

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz

Personal Experience

O.H. 1577

REVEREND WILLIAM BREWSTER

Interviewed

by

Matthew Butts

on

July 8, 1992

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Following high school, Brewster worked at various jobs. He then entered the seminary, preparing himself for religious service as clergyman in the Episcopal Church. He served in the United States Navy during the 1950's. Brewster then served at various parishes across the United States he arrived in Youngstown, Ohio in 1979 as minister of St. John's Episcopal Church. Throughout his service at St. John's, Brewster has served as both a civic and religious community leader.

Presently, Reverend Brewster continues to be very active in the Youngstown community. He resides with his wife, Dr. Arlene Brewster, at 117 Mill Creek Drive, Youngstown, Ohio.

MB: This is an interview with Reverend William Brewster for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Rabbi Sidney Berkowitz, by Matthew Butts, on July 8, 1992, at St. John's Episcopal church, at 10:20 a.m.

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, as far as your childhood and your education?

WB: I was born in Hartford, Connecticut. [I] grew up in Waterbury, Connecticut. I am the son of an Episcopal priest. My grandfather was a bishop of the Episcopal Church, and my great-grandfather was a minister of the Episcopal Church -- minister and priest. My great-great-grandfather was born a Congregationalist and died an Episcopalian. He decided to switch over during the 1820's at Yale University. My heritage starts in 1620 on the colony. I am a descendant of William Brewster from the colony, and I bare the name. That is why I have no middle name.

My schooling, with the exception of my first two years in Belmont, Massachusetts, my schooling was entirely at independent schools in new England. My father was the headmaster of a New England school, a church school, and I went to one. I went to Kent School in Kent, Connecticut and graduated, not from there. But later my father went to start another school in Austin, Texas for the Episcopal church, a parochial educational boarding school. I finished there and went on to the University of Texas. I can keep on going.

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WB: I was in the United States Navy in the 1950's, the mid-1950's. I went to seminary at the Church Divinity School in the Pacific in Berkeley, California. My first job was at the American Church in Switzerland, as the assistant and Youth Worker for American Students Overseas. Then I went to the University of Chicago for my Masters of Arts in ethics and social science. I went from there into campus ministry and taught at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. From there, I came into parish ministry, Christ Church, Ground Book, and here.

MB: What was your father's name?

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MB: When you came to Youngstown, what struck you about the city?

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MB: How soon after you arrived did you meet Dr. Berkowitz?

WB: I think I met Dr. Berkowitz very shortly after I arrived. My wife is Jewish and remains Jewish, and she made her way to Temple Rodef Sholom shortly after we arrived. I know she linked up with some people there for Passover in 1980, and I think we met Dr. Berkowitz some time right around then. I got to know him and his new associate shortly after that young man arrived. Of course, that was Rabbi Powers who stayed on afterwards.

MB: What struck you about Rabbi Berkowitz?

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MB: After Rabbi Berkowitz died, was there a void left within the Youngstown community? Did the ecumenical developments that had taken place diminish at all?

WB: I believe they did. It is hard to put the finger on what the transition point was, but I know that as of a year or so ago, it seemed to me that it was unclear who spoke for the Jewish community and who represented the Jewish community and who did Jews look to and who did the rabbis among themselves chose to hold up as the chief rabbi. We had a situation as of two years ago, where we had a brand new rabbi at Rodef Sholom, a brand new rabbi at El Emeth, further out in Liberty. The rabbi from the south side was well known and well liked, but did not seem to be held up as spokesman for the Jewish community. So, it was unclear. Going back further, I know that Rabbi Powers is certainly, being as young as he was, just did not have the same stature in the eyes of the people, as Sidney Berkowitz did. And I think something else, certainly the reformed community, reformed Jewish community, that has existed here for many generations was decidedly not Zionist in their Orientation. With Rabbi Powers came a very definite point of view -- the Zionist point of view.

I think one of the basic conflicts he had in the congregation that he brought to them was he was not only an innovator bringing in a new prayer book, which he had helped edit in a way, because he was part of that young group that studied it, but he also propounded Zionism. Even though he was not militant, he propounded it, and took that point of view in his sermons. All the rabbis since then have been more outspokenly Zionist in their point of view. That has definitely cast a chill on the ecumenical movement.

The reason it has is that in the Christian community, the early Christian missions were all to the Palestinian peoples in the Near East and the Middle East. So, you have Presbyterian, Methodist, and Anglican missionaries going out to Palestinians in Jerusalem and to Syria. So, you have Syrian Christians; you have Palestinian Christians, with whom there is a lot of rapport over generations. The Zionist movement comes into the middle of that and claims

land, has land; and holds land; and it begins to build the ideology saying that, "We deserve the land." It changes the mix, so that there has not been as nearly as strong a sense of unity since then. The only one of those three that remains is James Malone, and he probably will only remain another two or three years, because I think he is in his seventies. At seventy-five, he retires. It is a miracle he has lived. He had cancer ten years ago. So, he has lived. He continues to speak, but without the other two grand old men there, it is hard to find out who speaks for the Jewish community and who truly speaks for the Protestant world here. And that is too bad. Okay, that was a long answer to your question.

MB: No, no. That was great. That was very good. Was Rabbi Berkowitz, he was not as staunch a Zionist, then? He did not give that impression?

WB: No. Well, I think in his heart -- he definitely was ardently a Jew, from his toes up. Definitely a Jew. He was schooled in all the rabbinic traditions, and there was Hebrew. That was all there, but I think from a political point of view and from a cultural point of view, he had been brought up as an assimilated Jew. He received a doctorate, his Ph.D., at Oxford, meaning that he had been going back and forth in western culture. He studied his religious heritage in the context of western philosophy, the traditional philosophy, classic philosophy, modern philosophy, and the break down of the modern philosophy; so that he had much more sense that the well-being of Judaism in the western world, particularly in the English-speaking world, was carried along by the well-being of the culture generally. Even though the Holocaust has cast an enormous spell on that reality -- I mean it really has undermined that belief profoundly. Even though that was true, I think he still held on and clung to a sense that he was part of the larger culture, not just a Jew.

Younger rabbis came along caught up in the education about the Holocaust and how, in fact, it was perceived at one time that Jews never could be totally assimilated and, if they thought they were assimilated, they probably were at their most dangerous place and they must watch out. So every young Jew believes that. That is, those who observe and those who care about it. I am sure you would find lots of Jews who are not religious and not Zionist. But, I am talking about the self-conscious Jew. The younger generation is very different in that sense.

MB: Did Rabbi Berkowitz ever speak at St. John's?

WB: He claims he did and I think he did back in the 1950's. Yes, he did.

MB: Okay.

WB: I would say, back in the 1950's, what I hear described was that there was very

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I think one of the basic conflicts he had in the congregation that he brought to them was he was not only an innovator bringing in a new prayer book, which he had helped edit in a way, because he was part of that young group that studied it, but he also propounded Zionism. Even though he was not militant, he propounded it, and took that point of view in his sermons. All the rabbis since then have been more outspokenly Zionist in their point of view. That has definitely cast a chill on the ecumenical movement.

The reason it has is that in the Christian community, the early Christian missions were all to the Palestinian peoples in the Near East and the Middle East. So, you have Presbyterian, Methodist, and Anglican missionaries going out to Palestinians in Jerusalem and to Syria. So, you have Syrian Christians; you have Palestinian Christians, with whom there is a lot of rapport over generations. The Zionist movement comes into the middle of that and claims

land, has land, and holds land; and it begins to build the ideology saying that, "We deserve the land." It changes the mix, so that there has not been as nearly as strong a sense of unity since then. The only one of those three that remains is James Malone, and he probably will only remain another two or three years, because I think he is in his seventies. At seventy-five, he retires. It is a miracle he has lived. He had cancer ten years ago. So, he has lived. He continues to speak, but without the other two grand old men there, it is hard to find out who speaks for the Jewish community and who truly speaks for the Protestant world here. And that is too bad. Okay, that was a long answer to your question.

MB: No, no. That was great. That was very good. Was Rabbi Berkowitz, he was not as staunch a Zionist, then? He did not give that impression?

WB: No. Well, I think in his heart -- he definitely was ardently a Jew, from his toes up. Definitely a Jew. He was schooled in all the rabbinic traditions, and there was Hebrew. That was all there, but I think from a political point of view and from a cultural point of view, he had been brought up as an assimilated Jew. He received a doctorate, his Ph.D., at Oxford, meaning that he had been going back and forth in western culture. He studied his religious heritage in the context of western philosophy, the traditional philosophy, classic philosophy, modern philosophy, and the break down of the modern philosophy; so that he had much more sense that the well-being of Judaism in the western world, particularly in the English-speaking world, was carried along by the well-being of the culture generally. Even though the Holocaust has cast an enormous spell on that reality -- I mean it really has undermined that belief profoundly. Even though that was true, I think he still held on and clung to a sense that he was part of the larger culture, not just a Jew.

Younger rabbis came along caught up in the education about the Holocaust and how, in fact, it was perceived at one time that Jews never could be totally assimilated and, if they thought they were assimilated, they probably were at their most dangerous place and they must watch out. So every young Jew believes that. That is, those who observe and those who care about it. I am sure you would find lots of Jews who are not religious and not Zionist. But, I am talking about the self-conscious Jew. The younger generation is very different in that sense.

MB: Did Rabbi Berkowitz ever speak at St. John's?

WB: He claims he did and I think he did back in the 1950's. Yes, he did.

MB: Okay.

WB: I would say, back in the 1950's, what I hear described was that there was very

much the sense that the churches, including the temples, were very much on the cutting edge of where things were moving in the community. I know that there was an association of all of the churches on the hill. I mean, everything from the railroad tracks up, they got together frequently to program things jointly all through the 1950's and 1960's. My guess is that it all lasted until about 1967. There was a lot of change at that time, such as a change in the pulpits. Clergy left, and others came in every church; and a lot of things changed. Well, I do not know if I am answering your question or not.

MB: Yes, yes. Excellent. I mean, this is very good. Would you describe Rabbi Berkowitz as a leader, not only in the religious community, but in the civic community?

WB: Undoubtedly. Sidney Berkowitz had the ear of community leaders. The tradition of Temple Rodef Sholom, from the beginning, was at least in part, that of being a part of the civic community and a civic leader. For instance, in 1895, St. John's Church, the congregation had a church building down a block and a half on the corner of Wood Street and Champion; and it burned. There is a record, I believe we have a record that an offer was sent down to the congregation of St. John's that they could worship at Rodef Sholom. Rodef Sholom, at that time, was over where St. Andrew's AME is, so they were very close neighbors. The congregation chose, subsequently, to worship with First Presbyterian Church, which was on East Federal, I think, at that time. But the offer was made and people remember that. Rodef Sholom, at the time that the St. Columba Cathedral burned in 1952 or 1953, sent \$5,000 to the Diocese to help rebuild the cathedral. So, the congregation had this tradition, and Rabbi Berkowitz was always there with wisdom that he could speak, and also money to give and volunteers to help out. So, people knew that that temple meant what it said, and they were supporters of the community; and he was a leader in that.

MB: He was very active in a number of organizations still when you arrived?

WB: Well, I just did not know what he belonged to. I had a feeling that he was pulling back, that he was beginning to not do the things that he did not have to do. But, he was always very gracious to me and very gracious to others. When people asked his council, he gave it. He was there if he thought he was needed to do something.

MB: Is there anything that we have not touched on, that needs added?

WB: Well, it is a funny characteristic. This is a behind the scenes statement. I noticed this, during the service, when Sidney was back sitting in one of these grand chairs, if there was someone sitting next to him, he was always kibitzing

with them. He was always leaning over to say something, and it was usually a joke. So, right in the middle of this splendid service with words of praise of God Almighty, and words of thanks that was going on up front, here was sort of a back bencher telling jokes or giving comments on what was being said up there. I was always struck by that, too. I remember going, "Why did he do that? Why did he do that?" [Laughter]

I have learned over the years that Jewish worship is different. Jewish worship is conducted in a formal manner and often what goes on around it, other than the words being said, it can sometimes be very noisy. Sometimes people would stop in the middle of a prayer and crack a joke and go back to a prayer. They do not think that they are being irreligious at all. So, it was new to me. I was brought up in a very strict Episcopalian. We were always quiet in church. We were not joining in the liturgy; we were listening to it very attentively. So this was a very different experience for me, and I was always amused by it.

[Laughter] Then, he had his strong opinions. He could be sort of peevish about things, if they were not just to his liking, but he was n