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Reform Advocate: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Gerson Levi

In my three years here, I've developed something of a High Holy Day tradition. Each season, I explore some aspect of KAM Isaiah Israel's long history. You may remember my sermon two years ago about the founding of KAM or last year's sermon about this sanctuary being built by Temple Isaiah. So this year, we turn from KAM and Isaiah to Temple Israel and its leader for 30 years, Rabbi Gerson Levi. Rabbi Levi was not only a tireless advocate for Reform Judaism but also a vocal critic of political Zionism. Though he died before the founding of the State of Israel, his principles and perspectives are still helpful in the complex – and often fraught – discourse about Zionism today.

In 1913, he wrote, "Men are slow to notice that words have changed meaning even while they use them. ... And so for many years yet, it is possible that we shall be hearing about Zionism, its dangers and its ideals."¹ Rabbi Levi's prescience was matched by his intelligence; and his reasoning and beliefs remain vitally relevant, in this congregation and on this bima, whether or not we would agree with them today. Most important of all, Rabbi Levi never let politics eclipse relationship, and he remains a treasured example of how we can relate with integrity and respect to those who feel very differently on Judaism and the Jewish State.

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But first, some background.

Gerson Benedict Levi was born in 1878 in Glasgow, Scotland,² where he received his early schooling before moving to Philadelphia.³ He was a brilliant student, studying privately from the age of only 10 with Sabato Morais, the founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary.⁴ Levi earned a BA from the University of Pennsylvania at age 21, and he was ordained as a rabbi by his mentor's Jewish Theological Seminary five years later.⁵

¹ Gerson Levi in his editorial, *The Reform Advocate*, August 9, 1913:
<https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/refadv/1913/08/09/01/article/5/?e=-----194-en-20-refadv-1--img-txIN%7Ct%22isaiah+israel%22----1943-----1>

² As attested in his passport application, a scan of which was supplied by Jae Heisler, an archivist at the American Jewish Archives.

³ *The American Jewish Year Book*, September 10, 1904, to September 29, 1905 / 5665, Vol. 6, p. 219. This yearbook states he was born in Russia, though it seems to be the only source to claim this. I have concluded that this is an error.

⁴ *Ibid.* 220.

⁵ *Ibid.* 220.

From the start, Rabbi Levi showed an independent attitude and a zeal for progressive Judaism. Though he had studied with the luminaries of the Conservative Movement, he began his career at a Reform congregation in Helena, Arkansas.⁶ In 1906, he came to Chicago to become the rabbi of the newly-merged B'nai Sholom-Temple Israel, which was a historic offshoot of KAM.⁷ After only a year in that role, he married Elsa Hirsch, the daughter of Temple Sinai's illustrious Rabbi Emil Hirsch. This solidified his place among the highest ranks of the early Reform Movement, bolstering his position in Chicago and nationwide.

In 1923, Rabbi Levi's life changed course. He had preached regularly at Sinai Congregation for nearly 20 years; but when his beloved father-in-law died, Sinai's board passed over him to hire another successor instead.⁸ So in addition to retaining his more modest pulpit, Rabbi Levi assumed the role of editor-in-chief of the weekly Chicago Jewish newspaper, *The Reform Advocate*. A year later, B'nai Sholom-Temple Israel merged with Isaiah Temple, significantly increasing the standing of the congregation as it moved into this newly-built sanctuary.

Rabbi Levi worked hand-in-hand with Isaiah's rabbi, Joseph Stolz, during the first five years of the newly-formed Temple Isaiah Israel. Their partnership is enshrined on a pair of plaques at our main entrance, so be sure take a look as you leave tonight. When Rabbi Stolz retired, Rabbi Levi took over as the solo senior rabbi. All told, Gerson Levi served this congregation for more than three decades, the longest-serving rabbi in our history, retiring only two years before his death in 1939.

There's a lot more I could tell you about Rabbi Levi's long and illustrious career. But I don't have time to mention that he was the head of the Hebrew Department of the illustrious Chautauqua Institute⁹ or that he served as president of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research¹⁰ or that he arranged the Jewish exhibit in the Hall of Religions of the 1933 World's Fair.¹¹ Rather, tonight we focus on the most relevant, challenging, and inspiring aspect of his thought leadership: his decades-long advocacy against political Zionism as well as his tolerance – and even embrace – of people who felt very differently about the potential for a Jewish State.

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I'm holding an excerpt from the 1913 article I mentioned earlier, lovingly transcribed and preserved in our synagogue archives. Here, the young rabbi recounts

⁶ See *The Jewish Outlook*, Volume 1, Number 42, August 19, 1904, available:

<https://www.coloradohistoricalnewspapers.org/?a=d&d=JOL19040819-01.1.7&c=-----en-20--1--img-txIN%7CtXCO%7CtXTA-----0----->.

⁷ See *Sundays at Sinai*, p. 233.

⁸ See *Sundays at Sinai*, p. 272.

⁹ See *The Reform Advocate*, December 3, 1904:

<https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/refadv/1904/12/03/01/article/28/?srpos=14&c=-----190-en-20-refadv-1--img-txIN%7CtXTI-%22gerson+b.+levi%22-----1>.

¹⁰ <https://chicagosbr.org/history/>

¹¹ <https://www.jta.org/archive/throngs-attracted-to-jewish-exhibit-at-chicago-worlds-fair>

the recent history and current state of Zionist discourse of his age. As he saw it, *political* Zionism was only one expression of the broader spectrum of Zionism, which advocated for pride in Judaism and the advancement of Jewish culture and life. He writes of a fierce debate between Zionists who, on the one hand, wish to “preserve *the Jew*” and those, on the other hand, who wish to “preserve *Judaism*.” “Naturally we do like to believe that both can be preserved together,” he writes, “But shall we attack the problem from the side of the Jew or from the side of Judaism, in other words shall we attack the problem as a matter of politics or as a matter of cultural meaning?” This is the crux of the Zionist issue for Levi, from these early years and throughout his rabbinate.¹²

Rabbi Levi had sympathy for Theodor Herzl’s dream of safeguarding Jewish life in the modern world. But, he bemoaned, “the Zionism of Herzl is no more.”¹³ Instead, “Zionism has now ... come to be a matter of colonization,”¹⁴ more invested in securing a political future for Jewish people than in preserving Jewish religion and culture. For Levi, the heart and soul of true Zionism was religious, focused on the perpetuation of Judaism and Jewish life. A *political* project focused instead on Jewish settlement of Palestine seemed to him farfetched and beside the point. A true Zionist, he might have argued, doesn’t need an actual Zion.

In 1930, Rabbi Levi preached from this very pulpit:

I build my Judaism not upon the foundation of a political theory. I will not let my future rest upon the honesty of any political, acquisitive government on any ethical question. ... I will not let my Judaism build upon any bit of geography. My Judaism will be a religion that can be lived everywhere, or I do not want to live it anywhere. ... I cannot be a Zionist for the political exaltation of Palestinian soil.¹⁵

This view was common to many leaders of the Reform movement before the creation of the State of Israel. They felt the pursuit of a Jewish State in what was then called Palestine was a purely political endeavor that distracted from the essential principles and values of Jewish life. “Colonization,” as they repeatedly called settlement of Palestine, was a mistake.

Nevertheless, one can detect an evolution of tone in Gerson Levi’s writings over the course of his career.¹⁶ As the editor of a Reform Jewish newspaper, Levi

¹² The quotes in this paragraph are all from Levi’s editorial in *The Reform Advocate*, August 9, 1913. See above, note 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Since I Am a Jew,” preached on December 28, 1930. Printed in *The Thanksgiving of the Spirit and Other Sermons* (The Argus Book Shop: Chicago, 1938), p. 145-146.

¹⁶ See, for instance, “The Royal Road to Zion,” *The Reform Advocate*, July 9, 1937, in which he offers astute political analysis of the latest developments in mandatory Palestine. He writes, “...the continued opposition of Arabs who had been encouraged in a dream of a great Arab empire which Zionists themselves neglected or made light of, made the Jewish position difficult. There is no reason to believe that unless the whole attitude of mind of the Arabic world is changed that any government pronouncement, even written agreements, will last for any length of time. The idea of *the* Jewish homeland has vanished. The idea even of a Jewish homeland is in danger, in the sense in which a

continuously reported on the growing population of settled Palestine and frequently speculated about the future of the Jews who lived there. He certainly wished them no ill and hoped for peaceful coexistence between them and their Arab neighbors. His view could be summarized in these sentences from that 1930 sermon:

...If Jews make a home in Palestine and anyone of us can be of help to make that home in Palestine for those Jews, comfortable and happy, we shall. But we shall look upon that settlement in Palestine, not as “the” homeland, not as a sole salvation of Judaism. It will be one more place upon the face of the earth where Judaism can exhibit itself.¹⁷

The meaning of Jewish life in Palestine changed for Levi over time. His writings through the decades reveal an ongoing search for moral stances on shifting ground – an experience we may find familiar as we struggle with our own relationships to Israel or Zionism in times of turmoil and change. We don’t know what Rabbi Levi would have thought of the realized State of Israel, or what his politics would be today after nearly 80 years of Jewish sovereignty. But we can take inspiration from his rootedness in his ideals and his constant quest for truth.

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Crucially, while Levi opposed political **Zionism**,¹⁸ he did not oppose political **Zionists**. Indeed, he was a close colleague and institutional supporter of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, an ardent Zionist. When Stephen Wise founded the Jewish Institute of Religion, a rabbinical seminary in New York City, Gerson Levi served on its inaugural board.¹⁹ As Rabbi Dr. Shirley Idelson notes, “Wise was a Zionist ... [whose] desire to include non-Zionists stemmed from the belief at the heart of his Zionism that the bond Jews shared transcended their differences.”²⁰ The Jewish Institute of Religion – which would later merge with the Reform movement’s seminary, the Hebrew Union College – was a

place or country where a Jew lives as a law abiding and law respecting citizen is his homeland.” Available:

<https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/refadv/1937/07/09/01/article/5/?e=-----194-en-20-refadv-1--img-txIN%7CtXI-%22isaiah+israel%22----1943-----1>

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 146.

¹⁸ In “The Zionism of the Jewish Theological Seminary: 1902-1948” (*Avar ve’Atid: A Journal of Jewish Education, Culture and Discourse*, June 1998. Available:

<https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/avar/AVAR%20VEATID%20JUNE%201998%20-%2016-66.pdf>), Naomi Cohen notes, “Gerson B. Levi, class of 1904, preached rabid anti-Zionist views when he edited the Chicago-based Reform Advocate” (emphasis added).

¹⁹ See Shirley Idelson’s doctoral dissertation, “Reorienting American Liberal Judaism for the Twentieth Century: Stephen S. Wise and the Early Years of the Jewish Institute of Religion” (CUNY Graduate Center: 2014), p. 124.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 106. She also writes, “In accord with the school’s founding vision, the Institute’s faculty included Zionists and non-Zionists, conservatives and liberals. On the one hand, the diversity made real Emil Hirsch’s dream of an American-style Hochschule; on the other hand, the mix was not entirely unbiased. Compared to JTS and HUC, a preponderance of JIR faculty were supportive of Jewish nationalism, for example—and for the first time in an American Jewish seminary, Zionist faculty, and left-leaning faculty as well, did not have to exercise caution in expressing their convictions, lest they rankle the administration and board” (173).

model of political pluralism, showing by example that the strongest and richest institutions of Jewish life are fostered in an environment of respectful difference. Rabbi Levi's relationship to Zionism evolved through lifelong dialogue with political Zionists like Wise. He had a principled stance, and he held his ground; yet he was open to learning from those with whom he disagreed because of their shared commitment to the Jewish people.

The model of Levi and Wise is vital for us today. I am a liberal Zionist, as most of you know, which to me means **standing up** for the world's only Jewish state and also **standing against** its leaders who would violate the morals I hold most dear. Here in America, I have close friends who might be called "more Zionist" than me and others who are "less." I know that good people in good faith come to different conclusions about the past, present, and future of the Jewish State; and the flourishing of the Jewish people depends upon our ability to respect and work alongside one another, even (and especially) when we passionately disagree.

Indeed, openness to diverse views is a hallmark of progressive Judaism more broadly, though it is a very difficult position to hold in the world at large. The Reform movement itself – with its seminary and congregational union and professional organizations, not to mention its network of day schools, youth groups, and camps – is officially a Zionist one. But there are plenty of Reform Jews who are not Zionist, and they are welcome, too. This is because the undergirding values that hold us together – values of pursuing peace and promoting peoplehood and preserving the sanctity of Torah and *mitzvot* – are more important than our political views on Israel. I know that for some people, where you stand on Israel means standing with us or against us. But I think that approach betrays the principles of our movement, which for generations has held space for people of widely varying views.

Commitment to Jewish peoplehood entails a commitment to the country home to more Jews than anywhere else and open to citizenship for Jews around the world. And at the same time, commitment to religious freedom and human rights leads us to oppose Israeli governments that curtail the rights of Jews and non-Jews alike and persecute the Palestinians their settlements dispossess. Liberal Zionists honoring the legacy of Reform forebears like Gerson Levi must be willing to defend Jewish life in the Jewish State while simultaneously insisting on the tireless pursuit not of territory, waterways, or power but rather the values of peace and justice lovers of Zion have promoted since the days of the prophet Isaiah, after whom we take our name.

As a rabbi who bears the honor of following in the footsteps of some of our movement's most illustrious leaders, I insist every day that our congregation can be home to people of different opinions – even the deepest, most powerful and urgent convictions – about the State of Israel. Just as Gerson Levi and Stephen Wise were welcome in one another's communities and homes, our congregation can likewise be a meeting-place for Zionists, anti-Zionists, non-Zionists, and people who don't care much about Zionism at all, a place where we can work together to strengthen Jewish community and promote Jewish values while being a source of cultural, political, and religious creativity in Chicago's South Side and beyond. KAM Isaiah Israel strives to be

a force for good and a home to all with commitment to progressive Jewish life as our north star.

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Addressing the student body of the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1930, Gerson Levi made reference to the Torah portion we read on Yom Kippur. He called upon his audience, rabbis-in-training and their faculty and friends, to be “shoave mayim,” drawers of water (see Deuteronomy 29:10). He urged them to draw from “the waters of the Holy Spirit,” “the waters of Jewish tradition,” and “the waters of salvation.”²¹ “The world is thirsty,” he taught, referencing the themes of the High Holy Days, “for the achieving of a life whose God will be enthroned not somewhere and somehow and sometimes in a distant date and in another world but now and through us.”²² In other words, Judaism and Jewish life are in our hands, and we cannot relinquish our responsibility to others who would claim to speak for us. That’s why, nearly 100 years later, our congregation remains committed to the messy and raucous and vitally important project of figuring out and standing up for what’s right—in our land, in lands abroad, and in the Holy Land called home by so many, including Palestinians and Jews.

Let us heed the call to be drawers of water on this season of God’s enthronement. Let us receive with honor the legacy bequeathed to us by our forebears and bring the best of their aspirations and ideas into the future. And let us commit to a Jewish community founded on pluralism and respect, where all our efforts bend toward peace.

²¹ “The Drawing of the Waters,” preached on October 8, 1930. Printed in *The Thanksgiving of the Spirit and Other Sermons* (The Argus Book Shop: Chicago, 1938), pp. 41-54. See these references on pp. 42 and 50.

²² *Ibid.* p. 53.