BERNHARD FELSENTHAL: THE ZIONIZATION OF A RADICAL REFORM RABBI

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This article traces Bernhard Felsenthal's ideological and institutional odyssey from extreme radical Reform to committed Zionism. In the face of the overwhelming opposition of his Reform colleagues, Felsenthal endorsed and embraced the nascent Zionist movement and devoted his final years to its support.

The last half of the nineteenth century was a time of turbulent ideological ferment. Amidst radical social, economic and political change, new ideologies sprouted and fractured into competing factions. Buffeted by the tides of unanticipated consequences individual thinkers and activists frequently changed their positions and their affiliations. Moses Hess moved from a variety of socialisms to proto-Zionism, and Leon Pinsker from Russian assimilation to Jewish nationalism. Nussan Birnbaum — at one time a chief secretary to Herzl, drifted from Zionism to become general secretary of Agudat Yisrael with a stopover as a diaspora nationalist en route. Herzl himself was a convert to Zionism.

At the same time, perhaps in reaction against the turmoil and uncertainty, there were elements who responded with ideological

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inflexibility. The most obvious Jewish example is the Chatam Sofer whose dictum *chadash asur min hatorah* "innovation is forbidden from the Torah" forbade any change however trivial in traditional practice.

The overwhelming preponderance of the leaders of radical Reform Judaism in Germany and in America falls into the latter category. Having made a radical break from traditional Judaism they were militant and uncompromising in their adherence to the principles of "prophetic universalism" and the denationalization of Judaism. At its first meeting in 1890, the Central Conference of American Rabbis reaffirmed the resolutions of the Reform conferences in Frankfurt Germany in 1845, in Philadelphia in 1869, and in Pittsburgh in 1885, all of which emphatically rejected Jewish nationalism.[1] (Innovation is forbidden in the Torah of Reform.) The Jews were a religious community not a nation and the mission of the Jews was to be the bearers of a universal message. Manifestations of Jewish distinctiveness — "orientalisms" they were often called — were decried. With the approach of the "messianic age" of "truth, justice and peace" Judaism itself would one day disappear in a universal religion of humanity. Felix Adler carried the ideology to its logical conclusion when he left Judaism and founded the Ethical Culture Society. Most others held back because the "mission" of Judaism was not yet quite complete. But the goal was clear — dissolving Jewish particularism and perhaps Jewish identity. In the words of Isaac Mayer Wise: "The mission of Judaism from its inception was to become in the fullness of time, the religion of the human family."[2]

One of the most articulate protagonists of this point of view was Bernhard Felsenthal. He had arrived in the United States in 1854 and spent a few years as a teacher in small towns in Indiana. He began to perform some rabbinical functions though, according to his daughter's account, he did not yet think of himself as a rabbi. In 1858 he moved to Chicago where he worked as a bank clerk for German-Jewish employers who apparently allowed him free time to pursue scholarly study and writing. In 1859 he published a manifesto calling for the reform of Judaism entitled *Kol Kore Bamidbar.* This work led to the formation of Sinai Temple, the first Reform Jewish congregation in Chicago and brought him the recognition of Reform rabbis in the East. In 1861, Samuel Adler, rabbi of Temple Emanuel in New York conferred upon him the title *"Morenu Harav."* Two years later David Einhorn, the leader of radical Reform conferred on him the title *"Morenu."* As his daughter writes: "In the fifties, sixties, and seventies, [Einhorn and Felsenthal] were in complete intellectual harmony."[3]

In 1869, Felsenthal was one of thirteen rabbis who attended the first rabbinic conference held in America. It was convened by Einhorn and met in Philadelphia. One of Felsenthal's most vigorous statements during the discussions dealt with the colonization programs in Palestine. He regarded these as romantic efforts whose danger should not be underestimated. Felsenthal felt that the conference should register a strong protest against these efforts.[4] Three years later, he criticized Isaac Mayer Wise's revised *Minhag America* for including prayers for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and for failing to include more English and German along with Hebrew prayers. He declared: "not only do we not look upon this dispersion as a curse, we regard it as a blessing for all mankind."[5]

Throughout the decade he was in some respects even more radical than Einhorn and Kaufman Kohler. For example, in his leniency toward the acceptance of converts, Felsenthal did not require circumcision of male converts. He wrote: "it is imperative that we be lenient in the acceptance of converts...or to be ready to officiate at mixed marriages if the bridal couple promise to raise their children in the religion of Judaism." Kohler objected to opening Judaism's gates to proselytes.[6] Felsenthal responded that Judaism needed to denationalize itself. The Jewish religion did not need to be bound up with just "the Jewish race." Felsenthal, like all of his contemporaries, believed that the Jews were primarily a "race," but he struggled to reconcile this view with universalist aspirations and commitments. Felsenthal called on Jews to be united "as brethren who are largely of the same race and have been charged with the same mission, to be bearers and preservers of the monotheistic belief; precursors of the messianic times when Judaism will have ceased to be a racial religion and will have become a universal religion."[7] As late as 1881, Felsenthal feared the consequences of increased emphasis on Jewish nationhood."When one concentrates upon the idea of nationality, religion is not the only natural barrier which arises between Jews and non-Jews, but also other higher barriers must and will separate the Jews from the non-Jews." Such isolation, he thought, would restrict the development of enlightened practices by Jews.[8]

Where and why did his ideas begin to change? If, as some have suggested, he was moved by the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Germany in the late 1870s, and in the United States in the early 1880s, he makes few references to these developments in any of his writings or activities. Moreover, his Reform rabbinic colleagues show no reaction or response to renewed anti-Semitism. Quite the contrary, in 1885 a conference of Reform rabbis convened by Kaufman Kohler in Pittsburgh reaffirmed its confidence in the "approach of the

realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice or peace among men" and reiterated that "we consider ourselves no longer a nation." The preponderance of evidence suggests that what stimulated changes in Felsenthal was his exposure to and involvement with the East European Jewish immigrants who arrived in ever-increasing numbers after 1881.

Unlike most of his Reform colleagues, Felsenthal established warm personal ties within the immigrant community. He assisted in preparing evening schools for immigrants. A society which grew out of one school called itself "The Felsenthal Educational Society"[9] testifying to the regard in which he was held by the students. He encouraged the study of Hebrew but deplored the use of Yiddish. The one article which he published in a Yiddish newspaper was devoted to the necessity of learning English.[10] He urged that kosher food be provided in the Jewish hospital. During the 1880s, when most German Jews had moved to the south side of Chicago, Felsenthal and his family remained on the west side among the immigrant community.

His interest in Palestine and especially in Hebrew literature grew. In 1883, he joined with some intellectual leaders of the East European community to found "Dorshei Sifrut Ivrit" and wrote two articles for its magazine *Keren Or*. It is reported that "intelligent Orthodox Jews" considered him "only partly reformed" while other Reform rabbis were regarded "almost as Christian ministers."[11] In a reply to a letter from Felsenthal, a friend wrote: "You are right, there is a fanatical Reform as well as a fanatical Orthodoxy. To oppose emigration of Rumanian and Russian Jews to Palestine because perhaps such a step would lead to revival of national sentiment and the revival of national sentiment would perhaps lead to the construction of a temple with bloody sacrifices, and that again would lead to a Sanhedrin is a flighty speculation."[12] That same year — 1883 — Felsenthal attended the convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "I kept silent in seven languages," he wrote.[13] He chose not to attend the conference which drafted the Pittsburgh Platform.

In 1886, a branch of the Hovevei Zion movement was established in Chicago whose stated purpose was to support settlement in Palestine.[14] There is no record of Felsenthal's reaction or participation. However, when in 1891, a Christian millenarianist, William Blackstone, circulated a memorial proposing the restoration of the Jews to Palestine, Felsenthal was the only Reform rabbi to support the initiative. The proposal was vigorously denounced in the Anglo-Jewish press. The *Jewish Voice* charged that the supporters were free-thinking hypocrites who were not really "good Jews" and that

bringing Jews to Palestine would result in the creation of a huge ghetto in that land.[15]

Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, the leading Reform rabbi in Chicago declared: "We modern Jews do not wish to be restored to Palestine. We will not go back to form a nationality of our own."[16] In a letter endorsing the memorandum, Felsenthal supported the proposal to send 25,000 to 30,000 Jews annually from Russia to Palestine and predicted that the implementation of this plan would result in the complete occupation of Palestine by Jews after a period of twenty years.[17] Felsenthal justified his position when he wrote: "With me the Jewish question is at present a philanthropic question and nothing else. Millions of our oppressed Jewish brethren appeal: 'Help us' and we listen compassionately to this appeal and it is our duty to help and assist....At present the question is not restoration, but colonization. I vote for colonization. The Jewish colonies in Palestine hail to them! May they flourish."[18]

Felsenthal had retired as a rabbi of his congregation in 1887, however he continued and increased his communal involvements. In May 1891, Felsenthal was one of the speakers at a rally organized by a new organization, the Chevra Zion, whose aim was "to aid in the restoration of Palestine by assisting refugees who go to that country."[19] He also spoke at a mass meeting of the Jewish Alliance held in the Russiche Shul and served on the executive committee of the society in Aid of Russian Refugees. He became more and more involved with the East European community, and with the impact of the Palestine colonization effort on what he regarded as "the almost dead Judaism of Eastern Europe."[20] He opposed colonization plans in Argentina because "Jewish sentiment was directed toward Palestine."[21] In November 1896, the first Zionist organization in America was formed — Chicago Zionist Organization No. 1.[22] Felsenthal played an important part in founding the group and was the only German Jew attending. The anti-Zionist *American Israelite* observed that he "carries greater weight with Jews of all classes than almost any other man in the country."[23]

When the call to the First Zionist Congress was issued, Felsenthal urged American Jews to participate. He and Gustav Gottheil, rabbi of Temple Emanuel of New York, were the only supporters among the older generation of Reform rabbis.[24] Felsenthal, by now in his late 70s, would have liked to go to the Congress but his health did not permit the trip. In 1898, when the Federation of American Zionists was founded, the president was Richard Gottheil, son of Gustav, and Felsenthal was a vice-president. "It is my deepest compassion with the undescribable sufferings of hundreds of thousands of my Jewish brethren in various parts of the world which moves me," he wrote.[25]

His outspoken advocacy aroused vigorous denunciation. Gotthard Deutsch, professor of history at the Hebrew Union College, could not see how Felsenthal who years earlier had condemned "all orientalism" in Judaism could be a strong supporter of Zionism.[26] Emil G. Hirsch questioned Felsenthal's support for a Jewish state and asked how it fit with the mission of Israel. He denounced Zionists as "noble swindlers"[27] and decried the movement for "leading astray men who thirty years ago were in the lead of those who insisted on the denationalization of Judaism."[28] The Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution reaffirming a "total disapproval of any attempt to establish a Jewish state."

Felsenthal spelled out his reasons for supporting Zionism. His vision had broadened. Anti-Semitism, he contended, would never cease until a national home had been established for a considerable portion of Jews. Moreover, the mission of the Jewish nation or race could be better served if "a center for the dispersed nation exists in their old Palestine home."[29] Felsenthal attempted to reconcile the old mission ideology with the aim of a Jewish homeland and he now used the terms race and nation interchangeably.

Felsenthal became more and more ardent in his support of Zionism and in his conviction that Zionism was essential not only as a philanthropic endeavor but as a means of preserving Jewish life everywhere. Michael Meyer has suggested that Felsenthal "turned toward Zion perhaps because the loose bonds of individualistic religion required the firmer tie of an ethnic attachment."[30] His motivation and commitment were much deeper than this. "The Zionistic movement," Felsenthal wrote in 1899, "must especially find a loud echo in the hearts of those among us who do not desire a speedy extinction of the Jewish nation among the nations of the world but who believe and hope that Israel will continue to have a separate and distinct existence."[31] Moreover, "a new Jewish State in Palestine will exercise an influence over Jews in the Diaspora by awakening in them the spirit of a stronger attachment to Judaism."[32] As evidence of his American acculturation, Felsenthal envisioned that "the Jewish republic of the future" would be governed by Jeffersonian democracy.[33]

With the passage of years, Felsenthal became more and more concerned about the ravages of assimilation and "disintegration through the falling away of large numbers of families hitherto Jewish." Zionism he saw as a bulwark against assimilation. Zionism, he stated, was more important "than any other Jewish movement during the last 18 centuries which our history records."[34] The year was 1902 and Felsenthal celebrated his 80th birthday. He received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Hebrew Union College where his

character was praised while his idiosyncratic support of Zionism was decried.

Felsenthal continued to contest the opposition to Zionism among Reform rabbis and laymen. He spoke of changing conditions and concluded that if earlier Reform leaders were alive in the twentieth century they would conclude that "a Jewish state may become reestablished."[35] Kaufman Kohler of course did not agree. In 1903 Felsenthal was among those Zionists willing to accept Uganda as "a temporary place of refuge but not as the final aim of the Zionist movement....The Zionist movement cannot cease and shall not cease until Israel dwells again, a fit people in its own land."[36]

In his last years, Felsenthal's physical health waned but his intellectual and ideological fervor intensified and his critique of so-called "classical Reform" sharpened. In 1905, a year in which he received an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary, Felsenthal repudiated the idea of the "mission of Israel" altogether. "Let us not deceive ourselves," he wrote, "History teaches that by its dispersion Israel could not and did not bring mankind forward religiously and morally. At best, Israel was only a small factor....Only a certain kind of higher Jewish chauvinism can make such claims....Even if this mission phrase should have a kernel of truth, the dispersion of the Jews all over the globe and their suffering among the nations are not necessary conditions to its fulfilling this mission. As a nation living in its own land freed from oppression and persecutors, Israel could work more successfully than is possible in Golus as a number of scattered and isolated individuals."[37] Felsenthal was even more emphatic in his stress on the importance of Zionism for Jewish survival: "A mighty power to hinder the disappearance of Israel from the world is the creation of a national center in Palestine and the restoration of the Jewish nation in the land."[38]

In the end, Felsenthal lost his faith in the Reform movement. "It will one day be recognized that what we call 'Reform Judaism' is not the highest and finest thing to be found in modern Israel, is not that which is worthy of our devotion. The thought often comes to my mind that this extreme Reform we have in America will lead gradually to the extinction of Israel and its religion....Do you not agree with me that our Reform friends are preparing 'a beautiful death' for Judaism?"[39]

To Judah Magnes he wrote in 1907:

> From day to day my conviction becomes more intensified that Zionism alone will be the savior of our nation and its religion. I know that the anti-Zionists and especially those in the so-called Reform camp do not share in this view. They believe that by their

> 'reforms' they will save Israel and thereby empower it to fulfill what they call the Jewish Mission in the world....Absorption of Israel by other nations and gradual dying of Judaism will be their achievement....A beautiful death, euthanasia is in certain circumstances desirable. But to bring it about in regard to the people of Israel — no, I do not wish to be an accomplice in such a criminal proceeding.[40]

Less than a year later, on January 12, 1908, Felsenthal died at the age of 86.

Felsenthal had come full cycle. His observation and analysis of Jewish life led him to repudiate the very reformism for which he himself had labored and to embrace a broad vision of Zionism and of Jewish national revival. In so doing, he served as a mentor to young Zionists like Judah Magnes, Henrietta Szold, Stephen Wise and Max Heller and pioneered a direction through which later Reform rabbis would transform both Reform and the Zionist movement. Modern Reform Judaism has changed so much that in the opinion of Abraham Karp, "it is closer in spirit and program to Felsenthal than either Wise or Einhorn. The crown denoting the 'Father of Reform' ought to be placed on the head of Bernhard Felsenthal" Karp concluded.[41] Felsenthal would be surprised and pleased.

Notes

1. Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Yearbook*, vol. 1, 1890, pp. 80–125.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal, Teacher in Israel, Selections from His Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 22.
4. Sefton D. Temkin, ed., *The New World of Reform* (London: Leo Baeck College, 1971), pp. 38–39.
5. "The Wandering Jew," an address delivered by Felsenthal before the Young Men's Christian Union in 1872, in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 198.
6. A debate between Felsenthal and Kaufman Kohler in the *Jewish Advance*, 1, September 20, 1878, cited by Victor Ludlow in *Bernhard Felsenthal, Quest for Zion*, Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1979, p. 167.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
8. Bernhard Felsenthal, *Jewish Advance*, no. 150 (April 22, 1881), p. 7.

9. Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 198.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
11. Bernard Horwich, *My First Eighty Years* (Chicago: Argus Books, 1939), p. 132.
12. David Stern to Bernhard Felsenthal, April 19, 1883, Felsenthal Collection, American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts.
13. Bernhard Felsenthal, "The Recent Cincinnati Council," *The Occident* (Chicago) XI, no. 14, (July 20, 1883), p. 4.
14. Marnin Feinstein, *American Zionism 1884–1904* (New York: Herzl Press, 1965), p. 30.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
18. Bernhard Felsenthal, "The Palestine Memorial," *Reform Advocate* 1, March 20, 1891, p. 5.
19. H.L. Meites, *History of the Jews of Chicago* (Chicago: Jewish Historical Society of Illinois, 1924), p. 167.
20. Bernhard Felsenthal to Alexander Kohut, October 5, 1892, Felsenthal Collection, American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts.
21. Bernhard Felsenthal, "The Palestine Question," *Jewish Voice* XIV, no. 15, pp. 5–6, April 14, 1893, reprinted in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 337.
22. Horwich, *My First Eighty Years*, pp. 230-231.
23. Cited in Michael Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism: Early Efforts at Ideological Rapprochement," *Studies in Zionism*, no. 7 (Spring 1993):54.
24. Richard Gottheil, *The Life of Gustav Gottheil* (Williamsport, Pennsylvania: Bayard Press, 1936), p. 192.
25. Bernhard Felsenthal, "An Open Letter on Zionism," 1897, reprinted in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 262.
26. Gotthard Deutsch, "Mr. Schur and Ha-Pisgah," *Reform Advocate* XIV, no. 26 (February 12, 1898), p. 853, cited in Ludlow, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 277.
27. Emil G. Hirsch, "Editorial Notes," *Reform Advocate* XIV, no. 11 (October 30, 1897), p. 597, cited in Ludlow, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 281.
28. Feinstein, *American Zionism*, p. 180.
29. Bernhard Felsenthal, "Felsenthal on Zionism," *The American Hebrew*, LXII (December 10, 1897), p. 201.
30. Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1988), p. 294.
31. Bernhard Felsenthal, "The Jew as Politician," 1899, reproduced in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 258.

32. Bernhard Felsenthal, "Zionism," *The American Hebrew*, LXIV (January 13, 1899), p. 386.
33. Bernhard Felsenthal, "An Open Letter on Zionism," 1897, reproduced in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 262.
34. Bernhard Felsenthal, letter to Max Heller, March 31, 1902, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, cited in Ludlow, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 295.
35. Bernhard Felsenthal, "Israel's Mission," *Maccabean* IV, no. 3 (March 1903), p. 136.
36. Bernhard Felsenthal, *Maccabean* V (November 1903), cited in Feinstein, *American Zionism*, p. 264.
37. Bernhard Felsenthal, "Different Opinions," *The American Hebrew* LXXVII (June 2, 1905), p. 13.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Bernhard Felsenthal letter to Rabbi S. N. Deinard, March 1, 1907, quoted in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 94.
40. Bernhard Felsenthal letter to Judah Magnes, March 4, 1907, reprinted in Emma Felsenthal, *Bernhard Felsenthal*, p. 83.
41. Abraham Karp, "The Father of American Reform Judaism," *Judaism*, vol, 7, no. 4 (Fall 1958):362.