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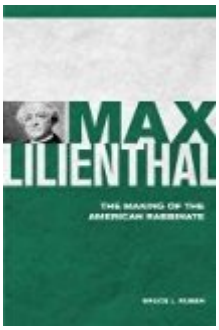
Bruce Ruben. *Max Lilienthal: The Making of the American Rabbinate.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011. 384 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8143-3516-1.



Reviewed by Michael Cohen

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

In *Max Lilienthal: The Making of The American Rabbinate*, Bruce L. Rubin aims to reconstruct Lilienthal's central role in the creation of American Reform Judaism while integrating him into a broader, post-emancipation context. Lilienthal has been treated as a footnote to the history of American Reform, Rubin argues, "eclipsed by the legacy of [Isaac Mayer] Wise's long career and lasting achievements" (p. 238). Rubin aims to trace Lilienthal's path from traditionalist to radical reformer, and in so doing to detail the emergence of American Reform and the broader American Jewish communal structure. Equally important, Rubin also hopes to view Lilienthal's career through a transnational lens, contextualizing his emergence as a modern rabbi within the milieu of *Wissenschaft* and European Jewish emancipation.

One of Rubin's strengths is placing Lilienthal into a European context--he devotes one chapter to his German youth and another to his Russian experiences. Lilienthal was born in Munich in 1814, the son of parents who had embraced the ideas of the *haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment). As a result, Lilienthal augmented his traditional Jewish education with secular studies, which taught him "to question assumptions and to apply scientific methodology" (p. 230). This, Rubin believes, "was perhaps the determining factor in his professional development" (p. 7). Lilienthal chose to study for the rabbinate, and when he could not find a job as a modern rabbi in the German lands, he moved east to Russia. In Russia, Lilienthal sought to advance the Eastern European *haskalah*, which had far less traction than the Jewish enlightenment in the land of his birth. Lilienthal worked closely with education minister Sergei Uvarov, advocating a Jewish educational system based on Western models, which would integrate secular subjects and the Russian language. Lilienthal played a large role in formulating an education law that, Rubin maintains, "should have guaranteed the success of his career" (pp. 52-53). Yet shortly after doing so he left Russia; like many other East European *maskilim*, he had placed a blind faith in the government's attempt to integrate the Jews, and when the reality

became clear to him, Rubin argues, he was disillusioned by his failures.

"No longer trusting in benevolent absolutism to provide emancipation," Lilienthal set sail for America, with "a powerful optimism concerning the future of Judaism in the New World" (p. 67). In America, Rubin argues, Lilienthal "would continue his quest to modernize Jewish life and create, in the process, a post-emancipation model for the rabbinate" (p. 57). When he arrived in 1845, he was one of the first rabbis in the United States, and accepted a position jointly serving three New York congregations. There, he drew upon his European experiences and "articulated a vision of the modern professional rabbinate," which went "well beyond the traditional model of the rabbi as interpreter of Jewish law" (pp. 71-72). He saw involvement in philanthropic societies as "as an integral part of the modern rabbi's role" (p. 87). In 1855, Lilienthal left New York and accepted a lifetime contract at Congregation Bene Israel in Cincinnati. There, he continued to shape his understanding of the modern rabbinate by moving his charity work into the broader Cincinnati community. Rubin argues that "he broke down the distinction between rabbi and civic leader," and that "Lilienthal's most important historical contribution was the creation of a model for a post-emancipation rabbinate" (p. 236).

In addition to shaping the modern rabbinate, Lilienthal played a critical role in the emergence of the American Reform movement, and his path from traditionalist to radical reformer helps to illustrate the emerging movement's trajectory. Initially of the mind that "Reform was needed in Europe only to help earn emancipation and was not relevant in free America" (pp. 230-231), Lilienthal believed that there was an "unchanging yet evolving spiritual core that gave a sense of continuity to Jewish history" (p. 118). By 1847, he had begun to undergo a shift to the left, suggesting that science justified a break from the past. By 1849, Lilienthal was moving further toward Reform, continuing to employ a *Wissenschaft* framework to call for a modernization of the service, increased decorum, and an increased level of edification. By 1854, he was more openly advocating Reform, which "(informed by *Wissenschaft*) allowed Jews to adapt to the modern world by differentiating the essence of Judaism from the historical accretions of centuries that developed into outmoded customs" (p. 231). By 1865, he had moved even further left, having "developed a universal, humanist view far beyond the moderate Reform views he had espoused in the mid-1850s" (p. 184). He now advocated for the triennial cycle, English or German readings, a melodeon to accompany the choir, English and German prayers, and deleting negative references to the diaspora. Why, Rubin asks, did Lilienthal move from traditionalist to radical reformer? Rubin suggests that "both his German background and American experiences were factors," and that he had a strong desire "to find a solution to the tension between tradition and modernity that matched his need to reconcile opposite points of view" (p. 233).

While he was crystallizing the need for Reform in his own mind, he was also working diligently on its behalf on the national stage--work that is frequently credited to Wise alone. Rubin explains how the two men complemented each other, and he details their strong working relationship. Wise, Rubin maintains, "needed to be the leader of any cause to which he devoted his considerable energy," while Lilienthal "renounced the desire for a leadership role," "happily allowing Wise that distinction" (p. 146). Moreover, Rubin argues that "Lilienthal, the stronger scholar, helped Wise, an autodidact, to develop the rationale for many of their positions. Wise, more of a popularizer, softened Lilienthal's tendency toward elitism" (p. 146). Both men were strong advocates of unity within the American Jewish community, and much of their work was intended to unify and not polarize. For example, the two organized the Cleveland Conference in 1855, where they "established their working relationship with

regard to the ideological battles unfolding on the national stage" (p. 146). Though the conference failed to achieve the desired unity, Rubin concludes that Lilienthal and Wise worked so well together because they shared a similar vision of Reform, "which they pragmatically adapted to the conditions of American Jewry" (p. 147).

Working together with Wise, and "having emerged as a local and national leader ... Lilienthal found himself in an ideal position to play a pivotal role in the creation of the central institutions of American Reform Judaism" (p. 191). One institution Lilienthal and Wise shaped was a rabbinical training seminary that reflected their inclusive stance--the Hebrew Union College (HUC). Another institution they created was the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which was also reflective of the unity for which Wise and Lilienthal both strove. The two men allowed the laity to take direct control of negotiations for the UAHC, and in so doing they "discovered the formula for resolving the long-standing lay-rabbinic power struggle." Rubin argues that "all subsequent American Jewish denominations would replicate this relationship between laity and rabbinate" (p. 208). Third, Lilienthal worked diligently to create an institution for rabbis and scholars that would raise the status of the rabbinate. Rubin notes that "although he had taken a back seat to his friend Wise in the creation of the UAHC and Hebrew Union College, here Lilienthal, who had successfully figured out what it meant to be a rabbi in the American environment, took the lead" (p. 219). Rubin observes that "all the other American Jewish denominations have emulated the organizational model that Lilienthal helped to establish--a national congregational union, a rabbinic college, and a rabbinic organization--for their key institutions" (p. 236).

Lilienthal died in 1882 during a fleeting moment of American Jewish unity. By analyzing his path from traditionalist to radical reformer and his work alongside Wise on the national stage, Rubin clearly demonstrates that Lilienthal should not be a footnote to history, but rather that he played a central role in the emergence of American Reform Judaism. More than this, however, Rubin shows that one of Lilienthal's lasting legacies to American Jewry was the creation of a communal structure that would be replicated after his death by each of the major movements.

One of Rubin's most important contributions is that he contextualizes the emergence of the American rabbinate within the milieu of European Jewish emancipation. Devoting a significant amount of space to Lilienthal's time in Europe, he demonstrates how Lilienthal's German and Russian experiences shaped his career in America. In so doing, Rubin creates links between American and European Judaism, placing the emergence of American Judaism within the context of European debates and ideologies. His work would have been stronger in this regard had he employed a wider variety of European sources--particularly in his chapter on Russia. It also would have been stronger had he more extensively connected the American and European experiences, moving beyond Lilienthal to draw even broader connections between Europe and America. Nevertheless, Rubin situates Lilienthal's career within a broader global perspective, and scholars of American Jewish history would be wise to follow this lead.

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