

## The American Jew in 1872

*Comparative religion was an infant discipline during the 1800's, so that an inquisitive reader in post-Civil War America who wished some accurate and authoritative information about his Jewish fellow citizens would have found it very difficult to satisfy his curiosity. In 1872, however, there finally appeared a book whose account of the American religious scene — including the Jewish component — had been, as the Reverend Dr. Alfred Nevin said in introducing it, "prepared with much care, accuracy, and ability." The book, edited by William Burder and published at Philadelphia, bore the rather lugubrious title, A History of All Religions: With Accounts of the Ceremonies and Customs, or the Forms of Worship Practised by the Several Nations of the Known World, from the Earliest Records to the Year 1872, with a Full Account, Historical, Doctrinal and Statistical, of All the Religious Denominations. A generation before, in 1841, basing himself on an early eighteenth-century French writer, Bernard Picart, Burder had brought out a similar volume at London, but the 1872 edition contained a section on "Religious Denominations in the United States," including an unsigned, but generally knowledgeable six-page article on the Jews. That Burder himself could take credit for the article is unlikely, of course. The scholarly Sabato Morais, rabbi of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation, is listed among the "Contributors to the History of All Religious Denominations in the United States," and Burder at the most probably edited the rabbi's manuscript. Morais' notion of American Jewish beginnings was faulty — he overlooked, for instance, the establishment of a Jewish community at Dutch New Amsterdam, now New York City, in 1654 — but his acquaintance with the community of his own day was thorough enough. The non-Jewish reader for whom Burder had undertaken publication of the book could come away with an adequate estimate of Jewish life in contemporary America.*

### JEWES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

#### CONGREGATIONS

The first appearance in our country of a community of men professing Judaism dates from the year 1694. They who formed it

were a number of wealthy families of Spanish and Portuguese descent. Having emigrated from some of the West India islands, they settled in Newport, R. I. The synagogue they erected and the burial ground they purchased are still objects of considerable interest. Though no longer in use by reason of the absence of any Israelites, care is taken that they be always kept in perfect order. Instructions were left to that effect by Judah Touro, an American born of the Hebrew persuasion. Among his munificent legacies to Jews and Christians, he bequeathed the necessary means to carry out his intentions respecting the preservation of those two places associated with the establishing of his brethren in this land.

The next settlement of Jews was in New York, in the year 1729. Before that period scarcely any of the ancient faith could be met in that city. But since then the influx of foreigners has been remarkably perceptible in the increase of Israelites. Their number is said to reach at present seventy-five thousand, which, if those residing in Brooklyn be calculated together, will probably amount to one hundred thousand. Their synagogues are very many, and they compare well in architectural beauty and elegance with the handsomest churches adorning that state.

Savannah, Ga., had formed in 1733 a religious body, which, till recently, remained the only congregation. But ritual differences gave rise to the establishment of another synagogue, more in consonance with the customs and taste of the worshippers.

In Charleston, S. C., the Jewish congregation has records going as far back as 1765. And up to 1843 there was but that first established. About that time, however, a division of opinions touching certain ritual questions occasioned a separation, and another was formed by those who disapproved of changes in the synagogue service. In late years mutual concessions effected a reconciliation, and the two congregations merged into a flourishing one.

The oldest congregation in Philadelphia was organized in 1782, principally — as usual in those days — by men of Spanish and Portuguese extraction. But in the course of years, persons from the North of Europe constituted themselves into separate bodies. At present eight synagogues are open for worship to the Jewish population. The latter is variously reckoned. But ten thousand would

seem to approach the correct number. Congregations of Hebrews can be found also in smaller cities of Pennsylvania, increasing in proportion to the advantages that the respective places offer to industry; for it may be safely asserted that wherever commerce flourishes there Israelites take up their abode.

Richmond, Va., had one synagogue, during a period of nearly half a century. But within the last thirty years the settling of foreigners in that city added considerably to the number of Jewish houses of prayer.

A state whose Hebrew citizens rival those of New York and Pennsylvania in standing and wealth is Ohio. Cincinnati especially contains several congregations noted for the commanding influence of their members. Fifty years ago a person in search of a synagogue might, perhaps, have found a few worshipers in a hired room. Now structures of imposing stateliness and grandeur will meet his vision in various localities.

Maryland, since the year 1823, in which a congregation was organized, has witnessed a vast increase of Jewish inhabitants. Baltimore alone counts five synagogues, some of which are thronged with worshipers on each revolving Sabbath, and on the festivals.

New Orleans, La., which the opulent Judah Touro had chosen for his residence, has a synagogue largely endowed by his liberality. It is not quite so old as that which German Israelites founded in 1828; nevertheless, its status has not been impaired by the progress which the last named has attained.

#### NUMBER OF JEWS IN THE U. S.

To offer a detailed account of Jewish congregations which have sprung up in our midst within the last half a century would be to allow this article a space exceeding the limits we purpose assigning to it. Indeed, so rapidly do those religious organizations increase, that it might baffle the endeavors of giving correct statistics. Suffice to say, that the descendants of the patriarchs can be found through the length and breadth of the Union. Whether we travel in the New England States, or in the distant regions of the West, houses of worship will be met which resound with prayers uttered by the

outcasts of Judea. Possessing no other data than the aforesaid to form a criterion, we may, in the aggregate, put down the number of Jews in the United States to about half a million.

### RITUALS

In the preceding pages, the name of Spanish and Portuguese, in contradistinction to that of German Jews, has been mentioned. The reader may feel curious to know in what they differ. With regard to the tenets of their faith, they hold precisely the same views. They both accept the thirteen creeds laid down by Maimonides, and conform likewise to the traditional rules embodied in the Talmud. The long dispersion, however, and the interruption of communication consequent thereupon caused a notable diversity in the liturgy, but specially in the pronouncing of the Hebrew language; those whose ancestors dwelt, previous to the expulsion of 1492 by the edict of Ferdinand and Isabella, in the Iberian land giving to it a softer sound than their co-religionists, who are of Teutonic origin. It would be impossible at this distance of time — and since the language has ceased to be spoken — to ascertain which accent is the most correct. Grammarians appear to favor, if not in toto, partly at least, that of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews.

With respect to the liturgy, that of the Germans, for ordinary occasions, contains the traditional prayers in a more condensed form. But for the festivals and fast days it abounds in poetical compositions of little merit and of obscure meaning.

### REFORM AND ORTHODOX

This fact has furnished the ground for the introduction of radical changes in the synagogue. It was argued that to detain the congregation with the recital of that which requires a comment to understand would be to estrange them from the worship; that the absence of mind exhibited by many, during the reading of that portion of the ritual, was detracting from the sanctity of the service; and that unless it be expunged the rising generation would join religious communions more congenial to their feelings.

The pruning knife was then unsparingly used, but, as it often happens, no sooner was the natural reluctance of altering what had stood for centuries overcome, than a desire for changes of a different nature found strong advocates.

Heretofore simplicity had characterized the Jewish worship. A reader (Hazan), chosen by the congregation, chanted the established prayers, and the audience made the responses. Either that individual, or another possessed of the requisite knowledge, delivered an occasional lecture explanatory of the biblical lesson of the week, or instructive of the duties connected with some approaching holiday. But that system was declared by Jews of the modern school incompatible with the wants of the age. First vocal music was introduced, and soon after instrumental music echoed in the synagogue. Hymns in English and German superseded Hebrew psalmodes; and preaching, which had been, however welcome, a mere adjunct, became the most indispensable part of the service.

These innovations, to which many Israelites object, because they divest the synagogue of the venerable appearance which antiquity gives it, and because they dress it in a garb foreign thereto, would nevertheless have been tolerated, as not encroaching absolutely upon the tenets of Judaism; but when the innovators went further, and erased from the ritual every mention of the restoration of their people to Palestine, every allusion to the resurrection of the dead, and taught in their sermons the abrogation of the dietary laws, then a schism divided the Jews into two camps; so that at present they are distinguished in almost all cities by the name of Orthodox and Reformers.

#### CHARITIES

But, notwithstanding this diversity of opinions, they generally unite in objects of benevolence. It is the acknowledged merit of Israelites that they are very solicitous for the welfare of their needy brethren. They will never suffer the destitute to be an incubus upon society at large. Rarely is any of their faith an inmate of the almshouse, and more rarely is any arrested as a vagrant or an outlaw. Charitable associations supplying food, garments, fuel, and house

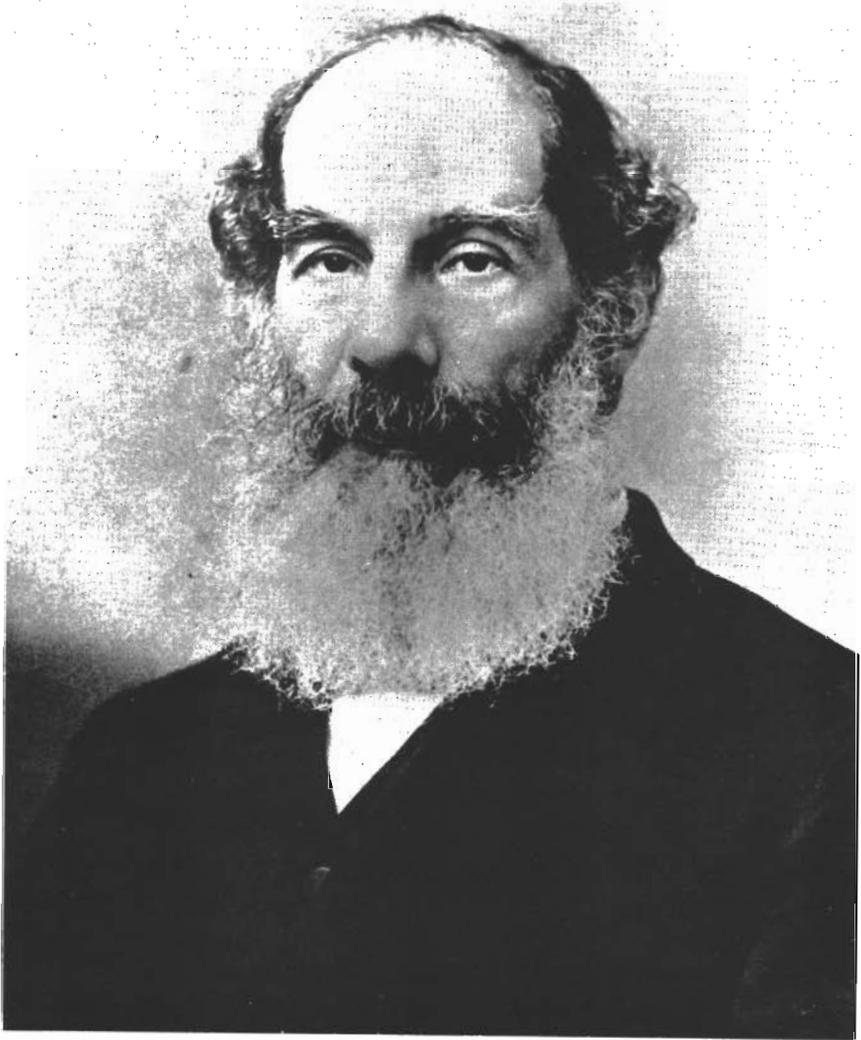
rent; loan societies, to encourage the industrious; hospitals, orphan asylums; foster houses, and homes for the invalid and the decrepit, are supported wherever a Jewish community exists. Incalculable is the sum yearly spent upon the maintenance of these institutions, and the effect thereof can be seen in the general absence of Jewish mendicants. Indeed, the facility with which assistance may be obtained has doubtless encouraged, in various instances, idle habits. Sensible of this fact, and anxious to prevent imposition, the directors of beneficial associations have been endeavoring of late to correct the evil by a fusion of all charities, under the guidance of a board of managers. These are men that have the capacity to discriminate, and leisure to examine into each case coming under their notice. Chicago took the lead in the matter, Philadelphia followed, and other cities are active to bring it to a successful completion.

#### SECRET SOCIETIES

Within the last decade three secret societies have been started, and they are rapidly spreading among our Jewish population. The first, called "The Sons of the Covenant" [B'nai B'rith], is the oldest, and consequently the largest. Under its auspices several public charities had their origin. The second, named "The Free Sons of Israel," has been divided into two orders, "The Independent S. of I.," and "The Improved S. of I." The third, styled "The Iron Band" [Keshet shel Barzel], bids fair to become very popular, for, in a short lapse of time, one hundred and fifty lodges were installed.

All the three are founded upon the same principle, and they aim to reach the same end. An amount, varying with the age of the applicant, is demanded before his initiation, and he is likewise bound to pay a fixed yearly subscription. That entitles him, if unable to follow his habitual vocation because of sickness, to five dollars a week. At his death his funeral expenses are defrayed, and his heirs receive a thousand dollars.

Should any member in good standing be in need, a grant is made by the lodge to which he is affiliated, for his temporary relief; and in a manner to spare his feelings.



*Courtesy, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York*

Sabato Morais  
(sec p. 29)



## SCHOOLS

Not less heedful than in dispensing charity, the Jews of our country are in affording education. Recent statistics show that the average attendance of their children to schools exceeds that of other denominations. The majority, recognizing the advantages of our admirable system, avail themselves of our public schools, and have their sons and daughters taught there. But some parents, wishing to combine religious with secular instruction, prefer those institutes where a portion of the time is given to studying the Hebrew language and the ritual. Institutions of that kind, however, are neither popular nor numerous, the Israelites of the United States evidently preferring to blend with the rest of their fellow citizens in all things which do not immediately appertain to their peculiar belief. But to facilitate the acquiring of the ancient tongue, almost every congregation has a school attached to it, where that branch of education is imparted during the afternoon or evening.

## SUNDAY SCHOOLS

In addition to that, Sunday schools are frequented by children of both sexes. A Philadelphia lady [Rebecca Gratz], highly accomplished, and devoted to her people, started the idea, about thirty years ago, of establishing such an organization. Her exertions were crowned with success. Sunday schools have spread everywhere, and they command the hearty support of the community. Hundreds of pupils attend with regularity, and their gratuitous teachers take pride in the task voluntarily assumed.

## COLLEGES

A great want yet felt, and not easily supplied, is the existence of colleges for the training of ministers. To this day none of the readers and preachers at the synagogue can claim the United States of America as their birthplace, or as the nursery of learning in which their minds were shapen. Foreigners fill all positions in the Jewish Church, and some of them too far advanced in life to become con-

versant with the vernacular, others unable to learn it by reason of their surroundings and occupations; so that German is the vehicle of religious teaching in most of the pulpits. An effort to establish colleges was made in Cincinnati [Zion College, 1855-1857] and in New York [Temple Emanu-El Theological Seminary, 1865], but it proved abortive. One has been in existence for the last four years in Philadelphia [Maimonides College], but it has not met with due encouragement. An idea seems to prevail that as long as Europe can furnish America with rabbis, the means necessary for the support of seminaries and academies may be bestowed on other objects. A few years will reveal the extent of an error so generally entertained. The youths of the Hebrew faith, having grown to manhood, will *demand* to be guided by individuals identified with them in language and national feelings.

#### JOURNALS

Papers mainly devoted to the interest of the Jewish Church are still few. New York publishes four weekly, one entirely in English (the *Jewish Messenger*); two in English and German (the *Hebrew Leader* and the *Jewish Times*), and another in Hebrew (the *Observer* [*Hatsofe*]). In Brooklyn, one entitled the *Era* has just begun to appear. Cincinnati issues one in English (the *Israelite*), and another in German (the *Deborah*). In San Francisco, Cal., two periodicals called *The Gleaner* and *The Hebrew* are printed, and occasionally we hear of some ineffectual endeavors to give there and elsewhere the Jewish press a larger scope. A severe loss journalism sustained in the cessation of a monthly magazine named *The Occident*, ably conducted for upwards of a quarter of a century in Philadelphia. After the decease of its editor and proprietor [Isaac Leeser, died 1868], an attempt was made, for a time, to prevent its extinction, but it failed.

#### LITERARY ASSOCIATIONS

An increasing taste for polite literature is evinced by the rising in our midst of associations which aim at the mental improvement

of their members. Various subjects are debated, short essays prepared, select portions of the classics read, upon all of which the sharp criticism of appointed judges is passed.

#### PUBLICATION SOCIETY

But what bids fair to promote the cause of learning, but specially of Jewish literature among the Hebrews of this land, is the project recently set on foot of forming a publication society. Properly speaking, it might be termed a revival, because some twenty-five years ago it existed, and gave to the public pamphlets and volumes as valuable as they were interesting. But it was suffered to die out. Now a new spirit has exhibited itself in various circles, and the promises for a speedy accomplishment of that design are very flattering. It is proposed that a translation of the Old Testament, more agreeable to the text than the authorized version, shall be the first fruit offered to American Israelites. That all-important work is to be followed by others, which multitudes may read with profit and procure for a nominal sum.

#### BOARD OF DELEGATES

The credit of having imparted a fresh impetus to the undertaking is vastly due to the Board of Hebrew Delegates [Board of Delegates of American Israelites]. That body lent its influence, and offered its support in this instance, as it has in many others, since its organization. Sixteen years ago a few prominent men of the Jewish persuasion met to consult how they could effectually redress any public wrong done them, as a religious body, and how they could cast a protecting shield around the life of millions of their fellow believers continually exposed to persecution in benighted countries. They issued a circular, urging each congregation to send two delegates to a meeting which would be held in New York. The response was not at first encouraging, yet it did not deter those zealous few from carrying out their intentions. They formed an association whose inherent vigor has been displayed in many a case of emergency. Through its energetic remonstrances injustice against the Hebrews, even in our midst, was

prevented. By its strong appeals the government of the United States interposed on behalf of the oppressed. It likewise seasonably rebuked narrow-mindedness and prejudice among high officials, and forced such before the bar of public opinion. The Board of Delegates joined similar organizations originated in Europe for the mental and moral elevation of the scattered members of the Hebrew race. It has encouraged agricultural schools in the Holy land; the introduction of a better system of education in the Barbary States; the sending of a missionary to rescue the Falasha Jews from heathenism. It has encouraged emigration to this country of freedom among the Hebrews still weighed down by relentless despotism, and whenever and wherever the hand of tyranny was raised to strike, it strove, though not always effectively, to parry the blow. That young but energetic association, alive to the advantage of fostering love for ancient literature, and a strong desire to rear ministers "to the manner born," is now actively engaged in working out these two objects. It will shortly be seen whether the time is yet ripe for the consummation of such an enterprise.

#### STANDING OF THE JEWS IN THE U. S.

It would be superfluous to say that the Jew labors under no disability, political or civil, in our Union. All avenues to greatness are open equally to him as to any member of the community. He is in every sense of the word the peer of his fellow citizens of another creed. This knowledge imparts to him the full dignity of manhood, and while raising him in his own estimation it develops all his capacities. On the bench, as well as in the busy marts of trade, alike among the medical as among the legal faculty, he occupies a seat, and the hall of legislation has, more than once, heard his voice. In this country, wrested from tyranny, and devoted to liberty, the Jew can, like his ancestors in the days of Solomon, "sit under his vine and his fig tree, with none to make him afraid."