

Henry Frank: Pioneer American Hebrew Publisher

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The sudden death of the pioneer American Hebrew publisher, Henry Frank, at Saratoga Springs, N. Y., on July 31, 1868, went unnoticed by the non-Jewish press of New York. Indeed, it was apparently only in the *Hebrew Leader* that his productive life was summarized, the editor remarking that, "during his long career in this country, which brought him in contact with persons of all creeds and nationalities, he quickly convinced them of his many noble qualities both as a man and a scholar." Then — nearly a year after Frank's death — his biography and his portrait were blazoned forth in one of New York's most unlikely media, the *American Phrenological Journal*. There, under the hyperbolic caption HENRY FRANK, THE FIRST HEBREW PUBLISHER IN THE UNITED STATES, three columns were devoted to his life and work, and a large portrait was accompanied by a phrenological analysis of his faculties and temperament.¹

The publisher of the *American Phrenological Journal*, Samuel R. Wells, was, of course, a student of phrenology or the science of the mind, the nineteenth century's equivalent of psychoanalysis. As such, he was deeply interested in so-called "national types," among whom the Jew, standing "at the head of the Semitic sub-races," always found a place in his ethnological analyses. As an example of a race characterized by a "lofty coronal arch, . . . breadth above the ears, and . . . broad, arched, and prominent nasal bone," Henry Frank may have engaged the attention of the phrenologist-editor Wells. At all events, the *American Phrenological Journal* was apparently the only periodical that carried Frank's portrait and gave his career the space it deserved. As a German-Jewish-American publisher, Henry Frank had indeed supplied the needs of a growing,

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¹ *Hebrew Leader*, August 7, 1868, p. [5]; *American Phrenological Journal*, XLIX, No. 4 (April, 1869), 161. A simple death notice was carried by the *Jewish Messenger*, August 7, 1868, p. [6].

changing country, and though he was not, as Wells believed, "the first Hebrew publisher in the United States," he was a pioneer who merits a niche in American publishing history.²

Born at Walsdorf, Bavaria, in 1804, young Frank became an apprentice printer at the age of thirteen in the neighboring city of Bamberg. Having, as the *American Phrenological Journal* was to put it, "gained a reputation highly flattering and deserving for one so young, which soon won him . . . fame as a practical printer," the twenty-year-old Frank was invited to superintend the Hebrew publishing firm of Arnstein & Sons in Sulzbach. There he continued for fifteen years until the concern retired from business. Only then, when he was in his thirties, did Frank strike out for himself. As Wells commented,

ambitious to establish himself, he succeeded in obtaining a license from the Bavarian Government, which, at that time, was a very difficult thing for an Israelite to obtain. His first publication was the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses, in Hebrew and German, of which we have a copy before us. This book was, through his energetic endeavors, introduced in all the theological schools and colleges of the kingdom, and thus laid the foundation of his fame. He carried on the publication of Hebrew books with great success until the year 1848, when the revolution, which spread all over Germany, gave a rather gloomy aspect to business. Expecting a brighter state of affairs in America, he emigrated to this country in that year with his family, and founded the pioneer Hebrew publishing house of America in the city of New York.

Obviously, with the migration of the "48'ers," a large market for German-Jewish books and Hebrew prayer books was created, and the need in New York City especially for a German-Jewish printer was apparent. Where there had been 5,000 Jews in this country in 1820, by 1848 there were 20,000. Henry Frank was one of them, who brought with him not only his hopes and his ambitions, but also a more tangible stake in the future — his ability as a practical printer, his experience as a publisher, a stock of Hebrew books, and his fonts of type.³

² Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character, as manifested through Temperament and External Forms* (New York, 1875), pp. 444-45.

³ Eric E. Hirshler, ed., *Jews from Germany in the United States* (New York [1955]), pp. 120, 153; Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of The Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860* (Phila., 1945), p. 219; Guido Kisch, "Israel's Herald: The First Jewish Weekly in New York," *Historia Judaica*, II, No. 2 (October, 1940), 83.

Establishing his press at 205 Houston Street, he appeared in the New York City directories for 1849/50 as a "printer." By 1850 he had published at least five books which set the pattern for his future list.⁴ Of these perhaps the most important was a Passover Haggadah, which he entitled *Service for the First Two Nights of the Passover*, "printed and published by H. Frank" in Hebrew and English and in Hebrew and German under the title *Die Pessach-Hagada*. The Haggadah would remain a staple publication of the House of Frank through the years. In addition, his imprint appeared upon the *Gebete und Gesänge zur Seelenfeier*, published in German and Hebrew for New York's Temple Emanu-El, as well as upon Salomon Herxheimer's *Catechism of the Faith* and Maurice Mayer's *Volksbuch über Moral und Sittenlehre*.

Frank's principal publications, the *Daily Prayers* and *Festival Prayers*, would, in their various editions, continue to fill the needs of Jews who swelled the westward migration after 1848. Despite the competition offered by Isaac Leeser, of Philadelphia, or "N. Ottinger," of New York, Frank prospered, supplying the demands of the increasing number of German Jews who had settled in America and required books for the festivals in Hebrew, German, and English.⁵ As the *American Phrenological Journal* explained,

In the outset he labored under many difficulties to procure journeymen printers, but finally succeeded . . . after five years' steady and unflinching labor he finished the publication of the "Prayers for the Festivals," or *Machsor*, in five volumes, in Hebrew, with an English translation. This work proved his greatest success. After the foregoing, he published numerous minor books, calculated for the Jewish faith, but which found sale among many learned and intelligent Christians. . . . A good proof of his industry may be drawn from the fact that there is scarcely a Jewish family on this continent who is not in possession of some Hebrew book published by Mr. Frank.

Among those books were scholarly or devotional works by the learned Rabbis Samuel Adler and Moses Mielziner, along with

⁴ A. S. W. Rosenbach, "An American Jewish Bibliography . . . until 1850," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XXX (1926), Nos. 665, 672, 687; Jacob R. Marcus, ed., *Jewish Americana . . . A Supplement to . . . An American Jewish Bibliography* (Cincinnati, 1954), Nos. 224, 226.

⁵ "N. Ottinger" may be one with the *sofer* Nathan Oettinger.

Wolf Schlessinger's *Religiose Betrachtungen & Gebete* and Fanny Schmiedl Neuda's *Stunden der Andacht*. This last was published also in an English translation as *Hours of Devotion*. Besides issuing the liturgy in the German and Polish rite, the firm saw through the press several works in English including Pyke's *Scripture History* and Bernhard Felsenthal's *Practical Grammar of the Hebrew Language*.⁶

Frank's patrons included the members of New York's Congregations Emanu-El, B'nai Jeshurun (for whom he published the Pyke's *Scripture History*), and subsequently Anshe Chesed (for whom his firm would issue the *Ordnung der Gebete beim Gottesdienst*). They numbered not only his fellow "48'ers," but also those who followed, bringing the Jewish population in America to some 250,000 by 1870. For them, "Frank's Hebrew Book Store" not only published books, but also imported Hebrew books published elsewhere. Moving about as the years passed, from Houston Street to Broome, from Cedar to Pearl and Division Streets, operating sometimes from his home, Frank supplied his patrons not only with books, but also with synagogue and society stationery, *etrogim*, and silk and woolen prayer shawls "selected by our agents in Europe." In addition, he annually distributed a Hebrew Calendar throughout the United States.⁷

The calendar marked for Henry Frank the passage of years kindly and prolific. The publisher was rich not only in his imprints, but also in his sons. One of them, Leopold H. Frank, had studied under his father's tutelage until he was able to superintend the firm on his own. Two other sons, inheriting perhaps their father's pioneer blood, struck out for the West Coast and by 1864 had established a branch of the business in San Francisco. There, Frank & Co., wholesale stationers on Sacramento Street, was managed by Jacob J. and Joseph H. Frank.⁸ Doubtless through their West Coast con-

⁶ Allan E. Levine, *An American Jewish Bibliography . . . 1851 to 1875* (Cincinnati, 1959), lists seventy Frank imprints. The Jewish Division of the New York Public Library owns various Frank publications which the writer has examined.

⁷ See the advertisement in the *Jewish Messenger*, August 17, 1860, and the listings in New York City directories 1849/50-1878/79.

⁸ See the listings in San Francisco directories 1864-1878/79.

nections, the New York firm was able to publish *A Class Book for Jewish Youth of Both Sexes* by Henry Abraham Henry, rabbi preacher of San Francisco's Congregation Sherith Israel, in an edition which, it was hoped, would "be found useful not only to Israelites but also to all enlightened Gentiles who may desire to inform themselves of those subjects." The growing Jewish, and possibly "enlightened Gentile" population in the golden West created the market that Frank's sons were swift to supply.

Sacramento Street was a far cry from Walsdorf, Bavaria, and by the mid-1860's, Henry Frank, having, as the *American Phrenological Journal* mused, "achieved his aim, . . . to establish a well-organized Hebrew publishing house on this continent," retired from business and left the firm in charge of his son Leopold. The firm name Henry Frank was altered to L. H. Frank & Co., although the firm's original purposes remained unchanged. In 1868, during a visit to Saratoga Springs, Henry Frank was stricken with apoplexy and, "after lingering in a state of unconsciousness for four days, he died, at the age of sixty-four years, surrounded by his children."

The business he had founded continued to prosper. L. H. Frank & Co. expanded the list begun by Henry Frank with a new illustrated edition of the Haggadah and by 1872 reached the thirteenth edition of the *Prayers of Israel* with English translation. For the Hebrew Free Schools of New York, the publishers issued *Daily Prayers, with English instructions*, while additions to the list included Bible Selections, Samuel Cahen's *Catechism . . . for children of the Hebrew Faith* translated from the French, and Hymen Polano's *Hebrew Speller . . . according to the German and Portuguese Mode of Pronunciation*. One of the most interesting of the later Frank publications, reflecting the changes in Judaism, was *The American-Jewish Ritual*, the Reform liturgy issued in 1870 for Temple Israel in Brooklyn. It was followed two years later by the Reform liturgy for New York's Congregation Ahavath Chesed.

Shortly after Henry Frank's death, in September, 1868, when Isaac Leeser's executives held a final sale of the Philadelphia leader's publications at Bangs, Merwin & Co. in New York, the "Messrs. Frank" had been "among the larger purchasers." Advertising themselves as "Publishers and Importers of Hebrew Books," L. H. Frank & Co. persisted in the sale and publication of works for

German- and English-speaking Jews.⁹ Their books were "also for sale" at the San Francisco branch of Frank & Co. Both in the East and in the West the business weathered the Panic of 1873, surviving in the San Francisco and New York City directories until 1878/1879. For thirty years the Frank family of publishers had supplied the intellectual and religious needs of German Jews who had migrated to this country, adding to the rich store of what has come to be called Jewish Americana. Yet, when the founder of that family died, his achievements were celebrated principally by the *American Phrenological Journal*. That *Journal's* analysis of Henry Frank's character has an abiding interest:

... The brain was large and the body well formed. The face indicates the character he was. There was length, breadth, and fullness in nearly every part. Observe how large the perceptive faculties! How broad the forehead between the eyes! No little mechanical talent is indicated by that amplitude. There was also much energy here. See how broad the head is between the ears! The top-head is also high, and the whole contour speaks the language of respect, kindness, affability, and executiveness. Such qualities, with integrity, ingenuity, and perseverance, would work their way up, as this man did. There is care as well as *work* in this countenance, but it is not the face of groundless fear or discontent. Nothing of timidity or irresolution is evinced. He evidently was at once self-relying and self-helpful. . . .

Surely this was as thoughtful and as laudatory an obituary as Henry Frank might have desired. He needed no other, for he is best remembered in the many books that bear his imprint and the imprint of his son Leopold. By these he takes his place as a pioneer in the long stream of American Hebrew publishing, and by these he gains his immortality.

⁹ *Jewish Messenger*, September 16, 1868, p. [4]; August 28, 1868, p. [3]; *Hebrew Leader*, February 26, 1869, p. [6].