

# The Next Generation of Conservative Rabbis: An Empirical Study of Today's Rabbinical Students\*

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While the controversy over the ordination of women as rabbis has generated much publicity during the past decade, other far-reaching changes in the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America have gone virtually unnoticed outside of the institution. These include a significant revision of the school's curriculum; changes in policies that define which faculty members may teach rabbinical students; the hiring of approximately two dozen new, and mainly young, faculty members; and most important of all, the admission of rabbinical students whose characteristics differ considerably from those of their predecessors.

This essay addresses the last of these recent developments by analyzing the present cohort of rabbinical students at the Seminary. Who are today's rabbinical students? What is their familial and educational background? What motivates them to aspire to become rabbis? What types of rabbinic work do they wish to undertake? And what is their outlook as Conservative Jews?

In order to answer such questions, the authors of this essay conducted an exploratory survey in the fall of 1985 when all matriculants in the Seminary's Rabbinical School and its affiliated programs at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and Neve Schechter in

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Jerusalem were asked to complete a questionnaire anonymously. Over seventy-five percent of this population (110 out of 143 students) responded. The questionnaire asked students about their personal backgrounds, perceptions of the rabbinic role, occupational preferences within the rabbinate, personal religious standards and practices, and assessments of the current curriculum. While the data we collected are sufficient to present a descriptive portrait of today's rabbinical students, we have been particularly interested in identifying changes over time, and accordingly have tried to place our findings into an historical framework. Fortunately, a few studies were conducted in the past—two by Arthur Hertzberg in 1943 and 1955, and one by Charles Liebman in 1967 as part of his larger inquiry into the training of American rabbis.<sup>1</sup> Whenever possible, we will compare our findings concerning the present cohort of rabbinical students with the results of these three earlier surveys. When such comparisons are not feasible due to a dearth of data, we will limit ourselves to a description of current students.

## **The Current Student Body**

### ***Familial Characteristics***

In the fall of 1985, 143 students were enrolled in the Rabbinical School, of which 26 were women. The vast majority of students were born and raised in the United States, mainly on the East Coast (51%), while smaller numbers came from West Coast and midwestern states (20% from each area), thereby reflecting fairly accurately the geographic distribution of American Jewry.<sup>2</sup> The students ranged in age from a few who were in their early twenties to one who was sixty-one years of age. Approximately half, however, were in their early thirties, and therefore as a group current students are somewhat older than their predecessors (Liebman, pp. 11–12). Unlike earlier populations, many present-day students do not begin rabbinical studies immediately upon completing their undergraduate education. Furthermore, the Seminary is now attracting a small number of rabbinical students who either have worked in other careers and are now retraining for the rabbinate, or are women who could not study for the Conservative rabbinate prior to 1983.

The presence of women and older students provides visible evidence of changes in the population of the Rabbinical School. Contemporary students also differ in less overt, but far more significant

ways from their predecessors. To begin with, their familial backgrounds are different. Three-quarters of all rabbinical students today are the children of American-born parents. (Let us note that this figure would be even higher were it not for the fact that the Seminary trains Latin American and other foreign students who will eventually serve as rabbis in their homelands.) By contrast, in 1943 barely 7% and in 1955 only 20% of rabbinical students reported that both their parents were born in the United States (Hertzberg, p. 312). And even as recently as 1967, only 55% of students were the sons of American-born fathers (Liebman, p. 12). Clearly, then, the Conservative rabbinate is no longer drawing most of its members from the children of immigrants, as had been the case from the founding of the Seminary until mid-century. Instead, rabbinical students of the present generation are the grandchildren of immigrants: all students surveyed had at least one set of foreign-born grandparents.<sup>3</sup> While this shift is not surprising given that the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States came to an end over sixty years ago, it highlights the distance between today's students and their immigrant forebears, ancestors who had a direct personal exposure to the traditional Jewish societies of the Old World.

A second shift in familial background concerns the occupations of the fathers of rabbinical students.<sup>4</sup> Continuing a trend that mirrors patterns in the Jewish community at large, there has been a steady rise in the number of students whose fathers are professionals, from 34% in the 1940s to 85% today (Hertzberg, p. 318). Significantly, there has been a corresponding decline in the number of fathers employed as professionals serving the Jewish community. In 1943 over one-third of all students were the sons of rabbis or Jewish educators, and as recently as 1967, close to one-fifth of students came from homes where the father was a Jewish professional (Hertzberg, p. 318; Liebman, p. 12). Today, only 7% of parents (fathers and mothers) are Jewish professionals. At the present time, it is impossible to assess the consequences of this shift. But we note that the children of Conservative rabbis and other professionals working in the Jewish community are not following in the career paths of their parents. An examination of rabbinic families in other denominations, and indeed of American clergy in general, may reveal that this lack of generational continuity is the norm. Our data suggest, however, that the tradition of service to the Jewish community that characterized many rabbinic families in the past is disappearing in the Conservative movement.

The most important changes in the familial backgrounds of rabbinical students pertain to the denominational affiliations of their parents. To understand this shift, let us begin with the broader pattern that has been developing during the past three decades. Prior to the middle of the century, the Seminary had recruited students who for the most part grew up in Orthodox homes. Writing in the mid-fifties, Arthur Hertzberg demonstrated that this pattern was changing; he noted that "the Conservative movement, which was in 1943 largely dependent upon the Orthodox group for its rabbinic candidates, is at present producing almost half its own rabbis" (p. 311). By the mid-sixties, Liebman reported that "most fathers of JTS students were affiliated with Conservative (69%), some with Orthodox (19%), and none with Reform synagogues" (p. 13). Today, two-thirds of all rabbinical students still come from Conservative homes. What has changed is that virtually none (merely 3%) come from Orthodox families, while 19% grew up in Reform and 12% in unaffiliated homes. (The latter category includes some rabbinical students who have converted to Judaism, and therefore listed their families as unaffiliated.)

### ***Educational Backgrounds***

The formal education of Seminary students prior to their enrolling in the Rabbinical School also differs markedly from the educational backgrounds of earlier cohorts. Although 92% of current students received a Jewish education on the elementary school level, only a small minority attended day schools. (Again, we must note the presence in this population of some converts to Judaism who, of course, as children did not have a Jewish education.) In contrast to the 41% of students in 1967 who had received most of their childhood education in day schools, only 22% of current students did so (Liebman, p. 15). This decline is even more noteworthy when we observe that the Conservative movement's Solomon Schechter Day Schools were proliferating at precisely the time when these students were of school age — and yet only a small fraction attended these or any other day schools. Instead, the majority of current students attended Hebrew Schools under Conservative auspices. Interestingly, close to half of the current student body rated their elementary level Jewish education as only "somewhat effective" or "ineffective." And when asked which institution had the greatest positive influence on

their Jewishness during their childhood years, only 22% cited their Jewish school, as compared to youth groups, summer camps, and synagogue programs. Thus, the quality of Jewish education experienced by current students at the elementary level was neither very intensive nor perceived as particularly effective. For the most part, rabbinical students did not receive a better Jewish education during their high school years: in fact, 35% of all current students received *no formal Jewish education* during their high school years; and only 8% attended day schools on the secondary level.<sup>5</sup>

For the vast majority of rabbinical students, the most important experience of Jewish education came during their college years rather than earlier. The overwhelming majority (83%) engaged in Jewish study at the college level, particularly in Jewish Studies programs. Here we have hard evidence of the much vaunted, but rarely demonstrated, contribution of Judaic studies programs at colleges to the strengthening of Jewish identity in students. Almost one-third of current rabbinical students majored in Jewish Studies, and another 30% took at least several courses. When we add to this group the population of students who studied formally in Israel and in other programs outside of their colleges, we have clear evidence of the critical importance of the college years as a time of decision-making and education leading to the rabbinic vocation. That the college years are crucial in identity formation is a commonly observed phenomenon, but our data suggest that the availability of courses and programs of Jewish study on campuses enables Jewish students to pursue their new-found interests. (We have no information as to whether these courses sparked such interest or simply attracted students who were searching for information on Jewish life.) Not surprisingly, most rabbinical students decided only during their college years to become rabbis.

In noting changes in the educational backgrounds of rabbinical students, we must draw attention to shifts in their experiences of informal Jewish education, as well. Whereas in 1967 over two-thirds of rabbinical students reported that they had been members of United Synagogue Youth or its Leadership Training Fellowship, only 36% of current students had been members of USY (Liebman, pp. 16-17). An even smaller percentage attended Ramah Camps — barely a quarter of all who attended any Jewish camp and under 15% of all current rabbinical students. Thus, the most important institutions for informal Jewish education of the Conservative movement — Ramah camps and the United Synagogue Youth — no longer serve as signifi-

cant feeders for the Rabbinical School. It appears that the institutions of the Conservative movement are shaping the outlook of future Conservative rabbis far less than they did in the past.

### **Career Choices and Expectations**

In order to gain a more rounded picture of the current student body of the Rabbinical School, our questionnaire posed a series of attitudinal questions concerning career choices and expectations. Unfortunately, there is virtually no information from earlier studies that would enable us to place the attitudes of current students into a comparative framework. Moreover, since our own survey represents only an exploratory stage of research that we hope to build upon with subsequent questionnaires, we cannot yet provide longitudinal data on this cohort of students as it makes its way through the Rabbinical School and into the field. Given these limitations, we will confine our remarks in this section to a brief description of students' attitudes and pose a number of questions that arise from our findings.

In assessing the present generation of rabbinical students, it is critical to understand how these students perceive the rabbinic vocation. What do they regard as the most important aspect of rabbinic work? What, in their opinion, does a rabbi need to do? To elicit information on these issues our questionnaire asked students to rate the relative importance of seventeen different skills and activities commonly associated with the rabbinic profession. Students rated as "extremely important" skills that related to teaching (86%) and counseling (77%). They also emphasized the importance of serving as a model of spirituality (66%), living as an halakhic Jew (50%) and a religious person (67%), speaking comfortably in public (53%), and demonstrating concern for the social issues of the time (50%). In contrast, a large proportion of students viewed the following items as moderately important: administrative skills (49%), actively supporting the local Federation (46%), promoting the study of Hebrew (45%), promoting improved relations between Jews and non-Jews (48%), understanding other religions (46%), and promoting Zionism (44%). Support for the policies of the Israeli government was viewed as unimportant by 45% of respondents. While women tended to view the understanding of other religions as more important to the rabbinic profession than men, there were no major differences in outlook between men and women, or junior and senior students con-

cerning the most important activities of rabbis.

To understand the statistical relationships between the various items concerned with the role of the rabbi, a factor analysis was conducted. Our analysis revealed three underlying constructs: the role of the rabbi was perceived as that of 1) a religious and public leader; 2) educator and counselor; and 3) *talmid hakham*. From a statistical standpoint, the first role has the greatest explanatory power. It describes a leader concerned with communal issues, relations between Jews and gentiles, the welfare of Israel, and the rabbi's public persona as leader and model of spirituality and religiosity. Of minor importance to this role is the mastery of Jewish texts and living as an halakhic person. The second role stresses the importance of the rabbi as counselor and educator, who is not particularly concerned with halakhic or spiritual issues. And the third role type perceived by students is concerned with study, spirituality, and Jewish law.

While these types are by no means mutually exclusive, they suggest that rabbinical students today are not monolithic in their approach to the rabbinic vocation. (It is doubtful that any cohort of rabbinical students at the Seminary ever was.) Given this clear evidence of heterogeneity within the student body and the perception of students that there are distinct role types, can rabbinic training at the Seminary better guide students to meet their individual career expectations? Could such guidance in rabbinical school help slow the rate of attrition in the Conservative rabbinate? Students who are most attracted to the *talmid hakham* model, for example, could be steered already in rabbinical school toward a career as educators or academicians. Alternatively, students most attracted to the counseling model could be steered to rabbinic work where such skills are most appropriate — for example, Hillel work and positions in helping agencies. While this might necessitate a track system (about which more below), it also would require an effort to aid students to become aware of their career expectations and to match those expectations with actual positions. The result might well be a more effective rabbinate.

Our questionnaire also asked students to identify the people and experiences that influenced their decision to enter rabbinical school. Over eighty percent of respondents cited the role of influential individuals, including family members, professionals in the Jewish community, professors of Judaica, and friends. While a few students cited their own synagogue rabbis, a far larger group were inspired by char-

ismatic Jewish personalities whom they encountered outside of their synagogues. These individuals range across the Jewish ideological spectrum, but share the ability to project spirituality. Among the individuals mentioned were: Rabbis Ben Zion Gold, Arthur Green, Max Ticktin, on one end of the spectrum; and Rabbis Brovender and Dovid Din, the Rebbetzin Jungreis, and local Lubavitch representatives, on the other. It is noteworthy that after exposure to these charismatic and spiritual types of individuals, students nonetheless enroll at the Seminary, which offers a more rationalistic approach to the study of Judaism. The impact of such individuals, none of whom is positioned at the center of the Conservative movement, suggests the need to reevaluate the ability of programs within the movement to inspire and excite young people. Put differently, does the movement's emphasis on the critical study of Judaism, and its discomfort with charismatics attract young people to Conservative Judaism and rabbinic work, or do we only preach to those who have been "converted" by others?

Unquestionably, the common experience shared by the highest percentage of rabbinical students (49%) was study in Israel. Two-fifths of all rabbinical student studied in Israel for at least a semester, and in some cases for up to two years *prior* to enrolling in the rabbinical school. Although only half of these rabbinical students viewed their experience in Israel as crucial in their decision to prepare for the rabbinate, there is reason to think that such programs may decisively influence an even greater number of students given the large numbers who were educated in Israel. Until the Six Day War, study in Israel was relatively uncommon for rabbinical students. (Liebman never even raised the question in his essay of 1968.) In our own time, study in Israel is as noticeable a factor in the educational backgrounds of rabbinical students as day school attendance was in past decades. It appears that Israeli study programs are now the decisive training ground for many future Conservative rabbis that day schools were twenty years ago.

Finally, we turn to the personal career goals of current students. Respondents were asked to rate fifteen different occupations most often associated with the rabbinate. The vast majority (87%) of students are most interested in becoming pulpit rabbis, and are considerably less interested in serving as administrators in Jewish institutions, educators, or chaplains. Women students were more interested than men in pursuing careers as rabbis of small congregations



(300 families and less), as well as directors of Hillel programs. Whether these preferences reflect the true aspirations of women or their assessments of what positions will realistically be open to them is not clear. It appears that the type of Jewish education students received affects their career goals: students with little formal Jewish education were not attracted to the field of Jewish education, whereas graduates of day schools considered becoming principals of such schools. Significantly, close to fifteen percent of current students are either highly or moderately interested in careers unrelated to their rabbinical training.<sup>6</sup>

These findings, though hardly surprising, raise a series of questions that deserve further exploration: Since the career goals of men and women differ, will certain fields of rabbinic work become associated with women and others with men? Will women, who in our survey indicate a greater preference for positions that involve more interpersonal work, eventually select jobs that entail such activities? And if not, will they adjust their career goals and experience frustration? And more broadly, does the diversity of career goals among rabbinical students suggest that the rabbinic career will undergo increased specialization? In other fields, such as law, medicine, and business, professional schools have provided students with tracks to prepare for specialties. Has the time come for rabbinic education to plan for specialization, as well? Is it advisable to educate the rabbi as a *kol bo* (generalist) or to train students for specific rabbinic roles?

## **Implications**

### ***For the Rabbinical School***

Having examined some of our most important findings about current rabbinical students, we conclude this essay with a discussion of some implications arising from our study. We begin by rejecting one possible inference that might be drawn from our discussion of shifts in the demographic, familial, and educational backgrounds of students — namely that today's students are less able than those of the past. In pointing to the differences between contemporary students and their predecessors, it has not been our intention to bemoan decline, but to identify change. There is no evidence that current students are any less gifted, open to education, or committed to serving the Jewish community than their predecessors. On the contrary, the Rabbinical School continues to admit students only selectively, and is

recruiting candidates from the finest private and state universities in the country.

Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that the less intense preparation in Judaica of current students necessarily predicts a lack of religious observance and greater latitude regarding halakhah. While much more research needs to be done on the religious observances of students, we have some information on their religious outlook that derives from a dozen questions posed regarding Conservative standards and practices. Seventy-one percent of students responded negatively when asked whether they "would drive to the synagogue on Shabbat"; and approximately forty percent oppose either strongly or moderately permitting congregants to drive to the synagogue on Shabbat, despite the Rabbinical Assembly's ruling permitting this practice. Similarly, three-quarters of respondents opposed abolishing the second day of Yom Tov. Ninety-five percent opposed permitting rabbis to officiate at intermarriages. And only seven percent approved "accepting as Jewish someone whose father, but not mother, is Jewish." By contrast, over ninety percent approved the ordination of women as rabbis and close to sixty percent approve the acceptance of women as witnesses for religious ceremonies. What seems to emerge from these responses is a pattern of traditionalism in areas of religious ritual combined with strong support for change when it comes to the traditional status of women. It will be important to monitor the changing religious practices and attitudes of students as they progress through rabbinical school and enter the field. But at the present time students show evidence of fidelity to halakhah and traditional observances.

Our findings, however, do confirm the perceptions of many faculty members and other observers of the Seminary who have noted that today's students differ from those of twenty years ago, let alone from those of forty years ago, in the intensity of their prior Judaic preparation. Many students enter the Rabbinical School with only an elementary knowledge of Hebrew, relatively little exposure to rabbinic texts, and a limited knowledge of practical halakhah. Yet the curriculum, with all the changes of recent years, still focuses mainly on providing students with the tools to master rabbinic texts, and thereby assumes that students are fluent in Hebrew and knowledgeable about Jewish practices and skills. If the goals of the curriculum are to remain the same, many students will require considerable work in basic Jewish skills and knowledge prior to matriculating in the Rab-

binical School. Like medical students who must obtain a solid background in biology and chemistry before entering medical school, rabbinical students will have to demonstrate their acquisition of linguistic and textual skills before embarking on rabbinical studies. This would, of course, lengthen the number of years of post-graduate study from 5–6 years to perhaps 6–7 years, thereby raising the financial and psychic costs of rabbinic education, and encouraging some potential students to enroll in other, less demanding, rabbinical schools.

An alternative to requiring incoming students to demonstrate a minimum of Judaic learning is to reconsider the goals of the Rabbinical School's curriculum. Is it still desirable to focus rabbinic education mainly on the mastery of classical texts? And if so, should the curriculum permit students to focus on one type of text by permitting them to major in Bible, or Talmud, or Codes, or modern Hebrew literature? The advantage of introducing a major requirement is that students would develop a sense of mastery in at least one area of Jewish learning, whereas today's students with their smattering of knowledge in all fields are not entirely at home in any field. The disadvantage is that students will leave rabbinical school with only a passing familiarity with several areas of classical Jewish learning. Let us note that these proposals are not necessarily mutually exclusive: with some fine tuning, the curriculum could still focus on the breadth of Judaic knowledge while permitting specialization.

### ***For the Movement***

The differences between current and earlier cohorts of students recruited by the Rabbinical School raise important questions for the Conservative movement as a whole. It is noteworthy that three-quarters of current students grew up in Conservative families, yet only small numbers participated in the youth and camping programs sponsored by the movement. Significantly, the Conservative movement also eliminated two important programs that had originally been designed to recruit future leaders—the United Synagogue's Leaders Training Fellowship (disbanded in 1971) and Ramah's Mador (terminated in 1980). To solve the long-term recruitment needs of the Rabbinical School, the Conservative movement will have to rethink how it develops its future leaders. Presently, most rabbinical students are not nurtured by the movement's institutions.

Shifts in the student body of the Rabbinical School also raise questions regarding recruitment to the Conservative movement at large. It is clear from our data that the Conservative rabbinate no longer holds any attraction for children of Orthodox Jews. We must ask whether this holds true among the laity as well. Will Conservative synagogues attract young Jews from Orthodox homes as they did in the past? Or will the bulk of lay people attracted from outside of the movement come from Reform and non-affiliated families, as is the case with rabbinical students? For much of this century, the Conservative movement has gained most of its adherents from among the dissatisfied children of Orthodox Jews; perhaps the time has come to recognize that Orthodoxy today is retaining the allegiance of its young, but the Reform movement is not as successful. As the Reform movement embarks on an aggressive campaign to attract intermarried couples and others on the periphery of Jewish life, perhaps the Conservative movement ought to appeal to more traditional members of the Reform laity, just as the Seminary is attracting rabbinical students from this population. Such a campaign would require the leaders of the Conservative movement to sharpen the distinctions between themselves and leaders of the Reform movement, distinctions that often have been blurred in the effort to form political alliances with Reform rabbis.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we must explore the consequences of shifts in the student body of the rabbinical school for relations between the Seminary and the movement. Much has been written by partisans of the movement, as well as academic observers such as Marshall Sklare and Charles Liebman, on the gap separating the ideology and observances of the elite from the Judaism of the laity. As the percentage of rabbis raised in the movement continues to climb, will that gap narrow? Or are current students as likely as their predecessors to be lonely champions of halakhah and Conservative ideology?

By raising a series of questions that cannot be answered on the basis of our present knowledge, it has been our purpose to highlight how much research remains to be done. It is ironic that the Conservative movement, which takes justifiable pride in its commitment to history and scientific research, has expended so little energy to document its own history and examine its present condition. In the field of social scientific inquiry, for example, far more surveys were conducted between 1930 and 1955, than in the past quarter-century.<sup>8</sup> Ongoing research is necessary to preserve the historical record of the

movement, as well as to plan coherently for the future. In the case of the Rabbinical School, we need to study the impact of rabbinic education as students make their way through the Seminary; then we must trace the experiences of rabbis in the field in order to evaluate the effectiveness of rabbinic education and to identify the factors leading to personal growth in the rabbinate, as well as burn-out. As the Jewish Theological Seminary begins its second century of training rabbis, a great deal needs to be learned about the students it is recruiting and how it can best prepare them to serve the American Jewish community.

#### NOTES

1. Arthur Hertzberg, "The Conservative Rabbinate: A Sociological Study," in *Essays On Jewish Life and Thought in Honor of Salo W. Baron*, Joseph L. Blau, et al., eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 309-332. Charles S. Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1968 (New York: American Jewish Committee) pp. 3-112. Page citations from the Hertzberg and Liebman studies appear within parentheses in the text of this essay.

2. In fact, Jewish communities from the sunbelt states are under-represented and those in midwestern and West Coast states are somewhat overrepresented in the Rabbinical School. On the geographic distribution of American Jewry, see Alvin Chenkin and Maynard Miron, "Jewish Population in the United States, 1979" in the *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1980 (New York: American Jewish Committee), p. 163.

3. Data on the birthplace and denominational affiliations of the parents and grandparents of students were obtained in a follow-up survey of sixty-five randomly selected students enrolled in the Rabbinical School.

4. Our data indicate that over 75% of current students have mothers employed outside the household. They are mainly engaged in teaching (35%), self-employment (23%), and clerical work (15%). No data are available in earlier surveys on the occupations of mothers, and therefore it is difficult to judge the significance of our findings on the employment of mothers.

5. In comparing the Jewish educational experiences of male and female rabbinical students, several important differences emerge. A greater proportion of female students: a) received a day school education; b) attended Orthodox schools; c) rated their previous Jewish education as effective. Women admitted to Rabbinical School during these first years, at least, seem to have enjoyed a more intensive and satisfying education than their male counterparts.

6. In order to determine how students perceive their career choices in relationship with their career preparations, it will be necessary to conduct interviews. It would be interesting to know whether the sixteen students (15%

of respondents) who indicate that they are interested in pursuing careers unrelated to rabbinic training intend to complete rabbinical school. Did earlier cohorts of students at the Seminary also have students who did not plan to practice as rabbis? How do career aspirations relate to attrition in the rabbinate?

7. It will also be of interest to learn whether students of a Reform or unaffiliated background differ from their classmates in their religious outlooks. An initial examination of this question based on our population sample indicates that students from Reform homes lean to the left in their religious practices and attitudes. The unaffiliated, on the other hand, tend to fit the pattern of the *baal teshuvah* (one who returns to Judaism). The former tend to perceive the rabbi as a spiritual leader, whereas the latter favor the *talmid hakham* model. But given the small samples and the limited data we have, such findings are inconclusive and the entire issue warrants further study.

8. For bibliographic citations to many of the earlier surveys, see Jack Wertheimer's essay on the Conservative synagogue in a volume he has edited entitled, *The American Synagogue in Historical Perspective* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 1987).