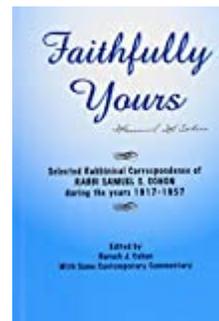




Baruch J. Cohon, ed. *Faithfully Yours: Selected Rabbinical Correspondence of Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon during the Years 1917-1957.* Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2008. xvii + 407 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60280-019-9.



Reviewed by Dana Evan Kaplan (Temple B'nai Israel)

Published on H-Judaic (June, 2009)

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

The Letters of Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon

Samuel S. Cohon is a largely forgotten figure. The results of googling his name are quite limited. Michael A. Meyer discusses him in his *Response to Modernity* and a select number of other writers have analyzed specific aspects of his intellectual contribution to American Reform Judaism, but there has been relatively little written about Cohon.[1] The American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, has an extensive collection of his papers, and booksellers still stock a number of his books, but most American Jews have no idea who he was. Even those with a serious interest in American Jewish history or Reform Judaism are unlikely to know very much about him. But, from 1923 to 1959, Cohon was one of the most influential Jewish theologians in the United States. Cohon worked as a pulpit rabbi for ten years before accepting a call to become a professor of Jewish theology at the Hebrew Union College (HUC), where he taught for thirty-three years.

Cohon was a leading advocate of what later became known as "the return to tradition." He believed in a transcendent God and, long before it became popular, was deeply interested in Jewish mysticism. Cohon helped

guide the Reform movement through difficult terrain at a critical time in American Jewish history. Cohon is best known for his drafting of "The Columbus Platform: The Guiding Principles for Reform Judaism," which is seen as having reversed the anti-Zionism of the "Pittsburgh Platform" of 1885. He is also of historical importance because of the role that he played in critiquing the *Union Prayer Book (UPB)*, which was the prayer book in virtually every Reform temple from the end of the nineteenth century until the publication of *The Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book* in 1975. Cohon edited the revised edition of the *UPB*, which was published in 1940; edited the *Union Hagaddah* (1923); and was a major influence on the *CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) Rabbi's Manual* (1928).

Faithfully Yours is a collection of letters that Cohon wrote or received during the years 1917 to 1957. It is not a biography or an analysis of Cohon's thought. Nevertheless, the volume is a very welcome addition to the scant literature on the subject. The correspondence was copied and prepared for publication by his widow, A. Irma Co-

hon, and was edited by his son, Baruch J. Cohon. This book is the final publication in a series of manuscripts transcribed and edited by Irma over a roughly thirty-year period. When Cohon died in 1959, he left a large quantity of unpublished material of various types. Irma, who was deeply devoted to her husband's memory and to the work that he had done, spent the succeeding years preparing some of these documents for publication. These included *Jewish Theology* (1971); *Religious Affirmations* (1983); a combined edition of *What We Jews Believe* and *A Guide to Jewish Practice, for the Enlightened, Modern Jew; Day Book of Service at the Altar as Lived By Samuel S. Cohon 1888-1959* (1978); and *Mekorot Haya-hadut* (1988). Irma became ill in the final stages of editing the Hebrew source book for Keter Publishing House, and Baruch completed the task. After his mother passed away in 1991 and he retired in 1994, Baruch turned his attention to continuing Irma's editing work, culminating in the publication of *Faithfully Yours*.

The volume has a detailed table of contents, which lists each letter, the date it was sent, the person with whom Cohon was corresponding, and the subject. Perhaps because of this detail, the editor felt that there was no need for an index. The editor included a very brief introduction, which explains who the writer was and why the correspondence has historical significance. Baruch does add comments in bold type after some of his father's responses, adding background information that could be helpful in understanding the context of Cohon's reply.

Taken as a whole, the correspondence shows Cohon as one of a handful of professors at HUC who served as religious resources for Reform rabbis facing difficult decisions in the pulpit rabbinate. The material is fascinating, typically consisting of a former student writing to him for advice and Cohon responding with an informal religious ruling. Along with Israel Bettan and a few others, Cohon became a sounding board for former students who encountered unusual situations. While the terminology is not used, the correspondence bears a great deal of similarity with traditional *she'elot ve-teshuvot*, responsa literature. The material has some likeness to the Reform responsa published by Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof (for example, *Reform Responsa for Our Time* [1977]) in numerous volumes, which every Reform rabbi of the generation that is now in the process of retiring had on their bookshelves. In fact, *Faithfully Yours* includes an extensive review of the manuscript of one of Freehof's earlier books, *Reform Jewish Practice*, which was published in 1944. HUC President Julian Morgenstern had asked Cohon to evaluate the manuscript, which Cohon

did and sent directly to Freehof. It is a shame that Cohon never took all of the religious decisions that he wrote up and reworked them into a comprehensive guide to Reform Jewish practice, similar to what Mark Washofsky did two generations later (*Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* [2001]). Nevertheless, Cohon's correspondence opens a window into congregational life and particularly into the dilemmas that Reform rabbis faced in the period straddling World War II.

Cohon had a great deal of confidence, presenting what he saw as the Reform position clearly and without apologetics. When appropriate, he was able to cite from his extensive knowledge of rabbinic literature. Scholars from the more traditional movements acknowledged that his Talmudic expertise was comparable with that of an Orthodox posek or a Conservative professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Cohon's son told me that when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel came to teach at HUC, he wanted Cohon to be his Rebbe. What is particularly impressive is how he related positively to the writings of the classical Reform rabbis of the previous generation while presenting a significantly more traditional approach to Reform Judaism. He seemed to see the evolution of Reform Judaism as not only ongoing but also natural. Let me give a few examples that illustrate the nature of the material.

In 1935, Rabbi Marius Ranson of Congregation Sharey Tefilo of East Orange, New Jersey, wrote Cohon that one of the boys in his confirmation class had been insisting that he did not believe in God. The boy's father was anxious to have the boy confirmed, but the mother, an "Ethical Culturalist," had expressed a deeply felt opposition to organized religion of any type. Rabbi Ranson wrote that he was thinking of refusing to confirm the boy, and had apparently already shared this possibility with the father, who vehemently insisted that confirmation was not a religious rite but rather a graduation ceremony. Since the boy had attended religious school at the synagogue for the past six years, he should be entitled to graduate and attend a graduation ceremony.

Cohon explained that the confirmation ceremony was introduced by the Reform movement as a substitute for bar mitzvah, and was "essentially religious in character." The purpose of confirmation, "as the very name indicates," was not to evaluate academic achievements but rather to confirm "their firmness in Jewish religious convictions." Cohon therefore advised Ranson to exclude the boy from the confirmation ceremony. Nevertheless, Cohon added that the father might be appeased by issuing

the boy a certificate of attendance. Further, he suggested that the boy might be won over through kindness (pp. 198-201). This response was typical in that Cohon sought to uphold tradition while avoiding the inflexibility that might permanently alienate anyone from congregational life.

Some of the material is valuable for the light that it sheds on the importance of social status in Reform congregational dynamics. For example, in another letter from 1941, Hilda Lichtenberg, the wife of Leo Lichtenberg, the Reform rabbi in Wichita Falls, Texas, wrote Cohon that one of the girls in confirmation class handed in an essay that her husband believed had been copied from some sort of published document. Cohon was able to identify it as a sermon written by Rabbi J. Leonard Levy and sent Hilda a pamphlet with the published sermon. Rabbi Lichtenberg wrote back about a month later explaining that once he received the published version of the sermon, he went to a Mr. Zale, the secretary-treasurer of the congregation. Mr. Zale told the rabbi that the behavior of the child did not surprise him because the family was known as people to whom truthfulness means nothing and pretense everything. They had, according to Zale, practically no friends in the congregation.

They decided to handle the situation gently so as not to allow the plagiarism to escalate into a major confrontation. Zale advised the rabbi to tell the girl that her essay was too good and that she should rewrite it in simpler language. As soon as the daughter returned to her house after Sunday school and told her mother, the mother called the rabbi to tell him that although she did not believe the rewrite was justified, she would nevertheless cooperate. Within a few days, the rabbi received the rewritten essay. Unfortunately, during the confirmation rehearsal, the girl started to recite her original essay. The rabbi and Zale then had to tell the girl's father exactly what had happened. Although the father denied that his daughter had actually plagiarized anything, they were able to pressure him into forcing his daughter to read the rewritten essay (pages 309-311). In a period before the Internet, many of his students relied on Cohon for information relating to scholarly and rabbinical publications not easily accessible to them. Cohon was always careful to urge congregational rabbis to be cautious in applying book knowledge to people in real-life situations.

The collection includes dozens and dozens of letters which present specific situations that required rabbinic responses. The majority of them are fairly simple. Can

a rabbi officiate at the burial service of a Jewish woman who is being buried next to her non-Jewish husband in a Christian cemetery? Cohon relied on Rabbi Kauffmann Kohler's rulings in *The Rabbi's Manual*, which prohibited the officiation at the burial of a Jew in a Christian cemetery if the decision was the result of conversion to Christianity. Cohon ruled that because the woman wanted to be buried in a Christian cemetery solely for the love of her dead husband, the rabbi should offer prayer at her interment. However, the rabbi should make it clear that the action is exceptional (pp. 332-333). Cohon relied on this exceptional case loophole, repeatedly urging his former students to make exceptions to the principles he explained in order to avoid hurt feelings.

There is a bit of material related to the controversy over Zionism in the Reform movement, including an exchange with Rabbi Louis Wolsey of Rodeph Shalom Congregation in Philadelphia, one of the leaders of the American Council for Judaism. There is also a written response to a verbal request made by HUC President Morgenstern in 1946 for specific suggestions on how to respond to political events in Palestine. One of the longest responses was to a 1934 request from Rabbi Philip F. Waterman of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who had had a disturbing conversation with an internationally known surgeon, who, despite his educational background, has been taken in by some of the most anti-Semitic propaganda (p. 69). Cohon's correspondence—or at least the selection of correspondence chosen for this volume—covered a great many topics rather than focusing on primarily one or two specific concerns.

The collection includes little on Cohon's theological interests. This is probably deliberate since the focus is on practical issues that concerned how rabbis should respond to various situations. Nevertheless, I personally would have enjoyed reading about the discussions relating to the formulation of a Reform Jewish theology for the times. Cohon criticized classical Reform for overly stressing Jewish ethics at the expense of ceremonial practice. Arguing that there needed to be a balance between halacha and aggadah, Cohon became the most influential Reform Jewish theologian of his generation. He is best remembered for the central role that he played in the writing of the Columbus Platform. In 1935, CCAR President Felix Levy appointed a commission to draft a new platform for the movement. Rabbi Samuel Schulman of Temple Emanu-El in New York was appointed chairman of the commission and wrote what he intended to be the first draft of the new platform. Terribly dissatisfied with what Schulman had written, Cohon wrote an alternative

draft, which was then accepted as the basis for the platform. Schulman had not been able to attend the second meeting of the commission because he had been ill and was very insulted that Levy had made a presidential decision to replace his draft with Cohon's. Schulman resigned as chairman of the commission, but came to the 1937 CCAR convention in Columbus, Ohio, determined to push for a vote of the full membership. Part of the conflict had to do with religious policy. Schulman was a classical reformer who had served Temple Emanu-El, one of the most diehard classical Reform congregations in the country. But much of the preference for Cohon's draft had nothing to do with theology. Rather, it was felt that Cohon's draft was simpler and more directly addressed the central concerns of American Reform Jews at what was a very traumatic time in Jewish history. His document reflected the changes that had been taking place in the movement since the 1885 Pittsburgh conference, but also showed the remarkable continuity that existed in Reform thought over that fifty-year period.

Schulman's supporters proposed a resolution against adopting any platform, and were able to find eighty-one votes in favor of this resolution opposed to eighty-one votes against. According to Reform folklore, both sides went out onto the golf course to find rabbis that they thought would support their position and hauled them off in order to vote. But, whereas at the time it was seen primarily as a power struggle between the old and new guard, in retrospect, the vote was interpreted as a referendum on the Reform movement's approach to Zionism. This was certainly a central issue but it was not the only factor in the conflict over the "Columbus Platform." In any case, Levy cast the deciding vote against the resolution to abandon the adoption of a platform and a revised version of Cohon's draft was accepted with only eight negative votes. Material on this episode can be found in the Samuel S. Cohon Papers 2/6-2/7 at the American Jewish Archives.

Cohon also played a central role in the revision of the *UPB*. The *UPB* had originally been published in 1895 and had been revised in 1918 (volume 2 for the High Holy Days had been revised in 1920). But the revision was very slight. There was a bit more congregational participation and a little more Hebrew. The revised *UPB* also used the new Jewish Publication Society Bible translation as the basis for the biblical passages that were included in the prayer book. But otherwise, it was virtually unchanged. In 1928, Cohon wrote a blunt critique of the *UPB*, arguing that it stressed rationalism at the expense of emotion. The prayer book needed to be reedited to stress the

omniscient nature of God. In addition, Cohon wanted to include prayers that would stress the personal relationship with God. The newly revised *UPB* was eventually published in 1940 (volume 2 for the High Holy Days appeared in 1945), incorporating many of Cohon's recommendations. *Faithfully Yours* does not include material on the extended negotiations that led to the final text of the new prayer book. Baruch told me that this material was simply not there. His hypothesis was that most of the discussions on this and other related topics were verbal and were therefore never in manuscript.

There are a number of letters that refer to the difficulty of reintroducing traditional practices in congregations that had grown accustomed to classical Reform. Some rabbis were caught between members from Eastern European backgrounds, who wanted more Hebrew and a more traditional atmosphere in prayer, and the "German Jews," who wanted to maintain the classical Reform approach that stressed prayer in the vernacular and strict decorum. Rabbi Phillip Jaffa of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote Cohon in 1936 that his congregation had just adopted the *UPB*, volume 2, as well as the experimental edition of volume 1 for Friday evening services. Jaffa explained that while many of the older Eastern European members "naturally object to the excessive use of English," the small group of Reform born members objected to the chanting of the Torah portion from the pulpit. He asked Cohon whether it was acceptable Reform practice for the rabbi to chant the traditional Torah portion from the pulpit. Cohon answered that it was, citing three cases where that was the actual practice. Cohon endorsed this approach, but explained that the final decision had to be made by the congregation itself. "If they find the chant from the pulpit annoying to them, then, in the interest of peace, the sacrifice should be made." Cohon, however, stressed that he considered the abandonment of this practice to be "a distinct sacrifice" (pp. 201-203).

Cohon was an incredibly influential leader of the Reform movement. His career spanned the period when the Reform movement made the transition from classical Reform to what became known as neo-Reform. Cohon was a progressive and yet also deeply traditional thinker who took positions that, with minor emendations, would be generally accepted by most Reform Jews today. He knew a great deal about traditional Judaism and was able to explain the halachic background for many Reform positions on various ritual matters. He displayed sensitivity to the needs of individuals and congregations, urging rabbis to make exceptions to the rules when he felt that it would be in the best interests of the Jewish community and the

future well-being of the religion. The publication of such a broad and varied collection, which spanned the critical decades from the end of World War I until the late 1950s, gives us a detailed look into the types of ritual and policy issues that Reform rabbis throughout the country were facing at that time. *Faithfully Yours* provides us with a large selection of fascinating correspondence, revealing a great deal about Cohon's approach to practical halacha

as well as the social history of Reform congregational life in the United States.

Note

[1]. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 317-320.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Dana Evan Kaplan. Review of Cohon, Baruch J., ed., *Faithfully Yours: Selected Rabbinical Correspondence of Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon during the Years 1917-1957*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24509>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.