This People Israel


Alan Henkin

Wednesday, June 20, 1951, was a gorgeous day in New London, Connecticut, with temperatures in the mid-seventies and not a drop of rain in the sky. At the Griswold Hotel ("The Finest Summer Resort Hotel in America") a dejected Roland Gittelsohn (1910–1995) stood before his colleagues at the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis to report on the status of the Conference’s placement plan for rabbis. The November 1950 General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations had killed the placement plan that he had so painstakingly crafted and shepherded through so many committees and conferences.¹

Just two years earlier, in 1949, the CCAR convened in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, at the historic Mount Washington Hotel, which in 1944 had hosted the Bretton Woods International Monetary Conference. In 1949 Gittelsohn had only returned a few years earlier from the Pacific Theater of World War II with three combat ribbons for his service with the Fifth Marine Division on Iwo Jima. An optimistic Gittelsohn and his Committee had presented a detailed plan for rabbinic placement that was well received and provoked such a lively conversation that it had to be continued

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later that afternoon. The plan attempted to remedy "the chaos and anarchy of the past with a procedure that would be orderly." Since its founding, the CCAR had tried many times to institute such a plan but all of its efforts had come to naught. The time was right for the CCAR to join with the congregational arm of the Reform Movement, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to correct "a situation which threatens to become intolerable."

The plan called for the establishment of a Placement Bureau composed of representatives of the CCAR, the UAHC, and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. The Bureau would hire a full-time director, and it would all be paid for proportionately by the three arms of the Movement. Congregations and rabbis would have to use the Placement Bureau exclusively. "Unless every rabbi and every congregation agree to abide by the same orderly and fair course of procedure, the rule will become nugatory, and the scrupulous penalized." Congregations had the right to describe to the Bureau the kind of rabbi that they were searching for, and the Bureau would have the authority to recommend candidates to congregations in search. The Bureau also would have the power to invoke sanctions on rabbis or congregations who violated its rules.

In the discussion afterwards Gittelsohn told the members that so far, the representatives of the UAHC "approved the report substantially," which Maurice Eisendrath (1902–1973), the president of the UAHC, confirmed. Solomon B. Frechot (1892–1990) expressed concern that the director "will have your career and your fate in his hands." Others voiced worries about the costs of the Bureau and about the necessity of sanctions. Overall, however, a consensus emerged that placement had become "a very sad situation and we have to take some very drastic steps," as Jacob J. Weinstein (1902–1974) put it. In the end the Conference approved the substance of the plan with some relatively minor changes, asking the Committee to send the amended plan to the members for the next Convention.

At the CCAR Convention held at the Gibson Hotel in Cincinnati in 1950 Gittelsohn brought forward the amended plan on Thursday morning, June 8. This too touched off a spirited conversation. Gittelsohn reported that the Executive Board of the UAHC tentatively approved the plan, but James G. Heller (1892–1971) warned the Conference that although the UAHC leaders seemed to favor
the plan, "some members of the New York Congregations took a violent attitude against the plan." In other cities the plan received widespread support of synagogue leaders. No wonder Gittelsohn and his Committee felt hopeful about his plan. So confident did the CCAR leaders feel that they included in the plan the establishment of a "temporary placement committee that will go out of existence immediately upon the establishment of the general placement bureau," said CCAR President Jacob Marcus (1896-1995). The vote on the provisional body was overwhelming, 78 to 11.

One year later, however, Gittelsohn's placement plan was dead. Oddly enough, the UAHC had approved a motion to create a placement system. But the plenum had attached several amendments that it knew would make it unacceptable to the CCAR. Among the "poison pills" were: the placement system would be optional for rabbis and congregations; and congregations could go into placement before they had resolved the status of their current rabbis. Years later James G. Heller would describe this UAHC meeting as "one of the most frustrating, and to a certain extent most depressing, meetings that we have ever had in Reform Judaism." Gittelsohn's Placement Committee voted 7 to 2 against accepting the UAHC amended motion, and it urged the CCAR Convention to reject it as well. The Convention turned down the UAHC-amended plan but it also voted to keep in place the provisional placement system set up just a year earlier. With that, admitting that he was "weary after three years of onerous and at times disheartening attempts" to construct a placement system for the Movement, Gittelsohn resigned as chairman.

The Early Years

By 1889, when Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) turned seventy, the Hebrew Union College had ordained twenty rabbis, and Wise turned to organizing the American rabbinate. In July of that year he and his disciple David Philipson (1862-1945) gathered the rabbis attending the council of the UAHC to ascertain their interest in a rabbinic conference. A motion to create a Central Conference of American Rabbis passed unanimously, and the CCAR came into existence.

Although the CCAR's first two conventions were held at Young Men's Hebrew Associations in Cleveland and Baltimore, the third
convention in 1892 met at Temple Beth-El in New York City. Beth-
El's new synagogue had just been built at the cost of $350,000
(abut $9 million in 2014 dollars), and the building was dedicated
only the year before. In 1879 Kauffman Kohler (1843–1926) suc-
cceeded his father-in-law David Einhorn (1809–1879) as rabbi of
Beth-El. Eventually Beth-El would merge with Temple Emanu-El,
but when in 1891 Beth-El was dedicated, the New York Times called
it “magnificently decorated.”

At this third CCAR Convention the members took up for the
first time the issue of rabbinic placement. On Sunday morning,
July 10, 1892, Maurice Harris (1859–1930) and Joseph Silverman
(1860–1930) introduced a resolution on rabbinic ethics, though
three of its six operative clauses dealt with placement. The first
clause asked that no CCAR rabbi accept a position in a congre-
gation “that sends adrift a colleague who has grown old in its
service” unless that rabbi has been offered a decent pension. The
second called on rabbis not to accept an invitation to serve a congre-
gation “while the incumbent is still in office” and wait until
“after the pulpit is declared vacant.” Third, when two rabbis are
both candidates for the same congregation, “they should extend
to each other all the courtesies and consideration possible in order
to maintain the fraternal feelings that should always exist among
colleagues.” We can only imagine the state of affairs among rabbis
that would have necessitated such a resolution. In any event noth-
ing seems to have become of this resolution.

Joseph Stolz (1861–1941), the founding rabbi of Temple Isaiah in
Chicago, was president of the CCAR in 1906. On July 2 of that year
he delivered his president’s message in Indianapolis and adum-
brated his vision of the CCAR as a professional body. He argued
that the Conference needed to find ways to prevent “unseemly ri-
valry and unbecoming commercialism in the filling of vacant pul-
pits.” Concretizing Stolz’s sentiments, Louis Witt (1878–1950) and
Samuel H. Goldenson (1878–1962) called for the appointment of a
committee that would bring back ideas “to relieve the present un-
regulated state of affairs with regard to candidacy for pulpits.”

The CCAR Executive Committee met during the January 1907
UAHC Convention in Atlanta and adopted a recommendation
from the Committee on Candidating for Pulpits that requested
the UAHC to appoint a committee to work with the CCAR on
placement. By the time of the CCAR’s Convention in Frankfort,
Michigan, in July 1907, the Conference seemed determined "to devise a plan to help congregations in the method of selecting Rabbis without advising which ones to select," as David Philipson's resolution put it. So the following year, on Wednesday morning, July 3, the CCAR agreed to establish a Pulpit Bureau "to aid congregations without Rabbis to secure them and Rabbis without positions or seeking other ones to be put in correspondence with such congregations." Nothing seems to have become of this resolution.

In 1910 Henry Cohen (1863–1952) was at the helm of the Pulpit Bureau, a committee of the CCAR whose first task was to collect information on the placement programs of other religious denominations. In the report he submitted in absentia he misunderstood his mandate and instead he surveyed eight CCAR members regarding the feasibility of a placement system that, besides placing rabbis in congregations, would work at resolving conflict and "weeding out of undesirables." But not only did Cohen misconstrue the charge, the responses he received were nearly unanimously discouraging, especially regarding the expulsion of members. By 1911 Cohen got it right, and learned that two placement systems predominate among the Christian groups: appointment by bishops and election by congregations. Cohen admitted that "there exists no satisfactory arrangement to bring together unemployed ministers and vacant pulpits." Nothing seems to have come of this survey.

Placement was back on the CCAR's agenda in 1915. Resolution E asked that a new committee be appointed to recommend "methods of pulpit candidating," because the members "strongly condemn all such methods of electing rabbis as tend to lower the high standard and dignity of the rabbinate, and we believe the present methods are on the whole of this tendency." Louis Witt, at that time the rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Little Rock, Arkansas, assumed the chair of the Committee on Pulpit Candidating, and the next year his Committee acknowledged that placement had come before the CCAR at least a half-dozen times with nothing to show for it. "Our policy has hitherto been, in the main, one of evasion and procrastination."

The Committee denounced the use of the trial sermon as the sole criterion for selecting a rabbi, but it argued that if synagogues must use this method, it would be best to implement it by way of serial visits. That is, they imagined a placement system in which congregational representatives would visit a rabbi in his home.
congregation and vote up or down on that rabbi before considering the next candidate. The Committee called this system "right of way": "One man at a time and out of the way before another man is called." The CCAR printed a pamphlet with the plan and circulated it among the members, but only a handful replied. The CCAR summarily rejected the plan for a Bureau for Filling Pulpit Vacancies on July 1, 1917, without explanation. Nothing seems to have become of this effort.

The Depression Years

Little activity on placement occurred in the Roaring Twenties, but with the onset of the Great Depression (1929-1933), the need for a placement system grew urgent. Congregational membership dropped off dramatically, synagogues cut back on programs and staff, rabbis were let go, and the rabbinical students of Hebrew Union College faced uncertain futures. Family membership in the UAHC fell from 61,600 in 1930 to 52,300 in 1934. At the CCAR investments declined by 20 percent, and a large percentage of its members could not afford dues.1

With David Lefkowitz (1875-1955), rabbi of Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, Texas, in the presidency of the CCAR in 1931, the members convened at the Spink’s Wawasee Hotel right on Lake Wawasee in Indiana. In his presidential address on Wednesday evening, June 17, he minced no words:

We are meeting in our forty-second annual convention with chastened spirits and in a sober, if not somber, frame of mind. A considerable group of rabbis is now unable to find pulpits and it will be augmented I fear, through the ordinations this year . . . In addition, many congregations have felt the need of reducing the salaries of their rabbis, which in most cases were meagre enough.

Lefkowitz then asked the Conference to get serious about a placement system:

The scene is being laid for an unholy scramble for pulpits far more undignified and disgraceful than it has ever been before in our American rabbinate. There will be bidding and under-bidding on the part of hard-driven colleagues, perhaps with families to support, and there will be all the playing of one rabbi against
another on the part of congregations, with wire-pulling and trial sermons thrown in for measure. Into the rabbinical profession will come the harsh competition and chaffer of the market-place with all the acerbities engendered in such unseemly dickering.

Within four days the Committee on the President’s Message, chaired by no less than Julian Morgenstern, president of the Hebrew Union College, acted on Lefkowitz’s remarks. It called for the CCAR Executive Committee to find a way to bring together for placement rabbis and congregations, especially ones in small, outlying communities. In addition, the Committee on Resolutions proposed, and the plenum adopted, a lengthy resolution on the economic conditions “that threaten with dire disaster many of our colleagues and their families, men without reproach who have served the rabbinate honorably and faithfully for many years and now in the prime of life find themselves sidetracked and shipwrecked.” The resolution called for the setting of a minimum salary, establishing a code of conduct for the way CCAR members treated one another, and the reviving of the Pulpit Bureau effort “to protect the livelihood and welfare of its members as well as the dignity of the rabbinate.” It looked like something would at last be done to mitigate “the unholy scramble for pulpits.”

Yet in 1932, when the CCAR gathered at the Sinton Hotel in Cincinnati, all that happened was that the Committee on Resolutions asked that a Pulpit Placement Committee be appointed “to aid colleagues who are in need of proper placement.” This Committee came into being and the renowned David Philipson, then in his seventies, chaired the group. On the morning of Sunday, June 25, 1933, Philipson reported that few pulpit vacancies had opened up, and in fact many congregations had closed, “thus throwing the rabbi out of a position . . . The unemployment which is so general has therefore also invaded the rabbinical field.” He also noted that the UAHC had created its own Pulpit Placement Committee, and so he urged that the UAHC’s and the CCAR’s committees be merged. The plenum adopted the report, but nothing seems to have come of it.

Perhaps the rise of European fascism or the eruption of virulent anti-Semitism preoccupied the Conference. Perhaps the rebirth of the Jewish homeland or the chilling specter of another world war dominated the attention of the members. Or perhaps the CCAR
stopped considering placement for several years in the mid-1930s because of the easing of the Depression. Indeed, in 1935 Barnett Brickner (1892–1958), reporting on aid to congregations and rabbis, claimed that “most of the unemployed rabbis had secured positions” though they were paid but subsistence wages.

Max Curriek (1877–1947) was the longest serving rabbi in the history of Temple Anshe Hesed in Erie, Pennsylvania, and when he presided over the CCAR in 1938, he had already been with his congregation for thirty-seven years. Currick was president of the CCAR during Hitler’s rise to international power, and his presidential address to the Conference at the Chelsea Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, focused on efforts that the CCAR could undertake, along with other American Jewish organizations, to thwart Nazism and to support German Jewry. Still, he insisted that the Conference develop a code of ethics “in order, to put it mildly, to remove the embarrassments of unethical competition [in placement].” In this context he suggested “that the whole subject of placement be treated anew by the Conference.” The Committee on the President’s Message reiterated Currick’s complaint, “The competition for pulpits which is now unfortunately prevalent had led to unethical practices which must be deeply deplored.” The Committee proposed that the CCAR create a committee on placements with representatives from the UAHC.

In 1939 at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., the CCAR celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Although president Max Curriek again asked the Conference to work with the UAHC on the issue of placement, the real activity resided with the Committee on the Code of Ethics chaired by past president David Lefkowitz. A good portion of the proposed Code dealt with placement. It forbade rabbis from applying for a still-occupied pulpit; it asked that searches proceed “in a dignified manner and with full reverence for the office of the rabbi”; and it demanded that rabbis be judged by their “whole record” and not just a “trial sermon.”

When the Conference met in June 1940, at the Charlevoix Inn in Charlevoix, Michigan, the focus was on a continuation of the previous year’s consideration of a code of ethics. CCAR President Emil Leipziger (1877–1963) of Touro Synagogue in New Orleans called for approval of the code to remedy “the chaotic and lamentable conditions which appear to exist in the rabbinate with regard to pulpit placement, rabbinical unemployment and inadequate
income in small positions.” The report of the Committee on a Code of Ethics was composed by David Lefkowitz and Abraham Feldman (1893–1977), then rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel of Hartford, Connecticut. In a postcard survey of the proposed 1939 Code of Ethics, the members of the CCAR by a slim margin had voted against this sentence: “No rabbi should make personal application to a congregation, even when a pulpit vacancy exists.” The majority opposing this sentence believed that until the CCAR could devise an orderly and credible placement system, it would be unfair to prohibit direct application to congregations. Although the Committee wanted to keep the sentence, it was removed in the final code. Also Section II, Paragraph 5, the part asking congregations to visit rabbi candidates in their own congregations and not to make quick decisions based on the “trial sermon,” was sent back to the Committee for rewording.

The World War II Years

Although World War II began in Asia in 1937 and in Europe in 1939, the United States did not formally enter the war until December 1941. With the nation’s mobilization for war, 1,045 rabbis, over half of the American rabbinate, volunteered for military service. In fact Jewish chaplains had been attached to the American military since 1862 when, after considerable controversy, Rabbi Jacob Frankel of Philadelphia was commissioned as a hospital chaplain. By World War I, twenty-three Jewish chaplains were in uniform, sixteen of whom were Reform rabbis. During World War II, 311 rabbis received commissions as Jewish chaplains. Almost half of them, 147, came from the ranks of the CCAR. Both their departure to and return from war would create havoc for rabbinic placement. In June 1941, when the CCAR met at the Chelsea Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, everyone knew that the United States was on the brink of war. Placement was low on the agenda, and resolving that the CCAR and the UAHC should work together on placement was all that could be mustered.

In 1942, however, James G. Heller sitting as both the president of the Conference and as the chairman of the Committee on Pulpit Placement and Ethics, offered a formal placement plan. He and his Committee presented it at an 11:20 p.m. special session of the Cincinnati Convention held at the chapel of HUC. The plan was
fully formulated, and it provoked strong reactions from the rabbis. The plan envisioned dividing North America into ten or twelve placement regions with a group of three rabbis and three lay people on each regional pulpit placement committee. The whole arrangement was overseen by a Joint National Committee on Pulpit Placement of the CCAR and the UAHC. Congregations would write the National Committee about their need for a rabbi, and the National Committee would “recommend one man at a time.” The Regional Committees would act as advisors and feeders to the National Committee.

The plenum hotly debated the plan. Some opposed the plan. For example, David Wice (1906–2002), then of Congregation B’nai Jeshurun of Newark, New Jersey, complained: “Tragic as have been the conditions in applying to congregations, I think you will multiply them a thousand fold by having these committees.” But the plan had supporters, too, like David Polish (1910–1995): “It is surprising that so many members of the Conference who have been bitter against the anarchic situation in the rabbinate, are unready to accept a plan which is certainly better than the chaos in which we have been proceeding.” Heller stepped out of his role as president and chair, asking for the privilege of the floor:

The conditions in the rabbinate have been growing steadily worse and they have been growing worse for reasons that are not entirely the fault of the Conference. They have been growing worse, first, because the theological institutions have been pouring men into the rabbinate despite appeals that have been made to them, to limit the number who were to be graduated. We have had more men for years than there were positions for the men to occupy, and the natural result of that, added to the lack of government in the rabbinate, was to aggravate conditions that had existed before for many years.

After some parliamentary maneuvering the plan for Pulpit Placement was adopted in principle in a close 54 to 45 vote, but sent back to committee to rework the details.

By 1943 the CCAR was providing 55 percent to 60 percent of the Jewish chaplains to the American armed forces. In most instances congregations “recognized their patriotic duty both as Americans and as Jews” to grant their rabbis leaves of absence to enter the military chaplaincy. In fact, the yearbook of the CCAR of that year
was dedicated to the first Jewish chaplain to lose his life in war, Alexander Goode (1911–1943), one of the famed four chaplains who died when the troop-transport ship Dorchester was torpedoed in the North Atlantic. A Committee on Placement and Ethics was appointed but appears not to have been active.

During these years the CCAR's Committee on Chaplains also had the burden of finding replacements for the rabbis who joined the chaplaincy. Because of the shortage of such rabbis, HUC and JIR accelerated their courses of study to provide rabbis for congregations in the absence of their regular rabbis. By 1944, 181 CCAR rabbis had volunteered for service, fully three-fifths of the available members. At the 1944 Convention that met over June 23 to 26 at the Hotel Gibson in Cincinnati, Ohio, the Committee released its "Principles on Replacement of Chaplains." The very first principle forbade rabbis from assuming the pulpit of a rabbi at war with the intention of holding it permanently; a rabbi could only replace another with

the definite understanding that he shall relinquish the position, when the Chaplain returns to it from his service. Chaplains now serving should feel assured that everything possible will be done by both the Union and the Conference to protect their professional interests and to see that the services they are rendering will receive due consideration, and that on their return every possible assistance will be given them to recover their status.

Anticipating the demobilization of Jewish chaplains and their return to civilian life, President Solomon B. Freehof created an Emergency Placement Committee. "It would be intolerable if, when [the chaplains] return to this country, they should find no civilian position available to them."

The resolve of the Committee on Chaplaincy was tested by Hyman Judah Schachtel (1907–1990). When Henry Barnston (1868–1949) retired from Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, Texas, after a forty-four-year rabbinate in 1943, Schachtel succeeded him without receiving clearance from the Committee, as required by the Conference. Beth Israel's associate rabbi, Robert Kahn (1910–2002), who had come to Houston as an assistant rabbi in 1935, was on a leave of absence serving in the Army chaplaincy, and many in the Conference and in the congregation felt that the pulpit should
remain vacant until Rabbi Kahn returned. The CCAR's Executive
Committee declared that Schachtel had "contravened the rules of
the Committee on Chaplaincy," and it reaffirmed its intention to
protect vacant pulpits so that returning chaplains might apply for
them. (Beth Israel split over Schachtel's election, and the splinter
group founded Congregation Emanu-El, naming Kahn the senior
rabbi in absentia.)

A similar situation with a very different outcome arose in Holly-
wood, California. After being installed as rabbi of Temple Israel in
March 1940, Morton Bauman (1912–1993) entered the Army chap-
laincy in 1942. To replace him, in 1942 the congregation engaged
a German refugee, Max Nussbaum (1908–1974), then with Congre-
gation Beth Ahaba in Muskogee, Oklahoma. The CCAR inter-
vened, reminding the leaders of the rule to keep open pulpits for
the returning chaplains. By the time of Bauman's return to Temple
Israel in 1945, the congregants had fallen in love with the charis-
tmatic and powerful Nussbaum and his wife Ruth. To solve the
dilemma, Temple Israel engaged both Nussbaum and Bauman for
four years until 1949 when Bauman left Temple Israel and began a
twenty-eight-year tenure with Temple Beth Hillel in North Holly-
wood, California.

When the CCAR gathered on June 25, 1945, at the Hotel Chel-
sea in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Hitler had committed suicide two
months earlier, the German Armed Forces High Command had
surrendered unconditionally, and the birth of the United Nations
had begun. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had just died, and the hor-
rors of the Holocaust were sinking in. The focus of placement was
naturally on the returning chaplains. In his Report of the Com-
mittee on Chaplains, Barnett Brickner (1892–1958) described the
continuing efforts "to prevent any replacement rabbis from taking
the positions of those for whom they are substituting." But the real
drama resided with Louis Egelson's Emergency Placement Com-
mittee. The Committee had adopted three principles that, if the
Conference confirmed them, would guide the placement of the re-
turning chaplains.

1. It should be the duty of chaplains to return to their former pul-
pits or positions from which they received leaves of absence.
2. Rabbis who are serving as replacements must relinquish their
pulpits upon the return of the principals.
3. In filling pulpits for returning chaplains, married chaplains shall be given priority over single chaplains.

Then, as something of a throwaway, the Committee recommended the creation of a Central Committee for the Placement of Rabbis, which would permanently take over the placement of chaplains and all other rabbis.

The Conference softened principle 1 to refer to the moral obligation, rather than the duty, of the returning chaplain to go back to his original position. Principle 3 was altogether removed, because, as one rabbi argued, it “gives the impression that the single man in the chaplaincy is only to be placed after all the married chaplains are provided for. Our task is to place all the chaplains.” The bulk of the rabbis’ debate centered on the suggestion that the CCAR establish a permanent placement committee. Abba Hillel Silver (1893–1963) in particular railed against the idea:

First of all, what is to be the life of this committee? How long is it to function? . . . Does this committee then remain the Rabbinical Placement Committee for civilian rabbis for this long a period of time? . . . I am also concerned about putting so much power in the hands of an executive director, a sort of rabbinical dictator, who will place men in the pulpits of this country.

In the end the plenum directed the Executive Committee of the CCAR to appoint a committee to study the problem of pulpit placement.

By late June 1946, Silver sat in the presidency of the CCAR. In his address to the CCAR Convention at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago, he claimed that the chaplain-rabbis returning from World War II “are being rapidly absorbed into their civilian ministries or into cognate professions.” It was time to dissolve the Emergency Placement Committee, he argued. A few days later Brickner delivered the report of the combined Committee on Chaplains and Emergency Placement. He concurred with Silver that more pulpit vacancies existed than the number of chaplains returning, and he also concurred that the CCAR should sunset the Emergency Placement Committee. But he also insisted that chaplains receive preferential placement treatment: “When a pulpit became vacant, the secretary [of the Committee] wrote to that congregation enclosing a copy of the Statement of Principles and requested that preferential
consideration be given to returning chaplains and to such men
who had clearance [to serve as replacement rabbis].” This touched
off a brouhaha. No one objected to encouraging congregations to
give special consideration to veteran rabbis, but the colleagues be-
lieved the proposal was unfair to rabbis who did not serve in the
armed forces. The fear was that the practice would create “a caste
system made up of former military personnel,” as Morton Berman
(1900–1986) put it. True to his opposition to a placement system,
Silver pointed out that since the Emergency Placement Com-
mittee no longer existed, Brickner was trying to legislate placement
through the Committee on Chaplains. In the end the plenum voted
to excise any reference to rabbis who received CCAR clearance or
who had simply chosen not to enlist. The Conference simply urged
congregations to give special attention to the chaplain rabbis.

The Post–World War II Years
In the years immediately following World War II, attempts to es-

tablish a placement system for Reform Judaism accelerated. In
1947 Brickner’s Committee on Chaplains adopted a new man-
date, that of procuring chaplains for the armed forces rather than
placing them in civilian congregations. The Committee on Pulpit
Placement and Ethics under the chairmanship of Louis Mann
(1890–1966) was reconstituted and quickly ran afoul of the Execu-
tive Committee, which had only asked the Committee to meet
with representatives of the UAHC to work out a placement plan.
In addition to doing this, the Committee recommended many
changes to the 1940 Code of Ethics. Also, the Committee wanted
to put on hold the creation of a placement system until the merger
of Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Institute of Religion was
concluded. Mann helped to organize and to chair a newly created
joint CCAR-UAHC Commission on Pulpit Placement and Ethics.

With Abraham Feldman (1893–1977) as president of the CCAR
in 1948, Roland Gittelsohn was named the chair of the Committee
on Placement. On Friday, June 26 of that year, the previous Com-
mittee chairman, Louis Mann, delivered a major address to the
CCAR entitled “Pulpit Placement and Ethics.” He cited the place-
ment system of the Rabbinical Assembly (RA). “Our Conservative
brethren have had a plan in operation almost two decades.” In-
deed, from the outset of the Conservative Movement in America,
their rabbinic placement system was handled by the Jewish Theological Seminary, but beginning in the 1930s the RA demanded a central voice in the placement process. Until the mid-1940s the RA’s Placement Committee was staffed by volunteers, but in 1944, under the pressures of World War II, Norman Salit, a rabbi and a lawyer, was hired to work with rabbis, chaplains, and congregations. When Salit left the position after the war, Bernard Segal (1907–1984) was appointed the RA’s first full-time executive director, serving also as director of the Joint Placement Commission of the Rabbinical Assembly and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Segal, in turn, was succeeded by Wolfe Kelman (1923–1980) in 1951, who also devoted a large portion of his work to placement.

Mann bemoaned the “old boys” network of rabbinic placement, as well as the “trial sermon” criterion. Mann employed words like “anarchy,” “chaos,” and “free-for-all” to describe the contemporary situation. Self-effacing and humble rabbis were at a disadvantage as compared to ambitious, forceful rabbis:

A practice that often penalizes virtue and rewards an aggressive disregard for the highest form of professional ethics is unwholesome. It breaks down morale and causes dissatisfaction that is both consuming and corrosive.

Acknowledging that no placement plan would satisfy everyone, Mann laid out the tenets of a successful plan:

a) a full-time director with many special gifts and qualifications; b) a staff to carry out the plan; c) full cooperation with a policymaking body; d) criteria for evaluation plus a means of keeping information up-to-date; e) the realization that it must be and remain tentative and experimental subject to constant modifications as the accumulated wisdom through trial and error dictates; f) the knowledge that the success of the plan will depend upon its being not too strong to preclude elasticity and resiliency, and not too weak to be without sanctions and significance.

He also called for the creation of a new kind of Joint Commission on Placement, one with representatives from the CCAR, the UAHG, HUC, and JIR (whose merger was in progress at this time). The Commission would assess rabbis, partly, but not exclusively, on the basis of seniority, and it would likewise assess congregations.
It would then recommend candidates and congregations to one another, rewarding “the modest, capable and conscientious rabbi.” It would prohibit rabbis from applying directly to congregations and from soliciting other rabbis to lobby on their behalf for positions. The Commission would have the power to sanction, even to expel, rabbis for violating its rules and policies. “Congregations also must be subject to discipline and standards when they fall below accepted standards.” Many of Mann’s ideas eventually found their way into the Reform Movement’s existing placement system.

Still the president of the Conference in June 1949, Abraham Feldman alluded to the “serious dislocation” that the war years had wrought on the effort to establish a placement system. With the presentation of Gittelsohn’s plan he made this observation to the plenum: “To be fully effective any plan of placement must be yours.” [Feldman’s emphasis] He warned the Conference that if the members wanted a placement plan, this was the moment for a decision.

Indeed, the moment had arrived. The CCAR’s congregational partner, the UAHC, had concurred. As far back as 1939 the UAHC’s 36th Biennial Council resolved to appoint a joint committee with the CCAR to “consider the proper procedure for filling pulpit vacancies.”7 For years the Union had taken up the issue in roundtable discussions, administrative meetings, and executive board proceedings. Gittelsohn’s plan went before the UAHC’s Administrative Committee in September 1949, which sent it on favorably to the UAHC’s Executive Board for approval. In December, UAHC President Eisenbruth explained the plan to the Executive Board, calling it “long overdue” and expressing his hope “that this Board will recommend” the plan to the General Assembly.8 By a vote of 28 to 5 the UAHC’s Executive Board agreed to submit the plan to the November 1950 General Assembly to be held in Cleveland, Ohio.9

Gittelsohn was well aware that the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues ferociously opposed the plan. He had presented it to the group in June 1950. He described the “almost frantic fear evident regarding congregational autonomy and sanctions.”10 To him it seemed that the congregations saw no problem and no chaos in the current placement situation. After that meeting he admitted that the “prognosis is not good” for the needed two-thirds approval of the UAHC’s General Assembly. In his notes he worried...
that the "opposition of Morgy [Julian Morgenstern], [Abba Hillel] Silver, [Solomon B.] Freehof [is] having an effect."’’ He crossed out this line so as not to state it publically. Gittelsohn hoped that the rabbis of CCAR would speak to their lay leaders to enlist their support and avoid a “rabbis vs. laymen fight” on the Assembly’s floor. Gittelsohn felt that with that support the plan would have a chance, but he was not optimistic.

In late October 1950, two weeks before the UAHC’s General Assembly, a Special Committee Representing Congregations in the Metropolitan District of New York circulated a pamphlet entitled “Second Statement in Opposition to the Plan of the Joint Placement (Rabbinical) Commission of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations”:

No Congregational activity of a constituent congregation is superior to the selection of a rabbi. Independence and autonomy in the selection of a rabbi is the first and foremost right of a congregation in Judaism . . . Our congregations, since their introduction in America, have been entirely independent and autonomous—free from all ecclesiastical control—and yet the admission is made that there must be surrender of some of this autonomy.''

The pamphlet, signed by lay leaders H. M. Stein and Henry Fruhauf (1923–2010), concluded by calling for the establishment of a voluntary Placement Bureau to “serve the congregations when they seek its advice and be ready to be helpful when called upon.”’’ What’s more, the pamphlet included an appended “Exhibit 1: Silver-Freehof Statement,” in which the two past presidents of the CCAR labeled the placement plan “undesirable from nearly every point of view.”’’

When Gittelsohn’s placement plan came before the General Assembly on Tuesday morning, November 14, Colonel Frederick F. Greenman (1892–1961) moved to amend the resolution in order to allow congregations to opt out of the plan and also to go into search before a pulpit was actually vacated. Greenman, a prominent Manhattan attorney and Republican party activist, was the honorary president of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues and a trustee and a vice-president of Temple Emanu-El. His amendment was seconded by Judge Meier Steinbrink (1880–1967), a New York Supreme Court justice from Brooklyn and a past president of Congregation Beth Elohim, who also feared that the
plan impinged upon the autonomy and independence of congregations. The debate lasted so long that the luncheon session scheduled to follow had to be canceled. Rabbi James G. Heller delivered the summation in favor of the plan; Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver delivered the summation in opposition to the plan. The motion to amend was carried, and the now amended motion passed—and proved to be unacceptable to CCAR.

So it was at the June 1951 CCAR Convention that President Philip Bernstein (1901–1985) conceded that he “profoundly regrets that this plan was rejected by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations at its meeting in Cleveland in November 1950.” Nonetheless, Bernstein urged the Conference to try again to create a placement system despite “only a temporary setback.” He thanked Gittelsohn and his Committee profusely, expressing his belief that “ultimately there will be a just and workable Placement plan.” The next day after delivering his final report to the Convention, Gittelsohn resigned as chairman.

The 1950s

When the CCAR met at the Statler Hotel in Buffalo, New York, in June 1952, its membership had grown to 625, a 50 percent increase since World War II. After the defeat of the Gittelsohn plan, a provisional placement plan was in operation and overseen by a Provisional Placement Committee (PPC). But as President Philip Bernstein noted, “It falls far short of the original Placement Plan in provisions for orderly and safeguarded pulpit changes.” Jacob Rudin (1902–1982) chaired the CCAR’s Committee on Placement and represented the CCAR on the PPC. He described the workings of the PPC. One volunteer from the CCAR, the UAHC, and HUC-JIR sat on the PPC, and the PPC received congregations’ requests for rabbis. The PPC then sent the congregations small panels consisting of the names of about six rabbis along with a completed but brief biographical questionnaire and a one-page autobiography on each candidate. After that, the PPC’s job was finished and the remainder of the process rested in the hands of the congregations.

Rudin also complained about the workload of the PPC. The PPC had written three hundred letters in the course of one year, not to mention the phone calls and the monthly in-person meetings.
Furthermore, 125 to 150 rabbis were in constant placement for fewer and fewer positions. "This is the basic problem: Too many men, not enough congregations." Even by giving the PPC as much as an hour a day, "this machinery is cumbersome." It was, however, cheap; Rudin estimated the cost to the CCAR of the first year of the PPC to be $30. At the same time the CCAR was discussing the possibility of hiring its first executive director, and one of the arguments for doing so was that he could assist with the placement efforts like the RA's Wolfe Kelman.

In 1953 at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, the conversation about a full-time CCAR executive director continued, though the hiring and installation of this man would await the 1954 Convention. Meanwhile the PPC soldiered on with its work, even though both rabbis and congregations were not obligated to make use of it. Still, virtually every congregation in search and every rabbi in placement sought its help. In two years' time the PPC played a role in filling no less than sixty pulpits. For Jacob Rudin, still the CCAR's representative on PPC, the Committee had proven the viability of a permanent placement plan. "None of the fears voiced by the opponents to the plan has materialized." The main problem: the workload had grown increasingly onerous. The Committee had written nearly one thousand letters in two years and had dealt with two hundred members of the Conference. The Committee still met monthly and was in constant telephonic contact with one another.

Sidney Regner (1904–1993) had been the rabbi of Temple Oheb Sholom in Reading, Pennsylvania, since 1927 and an active member of the CCAR, sitting on numerous committees and boards. At the CCAR's 1954 Convention in Pike, New Hampshire, Regner was elected and installed as the CCAR's first executive director. The CCAR also decided to establish its headquarters in New York City following the UAHC's move there in 1951. In the realm of placement a new chair for the Provisional Placement Committee was appointed. Nathan A. Perlman (1905–1991), whose rabbinate at Emanu-El of New York spanned 1932 to 1973, assumed the chair perhaps as a foil to the Emanu-El-based opponents of the Gittelsohn plan. Reminding the members that the Provisional Placement Committee was purely advisory and voluntary, he also complained about the hundreds of letters, phone calls, and personal interviews that went into the thirty-six placements for that year.
Over the course of the next year Regner gradually took over the CCAR role on the Provisional Placement Committee. Though the Committee had placed some fifty colleagues, Perilman, still the chair of the CCAR’s Advisory Placement Committee, had grown all the more convinced “that we should soon look to the time when the provisional character of this committee can be changed into permanent status.” Barnett Brickner ascended to the CCAR presidency in 1955, and he too called for another study of the need for a permanent placement bureau run jointly by the Conference, the UAHC, and HUC-JIR.

By 1956 Regner was staffing the Provisional Placement Committee for the CCAR, while Perilman was still chairing the Advisory Placement Committee. After a full year on the PPC Regner was lamenting the maldistribution of positions: a great many small congregations but few large and attractive congregations. Consequently the panels of rabbis sent to the large congregations necessarily omitted many deserving, qualified rabbis. Moreover, because the placement system was working as well as it might, Regner was ready to jettison the word “provisional” from the Committee’s title. Perilman, on the other hand, was convinced that the growing complexity of the PPC’s operation required at the very least the hiring of an executive assistant, “who would devote full time to the business of the Committee... [and would] visit congregations and rabbis to personalize the work that is presently done almost entirely by mail.”

Regner continued to complain about the workload of placement. In 1957, a year in which there were about eighty-five placements, he wrote:

The work of placement requires my continual attention. Each placement is a laborious process involving drawing up a list of rabbis to whom to write, correspondence with the congregation, and sometimes, either when no rabbis to whom we have written evince an interest in the congregation or when the congregation is not inclined to act favorably on any on the list, the process has to begin anew.

So in 1957 the president appointed a committee to explore the hiring of a full-time executive assistant to assist with placement.

In 1958 Abram Goodman (1903-2002) took over the Advisory Placement Committee from Nathan A. Perilman for just one year.
Regner complained again about the burdensome work; in this year ninety-five placements were made, a 10 percent increase over the previous year. In addition, the UAHC had taken close notice of the Provisional Placement Committee and passed a resolution insisting that PPC refrain from recommending rabbis to congregations not affiliated with the UAHC and student-rabbis to similar synagogues. Although the CCAR’s Executive Board endorsed the UAHC resolution, it reserved the right to dissent under special circumstances.

The CCAR Convention of 1959 proved to be the tipping point for rabbincial placement. Ironically the Convention met at the Mt. Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, the site of the 1949 Convention that had so hopefully approved the Gittelsohn plan. Jerome Malino (1911–2002), the rabbi of the United Jewish Congregation of Danbury, Connecticut, for sixty-seven years, took over the Advisory Placement Committee. Jacob Rudin, the CCAR representative to the Provisional Placement Commission and chair of the Placement Committee in 1952 and 1953, assumed the presidency. In his presidential address he pushed hard for the engagement of a placement director. “The right kind of man, understanding, sympathetic, would be counselor and friend as well as Director of Placement.” What’s more, Regner delivered a lengthy report on placement that provoked a full discussion among the colleagues. Regner described the process of putting together the panels. “We have no IBM machines to determine a man’s qualifications,” so the members of the PPC used their judgment, their knowledge of the rabbis, and their intuition regarding best matches. He again lamented the maldistribution of jobs and rabbis so that positions in small congregations remained unfilled even while some rabbis were unemployed. He also regretted that some rabbis circumvented the PPC, depriving other, often more deserving colleagues of the opportunity for advancement.

In the ensuing discussion Samuel Sandmel (1911–1979), a member of the PPC, opposed the idea of a single placement director, fearing the concentration of power in one person. But Eugene Lipman (1920–1994) seemed to have caught the majority sentiment: “From my standpoint, as a rabbi, I feel a real sense of urgency for us as rabbis to want to change the system as soon as possible to one which will accord us more dignity and more discipline.” James G. Heller recalled the bitterness of the 1950 defeat of the placement
proposal by the UAHC's General Assembly, but he contended that since the CCAR had learned much from the experiment with the PPC, the CCAR should consider establishing its own placement system even without its Reform Movement partners. H. Bruce Ehmann (1918– ) suggested that the CCAR mail a monthly list of congregational openings to all the members and allow members a brief period of time to signify their interest, an idea that eventually made its way into the current placement system. Given the prominence of the players and the depth of the conversation, the CCAR was now primed to launch another placement initiative.

The following year, 1960, with Bernard Bamberger (1904–1980) in the presidency, the effort to construct a placement system gained momentum. Bamberger made the creation of a placement system the centerpiece of his presidency. "I argued that to achieve any significant improvement we must not merely make some procedural changes, but adopt a mandatory system with provisions for enforcement," he said. He called for, and the Conference concurred, a special committee to draw up a comprehensive plan for placement including "such measures to insure compliance as it seems proper." Regner continued kvetching about how much of his time the Provisional Placement Committee occupied. "What this involves, sheerly in the mechanics of the job, in meetings, in correspondence with rabbis and congregations, in memos to the other members of the committee, in telephone calls, consumes, as you can well imagine, a great deal of time." And still the maldistribution of rabbis obtains: too many rabbis clamoring for large congregations, too few rabbis interested in smaller ones. He concluded, "We cannot do a proper job of placement unless we have a man working full time on it, under the direction of a committee which will devote considerable time to it."

Bamberger entrusted the design of a new placement system to a Special Committee on Placement chaired by Jacob Rothschild (1911–1973), the rabbi for the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation ("The Temple") in Atlanta. An outspoken opponent of racial injustice in the deep South, Rothschild received international attention when fifty sticks of dynamite exploded at The Temple on October 12, 1958, probably in retaliation for his unequivocal support of civil rights. Rothschild's Special Committee met in New York first on December 28, 1960, and for a second time on March 2, 1961, to hammer out the placement plan. Nearly all the Committee
members attended the second meeting, though notably Beryl Cohon (1889–1976) was absent.

Three months later at the New Yorker Hotel on Thursday morning, June 22, 1961, he stood before more than 450 colleagues at the CCAR Convention: “The appointment of this Special Committee on Placement represents a fourth attempt made by our Conference in the last twenty years to devise a satisfactory system of rabbinical placement.” The plan itself called for the CCAR to assume all costs for placement with the greatest expense being the hiring of a director of placement who would therefore be a member of the CCAR staff. (In a letter dated March 27, 1961, to Bertram Korn, Rothschild was still undecided if the placement director worked under—or independent of—the CCAR executive director.) Placement would be overseen by a Rabbinical Placement Commission which was to be composed of eleven members, seven of whom would be appointed by the CCAR. The plan would be mandatory for members of the Conference, requiring them to only seek pulpits through the Placement Commission. The Placement Commission would compile information on rabbis and congregations and use the information to match rabbis and congregations. The plan called for disciplinary action against any CCAR member found to be in willful violation of the Placement Commission. Finally, the plan would be given a three-year trial, after which it would be evaluated for continuation.

Beryl D. Cohon wrote a minority report that only he signed. His disagreement with the plan’s compulsory provisions was expressed in writing to the March 2 letter and in subsequent correspondence with Rothschild. Cohon suggested to Rothschild that he (Cohon) might put his concerns in a minority report, and Rothschild consented. In his report Cohon objected strenuously to the mandatory nature of the plan. His dissent set the tone for subsequent discussion of the plan. As correspondence with Regeer shows, the plan itself deliberately avoided using the word “sanctions,” speaking instead of disciplinary actions. Still, most of the criticism of the plan centered on this issue. Allan Tarshish (1907–1982) asked why the plan did not include sanctions on congregations. “Because this is a plan which puts placement into the hands of the CCAR,” explained Rothschild. So long as the rabbis subscribe to the plan, there is no need for the congregations to subscribe to it. After James G. Heller gave a passionate defense of
the need for disciplinary action in the plan, Roland Gittelsohn, the author of the doomed 1949 plan, rose to support it vigorously. He reiterated his previous position: a placement plan will only work if it is mandatory. Eugene Mihaly (1918–2002) moved to strike the section on disciplinary action (i.e., sanctions). Finally, Bamberger, at the urging of the members, spoke. He challenged Mihaly’s motion, asking, “What does it mean if you say a plan is mandatory and then cut out the provision for enforcement? . . . Do you want a mandatory plan or not?” In the end, Mihaly’s motion was defeated, as was a motion to table, and the report was adopted.

Conclusion

The 1961 Rothschild plan was similar to the 1949 Gittelsohn plan in many respects. Both plans contemplated the creation of an oversight body, the hiring of a full-time director, and a three-year trial period. The plans differed on important points also. Gittelsohn’s plan required the UAHC, CCAR, and HUC-JIR to share the costs of placement; Rothschild’s plan only expected the CCAR to pick up the expenses. Moreover, in the Gittelsohn plan all placement-related matters such as contracts, negotiations, and recommendations, had to be directed by the placement bureau. In Rothschild’s plan the mandatory aspects of placement pertained to only rabbis, not to congregations. The most important difference turned on sanctions. Gittelsohn’s plan imagined an ascending scale of punishments that could be levied against recalcitrant CCAR members and refractory UAHC congregations, while Rothschild’s plan anticipated vague disciplinary actions aimed at CCAR members only, not congregations. Clearly the CCAR had learned much in the decade following the defeat of the Gittelsohn plan. Rothschild’s plan made few demands on the congregations but held the rabbis to a very high standard.

In addition, much had changed in the world of American Jewry between the 1940s and the 1960s. Most important was the suburbanization of American Jews that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. With the proscription of restrictive residential covenants, the educational benefits of the GI Bill, a shortage of housing in cities, and government programs to encourage home ownership, Jews flocked to the new mass-produced suburbs like Levittown on New York’s Long Island. Historian Arthur Hertzberg once estimated
that one-third of urban Jews moved to the suburbs between 1945 and 1965.\textsuperscript{19} This engendered an explosion of synagogue construction with over a thousand synagogues built or rebuilt, mostly in suburbia. This out-migration from urban centers, especially New York, where the suburbs grew by hundreds of thousands of Jews, had the effect of diminishing the influence of the New York City opponents to placement.

Related to this phenomenon was the national redistribution of the Jewish population from the Northeast to the Sun Belt. Miami’s Jewish population grew tenfold between 1945 and 1965, from 15,500 to 140,000, and during these same years Los Angeles’s Jewish population expanded from 160,000 to 500,000.\textsuperscript{20} In the Reform Movement the UAHC’s Pacific Southwest Council, which included Southern California, Arizona, and adjacent areas, added fifty-two new congregations during this period. This shift to the Sun Belt, along with the move to suburbia, caused American Jewry to become more diverse and less monolithic, further diluting the power of the New York City congregations over the North American Reform Movement.

The seventy-year struggle to devise a rabbinical placement system was only partly about crafting a dignified and orderly method of employing rabbis. During the discussion of the Rothschild plan, Harry Essrig (1912–2003) asked, "Is this, or any placement plan, meant to advance the so-called trade-union aspects of the rabbinate, or is it meant to advance the professional interests of the rabbinate?" He identified the core issue of rabbinical placement. Placement is not the goal in and of itself; it is instrumental to a much larger end. Placing the right rabbis in the right synagogues enhances both rabbinic fulfillment and congregational Jewish growth. It leads to a deepening of Jewish life and observance. The result of the congenial fit between rabbi and synagogue is the living out of the covenant made between God and Abraham and Sarah thousands of years ago. In rabbinic placement, much more is at stake than merely whether a rabbi has a job or whether a congregation has a rabbi; it is the nurturing of the words of the living God.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all discussions are drawn from the pages of the CCAR yearbooks of the year under consideration.


4. Rabbi John Rosove and Enid Sperber, e-mail correspondence, April 15 and 16, 2012.


11. Ibid.


13. Ibid., 5.


16. “Jacob Rothschild Papers,” Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, box 5, folder 8.

17. Ibid.

