

THE LOST TRIBE:

**The American Council for Judaism
and "Jewish Self-Hatred"**

by *Richard Morrock*

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rom the time it was established in 1943 until 1968, when it parted company with its controversial executive director, Rabbi Elmer Berger, the American Council for Judaism (ACJ) was the bete noir of the Jewish community in the United States. Champions of what they termed “anti-Zionism,” and styling themselves “Americans of Jewish faith,” the ACJ’s partisans were reviled by their Zionist opponents as “spiritual barbarians,” “dogs,” “pygmies,” and “traitors to Israel.” Even Albert Einstein, a man hardly renowned for his narrow ethnocentrism, characterized the Council as “nothing more than a pitiable attempt to obtain favor and toleration from our enemies. . . .”¹

No other community in America ever produced a group so single-mindedly devoted to fighting against its collective interests, sabotaging its influence, and apologizing for its enemies as the ACJ. While the Council endorsed what it termed “the emancipation of the individual Jew,”² as opposed to the Zionist program for a Jewish state, its leaders had no use for groups such as the American Jewish Congress or the B’nai B’rith, which actually did fight against anti-Semitic discrimination. Berger derided them as “organizations which Zionism controls by penetration or financial or social intimidation.”³ Other non-Zionist tendencies remained light-years away from the ACJ. The left-wing secularists centered around *Jewish Currents* magazine and the *Morgen Freiheit* newspaper had no use for the Council’s “reactionary” views; while the Satmer Hassidim, who considered Zionism blasphemous, would not even have recognized the ACJ’s adherents as Jewish.

The ACJ was not “integrationist,” as it maintained, but “assimilationist,” the difference being that the integrationist seeks to abolish the oppression directed against his group, while the assimilationist merely seeks to escape it — even, if need be, at the price of endorsing the assumptions behind it.

The distinction was clear in pre-Holocaust Germany, where the Zionist movement was weak, and other tendencies had the field much to themselves. The major organization of German Jews, the Central Union, regarded its constituency as Germans by nationality and Jews by religion, but it had a long history of fighting anti-Semitism.⁴ The assimilationists, on the other hand, were represented by Dr. Max Naumann’s “National German Jews,” which sought — in vain, needless to say —

to prove to Hitler that German Jews could be good citizens of the Third Reich. Shortly after Hitler came to power, Naumann proposed that his own followers be exempted from anti-Semitic legislation, but that the rights of German Zionists and East European immigrants be revoked. “Unsparing in his defamation of all other currents within Jewry, Naumann went so far as to maintain that anti-Semitism in Germany was justified: the Jews were responsible for the situation in which they found themselves because they had not identified with, and sufficiently assimilated into, Germany.”⁵

Naumann’s approach, an extreme case of identification with the aggressor, may have been an understandable, if wrong-headed, response to the Nazi takeover in Germany and the consequent tidal wave of anti-Semitism; but how could a similar group have emerged in the United States, where anti-Semitism is publicly disavowed, democracy has ruled virtually unchallenged, and ethnic minority groups enjoy a climate of cultural pluralism? To answer this, we must go back to the nineteenth century, when the Jewish community in the United States was small, and consisted primarily of people of German background. Eager to adapt, these German-Jewish immigrants became proponents of Reform Judaism. Abandoning Hebrew prayers in favor of English, discarding yarmulkes and prayer-shawls, building temples that were designed to resemble churches, and even holding services on Sundays, these early Reform Jews transformed their faith into something that closely resembled Protestantism. In 1885, Reform Jews adopted the Pittsburgh Platform, which codified their religious practices. “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community,” read the Platform, which — it should be noted — was voted on by only 19 rabbis.⁶

Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began to arrive on a massive scale only around the beginning of the twentieth century. By the 1930s, the influx of East Europeans into Reform temples had shifted the ethnic balance within the denomination.⁷ The result was the Columbus Platform of 1937, which altered the direction of Reform Judaism, and incidentally gave rise to the ACJ.

There were three separate issues involved in the struggle over the Columbus Platform. The first was classical Reform vs. neo-traditionalism; proponents of the latter sought to reintroduce yarmulkes and a limited amount of Hebrew. The second issue was Zionism. And the third was the rift between the thoroughly Americanized German Jews and the Yiddish-speaking newcomers who were accustomed to regarding themselves (and were regarded by their Gentile neighbors in Eastern Europe) as a distinct ethnic group. There were some neo-traditionalists who were anti-Zionist, some adherents of classical Reform who were pro-Zionist, and some German Jews who became Zionist leaders. But the Council drew its original support from those who opposed the Columbus Platform on both political and religious grounds, and these were overwhelmingly German Jews from communities where East European Jews had not yet settled.

While neo-traditionalism divided Reform Jews into two camps, it was the endorsement of the proposal to create a Jewish Army, passed by the Reform movement in 1942, which led to the Council's formation. A Jewish Army could not be separated from a Jewish State, which the assimilationists viewed with horror. Arguing that Jews could serve in the Allied armies — and overlooking the situation of Jews who were stateless refugees, or citizens of Axis nations — a minority of the Reform rabbinate rebelled against the policies of the leadership.

This was clearly a split over a political issue, even though it drew much of its strength from a faction defined along religious lines — the pro-classical Reform minority. In Reform Judaism, individual congregations typically went their own way as far as their practices were concerned. But the texts which children learned from in religious school were printed for the entire denomination, and anti-Zionist rabbis were unwilling to tolerate pro-Zionist education in their own synagogues. Ironically, if the division had been solely over religious issues, it might have led to the creation of a new classical Reform-oriented denomination. But the ACJ's political agenda ensured that the organizations of Reform Judaism — the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis — remained intact, since the Council's leaders hoped to proselytize among as wide an audience as possible. While Berger constantly charged Zionists with inserting politics into religion, he was doing the same thing himself.

ACJ supporters did, however, set up a small number of separate Sunday schools, whose textbooks were carefully scrutinized to ensure that they did not “imply common descent of Jews” or “encourage the singing of Palestine or Israeli folk songs.”⁸

Formally established in 1943, after a meeting in Atlantic City, the American Council for Judaism ran into trouble from the beginning. News of the Holocaust in Europe was reaching the United States at that moment, causing some otherwise sympathetic rabbis to wonder if the time was quite right to take a stand against a Jewish Army that was intended to fight Hitler. Replying to a cautious Rabbi Morris Lazzaron, Rabbi Louis Wolsey, the leading figure in the ACJ's creation, declared: “Rommel is making his way to Egypt, or Rommel is getting into Palestine, or a holocaust is taking place in Poland; there is always a reason why we shouldn't do anything.”⁹

Wolsey was instrumental in selecting Elmer Berger to lead the ACJ. Berger was Wolsey's protégé, originally a member of his synagogue, and the most uncompromising opponent of Zionism in the Reform rabbinate. He was to serve as the ACJ's executive director for 25 years. A native of Michigan, Berger had been a rabbi in the town of Pontiac, and later moved to the larger city of Flint, where he began fighting against Zionism even before the Council came into existence. The origin of his anti-Zionist zeal has always been a mystery, perhaps even to himself. As a rabbi, he can hardly be accused of ignorance of his own religion, although it would be difficult for anyone to sit through a Seder without recognizing that it celebrated an event in the

history of a people. Berger's polemics typically boiled down to sophistry, his attacks on Zionism relying on the journalistic device of using scare quotes with such frequency that the reader was often left bewildered as to what his point actually was.

According to Thomas Kolsky, the foremost authority on the ACJ's early history, Berger became an anti-Zionist when, arriving in Flint, he "discovered the neglect of local Jewish needs and institutions while huge sums of money were being poured into Zionist ventures."¹⁰ But notwithstanding this avowed concern with the needs of his community, as soon as he was sounded out in 1942 about the possibility of heading the proposed Council, "Berger assured Wolsey that if a job offer were made 'there won't be a fast enough train headed out of this Ghetto [Flint]'. "¹¹

Berger always took the tack of portraying Zionism as a monolithic ideology, disregarding its sharp divisions into competing tendencies. In this way, every disagreement *within* the Zionist camp could be misrepresented as dissension *from* Zionism, a rhetorical device often used by creationists against proponents of evolution. Berger could argue that Zionists represented a minority position because only one in ten American Jews actually belonged to a Zionist organization, ignoring the fact that nearly all of the other ninety percent also repudiated the Council's views that Jews were not an ethnic group. Attempting to have it both ways, Berger excoriated the "non-Zionist" Jews as Zionist fellow travelers, while simultaneously pointing to them as proof that most American Jews were not Zionists.

The ACJ recruited perhaps 14,000 members at its peak, in 37 chapters,¹² although it claimed to have as many as 23,000. They were typically affluent, descended from German immigrants who had arrived in the nineteenth century, and strong adherents of classical Reform Judaism. The South and the West were the Council's strongholds, although the only temple they controlled was in a Chicago suburb. Generally, the larger the Jewish community, the less support the Council was able to recruit. Kolsky notes that with only 1,140 Jews, Little Rock had 168 members of the ACJ; by comparison, with 2,000,000 Jews, New York City had only about 1,000, a vastly lower proportion.¹³ These New York ACJ members were highly conscious of being in unfriendly territory, and sometimes kept their membership secret; it was comparable to being a Communist in Texas.

It has been common for the Council's enemies to accuse its supporters of self-hatred. But self-hatred is such a widespread phenomenon that the argument begs the question of why Jews, alone, should have given rise to the political expression of this neurotic symptom. No Irish-American group was ever formed to decry all varieties of Irish nationalism as a threat to the status of the Irish in America; nor did any organization of American Blacks lobby in favor of apartheid on the grounds that solidarity with Africans would be a form of racism. Underlying the Council's opposition to Zionism was an intense fear of being different, stemming historically from Jewish assimilation in Germany, and their subsequent rejection of German identity in the face of American nativism during World War I. To the ACJ, anti-Semitism conjured up images not of being beaten up by bullies, or of being deported to exter-

mination camps, but of being singled out, of being treated as different from their Christian neighbors. And Zionism, in its own way, appeared to be doing the same thing.

Fear of being different may have been the psychological underpinning of the Council's ideology as far as its mass membership was concerned, but the leadership had its own agenda. In the long run, they were unable to retain the loyalty of their own followers; the ACJ's membership dropped precipitously over the years, until by 1967 it had perhaps no more than 1,000 active members left, the other 90 percent plus having already defected. That such a large block of discontented members were unable to change the Council's direction before 1968 is testimony to both the bankruptcy of its assimilationist ideology and its undemocratic structure. Wolsey himself, who founded the organization only to be pushed aside by Berger and his ally Lessing Rosenwald, became a defector as well, bitterly denouncing the group's leadership for its "fascism."¹⁴

Rosenwald, a philanthropist and art collector whose family owned the Sears & Roebuck chain of department stores, was the ACJ's Chairman of the Board. Rosenwald was a curious choice to head a Jewish organization, since his previous political experience had been with the America First Committee, the group which opposed all U.S. efforts to resist Hitler. Even after the Committee's increasingly blatant anti-Semitism forced Rosenwald to leave the group, he retained business ties with its leader, Gen. Robert E. Wood, his successor at Sears & Roebuck.¹⁵

Despite his long service to anti-Zionism, Rosenwald was originally reluctant to take on his position with the ACJ. His fellow Philadelphian, lawyer Morris Wolf, another key figure in the Council, "maintained that the Zionist failure to secure Palestine, as was probable, would leave the Jews of the world without hope; however, under Rosenwald's leadership, the Council would be able to provide them with an alternative."¹⁶ Rosenwald did not agree to become the savior of the Jews, however, until he received the approval of Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, who told him in April 1943 that the Council "was vitally necessary" to serve as a counterweight to the burgeoning Zionist movement.¹⁷ The ACJ, in effect, was created to insulate the State Department from Jewish pressure by fostering the illusion that American Jews were really bitterly divided over the question of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Berger writes frankly: "The Department of State was eager to have someone — or something — 'hack it' in the country, since this was a job it could not do for itself."¹⁸

Rosenwald's "alternative" to Zionism took the form of promoting the Citizens Committee on Displaced Persons, which worked to liberalize American immigration laws.¹⁹ Strict barriers remained in place, however, until the Stratton Bill was finally passed in 1948, *after* the creation of Israel. Curiously, in its final form, the bill discriminated against Jews.²⁰ Instead, tens of thousands of pro-Nazi East Europeans, many of them heavily involved in murdering Jews and others during the Holocaust, were welcomed into the United States as "refugees from Communist tyranny," and

generally escaped prosecution for their own war crimes. The Council, having been used for this purpose by the State Department, never uttered a word of protest.

Rosenwald — perhaps like Oskar Schindler — may have hoped to be hailed for rescuing Jews, but Berger seems to have had a different purpose in mind. Ever the sophist, Berger managed to conceal his true motivation behind a screen of liberalism, anti-militarism, and enlightened opposition to self-segregation. On a few rare occasions, however, his real sentiments emerged. When speaking with Arthur Hays Sulzberger of the *New York Times*, who reminded him that many Jews in New York regarded themselves as part of an ethnic group, Berger remarked that he had heard such people could be found in the garment center. And, writing from Israel, he went himself one better: “There is a word I detest, but it has been running through my mind all day and I believe it most accurately describes the officialdom of this State [Israel]. They — and everything they touch — are the most vivid examples of what is called ‘Kike business’ I have ever seen. The State is always trying to be something which it is not.”²¹ Berger was probably projecting his own inner conflicts onto his political opponents.

Israelis and working-class Jews in the New York garment center were irrelevant to Rabbi Berger. Judging from his writings, the only real Jews were investment bankers, department store owners, newspaper publishers, and high-priced lawyers. He literally fawned over them. Zionism, and Jewish ethnic identity in general, even in its non-Zionist form, represented the “Ghetto,” a word which recurs constantly in his work.

The biggest obstacle to the spread of the Council’s influence was the experience of the Holocaust, and its twin lessons that oppressive societies (and families) give rise to unimaginable crimes, and peoples without countries — such as Jews and Gypsies — make easy targets. Repeatedly, ACJ spokesmen implicitly minimized or denied what had happened to the Jews of Europe. One searches in vain through the volumes of *Issues*, the ACJ’s publication, for a single article on the extermination of the six million Jews of Europe. Only passing references are made to the catastrophe, invariably referred to as “Hitler’s savagery,” as if one man’s madness could have accounted for it all.

Attempting to explain the failure of emancipation in Germany, where it had been tried, Berger wrote that “[w]hat failed in Germany was democracy, and that affected Jews just as it had affected all other Germans.”²² That German Jews suffered no more than their “Aryan” neighbors is a statement that would cause most historians to gasp in bewilderment. In an editorial in *Issues*, Berger spoke casually of “the abridged democratic forms [of government] which prevailed in Eastern Europe before the countries of that area became Soviet satellites.”²³ Here, Berger rips open the fabric of history, drops the Holocaust into the hole, and sews the two sides back together. The tumultuous interwar period merges seamlessly with the postwar Stalinist era. This is what is meant by historical revisionism.

In July 1945, two months after the end of the Holocaust, Rabbi Morris Lazaron — a relatively moderate key figure in the ACJ — cheerfully stated that Zionism was not necessary because “most Jews throughout the world were living under conditions of freedom and equality. . . .”²⁴ Lazaron failed to note that this was primarily because the bulk of the others had just been exterminated in Nazi gas chambers.

The ACJ was utterly shameless in its willingness to serve as a transmission belt for Arab propaganda. During the 1950s, Berger discovered the Arabs as fellow victims of Zionism. While pro-Israeli organizations had indeed presented a distorted picture of the Arab world to the American public, Berger — after a 1955 trip that took him to Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and ultimately Israel — engaged in even worse distortion in his uncritical defense of the monarchies and dictatorships that governed (and still govern) most of the Arab world. Apparently, he never met any Arab who struck him as too bellicose on the subject of Israel; he even hailed the Arab revolt of 1936-1939, led by the pro-Nazi Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and backed by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, as “the great Palestinian resistance. . . .”²⁵ Nor did Berger ever reject any pro-Arab argument, even when his informants were flatly contradicting each other.

Writing to Rosenwald and Clarence Coleman (president of the ACJ) from Nasser’s Egypt, Berger declared that there was “no indication of anti-Semitism here. *None at all.*”²⁶ To the extent that Egyptian Jews might have been carrying “an additional burden” in the tempestuous period following the 1952 officer’s coup which brought Nasser to power, “*it is a burden imposed by other Jews. . . .*”²⁷ (All emphasis in original.) Berger accepted without critical comment a written statement by one contact, reproduced in his *Who Knows Better Must Say So*, who presented himself as a Jewish journalist who had broken his ties to the Egyptian Jewish community. As a journalist, this man would have been little more than a government employee under Nasser’s tight dictatorship, but this gave Berger no pause. The official leaders of the local Jewish community had already assured Berger that they supported their country’s stand against Zionism; but the journalist insisted that they had, in fact, all been duped by the Zionists into supporting Israel. His statement continued: “Contrary to what happened in Iraq, where Jews, during and after the Palestinian campaign were discriminated, Egyptian Jews were enjoying their full rights.”²⁸

But when Berger reached Iraq and met with government officials and leaders of the remnant Jewish community, he was reassured that “there had never been any serious discrimination by Moslems against Jews” in that country either.²⁹ The 1941 pogrom in Baghdad, which took the lives of more than 100 Jews,³⁰ went unmentioned. There was some slight embarrassment over the fate of a Jewish communal leader in Basra, an extremely wealthy merchant whom the Iraqi government hanged in 1948 in a public spectacle. He had been charged with supporting both the Zionists and the Communists, and no witnesses were allowed to testify for the de-

fense at his trial.³¹ Berger was reassured that the trial had been “conducted with due process of law” and that the leaders of the 5,000 Jews remaining in Iraq after 1950 — the other 125,000 had gone to Israel — “believed the trial was as fair as it could possibly have been. . . .”³² The bombing of one Iraqi synagogue, and the supposed discovery of arms caches in several others, were casually blamed on “Zionist agents.” Berger made no attempt to seek out Iraqi Jews in Israel to get another perspective on the story.

It was the same in Syria, where Berger accepted the claim that the 1948 pogrom in Aleppo had been provoked by the Jewish victims. Again, he never contacted the survivors in Israel to hear the other side.

Berger’s views on the Middle East, in retrospect, make amusing reading. One year before Israel invaded the Sinai, and twelve years before the Six-Day War, Berger declared that future armed Israeli-Arab conflict was “highly unlikely.” And three years before a violent revolution nearly swept Iraq into the Soviet bloc, he stated, in regard to the short-lived Baghdad Pact: “The Iraqis are proud of their new association with the West.”³³

Apologizing for Arab fanaticism was hardly Berger’s exclusive preserve within the ACJ. In the late 1950s, a flap arose when the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) refused to hire Jews to work in its installations in Saudi Arabia, which denied entry to Jews regardless of their citizenship or political sympathies. Hauled before the New York State Commission Against Discrimination, Aramco was defended by the U.S. State Department, which had its own policy of not hiring Jews until such things became unfashionable a few years later. The Commission ruled in favor of the oil company.

When this incident was reported in various local Jewish newspapers, ACJ member Herbert Feibelman commented on it in a letter to the *Jewish Floridian*, which was subsequently reprinted in the ACJ’s *Issues*. He blamed the Saudi discriminatory policy on Israel’s Law of Return. “The problem presented,” he insisted, “is indissolubly a product of the creation of the State of Israel itself and the philosophy of its leadership.”³⁴ In a bit of sophistry that even Berger would have found hard to beat, *Issues* headlined the letter: “OPPOSES SAUDI ARAB BAN.”

The Law of Return, the Israeli policy which allows all Jews to become citizens of Israel as soon as they set foot on its soil, *if* they request it, came under constant attack from the ACJ. It was the Law of Return, they argued, which impeded Arab-Israeli peace, and threatened the status of Jews in the West. It bolstered Israel’s claim to speak for “Jews the world over,” rather than just its own inhabitants.³⁵ But the Council was hard-pressed to find a single concrete instance where the Law of Return, whatever its effect on Arab-Israeli relations, actually harmed the interests of a single Jew in any democratic country. It finally settled on an incident when the Israelis arrested a citizen of another country and charged him with crimes against Jews. Clarence Coleman strongly protested this in a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Christian Herter. Israel’s claim to be “the only sovereign authority in Jewry” was de-

scribed as “improper.” Coleman continued: “We urge you. . . to announce. . . that the United States denies the validity of the Israeli claim. . . as a serious invasion of the sovereign citizenship of a group of United States citizens. . . .”³⁶ Notwithstanding the protests of the American Council for Judaism, the Israeli government proceeded with the trial and ultimate execution of Adolf Eichmann.

We can hardly conclude our discussion of the ACJ without reference to one of the most outspoken members of the organization, Alfred M. Lilienthal, a Washington lawyer. Lilienthal held no official position in the Council, although he served as its lobbyist at the UN when the Council tried to persuade member nations to vote against the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. In addition, his article “Israel’s Flag is Not Mine,” from the *Reader’s Digest*, was distributed by the ACJ in reprint form. But even though the Council never disassociated itself from Lilienthal’s views, it was nonetheless able to claim that he spoke only for himself.

There was a genuine divergence between Lilienthal on the one hand and people like Berger and Rosenwald on the other, but it had nothing to do with Zionism. Berger and Rosenwald functioned as the “pet Jews” of the mildly anti-Semitic State Department; Lilienthal was involved with the radical right. In May 1957, one of Lilienthal’s anti-Israel articles was published in the (then) pro-Nazi *American Mercury*. Another contributor in the same issue was George Lincoln Rockwell, fuehrer of the American Nazi Party.

Such radical rightists were anathema to the State Department, which they in turn regarded as dominated by the Kremlin. As long as Lilienthal remained in such company, the ACJ could not appoint him to a leadership position and still remain on good terms with Foggy Bottom. Dismissing Lilienthal in private as an Arab agent, the Council’s leaders conveniently overlooked the fact that their own organization was also serving as a conduit for Arab propaganda.

The Six-Day War of June 1967 put the ACJ in an impossible situation, as the Soviets came out in favor of Israel’s Arab enemies, while the United States supported Israel. Having worried for decades that Zionism might cause Gentiles to question the loyalty of their Jewish fellow-citizens, the Council now found that its own anti-Zionism was aligning it with anti-American regimes from Egypt to North Korea. Ever alert to the needs of the State Department, Rosenwald and Coleman repudiated Berger’s pro-Arab stand in late 1967.³⁷ Accused by his fellow anti-Zionists of being an apologist for the big oil companies, Berger indignantly replied by pointing out that he had criticized these same oil companies for not being sufficiently anti-Zionist.³⁸ But it was to no avail; Berger was ousted from the organization he had led for so long. He formed an even more obscure group under his own leadership, American Jewish Alternatives to Zionism. Meanwhile, the Council curtailed its hostility to Israel to conform to American foreign policy. In doing so, however, it surrendered its reason for existence.

The ACJ’s argument that Jews in democratic nations had to choose between “individual emancipation” and “Jewish nationalism” was a false dichotomy. It was

never either/or; rather, it was both or neither. Only when Jews could live securely in their ancestral homeland did Jewish life in the West start to become relatively normal. That the classical Reform adherents in the Council felt no sense of identification with Jews elsewhere in the world was perhaps understandable, given that national identity depends not only on the language one speaks, but also on the language one prays in. But Irish nationalism was not invalidated because it failed to attract Ulster's Protestants; nor was African nationalism, because it didn't recruit one particular tribe of pygmies. In dissenting from Zionism, the ACJ's members may have only been exercising their individual rights; but in denying that Jews had the right to call themselves a people and exercise self-determination, they were lending open support to anti-Semites around the world.

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