

The Call for a Hebrew College

1843

Nineteenth-century American Jewry was most vulnerable in the area of Jewish education. Back in the mid-eighteenth century, New York City's Shearith Israel Congregation had organized an all-day school, a parochial school, if you will, where Hebrew and secular studies were taught. But the schools — there was a succession of them — were never conspicuous for their success. Later, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the efforts of that American mother synagogue to create a congregational school which would satisfy the religious and general cultural needs of New York Jewry continued to remain inadequate.

It was part of the program of the Philadelphia minister, Isaac Leeser, to battle vigorously for good schools for American Jewish youth. In the early 1830's, he pleaded with his congregants in Mikveh Israel to help him establish such a cultural institution; in 1835, he appealed to the inhabitants of the entire Philadelphia Jewish community for financial and moral support; and, in 1841, he turned to the country at large, but all in vain. American Jewry was not willing to provide schools where Jews could secure religious training and a good secular education.

Because, however, of the ever-present need and importance of such schools, Leeser was always ready to encourage others when they entered the lists and fought in the cause of Jewish education. Thus it was that Leeser gladly printed an appeal by Major M. M. Noah for a "Hebrew College," and prefaced it with a long editorial note of his own.

Major Mordecai Manuel Noah was a valuable ally in this struggle, for he was America's most distinguished Jewish layman in the 1840's. He was a former judge, a consular officer, a dramatist, and a newspaper editor. The Major had been interested in Jewish education as far back as 1821, when he had sponsored the request of Moses Elias Levy, a Florida entrepreneur, that American Jews create an "Institution" where boys could study Judaism and the arts and sciences, and prepare themselves, if they so desired, for life on the farm.

*The Noah appeal, published in Leeser's *Occident* (I [1843], 301-7), called for a "college," but that "college" was obviously to be nothing*

more than an elementary and high school, an academy, for it would be willing to accept children at the tender age of six.

The Noah plea — reprinted below — was to fall on deaf ears for the same reason that all earlier and later proposals and schools were to be rejected or to fail. For social reasons, the rich wanted their children to go to the better Christian private schools; the children of the poor remained in the public or charity schools because they cost little or nothing. Both the rich and the poor resented the Christian teachings to which their children were exposed, but their resentment was not deep enough to induce them to finance Jewish communal schools or to desist from sending their children to Christianized private or public schools.

By 1830, there were over one thousand academies in the United States; not one of them was Jewish.

Hebrew College

We invite the special attention of our readers to the subjoined proposals of Judge Noah of New York, for the establishment of a collegiate institution for the education of the children of our persuasion, from the age of six years and upwards. And we express only the heartfelt hope which we have long entertained, when we say that we wish the amplest success to this useful enterprise.

Every reflecting Israelite must long since have been cognizant of the evil tendency of sending his children to Christian boarding schools, or to colleges in towns where there are no Jews, for their education. Let them have been trained ever so strictly, no sooner are they there than they must habitually violate all the dietetic laws which our religion prescribes. We hardly think that in their hearts there are many among us who consider this not a very great evil, since as believers they must look upon the whole Scriptures as equally operative, and consequently they ought by no means to lose sight of the domestic ordinances. In addition to this, the parents cannot permit their children to be taught the religion of their [Christian] teachers; and consequently the young Israelites educated [away] from home must grow up without any belief at all, or if they have any, it will be what they insensibly imbibe from those whom they are taught to regard as their instructors, even admitting that they do not resort to the collegiate church [the chapel], and [do not] attend at religious instruction.

There may be children whose principles are so fixed by an early home education that their minds cannot be biassed by what they see or hear abroad [away from home]; but they are few indeed, and it would be almost a miracle, were they to remain free from taint, should they day after day mingle with those persons only who entertain opinions opposed to their received [Jewish] religion, without being more or less influenced by them. The only remedy for all this is an establishment like that proposed by Judge Noah, where sciences are imparted as the support of religion, and where this is taught by precept and example, in the manner in which we have received it from our forefathers.

There is no sectarian feeling connected with the idea of Judge N., since the proposed college will be open for pupils of all denominations, and we only desire to see its success, in order that children of Israelitish parentage may have an opportunity of participating in the acquisition of a classical and refined education, without injury to their spiritual welfare. We therefore invite all our friends to give the subject the serious reflection which it deserves, and to communicate to us or Judge N. their ideas upon it, cheerfully offering the *Occident* for its public discussion.

We learn, in a private letter from the projector, that an eligible situation for the college has been found at Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, New York, immediately near the Hudson, being a mansion forty feet in front by eighty in depth, with a large garden enclosed with an iron railing, which could be fitted up with all the furniture requisite by the first of November. And, as it is desirable that there should be no delay in the execution of the plan, we trust that those who feel disposed to aid therein will embrace the earliest opportunity to declare their intentions as above.

We could say a great deal more, but the full exposition presented by Judge N. precludes the necessity of our saying again what he has set forth so well. Moreover, it would be needless for us to say anything of the merit of a man so well known among us; and who, if he should devote the energies of his capacious mind to the furtherance of the project, will be able to render justice to the cause of our blessed religion in this land. The Judge is a gentleman of the kindest heart, of ample experience both in the political and literary world; and we confidently believe that, should the plan be carried out, he would be able to rally round him teachers both morally and scientifically able to be of the utmost service in their calling to the youth of our people.

For the present we take our leave, to resume the discussion in a future

number, and in the meantime allow Judge N. to unfold his plan in his own words. — Ed. *Oc.[cident]*

* * *

Mr. Editor — For several years past my friends have urged me to organize and propose a plan for the establishment of a Hebrew College in the United States, pressing the necessity of such an institution as specially desirable to the Jewish population, and referring to the literary establishments of other religious denominations throughout the Union, as an incentive for us to make a similar experiment.

Hitherto my occupations have prevented that attention to the subject which its importance demanded. Having now leisure to reflect upon a plan which may finally be successful in carrying out the wishes of our friends, I avail myself with pleasure of your kind permission to publish the details in your periodical, which, having an extensive circulation, will reach those who are particularly interested in the successful issue of the project.

The great increase of the Jewish population in our country, and the facilities and advantages which our free institutions hold forth to our co-religionaries throughout the world, the success they [the Jews here] have already met with, and their general spirit of enterprize, warrant the belief that in a few years the Jews will constitute a large portion of the freemen of this Union. It becomes therefore necessary to consider what steps are required to improve their condition, and enable them to assume and maintain a proper rank among their fellow-citizens, and, consequently, to secure for themselves and their posterity that consideration and respect which a sound education and a high moral bearing cannot fail to achieve.

Independently of emigration, it is also proper to know that the native-born Jewish population is rapidly on the increase, and it remains for us to ascertain what can now be done to elevate their character as a separate and distinct people, and place them on the road to honour and preferment, in common with their fellow-citizens of other religious denominations. With this object in view, it is desirable to establish a *Hebrew College*, where children of the Jewish persuasion can obtain a classical education, and, at the same time, be properly instructed in the Hebrew language; where they can live in conformity to our laws, and acquire a liberal knowledge of the principles of their religion.

The difficulty of obtaining the necessary funds for the endowment of a

college, for the purchase of a library and philosophical apparatus, for the salary and maintenance of professors, would present almost insurmountable obstacles to this experiment, situated as we are, having no government to appeal to, no nation taking an immediate interest in our welfare. Individual enterprise, therefore, is the only mode by which this desirable object can be accomplished. Someone must embark his own means and enlist his own energies in carrying out this important project, provided parents, who have the inclination and ability to pay for the education and support of their sons, will second this enterprise by committing their children to the care of such a person, and thus laying the foundation of an institution, which may hereafter be carried out on a broader and more extended scale.

I have long lamented the necessity of sending Jewish children to Christian boarding schools, not from any illiberal feelings towards schools of that denomination, but on account of the manifest injury to them in a religious point of view. Jewish parents who have a sincere attachment and regard for our holy and venerable faith are naturally desirous that their children should be educated as Jews. However liberal they may justly feel towards all religious denominations, however anxious they may be to see their children grow up with enlarged views and tolerant feelings towards other sects: still they wish them to be Jews, to understand their religion, to be able to explain its principles and defend its divine origin.

It is difficult to attain this desirable object in Christian colleges and boarding schools. The Jewish scholars [students] are compelled to live in daily violation of the Mosaic institutions, to neglect the Sabbath, and attend church on Sunday, in conformity with the regulations of the school. The consequences are that our sons, having finished their education, return to the bosom of their families, well instructed, it is true, but retaining only the name of Jews, unacquainted with the principles of their religion, perfectly indifferent to its obligations, and, probably, with prejudices against it, the result of other and early impressions, and if compelled by the urgency of business enterprise to go abroad [to leave home], forgetting in a short time that they were born of Jewish parents, and marrying in [to] other denominations and communities.

The successful establishment of a Hebrew College may, and I think will, remedy these evils, and relieve parents from a responsibility which at all times is peculiarly painful. In such an institution, under proper government [guidance], sons of Jewish parents can acquire a classical education,

all the accomplishments taught in other schools, all the exercise necessary for the promotion of health and comfort, while devoting a reasonable portion of their time in acquiring a thorough and grammatical knowledge of the Hebrew language, going through their daily prayers, attending worship on the Sabbath, and becoming practically acquainted with the ceremonies and obligations of our holy religion, a religion which only can be properly estimated by those who have enjoyed the benefits of a liberal education.

In proposing to establish this institution several eligible positions [localities] have presented themselves, each holding out certain peculiar advantages. The college should not be in the immediate vicinity of the city, as students might be induced by its amusements and attractions to spend more time in it than would be beneficial either to their health or morals, nor should it be so remote as to exclude early intelligence of what is going on in the commercial metropolis. I should prefer Newport, Rhode Island, from its healthy position, from there being a synagogue at that place liberally endowed [by Abraham and Judah Touro], and from its having formerly possessed a congregation distinguished for great wealth and respectability. The difficulty might be in finding at Newport suitable buildings ready for immediate occupation.

In the vicinity of this city [of New York], we have Flushing, a place of great celebrity for education, and New Brighton. On the North River [the Hudson], we have the advantage of water prospect, and its atmospheric influence, combined with pure mountain air. Poughkeepsie, Mount Pleasant, and Tarrytown, very pleasant villages, each present great advantages of location, in their daily communication with the city, in their already established literary institutions, and each having spacious buildings which could be procured forthwith. This point, however, would be reserved for future deliberation.

Our object and intentions should be to secure for this institution a reputation which will bear comparison with any college throughout the Union, by the employment of competent classical teachers in every department, by guaranteeing a thorough scholarship in every branch of study, by a high moral and intellectual training, a love of truth and justice, a veneration for religion, an honourable, high-minded feeling, a self-respect, and all those just, generous, and amiable feelings calculated to establish the character of an honourable, well-bred man.

The classical department should embrace a course of study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, ancient history and mathematics; the English depart-

ment, one of grammar, arithmetic, geography, penmanship, history, moral philosophy, elocution, composition, and bookkeeping, together with French and drawing, each branch applicable to the age and capacity of the pupil, advancing each by degrees, until attaining every department, and dividing the hours of study and recreation, so as to ensure a steady progress, while not neglecting that exercise so conducive to health.

The principal, scholars, and teachers should constitute one family, eating together, and sleeping under the same roof. The Hebrew professor should at the same time be the hazan [minister] and shochet [ritual slaughterer], read daily prayers, also on the Sabbath and holidays in the synagogue, which should be in the college, and it would be the duty of the principal occasionally to deliver an English discourse on religious and moral obligations. There should be two vacations: one of two weeks during the Passover, and one of four weeks during the fall holidays.

Such, sir, are the mere outlines of a plan to establish a Hebrew Seminary, which is every way feasible of execution, requiring only the cordial and prompt co-operation of our friends to carry it into effect. If a person possessing the entire confidence of the Jewish population can be found, with adequate means to carry out this enterprize, and lay the foundation of an institution which hereafter may do honour to our religion, I will most cheerfully assist in carrying the plan into successful execution. But such is my confidence in the successful issue of the project, that if no proper person can be found to embark in the enterprize, I am willing to commence it at my cost and risk, and thus give an earnest of my sincerity in carrying out this interesting experiment.

I believe that parents may rely upon my declaration that the treatment of pupils will be paternal and liberal, the management firm and kind, and the moral and physical training sedulously regarded. The entire expense of each scholar, including boarding, lodging, tuition in every branch of education, with the exception of music and drawing, will be two hundred and fifty dollars per annum; no children admitted under six years of age.

I invite my friends to communicate freely with me, to interchange opinions, and to take an interest in carrying out this useful and important project. If a reasonable number of students shall offer from different parts of the Union, and the West India Islands, to commence with, I think I can say that all the preparations will be completed for their reception by the first day of November next.

New York, August 18th, 1843.

M. M. NOAH