

Szim Shalom - The First Hungarian Jewish Reform Community

I was one of the founding members of the first Hungarian Reform Jewish congregation. It was born with the active participation, encouragement and financial support of British Jewry. In the following pages, in addition to giving an overview of the community's history and providing historical context, I will demonstrate how this community fits within the framework of "global religion". It involved transportation of the concepts and structures of a religious denomination from Great Britain to Hungary where it was called for by and adapted to the local needs and circumstances.

In 1987 a few British Jews, including rabbis, visited Hungary for Passover. Their goal was to find Jews who are interested in their Jewish heritage but knew little about it and teach them through celebration. They accomplished their target, and in the following years they came back for each major Jewish holiday to celebrate with an ever increasing number of Hungarians. They named their program "Rekindling the Flame," alluding to the fact that there was once a much more flourishing Jewish culture in Hungary. On the Hungarian side there was no formal organization involved. We learned about the visits through word of mouth and invited people from our social networks.

In 1989 these British friends raised enough money to invite a dozen of us to London for a month long intensive course on Reform Judaism. We learned the basics at the Leo Baeck College, the institution that trains rabbis and Jewish educators for the Reform and Liberal denominations in Great Britain and all of Europe. Upon our return to Hungary we wanted to maintain our newfound tradition. We became more and more organized and in 1992 formalized our group under the "Szim Salom" name and registered it as a (tax-exempt) non-profit association. Our original intention was to register it as a religious congregation, but for that we

lacked the necessary 100 members, required by state law. Soon after we also attempted to join the Alliance of the Jewish Congregations of Hungary but were rejected by its more conservative constituencies.

The community has been functioning continuously since its inception. In 1998 one of the original members, Katalin Kelemen finished her studies at Leo Baeck College, was ordained as a rabbi, and has been serving the community since then in this role. (She has been on the board from the very beginning.) We never had the sufficient funds to buy or build our own facilities. For the first few years we shared a renovated, but defunct synagogue building that had been unused since World War II. Later we rented various apartments and after a few moves we found the current location. Last July we finally reached the number necessary for state regulations to enhance our status to a registered church. A few months ago Ms. Kelemen was invited the very first time for a roundtable discussion along with representatives of other Jewish denominations. This was another breakthrough in achieving recognition.

A few notes might be helpful regarding the terms and names I used above. "Szim Salom" is the Hungarian spelling of the Hebrew words from a prayer, meaning "Give us peace." The English transliteration, thus the community's name in English, is "Sim Shalom." I referenced the community as belonging to the "reform" thread of Judaism. This word reflects my own understanding, while the official, self-determined label is "progressive." Both of these words are full of political content when viewed in the context of Hungarian Jewry. Progressive might be slightly less controversial for people of the more conservative persuasion. "Reform" has the connotation of changing, reforming the tradition, against which considerable resistance exists. Thus it was a conscious choice on our side to choose the "progressive" label hoping to gain easier acceptance by fellow Hungarians, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Szim Salom is an egalitarian and participatory community. It is the only such Jewish community in Hungary. We are egalitarian, in the sense that women and men have equal rights to participate in religious life, including services and all other ritual activities. In fact our rabbi is female, which is frowned upon by the other Hungarian Jewish communities who are not

egalitarian. We are also participatory because the congregation decides together the directions we take. Most activities were led by lay people. This aspect came out mostly in our Bible/Torah study sessions, where we all shared our thoughts and feelings related to the scripture. This was the most exciting type of event for me. Services were also mostly community led.

I have to admit that my connection to the community grew somewhat distant due to physical distance and infrequent communication since I moved to California 10 years ago. I assume that Ms. Kelemen's ordination 6 years ago led to granting her more authority than she used to have. Through her studies she has gained more knowledge of Judaism than most community members have, but the community is still very much based on the egalitarian and participatory principles.

These features may seem unassumingly nonchalant in America, but they were and are revolutionary in Hungary. Technically they were introduced by our British friends. They helped to establish a form of religion in Hungary that did not exist there previously. In understanding what led to the formation of this new group it is vital to be familiar with the history and structure of Hungarian Jewry. It is impossible to give justice of such a huge topic in a short place; therefore, I will limit it to the basic outline of how the various denominations were born and an introduction to the post-war situation. My primary source material for the former was Jacob Katz's "A House Divided" and Rafael Patai's "The Jews of Hungary", while for the latter András Kovács' analysis in the "New Jewish Identities" anthology.

In the 1840s there was a Jewish reform movement in Hungary. However it never gained as much strength as the "Neolog" direction. This is a term used only in Hungary for its unique kind of Jewish religious trend. It is comparable to conservative Judaism of Western Europe and US. Neologs support using Hungarian for sermons, but not for ritual prayer, adjusted the architecture of their synagogues and dress-codes of the clergy to that of the protestant churches of the times (and similarly introduced the use organs during services). They were altering the tradition but at the same time maintained that these were not reforms and that these changes remained within the framework of the traditions. Nevertheless the engulfing conflict with more

orthodox Jews resulted in a split in 1868. The Neolog community introduced no major changes in its theology or practice since its inception as a separate entity. This is where it differs from British Reform, that continued to adopt.

Without going into the details of further splits and the formation of smaller independent communities, it can be summarized that by the 20th century most major Hungarian cities had both Neolog and orthodox synagogues. The Holocaust (and to a much lesser extent the following emigration between 1945 and 1956) practically wiped out Hungarian Jews from the countryside. Today, in Budapest, there are 14 Neolog synagogues and 4-5 other synagogues belonging to various orthodox segments. The majority of religious Hungarian Jews (5-7000 out of 100,000) are Neologs, with the most extensive physical and organizational infrastructure.

British Reform Judaism developed in two major bursts, but the differing circumstances led to different outcomes. The first Reform synagogue (West London Synagogue) was consecrated in 1842. (Romain 1) They were isolated and introduced only minor liturgical changes. The second was founded in 1856 in Manchester and served as the prototype of the Reform communities. From 1930s on refugees and immigrants arrived in larger numbers from Germany, the home of Reform movement, where it started in 1810. This infused the movement with new energy to the point where they are at today: filling over 40 synagogues and being a respected part of the community (as opposed their original heretical status.)

The analysis of a survey of Hungarian Jewry conducted in 2000 showed that 18% "is characterized by a complete absence of tradition," (Gitelman 229ff) 28% by "abandonment of tradition in the last two generations," and 15% belongs to the "secularizing group". For more than half of the remaining segment (15%) "tradition is present as symbol" and only 13% "reverted to tradition." After the Holocaust most of the Hungarian Jewish survivors did not want to do anything with religion. A large number of them did not talk about any Judaism related topic in their home, thus a whole generation of people (my parents') grew up in complete ignorance in these matters. They are in the first 2 groups from the list above, making up almost half of all Hungarian Jews. A lot of them were highly educated in their fields, and often progressive in their

thinking. For them, practically the only way to learn about their heritage would have been going into a Neolog synagogue. There they were confronted with a language they didn't know (Hebrew and sometimes Yiddish), customs and rituals they couldn't appreciate or follow without intellectual understanding, and a strict separation based on gender. These aspects made them feel unwelcome.

These are the kind of people (and their children, like me) British Reform Jews were looking for during their late 1980s visits. The slogan of British Reform Jewry used to be: "rooted in tradition, responding to change." We were not familiar with tradition in Hungary, thus this slogan would not have been apt for us. But the spirit of Reform Judaism echoed well with us. According to Szim Salom's credo it is a "living, continuously developing tradition, which has something important to say to the people of today". It also encourages "to become familiar with the halakhic [Jewish religious legal] tradition, and holds that in keeping the laws everybody has to follow his or her own inner path." These are the principles that attract people to Szim Salom. On one hand these principles were imported from Great Britain. There, based on these principles, liturgy and religious life have developing changing for over 150 years. On the other hand there was an innate need in Hungarian, assimilated Jews for a modern form of Judaism that they can incorporate in their lives without being ostracized for their lack of knowledge. The meeting of the spiritual need (combined with intellectual curiosity) with the desire to educate was the most fortunate event.

Ms. Kelemen studied the what-how-why of these principles and the traditional sources of Jewish knowledge for 5 years in London. I studied there for one year. Members of our community go to London regularly to conferences, study weeks. We go there to get infused with spirituality and knowledge that we cannot get in Hungary. We seek rabbinical advice and financial support from British Reform Jews. We continue to receive visitors regularly from London. Right now, when I write this paper for example, the rabbi who spent 3 months in Hungary with us in 1993 (and worked with me on my bar-mitzvah at the age of 25) is visiting for

the weekend. The connection between London and Budapest is very much alive. Ideas and people constantly flow back and forth.

Unfortunately the aforementioned principles are the very same ones that separate Szim Salom from the Neolog and Orthodox communities. In whose understanding the law is eternal because of the divine origin attributed to it. Any change to tradition is considered human made therefore discouraged. According to this interpretation tradition is unchanging, while Reform claims that religious laws and texts were created and need to be interpreted in historical context. I felt necessary to cover the history of Reform/Neolog movements in Hungary and Great Britain, because it provides a good contrast. I believe that Neolog movement started out as Reform and their current resistance to Szim Salom's "new" reform is based on a misunderstanding of their own history.

Szim Salom was born 15 years ago for two main reasons: a few British Jews believed that their form of Judaism has legitimacy in Eastern Europe that just started to breathe more lightly escaping from Communist (anti-religious) regimes. Furthermore there was a small group of Hungarian Jews who were frustrated with the existing, unfriendly and alienating opportunities to be Jewish and were open to an influx of ideas and people from Great Britain. I am personally grateful for the meetings of these circumstances, because it provided me with friends, new learning and helped me find my spiritual identity.

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