: "Up till now things were always made easy for us," she said. "We were lucky people. There was always something exciting for us to do. Now it is not so easy for us to settle down to a life without excitements."

Naturally, one can only hope that the life which lies before her and her friends will, indeed, be without further "excitements." And much as one must admire the courage with which her generation

A CRISIS IN VALUES

Self-Questioning by Israeli Youth

By DAN JACOBSON

fought to establish and maintain the State, the calmness and irony of her remarks about what her generation now has to do seem to me in a way no less admirable. Tragedy and heroism, exaltation and despair, these people have known; now they must learn to know the day-to-day trivialities of the life which people less "lucky" than themselves have always known. The people in Israel are confident as they have never been before—as they could never be before—as that what they built and fought for will survive. Only now can they ask themselves what it truly is that they have built and fought for. Only now can they ask themselves how they are going to live a life which is not supported by the great demands and rewards of a community in continual crisis, in continual peril.

Virtues of Privacy

On the personal level, there is something curiously moving in the questions which this generation in Israel is now being forced to ask of itself. But the interest of this self-questioning is more than personal, for it is so closely involved with what is called "the crisis of values" in Israel. The virtues of self-sacrifice and devotion to the public cause have been for so long supreme in Israel that for young Israelis now it is a real effort to find out what are or could be the virtues of privacy, of the private life. (It is even an effort for them to believe that the private life can possibly have its own real virtues, its own honourable claims.)

They feel guilty about their desire to find individual rather than communal fulfilment; they feel even more guilty about their simple

longing for physical comfort. And their guilt is aggravated by the fact that it is the world "outside"—Great Britain and the United States in particular—which speaks most pressingly and invitingly to them of the pleasures of private life. They feel that their own longings are alien to their own and to themselves; and yet when they look around their own country they know that what they once did they cannot do again, and that they cannot again become what they once were. The guilt they feel for being attracted to the private life is married to their resentment of its humdrum and unheroic nature.

Country's Elite

I am speaking here of people who can quite fairly be called the elite of Israel—not only because of what they did in the past but because they feel so sharply within themselves a conflict of which others know only one side. What seems certain is that this conflict is going to persist; and what seems equally certain, to the present writer at least, is that the conflict is a healthy one. It is healthy because it is a symptom of confidence, as I have indicated; and because it is necessary, in Israel as much as in any other country, for there to be debate and discussion and even dissension between people on a level much deeper than that of party politics. (Though it is obvious that this conflict will find its political expression, too.)

Inevitably, a debate of this kind can never be resolved; and one should not even wish a resolution for it. What at best can happen, and what seems already to be happening in Israel, is that each of

the values will be infused in some degree with the others: it is in this way only that a supple, distinctive tradition of thought and feeling

about social and personal issues can develop. The Israelis will never be able to forget, or to do without, the collective and self-sacrificial values of their own immediate past. But the spell of peace and confidence the Israelis have recently won for themselves has made it certain that these values will never again be held as simply and single-mindedly as they once were.



A group of sabras—Israeli-born youngsters—waiting their turn to dance in Independence Day celebrations. Now that life is becoming more normal in Israel the sabras are faced with a need for readjustment, a problem described in the adjoining article. (Photograph by MARTIN KORETZ)

Mr. Jacobson, a noted South African novelist, has just been awarded the Literature Trust Memorial Prize for his collection of short stories, "A Long Way from London." He recently returned from a visit to Israel.