

What Price Conservatism?

Louis Ginzberg and the Hebrew Union College

HARRY H. MAYER

Louis Ginzberg was, beyond all doubt, the greatest Talmudist of our time. The influence of his spiritual insights has so deeply impressed itself on Jewish life and thought in America that it is impossible as yet to measure properly the full impact of his mind upon us. His intellectual achievements during a long life constitute a heart-warming story for the history books of the future. The kind of man Ginzberg was is signalized by the openhanded generosity which he extended to a distinguished former professor of a German university. Although the professor, stranded and penniless in New York, was personally a stranger to Ginzberg, and withal an "Aryan," he was ungrudgingly given, over a period of months and without charge or obligation, a room in the Ginzberg apartment and a seat at the Ginzberg table.

In view of all this, the little-known fact that, at the turn of the century, the Hebrew Union College let slip through its fingers the opportunity of adding this man, as much saint as scholar, to its faculty is of more than passing interest. The pertinent facts on record are, however, almost tantalizingly inexplicit and uninformative as to why the call issued to Ginzberg by the Cincinnati rabbinical school resulted in negotiations that were never consummated. As the only person now living who took a part in those negotiations, the writer is able, from his own personal knowledge, to assemble the jumbled pieces of what must appear as a puzzle. He happily avails himself of this opportunity to do so.

My connection with the matter under discussion goes back to the spring of 1897, when I was Ginzberg's fellow student at the University of Strasbourg. Ginzberg and I were enrolled with five

Rabbi Harry H. Mayer, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation B'nai Jehudah, Kansas City, Mo., now resides in Los Angeles, Calif.

or six others in Professor Karl Budde's advanced seminar for research into and reconstruction, if possible, of the *Urschrift*, the vestigial book or archetype, if such there ever was, of the written Torah. In the long twilight evenings of our summer as students at Strasbourg, the two of us used to walk together among the strolling masses on the charming civic promenade, the road lined on either side with brightly tinted stucco buildings that looked as if they had been devoutly handed down, as indeed they had been, from the later Middle Ages. Still fresh in my memory are the hours on end that passed as, side by side, we sauntered along, engrossed in far-ranging discussions of life and literature and all the lovely high hopes of youth. Ginzberg was delighted to discover that his friend could relate on excellent authority a number of unpublished anecdotes about one of Ginzberg's favorite characters, Seligmann Baer Bamberger, under whom my father had studied at the great rabbinical academy of Würzburg. The friendship between us was founded on so substantial a basis that it lasted, on a high level, for well-nigh sixty years until Ginzberg's death in 1953.

The affectionate regard in which the two of us held each other is best described by the acrostic which Ginzberg composed on my name and which he inscribed on the flyleaf of a rare Hebrew book that he knew I had been seeking:

מנחה ספר זה מוגש לך
 אות אהבה ביני וביניך
 'ספר זכרונות ימים עברו
 רגשי ידידות לא יוכלו יספרו

("This book I am sending to you as a gift; a token of our mutual love, may it bring to mind bygone days of such sweetness that words cannot do them justice.")

Anti-Semitism at Strasbourg during our time as students there was less evident than elsewhere in the German Empire, where obscene placards and shouts reviling the Jews were to be encountered always and everywhere. While I saw and heard many insulting signs of hatred against the "Prussian swine," signs bidding them "get back to their land of arrogant, strutting, square-headed, land-

grabbing fellow-gangsters," I seldom encountered displays of vulgar feeling against the Jews, probably because the popular spitefulness towards the Germans was so bitter and so all-absorbing that no room remained in the Alsatian mentality for other political, economic, or religious resentments.

From his letters during the summer of 1898, I learned that Ginzberg had become unhappy over conditions in a Europe which denied him any immediate prospect of a place on the teaching staff of one or another of the leading universities to which he aspired. I broached to Ginzberg the idea of his becoming a United States citizen in view of America's priceless boon of equal liberty and justice for all before the law, and went on to ask whether Ginzberg could be induced to accept a call from the Hebrew Union College. With Ginzberg's permission, I told him, I would do what I could. I was confident that Ginzberg's name needed only to be suggested and his credentials presented for all to want him. Ginzberg replied that a call from the Cincinnati school to become a member of its faculty would be an honor and that he would be receptive to such an offer. I then got in touch with Rabbi David Philipson, at the time a member of the Hebrew Union College's Board of Governors. Philipson agreed to sponsor the election of Ginzberg, whose appointment as "preceptor" in biblical exegesis at the College followed in due course. Yet while the brilliant young scholar whom I had come to know so well in Europe was en route from his home in Amsterdam to take up his position in Cincinnati, he was notified by order of the College Board that his election had been invalidated.

To my knowledge, the letter of revocation which Ginzberg received on his arrival in New York said nothing to indicate the cause of the Board's reconsideration and withdrawal of Ginzberg's appointment. What prompted this *volte-face* seemed a mystery. Though he was not offended, Ginzberg was duly amazed and mystified.

The courtesy and co-operation of Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, Director of the American Jewish Archives, have enabled me to examine the College Board of Governors' official records for the executive sessions of May 25, June 22, and July 25, 1899, the meetings at which Ginzberg's faculty appointment was considered. According to the Board secretary's minutes for the first of these executive

sessions, the Board considered a report from Isaac Mayer Wise, the venerated president of the College, a report in which Wise stated that he had "corresponded with some Doctors of Philosophy in the Shemitic [*sic*] Department with the intention of adding a competent man to our honorable and distinguished corps of teachers" and that he had "succeeded in finding one, whose precedents are quite promising. . . ." This was none other than Louis Ginzberg, of whom Wise had the following to say:

Dr. Ginzberg is a young man. He made his doctorate in Heidelberg but was a favored and prominent student at the University of Strassburg. He came to the University with considerable talmudical learning from Kowno. It seems to me that Dr. Ginzberg would, after some practice, do good work in the Department of Exegesis in this College.

Still, Wise felt constrained to add that he was "not in condition to vouch for him [Ginzberg] with any degree of certainty" and, therefore, proposed Ginzberg's "name to the Board for a probationary election as a teacher for the next scholastic year," Ginzberg's salary not to exceed \$1,000. "After one year's service," said Wise, "we will be able to judge whether Dr. Ginzberg is the man we want." He, for his part, Wise declared, had "a good deal of confidence in the University of Strassburg and in the reputation of Dr. Ginzberg."

Apparently, then, as is seen above, Wise found something lacking in Ginzberg's credentials. Why else would he have declined to "vouch for him with any degree of certainty"? But what could Wise have deemed questionable in the facts known to him about the talmudic child-prodigy of the Telsh and Kovno *yeshivot*, holder of a doctor of philosophy degree from Heidelberg, favored pupil of Theodor Noeldeke in Arabic and Syriac, and author of the now classic doctoral thesis, *Die Haggada bei ben Kirchenvätern?*

Any doubts which Wise may have had notwithstanding, the official record of the Board of Governors' executive session of June 22, 1899, seemed to indicate that Ginzberg's appointment was assured. That record states:

Agreeable to the suggestion of the President of the College he [Wise] was instructed to issue a call to Dr. Ginzberg to temporarily fill the position

of preceptor of the College from Sept[em]b[er], 1899, to June, 1900, as a probationary term at a salary of \$1,000 payable in monthly instalments of \$100 commencing on October 1st.

The Board of Governors' final action relating to Ginzberg's appointment was taken at the executive session of July 25th. At that meeting, the Board considered a report from Wise, in which Wise declared:

... in regard to the appointment of Dr. Ginzberg of Amsterdam I received July 9th the enclosed letter of your secretary ... in which I am informed that I may *issue a call* to the said gentleman, not that you elected him for such time with such salary; and I have no right to elect any teacher or to fix time and salary for any one. Nor could I assume the responsibility of calling one from Europe. Understanding that the candidate was not elected, I issued no call and hereby propose to your honorable body as assistant professor for one year at a salary of one thousand dollars Dr. Heinrich Malter of Berlin, Germany, whose application is hereby placed before you. . . .

Malter, recommended by the popular Berlin journalist Gustav Karpeles, the author of a history of Jewish literature, received the appointment. Karpeles, as Wise said, was "the most competent and reliable man in Berlin" Wise knew, and Wise endorsed his recommendation of Malter. The Board thereupon "reconsidered the resolution authorizing the call to Dr. Ginzberg, annulling the same by unanimous vote, and upon the recommendation of Dr. Wise unanimously elected Dr. Heinrich Malter. . . ." Malter's credentials indicated, Wise had declared, that he was

a Doctor and Rabbi, an expert writer in Hebrew, Arabic, German and conversant with the English — exactly what our College ought to have, and he is a considerable Talmudist besides. If a Professorship of Exegesis is to be created, this Dr. Malter seems to be the man to fill such a chair, for he is not (alone) the prominent philologist . . . but is also *a Rabbi, to whom Judaism stands higher than the learning of the Universities.* [italics added]

This last statement is highly significant. From a friend, now deceased, but at that time a member of the Board of Governors, I learned that Wise had heard a rumor that Ginzberg accepted the Higher Criticism of the Bible. It was Wise's surmise, based on

rumor and erroneous conjecture, that Ginzberg inclined favorably to the fascinatingly ingenious, superficial cleverness characteristic of the Kuenen-Wellhausen historico-literary interpretation of Hebrew Sacred Scripture. It was on the basis of this surmise, utterly mistaken though it was, that Wise was reluctant to approve unreservedly Ginzberg's faculty appointment and that he subsequently blocked Ginzberg's election, inspired the Board of Governors' astounding last-moment reversal of its decision with regard to Ginzberg, and prompted the Board's unanimous appointment of Malter. Most conclusive in support of this explanation is Wise's remarkable and altogether striking statement that "the man to fill . . . a chair [of biblical exegesis] . . . [should be] a Rabbi, to whom Judaism stands higher than the learning of the Universities."

That Isaac Mayer Wise had set his face like granite against any concession whatever to the "Higher Critics" in their reshuffling and refurbishing of the biblical narratives is abundantly documented in his published writings, particularly in his *Pronaos to Holy Writ*, published in 1891. Viewed in this light, the statements quoted above from the official record, the piecemeal and inexplicit details imbedded in the report of the secretary of the College's Board of Governors, merge into a simple and cohesive design.

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