

No Better Jew, No Purer Man: Mayer Sulzberger on Isaac Leeser

The Anglo-Jewish scholar Israel Abrahams was no great admirer of Isaac Leeser, and in 1920 he permitted himself the comment that "we shall soon be thinking of putting Isaac Leeser's memory in a museum of Jewish antiquities as a specimen of a lost type" (By-Paths in Hebraic Bookland [Philadelphia, 1920], p. 259). Leeser's younger contemporary and disciple Mayer Sulzberger, however, had been far from consigning his mentor to such a fate. When Leeser died in February, 1868, Sulzberger eulogized him devotedly in the pages of the March, 1868, Occident and determined to carry on as editor of the monthly which Leeser had founded at Philadelphia in April, 1843 — a few months before Sulzberger's birth. As it happens, he was able to maintain The Occident scarcely more than a year beyond its founder's death, and the magazine ceased publication in March, 1869. Still, a century later, few would quarrel with Sulzberger's estimate of Isaac Leeser as a genuine fons vitae — a genuine source of life — for the American Jews of his generation.

THE LATE REV. ISAAC LEESER

We can conceive of no tidings more painful to the Israelites of America, than the announcement of the death of Rev. Isaac Leeser. More widely known than any other Jewish minister in the country, acquainted with more persons in different portions of the Union than probably any clergyman in the land, he had, by his speeches, his writings, and his presence, interwoven himself into the whole system of American Judaism. His name was familiar as a household word. No intelligent Israelite could be found in all this broad land, who had not read or used some of the works produced by his genius and enterprise, and the veriest dolt knew him by the reputation he had so justly acquired. Nor was this confined to his co-religionists; for, among our Christian fellow-citizens, his fame as an elegant

writer, a deep thinker, a profound theologian and a good man, was firmly established.

Isaac Leeser was born at Neuenkirchen, in the province of Westphalia, Prussia, on the 12th of December, 1806. When but eight years of age, his mother died, leaving him to be reared by his father and grandmother. The father was a merchant, a man of strong, sound sense, of fair education, in comfortable circumstances, and sincerely and intelligently pious, without superstition. He possessed, besides, great bodily strength and powers of endurance. Such a man inspired the youthful Isaac with a freedom of thought and boldness of action, which could not fail to leave its impress. His grandmother was to him a good and kind parent, and to the last he mentioned her name with every mark of veneration and affection. After some preliminary education, he entered the gymnasium or college at Münster, where he acquitted himself with honor.

In his eighteenth year, he left Europe for America, at the instance of his uncle, Zalma Rehiné, who, having no children, desired to adopt one of his nephews. In May, 1824, he arrived at Richmond, Virginia, where his uncle resided, and after attending school for only ten weeks, he entered the latter's store. But his daily avocation could not check the ardent love of learning which animated the youth, and he spent his evenings and nights in literary pursuits. Even at that early age he gave evidence of the interest he took in Jewish education, by assisting his friend, Rev. Isaac B. Seixas, in giving gratuitous instruction on religious matters to such of the younger portion of the Jewish community as chose to attend at the Richmond synagogue on Saturdays and Sundays. Thus it was, that when the *London Quarterly Review*, in the year 1828, contained unjust and cruel aspersions on Jews and Judaism, this obscure stripling stepped forward, and in the columns of a Richmond newspaper, sent forth a vindication of his people and his religion, which at once attracted attention. This, be it remembered, occurred when he had resided but four years in the country, and his perfect mastery of the English language in so short a time shows the adaptation he possessed for philological science. Indeed, but a few years since, although totally unacquainted with the Spanish language, he translated in a short time a Spanish article for this magazine, without any other help than a

dictionary. And although it affected parties who considered themselves ill-used by it, no suggestion was made that there had been any error. On another occasion, we were present when he received from Palestine a facsimile of some portions of the Samaritan Pentateuch, and by the aid of an alphabet, he read it with ease and fluency in a very few minutes.

When Mr. Leeser first appeared as a writer, the Jews of the United States, lacking the proper *esprit du corps*, had been, so to speak, mere isolated representatives of Judaism. True, there were individuals who possessed even Talmudical learning, but they either would not or could not do much to further the interests of Judaism with effect. The office of Hazan of the Congregation Mikveh Israel, of this city, becoming vacant, he was deemed a fit person to fill that position in the then most important congregation of the country. He hesitated before consenting to become an applicant for the office, but the counsels of his uncle and of his friends overcame his reluctance, and he entered upon his duties in the year 1829. His active mind at once projected plans for the vivification of Judaism, and he brought to their realization so much talent, energy and perseverance, that it was soon felt that an original genius had arisen in America. Dissatisfied with the ignorance of his fellow-believers, and not content with the scanty methods of imparting instruction to them, he introduced the system of delivering English discourses at stated periods, and pronounced his first address on June 2d, 1830. But the duties of his office, novel as they were to him, did not prevent his literary labors. Within a year after his arrival in Philadelphia, he published his translation of [Joseph] Johlson's *Instruction in the Mosaic Religion*. In 1833 [sic — 1834] his first work, the defence of the Jews against their calumniators, appeared in the book so widely known as *The Jews and the Mosaic Law*.

Early in the year 1834 he fell sick of the smallpox, and after the most acute sufferings, he rose from his bed, broken down in health, and impaired in his faculties. The distress of his mind was heightened and intensified by the reflection that his only brother, Jacob, who hastened to his bedside immediately on learning of his illness, fell a victim to the fearful disease. In progress of time, however,

he recovered strength and those noble faculties which he retained undimmed to the last.

At the beginning of the year 1837, he published a series of his sermons, in two volumes. In the same year he commenced his *Portuguese Prayers*, and in 1838 he issued his spelling book. In 1839 and 1840, he wrote a series of articles for the *Philadelphia Gazette* in defence of the Jews against strictures of the *London Quarterly*, which he issued in the year 1841, under the title of *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights*. In 1839 there likewise appeared his catechism, and in January, 1841, another volume of his discourses. In the same year, he edited Miss [Grace] Aguilar's *Spirit of Judaism*, at the request of the gifted authoress. In 1843, he began to issue this magazine [*The Occident*], which he lived to conduct till near the end of the twenty-fifth volume. In 1845, he published the Pentateuch in Hebrew and English. His edition of the Daily Prayers, according to the German custom, appeared in 1848. In the year 1850 he retired from office in the Congregation Mikveh Israel. This abandoning of public position, instead of abating, seemed rather to stimulate his zeal and ardor. Then appeared in rapid succession his English translation of Rabbi [Joseph] Schwarz's [*Descriptive*] *Geography [and Brief Historical Sketch] of Palestine*, and his edition of the Hebrew Bible, prepared in conjunction with Dr. [Joseph] Jaquett, a learned Christian clergyman of this city. He now proceeded to carry out the noble idea, long before conceived, of furnishing his brethren using the English language with a Bible, which should be free from the errors of the Authorized Version, from its Christianizing tendencies and partialities, and from the prepossessions which the headings of the chapters therein were intended to inspire. After years of weary labor, he completed this model of elegance, usefulness, and erudition. By it the Jewish authorities are made accessible to the English and American Jews, and an attentive student of the valuable notes in this work will have no mean idea of the rabbinical commentaries. He afterwards corrected and revised this translation and issued it in [an] eighteenmo [format]. In 1857, the Congregation Beth El Emeth called him to be their minister, and this position he filled to the day of his death, earning and obtaining the love and affection

of his flock to a degree rarely known. In 1859, he published [Benjamin] Dias [Fernandes' *Series of*] *Letters [on the Evidences of Christianity]*, a powerful controversial work in favor of Judaism, and in 1860 he republished *The Inquisition and Judaism*. In 1864, he published the *Meditations and Prayers* of Mrs. Hester Rothschild, with notes and revisions, and, in the same year, Miss Aguilar's *Jewish Faith and Spirit of Judaism*.

Incessant labor had weakened his health, and in the fall of 1866, an affection of his lungs had become so alarming, that his physician ordered him to leave his home and spend the winter in the more genial climate of the Southern States. But illness could not quench his ardor, and he issued his prospectus for the republication of his English works, and especially for printing all the discourses he had written, amounting to about ten volumes of 400 pages each. This undertaking, great as it was, and hampered as he was in prosecuting it by his feeble condition, he lived to see nearly finished in the short space which intervened between that time and his death. Of the works announced, *The Mosaic Religion* has already appeared; the greater portion of *The Jews and the Mosaic Law* is completed, and of the *Discourses*, eight volumes are already published, and the other two will shortly appear. He possessed such a craving for active employment that, although engaged in the preparation, publication and sale of all these works, he had already projected an English edition of the *Sepher ha-Chayim*, and proposed the publication of the English translation of [Salomon] Munk's edition of the *Moreh Nebuchim* [of Moses Maimonides], now in course of preparation. Indeed, he rarely, if ever, completed any labor without having planned some new enterprise which should promote knowledge and improve his people. With all this, he performed the duties of his office, preached a sermon on every Sabbath and holy day, and edited *The Occident* with an ability which even his adversaries were forced to acknowledge.

Employments so harassing and multifarious as these, one would think more than sufficient to occupy the time of any ordinary man; but to Mr. Leeser ample time was left to attend to the sacred duty of charity. He gave the impetus to nearly every Jewish charitable institution in this city; he was a member of them all, and not only

freely contributed to their support, but attended their meetings and served on their boards. His farseeing vision, years and years ago, projected a Hebrew College, a Jewish Hospital, a Foster Home, a Union of Charities, a Board of Delegates of American Israelites, an Education Society, an American Publication Society, and everything else that could promote the welfare of his fellows.

To the Education Society, his services were peculiarly valuable. Impressed as he was with the truth of his religion, he held that pure Judaism could flourish only among enlightened men; his aim was to spread intelligence, and he felt convinced that Judaism would become widespread and deeply rooted. He devoted much time to the supervision of the school; he was liberal in his donations of books; he caused his friends to send their children to receive instruction, and his attention to the interests of the institution in all ways never flagged. When the College was to be pushed forward, his voice was heard, his exertions were felt. His personal influence procured considerable subscriptions, and, notwithstanding all other engagements, he offered his time and services gratuitously to act as one of the teachers in the College. When the institution was opened, as a just tribute to his eminent abilities, his exalted worth, and the honorable dignity of being the oldest Jewish minister in the country, he was elected Provost or President of the Faculty, his principal branch of instruction being homiletics and belles lettres. The duties of this position he faithfully fulfilled till his serious illness prevented him; and on his death-bed, he evinced his interest in the cause of education and enlightenment by directing in his will that his valuable library should not be sold, but should be delivered to the Hebrew Education Society for the use of the College, and by instructing his executors to present his plates of Miss Aguilar's works to an American Jewish publication society, if a proper one were formed within five years.

Some time in November, 1867, his physician discovered an internal tumor, which gave cause for serious alarm; and so rapidly did this increase in size, and aggravate his illness, that on the 19th of December he was forced to retire to bed. He recognized that his illness was fatal, and with calmness he uttered the confession for the dying, and gave minute directions as to the disposition of his estate, and the perpetuation of his writings. Although then very ill,

and considering himself dying, he dictated the draft of his will word for word, and a full and clear statement of where his various books, stereotype plates and other property were stored. His memory seemed to be as clear as at any previous period. He had two cherished desires: one, that his works should be perpetuated, and the other, that the writer of this [Sulzberger] should continue to publish *The Occident*, and nothing seemed to relieve him more than the assurance that every endeavor would be made to carry out his wishes in both these points. After his illness had been so alarming for three or four days, he appeared to grow somewhat better, and was so far recovered that he was enabled to leave his bed, and even to write something for the January number of *The Occident*. But about the middle of the month of January, he gradually began to sink, until, on Saturday morning, February 1st, at twenty-two minutes before eight o'clock, he died, as calmly as if going to sleep. His mind was perfectly clear to the last. Only on the Thursday previous to his death, when he was in great pain, he requested that the February *Occident* should appear early in the month, and on Friday afternoon, not more than eighteen hours before his death, he dictated a list of the receipts which were to be acknowledged in *The Occident* for February, and at no time during his illness, even when in the greatest pain, and under the influence of anodynes, did he omit to recite his prayers at the usual periods.

The news of his death, although not unexpected, created a more profound sensation than any other event that had happened among the Jews in this country for years. All the various congregations and societies in this city, and a large number in other places hastened to condole with his bereaved friends, and to testify to the world their appreciation of the services he had rendered to Judaism. The secular press and the public, with one accord, united with their Jewish brethren in lamenting the loss of so great a man.

The mental constitution of Mr. Leeser was gigantic. His memory was wonderful. He seemed never to forget the countenance or the name of a man whom he had once seen.

His comprehension was lightning-like. He could perceive in an instant the point of the most abstruse discussion or question, and his eminently logical mind at once followed it out to all its conclusions.

Frequently his views met with opposition from the fact that they were too farseeing and comprehensive.

There could be no greater mistake than a notion which some have expressed, that he was not a good scholar in the language and religious writings of the Hebrews. He had cultivated Hebrew grammar with industry and success, and though he never claimed to be a great Talmudist, yet his knowledge on subjects of Jewish law was considerable. It is true that in these branches he at once yielded to regularly educated rabbis; but this arose, we think, from an unwillingness to speak on subjects in which he could not take the highest rank. He had never pursued a thorough course of instruction in the Gemara [the Amoraic — mostly Aramaic-language — portion of the Talmud], but he was quite familiar with the Mishnah [the Tannaitic — earlier and mostly Hebrew-language — portion of the Talmud], and his singularly retentive memory enabled him to know more of the Gemara than many who had studied much more and much longer. As a general scholar he had few superiors, and his knowledge on all subjects cannot be described better than by terming it encyclopediac.

His thinking powers were so masculine, that their mere exercise supplied him with ideas, which other men obtain only by painful study. We remember well, that not many months since, in discussing a theologico-philosophical question with him, he used the same arguments and came to the same conclusion, as the illustrious Maimonides, without ever having read that portion of the great sage's writings.

As a speaker, his command of language and of ideas enabled him to present well-digested thoughts in excellent shape, without previous preparation. Indeed, many of his extemporaneous discourses might well serve as elegant specimens of pulpit oratory.

But it was, after all, as a writer that he earned the most fame; and in this he was truly great. The mere mention of a subject called up in his suggestive mind thoughts on its every aspect, and with wonderful fluency he wrote on it to as great a length as he wished, without exhausting himself or wearying his readers. Platitudes never issued from his pen, and no one could rise from the perusal of any production of his, without entertaining respect for the man who

could think so logically and so cogently express his thoughts. His style was plain and simple, his language easily comprehensible, his argument direct. The secret of his popularity was that he never appeared learned. He did not burthen his articles with masses of pedantic quotations, in tongues foreign to his readers; he did not cite authorities for any position of his own; but his calm, self-reliant mind thought it out, and showed the process to his hearers and his readers. All this may have detracted from his reputation for deep learning, but it added immensely to his influence and his usefulness. His knowledge was not in the clouds or in the stars, that the people should inquire, who will bring it to us. It was near, in his heart and in his mouth, and he communicated it to the hearts and the minds of the common people.

We honestly believe that since the great [Moses] 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.

[*The Occident*, XXV (1868), 593-601]

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