

Dismissal in Albany

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Isaac Mayer Wise, a founder of American Reform Judaism, significantly influenced the religious maturation of the American Jewish community during the nineteenth century. Born in the Bohemian village of Steingrub in 1819, he emigrated to the United States in the summer of 1846, to become not only the leading exponent of Jewish Reform in America, but the builder par excellence of its organizational structure.¹ He established the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873 and the Hebrew Union College in 1875, and inspired the formation of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1889. A gifted writer, he passionately advocated his religious philosophy in the pages of the Jewish journals of his day, as well as through the many lectures, articles, and books he wrote during his lifetime.

Through his friendship with the well-known New York Jewish minister, Max Lilienthal, Wise was elected to fill the rabbinical vacancy in Congregation Beth El in Albany, New York.² A very important facet in his career related to his difficulties with the Ortho-

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¹ For more complete details of the life and activities of Isaac Mayer Wise, the reader is referred to the following works: Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise* (Cincinnati, 1931); Max B. May, *Isaac Mayer Wise, The Founder of American Judaism* (New York, 1916); Israel Knox, *Rabbi in America, The Story of Isaac Mayer Wise, His Life and Works* (Cincinnati, 1965); Bertram W. Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Cincinnati, 1954), and *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1957).

² This was the first congregation to be founded in Albany and was incorporated on March 25, 1838. *Incorporation Papers*, Archives, Congregation Beth Emeth, Albany [ABE].

dox element of the congregation during his early ministry in Albany. While much has been written about the circumstances resulting in his dismissal from Beth El, the full story of the conflict has as yet not been brought to light or completely understood. We shall endeavor here to detail and interpret the authentic and relevant facts surrounding Wise's struggle for reform in Albany, a struggle which resulted not only in his dismissal but in the organization of a new synagogue in that city.³ This study is based upon an extensive examination of the available documents some of which are brought to light here for the first time.⁴

IN AN UNFORTUNATE MOMENT

Wise came to Albany in the fall of 1846 after having been elected rabbi of Beth El with the added responsibility of administering the congregation's school.⁵ From the very beginning Wise sought to introduce changes in the conduct of the service as well as in the structure of the liturgy. Among the reforms he established was the organization of a mixed choir, the elimination of the *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry), the introduction of German and English hymns, and the initiation of the confirmation ceremony to replace the traditional bar mitzvah rite.⁶ He also abolished the sale of the *mitzvot* (synagogue honors), and insisted that the congregation remain seated during the reading of the Torah.⁷ From the very outset, the direction that Wise sought to give to the religious life of the congregation brought

³ In this study we have limited ourselves to the more immediate causes for the split in Beth El. A comprehensive analysis of the cultural and socioeconomic factors involved in the secessionist movement in Beth El is extensively dealt with in the author's work on Albany.

⁴ In the standard works on Wise, his biographers, when dealing with the Albany phase of his ministry, have primarily utilized the *Reminiscences*, *The Asmonean*, *The Occident*, and his writings. In this work we have made use of the important documentary material available in ABE.

⁵ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, edited and translated by David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), p. 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53, 97-98, 112-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

him into conflict with members of Beth El who resented these changes in their mode of worship and, even more, the zeal with which the rabbi projected them. Thus as Wise proceeded to mold the congregation into that pattern of religious reform which he felt was the authentic expression of Judaism, negative and hostile reactions began to disturb the peace and harmony of Beth El.⁸ Requests and petitions were directed to the board of the congregation to undo some of these reforms, but Wise was able to muster sufficient support to sustain him in his position.⁹

By the summer of 1850, however, the relationship between Wise and his congregation entered into its final phase of storm and strife, provoking a split in the congregation and the establishment of Anshe Emeth, the first Reform synagogue in Albany. The circumstances were rather complex and subtle. In his own analysis of his problems in Albany, Wise placed the greatest emphasis upon the determination of the Orthodox party in the United States to punish him for articulating a new Jewish theology which assumed its most radical form in negating the doctrines of a personal Messiah and the resurrection of the dead.¹⁰

Wise's bold denials of these articles of traditional Jewish belief were occasioned by his visit to Charleston, S. C., in February, 1850. When writing his *Reminiscences*, Wise insisted that his trip to Charleston had been inspired by the information given him by Isaac Leiser that Rabbi Morris J. Raphall¹¹ would be in Charleston to

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* See also pp. 112-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 152-54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 131. Morris Jacob Raphall was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in September, 1798. He studied at a Jewish college in Copenhagen, where he earned the degree of *Haber*. He pursued his secular studies in Germany and England. After 1825 he lived in England, where he was engaged in Jewish scholarly pursuits. In 1841 he was elected to fill a rabbinical vacancy in Birmingham, England, where he served until 1849, at which time he came to the United States. He served as the minister of Congregation Bnai Jeshurun in New York. He enjoyed great popularity as a lecturer on Hebrew literature, and was the first Jewish minister to offer a prayer in the Congress of the United States. He died on June 23, 1868. See Henry S. Morais, *Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1880), pp. 287-90; also Bertram W. Korn, "Rabbis, Prayers and Legislatures," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, XXIII, Part Two, 96-99.

champion the cause of Orthodoxy in a debate with Gustave Poznanski.¹² As is well known by now, Wise came to Charleston as a candidate for the rabbinical office at Beth Elohim and not to participate in any debate. On May 6, 1850, B. H. Rodrigues, secretary pro tem. of Congregation Beth Elohim, responded to an inquiry by Louis Spanier, president of Albany's Beth El, and stated that Wise had "made application for the office of Minister of this congregation. . . ."¹³ When writing of Wise's radical theology, Leeser noted:

Dr. Wise, in an unfortunate moment, in the ardour, perhaps, of a new position as a candidate for the ministry of a congregation, some members and the minister of which were supposed unwilling to receive our creed as it stood and yet stands, was hurried away to answer "no" to a question put to the minister referred to by a learned divine who maintained the correct side of the faith.¹⁴

Obviously, then, Wise's visit to Charleston was undertaken to present himself as a candidate for the rabbinical vacancy in Beth Elohim.

It should be noted that Raphall's visit to Charleston was primarily for the purpose of delivering a series of lectures on "The Poetry of the Hebrew Bible."¹⁵ The debate was a secondary matter and involved only one encounter between the protagonists. It was then that Raphall, in a moment of agitation, propounded these two questions: "Do you believe in the coming of the Messiah?" and "Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?" To these Wise volunteered a loud and resounding "No."¹⁶

¹² Gustave Poznanski, a German-born minister in Charleston, S. C., assumed his position with Beth Elohim in 1836 and was known for his radical reforms. See James G. Heller, *Isaac Mayer Wise, His Life Work and Thought* (New York, 1965), p. 178.

¹³ ABE.

¹⁴ *Occident*, VIII, No. 6 (August, 1850), 256.

¹⁵ See the following Charleston papers: *Courier*, February 18, 23, 29, 1850; *Mercury*, February 2, March 9, 1850; *Evening News*, February 20, 25, 27, March 1, 4, 5, 8, 19, 1850. See also *Asmonean*, I, No. 20 (March 8, 1850), 157.

¹⁶ Letter from officials of Shearith Israel, the Orthodox synagogue of Charleston, to Louis Spanier, president of Beth El in Albany (ABE). See also *Occident*, VIII, No. 6 (August, 1850), 257.

It was this incident in Charleston which, according to Wise, contributed to his troubles in Albany.¹⁷ He also spoke of a "bull of excommunication" which Raphall published in *The Asmonean*, countless letters reaching the pages of *The Occident*, and devious pressures brought to bear upon Spanier to have Wise fired from his Albany pulpit. But documentary evidence tells another story.¹⁸ It is not to Charleston or even to the pages of *The Asmonean* and *The Occident* that we must look for the causes of trouble in Albany's Beth El, but rather to the internal conditions that existed and developed in that momentous summer of 1850. It is true, of course, that Louis Spanier and the Orthodox faction sought to make capital of the incident in Charleston. That is why they published the notarized letter from the officers of Shearith Israel Congregation in which Wise's heresy is detailed.¹⁹ We shall see, however, that Wise's theological pronouncements were not crucial to the antagonism that developed. They were merely used as an instrument to strengthen the position of Wise's enemies.

¹⁷ *Reminiscences*, pp. 152-54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* A search through the pages of *The Occident* and *The Asmonean* turned up no excommunication. In *Asmonean*, I, No. 26 (April 19, 1850), 5, two critical letters appear, one by "Israel," the other by Abraham Rice, an Orthodox rabbinic scholar and spiritual leader of Baltimore's Nidhe Yisrael. The first, in response to an anonymous letter sent Wise and submitted to *The Asmonean* (see I, No. 25 [April 12, 1850], 205), is abusive of Wise, ridicules his sincerity, questions the authenticity of the letter submitted by Wise, and also calls into question Wise's use of "Dr." The second letter, by Rice, is an attack on Wise's view not specifically regarding the Messiah or resurrection of the dead, but of his willingness to accept the type of reform practiced at Beth Elohim in Charleston and of his denial of the sanctity of the Talmud:

I will herewith show that a man who agrees with the reformers of the Charleston congregation Beth Elohim has no longer a right or a voice to talk about Judaism. . . . A man who says that all Post-Biblical Scripture [in which the Talmud is involved] are [is] exposed to his poor criticism can [not] be called an Israelite or a reformer only.

This can hardly be called a "bull of excommunication."

¹⁹ The letter from the officials of Shearith Israel Congregation was published in *The Occident*, but this, as we shall explain, was not the primary source of irritation.

A WALL BUILT BY CEREMONIES

Two basic issues embroiled Wise in a bitter and ill-tempered dispute with members of his synagogue. Despite his pronounced reform tendencies, Wise was a strong believer in the sanctity of the Sabbath. He had consistently endeavored to impose observance of the Sabbath on his congregants, and more specifically on those who occupied positions of leadership in the congregation. Wise was not the first to endeavor to secure the observance of the Sabbath by the leadership of the congregation. In 1843 seven members had submitted to the congregational board a petition asking:

That beginning with the next election, only those members shall qualify to be elected as trustees who keep the Sabbath and who do not desecrate the Sabbath by either buying or selling. Also disqualified for election shall be all such members who at the time of the services are in the city and do not attend the services, or those who customarily do not attend services.²⁰

During his tenure, he claimed, such a resolution had been approved, and on the strength of this, Wise addressed himself to a member of the board of trustees of the congregation, who apparently was in flagrant violation of the Sabbath regulation.

Mr. Solomon Levy: [no date]

Dear Sir: It is my duty to send you warning either to close your business on Sabbath or to resign your position as representative of an Israelitish congregation, inasmuch as it must be a shame for a Synagogue to have an officer who is openly a Sabbath breaker. In case you do not comply, I will be compelled to speak of it publicly.

Respectfully your Rabbi,
Dr. Wise²¹

When word reached Louis Spanier that Wise was determined to denounce Levy publicly for his violation of the Sabbath, he dispatched a message to Wise directing him to refrain from preaching on that

²⁰ Fragmentary leaf from the *Minutes of Congregation, Beth El* (ABE). The following signed the petition: Baruch Grosshut, Edward Bendell, Elias Schieleir, Elias Peterson, Joseph Weinstein, and Joseph Erich. The petition was voted down.

²¹ ABE. While the letter is undated, Wise sent it sometime probably during April or May, 1850, since the Sabbath on which he was to denounce Levy was June 1st.

day. Wise, however, ignored the president's order and at the appropriate time rose and approached the lectern to deliver his charge. According to Wise, Spanier then sought to interfere with his preaching, but Wise overcame this by speaking in a loud voice and ignoring Spanier. Thereupon Spanier and some worshippers left the synagogue.²² It was probably this incident which provoked the enmity between the president and the rabbi.

In his *Reminiscences*, Wise claimed that Spanier took exception to some of the doctrines pronounced by the confirmands during the Shavuot service of 1850.²³ Though Spanier could have been offended by the declamations offered by the young confirmands, it is not likely that mere ideological differences could have incited him against Wise to the passionate degree he exhibited at a later date. It was Wise's refusal to accept presidential guidance and his public display of indifference to Spanier's expression of authority which the *parnas* could not leave unchallenged.

In the wake of this cause célèbre, eleven members of the congregation addressed the following petition to Spanier: "We the undersigned wish and desire from the President and the trustees to request from Dr. Wise a copy of his sermon, of June 1, 1850."²⁴ While this communication is undated, we know from a subsequent document (to be dealt with below) that the request for the sermon was made on June 2—that is, one day after Wise had delivered it. Wise, with characteristic disdain, refused; he was not, he said, in the habit of preparing a written sermon in advance. In his *Reminiscences*, Wise wrote that Spanier, because of his improper conduct during religious worship, was asked to resign, was brought before the police magistrate on a charge of disturbing divine worship, and was subjected to a mild reprimand by the judge. There is no documentary

²² *Reminiscences*, pp. 157–58. In a letter to *The Occident*, Spanier explained that it was the public denunciation and its potential repercussions that he objected to. See *Occident*, VIII, No. 8 (November, 1850), 428.

²³ Wise admitted that at first he and Spanier had been good friends, but due to continuous baiting by the Orthodox group, Spanier had turned against him. See *Reminiscences*, pp. 152, 155–56.

²⁴ ABE.

evidence to substantiate or negate this aspect of Wise's recollections of his encounter and difficulties with Spanier.²⁵

In view of Wise's refusal to furnish the text of his sermon, nine members dispatched to Spanier a lengthy letter, in which some of the details of the sermon were recalled and some formal charges against Wise were listed.²⁶ The letter, addressed to "President Cong. Beth El., Albany," was dated June 14, 1850:

On June 2, 1850, several members of your congregation sent you a request to ask Dr. Rabbi Wise for a copy of his sermon preached on Saturday, June 1, 1850. This petition was accepted by you and as we may note here said petition was not noted by Dr. Wise.

We, the undersigned, therefore forced to show God and the world that we are Yehudim [Jews] and that we strive not to let our holy religion be desecrated by an apostate and that our basic rites should not be shortened or eliminated by this wicked person in order to install a reform temple service, . . . and that our holy Torah not be read to us in a foreign language. In order that these hellish plans for Judaism [be curtailed] and lest the religion which our great teachers and prophets have established for us be taken away, we bring the following charges against Rabbi Dr. Isaac M. Wise:

1. That Rabbi Wise tries lately . . . to dishonor our rite . . . to disobey our religion and to declare our forefathers who have instructed us to be stupid and crazy people.
2. He has in his sermon of June 1, 1850. Using the text of the [*Haf-tarah*] of *Parshat B'Halothecha—Rani v'simchi bat zion, ki hineni bo v'shochanti b'thochaich. N'eum Adonai.* ["Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo I come and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord that day, and shall be my people, and I will dwell in the midst of thee; and thou shalt know that the Lord hath sent me unto thee" (Zech. 2:14-15).] . . . and declared the following in explanation: "Many people come near to God except the Israelites. There is a

²⁵ *Asmonean*, II, No. 23 (September 17, 1850), 180; *Reminiscences*, p. 158.

²⁶ It was on the basis of this sermon that the formal charges against Wise were promulgated. For some reason this document makes no reference to Wise's pronouncements against Levy. Two explanations are possible. It might be that those who submitted the sermon did not want to offend one of their own group by referring to his laxity with regard to the Sabbath; or Wise's comments about Levy were separate and apart from the sermon and were not included in this epistle, since its primary aim was to show Wise's heresy and unlawful exercise of rabbinic authority.

wall between us and God—a wall which is built by ceremonies. We will ram our heads against this wall but we will never be able to see the other side until we tear down the wall.”

The undersigned want to know who is this God who is near to so many people but not to Israel? Who is this God that dwells among so many people but not among the Israelites?

3. That he used lies in the above sermon in which he declared prayers like *Y'hai sh'mai rabbah* [May His great name be blessed] and Amen are nothing and after we have been instructed we still don't understand anything according to his point of view, because we have been taught in a dead language. And furthermore [he holds] that *tephilin* and *tzitzith* [phylacteries and the fringes of the prayer shawl] has superfluous ceremonies.
4. We call him a hypocrite in trying to impress upon us that he is a God-fearing man—yet he tries in every way possible and with every device to negate the beautiful prayers which our renowned scholars have composed and to introduce those which are being used in the Offenbach Synagogue and other so called Temples.
5. Isn't it proof enough that his behavior for a year only leads to split the once-peaceful congregation Beth El. . . . And such a man we declare unworthy to occupy the position of Rabbi and preacher and the following reasons are sufficient to suspend him from such service.
 - a. He said in a sermon about 5 or 6 weeks ago that we have a God of reason, but we say that we have *Elokai avraham, elokai yitzchok vailokai yaakov* [God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob].
 - b. He said in his first sermon after his last election when he was accepted by a Reform Congregation in Charleston that he is in favor of such reforms and ones that even go beyond these. When a Yehudah [a Jew] is for reformation of religion like Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, S.C., it is bad enough, but if he is bent on going even beyond that, he cannot be a Yehudah.
 - c. We have heard that he has written on Rosh Hashanah [the New Year] in the Odd Fellows Lodge.
 - d. That he was supposed to have been swinging in a swing on Shabbat [Sabbath] in the Mineral Spring Garden.
 - e. That he was supposed to have read a letter addressed to Mrs. Gabriel Wise which came to him by mistake, to prepare the *mikveh* [ritual bath] and he read it in a saloon with ridicule.
 - f. He was impertinent and presumptuous how he behaved toward you last Shabbat.

You can see from the foregoing accusations that it is the duty of every

Yehudah to bring this matter to light, so that the guilty ones can be punished.²⁷

This letter was signed by the following: Leopold Koshland, Benedict Groshut, Abraham Kohn, Moses Hamburger, L. Sporborg, Moses Lindenstein, Mordy Lippman, J. L. Freund, and L. Lyons.²⁸

NO SHARE IN THE WORLD TO COME

Paralleling this development, or possibly even associated with it, Wise also became involved in a very serious dispute with two butchers in his congregation. The dispute arose when Wise declared the shochet Veist Traub unqualified to perform the ritual of shechita, and forbade the consumption of any meat slaughtered by him.²⁹ In the *Reminiscences*, Wise offered the explanation that Traub frequented saloons and played cards, and that these were the reasons compelling him to issue a ban against Traub's slaughtering. Wise's contention was, of course, without any foundation in rabbinic law. Frequenting saloons is not a violation of Jewish law, and gambling would merely disqualify one from giving testimony, but not from acting in the capacity of a ritual slaughterer. What Wise failed to indicate in his recollections, however, was that he was involved in a legal suit with Traub in which Wise was charged with libel.³⁰

²⁷ ABE.

²⁸ Hamburger, an Albany Jewish merchant who also dealt in liquor, lived at 73 Hamilton Street (*Albany Directory*, 1850). Regarding Koshland, Groshut, and Kohn, no data are extant. Sporborg, born in Altenstein, Bavaria, in 1812, married Sophie Elroth and died in Albany, in 1852 (Memorial Stone-Beth Emeth Cemetery, Loudonville, New York). Lindenstein, a butcher, was located at 196 South Pearl Street (*Albany Directory*, 1850, p. 206). Lippman, another butcher, was located at 8 Center Market (*Albany Directory*, 1851, p. 207). Freund was a peddler (*Book of License for Peddlers, 1850*, Manuscript and History Division of the New York State Library, Albany). Lyons, a merchant, had the Variety Store at 47 Washington (*Albany Directory*, 1848, p. 208).

²⁹ It is possible that Wise's difficulty with some of the Orthodox element also contributed to his conflict with the butchers. *Reminiscences*, p. 158. Also see letter to Spanier by Albany butchers (ABE); also *Occident*, VIII, No. 6 (September, 1850), 306-12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* II: 6 and Gloss 20 by the Rama and also commentary of the Shakh; *Occident*, VIII, No. 6 (September, 1850), 306-12.

Traub submitted the following letter and document to *The Asmonean* on October 11, 1850:

Sir—I have much pleasure in informing you that differences existing in the congregation Beth El at Albany have been satisfactory adjusted. I have been induced in a spirit of peace to accept from the gentlemen defendants in the above suits of libel an explanation and withdrawal of the language applied to me. And in justification of the course pursued by myself I request that you publish the accompanying documents.

Veist Traub
v.s.
Isaac M. Wise

Supreme Court
This action is
settled and the
defendant admits

that he spoke the words mentioned in the Complaint, the same were spoken in reference to the understanding that the Plaintiff heard a discourse delivered by the defendant in the Bethel Synagogue and that the Plaintiff understood the language of the discourse differently than others and that on the testimony he gave, in relation to the same, he acted in good faith.

Veist Traub
Issac M. Wise³¹

The controversy involved in the Traub suit should not be confused with the later internal difficulties and disturbances on the first day of Rosh Hashanah when, as we shall see, Wise was forcibly restrained from officiating as the minister.³² The evidence points to a legal controversy antedating the Rosh Hashanah day spectacle.

First, from Traub's letter it is obvious that this was an issue arising out of a libelous utterance by Wise in no way connected with the charges of assault and battery that developed out of the Rosh Hashanah débâcle. Furthermore, in *The Occident*, under the date of "Elul 5610," readers are told regarding Wise that ". . . he is dragged

³¹ *Asmonean*, II, No. 28 (October 11, 1850), 198. The date of the Supreme Court document is October 1, 1850. Rosh Hashanah was September 7, that year. There are two obviating facts confirming the contention that this document refers to a separate legal quarrel between Traub and Wise rather than an outgrowth of the Rosh Hashanah controversy. First, it is hardly possible that a case would be entered on the Supreme Court docket in the short space of three weeks, and secondly, the controversy resulting from the Rosh Hashanah fracas was tried in the Mayor's Court and not in the Supreme Court.

³² *Reminiscences*, p. 165.

before a court of law on a suit for damages for doing his duty. . . .” It is clear, therefore, that there was a suit brought against Wise in the late summer of 1850 prior to the Rosh Hashanah incident. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to conjecture that the legal action brought by Traub against Wise was related to Wise’s declaration that Traub was unfit to continue as ritual slaughterer for the community. The language describing the differences between Traub and Wise obviously points to the sermon which Wise delivered on June 1st, and which Traub “in good faith” transmitted to others. We may safely assume that the result of this transmission is embodied in the letter of June 14, 1850, in which the substance of the sermon was detailed.³³ Obviously, angered by Traub’s action, Wise proceeded to dismiss him from his function as Shochet.³⁴

Another letter addressed to Spanier containing charges against Wise was dispatched to the president on June 23rd. The contents of this letter are limited to complaints against Wise’s doctrinal heresy.

We the undersigned members of the . . . congregation find it our duty to bring charges against Dr. Rabbi Wise.

Since we heard for sure that at a meeting of Yehudim [Jews] in Charleston, S.C., he openly and without reservation declared that he does not believe in *be’ath hamoshiach* [the coming of the Messiah] and *T’chiath Hamethim* [the resurrection of the dead] and regarding these two matters our sages say:

Hakopher b’viath hamoshiach u-v’tichiath hamethim af al pi sheaino kopher b’torath Moshe nikrah min v’apikores v’ain lo chelek l’olam habah. He who denies the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead, even though he does not deny the law of Moses is called a sectarian and an Epicurean, and has no share in the world to come.

If this is true and we have no doubt about it, Rabbi Wise is a *kopher bailokai yisroel* [one who denies the God of Israel] and certainly is not worthy to occupy the position of Rabbi in a congregation. The undersigned therefore request you to start proceedings to investigate this matter

³³ ABE.

³⁴ The assumption that Traub was the one who transmitted the essence of Wise’s sermon on that day is based on two considerations: a) Traub was the most literate of Wise’s opponents and was the most qualified to handle Hebrew texts and quotations; b) while many of Wise’s opponents walked out with Spanier, Traub obviously had to remain since he was the hazan and had to conduct the *musaph* service.

and that Rabbi Dr. Wise be suspended from his duties until this matter has been resolved.

June 23, 1850

Leopold Koshland
 Benedict Groshut
 Abraham Kohn
 Luxie Kaufman
 G. Weiss
 L. Sporberg
 Moses Lindenstein
 Alexander Frank
 I. L. Freund
 L. Lyons⁸⁵

But more important than the above accusations of theological heresies were charges of abuse of rabbinic authority submitted to Spanier by two butchers in the congregation in a letter dated June 26, 1850. This letter is important because it informs us that Wise not only discharged Traub, but engaged another shochet to replace him. The text of the letter is as follows:

We, the undersigned Jewish butchers of the Congregation Bethel, make the following accusation against Rabbi Wise because of his having acted unfavorably against our trade. He tried to influence members of the congregation not to buy from Traub's Schechita.

We therefore put the following accusations before the President and the Trustees:

- 1) Is Rabbi Dr. Wise empowered to split the congregation over the matter of food provisions?
- 2) Is it in keeping with the character of [the] Rabbi to be a *masig gevul reaihu* [one who expropriates the right of others]?
- 3) Can Rabbi Wise interfere in the rights of the Congregation without the knowledge of the Trustees?
- 4) Can he employ a Shochet [ritual slaughterer] in a congregation without the approval and consent of the whole congregation?

The undersigned request the President and the Trustees to warn the congregation of similar action.

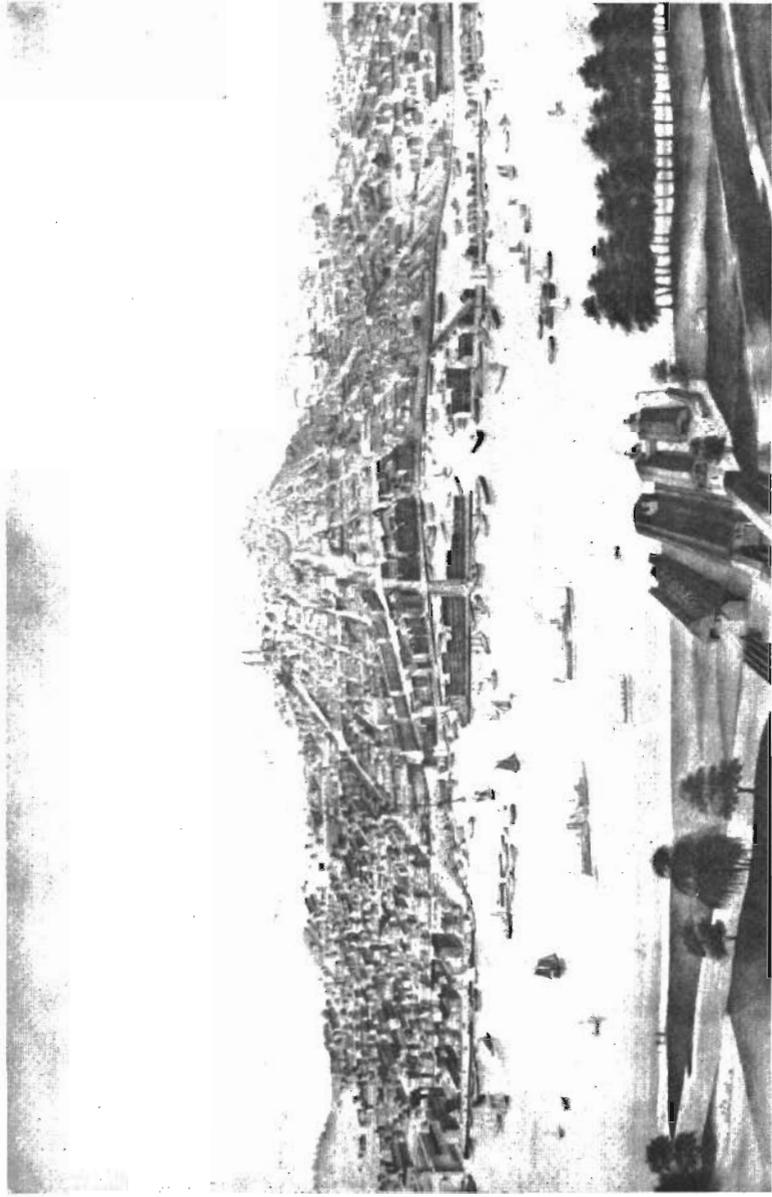
Moses Lindenstein
 Mordy Lippman⁸⁶

⁸⁵ ABE. The phrase "even though he does not deny the Law of Moses" refers probably to the fact that Wise consistently defended the Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*



Isaac Mayer Wise
As a young rabbi



*Courtesy, Albany Institute of History and Art,
Albany, N.Y.*

Albany in the mid-1850's

To add to Spanier's problems, he received a note from one A. Swartz, notifying him ". . . that Traub will give up his position in the Synagogue so he will not have to lead in the Services." The note ended with the suggestion: "Bring this before the Congregation."³⁷ On the first of July a Board of Trustees meeting was held in which charges against Rabbi Wise were debated.³⁸ Six accusations were brought against him. These breaches of conduct, emanating from the letter of June 14th, were as follows: 1) that he declared Hebrew to be a dead language; 2) that he had done away with revered prayers of the synagogue; 3) that his reforms would go even beyond those of the Charleston Beth Elohim Temple; 4) that he was seen writing in the Odd Fellows' Lodge on Rosh Hashanah; 5) that he had been seen swinging on a swing on the Sabbath; 6) that he publicly ridiculed the women's ritual bath.³⁹

The charges were forwarded to Wise by the hazzan, Veist Traub, who was also the secretary of the congregation. Wise was directed to respond in "writing no later than July 14th, 10 o'clock in the morning precisely."⁴⁰ Wise's response was typical, with his usual acid quip and condescending tongue. The document is worthy of note:

To the President of the Congregation
Beth El at Albany

I received the 3rd day of July this year, six pieces written paper with the enclosure. It was decreed by a trustee meeting which was held the first day of July, 1850, that Rabbi Wise shall have a copy of the complaints designated 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 against him and that Rabbi Wise shall send his defense of these complaints in writing to the President of the Congregation Beth El by the 14th day July at 10 o'clock in the morning precisely.

Veist Traub
Secretare (*sic.*)
of the Congregation

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ We know of the date through Wise's response to the charges brought against him at this meeting: ". . . by a trustee meeting which was held the first day of July 1850. . . ." Wise's letter, July 12, 1850 (ABE).

³⁹ ABE.

⁴⁰ *Letter of Board of Trustees to Wise, July 3, 1850 (ABE).*

I am compelled to reply

- 1) "What is my trespass, what is my sin, that thou has[t] hotly pursued after me?" [Gen. 31:36].
- 2) "Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?" [Exodus 2:14].
- 3) "Thinkest thou to kill me?" [Exodus 2:14].
- 4) Am I or anybody else obliged to answer writings in which I am called an apostate, a liar, a hypocrite and so, etc. etc.?
- 5) No law exists in this country which obliges anyone to defend himself in writing without confronting his accusers.
- 6) It is impossible for me to get a reasonable sense out of those writings, because there are plenty grammatical and spelling mistakes in it, here compositions without sense for any sensible man. But for the sake of peace I want to defend myself by word of mouth in the presence of my accuser providing you judge without partiality according to the law; you may therefore fix the day and place and I shall be there; but furthermore I must caution you that I forbid any insult whatsoever.

Albany, July 12, 5610

Dr. Wise⁴¹

Wise informed us in his *Reminiscences* that upon receipt of his response a meeting of the board of trustees was held at which time Wise was vindicated by a 3 to 2 vote. Furthermore, he declared that Spanier, having lost face, was requested to resign his office. But because of the ridicule heaped upon him by his enemies Spanier refused to remove himself as the parnas of Beth El.⁴²

Once more we do well to tread with caution. No evidence of any such meeting is extant save Wise's declaration in the *Reminiscences*. This we do know—Wise penned his response to Spanier on July 12, and we have a record of a board of trustees meeting held on July 24th. The meeting that Wise referred to could not have been the one held July 24th. At that meeting of the board, not only is there no evidence that Spanier was rebuked by his colleagues, but we know that the board by a 3-2 majority voted to withhold Wise's salary until the whole matter was brought before the entire congregation. In order to sustain Wise's assertion that the board had originally exonerated him of all charges, we must assume that not only was there an

⁴¹ ABE.

⁴² *Reminiscences*, p. 158.

additional board meeting between the 12th and the 24th of July, but that there was also a complete change of sentiment on the matter. This is possible, but unlikely.⁴³

I WILL REMAIN IN MY POSITION

It was probably in this charged atmosphere that Spanier wrote to Charleston inquiring about Wise's pronouncements on the question of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. The heresy issue raised by Spanier in his letter to the Charleston congregation should not be considered as the primary cause for the deteriorated relationship between him and Wise. The Charleston incident was by that time well known to everyone, since it had been reported and commented upon in the Jewish journals. Wise was obviously right to question the reaction of some of the Jews in Albany regarding his heretical views since they had all been well aware of his radical and unorthodox leanings.⁴⁴ It was not to ascertain the facts that Spanier wrote, but rather to procure for his own purposes official documentation of Wise's doctrinal blasphemy. Spanier was a man sensitive to public opinion; that is why he troubled himself to air his views in *The Asmonean* and *The Occident*. He wanted to make certain that his position could be presented in the most favorable light for himself and for his congregation. The problems involving the shochet, the unauthorized sermon, and even the pending legal entanglements were not sufficient, at least in his eyes, to arouse public sympathy on behalf of his course of action. These were, after all, local matters in which the outside Jewish world might not wish to become involved. But a matter of doctrine, a matter touching upon a cornerstone of faith and tradition, would have the necessary appeal and notoriety to attract and stimulate sympathetic interest. We may therefore assume that it was this consideration which motivated Spanier to have

⁴³ *Wise Correspondence*, July 12, 1850 (ABE); *Minutes Board of Trustees*, Congregation Beth El, July 24, 1850 (ABE).

⁴⁴ *Reminiscences*, p. 153. The exact date of Spanier's letter to Shearith Israel Congregation in Charleston is not known, but, since the response was dated July 8th, and since a letter of inquiry to Spanier regarding Wise's pronouncements in Charleston was dated June 23rd, we may assume that Spanier wrote to Charleston on or about that date.

the letter from Shearith Israel published in *The Occident*.⁴⁵ Spanier was using a doctrinal façade to justify his resolution to depose Wise. The meeting of the trustees on July 24th was held. The result of this meeting is reflected in a document dated July 24th:

We the undersigned as the trustees of the Congregation Beth El have decided today that the salary which Dr. Wise requested from the Congregation for the past quarter year from April 14th to July 14th should not be paid until it had been decided by the whole congregation at a Congregational meeting whether he should receive the same or not.

Louis Spanier, Pres.

Cong. Beth El.

Mayer Stein—Trustee

Solomon Levy—Trustee⁴⁶

Neither Wise's nor the community's reaction to this arbitrary action by the board is known. We can only assume that the bitterness was compounded on both sides, and that the stresses and strains to which the "once peaceful congregation" was subjected were rapidly approaching the breaking point. The month of August must have passed in a sullen brooding spirit. No official meetings were held, but surely we must assume that private consultations among the partisans were underway—quiet plans and calm deliberations before the fury and the storm.

On September 5th, the quarterly meeting of the congregation was held. Wise charged that the meeting was held earlier than was customary. During that week there was a state fair in Albany. The meeting was scheduled to begin at the unusual hour of three o'clock in the afternoon. Wise was sure that the date and time of the meeting had been scheduled so as to discourage a good attendance.⁴⁷

It might well have been true that the quarterly meetings of the congregation were often held after the High Holidays, but Spanier acted within the framework of the constitution, which provided that the quarterly meetings be held either "before or after" the holidays.

⁴⁵ *Occident*, VIII, No. 6 (August, 1850), 257.

⁴⁶ ABE. Stein was a local merchant; though he signed this document, he generally supported Wise and, in the fall of 1850, left Beth El to join Wise's new congregation, Anshe Emeth. See *Document of Withdrawal from Beth El (ABE)*.

⁴⁷ *Reminiscences*, p. 163.

Under the heading of "Meetings," Article 2 of the Constitution stated: "The quarterly regular meetings shall be held shortly before or after New Year, Candle mass [Chanukah], Pentecost and Pass-over. . . ." Furthermore, according to Article 3, "The President may call extra meetings of the Congregation or of the Trustees, as often as he shall consider it necessary."⁴⁸ Wise was indeed correct when he asserted that a state fair was being held in the Albany area on the day of the meeting. But as to his contention that the meeting commenced at "three o'clock in the afternoon" and lasted "till eleven o'clock at night," no substantial evidence for this is available and the length of time that the meeting would have taken suggests that Wise might be in error. Wise's further complaint that no notice was given the congregation regarding the special nature of the matter to be brought before the membership is apparently correct. It was on the basis of this neglect that Wise was later exonerated in court.⁴⁹

There are two conflicting views as to what happened at the meeting of September 5th: one, the version rendered by Wise in his *Reminiscences*, and the other, Spanier's in his communication to *The Occident*.⁵⁰

According to the first version, the meeting proceeded in a tumultuous fashion and with passionate debate regarding the charges brought against Wise. At a point when Wise's supporters were convinced that no real purpose could be achieved with its continuance, they offered a motion to have the meeting adjourned, but the president refused persistently to put the motion for adjournment. At eleven o'clock, Joseph Sporberg, the vice-president, again offered a motion to adjourn. "A vote was taken and Sporberg decided that the motion was carried." He declared the meeting adjourned and left with his friends. Following their departure, Spanier and those that remained sustained the charges against Wise and formally dismissed him from his post.

⁴⁸ Constitution, Congregation Beth El (ABE).

⁴⁹ According to the *Albany Argus*, August 27, 1850, p. 2, the Fair was open to the public as of September 5th. See *Reminiscences*, p. 205. See also *Occident*, IX, No. 3 (June, 1851), 166-67.

⁵⁰ *Reminiscences*, pp. 163-64; *Occident*, VIII, No. 5 (August, 1850), 257; No. 6 (September, 1850), 306-12; No. 8 (November, 1850), 422-24; IX, No. 3 (June, 1851), 166-67.

Spanier's recollection as to what transpired at the meeting differs from Wise's account in one important respect. According to Spanier, the motion to adjourn was put before the body "and negatived upon a ballot by a large majority." Spanier did not dwell upon the question regarding those who left the meeting and the matter of how many remained to vote for the dismissal of Wise. The document which was forwarded to Wise informing him of the action of the congregation read:

To Dr. Wise in Albany,

By the regular quarterly meeting of the Congregation Beth El, held the 5th of September, 1850, it was resolved by the majority of the Congregation Beth El after a long consult [*sic*] about different accusations and complaints against the Rabbi Dr. Isaac M. Wise (of said complaints Dr. Wise received on the 3rd day of July a copy).

- 1) That the contract between the Congregation Beth El one part and the Rabbi Dr. Isaac M. Wise another part shall be considered void and
- 2) Rabbi Isaac M. Wise shall be discharged from the Congregation Beth El from his office as a Rabbi and preacher commencing as of today the 5th day of September, 1850.
- 3) A copy of the resolutions shall be forwarded to the Rabbi Dr. Isaac M. Wise.

Albany, the 6th day of September, 1850.

L. Spanier,
Pres.

Veist Traub
Secretary of the
Congregation Beth El⁵¹

The impression that Wise sought to communicate was that the majority of the members assembled for the meeting were in support of the rabbi and that, had the meeting taken its natural course of action, Wise would have been exonerated and sustained. If this is so, why did Sporberg, one of Wise's staunchest supporters, seek an adjournment of the meeting? Would it not have been to the interest of Wise and his friends to permit the charges against him to be brought to a vote, thereby giving the majority of the assembled the most potent instrument of their support of Wise, namely, a resounding vote in his favor? At best, an adjournment would have retained the status quo with all of its confusion, indecision, bitterness, and tension. Furthermore, having failed in their attempt to have the meeting ad-

⁵¹ *Reminiscences*, pp. 163-64; *Asmonean*, II, No. 23 (September 17, 1850), 180; *Resolution Board of Trustees, Congregation Beth El*, September 6, 1850 (ABE).

journed, why did they decide to leave the meeting, thus assuring Spanier and his friends of an absolute majority? Is it not more reasonable to assume that it was Spanier who enjoyed a majority? Therefore, Sporberg and his party sought an adjournment of the meeting to gain time in order to change the tide of ill-will encompassing the rabbi. Having failed in this attempt, they left the meeting, hoping thereby to cast some doubt onto its legality.

We come now to the last and most dramatic phase of this intra-congregational struggle. Wise, in consultation with his friends and legal counsel, was advised to inform Spanier of his intention of remaining the rabbi of the congregation and of officiating at Rosh Hashanah services the following day. He, therefore, dispatched the following communication to Spanier:

In answer to your letter of September 6th last, I have to advise you that in keeping with my rights and in accordance with the desires of the majority of the Trustees of Cong. Beth El, I will remain in my position and will continue in my duties as before.

September 6th, 1850.
Dr. Wise—Rabbi
Congregation Beth El²²

THERE IS THE LAW

Apparently the evening services of September 6th passed without any incident. The following morning, however, when Wise arrived at the synagogue, he found that his seat on the pulpit had been taken. He, therefore, seated himself elsewhere. Wise's own words depict the mood of grave excitement that pervaded the congregation:

Everything was as quiet as a grave. Finally, the choir sings Sulzer's great *En Komokha*. At the conclusion of the song, I step before the ark in order to take out the scrolls of the law as usual, and to offer prayer. Spanier steps in my way and, without saying a word, smites me with his fist so that my cap falls from my head. This was the terrible signal for an uproar the like of which I had never experienced. The people acted like furies. It was as though the synagogue had suddenly burst forth into a flaming conflagration. The Poles and the Hungarians, who thought only of me, struck out like wild men. The young people jumped down from the choir gallery

²² *Wise Correspondence*, September 6, 1850 (ABE).

to protect me, and had to fight their way through the surging crowd. Within two minutes the whole assembly was a struggling mass. The sheriff and his posse, who were summoned, were belabored and forced out until finally the whole assembly surged out of the house into Herkimer Street. "Louis Spanier," said I to him, "there is the law to which I can appeal." He replied, "I have a hundred thousand dollars more than you. I do not fear the law. I will ruin you." I finally reached home bowed with pain and irrepressible grief.⁵³

Wise did not mention the scheme agreed upon by his friends to assure his presence on the pulpit that day. His supporters decided to purchase for him the honor of taking out the Torah scroll from the Ark. Spanier, upon hearing of this arrangement, declared all purchases of honors made on the previous day to be null and void, thus denying the opposition the advantage of conferring this honor upon the rabbi. Spanier, in his defense, claimed that rumors of trouble and the atmosphere of *ill-will* that prevailed had compelled him to seek the assistance of the sheriff's office even prior to the Rosh Hashanah outbreak.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Reminiscences*, pp. 165-66.

⁵⁴ *Asmonean*, II, No. 25 (October 11, 1850), 197. This incident was reported in the *Albany Evening Atlas*, September 7, 1850, under the heading "Great Excitement in the Jewish Church":

During the last two or three days the members of the Hebrew Congregation worshipping in Fulton [*sic*] Street have been in great excitement. It seems that they are not all united in love for the Rev. Dr. Wise, their spiritual adviser, and one portion have labored with great zeal to remove him from his pastoral station; while the other portion have been equally zealous in maintaining him in his position.

On Thursday, it seems, an election was held to test the question, when we understand there were other feelings than those of brotherly love strongly manifested. This morning being the Jewish Sabbath, the congregation assembled early, when a strife arose between the two sections as to whether the Rev. Dr. Wise should or should not officiate. It seems that as soon as the attempt was made by Dr. Wise to conduct the ceremonies, a general melee commenced. Argument, persuasion, and conciliation were dispensed with and angry words, threatenings and even blows were resorted to, and several severe assaults were committed.

The peace of that portion of the city became so alarmingly disturbed, that it became necessary, for the safety of the public, and for the belligerents themselves, to call in the interposition of the police authorities. Sheriff Beardsley repaired promptly to the spot, accompanied by a strong force, and soon cleared the synagogue of both parties, locked the doors, and took the keys in his possession. This had the desired effect, and the riot and disturbance then terminated.

After Wise arrived home, a local constable arrested him and escorted him to the police station, where "the whole rabble was present to feast their eyes on the sight of their rabbi appearing in court on New-Year's Day." The police judge, however, treated Wise with courtesy and permitted him to return to his home. Services for the second day of Rosh Hashanah were held in Wise's home for his supporters, and we may assume that, for the other segment of the congregation, arrangements were made either in private homes or possibly at the Beth El Jacob Synagogue since the police had confiscated the keys of the Beth El building and closed the premises for public use.⁵⁵

The first phase of the era of Isaac Mayer Wise was now history. The ties that had bound the members of the Beth El Congregation since 1838 were torn asunder. However illegal Louis Spanier's actions may have been, the relations between Wise and Beth El were at an end.

A multiplicity of causes contributed to Wise's dismissal from the Beth El pulpit. No single issue compelled Spanier to deprive Wise of his ministerial charge in Albany. Spanier had been challenged by the following facts: (1) Wise had delivered an offensive sermon contrary to the president's request; (2) Wise had arbitrarily discharged the ritual slaughterer and may have engaged another in his place without the consent of the congregation; (3) Wise had been involved in a law suit and charged with libel; (4) the rabbi was accused of heresy; and (5) in consequence of all this, Traub had threatened to resign his office as hazzan. Spanier was convinced that Wise had, by the willful, overbearing, and intemperate exercise of his ministerial office, threatened the already shaky peace and harmony of the congregation. He had made up his mind, therefore, to sever relations between Beth El and Wise.

Several of those who were in the melee soon afterwards applied to the police, for warrants charging each other with assault and battery. They will have a hearing probably on Monday, if they do not, previous to that time, reconcile matters among themselves, which we hope they may do.

On Monday, September 9th, the *Atlas* reported: "We were misinformed as to the location of the Synagogue in which the Hebrew brethren had their disturbance on Saturday. It occurred at the one in Herkimer and not Fulton Street, as we were then informed."

⁵⁵ *Reminiscences*, p. 166; *Occident*, VIII, No. 8 (November, 1850), 422-24.