

Isaac Leeser: Centennial Reflections

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When Isaac Leeser died in Philadelphia on February 1, 1868, Mayer Sulzberger, his young disciple — destined to become the first professing Jew to serve on the Philadelphia bench, a leader in such Jewish institutions as the American Jewish Committee, and the first important American collector of Hebrew manuscripts and incunabula — wrote of his teacher in these eulogistic terms:

We honestly believe, that since the great Mendelssohn, no one follower of the Law of Moses, either in Europe or America, has done so much and so successfully to vindicate Jacob's sacred inheritance when aspersed, to diffuse it when neglected, to promote its study when it had almost died out, as our lamented friend.

There have been greater Talmudists, there may have been more eloquent orators and more graceful writers; but among them all, there has been no greater genius, no better Jew, and no purer man than Isaac Leeser.¹

Sulzberger's tribute reflected the sorrowing, zealous adulation of a young student-assistant for his master; but it missed the mark by far. Leeser ought not to have been compared to the learned, philosophical Moses Mendelssohn. It would have been equally erroneous to have matched him against Samson Raphael Hirsch, Abraham Geiger, Leopold Zunz, or any other magisterial European Jewish spokesman of the day. Leeser was in no sense a creative scholar or a profound thinker. If he had been either, he would have been utterly out of place in the American milieu. Frustration would have driven him mad. The crisis in nineteenth-century European Judaism required the development of towering academicians who strove to interpret or reinterpret traditional religious values in terms of con-

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¹ *Occident*, XXV (1867-68), pp. 600-601.

temporary philosophical ideas and intellectual categories. The problem of the Jew in America demanded a different kind of direction. Leeser responded to that need. Sulzberger would have been more accurate if he had described Leeser as the first American Jewish leader who attempted to teach American Jews how to survive as Jews in a land where Judaism had not yet established roots.

But Sulzberger was too young to comprehend Leeser's achievements. He viewed him on the level of intellectuality, rather than in the perspective of historic growth. Sulzberger had no personal knowledge of the sterile, unpromising condition of American Judaism in 1829, when young Isaac Leeser had responded to the call of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation to become its *hazzan* (cantor-minister). There were then ten to fifteen thousand Jews in the country, served by perhaps a dozen congregations: two per community in New York City, Philadelphia, and Charleston; one each in Baltimore, Richmond, Savannah, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. There was not even one "ordained" rabbi in the entire country. A few laymen had been well trained in traditional lore and law. Israel Baer Kursheedt, of New York City, was the most learned Jew in the land. But such men as he occupied no official position; perhaps they did not accept formal responsibility for the advancement of Judaism because they thought it hopeless even to attempt to stem the tide of ignorance, apathy, and assimilation which were characteristic of the American experience of Jews. Intermarriage was rampant not only among native-born Jews of the second and third generations, but even among newly arrived immigrants. This was a sign of the widespread feeling that Judaism had no future in this new society, that it had no role to play in the lives of the young adventurers who were coming to the United States to build a new being for themselves through their own grit and resourcefulness.

A few lay enthusiasts had attempted to arouse some interest in the creation of a Jewish boarding school which would assure the survival of Judaism through the indoctrination of the younger generation in the traditional learning. Mordecai Manuel Noah, the journalist-politician of New York City, Moses Elias Levy, the Florida real-estate investor, and Jacob S. Solis, a devoted Jew whose

efforts to make a living through storekeeping in various towns met with little success, were among those who tried to establish such an educational institution, but they spoke to deaf ears. The religious schools which were associated with the existing congregations were notable for the ineffectiveness of their instruction and for the indifference of most of their graduates to Jewish learning and ceremonial practice. At Charleston in 1824, the first attempt to create a new kind of Jewish congregation, stimulated by reports of reforms in theology and practice which had taken place in Europe and by the example of rationalistic Unitarian worship in America, floundered in a morass of practical problems: the congregation had no zealous, dynamic professional leader to guide its development; its amateur spokesman, the educator-dramatist-journalist Isaac Harby, left town to seek a better living in the North; although much interest in the experiment was evinced by liberal Christians, Jews in Charleston and other American communities looked askance at "The Reformed Society of Israelites." Most of the early efforts to confront the problems of Jewish education and adjustment met with apathy or hostility.

I CONSENTED TO SERVE

The situation of European Judaism was bad enough: the struggle against deeply ingrained prejudice and repression; the lack of educational and occupational preparation of the Jewish masses for entrance into contemporary society; the conviction of wealthy, well-educated Jews that they themselves had no alternative to paying the price of baptism in order to obtain the "ticket" (as Heinrich Heine called it) which would admit them to European society; the apparently overwhelming challenge of contemporary philosophical and social ideas to Jewish laws and customs which had remained unchanged for three or four centuries. But the situation was even worse in the United States. Here Judaism possessed no roots or patterns, no masses of Jews who would participate in a full Jewish life through habit. The absence of a mass base meant that each Jew had to be appealed to as an individual. People were not used to reinforcing each other's practice of Judaism in the home and par-

ticipation in the regular worship of the synagogue. Nor was there any hostile pressure on Jews from the outside to keep them loyal to their ancestral faith. Here neither church nor government looked at Jews from a jaundiced medieval tradition of suspicion and hatred. Here the Jew was the equal of his neighbor in the eyes of the law. No state religion made him, automatically, a second-class citizen. In this open market place of religion and philosophical ideas, the Jew could opt to be neither a practicing Jew nor Christian; he could become a secular man of Jewish birth. No Jewry had lived in this kind of climate of freedom since the days of pre-Christian Alexandria, when religion was to a great degree a formality, and a man could pursue his own way.

It was to this inauspicious, problematic Jewish community that Isaac Leeser came when he emigrated from Germany to Richmond in 1824 to work for his uncle, Zalma Rehine. Not yet eighteen years old, he had studied traditional Jewish subjects under rabbis of the old school and had obtained some secular knowledge at the Gymnasium in Münster. He must have had no thought of undertaking a career of religious leadership, or else he would have devoted further years of study to the foundations of traditional Judaism, the Talmud and the legal codes. In Richmond, he entered a private school and studied English for a few months, then learned the ways of a storekeeper from his uncle. But the attraction of the synagogue was strong: he volunteered to assist the Richmond *hazzan* in the conduct of services, thereby learning the Sephardic *minhag* (rite), and taught the local children in the religious school classes. He seems also to have continued to study anything Judaic that he could find in a book. In 1828, he wrote a series of articles in defense of Jewish thought for a Richmond newspaper in answer to some slurs which had appeared in a British journal. The following year his name was placed in nomination for the Philadelphia position by Jacob Mordecai, a Jewish farmer and educator with a good Jewish background, who lived near Richmond and whose recommendation carried much weight with his friends in Philadelphia. We do not know if Mordecai wrote to Mikveh Israel without consulting his young friend, or if Leeser was privy to the correspondence. At any rate, he did consent to go North to conduct services so that the congregants might

judge his suitability, although he made no pretense of being a learned rabbi, or of possessing the results of the long years of training which he believed necessary for genuine Jewish religious leadership. Some years later, he wrote to the Chief Rabbi of England:

Knowing my own want of proper qualification, I would never have consented to serve, if others more fitting in point of standing, information, or other qualities had been here; but this not being the case (as is proved by there being yet two congregations at least in this country without a regular hazzan), I consented to serve.²

This modest recognition of his own educational limitations, and a willingness to defer to other men more knowledgeable than he in traditional sources, were fixed aspects of his attitude through all his years of leadership.

But Leeser's ambitions for Judaism in America were not modest. The Philadelphians did not know him very well. If they had been more fully aware of his talent, tenacity, vision, and strength, they would probably have elected any other candidate then available for their pulpit. Behind Leeser's shy and awkward manner, and his homely visage, lurked a reserve of intelligence, insight, and creative stubbornness which would give no peace to his congregations — and compelled them ultimately, in 1850, to sever relations with him. But during the twenty years of his service at Mikveh Israel, he contributed more to the creation of a viable American Judaism than any other Jewish religious leader has ever given.

FORTUNATELY BEARDLESS

From the very beginning of his ministry, he seems to have comprehended American Jewry's need for education, communication, translation, publication, articulation, and unification — a ponderous list, indeed, but it was an accurate assessment of the empty silence of American Jewish life. Less than a year after his entrance into the pulpit of his congregation, Leeser instituted regular English preaching. His members resisted this innovation. Not until 1843

² *Jewish Encyclopedia*, VII, p. 663.

did they adopt the practice as official congregational policy. His sermons were not mere commentaries on the weekly Scripture readings. They were adult education lectures, following a thematic approach, through which he sought to introduce the worshippers to a comprehensive knowledge of the entire range of Jewish teachings. He had brought with him from Richmond the manuscript of his first book, *The Jews and the Mosaic Law* (not published until 1833), which grew out of his newspaper articles, but the first book that he saw through the press was a religious school text book, a translation of Johlson's *Instruction in the Mosaic Religion* (1830). He set out to create or translate an entire library of basic Jewish books for American Jews. But he received little encouragement from his members and officers. Even the cultured Rebecca Gratz thought that he should pay more attention to his liturgical and pastoral responsibilities, and abandon his literary pursuits:

. . . You have been so kind as to enquire about our young reader [hazzan], and I would rather have postponed the subject a little longer — but as everybody have their troubles I may as well tell you his. Before he came to Phila^a he had written some essays in “defense of the Jews and Mosaic law,” which gained him some reputation among a small circle of friends. It was his first attempt at authorship and he fell in love with his work — has enlarged, improved, changed and laboured on it until it has almost become a volume which he greatly desires to see in print. I have read it, and although it gives me a good opinion of his talents have advised him not to publish — but some other friends have encouraged him, and he issued proposals to publish it by subscription . . . nor do I think his style sufficiently elegant to justify his claims to authorship. With these burthens on his shoulders, before he had got through the first difficulties of his new station, he had taken too much upon himself and does not seem to get along as happily as if he had reserved his whole strength and attention to the duties of the reading desk. But youth is apt to be proved, experience will aid in checking, or rather directing his enthusiasm to proper channels . . . he is certainly a very pious and worthy man and takes very hard the latitude allowed in matters of religion in this enlightened age. Fortunately he is a beardless youth. Did he wear the chin of a rabbi, he would be scoffed at by his congregation . . . ³

³ Rebecca Gratz to Maria Gist Gratz, Lexington, Ky., April 18, 1830, Library of the American Jewish Historical Society.

But no amount of discouragement could deter Leeser from a systematic effort to attempt to build the foundations of a strong, enduring traditional Judaism in America. In terms of synagogue decorum, and the provision of prayer translations for those who did not know the Hebrew language, Leeser departed from what we would call an Orthodox position; in all other regards, he was a strict traditionalist, adhering to the dictates, decisions, and documents of the past. It was that kind of Judaism which he was determined to preserve through his activity. Tenaciously and creatively he wrote, translated, published, and organized in a multitude of areas of Jewish religious life. It is difficult to believe that one man could have been so imaginative and productive. He was the first to perceive the need for such institutions as Jewish hospitals, orphanages, and community-wide charity federations on the local scene, and for united endeavors on the national level by congregations and rabbis, culminating in such institutions as teacher-training schools and rabbinical seminaries. The actual organizations and institutions which he succeeded in creating, and the educational and resource materials which he wrote or translated and published, are incredibly extensive: the first volumes of sermons delivered and published by an American Jewish religious teacher (1837); the first complete American translation of the Sephardic prayer book (1837); the first Hebrew primer for children (1838); the first Jewish communal religious school (1839); the first successful American Jewish magazine-news journal (1843); the first American Jewish publication society (1845); the first Hebrew-English Torah to be edited and translated by an American Jew (1845); the first complete English translation of the Ashkenazic prayer book (1848); the first Hebrew "high school" (1849); the first English translation of the entire Bible by an American Jew (1853); the first Jewish defense organization — the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859); the first American Jewish theological seminary — Maimonides College (1867). Practically every form of Jewish activity which supports American Jewish life today was either established or envisaged by this one man. Almost every kind of publication which is essential to Jewish survival was written, translated, or fostered by him.

STRUGGLING AGAINST THE TREND

That Leeser is deserving of a full-scale biography is obvious. It is characteristically tragic that no writer with adequate qualifications, insights, and appreciation has yet attempted to trace the dramatic course of this man's life. We use the words "characteristically tragic" for many reasons. The congregation which he served for twenty years never really understood his nature, supported his endeavors, or applauded his successes. Most of his officers and members, over the years, would have been far happier if he had not seen his role and responsibility writ so large. When, in 1857, a new congregation was organized by his friends specifically to give him a regular platform and income, it was too late to help him undertake the arduous obligations which he had imposed upon himself for the past twenty-eight years — and almost half of the decade that remained of his life was consumed by the frenzy of the Civil War. Congregants who shared his vision in large measure would have helped reduce the pressures of time, money, and strength which constantly assailed him. No publisher, for instance, would undertake the risk of issuing his books; Leeser had to be his own publisher, business manager, proof-reader, salesman, agent. That he was willing to do all this, in addition to the creative aspect of his work, speaks volumes for his character, but it is an indictment of the Jews of his time and place. Another negative aspect of his career was the fact that he was allied with Americanized Jews of Sephardic orientation whose influence was constantly shrinking under the assault of increasing numbers of vigorous German Jewish immigrants. The more time that passed, the smaller his constituency became in relation to the entire American Jewish population. Had he served an Ashkenazic congregation, his influence might have grown with the years, rather than diminished. Riding the crest of the rising tide of liberal-thinking German Jews was Isaac Mayer Wise, who finally succeeded, after Leeser's death, in establishing the instrumentalities for survival which Leeser had attempted to create: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873); the Hebrew Union College (1875); the Central Conference of American Rabbis

(1889). Leeser was struggling against the trend of the day, in attempting to maintain the sway of strict traditionalism; the times called for a liberal interpretation of the Jewish message and way of life. Only when that liberal viewpoint became radical were the traditionalist forces able to mobilize their resources for a rival organizational structure. By then, Leeser had passed from the scene. Many volumes have been written about Wise. He was the founder of institutions, the father of an enduring movement in American Judaism. Leeser had no organizations to preserve his memory. His influence was responsible, through his own creative vision and the work of his disciples, for the establishment of the United Synagogue and the Jewish Theological Seminary of the Conservative movement, and for the creation of Gratz College and Dropsie College in Philadelphia. All of these were the undoubted fruit of his inspiration, though he was dead before they saw the light of day. Fewer sermons will be delivered about Leeser in this year of the centenary of his death, than are devoted to Isaac Mayer Wise *every* year. This reveals something about the fragmentation of American Jewish life, and our myopic loyalty to structures rather than to values, which both Leeser and Wise would deplore.

Yet the overtones of failure in Leeser's life-story should not be exaggerated. Many satisfactions came to him over the years. He was by no means alone. Some loyal friends and followers worked with him and supported him, men like Abraham Hart, the brilliant Philadelphia publisher, who helped him with the technical aspects of the publication society which he founded in 1845. Young men like Gershom Kursheedt, of New Orleans, Solomon Nunes Carvalho, of Charleston and Baltimore, and Mayer Sulzberger responded eagerly to his leadership, took pride in disseminating his ideas and selling his books, carried his message to various parts of the country. Most of his colleagues in the rabbinate respected and admired him; they wrote to him constantly, soliciting his help in the solution of their problems and giving him insight into conditions in their own communities. The collection of some of the files of letters he received, now in the custody of Dropsie College, reveals the vastness of his contacts throughout the country — in metropolitan areas, in small towns, and on the frontiers where his correspon-

dent was sometimes the only Jew for miles around. No Jewish leader of the time was more highly respected throughout the land than Leeser; no one was invited to preach and to officiate at the dedication of more new synagogues than he. Only Isaac Mayer Wise came close to being his rival in this regard. Leeser never married, and was deprived of the affection and strength that a wife and children can give a man, but he had a huge family of Jewish followers throughout the United States. The effectiveness of his ministry was incalculable. While he was denied the strong, organized public support which was his due, it is an undeniable fact that numerous individuals, families, institutions, and communities were strengthened through his leadership, advice, and practical assistance. One of the most dramatic Jewish happenings of the nineteenth century — the bequest by Judah Touro, of New Orleans, of more than \$200,000 to Jewish agencies and institutions in America and in Palestine — was the direct and indirect result of Leeser's labors, through his personal contacts with Touro and through the influence of his New Orleans disciple Gershom Kursheedt, who was in constant communication with his teacher.

Touro's beneficence was not Leeser's greatest single achievement. If he could have done only one thing, and we were to decide from the perspective of these many decades later, we would have to single out Leeser's publication of his monthly journal, *The Occident*. Quite aside from its usefulness as a historic record of the time, *The Occident* was the first instrumentality to give a sense of national belonging to the widely scattered children of Israel in the United States. In its pages he published the best sermons which were submitted to him or which he himself translated from other languages; editorials on the pressing problems of Judaism, ranging from the church-state issue to the question of an educated rabbinate; articles which evaluated his proposals for the unification of American Jewry; debates on ideas of Reform and Orthodoxy; essays on Jewish history and literature; treatments of Jewish theological concepts; controversies with Christian missionaries; and news of every synagogue and Jewish organization in the country that was brought to his attention. The news was as important as the educational and inspirational material. *The Occident* reported on successful programs,

experiments and developments in various parts of the country, stimulating other communities to strengthen their own institutions; spread far and wide the names of emerging lay and rabbinical leaders, and brought them into contact with each other; aroused local leaders to look beyond their immediate problems to the more fundamental challenges of Judaism throughout the land; gave its readers a feeling of coherence and comradeship and overcame thereby the sense of isolation which was the natural result of great distances. Leeser helped American Jews to achieve a feeling of common experience and hope, of working together in the present and facing the future together.

EVERYTHING FROM SCRATCH

One may well ask what it was in Leeser's personality structure that made his career so unique. Unfortunately, thus far we know too little about Leeser's inner being to comprehend or explain the irrepressible drive which sustained him. Perhaps it was the loss of his mother when he was only eight years old. Perhaps it was the unattractiveness of his appearance that pushed him to make his mark — note Rebecca Gratz's comment that he was "ugly and awkward."⁴ Perhaps it was the same negative factor in his make-up which prevented him from marrying. While such psychological insights might help us to understand the sources of his dogged determination to reach his goals, no character analysis can explain the remarkable perception which helped him to develop so swiftly an all-inclusive solution to the problem of Jewish survival in a free America. This came from brilliance of mind and sensitivity of spirit, not from the hunger to achieve.

While there was no model which Leeser or anyone else could adopt for the organization of American Jewry, both European Jewish developments and Protestant denominational achievements undoubtedly helped him to see the way more clearly. In Europe, a number of periodicals had been published in both the vernacular and in Hebrew; rabbinical organizations had been created; modern

⁴ David Philipson (ed.), *Letters of Rebecca Gratz* (Phila., 1929), p. 108 (Nov. 4, 1829).

schools had been established; and communal and provincial consistories had functioned. All of these, of course, were based on the premise of existing communities and institutions. In America, everything had to be created from scratch. The American Protestant denominations had been struggling with the challenge of voluntarism ever since the disestablishment of state churches and had evolved a large number of institutional approaches with which Leeser was familiar. These no doubt helped shape his thinking, or at least made him aware of the variety of ways in which members of a religious group might be served on a national level.

Perhaps the contours of Leeser's program were inevitable. Perhaps Jewish survival and growth in America demanded these specific institutions and projects. It may be that they would have been envisaged or developed, anyway, by one or another leader. The fact is that Wise succeeded where Leeser failed, and there is no reason to believe that Wise would not have developed the same concepts even if Leeser had never come forward with them. It is equally important to recognize that the Conservative and Orthodox movements followed the same pattern in their own organizational growth once Reform found the way. If such trends were built into the situation, so to speak, it is all the more remarkable that this one man, so very early, should have anticipated every detail of the network of organizations and relationships which obtain today — from communal day schools to graduate seminaries of theology, from city-wide federations of philanthropic groups to a national organization for the support of agricultural undertakings in Palestine, from journals of news and opinion to a Jewish publication society, from national rabbinical conferences to local boards of rabbis, from pulpit discourses for adult education to textbooks for children, and many other agencies and programs.

A Moses Mendelssohn would have served little purpose in America in 1829 when Leeser came to Philadelphia — just one hundred years after Mendelssohn's birth. The German-Jewish philosopher would have been hard put to develop a practical, pragmatic scheme of organization and communication on a local and national scale. Leeser established that pattern of organization — help for local communities through national agencies, and the support of



President Harry S. Truman and his friend and former partner, Eddie Jacobson, believed to have influenced President Truman to recognize the new Republic of Israel

(see p. 125)



Courtesy, The Jewish Museum, New York

Photo by Frank J. Darmstaedter, New York

Isaac Leeser
A man of firsts
(see p. 133)

national institutions through local congregations and other affiliates, all intertwined and interlocked on a voluntary level, developed pragmatically for the solution of specific problems. That pattern has proved to be a useful one ever since. But Leeser had little to contribute in such fields as theology and philosophy. His was not a profound, searching mind which could penetrate the intellectual and spiritual perplexities of his or our time. Now that American Jewry possesses the organizations and avenues of communication and education which were essential to its survival, the next challenge awaits us — to nourish men of brilliant insight who will wrestle with the spiritual dilemmas of our time with the same courage and creativity that Leeser devoted to his tasks.⁵

⁵ Further data about Leeser's life and activities can be found in Henry Englander, "Isaac Leeser," *Yearbook, Central Conference of American Rabbis*, XXVIII (1918), pp. 213-52 — a detailed discussion of some of his convictions and beliefs; Korn, "The First American Jewish Theological Seminary: Maimonides College, 1867-1873," *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Cincinnati, 1954), pp. 151-213; Jacob Rader Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775-1865* (Phila., 1955), II, 58-87 — some excerpts from Leeser's descriptions of his travels to various Jewish communities; Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLVIII (1959), 207-44.

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