The Pulpit and the Stage:

Rabbi Joseph Silverman and the Actors’ Church Alliance

EDNA NAHSHON*

The interrelations between pulpit and stage constitute a curious lacuna in the historiography of the modern Jewish theater. Though surveys of Jewish theater customarily open with a citation of the biblical caution to avoid “the seat of the scornful” (Ps. 1:1) and stern Talmudic injunctions against theater attendance, the absence of a historical examination of rabbinic views of the stage, especially in the modern era, has endowed the ancient rebukes with an essentialist and ahistorical quality.1 This aura of immutability has discouraged further investigation by contemporary scholars of Jewish theater, who are mostly secular and not well versed in traditional Jewish sources. Moreover, their knowledge of theater history is grounded in the European and mostly Anglo-American narrative, one that encompasses the traditional hostility of Christian Puritanism toward the stage, culminating after 1642 with the closing of English public theaters by an act of Parliament and the designation of actors as rogues and vagabonds. Consequently, there is no study devoted to the intricate and shifting interconnectedness between these two spheres of Jewish culture. Needless to say, scant attention, if any, has been given to the question of a possible distinction in rabbinic thought regarding Jewish participation in and patronage of Gentile theatrical activities in contrast to the authentically Jewish venues offered by the modern Yiddish and Hebrew stages. Overall, the hum and buzz of

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1. For a recent example see Ahuva Belkin’s short introductory essay, “The History of the Jewish Theatre.” Belkin argues that the Jew has never been what she terms homō theatricalis, partially “because the Bible and the book of oral law—the Talmud and later rabbinical writings—contain vehement exhortations against the theatre” (The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies, ed. Martin Goodman [Oxford, 2003], 870). An important documentary source, albeit one devoid of interpretation, that seeks to document rabbinic antagonism to the stage since the Talmudic epoch is Shin Ernst’s “Tekstn un qvalen tsu der geshikhte fun teater, farvaylungen un mascaradn bay yidn” (“Texts and Sources for the History of Jewish Theatre, Entertainment and Masquerades”), Arkhiv fur der geshikhte fun yidishn teater in drame (Archive for the History of Jewish Theatre and Drama), ed. Jacob Shatzky (Vilna and New York, 1930).
implication is that the two disciplines stand apart, separated by a fundamental schism and mutual animosity.

In assuming that clerical antagonism to the stage is largely made of the same cloth, scholars have not examined the disparate concerns of Jewish and Christian clergy in their opposition to the stage. For example, until the early twentieth century, replication of religious ceremonies, including the marriage service, on the English-language stage was considered religiously offensive, and was prohibited by the Lord Chamberlain’s office, the official censor of the British stage. It was also frowned upon in the American theater, which mostly preserved English dramatic protocol. The modern Yiddish stage, on the other hand, has been infused since its inception with religious rituals, and an objection to the staging of ceremonies such as the lighting of the Sabbath candles or the performance of cantorial music, and especially of the ever-popular wedding scene, would be incomprehensible to its practitioners and spectators. This clash in sensibilities came to the fore in 1899, with the New York premiere of Israel Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto*. The production, which included the enactment of religious rites and prayers, incensed Clement Scott, formerly London’s leading theater critic, and now the highly respected guest drama critic at the New York *Herald*. Scott was particularly enraged by a scene in which the old father blessed his daughter, mentioning “Almighty God,” an utterance he considered the ultimate stage blasphemy.

However, when Abraham Cahan, then writing for the English-language press, took the sacrilege issue to two leading Lower East Side authorities, Rabbis Chaim Yaakov Widerewitz and Shmuel Wine, they completely dismissed it, and, unlike Protestant clergy and some Jewish Reform colleagues, regarded it as a matter of little consequence. Widerewitz told Cahan that there were graver sins in the world than singing the *Kaddish* in a theater, and explained that because the explicit name of God did not appear in the *Kaddish*, and was not pronounced in the other prayers, there was no offense in their performance on stage. Wine, equally tolerant, said that the issue was one of the overall spirit of the drama, and if no scorn were intended he saw no problem with the performance of religious rites on the stage.


Judaism’s liberal attitude toward the stage had already been pronounced twenty years earlier by English rabbi Morris Joseph. In 1879, Joseph preached at the Old Hebrew Congregation of Liverpool on “the duty of using, though with gratitude and moderation, the opportunities of enjoyment.” He pointed out that there was nothing ascetic or puritanical in Judaism, and that unlike “evangelical clergymen [who] indulge in abuse of harmless amusements,” rabbis did not have any particular grievances against the modern drama, and did not seek to head “a moral crusade” against it.

The liberality of Joseph and of the two Orthodox New York immigrant rabbis, who most probably had never set foot inside a theater, is telling, especially when one notes that, overall, active rabbinic antagonism is hardly mentioned in the foundation myths of the Yiddish stage, where rabbis constitute a largely invisible presence. There the enemies are either antisemitic Russian authorities from without, or uptown assimilated Jews from within. This raises the question whether modern rabbis, unlike many of their Christian colleagues, were significantly more tolerant toward stage entertainment than is generally presumed, and whether their occasional disapproval was propelled by social rather than theological concerns.

Such social concerns certainly motivated Rabbi Joseph Silverman (1860–1930), who has become the most conspicuous rabbinic presence in the annals of the Jewish theater in America. His name is evoked with little sympathy, though, for, in 1923, this New York Reform rabbi brought obscenity charges against the English-language production of Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance*, a play about a Jewish brothel-keeper that tackled issues of desecration, prostitution, and lesbianism. It was, say Silverman’s critics, the first major production of a Yiddish play on Broadway, and the scandal surrounding the rabbi’s complaint “killed” it. The *God of Vengeance* affair became a **cause célèbre**, and has been thoughtfully addressed by theater scholars Alisa Solomon and Harley Erdman. Seen through present sensibilities, Silverman’s action casts him in the role of an elderly, bigoted, and homophobic cleric. Since the rabbi’s records are not extant, scholars felt the understandable need to flesh out the barebone facts available. Erdman, for example, explains

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6. Ibid.
Silverman’s action with the following conjecture: “Angry congregants contact an eminent religious leader, who in turn is offended enough to inform the authorities, who in conjunction with him frame the indictment.”

Erdman’s narrative portrays Silverman as a tool in the hands of irate and well-heeled uptowners, and to a degree exonerates him from the role of instigator of the action. Such a reading casts the rabbi in a relatively benign light, yet it also diminishes his stature, divests him of personal judgment, and presupposes no prior knowledge of theatrical matters on his part. That, however, was certainly not so. By the time Silverman filed his complaint, he had been well acquainted with the theater for at least a quarter-century, and his protest arose out of a full appreciation of its popular appeal. For years he had been sensitive to performance of Jewishness on the mainstream English-language stage, and it was he who at a 1908 meeting of the Executive Committee of the B’nai B’rith argued for the establishment of an agency dedicated to “defense of the Jewish name,” a proposal that contributed five years later to the formation of the Anti-Defamation League. Some of the tasks of this agency, he suggested, would be to campaign for the removal of Shakespeare’s offensive Merchant of Venice from the curriculum of American public schools and for the elimination of the notorious “stage Jew” from the American playhouse. Silverman spoke for many who were deeply offended by the stereotypical caricature known as the “stage Jew.” In addition to Shylock, Fagin, and Svengali, the three Jewish arch-villains of the Anglo-American stage, lesser variations of this stock type were popular in comedy, vaudeville, and melodrama. Regardless of dramatic genre, the “stage Jew,” whether sinister or ludicrous, uptown financier or ghetto peddler, was always characterized by his obsession with money, his alien and distasteful appearance, and his foreign and grotesque speech.

Joseph Silverman was the first American-born rabbi to serve in New York City. Born in Cincinnati in 1860, he was educated in its public school system, studied at the University of Cincinnati and Hebrew Union College, where he was ordained in 1884, and received his D.D. three years later. Silverman began his rabbinic career in Dallas, then moved to Galveston, and, as a “roving rabbi,” developed a Texas circuit that offered religious services to small communities that were geographically

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remote from each other. In 1888, he became the assistant rabbi at New York’s Temple Emanu-El, the bastion of the city’s moneyed and upper-crust Reform Jews. He served under Gustav Gottheil, the temple’s chief rabbi, to whose post Silverman eventually succeeded, becoming Emanu-El’s fourth spiritual leader. He served in this position until his retirement in 1923, when he was appointed Rabbi Emeritus.

Silverman was not a maverick like his younger contemporary, Rabbi Stephen Wise of the Free Synagogue. However, he was highly respected by his fellow clergymen, and in 1900 he was chosen to follow Isaac M. Wise as President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, an organization he had helped establish eleven years earlier. He held other prestigious positions within American Reform, such as Honorary President of the New York Board of Jewish Ministers and of the Association of Reform Rabbis of New York and Vicinity, was closely affiliated with the Hebrew Union College, and served as consulting editor of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. He was a member of the Committee for Religious Congress of the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, and was twice invited to deliver the opening prayer in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., first in 1892 and later in 1904. Silverman was astute and diplomatic in his handling of the wealthy and magisterial members of the synagogue board and was well-liked by rank-and-file congregants. On March 4, 1928, the synagogue honored the fortieth anniversary of his ministry with a festive affair attended by numerous dignitaries, including Orthodox rabbis and Christian ministers.

Silverman was described as a commanding figure on the pulpit (figure 1). He was tall, good looking, gifted with a sonorous voice, and was often praised for his oratorical skills. In his later years, New York newspapers, impressed with his eloquence, physical stature, and snow-white beard, referred to him as “Isaiah in modern dress.”10 When he began his career, he was an adherent of the “New Pulpit,” a concept aptly described in 1895 by the Rev. H. R. Haweis as a “pulpit that is in touch with the life of the period. A pulpit up to date; interested in what is interesting; capable of refocusing religion; quick to note when a phrase is outworn; resolved to find why clever men won’t listen to sermons; convinced that every pursuit, occupation, discovery, and faculty of man should have a moral thrust and prepared to give it.”11 The importance of responding to the here and now was emphasized in Silverman’s 1899 inaugural sermon at Emanu-El, entitled “The Minister of Today,” in which he elaborated on his credo, saying that the scope of the pulpit

ought to be expanded and be more conversant with all aspects of life, including home, school, pleasure, education, and civic affairs.\textsuperscript{12}

Silverman did not hesitate to speak out about political and social issues and to assail corruption. Influenced by the Social Gospel of upper-class American Episcopalianism, he added his voice in 1900 to the campaign against urban vice, and, in a sermon entitled “Redemption of a Godless City,” called for the establishment of a government agency that would serve as a “Department of Public Morals,” whose board would study the social conditions of New York and formulate ways to bring about “elevation of the people socially and morally.”\textsuperscript{13} From his privileged pulpit, Silverman spoke against the harsh living and working conditions in the city slums, castigated child labor, criticized discrimination against black Americans, instituted the first deaf-mute Jewish religious services in America, decried restrictive immigration policies, denounced missionary attempts to convert Jews, and was impassioned on the subject of separation of church and state, especially within the public school system. At the same time, he was a conservative on the issue of woman’s suffrage, which he condemned as detrimental to the interests of family and children, and was a staunch opponent of


anarchism, socialism, and bolshevism. In his earlier years, he was a resolute anti-Zionist, completely rejecting Jewish separatism. He was to change his views later in life, though. In 1921, he joined the Zionist ranks and three years later visited Palestine. After his retirement from congregational duties, he became an energetic supporter of the Zionist movement, writing and lecturing throughout America on its behalf.14

Silverman continued Rabbi Gustav Gottheil’s work on improving Jewish–Christian relations and took an active part in ecumenical enterprises. He was a member of the Clergy Club, which consisted largely of Protestant ministers, and was often the only Jewish clergyman officially invited to participate in major Christian events. He admired Henry Codman Potter (1835–1908), the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of New York, and a prominent advocate of the Social Gospel. Using his powerful position, Potter criticized the injustices of capitalism, and argued, from a theological standpoint, that the laborer was not a commodity to be bought and sold, employed or dismissed. He was one of the leaders of the Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor (CAIL). Organized in 1887, it was the first influential Protestant group to stand for the right of workers to organize, and joined forces with labor in its battle for the establishment of shorter work hours and a weekly day of rest, and against the ills of slums and sweatshops. In 1893, CAIL established a Board of Arbitration, headed by Potter, with representatives from capital and labor, to help settle industrial disputes, including the 1896 cloakmakers’ strike.

Potter’s social agenda, his friendliness with labor, and his sensitivity to the plight of the poor brought him into contact with Jews, among them union leader Joseph Barondess, social and religious reformer Felix Adler, and uptown leaders such as Gottheil and Silverman, who wished to ameliorate the harsh conditions of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who kept pouring into the city.15 In 1901, Potter delivered


addresses at both Temple Rodeph Shalom and at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue Shearith Israel, the former Reform, the latter Orthodox. In 1902, when he spoke at the Educational Alliance on the social and economic standing of the Jew, the audience, according to the *New York Times*, “took particular pains to show its respect for him,” so much so, that he “was forced to motion it to desist in its applause of welcome.”

The other speaker that evening was Rabbi Silverman, who was hissed for his anti-Zionist stance. Potter’s contacts with people of different faiths and backgrounds liberalized his views, made him receptive to cultures other than his own, and provided him with a growing respect for individual decisions regarding religious observance. In 1909, at a memorial to Potter that was conducted at the People’s Institute, Rabbi Silverman hailed his “hospitality to all religions” and emphasized his religious tolerance and support for the separation of state and church.

Silverman’s and Potter’s association began in 1899, when the former joined the Actors’ Church Alliance (ACA), an ecumenical organization for which Potter served as president. The ACA was founded by Walter Bentley (1864–1962), an English-born Episcopalian whose family had settled in New York when he was sixteen, and who served in 1899 as Vicar of St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery and as an officer of CAIL. Before entering the seminary, he had been a professional actor, an avocation he gave up for his religious calling, but one he always cherished. His love of the theater propelled him to make it his lifelong mission to bring together clergy and actors in an attempt to bridge the historic rift between church and stage.

Bentley’s theatrical career had been spent mostly with the touring company of Louise Pomeroy, whose repertoire consisted primarily of Shakespearean plays and such popular classics as *Virginius*, *Richelieu*, and *East Lynne*. Pomeroy’s was a typical combination company, namely, a specially organized unit consisting of a star and supporting actors.

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18. An idealized biography was prepared by his wife and was privately published after his death. See Winfield Burggraaff, *Walter Edmund Bentley: Actor, Priest, Missionary* (N.p., n.d.).
formed for the run of a single play. In the 1870s, this mode of production, benefitting from the development of the American railroad network, displaced the previously dominant organizational unit of the locally-based repertory stock company, a rapid change that theater historian John Frick has defined as a rupture in the country’s theatrical life. The statistics speak for themselves: between 1872 and 1880 the number of first-class stock companies nationwide declined from fifty to eight, while the number of traveling combinations rose from five in 1872 to nearly a hundred by 1874, reaching some 300 during Bentley’s acting heyday in the 1880s, and peaking at 420 in December 1904.19 Most of the combination companies originated in New York, the hub of the country’s theatrical activity. In its earlier years this system was fraught with booking and managerial problems, of which actors were the first casualties. Having experienced firsthand the various problems encountered by the nomadic lifestyle of actors on the road, Bentley felt a particular empathy with touring actors, who spent much of their time away from family and home. Years later, he recalled his resentment of the grueling conditions and exploitation they faced. He offered an example of a weekend in the Midwest:

At night we did Richard III and it snowed very heavily and at 2:30 we had to leave for Cincinnati for two beautiful Sunday performances. The hotel manager refused to have us driven to the station and we had to trudge in the dark all tired and the express came in at a quarter to seven. Reaching Cincinnati we were driven up to the theatre in a wagon while church bells were ringing at two; without any lunch, we had to do Hamlet to a packed house and it was six before we were through and at eight Richard III. Not a single soul got a penny for that Sunday labor, neither there nor anywhere else throughout the country.20

In addition to his censure of these harsh working conditions, Bentley was also troubled by the fact that the touring actor, often regarded as a licentious vagabond, was spiritually, emotionally, and socially isolated, unwelcome in local churches, and lacking community support when sick or stranded.

In 1899, eight years after his ordination, Bentley learned about the recently formed Actors’ Church Union, an English organization whose affiliated clergy would serve as chaplains to touring actors in Britain. The idea of clergymen ministering to temporary parishioners, already an established practice for soldiers, sailors, and firemen, struck Bentley as a perfect arrangement for actors. Bentley connected with actor F. F. Mackay, President of the Actors’ Society of America, a professional association whose goals were to upgrade the image of the acting profession and to extend support to members against dishonest and exploitative theatrical managers, and invited him to address CAIL’s February 14th meeting. Only thirteen people attended Mackay’s lecture, entitled “How to promote a better mutual understanding between the Church and the Stage,” but they were impressed, and it was decided to establish a joint venture that would be named the Actors’ Church Alliance, with Bentley as chairman. Much encouragement came from Bishop Potter, who agreed to lend his support and serve as president. This was a bold action on his part, something for which, he reminisced a year later, he was “rather harshly criticised.” Though not active in the day-to-day operations of the ACA, Potter maintained his involvement throughout his life, making his presence felt and bestowing on the organization the full eminence of his position. He symbolically advertised his support of the acting profession on January 3, 1907, when he personally officiated at the marriage of two actors in the crypt of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, whose construction was another of Potter’s cherished projects.

Bentley’s personal experience and concerns were fully expressed in his formulation of the ACA’s mission, which he explained as follows:

“First, it aimed to spiritualize the stage and humanize the church. The Chaplains were required to visit the actors weekly as temporary parishioners and aid them in every way in their power, comforting the sick, cheering the lonely, and extending a hand of friendship to one and all. To hold special services where desired, and invite actors to their homes and to various social gatherings in their parishes.

Second, to aid the profession by discouraging Sunday performances, not alone because it was Sunday, but because actors were overworked without receiving any extra recompense.

21. The Actors’ Society, established in the mid-1890s, had a membership of 600 by 1896, which would rise to 1,770 by 1904. See Benjamin McArthur, Actors and American Culture, 1880–1920 (Philadelphia, 1984), 105.
Third, to build a bridge of sympathy and understanding and fellowship between the church and her first offspring, the theatre, and to abolish the prejudice and hostility that had existed between them for so many centuries, which was not the fault of the theatre, but of the church.24

The decision to establish the ACA as an ecumenical organization was pivotal. Prominent representatives of the city’s various faiths were personally invited by Bentley to the ACA’s first public meeting on June 14, 1899, at the Berkeley Lyceum at 23 West 44th Street. Potter gave the opening address, followed by F. F. Mackay and the Rev. Father Ducey of St. Leo’s Roman Catholic Church. Other speakers were notable theater people and clergymen, including Rabbi Silverman. Elections followed, with Potter elected President, F. F. Mackay First Vice President, and the Rev. Thomas R. Slicer, a Unitarian, Second Vice President. Bentley was elected General Secretary, and a central body, the Church and Stage Council, composed of an equal number of theater people and religious leaders, was established, with Rabbi Silverman, representing the Jewish faith, elected as one of the ten church delegates. Theater people included playwright and actor James A. Herne, who would soon direct Zangwill’s Children of the Ghetto, and actress Viola Allen, star of The Christian, one of the season’s biggest hits. The first official act of the ACA, a unanimous resolution expressing sorrow at the death of actor, producer, and playwright Augustin Daly, one of America’s leading theater personalities, was symbolic of the new bond between church and stage. Thirty years later, Bentley wrote of this evening, “It was the greatest meeting I ever attended or ever hope to attend. There can never be another like that. It was the first time in this country that the two professions, at swords point for centuries, had been brought together and too, the first time the clergy of all bodies, Episcopal, Roman, Protestant (of all stripes) and Jewish had assembled together since the Reformation.”25

While Bentley’s enthusiasm sprang from his life’s experiences and a desire to reconcile two aspects of his persona, Potter’s involvement, as well as that of some of the other religious leaders who subsequently joined the ACA, was triggered primarily by a deep concern over the social changes caused by America’s rapid urbanization, which, among other things, contributed toward the proliferation of special venues for popular entertainment. By century’s end, liberal church leaders were showing increased interest in the leisure and recreational activities of the working urban masses. In 1885, Washington Gladden, a proponent of the Social Gospel, acknowledged the existence of a traditional religious

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bias against amusements, yet conceded that there was a genuine human need for them, and called for the Church to take an active part in guiding their production. Gladden made it clear that this liberal approach stemmed from the fact that more people were frequenting places of amusement than churches, and that they were devoting a large share of their earnings to the consumption of entertainment. This was confirmed in an 1895 study conducted by the *New York Times*, which estimated that the expenditure for amusement in New York City surpassed by $1,000,000 the $12,000,000 spent on the maintenance of the city’s twenty-two religious denominations. The parallelism drawn between the city’s 500 houses of worship and its thirty-five theaters demonstrated the extent to which church and stage were considered equally potent forces in the cultural landscape of the period.

While liberal church authorities were swayed by the accelerated expansion of the entertainment industry toward increased tolerance of the stage, a term often used loosely to encompass diverse genres like opera, Shakespeare, melodrama, and vaudeville, conservative voices became increasingly shrill in their fiery attacks. In a seventy-seven-page treatise prepared in 1899 by Pastor J. M. Hubbert and entitled *The Theater: Shall We All Go?*, the irate author, whose final response to his question was “no, no, NO!,” depicted the theater as a den of vice, indecency, and corruption, an institution that threatened the well-being of Christianity and of society at large. Hubbert was scandalized by findings that the receipts of the New York theaters exceeded the expenses of the city’s churches, schools, and police force combined. He did not stand alone in believing that this was a situation the loyal churchgoer had to combat, not condone.

Despite such opposition, the theater had largely shaken off its demimonde reputation by the end of the nineteenth century, and had come to be regarded, albeit with hesitancy in some circles, as acceptable for middle-class family attendance. The growth in theatrical activity was apparent in the staggering increase in the number of professional actors in America. The 1850 census reported 722 men who listed acting as their professional occupation; ten years later the number rose to 1,490 men and women, to 2,066 in 1870, to 4,812 in 1880, and to 9,728 in 1890.


A more discriminating assessment of those engaged in “the higher form of drama” by A. M. Palmer suggested fewer than 800 actors in 1860, with a dramatic increase to 4,500 in 1888, and to 7,000 in 1895. The profession’s growing respectability, both in England and America, was apotheosized in 1895 in the knighthood of Henry Irving, England’s greatest actor, and the first of his profession to receive the honor.

While the church was forced into cautiously renegotiating its puritanical anti-theatrical stance, the theater community, craving approbation and acutely sensitive to the church’s moral clout, was eager for its seal of approval. In 1896, the rapprochement between church and stage was enhanced in England by the enormous success of the theatrical production of The Sign of the Cross, a so-called “toga play” that displayed love, passion, and early Christian fervor against the titillating background of first-century Rome. It was a production that tapped into a whole new audience, appealing to thousands who had never before been inside a theater. Hailed by the clergy as the “greatest religious drama,” it ran to full houses for an entire year, with the Church, commented critic William Archer, acting as “the most effective advertising agency in the world.”

Hall Caine’s The Christian (1898) and the stage adaptation of General Lew Wallace’s Ben-Hur (1899) were corresponding theatrical phenomena in America. While critics rolled their eyes, the public was by and large captivated by spectacular religious drama. Theatrical productions of Ben-Hur, the ultimate megahit of this wave of religiously themed plays, were seen by millions of spectators in North America, Europe, and Australia. The principal Jewish contribution to drama focusing on religious topics was Israel Zangwill’s Children of the Ghetto (1899), though it did not enjoy the popular success of the Christian plays.

The ACA became successful within this rather benevolent climate. In its first year, it reported a total membership of 703; of these, 154 were chaplains and 211 were theater people. The rest were various lay people and supporters. Two years later, the total climbed to 2,250 members, with 870 chaplains, whose ranks would shortly swell to an all-time high of 1,200. The ACA reached its zenith in 1905 with a membership of 3,500, including 250 members in New York and 100 in Boston. A clear mark of success was that some of the major personalities of the

31. Estimates are that by the early 1920s more than twenty million people had seen the play; www.Ben-Hur.com.
American stage became associated with it. In 1901–1902, superstars Joseph Jefferson and James O’Neill, and Daniel Frohman, the country’s top producer, became honorary vice presidents. A year later, they were joined by Sir Henry Irving, lending the ACA his legendary prestige. The profession’s respectability was suggested on the ACA seal, depicting a Bible resting on a volume of Shakespeare (figure 2). The appropriation of Shakespeare, whose iconic status in the English-speaking world approximated that of the Scriptures, was a brilliant stroke. It also served as a reminder to opponents like Hubbert, who suggested that it was legitimate to enjoy the drama as a literary text but not as a component of performance, that Shakespeare was a man of the theater whose plays had been written for live stage performance. To some extent, it also enhanced the Anglophile tendencies of the ACA, which commemorated events such as Queen Victoria’s death in 1901, Trafalgar Day, Henry Irving’s death, and the 1916 Shakespeare tercentenary. The ACA reveled in these prestigious associations, which helped the acting profession present itself as respectful and upright.

While the British organization that inspired the ACA was affiliated exclusively with the Church of England, the ACA gained much from its ecumenical nature, hailed from the beginning as one of its central underpinnings. Bentley never clarified in his accounts who had originated the ecumenical concept, but given his background and Bishop Potter’s, his ecclesiastical superior, it is reasonable to surmise that it originated with the latter, who was intensely attuned to societal implications. This embrace of religious diversity reflected a specific American reality. Clearly, a welcoming gesture from an elite Episcopal-run body to the city’s Catholics and Jews, many of them immigrants and children of immigrants, was appreciated by them, while their participation, albeit under Episcopalian leadership, gave the organization a larger and firmer base.

Extending the invitation to Jews was a particularly astute move, given the current state of the American stage (figure 3). At this time, the American theater was practically run by the Theatrical Syndicate, whose members were Charles Frohman, who controlled theaters in New York and Boston, Al Hayman, who owned and controlled bookings in the West, including San Francisco, Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger, who owned theaters in the South and held booking rights for an another two-hundred theaters, and Sam Nixon and Fred Zimmerman of Philadelphia, who controlled first-class theaters in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. All were Jews, albeit assimilated ones. When they joined forces to form the Syndicate in 1896, they were at first welcomed by many theater managers as a centralized organization that promised to reduce the chaos
Fig. 2. Official seal of the Actors’ Church Alliance. Courtesy of The Episcopal Actors’ Guild of America, Inc.

Fig. 3. Broadsheet distributed by the Indianapolis chapter of the ACA, with Rabbi Morris M. Feuerlicht listed as chaplain. His participation exemplifies the organization’s ecumenical nature. Courtesy of The Episcopal Actors’ Guild of America, Inc.
and financial losses that resulted from uncoordinated bookings of combination companies. John Frick has explained the way the system worked:

Syndicate members were bound by a contract that established the conditions under which attractions could play Syndicate houses, outlined how profits were to be pooled and divided, set forth the requirements for the future inclusion of theatres and managers in the trust, and included the requirement that Syndicate theatres be booked in conjunction with one another. The agreement further stipulated that managers who wished to book their theatres with the Syndicate must agree to book them exclusively through Klaw and Erlanger; provided similar exclusive booking imperatives for performers signing with the Syndicate.\footnote{Frick, “The Changing Theatre,” 213.}

The Syndicate, which insisted on exclusive representation, became enormously successful, and by century’s end, nearly all actors, including major stars who had initially railed against it, ended up joining it for fear their careers might otherwise end. The Syndicate ruled the American stage with an iron fist, leaving little room for independent producers. This was manifested in 1905, when the great actress Sarah Bernhardt, then on an American tour, was refused permission to perform in Syndicate houses because the tour was managed by a rival firm. The Syndicate would not budge, and Bernhardt had to perform in circus tents and independent houses. Many in the profession bemoaned this new theatrical landscape, feeling the American theater was now in the hands of philistine businessmen with no commitment to the arts. The Syndicate’s Jewish identity, its tough business practices, and the deep-seated stereotype of the Jew as Shylock introduced a covert strain of antisemitism into the critique of the “oriental” practices of its principals, who wielded as much power as their later reincarnations, the Hollywood moguls.\footnote{The most overtly antisemitic critic was James Metcalfe, drama critic of \textit{Life}, a popular weekly. In 1903, Metcalfe wrote: “What \textit{LIFE} has maintained, and still maintains, is that dramatic art in America is at its present low ebb because for several years it has been controlled by persons who have regarded it only as a money-maker, that these persons happen to be vulgar, ignorant and grasping, and that they also happen to be Jews. Their chief supporters and best patrons have been Jews of the same kind, and the American stage has been degraded to please their vulgar taste.” Metcalfe, “Not Entirely a Matter of Logic,” \textit{Life}, April 24, 1903, 372. The author wishes to thank Mr. John Tenney for the reference. The Syndicate retaliated by barring Metcalfe from entering its theaters.}

Given the goals of the ACA, which in addition to pastoral care for itinerant actors included a ban on Sunday performances and the elimination of indecent material from the stage, it would have been
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extremely unwise for it to alienate the Syndicate by not inviting Jews to join. Although the name of the Syndicate is never mentioned in ACA literature, it is significant that three Syndicate principals affiliated themselves with the ACA: Frohman in New York and Nixon and Zimmerman in Philadelphia, where they served on the Church Stage Council of the local chapter. Frohman, who supported the ban on Sunday performances, was an important ally in the ACA’s struggle for this cause, though he was less responsive to its moralistic quest. Clearly, the Syndicate’s acquiescence was needed for the ACA’s nationwide pastoral network to succeed. Traveling actors usually hooked up with local clergy in the following way. The ACA printed special calendars with a list of local chaplains, their respective churches, hours of services, and home addresses, to which were added the official seal of the Alliance and extracts from its constitution outlining the duties of chaplains. The latter were to “visit members as temporary parishioners, provide special services whenever necessary, welcome them to the social life of the parish, and particularly to care for any one who may be left sick in the town.” These framed calendars were posted in theaters, 174 in the first year, and 800 two years later. Naturally, the managers of these privately-owned theaters had to agree to such displays. Given the Syndicate’s control of most of the first-class theaters in the country, it is doubtful if agreement would be forthcoming had Jews been excluded from the ACA.

It appears that an invitation to join the Alliance was not extended directly to Rabbi Silverman but was sent to the Jewish Ministers’ Association. The Hebrew Standard, a popular English-language New York weekly with Orthodox leanings, devoted six lengthy stories to the Association, but the articles’ mocking tone and use of nicknames to represent real people make it difficult to figure out what actually transpired at its meetings. One recurring motif is the generational conflict between “old fogies” and young “philistine” rabbis, who were enthusiastic about the stage. Silverman, an exceptionally good-looking man, is referred to as “Rabbi Sixteen’twone” and is lampooned as the perfect representative at the ACA, “for he possessed the elements of youth, manly beauty, virile vigor, persuasive eloquence, dignified carriage, commanding form, natural grace,” implying he could be an actor himself.34

Silverman was chosen as delegate to the ACA in 1899, and promptly joined the governing board of the Actors’ Church Alliance. Within the year, twenty-two more rabbis joined. The first annual report of the ACA (1900) recorded a total of 375 chaplains in 126 cities, of whom 332 were

Protestant ministers, 20 Catholic priests, and 23 rabbis. The latter were all Reform, and they were drawn from all parts of the nation. By 1904–1905, the ACA was organized by local chapters, and the annual report of that year listed the names of seven rabbis who served on the resulting local church and stage councils.

The impressive number of rabbis who became members was particularly evident in the ACA’s first year, and their presence was conspicuous at major events, which were often referred to as “services.” One such early service was organized by Rabbi Leon Harrison on Sunday morning, February 11, 1900, at Temple Israel in St. Louis. It proved a great success, with seats in such demand that the police had to bar the doors and turn many away. Rabbi Harrison preached a sermon entitled “The Stage as a Teacher of Morality” to an audience of 2,500. The local press covered the event, citing part of the sermon, which was similar in tone to many others, some printed by the ACA itself. As Harrison stated,

The Church and clergymen are partly to blame for the conditions that are regrettable on the stage at the present time. The denunciation of the stage and stage people has not been discriminating. It has not been admitted by those of the clergy who preach against the stage that there is any good in it. This has led to the tabooing of all the theatres by a large part of the best people of all creeds. A result has been that by the withdrawal of these people from what is known as the theatre-going public, that public has been weakened as a moral and uplifting force.

According to newspaper accounts, the audience included members of Sir Henry Irving’s company, then on tour, as well as other visiting players. The program also included a performance by members of the well-

35. In addition to Joseph Silverman, the rabbis were: J. Aaron (Buffalo); E. N. Calisch (Richmond); Henry Cohen (Galveston); Barnett A. Elzas (Charlestown, North Carolina); M. Faber (Keokuk, Iowa); Charles Fleischer (Boston); Wm. S. Friedman (Denver); Louis Grossman (Cincinnati); A. Guttman (Syracuse); Leon Harrison (St. Louis); Emil Hirsch (Chicago); Alex S. Kleinfeld (the Bronx); Joseph Krauskopf (Philadelphia); Max Landsberg (Rochester); Isidore Lewinthal (Nashville); Alex Lyons (Albany); Morris Mandel (Washington, D.C.); Samuel Marks (San Antonio); M. Messing (Indianapolis); William Rosenau (Baltimore); H. Veld (Newburgh, New York), Jacob Voorsang (San Francisco); L. Wintner (Brooklyn). All are listed in Actors’ Church Alliance, Annual Report 1900. An additional name that appeared in the 1901 report was that of Moses J. Gries of Cleveland.

36. The following were listed as members of local councils: Rabbi Gries, Cleveland; Rabbi Grossman, Cincinnati; Rabbi Guttman, Syracuse; Rabbi Harrison, St. Louis; Rabbi Krauskopf, Philadelphia; Rabbi Messing, Indianapolis, Rabbi Sanfield, Memphis. See Actors’ Church Alliance, Annual Report 1904–1905 (New York 1905).

known Castle Square touring opera company. One may assume that the event created good will for the synagogue and the Jews of St. Louis in general.

Other than garnering good will and building bridges, what motivated the rabbis to become ardent ACA supporters? It was, after all, primarily a Christian organization, some of whose objectives, such as the elimination of Sunday performances, were of low priority for Jews and did not bear on the religious life of Jewish actors on the road. In fact, Silverman himself made it clear that, if it were up to him, he would have “the churches, the museums, the libraries, and the theatres open [on Sunday] so that men may imbibe the spirit of the day.”

The cynically minded would argue that the ACA offered a sought-after interaction with Protestant America, possibly yet another illustration of Israel Zangwill’s rhetorical statement in his discussion of Shylock: “The love and respect of these lordly Christians—when has a Jew not coveted that?”

But one can also posit a Jewish agenda that may have even run counter to some of the Christian aims of the Alliance. An ACA service that took place on Sunday, December 3, 1899, at Silverman’s Temple Emanu-El in New York provides some clues. At this “Special Service,” Silverman lectured to a packed house that included many non-Jews on “The Presentation of Religion on the Stage,” a topic triggered by the popularity of The Christian and the recently opened Ben-Hur, and the angry controversy surrounding Children of the Ghetto’s depiction of Jewish immigrant life. The text of Silverman’s sermon has not survived, but much can be gleaned from local press coverage, especially from the Dramatic Mirror, the major theatrical newspaper of the day. Silverman devoted much of his lecture to an erudite survey, albeit not a particularly innovative one, of the origins of the theater, the formation of religious drama, and the ensuing estrangement between church and stage. After praising the stage as a strong potential ally of the pulpit, one that could surpass the latter as a moral force because of its freedom from dogma, he finally arrived at his Jewish agenda, namely, an all-out rejection of religious plays. The initial reason he offered, that the purpose behind these productions was mercenary and not devotional, seems minor, and its function appears to have been that of easing his audience into his main argument, which went as follows: “If the object of such plays is to make men more religious, what form of religion shall the dramatist put

in his play? Shall it be Catholicism, Protestantism, or Judaism?” Religion, he said, was a controversial subject, and just as it was not taught in the country’s public schools, so it should be avoided on the stage.

Silverman also snuck in a telling comment regarding the Oberammergau Passion Play, which, he contended, many persons thought should be discontinued. Calling for the abolition of the popular Passion Play in front of a mixed Jewish–Christian audience was a bold move on Silverman’s part, since the play was generally favored by the Christian clergy and had been popularly romanticized as an authentic expression of faith, the very opposite of a commercial stage production. For Jews, however, the Oberammergau play was and has remained a source of much consternation, for though the text had been revised over time, it was a virulently antisemitic portrayal of Jews. Much of it has been cleansed since World War II, but at the time of Silverman’s sermon the play still offered a vivid portrayal of Jews as Christ killers.41 Due to reopen within a matter of months, the production was garnering considerable attention at the time he delivered his lecture, having become a major international tourist attraction, which in 1900 would draw a quarter of a million visitors. Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Temple Knesset Israel in Philadelphia, and an ACA member, traveled that year to the Bavarian village, and upon his return he offered a series of six lectures on the play that were also published in book form.42 He reported that the Passion Play was replete with falsehoods and served as a hotbed of antisemitism, and made him feel “as if I had to rise, and declare aloud to the thousands that crowded the auditorium, that what they heard and saw, was, as far as it depicted or typified the Jew, unhistoric in fact, false in interpretation, cruel in inference.”43

Silverman was not only worried about Old World dramatic antisemitism, but also about possible American versions of the play, a not unlikely possibility in light of the lavish 1879 production the Passion Play was given in San Francisco. This was the first American production of its kind, and it had clearly been inspired by the immense popularity of the Oberammergau event. Starring matinee idol James O’Neill as Christ, and boasting a cast of hundreds, including a hundred mothers with babies for the Massacre of the Innocents scene, an enormous chorus, and

41. For a detailed discussion of modern efforts to resolve the anti-Jewish aspects of the production, see James Shapiro, Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play (New York, 2000).
43. Ibid., 19.
a herd of live sheep, it triggered both religious fervor and civil unrest. Members of the audience fell to their knees in prayer, some fainted, and, during the crucifixion scene, some “young Irish Catholic rowdies” rushed outside the theater and attacked anyone who looked remotely Jewish and smashed Jewish-owned businesses. The production raised much opposition, and city authorities quickly moved to ban it. Efforts to bring it to New York and possibly to other American cities were aborted. Nevertheless, it had cracked the door open, and thus suggested future attempts to mount productions.

Although Silverman’s comparison of the mainstream theatrical stage with schools and his evocation of the constitutional separation of state and church may be disconcerting from an artistic point of view, he succeeded in conveying Jewish discomfort with the fusion of religion and entertainment, and, in fact, foreshadowed the common logic of television and most Hollywood fare, whose underlying rule is to offend no one, the price of which is the blandness that has become normative. Religious plays on the American stage, which would understandably cater to the Christian majority, even if they did not lead to overt anti-Jewish acts would no doubt make even an acculturated Reform Jew, no matter how accomplished, feel like an outcast, a pariah in a land where he did not regard himself as a transient, where separation of church and state had enabled him to achieve an unprecedented sense of equality.

On March 19, 1905, Silverman spoke at Temple Emanu-El on behalf of the ACA. Perhaps influenced by Bentley, who was eager for the organization to become involved in theatrical production, he suggested that the ACA create a theater that would fulfill its high moral and artistic standards. However, his involvement with the organization came to an end only several months later owing to an internal rift, which was probably also the reason for Bentley’s departure that same year. The rift became public at the sixth annual ACA convention in June 1905. Although the details are sketchy, they suggest an internal coup, possibly triggered by gender and generational issues. The skirmish involved a Mrs. Newton Bennington, formerly an actress who went by the name of Bessie Taylor. She resigned from her post as Second Vice President after Bentley tried to nominate Silverman for the post. Bennington, who

44. Misha Berson, *The San Francisco Stage, Part II: From Golden Spike to Great Earthquake, 1869–1906* (San Francisco, 1989), 36. The author wishes to thank Joel Schechter for this reference.
45. “Church Ally of Theatre?”, 7.
46. Bishop Potter remained President of the ACA, and Bentley would return eight years later.
chaired the meeting, declared Bentley out of order, and pronounced herself reelected. This was followed by an attempt to pass a new constitution, an act supported by Silverman, who said that the ACA in New York was “in a bad way,” and that things were bound to get worse unless the new constitution were adopted. Arguments followed, culminating in Bennington going into a “fit of weeping” and retiring to an anteroom, where she was joined by many women delegates. Mrs. Aimee Abbot called Silverman to account, upon which he apologized, Bennington returned, and then Silverman delivered a short speech in which he declared that it was essential to have a man in the office of Second Vice President, which was in turn followed by a loud chorus of “no’s” from the women present. Bennington resigned, but it was Vicar Thomas H. Sill, not Rabbi Silverman, who was chosen for the position. Other changes ensued: actress Edyth Totten, who in 1904 was “Secretary,” while Bentley went under the title “National Organizer and Secretary,” was elected secretary, Bentley’s former job, and a Miss E. B. Harris was elected treasurer. In a terse account of the seventh ACA annual convention, held in Providence, Potter (not present at either the sixth or seventh conventions) is listed as President, Edyth Totten as First Vice President, Mary Gibbs Spooner, Second Vice President, Olinda D. Drescher, Secretary, and Ellen B. Harris, Treasurer. With the exception of Edyth Totten (1885–1953), who was twenty-one years old at the time, none of these names had been listed in earlier ACA publications.

Although Silverman became disassociated from the ACA after the 1905 debacle, he continued his ecumenical work and maintained his interest in the moral aspects of stage productions and the new medium of motion pictures. In 1912, he was the only rabbi in a ten-member ecumenical group of clergymen who, in conjunction with the American Playgoers Club, visited major New York stage productions with the intent of formulating joint reviews for use in churches and synagogues. In 1913, Silverman, Bishop Greer, and Cardinal Farley were mentioned as supporters of the Children’s Motion Picture League, whose aim was to offer “clean entertainment” to working-class children. In 1922, a year before the God of Vengeance affair, he wrote, in conjunction with other clergy, to the New York State Motion Picture Commission, this time in support of Fate, a film accused of immorality in California.
More importantly, Silverman engaged himself in combating the negative representation of Jews in the mainstream popular media. On April 3, 1910, he advocated in a synagogue sermon the launching of a vigorous campaign against the caricaturing of Jews in the press and on the stage. He cited as a model the recent success achieved by Irish Americans in their fight to eliminate the “stage Irishman,” a coarse comic character endowed with an excessively thick brogue, green whiskers, and an inordinately elongated upper lip. Silverman did not mince words, declaring: “The stage Jew is a stench in our nostrils, a disgrace to the country, an insult to the Jew, and a discredit to the stage.”

His energetic approach was taken up by other rabbis, and the issue of the “stage Jew” became a serious topic of discussion at the Central Conference of American Rabbis in the summer of 1910. The fight against the offensive stereotype gained momentum, and in April 1913 Jewish leaders in Chicago convened to call for a nationwide boycott of theaters that featured the objectionable Jewish comedian. In September of that year, the Anti-Defamation League was established in Chicago. One of its goals, it was announced, was to fight the stage defamation of the Jew by enlisting the cooperation of producers and theater managers.

After 1905, the ACA went into decline. It no longer issued annual reports and received scant mention in the press. The Chicago chapter seceded in 1909. In 1910, the New York Times briefly noted that attendance at the ACA’s annual vesper service “was not large.” In the meanwhile, the general climate had also changed. Sunday performances became a labor issue, and actors were gaining more social respectability. Consequently, when Bentley finally returned in 1912 to resume his old post at the ACA, it became a predominantly charitable organization. In 1914, the ACA amicably fragmented into religious factions, Catholic, Episcopalian, and Jewish. It was formally dissolved in 1923. In 1924, the Jewish Theatrical Guild was founded. Its main goals were to serve the social and religious needs of Jews who worked in the theater, and to publicize their contributions to America and the performing arts.

The Guild’s founders were leading figures in the industry, notably agent William Morris, entertainer Eddie Cantor, and Variety editor Sime Silverstein. In recognition of his involvement in the theatrical sphere and his ceaseless efforts to upgrade of the image of the Jew on the American stage, Rabbi Joseph Silverman was honored as the Guild’s chaplain.