

Watchman on an American Rhine: New Light on Isaac M. Wise

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Isaac Mayer Wise was, in his day, perhaps the foremost organizer of American Jewry. His efforts inspired the founding of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and were instrumental in establishing the Hebrew Union College in 1875. In 1889, he helped create the Central Conference of American Rabbis. He was, as David Philipson called him, "the dreamer, the man of affairs, the idealist and realizer, the thinker and achiever, the student and organizer."¹

He published two newspapers, *The Israelite*, an English-language journal founded in 1854, and *Die Deborah*, which began to appear the following year in German and of which Wise also planned a European edition.²

A study of his German newspaper, *Die Deborah*, during the crucial years 1870 to 1875, at a time when Wise was working to establish the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew

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¹ David Philipson, *Centenary Papers and Others* (Cincinnati, 1919), p. 19.

² It is not generally known that Wise intended to publish a special European newspaper called *Die Deborah für Deutschland*. The first issue of this paper was announced in *Die Deborah*, Volume II, No. 4, p. 32, September 12, 1856. "Nothing is more desirable," Wise wrote,

than that in Europe, and particularly in Germany, one should be more accurately informed about American Jewish conditions. The lack of knowledge of the English language in Germany results in the most peculiar and the most erroneous reports on America. The significance of American Jewry for all Israel is completely misunderstood. Furthermore, all who have children or other relatives here [in the United States] take a lively interest in America, and nothing would be more welcome to them than authentic news from here. The foreign material which, of necessity, appears in *Die Deborah*, is of no interest in Germany. The postage fee (each paper costs 6 cents) deters many from reading an American paper (Volume I, No. 43, p. 352, June 13, 1856).

Unfortunately, this writer has been unable to find a copy of *Die Deborah für Deutschland*.

Union College, reveals to us the many-faceted personality of the man. The ideas and attitudes which he shared with, and transmitted to, his readers are spelled out in *Die Deborah*, as perhaps nowhere else.

Emerging from *Die Deborah*, as from *The Israelite*, is the well-known picture of Wise as the leader of American Jewry. Inasmuch, however, as *Die Deborah* was designed to appeal to Jews of German birth, Wise felt obliged to give fuller and more thorough coverage to Jewish foreign news in his German-language paper than in the English-language *Israelite*. He laid particular emphasis on Prague, the capital of his native Bohemia. Articles in the German press in America and abroad were thoroughly scanned for anti-Jewish references, and anti-Jewish writers were promptly taken to task in *Die Deborah*. What Wise considered encroachments of atheism from Europe, in the form of materialism and Darwinism, were challenged in the pages of *Die Deborah* through learned articles like "Anti-Materialism"³ and "Report on the Natural Sciences"⁴ by a Dr. I. Kitseer. Scholarly Jewish developments in Europe were closely followed, and such books as Abraham Geiger's *Judaism and Its History* were reproduced in serialized form.⁵ All this Wise did as the leader and guardian of American Jewry.

There emerges another aspect of Wise's personality which is more clearly revealed in *Die Deborah* than in *The Israelite*. Wise considered *Die Deborah*, more so than *The Israelite*, his personal paper.⁶

³ *Die Deborah*, Volume XXI, No. 22, p. 2, December 5, 1873, and following issues. All references, unless otherwise noted, are to volume and number of *Die Deborah*.

⁴ XX, No. 15, p. 2, April 11, 1873, and following issues.

⁵ XX, No. 15, p. 2, April 11, 1873, and following issues.

The common notion that, as Carl Wittke says, *Die Deborah* was "the German counterpart" of *The Israelite* (see Wittke, *The German Language Press in America* [University of Kentucky, 1957], p. 185) is not borne out by the evidence, for the learned articles cited above do not appear in *The Israelite*. *Die Deborah* was an independent newspaper with an independent editorial policy, and was a supplement to *The Israelite* in name only. It is to be especially noted that for many years, until January 3, 1873, *Die Deborah* was subtitled *Allgemeine Zeitung des amerikanischen Judenthums* (General Newspaper of American Jewry). No such appellation was applied to *The Israelite* until the issue of July 3, 1874, when its title was changed to *The American Israelite*.

⁶ Even his personal reminiscences appeared in XXIII, No. 1, p. 2, July 3, 1874, and following issues of *Die Deborah*. They were later edited, translated, and published by David Philipson as *Reminiscences by Isaac M. Wise* (Cincinnati, 1901).

Here was a place where he could, so to speak, "let his hair down" with his readers and give vent to the problems, frustrations, and prejudices which he shared in large measure with them. He could express himself in his native German tongue and treat those of his readers who were newly arrived as a father does his children.

This position enabled Wise to air his dislike of Christian evangelism. His readers understood him all too well, for they, too, had suffered discrimination and persecution in Europe at the hands of Christians, and they probably applauded his efforts. He could utter with impunity his prejudice against Orthodoxy and East European Jews, a sentiment shared by many of his readers. Moreover, he could emphasize the German origins to which both he (actually he was a Bohemian) and many of his readers still clung.

His distrust of Christianity notwithstanding, Wise was anxious to be accepted by his Christian neighbors and made every effort, through his sermons in synagogues and churches, to bring about a better understanding between the two faiths. He was the only Jew in the Free Religious Association, an organization founded in Boston and composed of liberal clergymen whose express purpose it was to discuss religious issues freely. Through this association, he felt that he had succeeded "in conciliating Judaism with the intellectuals of this country, so that the intelligent American will equate Judaism, progress, and enlightened ideas."⁷

Yet he firmly believed that, "in the camp of orthodox Christianity, there exists only intolerance or pity for the Jews."⁸ He was, therefore, quick to lash out fiercely against bigoted anti-Jewish clerics and particularly against Christian missionaries (some of whom happened to be baptized Jews). Of them he wrote: "The select heavenly police and the clean shaven Hussars of Jesus feel dutybound to transform the United States into a bigoted Christian state, into an open Pray-Fast-and-Penance institution, and to change the Constitution."⁹ He spoke acidly of "the holy ones from Phila-

⁷ XVI, No. 1, p. 2, July 1, 1870.

⁸ XVI, No. 1, p. 2, July 1, 1870.

⁹ XX, No. 11, p. 2, March 14, 1873. This, like many of the articles which appeared in *Die Deborah*, was not signed. Since, however, Wise was the sole editor of the paper

delphia, who as God's police and as the Hussars of Jesus, have tried for many years to importune the land with meetings, resolutions, and the writing of circulars in order to convince the people of the United States to baptize the Constitution of the land, to overthrow religious liberty, and to appoint [them] as our guardians."¹⁰

Undoubtedly, many Christian clergymen objected to Wise's attacks on dogmatic Christianity.¹¹ One pastor, Carl August TÜRCKE, of Cincinnati, criticized Wise and his lectures on the origin of Christianity, lectures which Bloch published in book form in 1873 under the title of *Three Lectures on the Origin of Christianity*. In reply, Wise condemned the pastor's use of the political press (*Cincinnati Courier*) for a discussion of religious issues. He then proceeded, in *Die Deborah*, to attack the beliefs of the Church and contended that all those outside the orthodox Christian fold no longer believed that Mary received the Holy Ghost, that Jesus was God's son, who performed miracles, or that sinners could achieve atonement through the death of an innocent person. He stated editorially: "It appears to me that the wonders [of the Church] are [indeed] to be wondered at, and that the belief in wonders (*Wunderglaube*) is [at best] childish."¹² Annoyed that TÜRCKE, in the *Cincinnati Courier*, continued to criticize him and his lectures, he wrote: "I have made the first lecture (*Lection*) available to [TÜRCKE] free,

from 1870 to 1874, it is safe to assume that these articles either stemmed from his pen or were written with his approval.

¹⁰ XV, No. 35, p. 2, March 4, 1870.

¹¹ Jews, too, are reported to have objected. According to Wise, these lectures provoked opposition on the part of certain New York Jews who claimed that such views could only create bad blood (*Rischnuss*) between Jews and Christians. XVI, No. 37, p. 2, March 10, 1871.

¹² XV, No. 34, p. 2, February 25, 1870. In "Meine Bücherei," which began to appear in *Die Deborah* in 1896 (it was translated by Albert H. Friedlander under the title of "The World of My Books" and published in *American Jewish Archives*, June, 1954), Wise reflected on his frequently rash statements. Writing of the objectivity and detachment which he had attempted to bring to the presentation of his views, Wise said:

With the exception of hasty newspaper articles, often written in the heat of the moment, I believe that I have followed this plan of battle consistently, particularly in the fight against dogmatic Christianity, wherein I found more of St. Augustine than of Jesus.

See p. 137 of Friedlander's translation in *AJA*.

though it is my habit to deal abruptly with rude pupils, and though I usually must be well paid for my lectures." He then rebuked the pastor in the strongest terms for wasting his valuable time in seeking cheap publicity. "A Christian theologian is in my opinion as dead as a doornail (*mausetodt*)," he argued, "if he does not possess the vitality to refute the simple hypothesis 'that no Jesus existed and that the whole Christian legend is a fairytale.'" He felt that it was beneath his dignity to continue the argument with a man who was neither a historian nor a theologian. Wise offered Türcke instruction in Christian theology, which he was certain he understood better than the pastor. This offer was only on the condition that Türcke behave himself and learn to ask questions like a gentleman. Wise reiterated editorially what he had said in his lectures, namely, that medieval Christianity was dead and would be neither resurrected nor saved.¹³

Wise was convinced that "history owes the Jew a debt of gratitude, for had he not given serious, decided opposition to the cross, all Christian laymen would by now be nailed on it and would be piously mocked by their priests."¹⁴

Christianity was, however, not all that aroused Wise's scorn. His bitter feelings toward Orthodox Judaism and toward East European Jews were manifest throughout the pages of *Die Deborah*. Reporting on his trip to Washington, D. C., in 1870, he mentioned that a *Minhag America* congregation¹⁵ had been established there, but that "the so-called Orthodox element" in this congregation had separated from it to found a new congregation. The rupture had been effected, Wise charged, so that the Orthodox might "yearn romantically every Sabbath and holiday according to ancient custom after Jerusalem, the sacrifices, the priests, and the Messiah king, and [that they might] immortalize the memory of the ghetto in the house of prayer."¹⁶

¹³ XV, No. 36, p. 2, March 11, 1870.

¹⁴ XX, No. 23, p. 2, June 6, 1873.

¹⁵ That is to say, a moderate Reform congregation using Wise's prayer book, called *Minhag America* ("American Rite").

¹⁶ XV, No. 50, p. 2, June 17, 1870.

"The Orthodox," he wrote, "cannot do without strife and dispute (*Hader und Streit*). Just as insolence belongs to true Orthodoxy, so does disputatiousness (*Wie die Ungezogenheit so gehört auch die Rechthaberei zur ächten Orthodoxie*) In all America there is no Orthodox rabbi or preacher who is a scholar or talmudist."¹⁷

To an opinion voiced in the *Jewish World* of London and in *Der Israelit* of Mainz, two outspokenly Orthodox Jewish newspapers of the time, that the *Shulchan Aruch*¹⁸ forbade singing on Friday night, Wise retorted: "If you are not permitted to sing, you wretched hypocrites, then whine and weep for holy music, but don't expect us to join in your caterwauling (*Katzenmusik*)."¹⁹

In the same vein, he wrote: "Singers who sing well are always welcome, but we cannot tolerate Orthodox gibberish (*Kauderwelsch*)."²⁰

Sometimes anti-Orthodox sentiments were voiced in *Die Deborah* through jokes like the following: "Recently an old fashioned Jew wanted to make a fool of a modernist Jew, so he said to him: 'Do you know why Reform services are so much more beautiful than the Orthodox? We [Orthodox] make use of services daily, in fact so much so, that they have become dull and ugly from constant wear. You [Reformers] make use of them only on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashonoh. Is it any wonder that they remain so beautiful with such good care?' Replied the modernist Jew: 'Do you know the true reason for the unshakable conviction of the Orthodox that the return to Jerusalem and the establishment of the Davidic throne is inevitable? I will tell you in strict confidence. Orthodoxy is taking

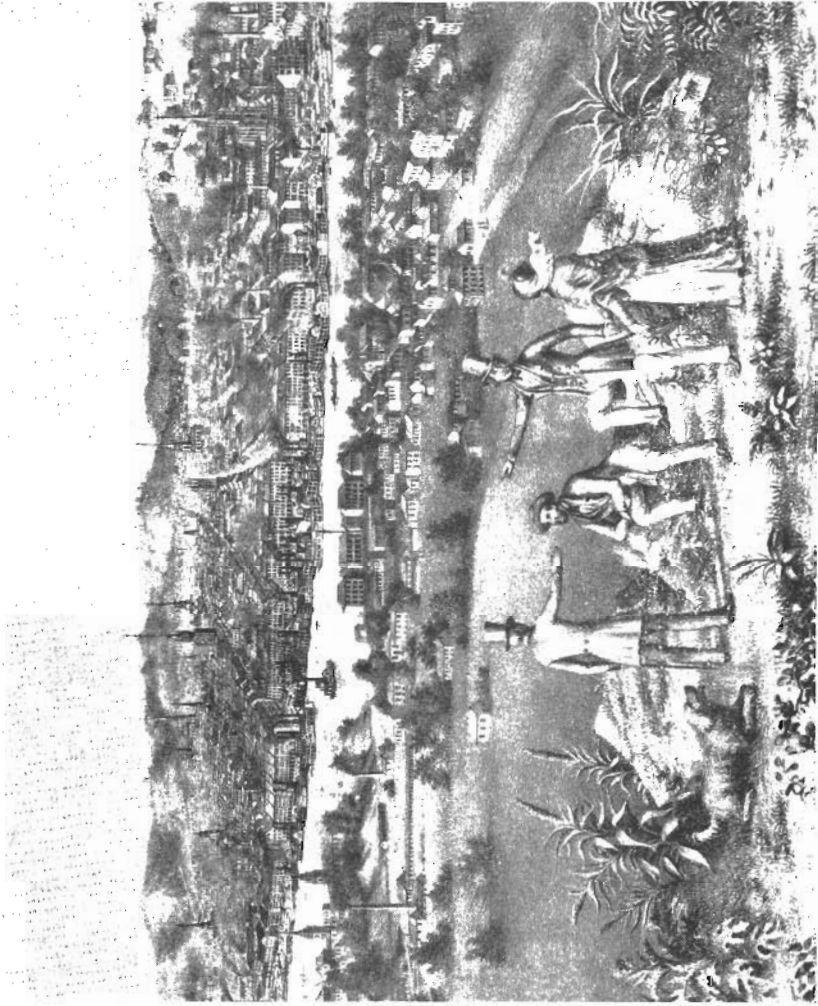
¹⁷ XVI, No. 3, p. 3, July 15, 1870.

¹⁸ *The Jewish World*, founded and edited in London, England, by George Lewis Lyon and Myer D. Davis, was the fourth Jewish newspaper to be published in London and began appearing on February 14, 1873. *Der Israelit: ein Centralorgan für das orthodoxe Judenthum*, founded in Mainz, Germany, by Rabbi Marcus (Meyer) Lehmann, began publication in 1860. Both newspapers were outspoken advocates of Orthodox Judaism and sharp critics of the Reform movement in Judaism.

The *Shulchan Aruch* is a code of Jewish law, a compilation of Jewish laws and customs.

¹⁹ XX, No. 26, p. 2, June 27, 1873.

²⁰ XVII, No. 3, p. 4, December 8, 1871.



From Historical Prints of American Cities. Century House, Watkins Glen, N. Y.

CINCINNATI IN 1855

A View from the Kentucky Side

such rapid strides backward that one fine day they will certainly arrive [at that point in history] where we were 2,000 years ago.'"²¹

Wise, like many of his German Jewish contemporaries, was much concerned about the mass influx of East European Jews and did all he could in his editorials to stem the tide. "In the interest of the immigrants as well as of American Jewry," he wrote, "we demand from Mr. [Benjamin Franklin] Peixotto [United States consul to Bucharest, 1870-1876] and the various committees that they send here only those who are to be designated as 'useful' people and no-one else." He promised to help establish an organization to take care of such "useful" immigrants, but refused to do anything if his wishes were not complied with. "Up to now," he stated, "our charitable European disposition has supplied us with cripples, beggars, work-and-light-shunning loafers who crowd together, particularly in the dirtiest streets of New York and Chicago. They remove themselves and their children from all culture, yet they maintain a monopoly on begging (*Bettelwesen*) throughout the land."²²

He warned those who did not know English or did not possess a useful trade to stay in Europe, because "daylaborers, handymen and roadworkers, who have not mastered the language of the land, are being crowded out by Irishmen and Negroes," and "we have enough beggars and humbug-seeking vagabonds here." He further suggested that people engaged as clerks (*Commis*), teachers, and bookkeepers stay away, for they were, according to Wise, "on the same level as unsuccessful students, classical philologists, and Russian Jews who write Hebrew fluently, but are divorced (*herausgerissen*) from all forms of modern civilization."²³

No man did more than Wise to bring about the Americanization of Judaism and Jewry.²⁴ Yet he never forgot his Germanic-Bohemian

²¹ XXIII, No. 13, p. 2, September 25, 1874.

²² XVIII, No. 17, p. 2, October 25, 1872.

²³ XXII, No. 12, p. 2, March 20, 1874.

²⁴ See Jacob R. Marcus' monograph, *The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise* (Cincinnati, 1931).

origins, and often reflected this pride in *Die Deborah*. France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 was the occasion for the following declaration in the columns of *Die Deborah*: "I thank God that I am a German Germany is mighty, Wilhelm [I, king of Prussia, 1861-1871; German emperor, 1871-1888] is godly and our Fritz [probably Frederick William, crown prince of Prussia, 1861-1888] is our pride (*Ich danke Gott, dass ich ein Deutscher bin Deutschland ist mächtig, Wilhelm ist gottvoll und unser Fritz ist unser Stolz*)."²⁵ Whether or not this statement came from Wise's pen, it is clear that he made no objection to the publication of such sentiments in *Die Deborah*. In a reply to Türcke, he mentioned that "the German is embedded in each of us, and when sometimes that German becomes heated [in argument], he then puts the *jus retaliationis* [law of revenge] into action (*Aber es steckt der Deutsche in uns, der zurweilen warm wird, und dann das jus retaliationis übt*)."²⁶

Wise's attitude to Germany was not, however, without ambivalence. In a sermon delivered in Cincinnati, on September 10, 1870, and reprinted in *The Israelite*, he spoke of "our Germany" and lamented:

Why must the blood of Germany be shed to punish the sins of France? Why must our German sisters, mothers, brides, wives, fathers and brothers mourn over the graves of [Germany's] slain sons, to punish the crimes of Napoleon [III, emperor of the French, 1852-1870]? My heart aches with the myriads of my former countrymen, whose fire-sides are deserted and cheerless, whose widows and orphans have so suddenly and largely increased, whose tears are so hot and bitter. Poor fatherland, why must thou be the rod of retribution in the hands of Providence?

Yet Wise went on to say that

military glory only strengthens the hands of kings, and weakens freedom's chances. The acquirement of territory enriches potentates and impoverishes [*sic*] nations. Why must Caesarism and glory be thine, that France be freed of her tyrant and restored to liberty?²⁷

²⁵ XVI, No. 12, p. 3, September 16, 1870.

²⁶ XV, No. 34, p. 2, February 25, 1870.

²⁷ *The Israelite*, Volume XVII, No. 12, p. 8, September 16, 1870.

Consistency was manifestly not one of Wise's attributes. Although in *Die Deborah* he could permit the statement that "*Wilhelm* [king of Prussia] *ist gottvoll*," in *The Israelite*²⁸ (and in a later issue of *Die Deborah*)²⁹ he could also publish a sharp attack on the institution of monarchy and suggest that, as a republic, the United States ought to hold no intercourse "with our avowed and outspoken enemies, as all monarchs naturally are."³⁰

Wise could brook no criticism from sources which did not share the high opinion which he had of himself. Hence he inveighed against the New York Jewish press (which apparently had criticized him) and claimed that he could not understand why 30,000 Jews and rabbis supported it, since it made its living from dirt and scandal.³¹ When *Hazofeh*, a Hebrew journal, insisted that Wise must have been an actor in Europe, he denied this allegation with characteristic sarcasm.³² He was disappointed that German newspapers in America ignored him despite the fact that he had "contributed more to the liberalization of the religious viewpoint in America than the combined German-American press."³³

The picture of Isaac Mayer Wise that emerges from a study of *Die Deborah* is not perhaps the one which has been popularized by his standard biographers. It is the picture of a man who was not only a creative personality and a dynamic organizer, but who was also given — and sometimes with rare passion — to pride and prejudice and even to hate. Wise had weaknesses, but far from diluting his greatness, these weaknesses testified to the full-blooded, many-faceted personality that he was. To commit his weaknesses to silence is a greater reproach to the memory of this man than a critical discussion of them. To overlook them is to overlook the

²⁸ *The Israelite*, Volume XVII, No. 17, p. 8, October 21, 1870.

²⁹ *Die Deborah*, Volume XVI, No. 14, p. 2, September 30, 1870.

³⁰ *The Israelite*, Volume XVII, No. 17, p. 8, October 21, 1870.

³¹ *Die Deborah*, Volume XVI, No. 11, p. 2, September 9, 1870.

³² XVII, No. 5, p. 2, August 4, 1871.

³³ XV, No. 27, p. 2, January 7, 1870.

tremendous and soul-trying task that Wise undertook in an era when American Jewry had neither cast off the burden of its European past nor recognized the challenge of its American future. Wise was sharply aware of the transitional character of the community which he was attempting to lead. If the consuming difficulties of the task and the passion which Wise brought to his encounter with them led him at times to extravagant and exaggerated views, they led him as often to courage and vision. The life of the nineteenth-century American Jewish scene was his life. The problems and paradoxes of that scene were also his problems and paradoxes. To overlook all this is to have a comfortable Sunday school picture. It is not to have a complete picture of Isaac Mayer Wise.

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