

# Isaac Mayer Wise and the Civil War

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## A TURBULENCE IN CINCINNATI

When, on April 12, 1861, the Confederate forces, by attacking Fort Sumter, kindled into flame the quivering feeling that had developed between North and South, Isaac Mayer Wise was forty-two years of age. He had arrived in New York from Bohemia fourteen years before, had settled in Albany shortly afterwards, and had removed to Cincinnati in April, 1854, there to serve as rabbi of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun and as headmaster of the Talmud Yelodim Institute attached to it. Within a month after arriving at Cincinnati, Wise had begun preparations for the publication of a Jewish weekly; the first issue of *The Israelite* appeared on July 15th. At that time a large proportion of the Jewish population of the United States was German-speaking, and twelve months after *The Israelite* made its bow Wise started a second Jewish weekly, *Deborah*, in German. The position which he had begun to carve for himself in the Jewish communities — admittedly new and unstable — of the West is indicated by the fact that in 1855 Wise had joined in the call for a conference of Jewish congregations. This conference had met in Cleveland, and Wise had been chosen as its president. This early effort at union proved abortive, except for the revision of the prayer book which, left in Wise's hands, was accomplished through the publication of *Minhag America* ("American rite") in 1857.

Wise was an energetic traveler, and in the course of his journeys he became acquainted with some of the country's leading politicians and publicists. His grandson and biographer declared that he probably had no warmer friend than Salmon P. Chase, United

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States Senator from Ohio and later Secretary of War and Chief Justice of the United States.<sup>1</sup> He had taken part in a delegation to President James Buchanan on the Swiss Treaty question. Wise had shown that his horizons were not limited to the boundaries of his "parish," and he had made himself a figure of more than local significance.

Nevertheless, like the rest of mankind, Wise doubtless felt first of all the influences that were closest at hand. Fortunately, his immediate milieu was in itself conducive to his taking an extra-parochial view of his responsibilities and opportunities. Ohio was then the fourth state in the Union in point of population. At mid-century the state was predominantly rural, but Cincinnati, then far and away its largest city, was the leading industrial center of the West. Its importance as a manufacturing center was associated with its position as the great entrepôt of the Ohio Valley, and this reinforced with commerce the links with which nature had tied it to the South.

The 1860 census gave the population of Cincinnati as 161,044. The 1840 figure had been only 46,338, and thus the population had multiplied more than three times in twenty years. An increase of this order suggests heavy migration into the city; in fact, most of the immigrants were German.

Another feature of the population at this time was its youth. The 1850 census showed that persons under ten years of age constituted over 30 percent of the population, and those under forty almost 84 percent.

A sudden increase in population suggests overcrowding, and a heavy influx of immigrants suggests a population without roots. These factors, together with the youthfulness of the people, lead one to infer that life in Cincinnati was, to put it cautiously, as vigorous as the climate allowed; turbulent and excitable would probably be expressions equally apt.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Roseboom and Francis P. Weisenburger, *A History of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1953), pp. 115-16, 119, 122-23, 216; Carl Wittke, ed., *The History of the State of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1941-1944), IV, 57.

Cincinnati was also noteworthy for the comparative size of its Jewish population. It is estimated that in 1860 there were altogether some 150,000 Jews in the United States, of whom 40,000 lived in New York.<sup>3</sup> In numbers, the 10,000 Jews of Cincinnati lagged behind, but they still constituted one of the foremost Jewish communities in the country.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, its geographical position at the gateway to the still important South — before the South had been destroyed in war and before the East-West railroads passing through Chicago had removed the economic fulcrum — was important. The dates of the founding of the Cincinnati synagogues confirm that the Jewish community, like the general population, was of recent growth.<sup>5</sup>

#### A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES

Wise arrived in Cincinnati at a time of political flux, as the bitter controversies which preceded the Civil War mounted in force. Six years before, the Whigs had split on the slavery issue. Chase had led a Free Soil movement, and out of this grouping the state's Republican Party was born in July, 1855. Chase suggested that Wise attach himself to the newly-born Republican Party. Wise himself declared that he had "sat at the round table at which that party was born and baptized," but that "some wounded apostles of the atheistical stripe" drove him out.<sup>6</sup> Wise's subsequent actions, in any event, suggest no sympathy with its aims. Perhaps the strong

<sup>3</sup> Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1951), p. 1; Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York: 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1945), p. 469.

<sup>4</sup> The Jewish population of Cincinnati is given as between 6,000 and 7,000 in *The Israelite*, November 14, 1856, and as 10,500-11,000 in the issue of March 29, 1861 — both cited by James G. Heller, *As Yesterday When it is Past* (Cincinnati: Isaac M. Wise Temple, 1942), p. 88. Charles Cist, *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1859* (Cincinnati, 1859), pp. 197-98, calculates the Jewish population as 7,913.

<sup>5</sup> Cist gives the oldest congregation ("Children of Israel") as having been founded in 1820, and the second ("Children of Jeshurun") as having been founded in 1845, and the other congregations as dating from 1847, 1850, 1854, and 1856.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Company, 1901), p. 327.

anti-immigrant "Know Nothing" element which pervaded the Ohio party (Chase was an exception) repelled him. In the 1855 state election feeling in Cincinnati was hostile to the Republicans. Chase's attitude towards slavery won no support from the business community, concerned for its trade connections with the South, while his associations with "Know Nothings" earned the suspicions of the German element, even though it tended to be Abolitionist.<sup>7</sup> There is no direct evidence of the effect of these influences on Wise, but his position as an immigrant and as a rabbi in a community closely engaged in commerce makes it legitimate at least to speculate whether they may have been present.

The issues must have forced themselves on Wise's attention. Cincinnati stood on the border between free and slave states; its environs were the first stage on the "Underground Railroad" by which slaves were taken to Canada for liberation; it was near the scene of attempts, sometimes the cause of riots, to arrest and return slaves under the Fugitive Slave law.

Something of a panic followed the Presidential election of November, 1860. Wise took a "plague on both your houses — why all this fuss?" attitude. He insisted on regarding the situation as an "artificial panic which . . . is no more than the product of the present state of politics and the cunning contrivance of bankers, stock jobbers, brokers etc." And he forecast peace: "The republicans have turned lambkins, tender and innocent, immaculate and bashful. . . . They are as tame and obliging now as the peasant the first time in the city. . . . The same thing . . . is the case in the extreme south with fire eaters, seceders and political circus riders."<sup>8</sup>

The belief that the fires would cool was widespread, and Wise was by no means alone when he remarked that "the two extreme factions will be cooled down before the year ends."<sup>9</sup> However, there is some interest in the decided view of human nature on which Wise based his conclusion: ". . . people care very little for abstract ideas, extreme views or false conceptions of honor when their

<sup>7</sup> Roseboom and Weisenburger, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> *The Israelite*, November 30, 1860, p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

material interests are neglected or even ruined."<sup>10</sup> And this worldly cynicism he backed with the affirmation that, threats of secession notwithstanding, he was still prepared to take payment for *The Israelite* in bills payable in any state of the Union.<sup>11</sup>

The crisis did not abate as Wise and others prophesied. South Carolina's secession occasioned a lengthy editorial in *The Israelite* of December 28, 1860: "The fanatics in both sections of the country succeeded in destroying the most admirable fabric of government. Under the pretext of progress and liberty, state rights and personal freedom they have made the beginning of destroying the proud structure of liberty to which all good men looked with hope and satisfaction."<sup>12</sup> Here, as before, the "a plague on both your houses" note is sounded, but as the article proceeds the balance shifts somewhat against the Abolitionists:

. . . Demagogues who sought offices at any price, red Republicans and habitual revolutionists, who feed on excitement and civil wars, German atheism and American puritanism who know no limits to their fanaticism, visionary philanthropists and wicked preachers who have that religion which is most suitable to their congregations, speculators in property, stock jobbers and usurers whose God is Mammon, thoughtless multitudes and hired criers in the South and North succeeded in breaking down the fortress of liberty, the great bulwark of our best hopes.

Wise continues in the pessimistic note: ". . . either the republican party must be killed off forever by constitutional guarantees to the South, to make an end forever to this vexing slavery question, or the Union must be dissolved." For the desired course, the necessary majority of three quarters of the states cannot be obtained, "because we have too many demagogues and fantasts, therefore we maintain this Union is as good as dissolved."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* The tone of Wise's approach is worth considering for its effect on a man like David Einhorn, in view of the latter's opposition to Wise and his works.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, December 28, 1860, p. 205. In this same article, Wise takes the stand against coercion mentioned on pp. 125 and 132, *infra*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Two weeks before, Wise had voiced his faith in the Union:

It is with the utmost regret that we record the fact of thousands of our fellow citizens speaking of the dissolution of the Union; they not only speak of but are actually

The dissolution of the Union is a theme to which Wise reverts when, in the following week's issue of *The Israelite*, he indulges in prophecy for the New Year:

The year 1861 must witness either the end of the Republican party or the dissolution of the Union. The Republicans know this very well and talk quite freely of the final and perpetual separation of the North and South. All their manoeuvres are intended to that point. They want neither war nor coercion nor compromises. Separation is their final object. They maintain their object of Abolitionism can best be achieved by the separation of the South from the North. . . .<sup>14</sup>

#### NO POLITICAL PREACHING

In December, 1860, President Buchanan had called upon all denominations to observe January 4, 1861, "as a day of fasting and prayer, that God might have mercy upon us and save this Union." In *The Israelite* of December 28th, Wise published a sarcastic reference to Buchanan's action, describing Buchanan as one of the principal agents of the calamity and as being possessed of "hatred and feelings of vengeance."<sup>15</sup> On the same page there was an announcement of a special service for the following Friday morning — the day appointed by the President — in the Lodge Street Synagogue, at which the "Rev. Doctors Wise and Lilienthal" would preach. However, some incident must have arisen which prevented Wise from using the pulpit of his own synagogue, for in an article headed

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zealous to accomplish it. . . . It is a lamentable evidence of the shortsightedness of man under the influence of passion, that there should be honest men in this country who, while European nations struggle after Union, should think of benefitting themselves by disunion. . . . Providence reserved this sea-girt continent for the last and highest triumphs of humanity. This great and blessed land was not reserved for schismatics and separatists; it is for God and freedom, for the highest interests of humanity, which to protect we must have the power of union — union and peace, union of sentiment and fraternal feelings must be our watchword. We do not know by what policy, compromise or amendments this can be effected easiest and quickest, but we know and feel that the storm must abate and the union must be maintained. (*The Israelite*, December 14, 1860, p. 188.)

<sup>14</sup> *The Israelite*, January 4, 1861, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, December 28, 1860, p. 206. Immediately below the editorial article is a letter signed "Amico," criticizing Buchanan's action, e. g., "Rocks are ahead, captain and officers take to boats and tell the crew to pray and save themselves."

“No Political Preaching,” which he published in *The Israelite* of February 1st, Wise declared that it had been his fixed principle not to say a word in the pulpit on the politics of the day “and for that very reason refused to preach the fourth of January last, in order not to violate our principle.”<sup>16</sup> No hint is given as to the issue which arose, but is it too much to assume that it may have been serious if it prevented the rabbi from addressing his own congregation? Perhaps, knowing the opinions to which he had given vent in *The Israelite*, the congregation expected some positive statement from the pulpit against secession and in favor of the Union; in view of the inflamed state of feeling, the absence of such a statement might have occasioned some disturbance. Nothing definite can be asserted.

In the course of a lengthy article, Wise, in giving his reasons for refusing to “preach politics,” makes some scathing comments on the nature of politics:

Politics in this country means money, material interests, and no more. The leaders of all parties are office-seekers or office-holders. They hold or seek offices, not in order to benefit the community, but to benefit themselves. . . .

Land speculators, who bought large tracts of land in Kansas, exercised every sort of influence to make her a free state, in order to increase the price of land. Other speculators . . . exercised all their influence in order to make a slave state of Kansas, in order to direct the current of migration to such states or territories where they possessed land, so as to dispose of it at improved rates. Slaveholders favor the extension of slavery because it increases their wealth, and land speculators oppose it, because they find their present account by it. Politics and money are synonyms, however holy, exalted or lofty these things may appear to the myriads of honest men who are dragged along by party leaders. . . .

Politics is a business, and in many instances a mean business, which requires more cheat and falsehood than a vulgar scoundrel would practice. Philosophize over it as you please . . . it remains a vulgar business . . . with which we are fairly disgusted on account of its dishonesty and violence.

In the context in which they were written — the issues before the American people just before the Civil War broke out, and the

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, February 1, 1861, p. 244. The minutes of the Board of Trustees of K. K. B'nai Yeshurun make no reference to any incident in connection with this service.

particular incident of the day of national prayer — these words convey an attitude towards those issues. The questions of freedom or servitude for the Negro, of Free Soil or the extension of slavery to the territories, of the right of secession or the indissolubility of the Union, seem to have been placed by Wise on the same level as controversies over the spoils of office or the granting of land to a railroad. A mountain peak looks more imposing when the traveler beholds it from a distance than when he is trudging up its lower slopes. Wise's vision during the weeks before the attack on Fort Sumter does not seem to have been directed to the loftier questions.

### THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

The fact that Wise treated opposition to the extension of slavery as a pretext indicates that he did not regard slavery as an issue;<sup>17</sup> and his repeated verbal assaults on "fanatics" suggests that he looked upon the Abolitionists as disturbers of the peace. Some controversy has arisen as to whether Wise actually favored slavery. The issue was faced squarely by other Jewish teachers. David Einhorn and Sabato Morais expressed themselves against slavery; Morris J. Raphall, supported by Isaac Leeser, took the view that it was an institution sanctioned by Judaism. Writing many years afterwards, Max J. Kohler, whose relationship to one of Wise's antagonists should not be ignored, said that Wise, in *The Israelite*, expressed approbation of Raphall's stand.<sup>18</sup> This is not true. Alluding to press comments on Raphall's proslavery sermon, Wise wrote that "among all nonsense imposed on the Bible the greatest is to suppose the Negroes are the descendants of Ham, and the curse of Noah is applicable to them."<sup>19</sup> But, though he contested the view that Negro slavery was supported by scriptural texts, he did not attack slavery.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Max B. May, p. 243, states that Wise "did not zealously advocate the abolition of slavery." If May meant to imply that Wise advocated abolition, though not zealously, he does not support his contention with evidence.

<sup>18</sup> *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society [PAJHS]*, V (1897), 150.

<sup>19</sup> *The Israelite*, January 18, 1861, p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> Max B. May, p. 245, attacks Kohler's statement that Wise approved of Raphall's position, but does not make clear what Wise's position was. Korn, "Isaac Mayer

Indeed, the above quotations suggest that, in Wise's opinion, it was proper to perpetuate slavery in order to prevent secession.

A clue to Wise's positive attitude may be found in his fervent memorial tribute to Stephen A. Douglas, who died shortly after the conflict began.<sup>21</sup> Douglas, to be sure, had supported war as a means of preventing secession, and that was further than Wise was prepared to go;<sup>22</sup> but it was Douglas who had proposed that the question of slavery be left to the people of the territories to decide as they organized themselves into states.<sup>23</sup> All this corresponded to the kind of sentiment that was fairly strong in Ohio. Its mainspring may have been prudential considerations natural enough in a border state, but there are grounds for believing that Wise's feeling as a Jew played a part. Wise "was essentially a middle of the road man, not only in religion, but also in politics. The only exception was where politics touched Jewish emancipation and liberty. Then he was an implacable extremist and demanded immediate change."<sup>24</sup> Rightly or wrongly, Wise appears to have suspected some of the Abolitionists of a disposition to tamper with the guarantees of liberty and equality which he regarded as the crowning glory of the American state and Federal constitutions. Massachusetts was a center of Abolitionism; Massachusetts was also antialien — specifically anti-Irish, but what immigrant was to know where the canker would spread? Therefore, Abolitionists were hypocrites. Such a

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Wise on the Civil War," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XX (1947), 638, states that Wise was "prepared to see slavery established as a permanent American institution, to save the Union," but was not "pro-slavery." On p. 640, he observes: "Long after the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Wise finally gave an expression of his views on slavery in the Bible. He showed no unwillingness to state his beliefs once slavery had ceased to be a political issue. They are, of course, the ideas of a man opposed to slavery." Still, it would not prove that Wise was antislavery before the Emancipation Proclamation, even were he shown to be equivocally so afterwards. On p. 641, Korn adds: "Wise was still unwilling to come to grips with the evils of southern slavery which so infuriated the north, or with the economic conditions which perpetuated those evils."

<sup>21</sup> *The Israelite*, June 7, 1861, p. 386.

<sup>22</sup> See Wise's rejection of coercion, p. 132, *infra*.

<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930-1935), V, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Jacob R. Marcus, *The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise* (Cincinnati, 1931), p. 10. This has been laid under contribution generally for its assessment of Wise's political ideas.



Louis Moreau Gottschalk  
American Pianist and Composer

(see p. 117)



*Courtesy, Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Cincinnati*

Clement L. Vallandigham  
Leader of the Peace Democrats

(see p. 136)

picture may be oversimplified to the point of caricature, but the lines are clear in Wise's view of the Abolitionists. He regarded them as ethically inconsistent for having adopted, in Massachusetts, in 1859, a law requiring of aliens seven years' residence and naturalization as qualifications for holding public office.<sup>25</sup>

Society in Ohio at that time may have reinforced an intense equalitarianism, which became charged with resentment at the least suggestion of any superiority of the Old American as compared with the New. The fact, however, that Abolitionism was espoused by the Christian clergy in the North did not endear the cause to Wise, because he suspected the political parsons of trying to inject Christianity into the Constitution.<sup>26</sup> Wise had known a system under which an authoritarian government interfered with every department of life and gave to the Jew a status inferior to that of the Christian. He was intoxicated with the liberty and equality afforded by the open frontier, the open society, and the political system of the United States. There, of all places, he seems to have felt, men should live and let live. He saw, in the Abolitionists, not men who wished to grant liberty to the slaves, but men who interfered with the liberty of the states. He lumped them together with those who would restrict the liquor traffic, enforce the observance of Sunday, and somehow make Christianity a legally established religion.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *The Israelite*, January 25, 1861. The inconsistency would seem to be Wise's, since a parallel can hardly be drawn between a civic disability which disappears either automatically or by readily taken administrative action and an inborn state of personal servitude. But Wise's view does reflect an intense dislike of enacting distinctions between different sections of the population.

<sup>26</sup> *The Israelite*, October 18, 1861, p. 124, despite its self-denying ordinance of April 19, 1861, contains an article in violent tone, headed "The Wrong Influence of the Church":

. . . who in the world could act worse, more extravagant and reckless in this crisis than the Protestant priests did? From the very start of the unfortunate difficulties, the consequences of which we now suffer so severely, the Protestant priests threw the firebrand of abolitionism into the very heart of this country. . . . Remember the violent abolition speeches and denunciations of all opponents from the [Henry Ward] Beecher and [Theodore] Parker factions and another host of eccentric minds. . . . Remember the petition to Congress by the Presbyterian synod of Pittsburgh, Pa., at the beginning of this war, praying to acknowledge God and Jesus, and abolish slavery. . . .

<sup>27</sup> *The Israelite*, January 24, 1862, p. 236:

Years ago we knew nothing of prayer meetings, Sunday laws, Christian country,

So ardent a lover of the American system obviously deplored secession — “this is the most terrible blow the cause of humanity is likely to suffer in the year 1861,” he wrote while the crisis was yet building up. Coercion, however, was not his line:

Keep the Union together by the force of arms, some say; Lincoln will do it, Buchanan is a traitor, we do not want the affections of the people as long as we have the power. That is as practicable and just as the other planks of the Republican programme are. — By what means will you coerce eight or ten states to obey your mandates? How can you command so vast an area of land, how can you conquer it? . . . Force will not hold together this Union; it was cemented by liberty and can stand only by the affections of the people. Every state may appeal to that right by which this Union was cemented, the right of man, and withdraw from this Union when her rights are infringed upon. No free state has a right to force another free state to adopt repugnant measures. Force and liberty are antagonistic. Either must fall to the ground.<sup>28</sup>

So, though he deplored secession, Wise held that the right to secede was there. The foregoing was written in December, 1860. By March, 1861, an anti-Semitic aside in an attack on Judah P. Benjamin by Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts provoked Wise to look upon the act of secession in a more favorable light:

With every passing day we get more and more convinced that the secessionists are right, they would not bow down to a set of fanatics who are blind in their zeal to do wrong, who care much less for the white man than for the Negro, and prove themselves faithful to one thing only, i. e., to fanaticism.<sup>29</sup>

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Christian legislations, and all that sort of new fangled theories, nay most of our eminent statesmen were not even baptized. . . . Now we have plenty (and yet more every day) of prayer meetings, Sunday laws, temperance laws, Christian states and legislations, Christian chaplains in the Army, Navy, hospitals, legislative halls and elsewhere, with a masterly inactivity, a lack of energy and vigor, a want of strength and honesty of purpose, plenty of blunders, weakness, fraud and selfishness almost everywhere. . . . How sick is our moral nature, if we stand in need of such artificial means and priestly guardians, and submit to them! The better nature of moral free-men must revolt against the impertinence of men to be our guardians in religious matters, in matters between man and his God. . . .

<sup>28</sup> *The Israelite*, December 28, 1860, pp. 205-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, March 22, 1861, p. 386. In *The Israelite* of February 27, 1863, Wise again associates Abolitionism with attempts to Christianize the Constitution.

## SILENCE, OUR POLICY

On April 14, 1861, Fort Sumter surrendered to the Confederate forces. The fire of that bombardment fused into a single mass the diverse elements that had existed on each side. Lincoln's call for volunteers met with an overwhelming response. *The Jewish Messenger*, of New York, reported from Cincinnati that "the Jewish young men of this city have entered into the war excitement with considerable enthusiasm; over fifty of our first Jewish young men have enlisted into actual service, and many more are about following."<sup>30</sup>

A little before, Wise had expressed himself in a manner indicating something falling far short of enthusiasm. Under the heading "Silence, our Policy," he had written:

We are the servant of peace, not of war. Hitherto we thought fit to say something on public affairs, and it was our ardent hope to assist those who wished to prevent civil war, but we wasted our words. What can we say now? Shall we lament and weep like Jeremiah over a state of things too sad and too threatening to be looked upon with indifference? We would only be laughed at . . . or probably abused for discouraging the sentiment. Or should we choose sides with one of the parties? We cannot, not only because we abhor the idea of war, but also we have dear friends and near relations, beloved brethren and kinsmen in either section of the country, that our heart bleeds on thinking of their distress. . . .

Therefore silence must henceforth be our policy, silence on all the questions of the day, until a spirit of conciliation shall move the hearts of millions to a better understanding of the blessings of peace, freedom and union. . . .<sup>31</sup>

There is no need to question the genuineness of Wise's abhorrence of the war; but Abraham Lincoln, who felt the anguish of the situation no less keenly, steeled himself to the consequences of his belief that the Union was indissoluble, and sober citizens without

<sup>30</sup> *The Jewish Messenger* (New York), May 3, 1861, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> *The Israelite*, April 19, 1861, p. 334. Evidently Wise's attitude in this respect came under criticism in Cincinnati. *The Israelite* of May 31, 1861, p. 380, contains a letter signed by Wise which was stated to have been sent to several dailies and refused publication. It opens by stating that a Rev. Mr. Conway, in one of his sermons published in the press, had accused *The Israelite* and another Cincinnati religious organ "of unfair motives on account of the silence observed on the present state of the country." Wise defends his attitude along the lines already indicated.

number must have acted in the same spirit. Wise's comment is that of a man who was opposed to the war, but whose position did not allow him to speak his mind.

The outbreak of war must have embarrassed Wise personally, because many of the subscribers to *The Israelite* lived in the South and became cut off, and many of those in the North cancelled their subscriptions. There is something quaint, however, in his lament, published in June, that the Postmaster General had stopped mails to the seceding states, and in his suggestion that this action was unconstitutional.<sup>32</sup> Evidently the implications of total war still had to be grasped.

The absence of any support for the Union cause from Wise did not pass unnoticed in Cincinnati. In *The Israelite* of May 31, 1861, he refers to a sermon by the Rev. Moncure D. Conway "accusing *The Israelite* and another religious organ of this city, of unfair motives on account of the silence preserved on the present state of the country" — to which Wise replied that he never preached on politics: "Spread eagle and star and stripeism may sound agreeably at political gatherings; in the pulpit, however, it appears to me a violation of the contract between minister and congregation, and a misapplication of the Sabbath and the pulpit; there are plenty of opportunities for almost anybody to make patriotic speeches outside the pulpit. . . ."<sup>33</sup>

The weeks rolled on with only the faintest suggestion of a war penetrating the columns of *The Israelite*. The topic was avoided in the reflections which Wise wrote for the New Year 5622,<sup>34</sup> and twelve months later the same policy was observed.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *The Israelite*, June 14, 1861, p. 396.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, May 31, 1861, p. 380.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, September 6, 1861, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> On this occasion the Civil War was alluded to, though without any opinion being expressed (*The Israelite*, September 26, 1862). A week earlier there had been a reference to the interruption in production caused by the proclamation of martial law in Cincinnati.

Occasionally notes were sounded which might be considered ambivalent, e. g., "Should this war result in an entire restoration of this union to its former majesty and integrity" (*The Israelite*, February 21, 1862, p. 269); the reprinting "as somewhat of a curiosity" of a form of prayer for the Confederacy introduced by the Rev. Dr. Bernard Illowy into some of the synagogues of the South (*ibid.*, February 14, 1862, p. 263); and an editorial,

Although Wise placed the main issues of the war outside his purview, his thunder pealed forth when the rights or the honor of Jews were touched. His pen was as forthright as it could be when anti-Semitic accusations were made, when Congress denied Jews the right to have army chaplains, and when General Ulysses S. Grant ordered Jews to be expelled from his Department.<sup>36</sup> More surprising, however, was his sudden incursion into politics at a time of acute controversy and when the Union cause was greatly harassed by war-weariness and internal dissension.

#### DELEND A EST CARTHAGO

Writing of the American people some years after the Civil War, James Bryce observed that "they have what chemists call low specific heat; they grow warm suddenly and cold as suddenly; they are liable to swift and vehement outbursts of feeling which rush like wildfire across the country, gaining glow like the wheel of a railway car, by the accelerated motion."<sup>37</sup> When the guns roared at Fort Sumter a war fever spread through the North, a fever in which all parts of Ohio shared; when the war proved to be something less agreeable than a picnic, when the Union cause suffered in battle and recruits for the army had to be drafted, defeatism became open. In Ohio's state elections in 1861, the Union Party, a coalition of Republicans and War Democrats, carried the day, but the Regular Democratic organization, which, while not clearly opposed to the war, favored peace through a Constitutional convention, remained intact. This sentiment was fed by weariness with the fighting, dismay at maladministration, and resentment at the unaccustomed powers exercised by the Federal government. The outstanding leader of the Peace Democrats was Clement L.

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headed "To Preachers," commending the vacant pulpit at Charleston, S. C. (*ibid.*, March 7, 1862, p. 285).

<sup>36</sup> This whole episode is dealt with in detail in Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War*. See also Ellis Rivkin, "A Decisive Pattern in American Jewish History," *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1958), pp. 37-38.

<sup>37</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London and New York: Macmillan and Company, 1888), II, 253.

Vallandigham, who sat in the Congress as representative for the Dayton District of Ohio. His attacks on the Lincoln Administration were merciless, and it appeared as if he desired the defeat of the Union forces in order to achieve peace. In the 1862 Congressional election, the Democrats won fourteen districts out of nineteen.

Sympathy with Vallandigham's movement expressed itself early in 1863 in the less constitutional forms of desertion from the army and armed resistance to conscription. Vallandigham, who continued to demand conciliation and to attack what he described as the unconstitutional measures of the Lincoln Administration, was arrested by military order in May and sentenced to confinement by a military court. By Lincoln's intervention, he was sent behind the Confederate lines. From the South he made his way through the blockade to Canada and, establishing himself at Niagara Falls, continued his propaganda from there. The arrest of Vallandigham strengthened the hold of the Peace Democrats on the party organization, and almost unanimously he was nominated as candidate for the governorship.<sup>38</sup>

The election was bitterly fought, and it was under these conditions that Wise, who previously had been adamant in his refusal to talk politics, suddenly descended into the arena. Cincinnati's *Daily Enquirer*, of September 6, 1863, reported the Democratic County Convention held at Carthage on the previous day. It was a Saturday, and Wise had not been present, but he received 280 votes, out of a possible 312, in the ballot for nomination of a state senator. The newspaper, which was the leading supporter of the Vallandigham cause, commented: "Dr. Wise is a gentleman of learning and accomplishments — is well known as an estimable Hebrew rabbi of this city. He would make an excellent Senator. . . ."

The news must have agitated some part of Wise's congregation, because two days after this report — that is, on September 8th — there was a special meeting of the Board of Trustees "to take in consideration the nomination of Dr. I. M. Wise as State Senator. . . ." "After some discussion," the minutes of the meeting tell us, "a

<sup>38</sup> Roseboom and Weisenburger, 282.

Committee of 3 . . . were on motion appointed to draft suitable resolutions, expressing the sentiments of the Board in relation to this matter, who reported the following communication to Dr. Wise, which was unanimously adopted and the Secy. ordered to forward the same, after which the meeting adjourned."

The letter appended to the minutes bears the date September 3, 1863 — the day prior to the meeting — and under that date it was subsequently published.<sup>39</sup> It is couched in respectful terms:

Rev. Sir — By unanimous desire of the Board of Trustees of K. K. [Holy Congregation] Bene Jeshurun, I am instructed to communicate to you that the subject of your nomination as State Senator by a Convention held at Carthage, on the 5th inst., has been fully deliberated upon.

The Board feels greatly honoured by this demonstration of confidence bestowed upon you; they are also well aware of your sincere attachment to our common country; nevertheless, as it is an established law with us that our minister should be present in the synagogue whenever divine service is held, and also, your services otherwise being indispensably necessary in our congregation, as well as in the scholastic department, you are hereby politely, but most emphatically requested to decline the said nomination at once.

With due regard, I have the honor to be, Rev. Sir, your obedient servant,

Fred[erick]. Eichberg,  
Sec'y of the K. K. Bene Jeshurun.

The polite tone of this letter does not conceal the "emphatically" and "at once" in its operative words.

Under the same date, the Board of Directors of the Talmud Yelodim Institute wrote to Wise, forwarding a resolution passed that day. This wears no velvet glove:

The Rev. Dr. Wise is engaged as school superintendent, with a fixed salary attached, and the duties of the superintendent are such as to require his attendance almost daily at the school.

Resolved, that we remonstrate to the acceptance, by the Rev. Dr. Wise, of the above named nomination.

Resolved, that we desire the Rev. Dr. Wise to decline the nomination, and for particular reason, that the duties and obligations due to our Institute are paramount to any other engagements.

<sup>39</sup> See *The Daily Times* (Cincinnati), September 10, 1863, p. 3.

## PEACE DEMOCRATS AND SHODDY CONTRACTORS

The trustees of the congregation held their quarterly meeting less than two weeks later, on September 19th, and a general meeting took place on September 20th. The minutes of neither meeting make reference to this incident. In the meantime, however, Wise had replied to the communications addressed to him, and the matter had spilled over into the daily press. In the course of his reply Wise stated:

. . . I beg leave to state that the duties I owe to the congregation and the school are prior to those of any other office to which I might be elected hereafter; therefore, as long as I am not dispensed of the first, I cannot enter upon any other. As you maintain you can not dispense with my humble services for the time I might be obliged to spend at the Capital of the State, and the law of the congregation especially ordains it so, I certainly feel obliged to decline a nomination so honourably tendered, notwithstanding my private opinion, that I might render some services to my country, not altogether unessential, especially as those who nominated me know well my sincere attachment to this country and government. God will save the Union and the Constitution; liberty and justice for all, without my active co-operation, being, after all, without any political aspirations — only an humble individual.

The tone is distinctly more chastened than that of the fighting editor of *The Israelite*. And perhaps the denial of political ambitions at the end only calls attention to that which it professes to disavow.

Some hint of these proceedings appears to have been dropped in the ear of the press. On September 8th, Cincinnati's strongly Unionist *Daily Commercial* remarked: "It is uncertain, we understand, whether Dr. Wise will accept the nomination." This hint may have encouraged further disclosures, for on September 10th, the *Daily Times*, an evening paper, published the correspondence, and on the following morning the pro-Vallandigham *Daily Enquirer* came out with this announcement:

The Rev. Dr. Wise has been forced, by outside pressure, to decline the Democratic nomination for State Senator. Had his name been on the other ticket, the Shoddy Contractors, who have been so busy in pulling the wires to produce this result, would have been contented to let it remain. The

names of these Shoddy Contractors do not appear on the record, but they are known nevertheless.<sup>40</sup>

That evening — September 11th — the *Daily Times* printed the *Daily Enquirer's* comments and added its own in a somewhat naive vein:

Relative to the above we have to say that when the letters announcing the declination of Dr. Wise were handed us yesterday, we asked if party feeling had anything to do with the matter. The committee assured us in the negative, but that they did not desire to release Dr. Wise even temporarily from his labors as a minister, but further, that it was against the tenets of their denomination to recognize the right of their minister to take an active part in political life.

On the morning of September 11th, the Unionist *Daily Commercial* also had printed the correspondence without comment, but, having read the *Enquirer's* acidly partisan observations, it returned to the subject on the following morning. Having quoted from the *Enquirer*, it proceeded:

The friends of Dr. Wise, who urged him to decline the nomination, will not be slow to appreciate this. The repetition of the phrase "Shoddy Contractors" is intended to cast an imputation on all Israelites who do not sustain Vallandigham.

It is reasonable to assume that it must have been humiliating to Wise, not merely to be forced to retrace his steps, but to have the fact bandied about in the daily press. In *The Israelite* of September 18th, he printed the correspondence and stated that "these papers were not intended for publication, but having been done so in the *Times*, Sept. 10, we think proper to republish them." By way of comment, he reminded his readers that on November 5, 1854, the Bene Israel Congregation, of Cincinnati, had elected him its rabbi, preacher, and school superintendent, but that B'nai Yeshurun would not allow him to accept the office. Did he think that, therefore, he was entitled to make his own terms?

Apart from the explanation printed in *The Times* of September 11th, no evidence has come to light which amplifies the written

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Enquirer* (Cincinnati), September 11, 1863, p. 2.

exchanges between Wise and his officers. Obviously they were not going to admit to the press that they were actuated by party feeling. Jews who were prominent in the clothing trade might be said to have acquired a pecuniary interest in the stability of the Republican Administration by virtue of the war contracts which they were enjoying.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Cincinnati as a whole was not a pro-Vallandigham center; and the congregation's case against having its rabbi involved in a bitterly contested election,<sup>42</sup> and as a supporter of a man who had been exiled as a traitor, was, to say the least, plausible.

### WE WILL SQUARE ACCOUNTS

Wise might have squared his candidature with his "no political preaching" line by asserting that what he might do as a state senator had nothing to do with his rabbinic office. His association with the Vallandigham Democrats is a development of the attitude which he expressed earlier towards secession and peace. But it is conceivable that beyond this, and beyond a resentment at military arrests and the suppression of free speech, a specifically Jewish interest may have drawn him to Vallandigham. On two occasions the member for the Dayton District had exerted himself to protect Jewish rights.

<sup>41</sup> The prominence of Jews in the clothing trade is mentioned in Roseboom and Weisenburger, pp. 122-23. *The Occident* (Philadelphia), May, 1863, p. 94, had noted "many of the Israelites of Cincinnati have grown immensely rich, as we hear, from contracts and other business springing up in their favour from the dreadful war of desolation which now sweeps over the Southern section of the land." A sign of this prosperity was the building of the large Plum Street Temple which Wise's congregation embarked upon at this period.

<sup>42</sup> Wise withdrew before election day, but the atmosphere of the contest had presumably developed before. Of this the following description is of interest:

The campaign of 1863 was rancorous to the point of ferocity, and has never been equalled in this state for political ferocity either before or since. . . . The bitterness of that contest became so intense in many parts of the state that business relations between Democrats and Republicans were entirely severed. They would have nothing to do with each other. The political feud was carried into their families, and old friends and neighbours became strangers. Fist fights were of daily occurrence, and a pin or emblem of any kind worn by a Democrat was like a red rag to a bull before the eyes of a Republican.

(Thomas C. Powell, *The Democratic Party of the State of Ohio* [Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Publishing Co., 1913], I, 148.)

On July 12, 1861, a Volunteer Bill came before Congress by which any "regularly ordained minister of some Christian denomination" would be qualified for appointment as an army chaplain. Vallandigham had moved an amendment to substitute "religious society" for "Christian denomination," doing so specifically because the clause as worded excluded Jews. His amendment was rejected, and Wise protested in *The Israelite* against "this unjust violation of our constitutional rights," adding: "Keep this paper for future reference. Peace will be restored to this country, then we will square accounts."<sup>43</sup>

But there had been an earlier occasion on which Vallandigham had taken a stand. The United States Treaty with Switzerland in 1855 had contained a clause which countenanced discrimination against Jews. Wise had taken a prominent part in the agitation against this treaty, writing articles on the subject in *The Israelite*, attending a convention of Jewish leaders in Baltimore, and joining a deputation to President Buchanan in October, 1857.<sup>44</sup> Here, too, Vallandigham had proved helpful to the Jewish cause. On March 2, 1859, he had introduced a motion requesting the President to communicate to the Congress any correspondence between Switzerland and the United States relative to the treaty, and the comment of New York's *Jewish Messenger* indicates that he had attempted to secure the intervention of the Executive in the Mortara Case.<sup>45</sup> In the absence of evidence we cannot be certain, but it is not far-fetched to assume that an appeal was made to Wise on the basis of these actions, and that they may have had something to do with his response. It is also possible that the chance to make a political career for himself was uppermost in his mind.

#### AN UNSETTLED ERA

What might look like inconsistency between Wise's attraction to the Republican Party in 1856 and his adherence to the Peace

<sup>43</sup> *The Israelite*, July 19, 1861, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> In Solomon M. Stroock, "Switzerland and American Jews," *PAJHS*, XI, 7, there are several references to the part played by Wise in the agitation against the treaty.

<sup>45</sup> *The Jewish Messenger* (New York), March 11, 1859, p. 75.

Democrats in 1863 is not important. Seven years lay between the two episodes; it was an unsettled era, and each party in its day may have seemed to represent the cause of freedom.

Moreover, if the character of Wise's writings is at all revealing, no single episode should be taken by itself as indicating the direction in which he was moving. He was impetuous, usually down to earth, often passionate; his style was crude; his opinion did not receive expression in considered, logical form. He was like an angry fly, buzzing, on a short-range view, first in this direction, and then in that; no single tack necessarily indicates the desired goal, but only out of a series can the direction be plotted.

Before this can be attempted, the investigation must be carried further. The source of Wise's opinions — and the influences which came to bear upon him — may emerge from a further reading of the publications, English and German, circulating in Cincinnati during the period under review. Thus far, one senses that his attitudes were molded by the feelings of an immigrant from Metternich's Austria, settled in a state which allowed no slavery and was, therefore, not involved in direct responsibility for the institution, but which was sufficiently connected with the South to make it difficult to take a high moral attitude. The United States, as seen from that position, gave peace and freedom, and the *status quo* was reasonably perfect. To interfere was unnecessary.

#### CORRIGENDUM

Prof. Harry Kahn, of Burlington, Vt., has kindly called to our attention the fact that in the April, 1963, issue of *AJA* (XV, 17-20), Buttenhausen is incorrectly identified as in Bavaria. In fact, the town is in Wuerttemberg.