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PERSONALITY PROFILE

Paula Ackerman: Pioneer in the Pulpit

by

Ellen M. Umansky\*

**O**n January 26, 1951, Paula Herskovitz Ackerman formally became Spiritual Leader of Reform congregation Temple Beth Israel in Meridian, Mississippi. In so doing, she became the first woman to serve as the religious leader of a mainstream American Jewish congregation.<sup>1</sup> Asked by Beth Israel's president, on behalf of the board of trustees, to succeed her late husband, Rabbi William Ackerman, until a suitable rabbinic replacement could be found, the fifty-seven-year-old widow understood how revolutionary this noble experiment<sup>2</sup> might be. As she told a *Time* magazine reporter: "I have accepted this assignment . . . with the greatest humility" and am "glad to pioneer in the movement which we hope may lead to the ordination of women."<sup>3</sup>

*Family Background*

Born in New York City in 1893<sup>4</sup>, Paula Herskovitz was raised in Pensacola, Florida. Her mother, Dora Lang, immigrated with her family to New York from Kempen, Germany, near Düsseldorf. Paula's father, Joseph, came to the United States in the late 1880s from the tiny, rural village of Vaslui in eastern Romania and settled in Waycross, Georgia.<sup>5</sup> He was then in his early twenties. Apparently, Joseph's parents encouraged him and his two younger brothers to emigrate, given the paucity of opportunities for

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Jews in Romania and the likelihood that if they stayed, they would be drafted into the Romanian army.<sup>6</sup> Dora and Joseph met in New York, lived in Waycross for the first few months of their marriage, and then moved to Pensacola. Joseph, who came from an observant family and had received a good Jewish education as a child, continued to recite Hebrew prayers each morning and, along with the few other Orthodox Jews in Pensacola, hired a resident *shokhet* so that they could keep a kosher home. Paula was born shortly after her mother turned twenty. Apparently, when they joined Reform Temple Beth-El six years later so that Paula could begin Sunday school, they still considered themselves to be "Orthodox in their leanings." Nonetheless, they became active temple members and eventually identified as Reform.

Still, her mother, whom Paula described as quite pious and very active in Jewish communal affairs, continued to keep a "relatively Orthodox home," eating kosher-style (i.e., they never had bacon or "anything like that in the house"<sup>7</sup>), celebrating the holiday of Sukkot (Paula vividly remembered decorating and eating in their backyard sukkah when she was in her teens), and changing the dishes at Passover.<sup>8</sup> Paula was confirmed at Beth-El and served for many years as one of its Sunday school teachers. Founded in 1876 and located on Palafox Street in downtown Pensacola, Temple Beth-El was (and remains) the oldest Jewish house of worship in Florida.<sup>9</sup>

While still a girl, Paula studied Hebrew. Her father wanted her younger brothers, Jennings and Toby (Tobias)<sup>10</sup> to learn Hebrew and engaged an Orthodox rabbi in town to come to their home three times a week to teach them. Far more interested in Judaism than they, Paula apparently convinced her father to let her join them in their lessons. As an adult, she could still read Hebrew from a printed, vocalized text, although her ability to translate words was minimal. I first met Paula in Atlanta in 1985. I asked her: "When you were a child, growing up in Pensacola, did you ever think or dream of becoming a religious leader?" She answered:

*Paula H. Ackerman.  
(Courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of  
Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, MS.)*

Oh no, what I wanted to be was a medical doctor. But Father wouldn't hear of it. That was back in 1911 [when Paula was 17 years old]. I'd won a scholarship to Sophie Newcomb in New Orleans. I'd graduated as valedictorian of my high school class — but when my father heard of my intentions, he hit the ceiling. He said, "If you want to go to college, you either go prepare to be a school teacher or a music teacher." That's all young ladies were supposed to do in 1911. And that's what he wanted. Well, I didn't want to be either one of them. And so I didn't go.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, her father went into a new business and she had to help supplement the family income.<sup>12</sup> Despite her lack of formal training and initial intention not to become a teacher, she became a private music instructor (having studied piano as a young girl) and taught math and Latin at the local high school. Remaining active at Temple Beth-El, she taught in the religious school, was the Sunday school pianist, and led the congregational choir.

*Rebbetzin in Pensacola and Natchez, 1919–1924*

In 1912, at the age of eighteen, she began a seven-year courtship with William Ackerman, who had just come to Beth-El to replace Jacob Schwarz as rabbi. Ackerman had recently received a Ph.D. from Columbia University and rabbinic ordination from the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York City. Hungarian-born, the son of a rabbi, and seven years Paula's senior, Ackerman briefly served as rabbi of Congregation Sinai (now called Temple Sinai), a small Reform congregation in Lake Charles, Louisiana, before moving on to Pensacola. There were few Conservative congregations in existence in 1912. The United Synagogue of America (now the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism), the congregational arm of the Conservative movement, was not created until 1913, and neither the Reform nor Conservative movement had yet established rabbinic placement bureaus. Indeed it was not until 1915, under the leadership of Cyrus Adler, that the United Synagogue began a concerted effort to obtain congregational placements for JTS graduates. Thus, in 1912 it would not have been unusual for a JTS

graduate like William Ackerman to seek a position at a Reform congregation.

Rabbi Ackerman was approximately five feet ten in height and slender, with bluish gray eyes and blond hair. Paula remembered him as very good-looking and full of fun.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Paula had dark brown, almost black, hair for most of her life (though by the time she reached her sixties it was speckled with gray) and her eyes were deep brown. Married in November 1919, Bill and Paula Ackerman left Pensacola shortly after their marriage for a better paying rabbinic position at Temple B'nai Israel (Children of Israel) in the port city of Natchez, Mississippi. An older and wealthier Jewish community than that of Pensacola, a group of traditionally religious German Jewish merchants purchased land for a Jewish cemetery in Natchez in 1840. By 1872, what began as a *chevra kadisha* adopted a more Reform style of worship and officially identified itself as Congregation B'nai Israel.

*Rabbi William Ackerman.  
(Courtesy of the  
Goldring/Woldenberg Institute  
of Southern Jewish Life,  
Jackson, MS.)*

While the Jewish population of Natchez never exceeded more than 5 percent of the city's population, it grew in size and prominence after the Civil War. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, nearly one third of Natchez's clothing and dry goods businesses, including several of the city's leading department stores, were Jewish owned, as were numerous banks and the city's Cotton and Merchants' Exchange. Some Jews volunteered for the local fire department, many were actively involved in the city's civic affairs, and a good number joined such fraternal organizations as the Masons, Odd Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias. In general, the Jews of Natchez enjoyed "close relations with their gentile neighbors."<sup>14</sup> They also created local Jewish organizations and institutions, including the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Association (founded in 1865 and later renamed the Hebrew Ladies' Aid Association), which ran B'nai Israel's Sunday school and visited the sick; the Hebrew Relief Association which helped Jewish immigrants find jobs and places to live; and the Standard Club, a Jewish social club established in Natchez in the 1890s, that like other such clubs throughout the country, was founded by wealthy German Jews. Both they and their eastern European counterparts sponsored balls, dances, and cultural events and "offered a comfortable environment [in which members could] play cards and billiards."<sup>15</sup>

By the time that Bill and Paula Ackerman arrived in Natchez, however, the city had already begun to decline. With an economy largely based on cotton, the arrival of the boll weevil in 1908 and the flooding of the Mississippi River that same year forced many businesses to close, including a good number that were Jewish-owned. By the 1920s, membership at B'nai Israel, then comprised of eastern European and central European Jewish immigrants as well as northern Jews who had settled in the South after the Civil War, became so low that the synagogue had trouble paying its dues to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the lay arm of the Reform movement. By 1927, Natchez's Jewish population had declined from 450—its size when Temple B'nai Israel dedicated its new synagogue in 1905—to 150.<sup>16</sup>

*Temple B'nai Israel, Natchez, Mississippi.  
(Courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute  
of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, MS.)*

*Paula and Bill Ackerman in Meridian, 1924–1950*

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that in 1924, Paula and Bill decided to move with their then fifteen-month-old son, Billy, from Natchez to the larger Jewish community of Meridian, Mississippi. The trustees of Temple Beth Israel offered Rabbi Ackerman both a higher salary and a parsonage (or as Paula jokingly called it, a “rabbinage”<sup>17</sup>) that, for almost fifty years, remained Paula Ackerman’s home.<sup>18</sup> Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century as a combined effort of the Jews of Meridian and nearby Marion, the

Meridian Jewish community was similar to that of Natchez. Originally founded by central European Jewish immigrants who by the end of the century had come to identify religiously with Reform, it also included eastern European immigrants, who, in contrast to the Orthodox eastern European immigrants of Natchez, soon formed their own congregation. Like Natchez, Meridian grew rapidly after the Civil War, although unlike Natchez, primarily as a railroad center. Like the Jews of Natchez, Meridian Jews were actively involved in the city's political, economic, social, and cultural life, enjoyed good relations with their non-Jewish neighbors, and engaged in a number of professions, including a disproportionate number in the dry goods and clothing business.

William Ackerman filled the pulpit of Temple Beth Israel, a congregation founded by "ten Reform Jewish families" in 1868, until his death in 1950.<sup>19</sup> By the latter date, Beth Israel, boasting a membership of between 100 and 150 families, had become the second largest Jewish congregation in Mississippi. It was the congregation to which most Meridian Jews belonged, including many members of Ohel Jacob, the Orthodox congregation founded by eastern European immigrants in 1895. During her husband's tenure, Paula Ackerman taught pre-confirmation classes and actively participated in the temple sisterhood. She served as sisterhood secretary, program chair, and advisor but refused to become its president. She believed that the presiding officer should be a congregant rather than the rabbi's wife, a belief that underscored her view that the many tasks she assumed as *rebbetzin* made her more than a "congregational member." Indeed, at her husband's request and with his active encouragement, she led Friday night worship services when he was ill or out of town. While few *rebbetzins* of her day assumed this kind of leadership role, it was not unheard of. As early as 1926, Rebecca Brickner, wife of Reform Rabbi Barnett Brickner of the Euclid Avenue Temple (later called Fairmount Temple) in Cleveland, Ohio, occasionally led services in her husband's absence, and by the 1930s, American *rebbetzins*, more generally, had come to assume a number of public religious leadership roles.<sup>20</sup>

Like many other Reform *rebbetzins*, Paula Ackerman became actively involved in the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS)<sup>21</sup> both before and after her husband's death. She served as president of the Mississippi-Arkansas District of the Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, was on the NFTS national board, and spoke throughout the country as a member of its speakers' bureau. From 1944 to 1945, she chaired NFTS's National Committee on Religious Schools, a position from which she urged sisterhood members to help extend and improve Jewish education on the local level. In the early 1940s, as war raged in Europe and the Pacific, she described religious education as an excellent "battlefront." She exhorted sisterhood leaders to ensure that "American Jewish youth is not 'lost' to Judaism,"<sup>22</sup> and she challenged those who were qualified to "rally to the noblest responsibility our Jewish inheritance requires today" and prepare to teach religious school.<sup>23</sup> By 1948, she became chair of the House of the Living Judaism fundraising campaign to build a headquarters for the major organizational bodies of the Reform movement in New York City. Jane Evans, NFTS's national director, initiated the campaign. Having long considered Evans to be a friend, and undoubtedly inspired by Evans's enthusiasm and vision,<sup>24</sup> Ackerman built on her own experiences in Meridian to encourage small sisterhoods in particular to raise funds.

Her interests, however, expanded beyond congregation-level education. In 1943, as a member of the NFTS national board, she was invited to a weekend seminar celebrating the seventieth anniversary of Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati, which she happily attended.<sup>25</sup> In addition, she was one of the first women to serve on the UAHC's Commission on Synagogue Activities, a position she held from 1947 until 1959. Like her husband, Paula Ackerman took an active interest in Meridian's civic, interfaith, cultural, and social affairs. Bill Ackerman's involvement was so great that in 1926, the local Kiwanis Club named him the city's "Most Worthful [*sic*] Citizen."<sup>26</sup> His congregants supported such efforts, and they took "great pride in how well he mixed into the larger community."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, like many other Jewish leaders in small cities and towns throughout the country, Rabbi Ackerman

*Temple Beth Israel, Meridian, Mississippi.  
A postcard of the Greek Revival style temple used by  
Congregation Beth Israel in Meridian from 1906 to 1964.  
(Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.)*

(like his wife after him) became what historian Mark Bauman has described as an ethnic broker, “a communicator . . . respected by his group” who acted “as a spokesman in intergroup relations.”<sup>28</sup>

During the years of her husband’s tenure as rabbi of Temple Beth Israel, Paula Ackerman assumed a leadership role in the local Parent Teachers Association and the city-wide PTA Council, at one time serving as president. She also served on the Meridian City Council. She belonged to, and soon after moving to Meridian, took a leadership role in several local literary and classical music societies. An opera lover, who studied and regularly attended opera performances from the time she was a teenager until well into her eighties, Paula wrote opera and literary reviews, served as president and a charter member of the Meridian Civic Music Association, and became president of the Mississippi Federation of Music Clubs and the Matinee Musical Club, a position she held

three times. According to Paula, for a while she was known as Mrs. Opera, not just in Meridian but throughout Mississippi. She frequently gave lectures on German opera, especially but not exclusively Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*. One such lecture was given at a Junior League benefit concert in Meridian. As Paula later remembered it, although the Junior League invited her to speak and sold tickets for the talk, league membership was closed to her because she was Jewish.<sup>29</sup> Whenever she returned to Meridian from Atlanta during the opera season, the music clubs of Meridian held a joint meeting at which she gave a general lecture on the operas that she had seen. Ackerman also gave a more detailed talk on the one that she had found to be particularly outstanding. Apparently she delivered such talks for several decades until she left Meridian.<sup>30</sup>

#### *The Call to Spiritual Leadership*

Yet none of these activities prepared her for the request made by Beth Israel's president, Sydney Kay, in early December 1950. On November 30, William Ackerman suddenly died of a heart attack. A week later, Kay, "simultaneously" with temple members from a variety of Jewish backgrounds and levels of religious observance (some of whom were members of both Beth Israel and Ohel Jacob), enthusiastically raised the idea of Mrs. Ackerman's performing "rabbinical function(s)" for the congregation.<sup>31</sup> Unbeknownst to Paula, Kay called Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, president of the UAHC to see what he thought of this idea. Apparently Eisendrath, despite having reservations about her qualifications, expressed initial approval.

By the early 1950s, as increasingly acculturated American Jews moved to the suburbs, the number of Reform (and Conservative) synagogues grew significantly. Consequently, as the number of congregations increased, so, too, did the need for more rabbis. Perhaps Eisendrath viewed Ackerman's assumption of leadership as a kind of litmus test to see whether the Reform movement was finally ready to ordain women. As Eisendrath knew, almost thirty years earlier, the HUC faculty had voted to admit women as rabbinical students, a vote subsequently overturned by the college's

Board of Governors. Indeed, a handful of women had previously taken classes at HUC and at Stephen Wise's Jewish Institute of Religion (JIR), established in 1922. These included journalist Ray Frank of Oakland, California, who studied at HUC for one semester in the 1890s (apparently at the invitation of President Isaac Mayer Wise); Martha Neumark, daughter of HUC Professor David Neumark, who unsuccessfully petitioned the faculty for a High Holy Day pulpit in 1921; Irma Levy Lindheim in the 1920s; and Helen Hadassah Levinthal and Dora Askowitz (who previously had received her Ph.D. in history from Columbia University) in the 1920s and 1930s at JIR in New York City. It was through Lindheim's efforts in 1923 that JIR formally revised its charter to state that it trained men and women for the rabbinate, although by the time it merged with HUC in 1950 it had not ordained a woman as rabbi. While Helen Levinthal completed the rabbinic curriculum in 1939, she graduated with a Master of Hebrew Literature, for as Stephen Wise later told her father, Conservative Rabbi Israel Levinthal, he felt that "'the time was not ripe for the J.I.R. to ordain a woman.'"<sup>32</sup> While there is no evidence that large numbers of Jewish women were actively discussing and raising the issue of women's ordination in the United States in the early 1950s, the merger of HUC with JIR in 1950, only months before Sidney Kay approached Maurice Eisendrath, did lead to the resurfacing of this issue, at least among some in the Jewish community. As early as 1948, Dora Askowitz, having learned of HUC and JIR's plans to merge, asked Stephen Wise and Nelson Glueck, then president of HUC, "to see if in the revisioned seminary, women, as well as men, would be ordained."<sup>33</sup> She raised the issue again, less than a decade later, in an essay published in *Judaism* magazine.

In a letter written to Maurice Eisendrath on December 10, 1950, Sydney Kay maintained that, pursuant to their conversation and his promise to keep him informed of the temple's "proposed revolutionary step of profering [*sic*] the pulpit of 81 year old Congregation Beth Israel to Mrs. William Ackerman, Sr.," he was writing to let Eisendrath know that the temple's board of trustees had since voted unanimously "to elect Mrs. Ackerman as its Spir-

itual Leader.” “This is particularly momentous,” he added, “in view of the fact that several members on our Board stem from real Orthodox roots . . . [and] that the thinking of the overall Jewish Community here is not usually so progressive or non-conformist.”<sup>34</sup> While, according to Kay, Paula was currently considering their proposal (which she apparently first learned of after the board of trustees’ vote), “for the Archives,” he concluded (perhaps referring to Beth Israel’s congregational archives—perhaps to the history of the Reform movement more generally), “whether she accepts or declines the honor, we are on record as having offered her the position of Spiritual Leader in an old and honored Liberal Jewish Congregation.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, while Lily Montagu had long before assumed lay leadership of the West Central Liberal Jewish Congregation in London and Tehilla Lichtenstein continued to serve as leader of the Society of Jewish Science in New York City (a movement that sought to help Jews find health and happiness within a Jewish context), Paula Ackerman would become the first Jewish woman in the United States to become spiritual leader of a mainstream congregation.<sup>36</sup>

It is unclear from Kay’s letter whether the “overall Jewish community” to whom he referred included Meridian Jews other than those who belonged to Beth Israel. Most likely, it referred to the more traditionally religious members of the temple.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in a letter written by Paula Ackerman on January 12, 1951, to the managing editor of the *National Jewish Post*, she maintained that it was her intention to appear before “our local board” [the temple’s board of trustees] and later, the congregation as a whole, to explain “that any member . . . preferring the services of a neighboring rabbi for weddings or funerals” had her “full consent” to utilize the services of such a rabbi. “I will only perform such services for members who request them,” she wrote, and “as far as the legality is concerned, the state of Mississippi gives me that right” as leader of the congregation.<sup>38</sup>

Paula Ackerman’s initial response to the board’s offer was that Beth Israel should hire an ordained rabbi. Sydney Kay said that they would look for one, but hoped that in the meantime, she would agree to the position (for \$300 a month, far less than they

had paid her husband, and far less than the amount they were willing to pay rabbis who later expressed interest). Having received Kay's assurance that Eisendrath thought her becoming the congregation's spiritual leader was a "wonderful idea," Paula then told him that she needed a month to consider the offer. "And so," she later recalled,

for a solid month, I prayed. I prayed the entire month of December and didn't give them my answer until after the first of January. . . . During that month a number of things happened to me that made me think the Lord was telling me to do it. One incident stands out clearly in my mind. At the time that the congregation came to me, I was scheduled to have a hysterectomy. I was 57 years old and still menstruating. I didn't want to have the operation. What's more, I didn't think that I should read from the Torah if I were menstruating [a view grounded more in folk tradition, or superstition, than in Jewish law]. Well I prayed to the Lord for guidance and from that moment on, from the moment I thought I would say yes to the congregation, my period stopped completely. I went to my gynecologist and told her about it. She said, "Don't feel that it's gone. Often, a shock like you've had with your husband's death and the congregation wanting you to carry on could make it stop. It could come back after seven years." Well, I have never seen it [i.e., her menstrual period]. And I never needed to have the hysterectomy. Wouldn't you think the Lord was telling me something?"<sup>39</sup>

This was not the only time in her life that Paula Ackerman believed she had received a sign from God. Indeed, every morning during the two and a half years that she served as spiritual leader of Beth Israel, she would awake early each morning, go to the temple, sometimes as early as 6 A.M., enter the sanctuary, open the ark—and, just as she had during the month of December 1950 while deciding what answer to give the board of trustees—prostrate herself before the ark's two Torah scrolls, asking God for guidance. As she later wrote in one of her sermons:

I feel that in your life, and in mine, there is a Presence, there is an Influence—I call it God—you may call it what you will—Something, Someone—to whom I am attuned when I am at my best, revealed to me when I am revealed to myself. And when

this Presence comes and touches us and moves us, then Religion comes to us; for when God finds us, we find God; and then we know the meaning of adoration, of awe and reverence. We know that God is and we know what God is, when God is in our souls and lives.<sup>40</sup>

Paula Ackerman did more than turn to God. She had a complete physical examination to make sure that she was healthy enough to take on this new position (apparently she was) and turned for guidance to old and trusted friends like the man Bill had replaced, Rabbi Jacob Schwarz, whom she had known since childhood and who, from 1932 until his retirement in 1952, served as the UAHC's national Director of Synagogue Activities. In a handwritten letter dated December 12, 1950, Paula asked Schwarz whether he was "as enthusiastic over the idea as Mr. Kay (our president) tells me Rabbi Eisendrath is."<sup>41</sup> In a lengthy letter written eight days later, Schwarz pointed out some of the difficulties that might lie before her in assuming such a demanding role and cautioned her to consider them carefully before reaching her decision. Still, he concluded,

I do want to say that, as I am sure you know, I have the greatest admiration for your talents and confidence in your ability and integrity and if you do accept it will be a wonderful thing not only for yourself and the community but as opening up new avenues of usefulness for the Jewish woman and new opportunities for contributing to the spiritual life . . . . I know your deep faith, and trust and am sure that you will continue to make your life to the utmost useful and happy.<sup>42</sup>

On December 12, a day after Kay wrote to Eisendrath informing him of the board's decision (the same day that Paula wrote to Jacob Schwarz for advice), Eisendrath responded to Kay thanking him "for your most interesting letter and for the formal announcement of that which you discussed with me over the telephone." He stated that he would be "especially interested" in learning whether or not Paula Ackerman accepted the board's proposal and appreciated being kept informed about the community's reaction should she say yes. "I hope," he maintained, "that it will be of the best and that your congregation will continue to

grow and prosper under the spiritual leadership that, with real pioneering courage you have chosen."<sup>43</sup>

Yet when Kay happily informed Eisendrath by phone in early January that Paula had accepted their invitation, Eisendrath had second thoughts, asking Kay whether her background and knowledge were sufficient to enable her to serve as spiritual leader of their congregation. In a written reply, dated January 11, 1951, Kay simply stated, "My answer then and now, is that in the eyes of practically all of the members of our congregation she is qualified, and we want her."<sup>44</sup> Apparently learning of Eisendrath's change of heart, Paula Ackerman wrote to Nelson Glueck that she was "truly penitent" if the "very beautiful and well-intentioned action of Beth Israel" had caused him embarrassment. She emphatically assured him that she had "no intention whatsoever of making a career of the Rabbinate." Eisendrath, she continued, initially had no objection to the prospect of her acceptance "and even hoped it would lead to women students at HUC and JIR who would be ordained and serve congregations." Thus, she wrote, "If my service would be pioneering in this field, I should feel that my life had meant something. That is all I ask - to serve Beth Israel for an interim period and to plant a seed for enlarged activity for the Jewish woman."<sup>45</sup>

While there is no extant correspondence from Glueck to Ackerman, she wrote to Jacob Schwarz on January 23 that Glueck was "very much more understanding and considerate"<sup>46</sup> of her than Eisendrath had turned out to be. Here she no doubt was referring to the press release issued by Eisendrath on January 15 denying reports that the UAHC had "given approval to the appointment of Mrs. William Ackerman as spiritual leader of Beth Israel Congregation of Meridian, Mississippi." Although in theory he believed that women should serve in the rabbinate, "to his knowledge Mrs. Ackerman did not possess the qualifications of a rabbi," nor, as far as he could gather, had she received rabbinical training or been ordained. The UAHC, he maintained, would have "grave reservations" about the rabbinical appointment "of any non-ordained person, male or female, to any pulpit in a Liberal Jewish congregation."<sup>47</sup>

*Paula Ackerman with Bible.*  
(Courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute  
of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, MS.)

As Paula reminded Schwarz in a letter dated January 23, Eisendrath had known of the congregation's intentions since early December, was well aware of the fact that she was not seeking ordination, and knew that she was not being appointed as the congregation's "rabbi," but rather as their interim spiritual leader. Earlier having promised to "tell him everything" about the congregation's interaction with Eisendrath, she now sent him letters and other relevant materials from December and early January. As her friend, confidant, and advisor as well as Director of Synagogue Activities for the UAHC, Schwarz later told her he was happy to receive these materials, as it gave him "a much better understanding of the relationship between your congregation and the Union [UAHC] with respect to your election."<sup>48</sup> What Ackerman may not have known at the time was that four days after his press release appeared, Eisendrath, who was out of the country, wrote to Kay assuring him that he was working on getting someone from the UAHC to go to Meridian for Ackerman's formal installation.<sup>49</sup>

Apparently several reasons ultimately led Paula to accept the board's offer. First, as she wrote to Schwarz in early January, before Eisendrath had second thoughts about her appointment, the congregation clearly wanted her. She had been there for twenty-seven years and found their confidence gratifying and challenging, giving her "the courage to try to lead them."<sup>50</sup> Second, she had received a good Jewish education; had long taught Sunday school and pre-confirmation; and for decades had led services when her husband was out of town. Acknowledging limitations in her preaching skills and Jewish knowledge, she asked Schwarz for recommendations of books that might be useful. At the same time, she reiterated her belief that what the congregation most wanted was for her to speak, not from books, but from the heart, sharing with them "the Jewish way of life that I've lived every day of my life—that shouldn't be too hard."

Third, the position she accepted was clearly, at least in her mind, not that of rabbi but of interim spiritual leader. It may well be, as Shuly Rubin Schwartz has maintained, that Ackerman was offering a "gendered response . . . [that served] to downplay the

importance of her decision without overturning it.”<sup>51</sup> Still, her response was an honest one. Had the congregation formally asked Paula to be their rabbi, she might have refused. Instead, what they offered was a role for which she ultimately felt qualified and which, she believed, had already gained the approval of others.<sup>52</sup> Fourth, it was Ackerman’s belief that this approval not only included that of Maurice Eisendrath, Jacob Schwarz, and other leaders of American Reform Judaism, but also that of non-Jews in Meridian. Subsequently, members of the Ministerial Association of Meridian, whom she knew through her husband and whom she considered to be friends, accepted her as Beth Israel’s spiritual leader and, although she never became a member, included her in all of their activities.<sup>53</sup> Fifth, were pragmatic concerns. After her father’s death in the fall of 1950, about a month before her husband died, Ackerman moved her mother from Pensacola to Meridian. In ill health, Dora Herskovitz lived with the Ackermans, and, after Bill’s death, with Paula until she died. For Paula, accepting the congregation’s offer meant financial and emotional security. The position enabled her to remain in the parsonage with her mother, who by 1951 relied on nurses’ home care. Last, after weeks of inner reflection and personal prayer, Paula came to believe that it was God’s will that she become Beth Israel’s religious leader and, as such, plant a seed for women’s future ordination.

*Spiritual Leader of Congregation Beth Israel, 1951–1953*

On January 26, 1951, three days after Ackerman wrote to Schwarz, the temple held its annual meeting. Paula delivered an address to a record-breaking number of congregants<sup>54</sup> that apparently “was followed by a rising vote of confidence” from the entire congregation.<sup>55</sup> According to Sydney Kay, her address was not written “but delivered entirely from her heart.” When she finished, he maintained, “it was hard to find a dry eye” among those in attendance. Indeed, after the meeting, several members voluntarily voted to raise their dues. Thus, Kay wrote to Eisendrath on January 29, given the fact that Paula’s assumption of religious leadership had become local news, it was “more imperative than

ever that we arrange for a formal installation so that the public at large can be invited."<sup>56</sup>

In the meantime, word of Paula Ackerman's groundbreaking appointment had quickly spread. The *Meridian Star* applauded her already proven leadership ability within the Reform movement and, quoting Kay, declared her to possess a "brilliant mind," "friendly heart," and "helping hand," all requirements of a spiritual leader.<sup>57</sup> The *Cincinnati Post* printed an article that began with the headline: "Jewish Church May OK Women Rabbis,"<sup>58</sup> and *Newsweek* printed a short piece, stating that a fifty-seven-year-old mother had been elected to lead Congregation Beth Israel. *Time* magazine devoted four paragraphs to the story and included a large photograph of Paula Ackerman, under which was written, "Paul disapproved," referring to a New Testament quote traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul (who was identified in the article as a Jewish Pharisee) that "women should keep silent in churches."<sup>59</sup> For several weeks, newspapers throughout the world announced her historic appointment. Most described her assumption of religious leadership in a positive light. One glaring exception was Mr. A. Slabot, editor of *The New Orleans Jewish Ledger*, who, under the headline "Can You Top This," suggested that Ackerman's only qualification for the position was that she had lived with a rabbi and maintained that her appointment would only add to the confusion and apathy prevalent among world Jewry.<sup>60</sup> In response, Sydney Kay angrily wrote that Mrs. Ackerman had been elected to the position of spiritual leader because of her "exceptional intelligence, [religious] background, and personality" (although undoubtedly her civic and Jewish communal involvement were equally important) as well as the congregation's belief in a "progressive Judaism." Her assumption of religious leadership has been acclaimed by our entire congregation, he wrote, bringing members "closer to the Synagogue than anything that has happened in many years" and has been acclaimed by the "local citizenry as well."<sup>61</sup>

The story was also carried on the radio. Indeed, on the January 16 syndicated broadcast of her popular news and commentary program, *Kate Smith Speaks*, Smith announced that

*Meridian Star, January 18, 1951.*

*Front page banner head with a lead story on Paula Ackerman's election as spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Israel.*

*(Courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, MS.)*

widow of a Mississippi Rabbi is the newest member of a list of distinguished American women. . . . The woman of whom I'm talking today is Mrs. William Ackerman, Sr. of Meridian, Mississippi, who accepted a call to succeed her late husband . . . as head of Reform Temple Beth Israel in Meridian. She is the first woman spiritual leader of any American Reform Jewish congregation. . . . On behalf of American women of all faiths, I want to extend our very best wishes to Mrs. William Ackerman upon a noteworthy achievement.<sup>62</sup>

Ackerman received what she later described as "beautiful letters" from members of the national membership organization and women's fellowship, National Methodist Women (which became part of United Methodist Women in 1968) who apparently were

intrigued by her appointment. Throughout the early 1950s, the ordination of women was actively discussed and debated within the Methodist Church (the largest group of Methodists in the United States), leading to women's ordination and their receiving full clergy rights in 1956. While there were some Reform rabbis who, like Eisendrath, publicly voiced disapproval of Paula Ackerman's appointment, many supported it. Rabbi Isaac Marcuson of Macon, Georgia, then secretary of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), apparently kept her husband's name on the CCAR mailing list so that she would receive information and publications that might be useful, and other Reform rabbis, whom she remembered as being kind to her, offered suggestions for sermons and books that she might find helpful. Although a number of congregations, especially those that were either Orthodox or Conservative, "fought" her appointment,<sup>63</sup> among her most treasured letters was one that she received from Tamar de Sola Pool, former national president of Hadassah and wife of Orthodox Rabbi David de Sola Pool of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City.<sup>64</sup> Offering Paula her congratulations, Pool told her in confidence that she had been nominated for the well-deserved honor of Hadassah Woman of the Year.<sup>65</sup>

Despite Maurice Eisendrath's initial approval of Ackerman's appointment, correspondence and congregational board minutes reveal that the UAHC-sanctioned installation that Kay and others had hoped for was not to be. By mid-January 1951, retired Rabbi Samuel Goldenson, who had served as president of the CCAR and rabbi of numerous Reform congregations, including Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh and Temple Emanu-El in New York City, had been assigned by Eisendrath to deal with the matter. Having offered his services to the UAHC to work with "small, isolated congregations" to strengthen their commitment to "liberal prophetic Judaism,"<sup>66</sup> Goldenson wrote to Kay at the end of January. Although earlier in the month, he had looked favorably upon Ackerman's assumption of religious leadership, he had since reconsidered. After talking to several rabbis and giving the matter more thought, he concluded that despite Ackerman's "unusual

personality and her mental and social gifts which [when we spoke several weeks ago] seemed to me would amply qualify her for communal leadership," he feared that the step Beth Israel was taking "might lead to more problems raised than solved." Since as a woman, Ackerman had not been able to receive "the necessary qualifications for the discharge of the full rabbinical duties," he worried that despite the many years in which she stood by her husband's side, she would not adequately be able to religiously represent the community on public occasions, leading to moments of "considerable embarrassment" for her. He suggested that the congregation give itself time to recover from the loss of their rabbi and that, until then, Ackerman serve in a position of lay leadership.

This rather vague suggestion was followed by another, namely that after the congregation had readjusted "to the new situation in due regard to everyone's interest in the matter," should such a course of action be adopted, presumably to retain Paula Ackerman as spiritual leader of the congregation, "it would naturally be pursued with a view only to the local situation and would therefore not raise any questions nor any problems of a general professional nature." Here, it seems, Goldenson began to express his real concern. He apparently had visited several congregations in which the rabbis were fortunate enough to have "exceedingly able wives." Yet even they, he maintained, did not necessarily have Ackerman's qualities or qualifications. Thus, he was afraid that if she were to become Beth Israel's spiritual leader, other Reform congregations might see this as a precedent, leading other, not necessarily qualified rabbis' wives (or widows) to similarly serve as spiritual leaders. While Goldenson did not explicitly tell Kay that the congregation should rescind the offer, he suggested that they talk the matter over further on his planned trip to Mississippi at the beginning of March.<sup>67</sup>

In the meantime, Ackerman met with the congregational board, indicating that she was willing to serve until a rabbi could be hired. On Friday evening, February 2, 1951, she conducted her first service as Beth Israel's spiritual leader. According to her son Bill, attendance was so great it was reminiscent of High Holy Day

services and, understandably, his mother was extremely nervous. "At 7:30 p.m. sharp," Bill remembered,

Mrs. Crumpton, the organist, began to play the massive pipe organ. Paula took a deep breath, bowed her head and intoned a silent prayer, then announced, "Well, this is it . . . let's go." She and the others [who were to sit on the bima with her, including Sydney Kay and Lucille Rosenbaum, president of the temple sisterhood] proceeded out the [temple] study door in single file and mounted the steps of the bima and sat in assigned chairs. . . . The choir, actually a quartet, began the opening hymn, and the first service in a Reform Jewish congregation led by a woman began.<sup>68</sup>

She chose to deliver her sermon, "Reserve Resources," not from the raised bimah but from the floor, directly in front of the congregation. Asking for their support, without which, she said, she could not function successfully, she began by directly addressing those whom she identified as the three groups within the temple: the descendents of the congregation's founders, the intermarried, and the more traditionally religious. She told the descendents of Beth Israel's founders – the "nucleus of this Jewish community" – how important it was for them to extend open arms not just to her but also to other groups within the temple. Turning to the intermarried, she made it clear that Christian wives and husbands were welcome to attend services and participate in all temple activities and boldly asked that they consider raising their children as Jews and sending them to the temple's Sunday school. The reason she gave was that since Christianity taught that the only avenue to salvation and thus to God was by following the "Christian path," the Jewish parent of such children "would not have the same chance for salvation as the Christian parent." It was her belief, she maintained, that the child of a Jewish father and a Christian mother "would feel better and be much more secure in knowing that his father and his mother were together in religion as well as in everything else."<sup>69</sup>

Most surprisingly, in what she admitted was a break from the tradition of Classical Reform Judaism and Beth Israel (but which drew, perhaps, on memories of her parents' experiences as

traditionally religious members of a Reform congregation), she told observant members of the congregation that if the men felt more at home worshipping with yarmulkes, she wanted to assure them that they were free to do so. Suggesting that perhaps they had not attended many congregational activities in the past because they had not felt completely welcomed, she emphasized how much she needed their participation. "I know," she added, "the other members of this congregation need . . . [you] also, since we are, after all, a very small group of Jews living in the midst of a predominately non-Jewish community."<sup>70</sup>

One month later, Goldenson still had not visited Meridian. While Ackerman had already assumed her congregational duties, her formal installation had been postponed until someone representing the UAHC, presumably Goldenson, could attend. Consequently, Walter Kass, secretary of the congregation (and the father of Paula's daughter-in-law, Anne), sent a letter to Eisendrath telling him in no uncertain terms that members of Beth Israel's board of trustees were extremely displeased that Goldenson had not come to Meridian as promised and that they felt the UAHC in general and Eisendrath in particular had been "both uncooperative and remiss in not rendering" to them this one service that they had requested during their many years as members of the organization. "Let us remind you," Kass wrote,

that before we asked Mrs. Ackerman, officially, to become our Spiritual Leader, we conferred with *you*. We asked you to select a representative of the Union [of American Hebrew Congregations] to assist us in the installation of Mrs. Ackerman, believing in the autonomous right of each Congregation to select its own Spiritual Leader. . . . [While we were informed by letter that Rabbi Goldenson would come to Meridian], to date we have heard nothing further from you, [UAHC Administrative Secretary] Rabbi [Louis] Egelson, or Dr. Goldenson! Feeling that we have extended you and the UAHC every courtesy possible in this matter, as members of the UAHC, do we not have the right to know why we are being subject to the embarrassment meted out to us by you and by the UAHC?<sup>71</sup>

There is no extant correspondence indicating whether or not Kass received a reply but relations between Beth Israel and the

UAHC remained tense. The congregation eventually held a formal installation for Ackerman. The sanctuary filled with Jews and non-Jews from Meridian, but no UAHC representative appeared. In fact, Paula waited another thirty-five years to gain that recognition.

What began as an interim role became a full-time position that lasted for almost two and a half years. From 1951 to 1953, Ackerman conducted Friday evening and holiday services at Temple Beth Israel, officiated at weddings, funerals and headstone unveilings, and consecrated new homes. She taught and prepared interested non-Jews for conversion and performed conversion ceremonies before two officers of the congregation. Most of those whom she converted were Christians planning to enter into an interfaith marriage. According to Paula, she constantly received calls or visits from interfaith couples asking her to officiate at their wedding. Ackerman personally was not opposed to doing so, believing that if she officiated, the non-Jewish spouse might one day convert to Judaism. Yet she knew that her husband, perhaps because of his traditionally religious upbringing or rabbinic training at JTS, had taken a stand against this, insisting that the non-Jewish half of the couple convert before they got married. Conscious of the fact that she had taken over her husband's pulpit, Ackerman later said that she felt she should honor his point of view.<sup>72</sup>

Another factor that led to her decision not to officiate at mixed marriages was Ackerman's genuine desire not to alienate traditionally religious members of the congregation. Indeed, after becoming spiritual leader, she took steps almost immediately to increase their involvement by having those that were qualified and willing read from the Torah at holiday morning services. Ackerman initiated *Yizkor* services on the last day of Passover, presumably in addition to those held on Yom Kippur. She encouraged those who wanted to have a brit milah for their sons to hire a mohel and said that if they were interested in her participating in the ritual, she was happy to do so. She especially enjoyed baby namings and fondly remembered naming her grandson, Joel, at his brit milah, and in August, 1953, as her "last official duty," her granddaughter, Carolyn.

*Paula Ackerman at the wedding of Sydney Kay's daughter,  
Morele to Lewis Rosenfeld, December 1951, in Meridian.  
The bride and groom are standing to Ackerman's left.  
The others in the picture are friends.  
(Courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute  
of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, MS.)*

When she led services, Ackerman wore her husband's robe, which she apparently had altered, and a small white scarf made by some of the women of the congregation. The scarf, reminiscent of a tallit, draped around the middle of her neck and was tucked inside the robe. Clearly visible around her neck, falling just below the robe's v-shaped opening, was a necklace with a small round pendant that held a white Star of David. It was a gift sent to her from her mother-in-law after Rabbi Ackerman's death. A sign of her love and support for the role that Paula was about to assume, the necklace came with a note to wear it whenever she wore the robe. As Paula remembered, and as photos reveal, she always did so.<sup>73</sup>

As spiritual leader of Beth Israel, Ackerman represented the congregation at regional rabbinical meetings and participated in interfaith programs in Meridian with local Catholic and Protestant clergy. Various national and local Christian youth groups, pastors, and teachers visited the temple, and Ackerman spoke to them about different symbols and rituals of Judaism, presumably including those in the temple's sanctuary. She accepted invitations to deliver the invocation at more than one state women's convention in Mississippi, the Matinee Music Club's annual luncheon in 1951, a seventy-fifth anniversary dinner of B'nai B'rith, and regional NFTS conventions.<sup>74</sup> At her initiative, beginning in 1951, morning services on Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre service on the evening of Yom Kippur were broadcast on local radio station WTOK. As Paula later reported to the congregation:

Many and favorable have been the comments from non-Jews and Jewish shut-ins in regard to these services. We rejoice to have reached so many in adjacent counties, as well as our own community. I consider it one of our most effective adventures in better understanding.<sup>75</sup>

Following in her husband's footsteps and involving herself in activities that were fairly typical of rabbis during this era, she gave talks and presented special programs to groups within her congregation and to members of other Jewish groups in and outside of Meridian. She frequently addressed non-Jewish groups as well. For example, she spoke to the students of Meridian Junior College (now Meridian Community College) at a school-wide assembly, gave talks at local high schools, and spoke at a meeting of Meridian's Episcopal Church Guild. She also presented a program on Hebrew music to the Meridian Matinee Music Club, of which she had long been a member. Some of these talks were broadcast on the radio.<sup>76</sup>

By the summer of 1951, a few members of Beth Israel complained about not having an ordained rabbi.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, that September the board sent out 175 letters, presumably one to each family in the congregation, asking whether they felt the board should conduct a rabbinic search. In response, only twelve said yes. Yet four months later, a three-person committee was formed

to look for "a new rabbi" (intentionally or not, implying that Paula was their current one).<sup>78</sup> Admitting their own inexperience in conducting a rabbinic search and clearly frustrated by the fact that the UAHC had "no organized process of securing a Rabbi" (apparently having defeated a proposition to establish a rabbinic placement bureau in 1950), committee members reported to the congregation on October 26, 1952, that they were dissatisfied with the few rabbis who had expressed interest in the position. They had thus decided that while the search for "the right man" would (at least theoretically) continue, they were in no hurry, for they believed that it was the congregation's good fortune to have "someone of Mrs. Ackerman's caliber as spiritual leader."<sup>79</sup> By the spring of 1953, however, Ackerman wanted to step down and appealed to the board to find a rabbi to replace her. The position, with its many demands, had begun to adversely affect her health, her mother's physical condition had worsened and she wanted to spend more time with her, and, as Paula later recalled, she found it too depressing to "bury her friends."<sup>80</sup>

Formally leaving her position before the High Holy Days in September, Ackerman remained in Meridian. At first, she lived in a two-bedroom apartment with her mother, then in a smaller one on the corner opposite the temple. She helped care for her mother (who died in 1955) and enjoyed spending time with her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren, who stayed in Meridian for many years.<sup>81</sup> Like her son Bill and daughter-in-law Anne, Paula remained an active member of Beth Israel, particularly its sisterhood, as well as the greater Meridian community. Although her arthritis began to bother her and walking became more difficult, she continued to lecture in and outside of Meridian, attend national sisterhood conventions, attend meetings of the various music and literary clubs to which she belonged besides writing reviews for these, and, on occasion, travel for pleasure.

#### *Returning to Pensacola*

Paula resumed the role of spiritual leader from January through June 1962. Temple Beth-El in Pensacola was in need of a rabbi and convinced Ackerman to help them through Sha-

vuot while they conducted a formal search for a replacement. Having been a long-time member, teacher, and *rebbetzin* of the congregation, she felt she could not refuse. Even after she agreed, however, she continued to live in Meridian, commuting the two hundred miles back and forth to Pensacola. "I said to myself," Paula later related, "I'll keep my apartment [in Meridian] and if Pensacola doesn't like me, I'll get in my car and go home. If I don't like Pensacola, I'll do the same thing. But we got along famously."<sup>82</sup> Her responsibilities at Beth-El included leading Friday night and holiday services, performing various pastoral duties and life-cycle events, and teaching the five students in the confirmation class.<sup>83</sup>

*San Carlos Hotel, Pensacola, Florida.*

*Ackerman rented an apartment here when she returned to Pensacola.*

*This historic hotel was at the northwest corner of Garden and Palofox in downtown Pensacola from 1918 until it was torn down in the middle 1990s.*

*(Courtesy Pensapedia: The Pensacola Encyclopedia.)*

*Conclusion and Epilogue*

Ackerman continued to live in Meridian until January 1970. During the late 1960s, she lived in a hotel across the street from the county court house. When the hotel was sold at the end of 1969, she decided to rent an apartment at the San Carlos Hotel in Pensacola, the same hotel where she used to go to formal dances as a girl and where her parents had lived for many years. Before she left Meridian, Beth Israel held a farewell dinner and a special Friday evening service in her honor. The temple sisterhood presented her with a beautiful gold and pearl pin. Over a decade later, when the San Carlos closed, she moved to Georgia, first to Atlanta and then to Thomaston, so as to be closer to Bill and Anne who had relocated to these communities.

Over twenty-five years ago, I was an assistant professor of religion at Emory University in Atlanta. One evening, I was at dinner with some friends, including Alvin Sugarman, rabbi at The Temple (formally, The Temple-Hebrew Benevolent Congregation) and a Ph.D. candidate at Emory, and Alvin's wife, Barbara. Knowing of my research and writing on Jewish women, Barbara, who was from Meridian and belonged to Temple Beth Israel as a child, turned to me and asked: "Ellen, do you know Paula Ackerman?" I remember saying, "I don't know Paula Ackerman, but if you mean Mrs. William Ackerman, who served as spiritual leader of Temple Beth Israel in Meridian, Mississippi, I know of her." In fact, several years before, I had included her in a book chapter I wrote on female Jewish religious leaders. "Well," Barbara continued, "she's alive and well and living in Atlanta." With Barbara Sugarman's help, I arranged to meet Ackerman, an opportunity that led to a friendship that lasted over four years until Paula Ackerman's death in January 1989.

In those years, I found Paula Ackerman to be a remarkable human being. It was easy to see why she was so beloved and admired by her community. What I remember most about her was her kindness, generosity of spirit, and deep and abiding faith. Indeed, I have never met a Jew, before or since, who spoke about talking to God as easily and unselfconsciously as Paula Ackerman. Thus, I am not at all surprised that her response to the invitation

*Paula Ackerman at home in Thomaston, Georgia, in October 1986.  
At the time of this photo, taken by the author, Ackerman was 92 years old.  
(Courtesy of Ellen Umansky.)*

to serve as spiritual leader of Temple Beth Israel was a religious one. As she told the congregation's members: "I have considered [this offer] carefully and prayerfully and I feel that in accepting it, I am answering the call of God whom, I have loved, trusted, and served throughout my entire life."<sup>84</sup> In so doing, she helped pave the way for the future rabbinic ordination of women.

In 1986, at my instigation, the UAHC agreed to formally recognize Paula Ackerman's contribution to Reform Judaism as spiritual leader of Temple Beth Israel from 1951 until 1953 and Temple Beth El in Pensacola from January to June of 1962. At a special Shabbat service held at The Temple in Atlanta on April 18, 1986, I paid formal tribute to Paula Ackerman, and Rabbi Malcolm Stern, representing the UAHC, presented the then ninety-two year old Paula with a plaque acknowledging her pioneering achievements. The Temple's sanctuary was filled with congregants,

friends, and family who drove to Atlanta from Pensacola, Meridian, and Thomaston. It was at that service that I met Morele Kay Rosenfeld, Sydney Kay's daughter. Thirty-eight years earlier, in December 1951, Paula had officiated at Morele's wedding to Lewis Rosenfeld. It was apparently the first wedding at which Paula officiated in Meridian (earlier, she co-officiated at two weddings, including one at Temple Emanu-El in New York City). While rabbis who were friends of the Kay family volunteered to officiate at Morele's wedding, Sydney Kay responded that he and his wife, Sylvia, would be honored to have them as guests, but Paula would officiate.<sup>85</sup>

In assessing Paula Ackerman's historical significance, historian Stuart Rockoff has astutely noted that, for the members of Congregation Beth Israel, Ackerman's assumption of religious leadership was more of a conservative move than a radical change. The Meridian Jewish community had long prided itself on fitting in, "on being a respected and accepted part of Meridian society." As one Meridian Jew told Rockoff, "society in this city is based on 'who you are, not where you pray.'" Jews in Meridian, Rockoff continues,

were somebody in Meridian; they played a key role in the creation and development of the city. . . . And yet, like Jews through the South, there was always some sense of anxiety, of being different from the mainstream, a fear of sticking out too much. Having the "right kind" of rabbi was essential for a community like Meridian. This meant someone who would be an active part of the larger community, who would forge working and even personal relationships with the ministers of the leading churches in town. . . . They expected their rabbi to be a representative of the Jewish community that they could trust to interact with other civic and religious leaders and above all, to fit in. . . . William Ackerman was the right kind of rabbi for Meridian. And when she was the rabbi's wife, Paula Ackerman also performed this role beautifully. So when Rabbi Ackerman died, Jewish leaders turned to someone they could trust to follow in his footsteps.

My research on Paula Ackerman bears out Rockoff's assessment. Congregational minutes reveal that in 1952, at least one applicant for the rabbinic position at Beth Israel was rejected by

the search committee because he was foreign-born and spoke with an eastern European accent.<sup>86</sup> As one member of the committee told the UAHC official with whom he met, the congregation was looking for someone who was American by education and birth. They were also looking for a rabbi who would remain “personally aloof” from, and agree not to speak publicly on such political issues as segregation, race relations generally, and Zionism, pro or con. Then again, black civil rights was not nearly the hot topic it became after 1954 and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court or during the Montgomery bus boycott. The committee reported back to the board of trustees that they had made it clear to the UAHC that these were among “the important personal characteristics” that they were looking for in a rabbi.<sup>87</sup> While apparently, they had been told by the UAHC that finding someone who fit these requirements would be difficult, they knew that Paula Ackerman fit each of them.

Like them and like most members of the congregation, Ackerman had spent all of her life in the segregated South. While Jews later took an active role in carrying out integration in Meridian (leading to the bombing of Beth Israel’s education building by members of the Ku Klux Klan in 1968), during the early 1950s most avoided taking a public stance. Until then, it seems that the only blacks Paula personally knew or had known, were those that worked or had worked for her family or their friends. During Paula’s youth, her family had black maids and cooks. When her son, Billy, was born in Natchez, she hired what she later described as a “mammy nurse” for him.<sup>88</sup> By the time I met Paula in 1984, she saw racial integration as an example of how the South had changed since her childhood, but not as something substantially different from the increasing social integration of Christians and Jews, of which there was very little during her years growing up in Pensacola, and which remained restricted in Mississippi and elsewhere in the United States up through and beyond the 1950s. As a congregational leader, Ackerman’s focus was not on politics but on spirituality. Her sermons were on personal religion, drawing on Jewish and non-Jewish texts to awaken within her listeners an awareness of the presence of God. Nonetheless, the role that

Ackerman assumed as leader of Beth Israel was pioneering, something recognized at the time by her, Sydney Kay, the congregation, her supporters, and her critics. Even if it took the UAHC over thirty years to formally recognize her achievements, she paved the way for women in the American Reform rabbinate and demonstrated ways in which the Reform movement's theoretical commitment to women's equality could become a reality. During the years in which Ackerman served as spiritual leader of Beth Israel and later Beth-El, Reform rabbis knew of her work and on the whole accepted her. In fact, she was included among the Reform rabbis who marched in the processional at the dedication of the UAHC's new headquarters in Manhattan, the House of Living Judaism, in 1951.<sup>89</sup> Although for decades that work went largely unrecorded, Ackerman today is recognized as a significant figure in the history of Reform Judaism in the United States and in American Jewish history in general.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> She was not, however, the first woman to become spiritual leader of an American Jewish congregation. That distinction belongs to Tehilla Lichtenstein, who in 1938 succeeded her husband, Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, as leader of the Society of Jewish Science in New York City.

<sup>2</sup> Paula Ackerman, "Report to the Annual Meeting of Congregation Beth Israel, Meridian, Miss.," November 11, 1951, attached to minutes of Congregation Beth Israel.

<sup>3</sup> *Time*, January 22, 1951.

<sup>4</sup> As Paula Ackerman later remembered: "I was born by accident in New York City . . . We were living in Pensacola and there was a yellow fever scare and my mother was very pregnant with me and my father insisted that she get away from Pensacola and . . . she went to New York where my grandmother lived . . . I was born on the seventh of December, 1893, in my grandmother's home." When Paula was six weeks old, she and her mother returned by train to Pensacola. She spent her childhood in Pensacola with the exception of a brief time (c. 1899) in New York City with her mother and brothers (she was enrolled in kindergarten/first grade) while her father was in Cuba. Paula Ackerman, inter-

view conducted by Roseann Mann, Pensacola, FL, 1981. My deepest thanks to Roseann Mann for sending her copious pages of interview notes to me.

<sup>5</sup> In his memoir *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi*, Edward Cohen writes about his grandfather, who interestingly enough also came to the United States from Vaslui, Romania, without his parents in the late 1880s and settled in the South. Edward Cohen, *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi* (Jackson, MS, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Paula Ackerman interview conducted by Ellen M. Umansky, February 21, 1985, Atlanta, (also told by Paula Ackerman to Roseann Mann. Ackerman interview by Mann).

<sup>7</sup> Although according to Paula Ackerman, later in her life, her mother came to enjoy bacon, so much so that "she had to have it . . . though she was on a salt-free, sugar-free diet. We had to boil out the bacon, to take out the salt and the sugar so she could have it. And my father, who never could stand the smell of it, he used to laugh at her . . . I laughed at her [too] because she was so orthodox when I was a little girl." Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> See Henry A. Green and Marcia Kerstein Zerivitz, *Mosaic: Jewish Life in Florida* (Coral Gables, FL, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> As adults, Jennings and Toby legally changed their last names from Herskovitz to Hertz.

<sup>11</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> It's unclear whether her family actually needed the additional income, since Paula later told me that she had "trained servants" her whole life (as a child, during her married life, and after). In her interview with Mann, she said that although her family was not wealthy, they belonged to the Progress Club, a Jewish social club in Pensacola, where she particularly enjoyed the annual Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve dances and Purim and debutante balls. Progressive Clubs, such as the one in Pensacola, existed throughout the United States as the eastern European counterpart to the Jewish Standard Clubs created by German Jews and exclusive clubs created by non-Jews. Paula described the dress she wore for her debut at eighteen as pale yellow with a gray velvet sash with gray beads in the front. She told Mann that her father was in the "ready to wear business" and had a department store downtown, which apparently closed years later. "My father," she said, "carried the prettiest dresses in town. There was a [New York] designer who made them. Her name was Ray (sp?) Winn, and she made the dress especially for the occasion." She also described to Mann several "happy dinner dances" that she attended at the elegant San Carlos Hotel, which opened in 1910 (it closed in 1982 and was demolished eleven years later).

<sup>13</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>14</sup> "Natchez, Mississippi," in the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, at <http://www.msje.org/history/archive/ms/natchez.htm> (accessed August 10, 2010.)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> The Ackermans named their son William Joseph Ackerman, Jr. He was given his middle name after Paula's father Joseph (who was still alive). According to Paula, her husband took the middle name Joseph shortly before their son's birth, so that Billy could be a "junior" (thus becoming William Joseph Ackerman, Sr.). Ackerman interview by Mann. While Jews of central and eastern European descent (Ashkenazim) do not traditionally name their children after living relatives, this is a custom, not a law. Twentieth century American Ashkenazim named "junior" include Reform Rabbi Julian B. Feibelman of Philadelphia and, later, New Orleans.

<sup>19</sup> "Meridian," in Leo E. Turitz and Evelyn Turitz, *Jews in Early Mississippi* (Jackson, MS, 1983), 89.

<sup>20</sup> See Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Rabbi's Wife: The Rebbetzin in American Jewish Life* (New York, 2006). See pages 101–113 for a detailed description of Rebecca Brickner.

<sup>21</sup> The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (NFTS) is now known as the Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ).

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, *The Rabbi's Wife*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889–1985* (Boston, 1998), 121.

<sup>24</sup> I knew Jane Evans for over twenty years, and on several occasions, both formally and informally, spoke to her about her work as executive director of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. I can attest to her tireless energy, deep religious faith, and commitment to Reform Judaism. She remained actively involved in the UAHC, the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and the Jewish Braille Institute, which she founded, until shortly before her death in 2001, at the age of 96. She told me that the establishment of the House of Living Judaism in 1950 at 838 Fifth Avenue in New York City—resulting in the UAHC moving its headquarters from Cincinnati to New York—was her idea and that NFTS raised most of the funds.

<sup>25</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>26</sup> "History of Congregations Beth Israel and Ohel Jacob, Meridian, Mississippi," in the Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, at <http://msje.org/history/archive/ms/HistoryofMeridianCongregations.htm> (accessed August 10, 2010.)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Mark K. Bauman, "Role Theory and History: The Illustration of Ethnic Brokerage in the Atlanta Jewish Community in an Era of Transition and Conflict," in Bauman, ed., *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History* (Tuscaloosa, 2006), 242.

<sup>29</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sydney Kay to Maurice Eisendrath, December 10, 1950, Paula Ackerman Papers, Jacob Rader Marcus Center, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati (hereafter cited as Ackerman Papers, AJA).

<sup>32</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis*, 82. See also Nadell's discussion of Helen Levinthal Lyons's work after she left JJR and her subsequent attempts to receive ordination, pages 108–112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Kay to Eisendrath, December 10, 1950. By 1950, Paula Ackerman knew most of the Orthodox Jews in Meridian, including those who were not members of Beth Israel, as she and her husband always attended services on the second day of Rosh Hashanah at Ohel Jacob (which disbanded in 1990). As she later told Roseann Mann, she continued to do so even after her husband's death. Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>35</sup> Kay to Eisendrath, December 10, 1950.

<sup>36</sup> See Ellen M. Umansky, *Lily Montagu and the Advancement of Liberal Judaism: From Vision to Vocation* (Lewiston, NY, 1983); Ellen M. Umansky, ed., *Lily Montagu: Sermons, Addresses, Letters and Prayers* (Lewiston, NY, 1985); Ellen M. Umansky, *From Christian Science to Jewish Science: Spiritual Healing and American Jews* (New York, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Paula Ackerman, cited in William J. Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," unpublished manuscript about his mother, 2004. The type of positive interaction and blurring of lines between traditionally religious and liberal Jews that the Ackermans found in both Natchez and Meridian is discussed by Lee Shai Weissbach and Leonard Rogoff in their books and articles on life among small town Jews. See, for example, Lee Shai Weissbach, "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South" in *Dixie Diaspora*, ed. Mark K. Bauman, 108–142; Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (New Haven, 2005); and Leonard Rogoff, *Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Paula Ackerman to Ben Gallob, managing editor of the [Indianapolis] *National Jewish Post*, January 12, 1951. This letter was written in response to a letter Gallob had sent her a day earlier. Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>39</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>40</sup> Paula Ackerman, "A New Year or Another Year," Sermon delivered Erev Rosh Hashanah, September 19, 1952, Temple Beth Israel, Meridian, MS, from small loose leaf with sermons, newspaper clippings, and handwritten notes. My thanks to William Ackerman, Jr., for sharing this loose leaf with me, which he later sent to the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience in Jackson, Mississippi. William Ackerman, Jr., died on February 2, 2007, in Ft. Myers, Florida, where he lived with his wife, Anne. Two weeks after his death, a memorial service was held in Meridian (where he had practiced dentistry for over twenty years) at Temple Beth Israel.

<sup>41</sup> Paula Ackerman to Jacob Schwarz, December 12, 1950, Ackerman papers, AJA.

<sup>42</sup> Jacob Schwarz to Paula Ackerman, December 20, 1950, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>43</sup> Maurice Eisendrath to Sidney [sic] Kay, December 12, 1950. Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>44</sup> Sydney Kay to Maurice Eisendrath, January 11, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>45</sup> Paula Ackerman to Nelson Glueck, January 11, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>46</sup> Paula Ackerman to Jacob Schwarz, January 23, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>47</sup> UAHC Press Release, "Rabbi Maurice N. Eisendrath Denies Approving Appointment of Woman Rabbi," January 15, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob Schwarz to Paula Ackerman, January 26, 1951, Ackerman papers, AJA.

<sup>49</sup> Maurice N. Eisendrath to Sidney [sic] Kay, January 19, 1951, Ackerman papers, AJA.

<sup>50</sup> Paula Ackerman to "Dear Friend" (written to Jacob Schwarz, whom she often addressed as "Dear Friend"), January 9, 1951, Ackerman papers, AJA. This letter and several others written by Ackerman from mid December, 1950, through January, 1951, are reprinted in Shuly Rubin Schwartz's "From Rebbetzin to Rabbi: The Journey of Paula Ackerman," *American Jewish Archives Journal* (2007): 96-106.

<sup>51</sup> Schwartz, "From Rebbetzin to Rabbi," 101.

<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, Ackerman privately referred to her position as that of "rabbi." She wrote: "There is no congregation in the whole country that I'd even consider serving as 'Rabbi' except Meridian where Bill and I worked together so happily for 27 years." Paula Ackerman to Jacob Schwarz, January 9, 1951.

<sup>53</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>54</sup> Sydney Kay to Maurice Eisendrath, January 29, 1951, Ackerman papers, AJA.

<sup>55</sup> Minutes, Congregation Beth Israel. Annual congregational meeting, January 26, 1951. My thanks to Stuart Rockoff for sending a copy of the board of trustees and congregational minutes from January 21, 1951, to October 26, 1952, to me.

<sup>56</sup> Sydney Kay to Maurice Eisendrath, January 29, 1951.

<sup>57</sup> *Meridian Star*, January 21, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>58</sup> "Jewish Church May OK Women Rabbis," *Cincinnati Post*, January 11, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>59</sup> *Time*, January 22, 1951, clipping in Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>60</sup> Stuart Rockoff, "'Not to Be Taken Lightly': Paula Ackerman & Temple Beth Israel of Meridian, Mississippi," unpublished paper, n.d. My thanks to the author for sending a copy of his paper to me.

<sup>61</sup> Sydney Kay to Mr. A. Slabot, editor, [New Orleans] *Jewish Ledger*, January 23, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 51. Kate Smith, who was born in Virginia, was dubbed "The Songbird of the South." She is best known for her rendition of "God Bless America," which Irving Berlin wrote for her in 1938. She also had a successful radio, television, and broadcasting career.

<sup>63</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>64</sup> Tamar was also the sister of Tehilla Lichtenstein, who served as leader of the Society of Jewish Science from 1938-1973 with the public support of both Tamar and her husband, David.

<sup>65</sup> In describing the letter, Ackerman stated that Mrs. Pool wanted her to know that she would have won the award had she had more than one child (apparently the woman who won "had six or seven children . . . [which] entered into their decision." Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Jacob, "Samuel H. Goldenson," in *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, ed. Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman, and Malcolm H. Stern (Westport, CT, 1993), 73.

<sup>67</sup> Samuel Goldenson to Sydney Kay, January 30, 1951. On page 163 of her book, *The Rabbi's Wife*, Shuly Rubin Schwartz incorrectly identifies Eisendrath as author of this letter. Paula Ackerman gave me a copy of this letter signed by S. H. Goldenson.

<sup>68</sup> Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 54.

<sup>69</sup> Paula Ackerman, "Reserve Resources," cited in Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 56.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 55.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Kass to Maurice Eisendrath, March 4, 1951, Ackerman Papers, AJA.

<sup>72</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>73</sup> Paula Ackerman interview conducted by Ellen M. Umansky, November 14, 1984, Atlanta.

<sup>74</sup> Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 79, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 84.

<sup>76</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

<sup>77</sup> At a special Board meeting held on June 2, 1951, first vice-president and board member Sylvan Straus reported "that a few members of the Congregation wondered, if no rabbi should be employed by the Congregation." The board then discussed this report, and it was pointed out that "only a very small minority may have caused this rumor, as an overwhelming majority is very satisfied with Mrs. Ackerman's appointment and the services she renders." The minutes neither identified the dissatisfied members nor indicated how many this "small minority" might have been. Minutes, Congregation Beth Israel, June 2, 1951.

<sup>78</sup> Why such a committee was formed when so few members favored the board's conducting a rabbinic search is unclear. Although board minutes indicate that the committee was formed after its June 2, 1951, meeting, the committee's report to the congregation on October 26, 1952, indicated that the committee had "been actively engaged [albeit unsuccessfully] in searching for a qualified and satisfactory Reform Rabbi for our congregation" for "the past two years" (in any case, an overstatement, since William Ackerman died at the end of November, 1950). "Report of Pulpit Committee Congregation Beth Israel," October 26, 1952, saved with Minutes, Congregation Beth Israel Archives, Meridian.

<sup>79</sup> Minutes, Congregation Beth Israel, October 26, 1952, AJA.

<sup>80</sup> Ackerman interviews by Umansky, November 14, 1984 and February 21, 1985.

<sup>81</sup> After twenty years of practicing dentistry in Meridian, Bill and Anne moved to central Georgia, where he had a dental practice for twenty-five years. Consequently, in 1970 (around the time that they moved), Paula moved to the Jewish Tower in Atlanta, an independent and assisted living facility. At the time, and for many years after, her brother, Jennings, lived in Atlanta as well.

<sup>82</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, November 14, 1984.

<sup>83</sup> Ackerman interview by Mann.

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<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Ackerman, Jr., "Footsteps," 51.

<sup>85</sup> Morele Kay Rosenfeld to Ellen M. Umansky, February 21, 1990.

<sup>86</sup> In light of the fact that Rabbi Ackerman was born in Hungary, the objection of the committee seems to have been that the applicant (unlike Bill Ackerman and his predecessors) was not fully Americanized.

<sup>87</sup> "Report of Pulpit Committee Congregation Beth Israel," October 26, 1952.

<sup>88</sup> Ackerman interview by Umansky, February 21, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Ackerman, "Report to the Annual Meeting of Congregation Beth Israel," November 11, 1951.