

How I Lost the Election in St. Louis

July 9, 1971

Beerman's report of his defeat in the election for the position of vice president (and thereafter president) of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) highlights a certain ferment within Reform Judaism in 1971. His initial nomination for the vice presidency, followed by the unprecedented challenge to it, reflected a deep generational divide within the Reform rabbinate. Beerman, at fifty, represented the young guard, which was regarded with considerable trepidation by older rabbis. The issue at hand was not merely the question of who would be in charge of the movement. Reform rabbis were also divided at this time over whether they should be permitted to perform mixed marriages (the policy of the CCAR today is to discourage but not prohibit rabbis from doing so, though the movement did agree to regard those born to Jewish fathers as Jews in 1983).

Beerman also reports that colleagues were divided over matters of intense political concern in America of the time—for example, whether to oppose the military draft or to support bail for political activist and scholar Angela Davis. Moreover, he relates that at least one colleague opposed him for the vice presidency of the CCAR because of his views on Israel—an early indication of his critical stance, which would become a cornerstone of his political engagement, and a source of controversy within the Jewish community.

I have just returned from a most painful experience. Two weeks ago in St. Louis I suffered a defeat, and I didn't enjoy it at all. I came away from it licking my wounds, whimpering. I had my rabbinic nose rubbed in the dirt; I was clobbered in public. I played the role of victim in an event that made history. Oh, you won't ever read about it in the *Readers Digest*, or for that matter in the *Jewish Digest*.

It's the kind of history that is already forgotten, or will never be written. It isn't very important history. It concerns the 82nd Annual Conference of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Within a period of less than 24 hours I was and was not the next Vice President of the CCAR. The nominating committee had selected me on Wednesday afternoon to the post, which according to conference tradition leads normally to the presidency two years later. Had the tradition of the CCAR been followed this time, I would have been perhaps the youngest president in the eighty-two-year history of the American reform rabbinate. But history was made in another way. In the closing hours of the convention after the majority of those attending had gone back home, for the first time in conference history a nomination was made from the floor opposing mine: and the new vice president, president to be, is not the fifty-year-old Leonard I. Beerman of Los Angeles, but the sixty-year-old Robert I. Kahn of Houston, a revered and distinguished colleague whom I fully expected would be the next president anyway.

Those of us who were in St. Louis will have trouble making sense out of what occurred there. It was a confusing time, and we are still too close to it to understand just exactly what happened, but there might be some value in talking about it. At least it serves a purpose for me. If I made a fool of myself in St. Louis there is no reason why you shouldn't know about it. Or for that matter if I had been a hero.

I think my troubles began when I was thirteen years old. To begin with, I was very slow in growing. The signs of maturity were delayed in coming. At eighteen I could still get into the movies as a twelve year old. Maybe that's why at fifty some of my colleagues counted me among the young rabbis of our rabbinic association. But something else happened at thirteen. I had straight black hair and I wanted wavy hair. I had rich and powerful fantasies about me with wavy hair. And sure enough in the summer of my thirteenth year I went swimming in the dirty old Shiawassee River that meandered through our little Michigan town, and I developed a good solid case of typhoid fever, in the process I lost my straight black hair, and wonder of wonders my fantasy became a reality; the new hair came in wavy and curly. And that's the way it remained, until twenty-five years later when baldness began to take over.

That's where my troubles began, when my hair was straight. Ever since then I have had a great reverence for fantasies. Fantasy enriches my life and quite often has made life tolerable to me. I use it especially at religious services and board meetings. If I don't like what's going on I create my own meeting out of my fantasies. It's exciting and pleasurable.

These last two years have been very difficult for me. I have been the secretary of our rabbinical association, the CCAR. I have been deprived. Secretaries *have* to listen, have to take notes. No place for fantasy. No private meetings. For two years I have had to bear that burden. I flew to St. Louis a couple of weeks ago knowing that this would be the last meeting at which I would serve as secretary. But that also meant no office in the CCAR. No trips to New York. No opportunities

to see our daughter who attends College at 116th and Broadway. What would I do? The fantasy apparatus started working; starved, famished after two years of deprivation—bursting for expression. I couldn't be secretary again. They don't usually reelect men to offices. They like to pass the honors around. That left only the vice presidency. But I'm only fifty. It ordinarily goes to a man ten years later. Besides there's Robert Kahn of Houston; by all the laws of conference tradition—service to the conference, distinction, respect of colleagues—Kahn is our next president. Impossible for you; your turn might come, if you are lucky, in ten years, if it's to be at all. But not now. Forget it.

But the worm had entered the apple; the fantasy had entered my mind, and although I didn't really think about it until two days later—that's where the trouble began, back on the Shiawassee River.

Meanwhile the Conference went on its somewhat boring way. It voted down a resolution urging an end to the draft, which I had drafted myself. That was my first defeat. It avoided a statement which would directly support Angela Davis' right to bail; it postponed for a year a confrontation on the question of a self-imposed draft of chaplains for the military, and it postponed a consideration of a question Rabbi Kominsky was very much involved in, the question of mixed marriage. I myself was to give a formal response (at one of the low points of the meeting on Wednesday night) to a paper delivered by an Adlerian psychologist from Chicago, but that was still to come.

By Tuesday some of the youngest men of the Conference were ready to go home. One made plans to attend a rock festival in New Orleans, rather than stay in the heat of St. Louis. He discussed the idea with an older colleague who suggested he try to turn the Conference around—take a new direction; bring in a man who represents some of the diffused yearnings of the disenchanting, Leonard Beerman. The young Rabbi with hair and beard longer even than Kominsky, on little scraps of paper, circulated a petition, requesting the nominating committee to propose Beerman, and went about gathering signatures by the dozens.

Some signed out of conviction; others who never even heard of me. I made a half-hearted effort to stop it. I told the chairman of the nominating committee, I wasn't interested in the job, but two older colleagues and past presidents told me that was an arrogant, nonsensical thing to do. Arrogant to turn down a nomination before it was offered, nonsense to think I had any chance of being nominated in the first place.

Wednesday evening at dinner, while Martha and I were sitting making conversation with the psychologist who was about to deliver the paper that I was to give the response to, the chairman of the nominating committee came to me with the news—I was the unanimous choice of the nominating committee on the second ballot. The committee had felt it was time for a change, they wanted a candidate independent of existing power structures—some such talk—and like typhoid fever in the Shiawassee, and wavy hair emerging magically out of my fantasies

it had really happened. I woke up in the middle of the night feeling proud of myself—already alive with new imaginings of what I might do for the young and the excluded, the forgotten men of the Conference.

Some eight hours later, two-thirds of the conference having gone home, a colleague took the floor, visibly shaken, pained at violating the established tradition of the Conference, and nominated from the floor Robert Kahn of Houston. More important than the sanctity of the nominating committee, which never in its history has had its choice challenged, was the sanctity of age. Age rose up to protect its prerogatives. How could the Conference trample over a man of age and respect and competence, no matter how worthy this Beerman might be?

Only one man rose to attack Beerman, someone who claimed to be liberal and of the left, but deeply disturbed by my position on Israel, something he had heard at Miami two years before, or thought he heard. Someone else got up to attack Kahn for his purported alliance with the military industrial complex. Kahn had served as chaplain for the American Legion. The young men who spoke, spoke for Beerman. The ballot was made secret. The atmosphere was very solemn, rabbinical, but tense. The vote was taken and Beerman went down, 77 to 55.

Several young men had raced out to pay their \$35 registration fee, which many of them had not been able to afford, just so they could vote—but it was not enough.

What had happened? I am not sure. The young men had distributed the petition because they felt the Conference was ignoring them and their needs. Men under thirty felt they were not needed or trusted. Their feelings of impotence and frustration prodded them into this campaign to elect someone almost twice their age but whom they felt shared their aspirations. In the eyes of the elders of the Conference, although I was fifty, I was still identified with the young.

No question that the older men felt threatened, fearful of the radical change they somehow perceived in my election. But more than that there was a great unrest that permeated the entire Conference and the profession itself. Young men were concerned about being ignored and neglected—they perceived their Conference as moribund, not responsive to the changing needs of the time. Older men were very uneasy about their security.

One of the most distinguished colleagues, after seventeen years of service to a great congregation in the East, was summarily fired a few weeks ago. And that shook us all up, because he is a man of considerable distinction, and if congregations can treat rabbis of distinction and long service in what appears to us to be an arbitrary fashion, you can imagine how lesser men might have had their security severely shaken. Even the middle-aged men began to be threatened by the exaggerated attention being given to the young.

They found themselves suddenly passed over by a Conference, which had ignored them when they were young, and now they were already too old to be young.

The Conference was split over a dozen issues. Over mixed marriage, when an effort was made by the then President of our Conference to add more traditional

teeth to the forty-two-year-old conference position declaring mixed marriages to be contrary to the tradition of Jewish religion and therefore to be discouraged by the American rabbinate. That's the way the words read forty-two years ago and still apply. Roland Gittelson, our outgoing president, in his opening address called upon the members of the Conference to declare officially that they would not officiate at such mixed marriages. That produced a strong division within the Conference.

There was a division of feelings about the new prayer book which is in the process of being developed, and which has been circulated throughout the Conference over the last couple of years and will probably reach the printer within the next two or three years—there too the response showed a broad diversity within the Reform movement.

What we see in our Conference is essentially what we see in our congregations. We are ministering to a divided group of Jews. An infinitely varied group of Jews. Somehow the existing structures are seeking a way to respond to the variety of needs and values and ideals which can be found within the individual structures, without trampling on the rights of any individual, with due regard for the need for change, with due reverence for tradition, trying to find a path that makes sense, that is intelligible, that will respond to the need for change and at the same time not trample on the feelings of the old or those who are content with the old. That is the difficulty that faces the Conference, even as it faces our individual congregations. The revolt of the young, and the willingness of the young, whoever the young may be, to try out the new, to probe and risk the new, of course appears always as a threat to the existing institutions and existing structures of power. Certainly that in part was true in St. Louis.

And as for me, I ignored that old Jewish lesson, "don't make waves," don't make trouble, and you will never get hurt. I for a moment was touched, puffed up with the spirit of ambition. I forgot the little boy who was swimming in the Shiawassee and I lived for a moment in the world of fantasy. I learned that it is possible to get hurt. It is possible to get your nose pushed in the dirt, and it is possible to have it done in the presence of all of your friends, your colleagues. I learned much more: That I have many friends, wonderful friends, particularly among the young men of the Conference, and among the old as well. I learned that the Conference will never be the same again, and in many different ways.

Who knows what the future will hold. Perhaps even these Reform rabbis, in their wonderful variety, will discover again, as my friend Richard Levy says, that Reform is something more than a struggle between the old and the new but rather a way in which, perhaps, we can turn this country of ours around. Perhaps we can find a relevant way to transform our lives as Jews and through the transformation of our own lives, the life of the society of which we are a part.

In the meantime I can go back now to my private meetings. As a booby prize they elected me to the Executive Board of the CCAR. So I'll get those trips to New York.

If I don't like the Executive Board meeting, I can conduct my own private meetings. I suppose there is some kind of poetic justice in that.

And so it was a hot seething week in St. Louis. A lot of feelings are ruffled, a lot of people were made happy. A lot of people came home wiser, more sober, more troubled, and maybe even a little more hopeful about the possibilities of the future.

COMMENTARY BY PROFESSOR WILLIAM CUTTER

I was one of those young rabbis who hoped that Leonard Beerman could revive the professional guild of Reform Rabbis, known as the CCAR. I was new to our shared work, but I already knew Rabbi Beerman to be a forthright speaker, a man of robust integrity, and one of those rare public figures with a sense of irony about himself. Soon after I joined Leo Baeck Temple to learn from him and to share in his quiet aura, I found that around the nation, other young rabbis were beginning to look to him for leadership. Without trying very hard (and we liked that, it seems), he was a man whose opinions had to be reckoned with. Among those opinions were certain beliefs about leadership, and a caution about univocal-homogenous support for Israel's new role as a power in the Middle East. Both aspects of his uniqueness inspired the original nomination, but probably helped to change the direction away from his nomination as our next president once the demographic balance shifted at the end of our conference.

I was not used to seeing Leonard display that much public ambition, and his generally gentle approach to things within the CCAR makes the document before us all the more intriguing—and perhaps more important historically. Leonard's words here bespeak a genuine disappointment with the outcome of a quirky situation, along with a concern that dissent of a certain kind may be respected but not viewed as appropriate for rabbinic leadership. A more conventional, and predictable, substitute was found in the elegant Robert Kahn. One could protest procedure, but not the integrity of the new choice.

Yes, many of us wanted someone more challenging, and our selection of Leonard reflected that aspiration. Perhaps we followed in the spirit shown at the Chicago political convention of 1968. And I, personally, regretted that I could not be in St. Louis for the challenge.

Many of us communicated for a long time after our rabbinic convention about our disappointment. None were more disappointed than Leonard Beerman, but none were more surprised than we, his loyal Hasidim, who were not used to thinking about Leonard's ambitions to turn his professional guild around. That aspiration is reflected in these surprising, humorous, and deeply human words.