

# Not Orthodox! Not Reform! What Is The Tree of Life?

Interview with Rabbi Herman Hailperin on Eve of  
Tree of Life 70th Anniversary Celebration

By H. Norman Shoop

It was expected that the rabbi who talked so fearlessly and frankly of new-day philosophic interpretations and scientific discoveries from his pulpit would answer with equal confidence and intrepidity even such a bold question as:

"Why do people belong to the Tree of Life, apart, as it is, from the more thickly Jewish populated centers of the city?"

There was no hesitation... none at all. Rabbi Herman Hailperin replied:

"The day is past when every person can have his synagogue next to his door. Ghettos are no more, at least in America. And even if there be a Ghetto it lasts but a few years and the wave that marks the moving about of Jews in every large city is today an irregular wave; one doesn't know how long Jews remain in any particular neighborhood. That a synagogue must be next door to a man's home is a vestige of the old Ghetto. Henceforth synagogue membership must be based upon the potentiality of that synagogue to meet the religious needs of the individual who joins."

It wasn't the first time we had entered this 25-year-old classically-columned Temple of Worship on Craft Avenue, a few doors above Forbes. We've often shown a more than ordinary interest in this curiously-flourishing synagogue that has played a part in the lives of a Frank and a Seder, a Sol Rosenbloom, a Jackson and a Sanes of surgical fame. Oblivious to constantly-changing surroundings in a district affected vitally by decades of civic and industrial progress, the Tree of Life synagogue, a monument of architectural dignity, looms stronger and mightier each day in communal life. We've often wondered about the Tree of Life and it was not sudden curiosity that prompted us to ask a lot of candid questions.

Questions like: "What kind of a synagogue is the Tree of Life?"; "What is its program and platform?"; "Is it Orthodox...is it Reform?"; "Where do members of the Tree of Life Stand?"; "What is their conception and philosophy of Judaism?"; "Why have the bulk of the membership chosen to remain affiliated with the Tree of Life Congregation without regard to their proximity to the synagogue building?"

Like many Pittsburghers, we have known it is a Temple that clings to historic Judaism, yet keeping pace with the necessities and truths of the day. We've thought of it as spanning the gap between the old traditions and the new liberalities... a priceless link that connects a weakening Orthodoxy with a too progressive Reform. Its pulpit we have known, while ritually historical, faces every new truth of science and philosophic interpretation with an uncommon candor. As the rabbi worded it:

"Certainly one must recognize the fact that nothing can be more sacred than the sacredness of truth. If a new discovery in the field of science or historical research has been firmly established as true, then this latest discovery is indeed the 'Word of God' in no different sense than any other idea has ever been the word of God."

Our interview takes place in the book-laden study of Dr. Hailperin in his Tree of Life Synagogue in Craft Avenue. He has served this congregation almost twelve years. Shelves are lined with costly volumes on Jews and Judaism. There are many finely-bound books in Hebrew, many of them from the library of his beloved father and rabbi, Baer Hailperin, who was one of the first spiritual leaders of Polish-Russian Jewry in the Eastern United States. Some of these Hebrew books were inherited from a grandfather of the Tree of Life rabbi. Our eye is caught by an immense volume

est in this distinguished Jewish congregation in Oakland and people are asking these questions."

"Our congregation is going and will go in a direction that is neither Orthodox nor Reform...and that does not necessarily mean in-between. It may be a direction that is neither one nor the other, yet...positively Jewish. That will be the Judaism of tomorrow in which the Tree of Life can play a great part."

In reply to the question as to what will be the Judaism of tomorrow, Dr. Hailperin answered: "We cannot tell until tomorrow comes."

"And what about the meantime?"

"In the meantime, this being a transitional period, examination and careful study must be given to the whole literature of Israel throughout the centuries so that Jewish values as they bear upon our life may be made known."

It was interesting to learn from Dr. Hailperin that while the Tree or Life Synagogue has been part of the "Reform" movement in its wider aspects (though it has never affiliated itself with this movement) it was originally organized to continue the spirit of historical Judaism, and it has never deviated from its purpose.

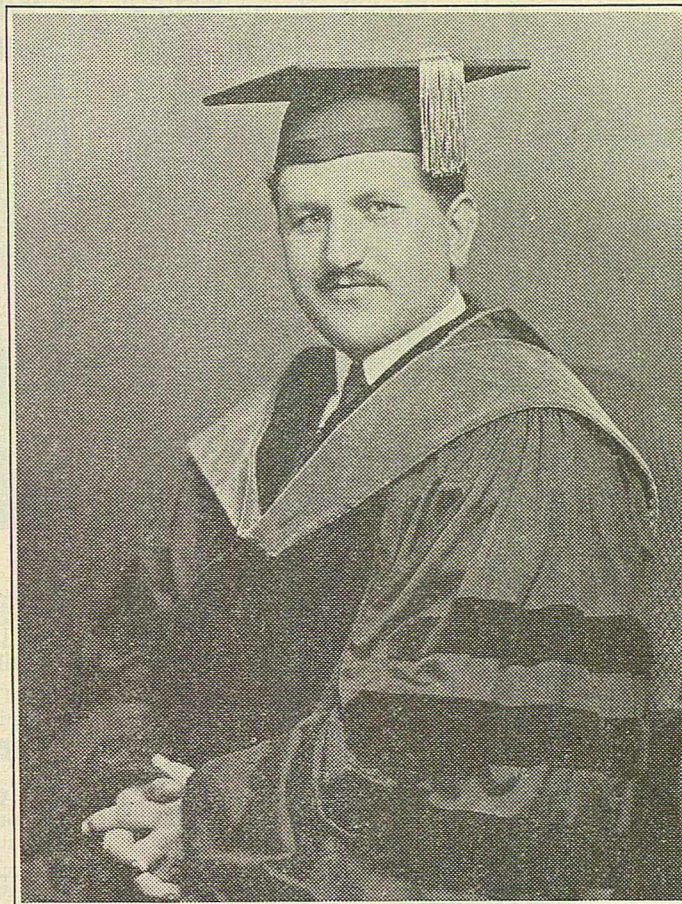
"It was willing to accept those elements that make for greater decorum and general aestheticization of the religion," according to the rabbi. By way of example he pointed to the family pews now in practice for several decades, the mixed choir and the recitation of special prayers in the vernacular. Also he noted, by way of illustrating how a tradition is observed though a mechanical change is introduced, the fact that the Megillah for the Purim service is read at eight o'clock, for the convenience of the members, instead of the supper hour, thus attracting larger attendances just as on the High Holidays. These are all elements connoting reforms, in the opinion of Dr. Hailperin.

Seeing in the Hebrew language a great factor in making for the unity of Israel throughout the world, the Tree of Life makes the Hebrew language the center of gravity of the service. Jews of France, Italy, Germany or anywhere may come to this synagogue, and though they may sense a few local elements they will, in general, feel at home simply because they have retained those elements that make up the peculiar Unity of Israel. Believing that the Jewish people represent what history has made them, a religio-national group, the Tree of Life Synagogue stresses the restoration of Israel to Israel's land.

Rabbi Hailperin said: "Our religion has in it the element of nationalism; its nationalism is religious. This isn't a theory but a result of Jewish history over a period of thousands of years."

Asserting that in the Reform movement today there is much dissatisfaction and that Orthodoxy appears incompatible with the direction in which modern thought is going, Dr. Hailperin maintains that during this important transitional period the Tree of Life Synagogue plays a special "adventurous and romantic role, 'not because the synagogue has chosen to play this role, but because its own history gives it that position.'"

He pointed out that there is need of a "reevaluation of Jewish values" in terms which the average, intelligent modern man can understand. He predicted that as the transition period in American Jewish life will gradually come to an end, the "philosophy of Judaism of those who belong to such synagogues as the Tree of Life will gradually become more and more articulate, and that which seems negative will appear bold and clear, as most positive, definite, concrete."



Rev. Dr. Herman Hailperin

of infinite value... a book of the year 1481. It is a Commentary on the Bible written by a French monk who depended upon rabbis of the day for his information.

This and other books served Rabbi Herman Hailperin in gathering material for his doctoral dissertation entitled "Intellectual Relations Between Jews and Christians in Europe Before 1500 A.D." This labor of historical research, on which he spent several years at the University of Pittsburgh brought him the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

We can't help observing on his desk his book, a monograph in the field of American history, namely, Pro-Jackson Sentiment in Pennsylvania 1820-30, which was published in 1926 by the Pennsylvania Historical Society. We

learned that it is now used as a reference book and is catalogued on file in all libraries.

And while we are waiting for Rabbi Hailperin to complete a telephone conversation relative to the magnificent historical pageant planned as a feature of the 70th anniversary celebration, we admire the saintly countenance of a portrait directly above his desk chair. It is a picture of another grand-father of Dr. Hailperin, Rabbi Samuel Gutkin, portrayed in his traditional prayer shawl and the ancient phylacteries, just as the devout men in Israel wore them in many bygone centuries.

"Tell us," Dr. Hailperin, "is the Tree of Life Reform or Orthodox? Just what is it? The approach of the 70th anniversary has aroused a new inter-

## EVENTS

### Seventieth Anniversary Celebration TREE OF LIFE SYNAGOGUE

Week of March 18 to 25

Sunday, March 18

Memorial and Unveiling of Tablets

Monday, March 19

Historical Pageant — Y. M. and W. H. A. Auditorium

Tuesday, March 20

Abraham Goldstein Jubilee

Wednesday, March 21

Sisterhood Ball

Thursday, March 22

Communal and Civic Night

Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24

Special Religious Service

Sunday, March 25

Anniversary Banquet