



THE BOARD OF RABBIS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

THE HISTORY

1937 ~ 2009

by Sarah Bassin

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California (BOR) convened in 1937 under the leadership of Rabbi Jacob Kohn of Congregation Sinai. At that time, Los Angeles was home to 95,000 Jews, tying the City of Angels with Boston as the fourth largest concentration of Jews in the United States behind New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The BOR's initial 21 members spanning the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements¹ organized in response to what one critic identified as a "lack of unity" in the Jewish community.² Tensions ran high between the secular United Jewish Community and the rabbis of local congregations who were largely removed from communal decisions. With no professional staff, the Board of Rabbis met in the offices and congregations of various members to contribute a rabbinic voice on the issues facing the community.

While no mission appears to have been articulated to the public, the Board of Rabbis rallied around those affairs they considered most pressing in their day. Two months after their formation, the BOR in conjunction with many other Jewish organizations established a central authority on *kashrut* in Los Angeles to rectify the problem on non-existing standards.³ Notably, the Board of Rabbis did not involve itself with delineating the standards of *kashrut*. Such an act would be nearly impossible with members spanning the ideological spectrum on Jewish dietary laws. Rather, the BOR simply supported the idea of centralized Orthodox authority. This disengagement from actual halakhic decisions would continue to characterize the organization throughout its history.

¹ "Board of Rabbis Convenes," *California Jewish Voice*, 26 February, 1937, p. 3. See article for list of founding members.

² "Browne Deplores Lack of Unity in Jewish Community," *California Jewish Voice*, 27 November 1936, p. 1.

³ "Authority on Kashruth Established," *California Jewish Voice*, 23 April, 1937, p. 7.

More consistently, the BOR fought the emergence of “mushroom congregations” – communities created for the sole purpose of providing High Holiday services that disband after Yom Kippur. This nation-wide trend aroused the condemnations of the BOR in 1937,⁴ 1940,⁵ 1942,⁶ and 1986⁷ as the rabbis argued that these groups made “no contribution toward the welfare of the Jewish community or the general community throughout the year.”⁸ In an additional attempt to ward off this harmful trend to their congregations, the Board of Rabbis promoted Rosh Hashanah⁹ and Yom Kippur¹⁰ service times and sermon titles at established congregations.

As the implications of World War II for European Jewry became clear, the Board of Rabbis offered a guiding pastoral voice to the Jews of Los Angeles. In April, 1943, the deaths of two million Jews had been made public. With Passover nearing, the rabbis proclaimed, “To mourn for the 2,000,000 murdered Jewish dead in Europe is not enough unless our mourning is instrumental in stirring us to action on behalf of the 5,000,000 European Jews not yet dead and the countless millions of other people in jeopardy.”¹¹ They advocated integrating a moment of silence in the seder to move people to increase support of the War Effort. A similar proclamation was issued on Passover the following year.¹² In their own attempt to support the effort, the Board of Rabbis endorsed a “Russia Day Tribute” on June 22, 1943, at the Hollywood Bowl along with the Catholic Archbishop and the head of the Protestant Church Federation.¹³ “The Russians have blocked Nazi attempts to destroy civilization,” The BOR proclaimed, “Los Angeles Jewry should remember this with material and spiritual aid, with clothing and prayers for the Russians.”¹⁴ While the proclamation was not issued in conjunction with the other supporting faith communities, it foreshadowed the Board of Rabbi’s participation in interfaith initiatives and discussions in later years.

With a limited ability to create change on the international front, the Board of Rabbis channeled their energies into bettering the Los Angeles Jewish community. Improving Jewish education became a central goal by the end of 1943. Top on the list of priorities was restructuring the Bureau of Jewish Education. The BOR publicly demanded that Rabbi Edgar Magnin of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, then head of the Board of Rabbis,¹⁵ replace the Education Chairman. “Led by many of the younger Rabbis and reflecting their vigorous determination to build a real community spirit in Los Angeles, the ‘revolt’ of the Rabbis [was] followed by three days of the *California Jewish Voice’s* charge that the Bureau of Jewish

⁴ “Board of Rabbis Issues Proclamation Opposing Holiday ‘Mushroom’ Congregation,” *California Jewish Voice*, 9 July, 1937.

⁵ “Board of Rabbis Scores ‘Mushroom’ Synagogues,” *California Jewish Voice*, 20 September 1940.

⁶ “Proclamation by Local Rabbinate,” *California Jewish Voice*, 17 July 1942.

⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 1986.

⁸ “Proclamation by Local Rabbinate,” *California Jewish Voice*, 17 July 1942.

⁹ “Holiday Service, Sermon Schedule in Local Synagogues,” *California Jewish Voice*, 3 September 1937, p. 2.

¹⁰ “Yom Kippur Services, Sermons, Scheduled Throughout City,” *California Jewish Voice*, 10 September 1937.

¹¹ “Local Rabbis Issue Vital Pronouncement,” *California Jewish Voice*, 23 April 1943, p. 1.

¹² “Board of Rabbis Issues Special Passover Appeal,” *California Jewish Voice*, 31 March 1944, p. 2.

¹³ “Rabbis Issue Statement on Russia Day Tribute,” *California Jewish Voice*, 18 June 1943, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Magnin Heads Board of Rabbis,” *California Jewish Voice*, 12 April 1940.

Education constitutes the weakest link in our community structure.”¹⁶ While the position was not given to Magnin, a new chairman was appointed and many of the other demands made to restructure Jewish education were heeded.¹⁷

In September, 1945, Rabbi Edgar Magnin publicly shared his reflections on the state of Los Angeles Jewry and its communal institutions. “Considering the newness of the city and its vast area and large and increasing Jewish population, a spirit of harmony and cooperation has existed among the leaders of which we may well be proud.”¹⁸ While citing some duplication in function, he commended both the Jewish Community Council and the Federation of Jewish Welfare Organizations for their work. Given the previous discord between the secular communal organizations and rabbis, Magnin’s reflections are quite striking. “There is an integration between the religious, cultural, and philanthropic activities which is second to none, anywhere. The synagogues, their rabbis and lay leaders, have backed up every worthy activity in the community and the spirit of harmony...is for the most part a model for any community.”¹⁹ It is possible that Magnin overstated the reality. Rabbi Jacob Pressman cited a pervasive “anti-religious and anti-clerical” sentiment in the community.²⁰ Moreover, Walter Hilborn, then president of the Federation of Jewish Welfare Organizations, made no mention of rabbis or of the symbiotic relationship between Federation and synagogues in his own reflections on the state of Los Angeles Jewry.²¹

Nevertheless, partnership increased between the Federation and the Board of Rabbis. In 1965, the Federation assembled a regional social action conference for over 200 congregations under the auspices of the three religious movements and the Board of Rabbis of Southern California.²² Such recognition and deference from the Federation towards the BOR would have been implausible during the first years of the Board’s existence. Yet as Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman claimed, the BOR was “instrumental in trying to give certain definition to the Jewish community; and it eventually succeeded.”²³

In 1967, the Board of Rabbis wanted to take its relationship with the Federation to an even greater level of cooperation. With the support of Federation Vice President Al Shapiro,²⁴ Rabbis Aaron Weiss and Morton Bauman approached the Federation with a proposal of integration between the secular Jewish institution and the rabbis of Los Angeles. They offered that in exchange for the Federation providing an executive director and office space at the Federation, the executive director would in turn coordinate rabbinic giving to the Federation’s United Campaign.²⁵ Yet as part of the agreement, the Board of Rabbis demanded independence

¹⁶ “Local Rabbis Ask Hollzer fire Bachrack,” *California Jewish Voice*, 22 October 1943, p. 1.

¹⁷ “Community Scores Great Victory; Kahn to Head Bureau of Education,” *California Jewish Voice*, 15 September 1944, p. 1.

¹⁸ “Jewish Community Life.” *The B’nai Brith Messenger*, 7 September 1945, p. 32.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Rabbi Jacob Pressman, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 4 March 2009.

²¹ “Federation and Community,” *The B’nai Brith Messenger*, 7 September 1945, p. 33.

²² “Social Action Conference Involves 200 Congregations,” *California Jewish Voice*, 19 November 1965, p. 2.

²³ Interview with Rabbi Ben Zion Bergman, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 11 March 2009.

²⁴ Interview with Rabbi William Cutter, Member, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 15 May, 2009.

²⁵ Interview with Rabbi Paul Dubin, Former Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 31 March, 2009.

to make whatever public proclamations it deemed necessary without the approval of the Federation.²⁶ Rabbi Magnin purportedly disapproved of this proposed integration claiming that as long as the BOR and the executive director was being paid by the Federation, they would not be independent.²⁷

Upon acceptance of the proposal, the Board of Rabbis chose Rabbi Paul Dubin as its executive director. A native of Los Angeles who left the city only to receive ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary and to serve in the Korean War, Dubin returned to serve B'nai Israel, a small congregation in Baldwin Hills. Yet with the white flight of the 1950's and 1960's, shifting demographics had decimated B'nai Israel.²⁸ The search for an executive director coincided with the dissolution of Rabbi Dubin's congregation, making him a convenient candidate already knowledgeable of the intricacies of the Los Angeles Jewish landscape. By early 1968, Rabbi Dubin moved into the Federation building at 590 North Vermont. Dubin saw his role as one of service to the larger community. "If people didn't have a rabbi," he said, "then I was their rabbi."²⁹

With this new incarnation of the Board of Rabbis, Jewish chaplaincy work in Southern California hospitals and prisons became central. Rabbis Edgar Magnin and Abram Maron had attempted to build a Jewish chaplaincy presence in jails in the past but with little money to support the effort, their success was minimal.³⁰ The existence of a professional staff at the Board of Rabbis enabled the organization to pursue this mission more seriously. For many years, chaplaincy provided the cornerstone of the BOR agenda. Jewish chaplain Harry Heiman was brought from the Gateways Mental Hospital to work under the auspices of the BOR at the Federation.³¹ While dates of employment are unknown, Rabbi Martin Ryback became the BOR's long term head of chaplaincy – coordinating the rabbinic presence in hospitals and prisons for many years.³²

Rabbi Dubin's start with the Board of Rabbis also coincided with an emerging emphasis on interfaith dialogue. A 1968 meeting between the Board of Rabbis and the executive of the Los Angeles Council of Churches established the Interreligious Council. Open to ordained clergy of recognized religious denominations, the Catholic community initially refused official participation, sending only an observer. The composition of the group continued to evolve with the integration of Muslims and eventually other religious communities lacking any clerical structure. The council continues to exist today with the participation of the Board of Rabbis although its clout has diminished over time.³³

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 29 April 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Rabbi Paul Dubin, Former Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 31 March, 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Interview with Rabbi Rembaum, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 10, June, 2009.

³³ Interview with Rabbi Mark Diamond, Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 13 May, 2009.

Intrafaith initiatives also occupied the Board of Rabbi's Agenda. Rabbi Dubin convened a Council of Synagogue Associations that brought the Orthodox Union, United Synagogue and Union of American Hebrew Congregations together every few months to address common problems. Yet respectful cooperation across denomination can be difficult to achieve. The Council of Synagogue Associations disbanded when the Orthodox Union withdrew during Rabbi Dubin's hiatus from the BOR between 1971 and 1979 under Executive Director Rabbi Harry Essrig.

The Board of Rabbis itself still provided a safe space for colleagues across denominations to interact. Accord to Rabbi Allen Freehling, the BOR offered a

forum in which colleagues of like and diverse backgrounds were able to sit around the table, discuss issues of common interest and often commit themselves to speaking out on issues with which some were more invested than others, but once a consensus was formed, statements could be made representing the whole rather than some of the parts.³⁴

Rabbi Moshe Rothblum concurred, remarking that the Board of Rabbis was "a place where colleagues could get together no matter what their movement and be comfortable discussing issues facing the Jewish community."³⁵ The organization had professionalized with its acquisition of paid staff, yet at its core, it was still primarily an organization that existed for the sake of its membership. Monthly meetings were held to discuss and approve of any actions taken by the Executive Committee.³⁶

Because of this emphasis on membership, much of the agenda of the Board of Rabbis was determined by the two-year termed presidents. The office itself rotated among representatives of the various denominations. Rabbi Maurice Lamm, president from 1977 to 1979 was interested in hospice work.³⁷ Rabbi Leonard Beerman (1979-1981) as a prominent social-justice minded rabbi took up progressive social issues.³⁸ Rabbi Rubin Huttler (1983-1985) was encouraged into the position by the influential Orthodox past president, Rabbi Maurice Lamm.³⁹ Newer to the Los Angeles community and less familiar with the Board of Rabbis, he supported the initiatives of Rabbi Dubin as the executive director of the organization. Huttler remarked, "I okayed whatever he wanted to do."⁴⁰ Of the former presidents interviewed, only Rabbis Hutter and Rothblum articulated deferring to Rabbi Dubin as the primary person to set the agenda. All other former presidents brought their priorities to the organization.

³⁴ Interview with Rabbi Allen Freehling, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 24 April 2009.

³⁵ Interview with Rabbi Moshe Rothblum, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 11 June 2009.

³⁶ Interview with Rabbi Paul Dubin, Former Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 31 March, 2009.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Interview with Rabbi Rubin Huttler, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 4 May 2009.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Often, however, those priorities were determined by external events. Rabbi Allen Freehling became president at the height of the AIDS epidemic in 1985. He reached out to the Orthodox members of the Board of Rabbis to develop a fully cross-denominational statement promoting 'safe-sex' education.⁴¹ Additionally, he helped create the AIDS Interfaith Council of Southern California to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of people living with AIDS.⁴²

The Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King verdict occurred during the presidency of Rabbi Harvey J. Fields (1991-1993), igniting a campaign for police reform by Jewish and interfaith coalitions alike. Fields' leadership was central to these campaigns⁴³ as well as to providing a pastoral voice for the Los Angeles community.

During the presidency of Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, the president of the New York Board of Rabbis, Marc Schneir, attempted to assemble a National Association of the Board of Rabbis (NABOR).⁴⁴ Fearing that this would lead to the establishment of a chief rabbi in the United States, Goldmark chose not to involve the Southern California organization in the matter in spite of some support for the proposal from fellow BOR members.⁴⁵ Because Los Angeles is the second largest Jewish community behind New York, the absence of its participation in NABOR caused the initiative to fail.

Rabbi Dubin retired from his many years of service as Executive Director of the Board of Southern California at the end of 1997.⁴⁶ While Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson was hired as his successor,⁴⁷ he left a few months into the position to become dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University. Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark filled the vacancy, transitioning from president to acting Executive Director while still presiding over his congregation in Orange County.⁴⁸ Rabbi Gil Kollin became president of the Board of Rabbis and Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben headed the search committee to find a permanent executive director.

According to Reuben, the search for a new executive director raised questions about what the Board of Rabbis ought to be as an organization and how it should relate to the Federation. While the organization had always been somewhat of a hybrid between an independent agency of the Federation and a more closely linked department, the organization had mostly functioned as an agency. The Federation supported the salaries of the BOR's professional staff, but offered no programming budget.⁴⁹ Some rabbis wanted to retain this relationship, emphasizing the independence that comes with it and the ability to make public statements without the input of the Federation. Reuben, however, preferred a shift to more of a department-like structure. He believed that it would be unlikely for the rabbis of Southern

⁴¹ Interview with Rabbi Allen Freehling, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 24 April, 2009.

⁴² "Clerics Assail Larouche Aids Initiative as Bigotry," Los Angeles Times, 15 July, 1986.

⁴³ Interview with Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 13 May, 2009.

⁴⁴ Interview with Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 29 April, 2009.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Los Angeles Times, 13 December, 1997.

⁴⁷ Los Angeles Times, 23 May, 1998.

⁴⁸ Interview with Rabbi Lawrence Goldmark, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 29 April, 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview with Rabbi Paul Dubin, Former Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 31 March, 2009.

California to raise enough money to support an active and thriving Board of Rabbis on its own accord.⁵⁰ Then president Kollin concurred.⁵¹

There was significant disagreement between the Federation and the Rabbis in terms of what the Board of Rabbis ought to be and what type of rabbi ought to head it.⁵² The only thing that was clear to everyone was that the job of the executive director was expanding and that the profile of the organization was being raised.⁵³ Originally, the Federation offered the position to a rabbi with no pulpit experience who had successfully transformed the 92nd street Y in New York City into a vibrant cornerstone of the secular Jewish establishment.⁵⁴ Yet when that rabbi turned down the position, it was offered to a well-seasoned pulpit rabbi.

Rabbi Mark Diamond was hired away from a senior pulpit position in the East Bay where he had also been president of the East Bay Council of Rabbis. When hired for the position, his contract stressed that he was accountable both to the president of the Federation and the president of the Board of Rabbis and that his job description would consist primarily of chaplaincy and adult education. Yet the support of Federation president John Fishel enabled the Board of Rabbis to vastly expand its programmatic functioning. Fishel told Diamond that he was interested in supporting initiatives by the Board of Rabbis from the Federation president's discretionary fund.⁵⁵ Thus, the expanding portfolio of the BOR resulted from a gradual piecemeal approach rather than strategic planning.

Rabbi Diamond's professional leadership over the Board of Rabbis signaled a significant departure from the organization's earlier incarnation. Service to membership was to be pursued through professional development seminars and individual counseling rather than through the collegial and informal open monthly meetings. He raised the profile and reach of the High Holiday Seminar, an annual program assisting congregational rabbis in finding topics and resources for their sermons. Financial support from the Federation also enabled the expansion of the BOR's professional staff to include a program director, a director of education/interreligious affairs and a rabbinic intern. In accordance with what the Board of Rabbis had been striving toward since its outset, he successfully made the BOR the address for journalists to seek a rabbinic opinion on issues facing the community.

As a representative voice of Los Angeles' Jewish clergy, the Board of Rabbis naturally lends itself to leadership in interreligious affairs. This tendency has been historically evident through the organization's participation in the interreligious council and through partnerships with clergy of other faiths on issues facing the community. Yet Diamond vastly expanded the BOR's programmatic presence in interreligious affairs out of both want and necessity. Diamond himself has always demonstrated great interest in cross-religious endeavors.⁵⁶ The relatively

⁵⁰ Interview with Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 13 May, 2009.

⁵¹ Interview with Rabbi Gil Kollin, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 9 June 2009.

⁵² Interview with Rabbi Mark Diamond, Executive Vice President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 13 May, 2009.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

small presence of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) within the Los Angeles Federation left an unmet need for interreligious activities that Diamond was able to address. Programs like the Jewish/Christian clergy trips to Rome and Israel and the Troubling Traditions Conference on problematic religious texts became staples in the BOR's programming. Moreover, the single largest historical donation to the Board of Rabbis supported the creation of the Interreligious Action Center (IAC), an initiative enabling further expansion of the organization's interfaith endeavors.

In late 2008, the Board made history by electing Rabbi Denise L. Eger as the first female president of any Board of Rabbis in the country. Rabbi Eger also became the first openly gay or lesbian president of a Board of Rabbis, serving from 2009-2011. Together, these "firsts" reflect the Board's long-standing commitment to pluralism and the welcoming of all Jews, regardless of denomination and of ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference.

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California has been constantly evolving and adapting in response to its environment. While the early years of the organization were marked by a tumultuous relationship between the secular and religious leadership of the Jewish community, the relationship between the Board of Rabbis and the Federation gradually transformed from antagonistic to symbiotic. What began as a loose professional network of 21 rabbis has transformed into a complex organization with over 300 members. The oldest living past president best captures the journey of the organization. According to Jacob Pressman, the Board of Rabbis was "a loose fellowship of rabbis in Greater Los Angeles in the years before and shortly after World War II."⁵⁷ The Board of Rabbis has become "a recognized, respected, and important branch of the concerned Jewish community whose influence is extended throughout much of the Jewish as well as public institutions of communal service in Los Angeles."⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Interview with Rabbi Jacob Pressman, Former President, Board of Rabbis of Southern California, 4 March 2009.

⁵⁸ Ibid.