

# The Sprout That Grew

ABRAHAM CRONBACH

*Abraham Cronbach (1882–1965), a native of Indianapolis, began his studies at the Hebrew Union College in 1898, two years before Isaac M. Wise's death. Ordained in 1906, Rabbi Cronbach returned to the College in 1922 to serve on its faculty. In 1950, he retired as professor of Jewish social studies. Notable for his outspoken attachment to pacifism and social justice, he was the author of many books; his autobiography appeared in Volume XI (1959) of the American Jewish Archives. On March 26, 1932, Dr. Cronbach delivered the annual Founders' Day address in the chapel of the Hebrew Union College.*

The institution of Founders' Day at the Hebrew Union College is exactly thirty-one years old. Today marks the expiration of precisely thirty-two years since the illustrious Isaac M. Wise passed from the scene of his labors. A few of us still remember him—bent, feeble, tottering in the eighty-first year of his arduous life. A few of us still recall that sad Monday, March 26th, 1900, with the sunset of which the brightest sun of American Judaism also had its setting.

You have often heard how the master was fatally stricken while teaching a Saturday afternoon class at the Hebrew Union College—not in this building [on Clifton Avenue in Cincinnati], but in the old edifice situated [on West Sixth Street] in what is now a neighborhood of extreme deterioration. Though his interests were exceedingly varied and though the Hebrew Union College was only one of several enterprises which he fathered, it happened nonetheless that the final summons came while he was imparting instruction at this institution.

As we look back through the years with their fading memories and their prodigious changes, one fact emerges clear and vivid, namely, that it is just as easy to misunderstand Isaac M. Wise as it is to understand him. Isaac M. Wise was a prolific writer. He wrote and published both in English and German, novels, editorials, sermons, lectures, hymns, poems and scores of disquisitions historical, polemical, and philosophical. With certain exceptions, this printed output does not reveal the secret of the man's greatness. His poetry is one of these exceptions. The new *Union Hymnal* which appeared a month ago

contains three of his numerous hymns. To understand Isaac M. Wise, you must sing: "Hear, O Israel, Hear!"

*Hear, O Israel, hear; God, thy Lord, is near,  
Love and mercy mark His trace:  
Light from Seraph flame, Truth the angels claim,  
Pours on thee His boundless grace.*

*Sing, O Israel, sing.  
God is Lord, and King;  
He redeems, besides Him none,  
Suns and stars proclaim God's exalted name  
One is He, Eternal One.*

You must sing or hear sung his "Let there be light!"

*"Let there be light!" at dawn of time  
The Lord of Hosts proclaimed.  
"Let there be light!" this call sublime  
Went forth when Horeb flamed.  
Then broke on Israel's mind a day  
Illumined by a heavenly ray.*

You must, at some solemn memorial service, hear his magnificent German hymn, "Es leben deine Tote." Do not read his historical writings or his theological writings, least of all his polemical writings if you would comprehend how it came that myriads followed and all but worshipped him. Read his poems. Read his hymns.

Next to his poetry stand his editorials [in *The Israelite* and *Die Deborah*] as important revelations of the man, his editorials not when they run into sky-flown vaticinations about the mission of Israel or the cause of humanity or the unity of God, but when they are "of earth, earthy," when they deal concretely with current events and definitely with practical proposals. Here you meet a strength as titanic as it is unpolished. Today we would speak of his "striking out from the shoulder." Isaac M. Wise, in other words, knew how to dispense with rhetorical kid gloves when necessary. When he had something to say, he said it with no one's leave—not even that of the dictionary. He permitted few rules of syntax or diction to trammel him when there was an idea that had to be shot out with the force of a cannon ball. He was one of the very few who have been great enough to do this with impunity.

Again, if you wish to understand Isaac M. Wise, you must come into contact with some of the few survivors among those with whom he came into contact. It is almost inexplicable how a man with his well known and self-confessed brusqueness could elicit such immeasurable devotion. He also had his enemies who vigorously denounced him. But no one ever ridiculed him. No student, so far as I know, ever mimicked him.

But the chief revelation of Isaac M. Wise is to be found in the living, growing institutions which he created. In him is illustrated the oft quoted dictum of Carlisle that an institution is but the lengthened shadow of a great man. And his methods of creation were extraordinary. At the inception of the Union [of American Hebrew Congregations], the College and the [Central] Conference [of American Rabbis] stands a paradox that deserves notice. Our very expression "Founder's Day" involves that paradox.

How shall we spell "Founder's Day?" Should the apostrophe stand before the *s* or after the *s*? Does this day commemorate one founder or many founders? While all of us know that Isaac M. Wise was the founder of the Union, the College, and the Conference, one of the amazing features of the early printed records [*Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations* (1873)] is the far greater conspicuousness of other names than his. That Isaac M. Wise was more than an obscure and casual hanger-on, there is in those records very little indeed to indicate. The first name and for many pages the most prominent name is not that of Isaac M. Wise, but that of Moritz Loth, president of the Plum St. Temple. It is Mr. Loth, apparently, who proposes the creation of a congregational union which is to support a Rabbinical college. After a lengthy citation of Mr. Loth's presidential message to the Plum St. congregation, there is inserted into the record an editorial published by Isaac M. Wise in *The American Israelite* in which Isaac M. Wise actually takes issue with Mr. Loth on a number of points although endorsing the proposition about a union and a college. From here on for 238 pages the name of Isaac M. Wise appears but dimly and rarely. It appears on none of the committees connected with the convention of 1873 at which the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was organized. Among the delegates to that convention the name of Isaac M. Wise stands almost imperceptible near the bottom of the list. He is mentioned as the delegate for the congregation of Shreveport, La. (fifty

members). At the first council of the Union in 1874, Isaac M. Wise is named as delegate for San Antonio, Texas, a congregation so small that its membership is not given. Even this tiny function he turns over to someone else, retaining for himself the dignity of representing, in conjunction with another delegate, the sixty members of the Charleston, S. C., Congregation. At the second council he was the delegate for Petersburg, Va. (twenty members), and at the third, for Farmersville, La. (twenty-one members). Throughout this period he is mentioned rarely and inconspicuously among the rank and file members of a few of the committees. The stone which became the chief cornerstone looks decidedly like a stone which the builders were rejecting.

The very name "Union of American Hebrew Congregations" was used for the first time, not by Isaac M. Wise, but by a Mr. Jacob Ezekiel. Isaac M. Wise was one of the six on the committee in whose report the name "Hebrew Union College" is used for the first time. He was one of the seven Cincinnatians among the twelve members of the Board of Governors of the projected College, but this honor he had to resign in a few months, when he was made the first president of the College.

So remotely was Isaac M. Wise associated with the proposed Jewish Theological Faculty, as they called it, that the congregation of Peoria, Ill., wrote to the convention of 1873: "For the erection of a Hebrew College here we offer one block of valuable ground on the Bluff." Some from Charleston, W. Va., wrote: "I will give ten acres of land in the city of Charleston (West End) . . . for a site for the erection of a College." Someone else from Charleston, W. Va., wrote that he would donate "one hundred acres of timber and mineral land in Boone County, West Virginia, to the Theological Institute," whether as a site for the proposed college or merely as a source of income is not stated.

As we read the names of the numerous persons associated with the inception of the Union and the College, we realize that all of those people with all of their ability, zeal, and splendid service were but rays of that central luminary whose name was Isaac M. Wise, delegate for Shreveport, then for Petersburg, then for Farmersville and provisional delegate of infinitesimal San Antonio. But we know all of this by a kind of *torah shebe'al peh*, a kind of oral tradition which has descended to us supplementing the printed records in which the role

of Isaac M. Wise is almost invisible. Similarly, when, sixteen years later, the Conference was formed, Isaac M. Wise was seemingly the last and least who had anything to do with it. A septuagenarian at the time, he resisted and protested when he was made the first president.

In a word, Isaac M. Wise was great because he knew how to be small. He knew how to keep himself in the background until he was needed in the foreground. He embodied the wisdom of that [mishnaic] adage, "In the place where there are no men, strive thou to be a man," which presumably carries as its corollary "In the place where there are men, do not strive to be conspicuous."

If English usage permitted, we should call this occasion not Founder's Day, by Planter's Day. The image not of an edifice that is erected and then remains as it is, but of a plant that grows and ever changes, would be most suited to Isaac M. Wise's achievements. The beginnings of all the organizations which he started were extremely humble. The Hebrew Union College itself began in a basement. That gloomy basement can still be seen in a squalid neighborhood where few Jewish persons any longer reside. As president, he presided at first over his unsalaried self and over one other man, a preceptor salaried at \$500 a year with an additional \$200 for tutoring backward students. This munificently compensated preceptor is officially reported to have "assisted the President of the College with fidelity and ability." On the day the College opened, nine students presented themselves. Five more entered within a month, and three more at the end of the first term. Of these seventeen, only four ever reached the pulpit. Four were registered as special students, one of them a little girl who could not be regularly matriculated because she was not yet in high school. The library consisted of a Greek grammar, a Dutch library catalogue, three dictionaries, some Bibles, some Mishnas, and two or three other Hebrew books.

Yet Isaac M. Wise had the discernment to realize that the soil in which the humble sprout was bedded was fertile soil. He understood what the hour required and whereunto the time was ripe. He was a poet and a dreamer, but like Joseph the dreamer, he was more than a mere dreamer. His feet touched the ground. His hand gripped reality. The result was that what he planted grew. Isaac M. Wise passed away and still it grew. If any admonition is to be taken to heart this day, it must appertain to that continued growth.

What needs to be stressed is that the commonly celebrated ele-

ments of that growth are not its most significant elements. That the Union of American Hebrew Congregations has increased in the number of its supporters and enterprises and in the scope of its activities; that the Hebrew Union College has acquired a numerous faculty and student body, property worth millions of dollars, graduates in many regions, a library unsurpassed, and a prestige exceeding that of any similar institution; and that the Central Conference of American Rabbis has multiplied its membership and its accomplishments many fold—just these are the lesser gems in the crown of Isaac M. Wise.

It is its intellectual and spiritual growth much more than its material growth that justifies whatever pride we may feel in our College. Many a conviction, which Isaac M. Wise cherished, no longer prevails in our midst. His conceptions of Judaism are no longer our conceptions, nor are his conceptions of Americanism our conceptions—as our teacher, Dr. [Jacob R.] Marcus, pointed out so ably in his address [“The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise”] on this occasion a year ago. Isaac M. Wise held views on Jewish nationalism which are not entirely defunct in our midst, but almost defunct. Even some of us who are opposed to Zionism are likely to rest our opposition on grounds other than those invoked by Isaac M. Wise. Isaac M. Wise’s views on Darwinism, on evolution, on the relation of science and religion, assuredly his views on biblical criticism, have disappeared from these halls. It is doubtful whether his economic views (if he had any) would accord with the opinions that some of us espouse. But does this becloud the glory of our founder? Indeed, no. It only imparts an added luster to his name. When Isaac M. Wise planted, he planted not a shrub, not a stalk, not a bush which never grows higher than the one who plants it. What he planted was an oak so mighty that beside it the planter himself is dwarfed.

Not many days ago a famous old theological institution of Cincinnati all but closed its doors and passed out of existence. That institution had failed to grow. Forces were operative there which resisted the changes necessary to maintain life. The grandeur of Isaac M. Wise is not that he founded an institution, but that he founded an institution with life blood—an organism capable of adaptive changes. Isaac M. Wise knew his *Pirke Aboth*: “*De-la mosif yasef.*” “Not to go forward is to go backward,” “To remain static is to recede.”

Wherein now does intellectual and spiritual growth consist? It consists in this: in the substitution of understanding for controversy.

Abraham Cronbach  
Friend of every man





Controversial attitudes toward Orthodox Judaism, Zionism, evolution, higher criticism, etc., have yielded in this College to an attitude, if not of endorsement, at least of ampler comprehension. It is fair to assume that in the same direction future growth must lie.

To understand a given view does not necessarily mean to subscribe to that view. It may mean to oppose that view all the more decisively. But to understand does mean the supplanting of an emotional attitude with an intellectual one. To understand is to perceive human trends in their historical and social settings. It is the viewing of human beliefs and acts in relation to their causes. Already Spinoza said that the moment we trace the causes of things we cease to be irritated at those things.

A few weeks ago there was held at Washington a notable conference for the promotion of friendly relations between Jews and Christians. Even greater is the need of promoting friendly relations between Jews and Jews. Who of us has collisions with non-Jews as frequently as we have with our own? It has often been noted that conflicts are most violent not between people who differ greatly, but between those who differ slightly. Psychoanalysts have even advanced the theory that the beliefs which we assail most violently are likely to be the beliefs to which we unconsciously subscribe and which we are likely some day to profess openly. Our inveighing against those beliefs, we are told, is really an inveighing against our own subliminal selves. The religious fanatic is said to be a heretic at heart. The boaster is said to be plagued with a hidden sense of inferiority. The prig or prude is said to be secretly ridden with an excess of sex. The same mechanism may account for many of the acrimonies among us Jews. One fights one's own recalcitrant self in fighting those who are not extremely different, but just slightly different from one's self.

In this College, there has never existed any antagonism toward the Hasidim, the Karaites, the Yemenites, the Maskilim, the Cabbalists or the Sadducees, violent antipathy though these types may have evoked in other times and climes. These types were too remote for our opposition. If aversion toward the Ethical Culturists ever obtained here, the surviving vestiges of that aversion are faint indeed. Our new *Union Hymnal* contains no fewer than eight hymns written by Felix Adler, the originator of Ethical Culture. There are only three other authors whose productions the new hymn book offers in equal or greater number.

These rather are the Jews whom we reprobate today: The Hu-

manist Jews, the Communist Jews, the Christian Science Jews and the Hebrew Christians, otherwise called apostate Jews. Such are perhaps the only Jewish groups that inspire in us any pronounced acerbity. Perhaps we shall never make our peace with these groups. Some of us rule them out of Judaism altogether, precisely as some of the Orthodox contemporaries of Isaac M. Wise ruled him out of Judaism. This only we must affirm: If ever we do come to terms with any of these people, it will not necessarily indicate that we share their doctrines. One does not have to be a Humanist to know the soul of a Humanist any more than a biologist in the laboratory, to understand the anatomy of a frog, has to be a frog.

Isaac M. Wise traveled far beyond his predecessors. We have traveled beyond Isaac M. Wise. Who knows how far beyond us our successors may travel? They may understand Jews whom we do not understand. They may even fraternize in Jewish circles where we cannot fraternize. The poet may have been right when he said: "The thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns."

It requires no recalling that since the days of Isaac M. Wise the Jewish constituency of America has changed enormously. In his day our Jewish population was predominantly of German extraction. Today, East European derivation far exceeds the German. In Isaac M. Wise's day, the Jewish university student or graduate was rare. Today the ratio of Jewish persons attending our universities is greater than that of any other group in the land. In Isaac M. Wise's day, the proportion of Jews in mercantile pursuits must have been perceptibly larger than it is today when the Jewish accessions to the professions, the arts, agriculture, and the handicrafts have mounted so strikingly. In Isaac M. Wise's day, our people, being preponderantly of foreign upbringing, carried certain rudiments of Hebrew knowledge and of ritual prepossessions which in this generation of American birth are almost extinct. The result is that the type of religious ministration suitable in Isaac M. Wise's day is not suitable in ours. The kind of preaching that was effective in his time is no longer effective. Ritual procedures satisfactory to his contemporaries do not appeal to our contemporaries. How urgent in these domains the need for further growth!

We speak of "a good Jew." Customarily we mean by a good Jew a Jew not only of moral probity, but also of loyalty to the old traditions. The phrase "good Jew" has been taken intensively. But in the

swirl of modern life there may repose the embryo of a new conception of the good Jew, the good Jew not intensively but extensively. The good Jew would be the Jew with a breadth of understanding and sympathy for fellow Jews—the Jew who can comprehend and on occasion serve the Orthodox Jew with his ceremonial attachments and, at the same time, the Humanist Jew with his iconoclasms; the Zionist Jew with his nationalistic slogans and, at the same time, the assimilationist Jew with his different set of slogans. Our good Jew would appreciate the devout Jewish person—there are such—who can truthfully say, “Like as the stag panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God”; and at the same time fathom the anti-theistic Jew who shudders at the recollection of the only kind of religion that he ever knew. The good Jew would sympathize with the immigrant Jew struggling for adjustment to the American scene and, at the same time, with the native Jew who differs from the non-Jew in cast of countenance, if even in that regard. Our good Jew would grasp the psychology of the Communist Jew with his caustic comments on the *status quo* and, at the same time, that of the Jewish self-made man who evinces scant patience with those who blame their troubles on circumstances. The good Jew would cultivate a friendly footing with the uninformed Jew—even with the Jew who wants sensational sermons and recreational synagogues—and, at the same time, a friendly footing with the scholarly Jew. The fact that many of the linguistic and historical studies assigned in this College impinge but slightly upon the lives of ordinary Temple goers (or Temple neglecters) is by no means an argument against the pursuit of those studies. The well read Jew, the studious Jew, the learned Jew does exist here and there. He also deserves our comprehension and our consecration. Disdain the studies that a person fancies and to that extent you exclude that person himself from your life. To that extent our own life is contracted. Your Jewish sympathies atrophy to that extent. In brief, a Jew would be a good Jew not in proportion to the number of doctrines in which he believes or the number of rituals he performs, but in proportion to the number of Jews he understands, on occasion serves and, if possible, loves. He is the Jew who is alert to the potentialities of stimulating friendships and reciprocal inspirations in all Jewish sections.

With the Hebrew Union College growing in the things of the spirit, this ideal may become our ideal—veritably an ideal vastly different

from anything ever visaged by Isaac M. Wise and yet the natural outgrowth of his vision, like the blossom which, though different from the seed, nevertheless unfolds out of the seed. And as the ideals of Isaac M. Wise become transmuted into ideals beyond Isaac M. Wise, the name of Isaac M. Wise will shine not the less radiantly, but the more radiantly. The founder of the edifice will be honored in those who extend and adorn the edifice. The planter will be exalted in those who foster the never-ceasing growth of that which he planted when, in the rich soil of American Jewish life, he placed a lowly sprout that grew.

#### CENTENNIAL REPRINTS

The years 1973 and 1975 mark the centennials of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, both founded at Cincinnati by Isaac Mayer Wise. The April, 1973, and November, 1974, issues of *American Jewish Archives* were devoted to documentary surveys of the history of the College—Institute and the Union.

Both issues are available in special reprints.

Inquiries should be directed to the American Jewish Archives, Clifton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220.

#### BICENTENNIAL ISSUE

Since the mid-1970's mark the Bicentennial of American national independence, the November, 1975, issue of *American Jewish Archives* will be devoted to a documentary survey of the Jewish involvement in the Revolutionary period.