

After One Hundred Years

Isaac Mayer Wise in the West

A hundred years ago Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise settled in Cincinnati, in the Ohio Valley. This Bohemian immigrant who had been but eight years in the land left his post in Albany to seek a larger opportunity in the trans-Allegheny region.

The Cincinnati to which he came was an important city. It was still the Queen City of the West, a great center of commerce, industry, and culture. The Jewish community was one of the largest in the country, eager for expansion and leadership.

Wise brought with him an unflagging energy, a restless, driving ambition, a capacity to fight doggedly for the things he wanted, a determination to further liberalism both in the smaller Jewish world and in the larger Gentile community about him.

Above all, he was a builder of institutions. Wise was not the *creator* of the American Jewish Reform Movement; he *was* its organizer. After struggling for almost a generation, he finally succeeded in bringing many of the congregations of the country together in a Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Two years later he created the Hebrew Union College, the oldest Jewish theological seminary in the Western Hemisphere; and before he died he had united all the liberals among his Jewish fellow-clergymen in the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The Conference is today the largest association of rabbis in the world.

Through *The Israelite*, a weekly newspaper, which he founded in 1854, he reached into thousands of homes between the Alleghenies and the Rockies. Through *Die Deborah*, a sister publication, established in 1855, he touched the lives of those immigrants who still cherished their German mother tongue.

He traveled everywhere, preaching and spreading his gospel of moderate Reform. Through his hard-hitting editorials in *The Israelite*, he encouraged his fellow-Jews to fight, in the Jeffersonian tradition, for the separation of Church and State. He was relentless in his attacks on bigotry—and his courage gave courage and dignity and self-respect to a whole generation of Jews who not only loved him but followed him.

Wise was the most influential Jew in the Mississippi Valley in the middle-nineteenth century. Today, a century later, his influence persists through the institutions he created and the spirit he breathed into them.