

# The Lion and the Lamb

AN EVALUATION OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF STEPHEN S. WISE

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Twenty years have sped by since April 19, 1949, when Stephen Samuel Wise died at the age of seventy-five in New York City's Lenox Hill Hospital. He had served in the rabbinate since 1892 when, recently graduated from Columbia University and only eighteen years of age, he had been ordained in Baden-bei-Wien by Dr. Adolf Jellinek, Chief Rabbi of Vienna.

During an active career of fifty-seven years, Wise held three rabbinical posts: Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (known also as the Madison Avenue Synagogue) in New York City from 1893 to 1900; Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, from 1900 to 1906; and the institution he founded, the Free Synagogue of New York City, from 1907 until his death forty-two years later. Each of these he served with devotion and distinction. His work, his bold utterances, and his forthright actions thrust him into positions of leadership in Jewish and American affairs.

Wise's genius for establishing personal relationships won him a host of friends in all walks of life and throughout the whole world. The alumni of the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City were so devoted to him that scores of them named their sons "Stephen" in his honor.

His keen interest in social problems and his unflagging zeal for justice impelled him to take a vigorous part in the work of groups like the Child Labor Committee, the Old Age Pension League, the Religion and Labor Foundation, the American Union Against Militarism, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National

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Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Several of these, notably the N. A. A. C. P., he helped found. To all of them he gave generously of his time and efforts, often speaking on their behalf. That was a gift of great value, for he was one of America's foremost orators, capable of holding audiences, large and small, under the sway of his eloquence.

He was more than an orator, however. Had he never led a synagogue or belonged to a single Jewish organization, he would have been remembered by his contemporaries and later generations as a social prophet whose influence was equal to that of a Henry Demarest Lloyd or a Henry George, a Jacob Riis or a Josiah Strong; but because he cherished his calling as a rabbi and his heritage as a Jew, he made an even greater contribution to the advancement of his people. What Walter Rauschenbusch, of Rochester, New York, "the Father of the Social Gospel," meant to twentieth-century Protestantism, Stephen Wise meant to contemporary Judaism in many of its manifestations; he was the source of a progressive, socially minded faith. Wise would have been ninety-five years old in 1969, and had he lived, he would have beheld the attainment of many an objective for which he battled valiantly — in particular, the steady growth of modern Israel, whose establishment as an independent Jewish state this pioneering Zionist hailed in the last year of his life.<sup>2</sup>

Chief among Wise's loyalties were the several significant Jewish organizations among whose founders he was numbered and which he often guided as an elected officer: the Zionist Organization of America, to which he devoted himself as honorary secretary from 1898 to 1904, when it was a fledgling society known as the Federation of American Zionists, as vice-president from 1918 to 1920, and as president from 1936 to 1938; the American Jewish Congress, which he served initially as vice-president from 1922 to 1925, as president from 1925 to 1929, and subsequently as honorary president from 1929 to 1935, assuming the active presidency again from 1935

<sup>2</sup> At Boston's Ford Hall Forum, in his address "My Challenging Years; A Seventy-Fifth Birthday Anniversary Address," on March 27, 1949, Wise said: "I have lived to see the Jewish State. I am too small for the greatness of the mercy which God has shown us."

to his death; and the World Jewish Congress, whose president he was between 1936 and 1949. Not least was the Jewish Institute of Religion, whose acting president Wise was from 1922 to 1927 and whose regular presidency he held from 1927 until 1948, when he stepped aside for Nelson Glueck as a preliminary to the Institute's merger with the Hebrew Union College.

#### THE SPIRIT KEEPETH ALIVE

During his lifetime, Wise was loved, envied, and hated. Invariably the center of controversy, he was a man about whom strong, often opposing, views were expressed by both friend and foe. I have heard his fellow-rabbis denounce him as a "phony" and a "fake," and my Christian colleagues damn him as "a demagogue" and "a blatherskite." The president of a leading Jewish communal organization said to me one day in the mid-1940's: "The trouble with you ministers and rabbis — and some of your followers, too — is that you make a demigod of Stephen Wise."

Many more, however, were singleminded in their praise of Wise, as I learned during my years of research in his papers. I have been intrigued by the wide range of tributes to Wise from men of vastly different backgrounds and vocations, and impressed by the courage and vision, candor and bluntness, sensitivity and concern, reflected in the thousands of letters Wise wrote in the years between the early 1890's, when he was a young man, and 1949, the year of his death.<sup>2</sup>

In the opening days of 1900, Thomas Davidson, the founder and head of the Breadwinners' College at Croton-on-Hudson, wrote of Wise's talents and potential in a letter to Felix Adler, founder and leader of the Ethical Culture Society. The picturesque Davidson,

<sup>2</sup> Most of Wise's letters are housed in the Stephen Wise Archives at the Goldfarb Library of Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts; others may be found, either in carbon copies or photocopies, at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati; the American Jewish Historical Society on the Brandeis University campus; the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem; the Archives of the Jewish Historical Society, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, and the National and Jewish Library, Hebrew University, Jerusalem; as well as the Yale University Library, the Harvard University libraries, and the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

an unorthodox Scottish theologian, who was the beloved teacher of Wise in the 1890's and of John Dewey and Morris R. Cohen as well, had received an inquiry from Adler. The Waterman family, knowing that Wise had only honorable intentions in courting the lovely Louise Waterman, nevertheless wanted to learn more about the young rabbi: his capabilities, interests, character, and prospects. Davidson assured Adler and, through him, the Waterman family:

The fact is, I am so fond of Stephen Wise personally, that I cannot, perhaps, be trusted to judge him impartially. I have known him for the past six or seven years, and my respect and affection for him have grown all that time. He is loyal in his personal relations, and socially attractive. I cannot think of him as doing a mean thing. When roused, he is an eloquent and powerful speaker, with a delightful sense of humor.

He is still young — only twenty-seven, I think — and may have some of the faults of the young and inexperienced, delight in sense of power and perhaps desire for popularity, though the last is not especially prominent.

He is distinctly a stirring man, original and forcible, with great schemes in his mind. I always leave him with the sense that I have been facing a brisk, bracing wind.<sup>3</sup>

In June, 1900, as Wise prepared to leave B'nai Jeshurun and begin his duties as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon, Davidson wrote to his "dear, dear Stephen" from Glenmore, New York, where he was preparing the program for his annual summer camp devoted to seminars on philosophy and theology:

I have just read your parting address to your New York congregation with tears in my eyes. It contains sentences that Jeremiah might have been proud of. You are of the stuff that he was made of, and your life will be immortal. . . .

I want you to do me a great favor. Before you leave, you must send me a good photograph of yourself, and I will send you a recent one of myself. I want to have your face on my desk before me all the time.

New York will be poorer for your absence; we shall all be poorer. My boys and girls will miss you and your encouraging words. But you go to great work, and we shall follow your career with the deepest interest.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Voss, *Rabbi and Minister* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1964), p. 44.

You will not forget that Judaism, like all living things, changes as it grows, and that, while the letter killeth, the spirit keepeth alive. You will diffuse a twentieth-century Judaism, fitted to meet the needs of the present day. In waging your immortal battle in behalf of immortal things, you will use all the weapons of modern warfare, and all the generosity of the modern warrior. "Truth and righteousness" will be your motto. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Wise never forgot Davidson nor what Davidson had urged on him. On September 14, 1900, Davidson died, and Wise wrote from Portland, Oregon, to his fiancée, Louise Waterman, in New York:

I would have been so happy over your letter of last night, had it not been for the sad, sad news of dear Professor Davidson's death over which I cried like a baby. I revered him and I loved him. Poor lonely man — battling for "Truth and Righteousness" all his life, as he bade me do in that precious letter which I trust you have treasured up. He has been an influence for good in many lives beside my own. Above all things he sought after truth and he made knowledge and wisdom not idols or fetishes to be worshipped, but instruments to be used for the weal of others. . . .

I have written to two friends in New York, suggesting a memorial service for him at the Educational Alliance, under the auspices of his classes at which I wish once more to pay my affectionate tribute to his sterling worth. I also suggest some endowment by popular subscription in his honor, a scholarship at some college or other.

We never met without embracing, in the street or anywhere else. His death makes me think. Oh, the marvel and mystery of it all — we cannot understand, for we see only with our eyes, but I cannot bring myself to believe that he is perished and gone for ever. Fond delusion? Say rather, blessed illusion. Dear Professor Davidson — God gives him peace — he was Heaven's own soldier, he wielded the sword of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In 1911, Davidson was memorialized by William James as "a knight-errant of the intellectual life" in *Memories and Studies*, and by Morris R. Cohen in *A Cyclopaedia for Education*, Volume II. Born in Scotland in 1840, Davidson traveled widely in Europe and North America. In 1883, he founded at London the Fellowship of the New Life, which later developed into the famous Fabian Socialist Society. Wise worked with Davidson in association with the People's Institute and the Educational Alliance in New York City, as well as in the Summer School for the Cultural Sciences in New Jersey, then in Connecticut, and later in Keene, N. Y.

<sup>5</sup> *The Personal Letters of Stephen Wise*, edited by Justine Wise Polier and James Waterman Wise, with an introduction by John Haynes Holmes (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), pp. 74-75.

## BORN TO RULE EMPIRES

Nearly four decades later, the scholarly rabbi and Zionist leader Solomon Goldman wrote in similar fashion about Wise in his essay, "Portrait of A Leader."<sup>6</sup> Describing Wise as "the most vital, the most dynamic, most challenging person in American Jewry," Goldman noted the overwhelming impression Wise made upon people by his "lion's voice, keen wit, overflowing kindness, . . . youthful gait, Jovian gestures, alertness, impatience," and called him "a proud, living, storming Israel." To Goldman, it was Wise's "sheer force of personality, . . . the vigor of his oratory, and the scope of his interests," which made the synagogue "once again commensurate with life." To be sure, he had reservations about Wise's holding services on Sunday morning, failing to plead for more intensive Jewish education, and forsaking some of the traditions of Jewry; yet flaws like these were dwarfed, he contended, because Wise was "the embodiment of his people — Israel, with its restlessness and its dynamic power, its eternal youth, its sense of justice, its mighty voice — aye, its failings, too."

Dr. Wise has been criticized for the attention the newspapers have given him; for the spectacular and dramatic in which he is supposed to indulge. Every time I hear this charge, I cannot help but contrast Wise with a Borah, a Lloyd George, or a Masaryk. I sigh within me, how little people understand. Wises are born to rule empires; all that Jewry could offer was a pulpit.

Only a few years earlier, the essayist and novelist Maurice Samuel had written in this vein, assessing Wise as "the outstanding popular leader in American Jewry, . . . a very extraordinary figure [with] all the requisites of leadership [and] the will to lead, . . . a master of publicity, . . . in action a terrific, leonine figure."<sup>7</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr, of Union Theological Seminary, would use the same metaphor when he reviewed Wise's posthumously published autobiography<sup>8</sup>: "a leonine figure in physical appearance and in spiritual stature." Niebuhr pursued the analogy further:

<sup>6</sup> S. Goldman, *Crisis and Decision* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), pp. 74-78.

<sup>7</sup> M. Samuel, *Jews On Approval* (New York: Liveright, 1932), pp. 132-38.

<sup>8</sup> S. S. Wise, *Challenging Years* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1949).

Only one aspect of Wise's life is not mirrored in these pages — his capacity for sympathy in every case of individual need which came to his attention. I know of one sensitive European intellectual who was completely frightened by Wise's power as orator and statesman. But he saw the whole character in a new light when he found how this busy man could take infinite pains to alleviate the distress of any unfortunate who sought his aid. This touch of lamb in the lion should have appeared somewhere in the record to make it complete.<sup>9</sup>

A summation of another sort came from Francis J. McConnell, Bishop of the New York East Conference of the Methodist Church, who wrote about Wise in "Some Notables I Have Met," the concluding chapter of his autobiography. After listing religionists like John Haynes Holmes, S. Parkes Cadman, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, and such public figures as William Jennings Bryan, J. Ramsay MacDonald, Harold Laski, Clarence Darrow, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, and Presidents Taft, Wilson, Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Bishop McConnell turned to Wise and called him "a great church leader,"

... the builder of a synagogue [the Free Synagogue of New York City] which was a positive and enduring force in New York for a generation, of a theological seminary [the Jewish Institute of Religion] which has put a solid foundation of religious thinking under scores of intellectual students. He gave direction to the wisest forms of socially redemptive effort at the same time that he himself fulfilled the ideals of Old Testament prophecy. He was a Jew with the distinctiveness of genuine Judaism. In these days of flabbiness in much Protestant alleged thinking, it may be just as well to remember that Jewishness of Wise's type works incalculably to keep vital the essential of all true religion, namely, the conception of a moral God.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most sensitive appraisal was delivered by Horace M. Kallen, of the New School for Social Research, at a memorial service in May, 1949:

Those of you who attended the funeral ceremony in Carnegie Hall [will] recall that, as against the few thousands who were assembled in the Hall, tens of thousands stood in the downpour on the streets outside,

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, November 6, 1949, Sec. VII, p. 6, col. 1.

<sup>10</sup> F. J. McConnell, *By the Way: An Autobiography* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 253.

men and women of every rank and station, from all parts of the land, . . . Americans of every race and clime, . . . Negroes, Hindus, Chinamen, faces and features suggesting the miscellany of mankind, . . . multitudes standing together silently in the rain [as] the symbol, perhaps the truest symbol, of the role and meaning of Stephen Wise. [Although Wise had been] an unflagging leader in labors for his violated people, . . . his role was not primarily Jewish alone. . . . His labors on behalf of Israel were labors sustained by a vision of global fellowship; his invincible opposition to Nazism and all its work was an opposition illumined by his faith in equal liberty and equal security for all men everywhere. . . . For his faith in freedom, he himself suffered greatly and endured greatly. He was always a brave man, with a gaiety of spirit, and a spontaneous courage that often seemed quite other than Plato's wisdom concerning dangers.

Paying tribute to Wise for a generosity which "was uncommon at best, and rare indeed in members of the cloth," Kallen concluded:

In . . . [his] dedication to freedom, the innumerable contradictory qualities of the man, which irritated his friends and by which his foes justified themselves, were reconciled: the vanities always dissolving in a basic humility; the prophetic judgment tempered to a charity that forgave, in fellow-workers, cowardices and disloyalties I myself have never been able to forgive; the arbitrariness dissolved in a goodwill by which the man, who was on occasion peer and companion of the great ones of his times, was not less the equal friendly companion of the little people who looked to him for light and leading.<sup>11</sup>

All six of these men, Davidson, Goldman, Samuel, Niebuhr, McConnell, and Kallen — three Jews and three non-Jews — agreed on one thing: Wise may indeed have been complex, but he was a heroic, often a prophetic figure in the first half of the twentieth century. Themselves of more than ordinary stature, they thought of Wise as an extraordinary man and, like countless others, were able during Wise's lifetime to tell him so, some in writing and others by the spoken word.

#### I BEGAN MY CAREER AS A SCHOLAR

Few know that, in 1892, Stephen Wise, as a budding scholar, considered enrolling at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati,

<sup>11</sup> H. M. Kallen, *"Of Them Which Say They Are Jews" and Other Essays on the Jewish Struggle For Survival* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 154-59.

but he wanted to stay in the East, to study in Europe during the summers, and to train in a rabbinical post around New York City. He wrote, therefore, to Isaac Mayer Wise, the aged founder-president of the College, about the possibility of working under the direction of the administration and faculty in Cincinnati, but from afar, so that he might continue towards his doctorate in Semitics at Columbia University with Richard J. H. Gottheil as preceptor. In the late summer of 1892, Isaac Mayer Wise sent him a copy of his *Pronaos to Holy Writ* and answered that, notwithstanding his young correspondent's lack of talmudic study, he would "register . . . [his] name with the remark *in absentia temp.* in first collegiate class. . . ."

If at the end of the semester (last week in Jan.) or the year (last weeks in June) you are prepared for examinations, you come to Cin. and make your examinations with the class.

My private opinion, however, is that it would be much better for you if you could reverse the order, viz. to get permission from Columbia to make your postgraduate studies for the degree you seek "*in absentia*" and come here to make your rabbinical studies regularly. You cannot do the amount of work in "Rabbinica" by private tuition which you can do here. Your main object, however, is the "Rabbinica" which I think should now occupy your main attention and the work for the Ph. [D.] or any other degree be done simultaneously. But as your father [Rabbi Aaron Wise] seems to think otherwise and your taste runs in the same direction, I submit — בטלחי רצוני מפני רצונכם [suspending my will in favor of your own] and register you *in absentia* for this year anyhow.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Stephen Wise was enrolled as a student at the Hebrew Union College in 1892, but his work was carried on under Jellinek in Vienna, Adolf Neubauer in Oxford, and Gottheil at Columbia.

That he kept in close touch with his European mentors is evident from a letter sent him three years later, in November, 1895, by Israel Abrahams, reader in rabbinics at Cambridge University, in anticipation of Wise's return to Great Britain in 1896:

It was delightful to hear from you, and if — as Mr. [Solomon] Schechter says is possible — you come to England next summer, I do hope to have

<sup>12</sup> I. M. Wise, Cincinnati, to S. S. Wise, N. Y., September 4, 1892 (American Jewish Archives).

the opportunity of seeing more of you. Your [Israel] Zangwill cutting amused him and me greatly. Z. thanks you for sending it, *but* — such is the perversity of genius — he begged me not to call attention to it in print. . . .

How is your Arabic work getting on? [Wise was translating Solomon ibn Gabirol's eleventh-century ethical treatise on "The Improvement of the Moral Qualities" for a doctorate at Columbia University.]

We have had a rather amusing incident in England lately. Dr. [Moses] Gaster has given the *החזקת הוראה* [authority to teach and make rabbinical decisions] to two very ignorant students. I do not know whether in the States you treat this title lightly? I am not myself in favor of giving it, except as a real mark of knowledge of the Rabbinical Law. If one wants to give a mere diploma, then he should not appropriate an old, well-established title, which means something else.

But Abrahams had more than "the Rabbinical Law" on his mind:

I hear that there is going to be a new outburst of Jewish *Nationalism* — based on the [anti-Semitic] Vienna incidents. This is at present a secret, but we have had an exciting visit from a leading man of letters of Austria [Theodor Herzl] and the thing is likely to be promulgated soon. I have little sympathy with it and yet when I remember what happened when Ezra took back the Exiles and how the world's religion was then fixed for centuries, who knows but that the Religion of the Future may be formulated once more in Zion?<sup>13</sup>

The twenty-one-year-old Wise's scholarly abilities elicited such respect that, in December, 1895, he received a flattering letter from the Jewish Publication Society of America, inviting him to prepare a translation of the Book of Judges for a new English version of the

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Wise Archives, Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University. Wise would invite Abrahams to the United States in 1911-1912 for the Lewisohn Lectureship (founded at his invitation by Adolph Lewisohn) and would thus make Abrahams available for lectures at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. When Wise founded the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City in 1922, he offered the presidency of the institution to Abrahams, who declined but came as visiting lecturer. On February 3, 1923, during his initial visit to the J. I. R., Abrahams wrote to Louise Waterman Wise:

My first week has passed since I arrived, & I feel that I must write a sentence to tell you how much I have already gained from my intimacy with your wonderful husband. It is no use trying to tell *him*, for he will not listen. Nor need I say more to you. It was worth coming over to see, hear, & commune with him. That is all I need say. It says everything. And as for *your* kindness to me, I can say nothing at all. It passes words.

After Abrahams' sudden death in 1924, Wise arranged for the J. I. R. to pay Mrs. Abrahams a pension of \$2,000 per annum over a period of several years.

Hebrew Bible.<sup>14</sup> Wise accepted the assignment and in November, 1908, submitted his translation to Max L. Margolis, the editor-in-chief of the new Bible.

Though an activist, Wise yearned for the scholarly life throughout his days; he persisted in encouraging scholars, young and old, and in finding posts for them. He founded the Jewish Institute of Religion with scholarship as a prime objective and played a leading role in rescuing scholars from Europe, first in the inflationary era of the post-World War I years and then during the Hitler nightmare. With wry humor he often said: "I began my career as a scholar; but events turned me in other directions, too. Why must I be the policeman for the Jewish people?"

#### NOT THE GLORY OF VICTORY

Assertions that Stephen Wise was "not very spiritual" were on occasion based on unjust inferences which readers drew from a curiously and unfortunately exaggerated incident recalled by Abraham Cronbach, his onetime associate at the Free Synagogue. While talking to the children of a confirmation class led by Cronbach, Wise told them that, in his crowded life, he often found it difficult to experience God's presence — "between God and him," as Cronbach remembered Wise putting it, "there was a barrier, a thick wall which he was unable to penetrate."<sup>15</sup> This remark, made in humility and unusual self-knowledge, may well have reflected a unique awareness of God and closeness to Him. Cronbach certainly intended no aspersion of Wise's spirituality.

Wise's thousands of letters, his work, and his thought were informed by an ardent and genuine religious faith. His was a profoundly religious spirit. Had it been otherwise, he could never have borne the abuse heaped upon him, often by colleagues in the ministry, both Jewish and Christian. He was always a voice in the wilderness,

<sup>14</sup> Marcus Jastrow, Germantown, Pa., to S. S. Wise, N. Y., December 26, 1895 (Stephen Wise Archives, Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University). The Jewish Publication Society's new translation of the *Holy Scriptures* was published in 1917.

<sup>15</sup> A. Cronbach, "Autobiography," *American Jewish Archives*, XI (1959), 49.

but especially so from 1933 to 1945 when few heeded his warnings and prescience of disaster for world Jewry. In 1942, he wrote to his friend John Haynes Holmes:

I am almost demented over my people's grief . . . and still I must add, I do not lose faith — my faith that we will, in part, because of these awful sacrifices, march on to a decenter, juster and, it may be, a warless world. Faith, as we both know, isn't a thing to be reasoned about. One has it, or one has not. You and I both have it. Both of us see the divine, even from far off, toward which all creation moves, though it move haltingly, painfully and, perhaps it must be so, sacrificially.<sup>16</sup>

One day someone will edit a book of Wise's prayers, especially those he voiced in the morning chapel services with his "boys" at the Jewish Institute of Religion, or at funerals where he would offer petitions of poetic beauty. The famous prayer, given by him at the Democratic National Convention in Madison Square Garden on June 26, 1924, exceeded in meaning and power the prayers offered by sundry other clergymen before those monotonous sessions, and was unique in coming from the lips of an Alternate Delegate:

Almighty God and Father, give Thy merciful guidance to this gathering of the Sons and Daughters of our beloved Nation, that together we may greatly serve the highest and noblest interests of our Country. Help us to be brotherly and forbearing to one another, but dauntlessly resolute for the right. May we battle for truth, not for advantage, for public honor and not private gain, for the privilege of service and not the glory of victory. Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it. So let this mighty gathering help to build the house of a righteous and peace-furthering Nation; and in the unity of our fellowship and the bond of our abounding fulfillment of the prophecy, "For Mine house shall be called the house of prayer unto all peoples." And Thine, O Father, be the honor and the praise and the glory, forevermore. Amen.<sup>17</sup>

When word came to the Convention that the younger son of the Republican President, Calvin Coolidge, had died, the chair recognized "Mr. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a delegate from New York, who offers a resolution which will be read by Rabbi Wise." According to the Convention record:

<sup>16</sup> *The Personal Letters of Stephen Wise*, p. 261.

<sup>17</sup> *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention held in Madison Square Garden, New York City, June 24-July 9, 1924*, p. 227.

RABBI STEPHEN S. WISE (of New York): I offer this resolution on behalf of Mr. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Chairman of the New York State Delegation.

This Convention of the Democratic Party gathers this morning under the shadow of the grief that has come to the home of the Chief Magistrate of our Nation, together with all our fellow Americans. We bow our heads in sympathy and reverence by the side of our President as he and his family pass through the valley of the shadow of death. We pray that the Divine comfort and healing may be vouchsafed to the sorrowing parents. May the father and the mother of the lovable youth who has been called from life find solace and strength in the thought of the loving sympathy of all the American people.

In token thereof this Convention silently bows its head with loyal and affectionate regard for the President and for Mrs. Coolidge, the mother of Calvin Coolidge, Jr.<sup>18</sup>

Wise was clearly the author of Roosevelt's resolution; and, as with his prayer, he raised the whole tone of the tumultuous convention. It was at that same convention that he struggled valiantly to have the Democratic Party reaffirm the principles of Woodrow Wilson and emphasize anew America's obligation to join the League of Nations, as well as to defy Southern delegates and insist on denunciation of the Ku Klux Klan.

#### HIS CAUSE SHALL BE OUR CAUSE

Few Americans were as fearless as Wise. He was always on the front line of battle, especially on behalf of freedom of the pulpit, whether at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City or at Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon. The most dramatic instance of his convictions on this score was his rejection of overtures from the trustees of Temple Emanu-El in New York City and his founding shortly thereafter of the Free Synagogue. But his courage took him much further afield. Before World War I he demanded higher safety standards after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and denounced the Steel Trust. After the War, he led the way in condemning anti-union Garyism, stood in the forefront during important strikes of the mid-1920's, denounced Fascism in the 1920's

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 852-53.

and 1930's when Mussolini and Hitler were coming into power, protested government-sanctioned repression of free speech, and exposed the anti-Semitism already apparent in policies of the Soviet Union.

A lesser man might have been more timid or expedient; Wise could be neither. He fought Tammany Hall from the mid-1890's all through his life — most spectacularly and successfully when the City Affairs Committee which he and John Haynes Holmes headed proved ultimately responsible for compelling Mayor "Jimmy" Walker's resignation.

It would have been simple, too, for him to have restrained his Zionist convictions, for in its early days Zionism was unpopular among American Jews, especially Reform Jews and their rabbis. In 1898, Wise wrote to Herzl in Vienna that he anticipated "a hard, uphill fight for Zionism in this country." The Jewish press was "almost unanimous in its opposition," and Wise owned himself "half ashamed that the fewest of the American Jewish ministers, who should have been the first to forward this great movement, are lending it any support whatever. . . ." <sup>19</sup> He defended Herzl when nearly everyone else considered him an impractical and dangerous visionary, and at Herzl's death in 1904, Wise told his congregation in Portland:

He was one of the rarest of men, dreamer and doer alike. "*Wenn Ihr wollt ist es kein Maerchen.*" ["If you will it, it is no mere dream."] To charge him with having been an irresponsible dreamer is wickedly and cruelly libelous. The pygmies, plodding and unprophetic, looked upon this giant, gazing at the distant horizon, and they cried aloud, "Irresponsible dreamer!!" — For us he died. His cause shall be our cause; for it will we live and labor. <sup>20</sup>

Wise was more concerned with principle than with practicality, with truth rather than expediency. Utterly heedless of consequences, disdainful of possible reprisals, he served as a dedicated minister in three pulpits, fought entrenched bureaucracy in the American Federation of Labor during the 1925-1926 textile strike in Passaic,

<sup>19</sup> S. S. Wise to Theodor Herzl, June 26, 1898 (Goldfarb Library, Brandeis University).

<sup>20</sup> *Beth Israel Pulpit*, Portland, Oregon, Vol. V, No. 1, p. 1.



Companion of the little people

Wise visiting survivors of Nazism at the Zeilsheim Displaced Persons Camp



A gaiety of spirit:  
Wise with Albert Einstein and Fiorello LaGuardia

supported Gandhi in his struggle against the British Empire in the 1920's and 1930's — and later criticized the Mahatma mercilessly for his lack of discernment about Zionism and the objectives of the Jewish people. He condemned Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then Governor of New York, for a lack of courage and forthright action in the Mayor Walker episode in New York City. Subsequently, however, out of conviction — and indeed with complete selflessness — he supported Roosevelt for his second, third, and fourth terms as President.

The letters Stephen Wise wrote were not always to the great and powerful, not always in support of noble causes or downtrodden minorities. His tender and concerned letters to children, to the bereaved, to the countless little people in his congregation or his circle of acquaintances, reveal a different side of this extraordinary man. He was never too busy, never too tired, to offer comfort or support. Despite a multitude of activities, a diversity of interests, and an endless correspondence, he never failed to remember birthdays, to send a note of comfort on the anniversary of a death, or to go to the bedside of a dying person at any hour of the night and to stay as long as he could be of help. There was nothing of the public figure here, and these “little remembered acts of kindness and of love” typified Stephen S. Wise just as much as did his more publicized struggles, his ceaseless battles to safeguard freedom and justice for men of all creeds and colors.

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The precarious position of Jews in eighteenth-century French Louisiana is documented in a new 188-page work, *Commerce and Contraband in New Orleans During the French and Indian War: A Documentary Study of the Texel and Three Brothers Affairs*, by Abraham P. Nasatir and James R. Mills.

For copies, write to the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.