



The professional choir of Temple Emanu-El. First row, left to right: Max Spicker, music director; William Sparger, cantor; Will C. Macfarlane, organist
(Courtesy *New York Tribune* [9 August 1903]: 3)

William Sparger: Enigmatic Pioneer of the American Reform Cantorate

Howard M. Stahl

Excellent accounts of the development of the Reform cantorate in America have been provided by, among others, Hyman Grinstein, A.Z. Idelsohn, Albert Weisser, Mark Slobin, and Judah Cohen.¹ There is, however, a paucity of information and scholarly research into the lives and work of the three men arguably most responsible for the professionalization of the American Reform cantorate, namely Edward Stark, Alois Kaiser, and William Sparger. Jeffrey Zucker provides us with some insights into the career of Stark, who served Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco from 1893–1913.² The only significant information published about the cantorate of Kaiser, who served Baltimore’s Congregation Oheb Shalom from 1866 until his death in 1908, is a posthumous tribute offered by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR).³ Sadly, to date, no comprehensive study has been made of the life and work of Sparger.

Sparger served as rabbi of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn and, subsequently, as cantor of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York. He was a communal activist and a champion of social justice. Given his activism and ambitious personality, his move from rabbi to cantor must have impelled him, emulating Salomon Sulzer, the pioneer and progenitor of the modern day cantorate, to advocate for the authority and freedom of expression for the cantor. Sparger’s relationship with Kaiser and his work with the CCAR, including numerous interactions with his great role model, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise—to whom he dedicated a piece of music titled *Liebeszank* (Love Strife)⁴—fostered and self-validated his image as an important figure in the Reform movement. Sparger was driven by an almost relentless, if not manic and often manipulative, desire to succeed professionally.

This article will examine the state of the American Reform cantorate in the late nineteenth century and attempt to shed light on the personality and career of this charismatic and enigmatic figure whose work affected the development and professionalization of the American cantorate and whose contributions to the style and substance of the Reform cantorate merit recognition and further study.

The Influence of Isaac Mayer Wise

From colonial times, religious leaders had varying degrees of religious and secular education. Many of them had received some training at European *yeshivot* and/or rabbinical seminaries. None until Rabbi Abraham Rice, who arrived in Baltimore in 1840 and went on to serve what later became the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, was formally ordained.⁵ These religious functionaries were engaged as “*hazzan*,” “minister,” “pastor,” or “cantor, preacher, teacher”

and were often addressed as “Reverend.”⁶ The most famous and widely respected was Gershom Mendes Seixas, who served Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City from 1768 to 1775 and 1784 to 1816.⁷

When Isaac Mayer Wise, putative founder of the Reform movement in America, arrived on these shores in 1846 seeking employment in synagogue ministry, he sought counsel from Rabbi Max Lilienthal, the second ordained rabbi in New York.⁸ Despite Wise’s questionable rabbinic credentials, Lilienthal advised him to pursue a career in the rabbinate.⁹ Michael Meyer describes Wise as follows:

Though not an outstanding intellectual or an original thinker, Wise was an uncommon man. Initially plagued by recurrent severe depressions, hypochondria, and the wish for death, he was able to overcome his debilitating self-doubts and assume a supreme, manic self-confidence that enabled him to face enemies and personal defeats with equanimity, always certain he would succeed.¹⁰

Wise’s pioneering spirit took him and his family up the Hudson to the burgeoning textile manufacturing city of Albany. There he found employment with Congregation Beth El, composed of German Jewish immigrants who had established the synagogue in 1838.¹¹ They initially offered him the position not of rabbi, but of preacher and teacher. Wise insisted, however, that he be engaged and addressed as “rabbi.”¹² His relationship with his congregants was at best stormy. Shortly after his arrival in Albany, he declared war on what he considered to be the crude, provincial, and obsequious religious practices of Albany’s Jewish community and its leaders. This crusade was to be expanded to every town and city he visited throughout his long career. He records his first impressions upon his arrival in America in his autobiography, *Reminiscences*:

There was an antipathy at that time in America to rabbis and preachers in general, just as there was a prejudice against cultured people of any kind, because they were looked upon as unpractical and helpless. The peddler’s pack was too heavy for them, work too hard, and their learning profited naught. There was no room in the synagogue for preachers and rabbis. The *chazan* was the Reverend. He was all they wanted. The congregation desired nothing further. The *chazan* was reader, cantor, and blessed everybody for *chai pasch*, which amounted to 4 ½ cents. He was teacher, butcher, circumciser, [shofar] blower, gravedigger, secretary. He wrote the amulets with the names of all the angels and demons on them for women in confinement, read *shiur* for the departed sinners, and played cards or dominoes with the living, in short, he was a *kol-bo*, an encyclopedia; accepted bread, turnips, cabbage, potatoes as gifts, and peddled in case his salary was not sufficient. He was *sui generis*, half priest, half beggar, half oracle, half fool, as the occasion demanded. The congregations were satisfied, and there was no room for preacher or rabbi. Among all the *chazanim* whom I learned to know at that time,

there was not one who had a common school education or possessed any Hebrew learning.¹³

Wise's commitment to organizing, professionalizing, and spiritually cleansing religious life in America, energized by his entrepreneurial spirit, ultimately redounded in the creation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, 1873), the Hebrew Union College (HUC, 1875), and the CCAR (1889).¹⁴ On the surface, one might argue that Wise's efforts resulted in the systematic derailing or dismantling of the American cantorate, yet Wise's real enemy was not the cantorate per se. His sworn enemy was the charlatan, the sycophant, the *poseur* who had what he perceived as a stranglehold on religious leadership.¹⁵ Wise was a disciple of Cantor Salomon Sulzer and Rabbi Isaac Noah Mannheimer, who founded the so-called "Vienna Rite," an attempt to synthesize traditional Judaism with modernity, at the Wiener Stadttempel in 1826.¹⁶ Wise came to this country armed with Sulzer's magnum opus, *Schir Zion*, and worked tirelessly to rescue worship from the wilderness of the banal, the trivial, and the chaos of ignorance.¹⁷ He writes in *Reminiscences*:

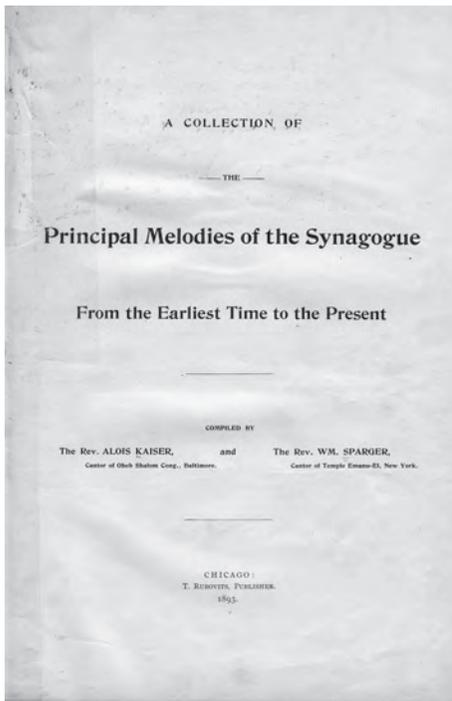
No reform of the Jewish service was possible until the Jewish ear had again become accustomed to harmony and beauty. The service would have disappeared gradually altogether if it had not been reinstated in its old dignity and uplifting solemnity by song. Many who longed unconsciously for, or even opposed the introduction of the choir into the synagogue, surely recognize now how the harmonious strains affect and edify the worshiper, and exert an uplifting effect even upon the whole of life.¹⁸



American cantor and composer,
Alois Kaiser (1840–1908)

(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

By the second half of the nineteenth century, there were men, many themselves disciples of Sulzer, who measured up to Wise's criteria and functioned with dignity and devotion, at first independently, and then, side by side with their rabbinic colleagues.¹⁹ Perhaps the most famous was Cantor Alois Kaiser (1840–1908). Kaiser's congregants revered him, and Wise and the Reform rabbinate held him in the highest esteem.²⁰ Kaiser was an honorary member of the CCAR and, in 1892, was chosen as the editor of the first edition of the *Union Hymnal*. He was the founder of the Society of American Cantors in 1894, the first professional cantorial organization in this country,²¹ and he helped shape the modern cantorate in America based on Sulzer's model.²²



From *Souvenir of the Jewish Women's Congress held under the Auspices of the World's Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon, 1893)
(Courtesy Klau Library, Cincinnati, OH)

Sparger's Early Years

William Sparger is best remembered as the cantor of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York from 1891–1903 and the co-compiler, with Max Spicker, of *The Synagogical Service: Part 1 and 2: Service for Sabbath Eve and Sabbath Morning* (the “Spicker-Sparger Service”), published by G. Schirmer in 1901.²³ Also an honorary member of the CCAR, Sparger was Kaiser’s coeditor of the 1897 edition of the *Union Hymnal* and collaborator on the *Souvenir of the Jewish Women’s Congress held under the Auspices of the World’s Parliament of Religions* which contained a scholarly introductory essay and a selection of traditional and contemporary music.²⁴ Sparger’s early years are only sketchily recorded, and the end of his life is shrouded in mystery.

Sparger—who began life as Jakob, later Wilhelm, and, still later, anglicized to William—was born on 18 April 1860 in Tallya, Hungary, to Rabbi Koloman Sparger (b.1822) and Zsani Veisberg (b.1822).²⁵ An article in the periodical *The Menorah* records that Sparger’s father served as district rabbi and enjoyed a good reputation as a teacher and scholar. William attended elementary school in Tallya and studied text with his father. At age nine, he attended Gymnasium in Miskolcz. He was an eager student who apparently had a beautiful voice and a talent for music, and he sang in the synagogue’s choir. In 1879, he enrolled in the University of Vienna and attended the Royal Conservatory of Music. In 1881, he accepted a position as “reader” (*vorbeter*) of the synagogue in Dortmund, Germany. Shortly thereafter, he accepted a call from the historic synagogue in Worms.²⁶ Little is known about his formal preparation for these positions or the depth and reliability of his Judaic or secular education. According to immigration records, Wilhelm Sparger entered the United States through Castle Garden on 28 August 1882.²⁷

The Rabbinate of Congregation Beth Elohim

From an 1884 article in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, we learn that shortly after his arrival in the United States, Sparger took a position as rabbi of Congregation B'nai Zion in Danville, Pennsylvania, in 1883.²⁸ This is uncorroborated, as the records of the Jewish community of Danville were lost in Hurricane Agnes in 1972.²⁹ In 1884, just two years after his arrival in America, Sparger somehow secured a position at the historic Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn as its rabbi, succeeding Rabbi Solomon Mosche.³⁰ It would be remarkable enough for a twenty-four year old to be offered this prestigious post; for a relatively recent Hungarian immigrant with little or no knowledge of the English language and questionable formal Judaic education to do so is nothing short of astounding. He was, however, known for his charisma and intensely determined manner, and his lifelong hunger for success and recognition propelled him in his professional efforts. In an article titled "A New Pastor," The *Brooklyn Eagle* reports, "He is a pleasant, energetic, zealous young man of the most extreme school of reformed [*sic*] Hebrew theology."³¹ On 16 April 1885, he married Rebecca Arensberg, a daughter of Lipman Arensberg, a prominent Brooklyn tobacco merchant.³²

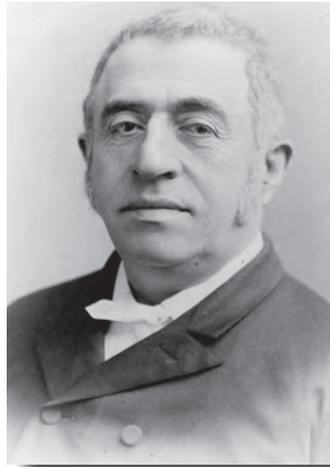
In 1886, the *Brooklyn Eagle* described Sparger as "a well built little gentleman of 25. He has dark hair, a pale face, a deliberate delivery and an air of determination."³³ He was actively involved in communal efforts of social conscience, preaching tolerance and universalism to his congregation.³⁴ At the same time, his musical prowess was not neglected. The *New York Herald* in 1889 favorably reviewed his performance in, of all things, the Liszt Oratorio, *Christus*.³⁵ The *Brooklyn Eagle* hailed both his preaching and his singing at services in 1890.³⁶

Almost immediately, Sparger began to effect change at Beth Elohim. He introduced a new prayer book (the Jastrow *siddur*), created an expanded Friday evening service, improved the quality of the choir, and made the sermon a key element of the worship service. His youth and energy appealed to the younger congregants, and membership at Beth Elohim increased. As a result, in 1885, the synagogue outgrew its Pearl Street location and purchased the building of the Congregational Church on State.³⁷

As rabbi, Sparger enjoyed wide appeal and public acclaim for his passionate sermons and his commitment to social justice. In 1886, the *New York Times* recorded Sparger's appointment to a committee of eleven ministers charged with investigating charges against the Brooklyn District Attorney.³⁸ Several months prior to that, the *New York Times* reported on Sparger's eloquent sermon on tolerance, castigating narrow-mindedness and bigotry.³⁹ In 1887, the *New York Times* praised Sparger's leadership role to erect a monument in memory of Henry Ward Beecher, the great preacher and role model to Sparger.⁴⁰

Interface with the Reform Movement

Sparger was deeply involved in the nascent Reform movement in America. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that Sparger attended the semiannual conference of the Association of Eastern Rabbis (a precursor of the CCAR) in November of 1886.⁴¹ The meeting was at Temple Ahawath Chesed in New York City (now Central Synagogue), with Rabbi Gustav Gottheil, president of the group, presiding. The primary order of business was the report of the committee on the prayer book (the Jastrow *siddur*). Later that day, the committee on credentials met to appoint an advisory committee to investigate the credentials of applicants for membership. The article reports that “there were many rabbis who were persons unfit for the office, men who were grocery keepers, butchers, and a saloon keeper in one case in this city was found to be performing that function. The result was much laxity in morals. These persons also performed marriage ceremonies.”⁴² Apparently, the committee’s assessment of the state of religious leadership in America had not changed much since Wise’s appraisal forty years earlier. The article further comments, “Dr. Sparger said that in one instance he knew of an unfit person acting as a rabbi who married a woman to two different men in one year.”⁴³



American Reform Rabbi, Gustav Gottheil (1827–1903)
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Grinstein discusses the difficulty in verifying rabbinic ordination and doctoral degrees of American Jewish ministers. He observes, “Often men came to this country and made wild claims which cannot be substantiated.”⁴⁴ As Temkin points out, Wise, like Sparger, was an autodidact with suspect rabbinic or university training.⁴⁵ While various sources report on Sparger’s and Wise’s attendance at European academic institutions, and both men insisted on using the title of rabbi, no definitive evidence of either having graduated from a university or a rabbinical seminary can be found.⁴⁶ Temkin puts it more poetically: “In that era the waters of the Atlantic washed away many a defect.”⁴⁷ Regarding Wise’s credentials, Temkin further observes: “Of the diplomas which would be so advantageous for a career in Central Europe, or of the aloofness that often went with the possession of such diplomas, there is no sign.”⁴⁸ Wise and Sparger were both mercurial and charismatic leaders with great popular appeal. Contrast their demeanor to that of Rabbi David Einhorn, an aloof but brilliant scholar with documentable academic and rabbinic credentials.⁴⁹

In January 1891, an article appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle* reporting that Sparger had accepted a call from Temple Emanu-El of the City of New York to

serve as its cantor. The article speculates that the offer was tendered due to the attention Sparger had gained from his public jousts with a Brooklyn minister named Dr. Meredith on the topic, “Who killed Christ?”⁵⁰ The *Brooklyn Eagle* also reported that Beth Elohim had accepted Sparger’s letter of resignation citing his accomplishments, including: developing the young people’s society; increasing the congregation from 60 to 250 members; growing the Sunday school to three hundred students; and spearheading the move of the temple to its new building on State Street. The article characterizes his religious views as liberal, advocating for nonradical reform. The article concludes with the puzzling statement that implies that there would now be “three rabbis at Temple Emanu-El [Gottheil, Joseph Silverman, and now Sparger], all of whom will alternate in the pulpit and who enjoy equal honors in conducting services.”⁵¹ An article in the same paper published the next day announces that Sparger will become “associate minister” at Emanu-El.⁵²

From Rabbi to Cantor

Congregation Emanu-El had been seeking a replacement for its beloved cantor, Adolph Rubin, who served the temple from 1852 until his death in 1890. Rubin was revered by the congregation and highly respected by the Reform rabbinate.⁵³ In January 1891, Sparger was elected to the position of “cantor and reader” (not rabbi) of Congregation Emanu-El for a two-year term at an annual salary of \$3,500.⁵⁴ From its founding in 1845, Emanu-El had always separated the offices of rabbi and cantor—unlike many congregations, which employed a sole clergy person who often served as cantor, reader, and preacher.⁵⁵ Emanu-El’s senior rabbi, Gustav Gottheil, was also a prolific poet who provided the English texts for many popular hymns, including *God of Might*, *Rock of Ages*, and *Early Will I Seek Thee*. In 1887, Gottheil had collaborated with Emanu-El’s organist, A.J. Davis, to produce a hymnal that achieved widespread use.⁵⁶ Gottheil was well acquainted with the role of the cantor in Europe and America, particularly Sulzer’s commitment to elevating the stature of Jewish music and the cantorate. Gottheil was present at the Leipzig Synod in 1869, when Sulzer presented a resolution advocating strenuously for the proper training of cantors.⁵⁷

The Spargers relocated from Brooklyn to Manhattan and Sparger began his duties at Emanu-El immediately, working with Rabbis Gottheil and Silverman, as well as organist and choir director Davis, who had been with the temple since 1876.⁵⁸ Although now functioning as a cantor, Sparger continued his national connection with the rabbinate, attending the CCAR midwinter convention in Washington, DC, in 1891.⁵⁹ He was a frequent contributor to journals and, according to Alfred Sendrey, Sparger is credited with producing the first bibliography of the literature on Jewish music.⁶⁰

Discord and Strife

Despite Gottheil's initial approbation, Sparger's tenure at Emanu-El was, almost from the beginning, marked by tension and friction. In March of 1892, the board heard a report of the ritual committee reporting on the funeral duties of the clergy. The new policy maintained that families could choose which "minister" they preferred to be present at the house (where most funeral services were conducted) and the other minister was to officiate at the cemetery. Here, "minister" refers to the rabbis, as the report further states that Sparger "shall attend all funerals and say the Prayers at the house." (i.e., the house of mourning).⁶¹ On 10 March 1892 Gottheil wrote to Emanu-El's board of trustees complaining that it was not fitting for the cantor to read the service at a house of mourning while he, the rabbi, was relegated to standing idly by. He thought it beneath his dignity for "their Minister" to remain silent while "the reader"—whom, according to Gottheil, the family usually did not know—led the service.⁶² Gottheil mentions in his letter that he never had this issue with the previous cantor, Adolph Rubin, and the change in procedure was deeply disturbing to him. Gottheil asks the board to reconsider.⁶³ They declined to do so, reaffirming the new policy, despite Gottheil's objections.⁶⁴

Early on, Sparger had petitioned the board of trustees to serve on the choir committee and asked that Davis, with whom Gottheil had a close and collaborative relationship, be directly responsible to the cantor.⁶⁵ In April 1892, the board reaffirmed that "the musical arrangement of the Choir in the Temple be under his charge and that the Organist to be subordinate to whatever applies to the music arrangement to the said Cantor, Rev. Wm. Sparger."⁶⁶ These decisions served to exacerbate the tension and triangulation among Sparger, Gottheil, and Davis.

Sparger's and Gottheil's discord soon became a matter of public record. On 17 February 1893, Sparger wrote a long letter to Emanu-El's board of trustees requesting protection against "the humiliating treatment to which I was subjected by the Rev. Dr. Gottheil."⁶⁷ Sparger accuses Gottheil of making public criticisms of him while Sparger was leading worship, such as, "This is terrible"; "I will not stand it"; and "I will leave the Temple."⁶⁸ He also continues to complain of his lack of authority over Davis, saying that the music of the services should be in the hands of "one ... musician ... who [knows] the requirements of a *Jewish* [Sparger's emphasis] service."⁶⁹ Sparger accuses Davis of retaliating against his protests to the music committee by "playing my accompaniments during the following Sabbath services so loudly, that the sound of the organ overpowered the sound of my voice."⁷⁰ Sparger further advises the board that the above abuses "detract from the dignity of my office which I consider as sacred as anyone in the Synagogue, and changes my position of a '*Shaliach Zibbur*' to that of a public singer, a calling which is undoubtedly a very honorable one, but which it never was nor ever will be my intention or ambition to embrace."⁷¹ He

concludes the letter stating that he “respectfully decline[s] to be a candidate for re-election at the next May meeting of the Congregation.”⁷² One week later, Sparger informed the board that he had accepted the position of cantor of New York City’s Temple Beth-El “with the privilege of occupying the pulpit” (i.e., preaching), effective 1 May 1893.⁷³ Interestingly, the minutes of Beth-El do not contain any reference to Sparger’s potential or offered employment.⁷⁴ On 24 February, two days after he announced his resignation and impending move to Beth-El, Sparger wrote to Emanu-El’s board rescinding his resignation and claiming that any allegations made against him were false, and the undue stress caused him to resign prematurely.⁷⁵ This questionable judgment and impulsivity proved to be a recurring theme throughout Sparger’s career.

On 23 February the board appointed a special committee to examine and report on the grievances that prompted Sparger’s resignation.⁷⁶ In addition to the complaints Sparger had lodged against Gottheil, the committee was charged with investigating complaints against Sparger. The committee informed Sparger that there were rumors that he had misappropriated money given him by Emanu-El’s charity committee to help a former choir member by the name of Bologne, who was in distress. They also addressed Rabbi Gottheil’s accusation that Sparger remarked after the death of Seligman Adler, a prominent temple member, that “he was glad he had died, as he was his enemy.”⁷⁷ The committee duly investigated the complaints and, over several weeks, met with Sparger, Gottheil, Silverman, and members of the choir. Bologne absolved Sparger, saying that he was destitute and Sparger did in fact give him fifty dollars. When Gottheil met with the committee, he denied that he had any charges or had any knowledge of any grievances whatsoever against Sparger. Gottheil told the committee, “I did not say that Mr. Sparger said he was glad that Mr. Adler died, but he said that he was not sorry, as he considered Mr. Adler one of his bitterest enemies.”⁷⁸ Silverman added a twist to the story when he confirmed for the committee that Gottheil had, in fact, remarked to him that, “Mr. Sparger, today only said that he was glad that Adler was dead, as he was one of his bitterest enemies.”⁷⁹ Silverman told the committee that this could not have been true, as Adler had told him shortly before he died that he could die in peace, “as all matters between Mr. Sparger and Bologne are satisfactorily cleared up, and he, Mr. Adler does not know of any enemies he leaves.”⁸⁰ The committee asked Silverman if he considered Sparger a competent cantor. Silverman responded, “I think so, and he is considered so by everybody.”⁸¹

This was but one example of the kind of friction between Gottheil and Silverman, which extended through Gottheil’s retirement and, ultimately, through his funeral. Gottheil’s son Richard wrote to Silverman on 8 May 1903, a few weeks after his father’s passing, chastising him for ignoring the family’s request that Silverman not deliver the eulogy—a request that Silverman did not honor. Richard Gottheil tells Silverman, “Among the very few things which

clouded the declining years of my father's life was the feeling that you continually exhibited that he was in your way. You did everything in your power to brush him aside."⁸²

The committee questioned Sparger on his relationship with organist Davis. Sparger commented that Davis "does not respect him or treat him properly, but does things to spite him during the services; plays purposely some times so high that his, the Cantor's voice could not be heard, which not only compelled him to strain his voice unnaturally, besides causing confusion."⁸³ Sparger also claimed that the choir had no respect for Davis.⁸⁴ Sparger reiterated that he must be consulted on any music chosen or any change of ritual.⁸⁵

On 6 March 1893, the committee informed Gottheil by letter that Sparger is "not guilty of any wrongs as rumor charged him with."⁸⁶ Furthermore, the committee advised Gottheil that "our Rev. Mr. Sparger is perfectly and positively innocent, and we are pleased that our Congregation will continue to have the Reverend Cantor with us."⁸⁷ They chastised Gottheil for unwisely interfering with their work and urged him to "pay the same respect to the named Reverend Gentlemen [Sparger and Silverman] as we insist upon their paying you."⁸⁸ Gottheil responded that he never showed discourteous treatment toward Sparger and denied the right of the committee to lecture him on that point.⁸⁹ The committee concluded its report with the hope that this matter would now be completely closed and that amicable relationships among Sparger, Gottheil, and Silverman could be restored.⁹⁰ On 6 March 1893, the board voted to offer Sparger a three-year contract at a salary of five thousand dollars per year (a very generous salary at the time).⁹¹ Nothing further is recorded in Emanu-El's minutes relative to Sparger's relationship with lay or religious leadership.

Sparger's Remaining Years at Emanu-El

In the years following, Sparger devoted himself to his cantorate at Emanu-El and brought outstanding musical talent to the congregation. Davis continued to serve as organist on a limited basis until 1898.⁹² Sparger engaged Frank Van der Stucken in 1892 to serve as choir director, a post he held until 1895.⁹³ He also brought Heinrich Zoellner to serve as choir director from 1897 to 1898.⁹⁴ In 1898 he hired Max Spicker, who served as choir director, and Will C. Macfarlane, who served as organist; both men held those positions until 1912.⁹⁵ Each of these highly respected musicians composed and arranged music for the cantor and choir. Many of their and Sparger's compositions became staples of the musical liturgy in Reform synagogues in America for decades. In 1901, Sparger and Spicker published the popular two-volume work *The Synagogical Service*, which contains their original compositions and those of their musical colleagues at Emanu-El.⁹⁶

Sparger continued his active and passionate involvement in the Reform movement. Along with Alois Kaiser, Sparger served on the CCAR's committee to

develop a *Union Hymnal* for use as the official musical supplement to the newly issued *Union Prayer Book*.⁹⁷ In July of 1897, the *CCAR Yearbook* reported that the Society of American Cantors had completed setting the texts for the hymnal, and it would be ready for delivery to congregations by August.⁹⁸ Silverman, in Sparger's name, urged the members of the CCAR to use their influence to have the hymnal introduced to their congregations.⁹⁹ The *CCAR Yearbook* for 1898–1899 lists both Sparger and Kaiser as members and contains criteria for CCAR membership—grandfathering in those with “high sounding titles of reverend, doctor, rabbi, and the like,” with no claim to examine their “papers or academic credentials.”¹⁰⁰ Clearly, the CCAR had capitulated to pressure from UAHC congregations to accept their religious leaders, irrespective of verifiable credentials—not surprising, since the rabbinic and academic credentials of Isaac Mayer Wise, president and founder of the CCAR, had long been under scrutiny and question.¹⁰¹

Gustav Gottheil retired from the pulpit of Emanu-El in 1899.¹⁰² Despite Silverman's long association with Emanu-El, the congregation declined to offer him the position of senior rabbi.¹⁰³ Emanu-El conducted a search for a successor to Gottheil, seriously considering giants of the Reform movement such as Emil G. Hirsch in 1899,¹⁰⁴ Max Heller in 1903,¹⁰⁵ and Stephen S. Wise in 1905.¹⁰⁶ Finally, Judah L. Magnes was named as Silverman's co-rabbi in 1906.¹⁰⁷ This was short lived, as Magnes and Emanu-El parted company in 1910 as a result of Magnes's more traditional leanings.¹⁰⁸ Silverman persisted and finished his career at Emanu-El in 1920 as co-rabbi with Hyman G. Enelow, elected in 1912.¹⁰⁹

The Precipitous Decline

A series of events that were unrelated, but invariably affected Sparger's sense of well-being and his ability to function effectively, occurred almost from the beginning of his cantorate at Emanu-El. In addition to his previously mentioned professional difficulties, Sparger suffered several personal crises. On 23 July 1892, Sparger's older brother, Leopold, a traveling salesman, was found dead in his hotel room in Richmond, Virginia, from an apparent overdose of morphine at age thirty-six.¹¹⁰ Two years later, Leopold's six-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Miriam, died in Great Britain.¹¹¹ In May 1902, Sparger's father, Koloman, died in Tallya at age eighty.¹¹² Although their relationship was often stormy, Gottheil's death in April 1903¹¹³ may have represented the loss of another father figure for Sparger, thereby accelerating a downward spiral that would bring him to ruination.

The High Holidays of 1903 fell in mid-September, and Sukkot was over by October 13. We learn from a *New York Times* article dated 17 October 1903 that, when Yom Kippur concluded, Sparger apparently wrote to Emanu-El's president, James Seligman, requesting a leave of absence for poor health.¹¹⁴ When Sukkot concluded, Sparger traveled to Philadelphia. Complaining of headaches, he left for Washington, DC, where he was hospitalized and appar-

ently attempted to commit suicide with an overdose of pain medication. He left the hospital, returned to Philadelphia, and checked into the Walton Hotel. Shortly thereafter a maid found him lying on the floor with his throat and wrists slashed. The only thing Sparger would say was “Notify Dr. Berkowitz.”¹¹⁵ He was immediately taken to the Jefferson Hospital. When questioned, a depressed Sparger says, “I have done better this time.... Before I tried chloral, but drugs are unreliable.... The doctors gave me strychnine and brought me back. I don’t think they will be able to do that this time.”¹¹⁶ The doctors found that no arteries were cut, but the jugular had probably been bleeding for about an hour before he was discovered. He was also suffering from the effect of what the doctors thought was morphine.

Sparger was referring to Rabbi Henry Berkowitz (1857–1924), of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. An article appeared the next day in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wherein Berkowitz identified himself as a personal friend of Sparger and expressed shock at Sparger’s behavior. Berkowitz contacted Sparger’s family in New York and informed the newspaper that Sparger’s daughter knew of no reason why her father would attempt suicide.¹¹⁷ The *Inquirer* followed up the story with a brief article dated 19 October saying that Sparger was still in serious condition and the doctors feared a change for the worse.¹¹⁸ On 20 October, the *Inquirer* subsequently reported that Sparger’s condition had greatly improved and that he would most likely recover. The article quotes an unnamed friend of Sparger’s, saying that there was “no foundation for the stories that the cantor had attempted suicide owing to his excessive use of cigarettes or on account of speculations which had caused him to lose large sums of money. He said that the motive for Mr. Sparger’s act was due to overwork, which had unbalanced his mind.”¹¹⁹ On 20 October, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that the family maintained that the overuse of tobacco, drugs to alleviate headaches and insomnia, and temporary insanity had caused the suicide attempts.¹²⁰ Yet another unnamed source from New York City is quoted as saying, “The rabbi had been speculating and had lost about \$2,000,” and the despair from these losses caused him to try to take his own life.¹²¹

There are no extant records at Temple Emanu-El relating to this incident. However, the board minutes of 2 November 1903 record that, “The president read the resignation of Mr. Sparger as Cantor of the Congregation. Upon motion of Mr. Marshall the resignation was accepted.”¹²²

On 6 November 1903, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* titled “Cantor Sparger Eludes Sleuths” reported that friends of Sparger had hired two private detectives to bring him from the Jefferson Hospital back to his home in New York City. The friends feared that he might again attempt suicide if left to return to New York unescorted. Sparger slipped out the back door and outwitted them.¹²³ The same day, the *New York Times* recorded that “they [Sparger’s family] knew nothing of his actions and that the dispatch from Philadelphia

telling of his having eluded the detectives was news to them.” His wife, they said, “had been made ill by her grief growing out of her husband’s actions.”¹²⁴

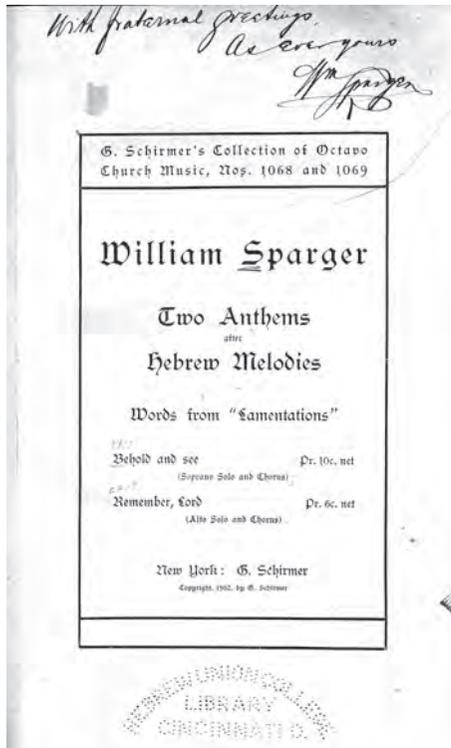
The newspapers, journals, and historical texts, as well as the minutes of Temple Emanu-El, are silent after this date. Sparger’s date of death remains a mystery. Rebecca Sparger died on 16 March 1939.¹²⁵ The 1910 federal census shows her living in Brooklyn with her daughter, Jeanette, and her younger brother, Meyer. Rebecca listed her marital status not as widowed but as “married for 25 years.”¹²⁶ In the 1920 and 1930 federal censuses, she listed herself as “widowed.”¹²⁷ Did Sparger disappear after his escape and have no contact with his family? Was he confined to a psychiatric facility due to mental illness? Did Rebecca believe he was still alive seven years after the escape, or did she have to wait that period of time before he could be declared legally dead? The trail ends abruptly in the absence of a death certificate or burial records. The meteoric rise of a cantorial pioneer fizzles and fades into the oblivion of speculation, mystery, and intrigue.

Conclusion

More than a century after the last record of his existence, William Sparger remains an enigma. Amid the legacy of his contribution to the Reform Jewish cantorate, one is left to wonder what motivated him. What drove him to the point of desperation and attempted, if not successful, suicide?

Sparger repeatedly hitched his star to other charismatic religious leaders and patterned his career after contemporary clerics such as Henry Ward Beecher and Isaac Mayer Wise. He came to this country armed only with a cursory education but, like Wise, with a world-class ability to connect with people and enchant them through his diverse talents. He knew his career in Europe was limited, as did Wise. Unlike Sulzer, who remained in Austria to actively

pursue his work on behalf of Reform Judaism and the cantorate, Sparger was willing to leave his family and follow Wise’s example of paving his way in



Signed cover page of Sparger's Two Anthems after Hebrew Melodies

(Courtesy Klau Library, Cincinnati, OH)

America toward acceptance and, ultimately, national recognition. This he did relatively quickly, achieving wide acclaim at Beth Elohim in his dual role as rabbi and cantor.

The fundamental question, then, is why would he leave the security of his role as primary religious leader at Beth Elohim to serve Temple Emanu-El, not as rabbi, but as cantor? We know that, while Adolph Rubin enjoyed the respect and affection of his congregants, his role was clearly as “reader.” It was Gustav Gottheil who was rabbi and regarded as the “minister” of the congregation. Sparger was aware of Gottheil’s role, and he was apparently willing to move from a leading role, if you will, to a supporting role. It seems that Sparger was biding his time and hedging his bets that someday *he* would succeed Gottheil as senior rabbi of Temple Emanu-El. His reasoning was not without merit. First, he knew that, by 1891, Gottheil was sixty-four years old. Second, he knew that Gottheil’s assistant, Joseph Silverman, who had only been at Emanu-El for three years, was relatively new to the rabbinate and lacked the reputation and public recognition that Sparger had already achieved. Third, like Wise, Sparger had *chutzpah* and the ability for self-promotion. He most likely believed that, given a few years, he could win over Emanu-El’s leadership and they would unquestionably name him as Gottheil’s successor.

It only took a couple of years before the plot unraveled. Sparger managed to alienate Gottheil by insisting on assuming duties never before undertaken by Emanu-El’s cantors. Moreover, he sought to oust organist Davis—Gottheil’s friend and collaborator. While the laity generally liked Sparger and appreciated him professionally, it was his cantorial talent that impressed them. There are no references in Emanu-El’s records indicating that Sparger ever preached at services. He read and chanted, as Emanu-El’s cantors were accustomed to doing. He did not have the “privilege of the pulpit.” He consciously triangulated relationships among Gottheil, Silverman, and himself. Gottheil’s petulant behavior notwithstanding, Sparger was more than just a “prima donna”; he behaved in a calculating and fixated manner. It all spelled disaster.

Psychologically, by 1903, Sparger was in the throes of a crisis. The *Baltimore Sun*’s report that “temporary insanity had caused the suicide attempts”¹²⁸ was not far from the truth. Examining his moods almost from the start of his career, perhaps Sparger would have met the criteria for a diagnosis of bipolar disorder (with manic and depressive episodes). Mania is often characterized by inflated self-esteem or feelings of grandeur and euphoria. The individual may feel almost indestructible, often taking excessive risks and exhibiting precipitous behaviors. Common symptoms of manic episodes are disturbed sleep patterns, rash business decisions, lavish spending, reckless and impetuous personal decisions, and drug and/or alcohol abuse. A depressive state is often triggered as the manic high subsides and, as the consequences of the manic activities become apparent, the depressive episode can be accelerated and exacerbated.¹²⁹

It is not inconsistent with his driven personality and erratic behavior with its accompanying highs and lows that Sparger would turn to addictive behaviors—the abuse of tobacco, financial speculation, and drug abuse—all of which are alluded to in the newspaper articles surrounding his suicide attempts. Ironically, like his hero Wise, Sparger, until the end, was also “plagued by recurrent severe depressions, hypochondria, and the wish for death (and) was able to overcome his debilitating self-doubts and assume a supreme, manic self-confidence that enabled him to face enemies and personal defeats with equanimity, always certain he would succeed.”¹³⁰

Perhaps not coincidentally, Sparger followed the same depressive and suicidal path his brother had followed a decade earlier. The pain of losing his father in 1902 may have been intensified by the death of a second, albeit conflictual, father figure the next year. Gottheil’s death in 1903 may have been the final blow to Sparger, who had disappointed not one, but two, demanding father figures. The result was a downward spiral that would bring him to abort his career, his family connection, and, ultimately, his life.

William Sparger, as well as Alois Kaiser, could have and should have logically been the ones to carry out in the United States the seminal work Sulzer undertook in Europe to professionalize the cantorate. However, the Society of American Cantors was short-lived, and subsequent efforts to establish a professional organization for the Reform cantorate, including the Jewish Cantors Ministers Association and the Board of American Hazzan-Ministers, were less than effective. It was not until 1953, fifty years after Sparger’s disappearance, that the Reform movement’s American Conference of Cantors was founded.¹³¹ One wonders how it might have affected the state of the cantorate today if Sparger had lived longer and continued his work toward professionalization. Nonetheless, despite his personal struggles, his tireless efforts to elevate the stature of the cantorate have proven to be a valuable and instructive link in the chain that connects Sulzer’s pioneering efforts with the model that exists today.

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