



## LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

[www.huc.edu/libraries](http://www.huc.edu/libraries)

### Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

Statement by Referee of Master's Thesis

The M.H.L. dissertation entitled:

"The Place of Isaac Leeser in American Life."

written by Theodore S. Levy  
(name of student)

- 1) may (with revisions) be considered for  
publication ( )  
cannot be considered for publication ( ✓ )
- 2) may, on request, be loaned by the Library ( ✓ )  
may not be loaned by the Library ( )

JRM  
(signature of referee)

Jacob R. Marcus  
(referee)

January 30, 1951  
(date)

Mic. 10/26/78

THE PLACE OF ISAAC LEESER IN AMERICAN LIFE

by

Theodore S. Levy

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Hebrew  
Letters Degree and Ordination

Hebrew Union College-  
Jewish Institute of Religion  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
January, 1951

Referee:  
Professor Jacob R. Marcus

## Resume of Thesis: The Place of Isaac Leeser in American Life

This thesis is an attempt to place Isaac Leeser in the historical, and social setting of American life during the period from 1800 to 1850.

The first chapter of this record sets the historical background for Isaac Leeser's era. During this period from 1800 to 1850 American Jewry consisted of many Ashkenazic Jews moving into the regions of the United States that were remote from the large cities and towns. More notably though, the history of this period reflects the great contribution that caused American Israel to play its role in America's expansion. The chapter goes on to show that as a result of these two driving forces--the westward expansion of America and the Ashkenazic Jewish immigration--there emerged several bi-products which eventually involved a weakening of the uniform congregational structure. These forces were the "preponderance of Ashkenazic over Sephardic Jewry, the waning of synagogal authority, and the beginnings of reform."

The second chapter relates Isaac Leeser's life in Chronological form. This work in particular is the result of the reading of Leeser's 10 volumes of sermons entitled Discourses on the Jewish Religion. These Discourses offer much of the valuable material that is needed to fill in some of the vague incidents in his life. A typical example of the color that these works add may be seen in the following incident. Isaac M. Wise accused Leeser of not being able to

read unvocalized rabbinic texts. Quite accidentally Leiser refers to a medieval Hebrew rabbinic source which served as a basis for many of his sermons. To this proof of ability a letter of Rebecca Gratz is also added. Though his sermons may be considered "heavy" reading, they still serve as excellent primary source material for his life's background.

The third and final chapter of this work expresses most of Leiser's opinions on subjects ranging from his call for union in American Israel, his many progressive desires in regard to non-doctrinal and non-ritual matters in Judaism, to his many vitriolic attacks against Reform Judaism.

Through all of this, Isaac Leiser was certainly a man ahead of his time; for his time; and in the long run the equal of Isaac Mayer Wise.

TO MOTHER AND DAD

with

Deepest Love and Gratitude

"Even as the  
strings of a  
lute are alone  
though they  
quiver with the  
same music."

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### P a g e

Chapter I	A Brief Historical Background of the period 1800-1850 .....	1
Chapter II	The Life and Activities of Isaac Leaser .....	19
Chapter III	A Survey of Isaac Leaser's Attitudes Towards Important Aspects of American Jewish Life .....	62
Appendix A	A Chronology of Isaac Leaser's Life .....	68
Appendix B	A List of Leaser's Publications .....	71
Appendix C	Isaac Leaser's Exposition of the Rabbinic Sources of the Lord's Prayer .....	72
Bibliography .....		74
Notes .....		75

## CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND OF THE PERIOD FROM 1800 to 1850



## BACKGROUND OF THE PERIOD FROM 1800 to 1850

It was the early part of the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution which was taking place in these United States resulted in Fultons steamboat, Morses' Telegraph, Bells' Telephone and Marconi's Wireless. America was growing, now that several decades had passed since the government had been established.

But what of Jewish settlements? What was happening to the Jewish population of the United States? Certainly, a segment of our people were to have some influence in this relatively new land, since intolerance and privation were facing their brethren in Europe and forcing them to seek new outposts of living. European living placed before them the alternative of forced conversion or intermarriage. The French Revolution may have rekindled a temporary spark of expectant hope, but that flame was quickly snuffed out when all hope of freedom died with Napoleon's defeat. This temporary set back in Europe caused an immediate surge of immigration which swept towards these United States. We note that between 2500 and 3000 Jews were concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard in 1800, and that during the first four decades of the nineteenth century the Jewish population multiplied fivefold. Isaac Harby, writing in the North American Review, placed the number at 6,000 in 1826, and in 1840 the American Almanac raised that figure to 15,000.<sup>1</sup>

The Jews that the European unrest had sent to the United States were people of much fortitude and strength,

for they faced their new life with a zest that made them outstanding in their era. Many of our people were forced to take risks and make great sacrifices in order to obtain a freedom and maintain a liberty which their adventuresome souls sought. The early men had been traders and peddlars who often amassed small fortunes by serving the needs of the American Community. It may be well to note here that the Spanish Jews, who had come already, had worked hard and made good. Compared to the Ashkenazic Jews who were entering now with much less of the material possessions, it was quite obvious that it would take a while for them to catch up to their brethren who already had a substantial foothold. Once arrived these German Jews moved to the more remote regions away from the already populated cities and towns.

"But more profoundly, the record reflects how deeply American Israel was involved in the expansion of America. From two primary forces, the westward expansion of America and the German Jewish immigration, there emerged several ancillary factors which slowly weakened the uniform congregational structure. They are, in order; the preponderance of Ashkenazic over Sephardic Jewry, the waning of synagogal authority, and the beginnings of Reform."<sup>2</sup>

Let us now examine these subordinate factors which supposedly weakened the uniform congregational structure.

"The German Jew was a pluck, hardworking, honest, frugal, individual."<sup>3</sup> At first these Jews were looked down upon by the Sephardim because the latter had already established themselves socially and economically. But the German Jews

who entered the states (most of them coming from Bavaria) with a little bundle on his back also were able to make their way here. He took his wares and his stories and started in all directions. "He went West to Illinois and Ohio and Iowa and Wisconsin, to Oregon and Texas. His foot touched the soil of California and Nevada, the red-jawed hills of Utah looked down upon him, and the Rio Grande ran sluggishly at his feet."<sup>4</sup> The time was ripe for him and the country was expanding. From these small beginnings the German Jew saved, and as his earnings increased he bettered himself economically and socially.

A great many of the immigrants who came to the United States were not of the highest calibre intellectually, for most of the learning they had was of German literature and life. They, of course, were limited by the fact that this was a period of time when the German schools were not open to Jews. In time, though, a small group of the more recent immigrants around 1880 were "full exponents of Jewish culture."<sup>5</sup> "Dr. Isaac M. Wise tells of asking for a Mishnah in an orthodox synagogue in New York shortly after his arrival in the 40's; the sexton laughed at him thinking only a greenhorn would ask for a Hebrew book in America. Wise complained bitterly of the equal lack of Jewish and American learning among the members of the first congregation he had in Albany, and contrasted them with the superior Spanish Jews of Charleston."<sup>6</sup>

Together with this problem of education was linked the resulting bi-product of synagogal authority. This problem

met with a twofold influence in America, since both England and Holland exerted a strong influence on Jewish cultural life here. Though the Jews lived in the United States, Europe was the seat of authority. In each instance in which American Jewry asked a leading legal question, there were neither "qualified scholars or rabbis" to offer any satisfactory solution to the problem. As a result, the problems were handled by a foreign element--being an authority located in London. All of the American German synagogues accepted this seat of authority as having the final word. "As late as 1837 Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, for example, paid an annual half shekel to the chief rabbi, as the minutes of the congregation reveal."<sup>7</sup>

But what of the synagogue as a Jewish institution serving the immediate needs of the people? We find that most of the communities were far too small to have any great organization. Usually the synagogue was the ONLY Jewish institution where the peoples activities could be centrally located. (see chart No. 1 page 5)

The synagogal government usually consisted of a president, or parnass, as he was called; a board of trustees; a treasurer; and a chazan, or cantor. It may be well to cite specific facts of synagogal government as they appeared in New York during this period to show some general structure.

Laws and regulations for Jewish communities were drawn up many centuries before in Europe under the name of takkanot.<sup>8</sup>

## CHART 1

---



---

 AMERICAN JEWISH CONGREGATIONS 1802 to 1843
 

---



---

Rodef Shalom	Philadelphia	1802
B'nai Israel	Cincinnati	1824
B'nai Jeshurun	New York	1825
Shaarai Hesed	New Orleans	1828
Baltimore Hebrew Congregation	Baltimore	1830
Anshe Hesed	New York	1830
(incorporated into Temple Emanuel)		
Beth El	Albany	1838
United Hebrew Congregation	St. Louis	1838
Sharrei Zedek	New York	1839
Anshe Hesed	Cleveland	1839
Brith Shalom	Easton, Pa.	1839
Society of Concord	Syracuse	1839
Mishkan Israel	New Haven	1840
Brith Kodesh	Rochester	1840
B'nai Jeshurun	Cincinnati	1840
Adath Israel	Louisville	1842
Har Sinai	Baltimore	1842
Ohabei Shalom	Boston	1842
Rodef Shalom	New York	1842
Beth Israel	Hartford	1843
B'nai Israel	Natchez, Miss.	1843
Anshe Chesed	Vicksburg, Miss	1843

The Jewish community in America, therefore, used these regulations as a basis by which they set their congregational constitutions. "Thus each synagogue after its formation drew up a formal constitution. A special book was usually reserved for this document; the last pages signed by the members as a promise to uphold these laws and abide by them, and as an indication of membership in the synagogue."<sup>9</sup>

After each synagogue drew up a formal constitution, the presidents, assistants, Hazan, and Shammass were elected to their respective positions. In most congregations there was no real class of seat holders, for few of the seats were sold for a complete period of time. Moreover the people themselves showed most interest in those houses of worship where the seat was rented, since those who paid dues on a yearly basis were entitled to become electors as prescribed by the Religious Societies Corporation Act of 1784. Synagogal membership obtained with it two kinds of rights. First, it gave the member certain religious prerogatives; and secondly, it gave the member the right to participate in the organizational life of the congregation.

The actual synagogal structure itself was in the colonial style; one of the oldest now standing in Newport, Rhode Island is an excellent example of the American architecture of that period.<sup>10</sup> Most of the synagogues were intended for Orthodox services since the reader's platform was raised and placed in the center of the building. Women sat in the traditional gallery; or some separation was pro-

vided if the entire congregation sat on one floor. The Sephardic and Ashkenazic service ritual differed somewhat, the latter differing mainly in the pronunciation of the Hebrew text. Eventually, the German Jews started to branch out and build synagogues for themselves. They were growing in numbers and to that was added the feeling of being at home with so many of their brethern, since the Sephardic aristocracy did not set them at ease.

Jewish education at this time was one of the functions of the synagogue. As early as 1731 we find the New York congregation Shearith Israel establishing a Hebrew school, and just fourteen years later we find it being turned into a regular Hebrew parochial school where Hebrew, Spanish, English, writing, and mathematics were taught.<sup>11</sup> During these times the parochial school was the only one that offered a substantial elementary education. But as the public school system developed and replaced these parochial schools the Hebrew school met in the afternoons when the public school session was completed.

The third and final source that weakened the uniform congregational structure of Judaism was the rise of Reform Judaism. It came as a totally unsuspected surprise, boring within the structure to create an exclusive American Judaism.

Contrary to many of the statements Reform Judaism did originate in the United States. It got its start in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824, when some forty-seven members of the Beth Elohim Congregation threw over the

traces and demanded a reformed ritual. As a result of these demands upon the congregation a complete split took place when thirty-five members of the congregation refused to listen to such a thing. The twelve congregants who did want the change then proceeded to form a new congregation. On November 21, 1824, The Reformed Society of Israelites was formed. They immediately introduced prayers read in English and Hebrew, as well as Hymns sung also in the vernacular. The original service was shortened, certain of its ceremonies were eliminated, the sections of the Maimonidean creed that declared the belief in the coming of the Messiah and the bodily resurrection were omitted, instrumental music was introduced into the service, and the congregation worshipped with uncovered heads.<sup>12</sup> ALL OF THIS BUT NO LEADER.

It was not until 1836 that Gustav Poznanski, a follower of the Hamburg Reform Ritual, came to Charleston and Beth Elohim. From the reform flame that had been kindled there, Poznanski gave his consent to an organ, and it was but a matter of time before the second day of holidays was abolished as well as other minor reforms introduced into the service. Just a few years later in April of 1842 Har Sinai Congregation of Baltimore was formed and in another three years the reform Vereine laid the basis for Temple Emanuel of New York.<sup>13</sup>

From all of this followed many more reform congregations in quick succession as may be noted on Chart No. 1.

If we but look into the course that reform followed in New York, one notes that there were individuals who wanted



a change long before the arrival of the Ashkenazim. Noah had warned against such innovations from the "foreign" element. Yet in 1834 he himself advocated English prayers and music for the synagogue; however, in later years he once again returned to his conservatism. It may be well to note here that Isaac Harby came to New York in 1828 and influenced Noah somewhat in his beliefs, but his death may have prevented further reforms momentarily.

The first concrete step in this community of New York was the formation of a "cultus society" by Renau, Bruckman, Meyer, Rosenborough, and Mulhauser in 1844. Their purpose was to permit Jews to occupy a position of greater respect among their fellow citizens, to enable greater devotion, and to attract the young people. Merzbacher soon joined this group and together they organized Temple Emanuel in 1845. Originally this synagogue was quite conservative and kept the old Prayer Book except for a few deletions. Hats and Talaithim were also worn; however, their main aim was towards a more orderly and decorous service. To the service was added some vocal music, a German hymnal, and the sermon. It was not until the new synagogue was purchased in 1847 that changes in the ritual were made. A three year torah cycle was introduced, as was the Bar Mitzvah, the organ, the sukkah, and the family pew. In 1859 there was a movement to remove the hat. A three day mourning period was substituted for the customary seven days. Throughout all of this there was a constant motivation from Merzbacher who felt that reforms were necessary, but they must be based on Jewish Law. He

further felt that even if a custom was not Mosaic in origin, as long as it had value for a minority it should most certainly be retained. To this the lay leaders also agreed for if the majority voted for something it should certainly be enough. Eventually the radical lay leaders gained control and then men like Adler believed that the hat should be removed only for sermons and others thought that it should be abolished altogether. In addition Merzbacher's prayer-book was shortened. Here we note that by 1860 three prayerbooks widely influenced reform: Wise's Minhag America, Einhorn's Olat Tomid, and Merzbacher's Seder Tefillah. The latter work occupied a middle ground between Einhorn's radical arrangement and the conservative work of Isaac M. Wise.

Anshe Chesed was the only other New York congregation to make changes, it being the first conservative synagogue in America. They adopted the Minhag Vienna and a mixed choir. But agitation continued and the group was forced to engage Dr. Jonah Bondi as rabbi. He rearranged the order of prayers, omitted the chanting of the haftarah and substituting a recitation. The kittel was also abolished as was the white hat for the high holidays. Eventually the decision towards reform was taken out of the hands of the rabbi and granted to the lay leadership of the congregation.

Another congregation, Shearith Israel, remained free of innovations for the most part and opposed reform, as did S. M. Isaacs of Shaarey Tephilah. However, men such as Leeser of Philadelphia and Rice of Baltimore fought Reform

Judaism as a movement of large national proportions with Wise representing conservative reform, and with Adler and Einhorn representing the radical reformers. So it was that Reform was not on its way; but not without some opposition from the defenders of traditionalism. For those who shouted the loudest for orthodoxy only forced the Reformers to increase their fight against the religious conservatism of their era.

During this half century span of time, Jews also distinguished themselves in the armed forces of the United States government. In the war of 1812 we find that at least forty Jews participated. "Thirteen were officers. Nathan Moses of Pennsylvania wore the stripes of colonel. Meyer Moses of South Carolina and Mordecai Meyers fought as captains. Then there were three lieutenants, one adjutant, an ensign, two sergeants, three corporals, and twenty-seven privates."<sup>14</sup> One of the highest ranking men of the service who fought in that war was Commodore Uriah P. Levy. He had the sea in his blood from his early youth. In 1803, at the age of eleven, he was a cabin boy, and three years later found him an apprenticed sailor. After that he managed to spend one of the next four years at a naval school in Philadelphia, and by 1810 he was second mate on the brig "Polly and Betsy." Several years later he became the part owner of a schooner called the "George Washington." While this ship was on a cruise some of the crew mutinied, taking his ship from him and leaving him stranded in a foreign country. But Levy refused to let this stop him, and he some-

how managed to return to the United States to set out after his mutineers. It was not long before he found them, returning them to the United States where they were hung. Shortly thereafter, the war of 1812 broke out and we find Levy enlisting and receiving the commission of a sailing master in the Navy. While on the "Argus" sailing for France, he helped in the capture of several enemy ships; however, misfortune befell him when fighting an English vessel against overpowering odds. He was interned in England until the end of the war, at which time he was returned to the United States where he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant for his bravery. The next four decades saw much turmoil in Levy's life. He fought prejudice as a Jew and as a loyal American, and the fact that he lost his commission after being court-martialed six times only caused him to fight harder. In 1855 we find Levy once again reinstated and rising to the highest rank in the Navy. Commodore Levy died shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, and the following statement found on his tombstone best relates his life's story: "He was the father of law for the abolition of the barbarous practice of corporal punishment in the United States Navy."

The 19th of July 1785 saw the birth of Mordecai Manual Noah who became a well known politician and writer during Isaac Leeser's period. Though his family followed the Sephardic ritual and belonged to the aristocratic class in the U. S., their son Mordecai was poor and had to work for a livelihood. It was not long before a Robert Morris

noted his abilities and got him a job as clerk in the auditor's office of the U. S. Treasury. Shortly thereafter, he was once again on the move, this time reporting the Pennsylvania legislative sessions for a newspaper. After this, his first real experience in Journalism, he went to Charleston, where he studied law and edited the Charleston City Gazette. Here he was regarded as a radical because of his ideas; but over a number of years, and with much traveling, he finally got his wish of entering into politics and staying with it. In 1822 he was appointed High Sheriff of New York, and somewhat later received the appointment of Surveyor of the Port of New York.<sup>15</sup> Though Noah loved politics his greatest fame resulted from his literary accomplishments and his love of Israel as the promised land for the Jews. He continually hoped for the gathering of all the scattered remnants of Jewry throughout the world. Of all his hopes the plan "to establish a 'refuge for the Jews' on Grand Island, near Buffalo, New York came nearest to realization."<sup>16</sup> But despite this attempt at some sort of a Jewish state, the city of Arrath, the name given this project, never did materialize. Rather, it became a folly, and after much censorship and ridicule this vain attempt passed away. But this idea of nationalism never did die in the heart of Noah. Thus in 1837 he stated that the Jews should pool their money and buy Palestine and Syria. Again, in 1844, he devoted an entire speech to the restoration of Jews to Palestine, asking that the United States purchase it and after a while the Jews would repay the debt. As he sincerely believed that the major threat to

the Jews was from a lack of feeling of union among them. Of course, Orthodox Judaism opposed him for his stand, but Mordecai Noah was the first to actually speak out in the United States in support of obtaining Palestine for the Jews.

To the afore mentioned list of notables we must also add the name of Judah Touro, the son of a Newport Rhode Island rabbi. Touro at a very young age was destined for success. In 1802 he owned a thriving business in New Orleans which sold many of the products of New England. When the United States purchased the Louisiana lands his trade increased tremendously, making him one of the wealthiest men in that region. In 1815 he volunteered his services in the defense of New Orleans serving under General Jackson. While in battle he was severely wounded and left to die; however, a Virginian by the name of Rezin D. Shepherd found him, and cared for him until he regained his health. Touro became the life long friend of Rezin and, as a result of Rezin's earlier kindness, he made him one of the four executors of his estate. However, Touro amassed a sizable fortune and was most charitable. It may also be well to note here that Isaac Leeser in his Discourses mentions that the "late Rezin D. Shepherd did not imitate Mr. Touro as he gave not a solitary penny to Jews and Jewish objects. This was a curious contrast."<sup>17</sup> An example of his charitable nature is noted in the fact that he bought a Universalist Church, whose congregation had been forced to sell because of too

many debts, and at a later date permitted them to use it.

When the Bunker Hill Monument was to be raised Judah Touro met the \$10,000 subscription of Amos Lawrence of Boston with an equal amount on the condition that the remaining thirty thousand dollars also be raised. The monument was dedicated in 1843 and the chief address of that occasion was delivered by Daniel Webster who paid special homage to these two men who contributed the largest amounts. The following was read:

"Amos and Judah--venerated names!  
Patriarch and prophet press their equal claims,  
Like generous coursers, running neck and neck,  
Each aids the work by giving it a check.  
Christian and Jew, they carry out a plan--  
For though of different faith, each is in heart a man."18

Touro also founded a synagogue in New Orleans with a \$40,000 gift, left money to Moses Montefiore for the poor Jews of Palestine, founded a hospital in New Orleans, and left large sums to worthy Christian charities. To all of this the inscription on his tombstone offers testimony.

Among this list of famous men we may mention only two women. Rebecca Gratz, who legend claims was the original character of Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe," was born in Philadelphia in 1781 of a prominent business family. Though she had a good education and was respected in social circles, her most notable achievements were in the fields of religious education and charity. She devoted much time to the Hebrew Sunday School; however, societies such as the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, the Jewish Foster Home, the Fuel Society, and the Sewing Society occupied most of

her time.

While Rebecca Gratz labored in Philadelphia, it remained for Charleston, South Carolina, to shelter a French Jewess by the name of Penina Moise, one of the most popular writers of poetry during that time. She was a poor girl and with an invalid mother to tend, it is most amazing to see how she managed to survive. Her humorous and serious poetry appeared in Godey's Ladies Book. Later, many of her works were published in book form. Charleston, being a center of culture, readily made her a leading lady in many of its literary circles. During the last twenty-five years of Miss Moise's life she suffered in pain. Though blind she and her sister conducted a private school. She also was the second superintendent of the Sabbath School at Charleston,<sup>19</sup> and received copies of lessons for each week from Miss Gratz in Philadelphia who wrote them out in English. Though she died in 1880 suffering to the end, her "suffering rather strengthened than weakened her faith in God and man, and brought her a measure of solace and peace comprehensible only to the deepest of religious natures."

The year 1848 saw a new element entering the states. That was the year of revolt in Germany and when that revolt was put down many of their best minds, both Jew and Christian, left their fatherland. One of the outstanding "48'ers" was Abraham Jacobi, a Bavarian, who fled to this country. Jacobi was a very close friend of Carl Schurz who also fled Germany. Schurz, one of the German revolutionaries, was a great social thinker, and once in this country he became a radical abolition-



1st. Jacobi was a doctor and became the founder of the science of Pediatrics in the United States. Also, he was president of the American Medical Association. Other "48'ers" were Joseph Goldmark, a famous percussion cap manufacturer, and Joseph Lewi, a writer for the Israelite and later on the staff of the New York times. Also to this list may be added the names of Dr. E. Morwitz, a prominent Philadelphia physician, and journalist; Michael Heilperin," a man of remarkable attainments, afterwards an associate editor of Appleton's "America Cyclopaedia;"<sup>20</sup> and Julius Bien, a lithographer and businessman. Not all of the "48'ers" that came to the United States were successful, and to that list the names of Nathan Grossmayer, August Bondi, Louis Schlessinger (Walkers Filibusters), and Adolphus Adler (Confederate Army) may be added.

Previously we have mentioned the men and women who played important roles in this period, but what was the status of the Jews in the various parts of the United States?

In Maryland there was much strife between the rural and urban areas when a Jew tried to hold office. But in 1825, Baltimore got the upper hand in the struggle with the rural dwellers and "an act for the relief of the Jews of Maryland" was passed by a small margin.<sup>21</sup> In North Carolina it took until 1868 before Jewish emancipation was accomplished.<sup>22</sup> In New York the Jewish community thrived as the synagogues, lodges, orders, and societies were successful. In Philadelphia Isaac Leiser was giving Reform Judaism quite a

battle, congregations flourished under capable leadership, and tireless workers like Rebecca Gratz gave to education a continued impetus. In the South at Charleston, South Carolina, Reform Judaism had been started by an originally Sephardic congregation who modeled their constitution after the London Ashkenazic Congregation. Here we may pause a moment and ask why did Reform have such an excellent opportunity here? First, South Carolina had equal rights for all continually, and it was not a difficult task for the Jews to become integrated into a highly educated society of newspaper publishers, bible schools, and poets. Secondly, there was quite a substantial Jewish community in Charleston. Of the 5,000 or 6,000 Jews in the United States during this period, between 1,000 and 1,200 were centered in Charleston. In the West the Jew traveled with the expansion of the frontier. A congregation was formed in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1848.<sup>23</sup> There were Jewish traders in the north, and settlers in the south. This was the period of American expansion fostered by the impetus of manifest destiny; and the Jew had his place in this expansion.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF ISAAC LEESER

## THE LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF ISAAC LEESER

By carefully examining the historical background previously stated in the first chapter of this work, one may infer that Reform Judaism met with limited opposition in some major cities of the United States. However, upon closer examination of the history of this period we find that Reform did meet a stiff opposition in Philadelphia, and that the opposer was none other than the Goliath of American Orthodoxy--Isaac Leeser.

Isaac Leeser was born in Neuenkirchen in the province of Westphalia on December 12, 1806. Leeser's early life was a difficult one, for he lost his mother at the age of seven and the death of his father and grandmother a few years later continued to work hardship in his early life. He attended the gymnasium at Muenster for two and one-quarter years. Leeser also states that this part of his education corresponds to the average American college bestowing the A.M. degree.<sup>24</sup> The only relative whose name has been preserved in connection with some portion of his education is his cousin Heiman Leeser, a minister at Luebbecke and the author of a text book on Hebrew grammar.<sup>25</sup>

It may be well to note here that in 1808, two years after the birth of Leeser, the kingdom of Westphalia under the rulership of Jerome, the brother of Napoleon, granted to all the Jews the full right of citizenship. With this new freedom came new ideas and improved modes of worship. This

was the golden opportunity for Israel Jacobson, the president of the Jewish consistory patterned after the French institution, to bring his new spirit of honest and earnest reforms to Judaism. The result of this spirit was the founding of the first Reform temple in Seesen in 1810.

The eighteen years that Leiser lived in Westphalia with its new Reformed Judaism had little effect on him. However, we cannot overlook the fact that his later and life-long antagonism for the progress of new principles in Judaism may well have been nurtured in his very birthplace. Graetz states that during this period "the adherents of traditional Judaism were aroused by what they deemed dangerous, uncalled for and illegal innovations." One of the rabid opponents of Reform, the "Right Reverend Abraham Sutro, Chief Rabbi of the Diocese of Muenster and Mark" make a tremendous impression upon Leiser when he was only nine years old. Sutro was the author of Milhamot Adonai, which unleashes a stinging attack upon Reform in all of its forms, and in the greater portion of Leiser's editorial utterances we find the same spirit that is manifested in Sutro's work.

Throughout his early educational period we find that Leiser had quite close association with many Christian friends. "Despite the political reaction that is recorded as having taken place in the German provinces, a reaction that affected the Jews unfavorably, the gymnasium at Muenster, it seems was not attacked with the virus of anti-semitism, for Leiser makes mention of the fact that Jewish students were well received by their Christian friends. And again

to strengthen his contention of freedom from prejudice against Christians, he refers to having been partly educated in a Catholic college, and to having enjoyed the kindness and instruction of several clergymen of that religion."<sup>26</sup>

At the request of his uncle, Zalma Rehiné a Richmond, Virginia merchant, he left Europe and arrived in the States in May of 1824. Leaser came prepared to engage in a commercial career, but entered school instead. It was not long thereafter that he changed his mind once again and left school to engage in business, but not without continuing his religious and secular education. His uncle, having married into the well known Seixas family and this afforded young Leaser an excellent opportunity to render assistance to Reverend Isaac B. Seixas, who was then minister of the Portuguese Congregation in Richmond. Leaser early evinced interest in religious affairs, as is shown by the assistance he gave to Seixas in gratuitously teaching the younger portion of the Jewish community of Richmond. It did not take Leaser long to gain mastery of the English language, as well as increase his knowledge of Jewish thought. Within five years after his arrival in Richmond he was already gaining popularity as a forceful English writer and controversialist.<sup>27</sup> However it was not until 1828 that Leaser attracted public notice. In that year the London Quarterly Review published some articles which attempted to defame the Jews and Judaism. On reading these slanderous statements Leaser chose to answer these remarks in the Whig, a Richmond news-

paper. So ably and thoroughly was the question handled, that the article became the subject of conversations, and Leeser's abilities being recognized, he was called to Philadelphia the following year to an office which any representative minister might have eagerly desired.<sup>28</sup>

Leeser states himself, that "it was in the early part of the summer of 5589 (1829), that I was invited to become a candidate for the office of Hazan of the congregation Mikve Israel of Philadelphia. (The new synagogue of Mikveh Israel was consecrated on Sabbath Bo-el Paroh in the year 5585 (1825)).<sup>29</sup> I (Leeser) was at that time only a few months over twenty-two years old, and had not thought of ever becoming the minister of any congregation, and was induced solely under the persuasion that by being in public life I could become useful to the Jewish community, that I consented to have my name presented among others. At that period the duties of the minister were confined to the conducting of the public worship in the synagogue and elsewhere, and it was not expected that he should be at the same time a preacher and exhorter, but even before my being in office it had appeared to me as an incongruity, that words of instruction formed no part of our regular service; and having been summoned on account of some literary efforts produced in Richmond to accept the trust with which the voice of a large majority of the Israelites of Philadelphia honoured me, I had indulged the hope that I would be requested immediately after my election to give discourses on our religion in the language of the country."<sup>30</sup>

In 1829 the fame of Isaac Leeser had been noticed by the Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia. Mikveh Israel was a congregation at that time which continued to hold its station among the influential congregations of the United States. Seeing that Leeser was a pioneer, it arranged the system for organization among the Jews and invited him to become pastor. The circumstances relating to Leeser's election are interesting. At a meeting of the congregation on June 28, 1829, a Mr. Raphael de Cordova, Chairman of a Committee previously appointed to invite candidates for the position of "Chazan" reported that "they (the committee) had received an answer from Richmond highly recommending a gentleman by the name of Mr. Leeser, as also a reply from Charleston, with an application for a gentleman resident of that city, which they now offer for the consideration of this meeting." The names of Isaac Leeser, or Richmond, and Abraham Ottolengui, of Charleston were presented. However, no election was held until September 6, 1829, when a letter was submitted from Gompert S. Gomperts, who offered his services as "Chazan." The candidates ballotted for were E. L. Lazarus (the same who had previously been elected but had declined, and who had officiated during the Passover Holidays in 1829, prior to Mr. Leeser's election) and Isaac Leeser. The former received seven votes, and the latter twenty-six votes. Reverend Isaac Leeser was declared elected for three years, beginning with "Rosh Ha-Shana" (New Year) 5590-1829, at a salary of \$800 annually.<sup>31</sup> Leeser was truly inducted into the ministry without his seeking, and introduced a new era into the con-



gregation which he was called to serve for over a period of twenty-one years.

A picture of Leeser's condition with his congregation just a few months after he assumed the post of minister is noted in a November 4, 1829 letter of Rebecca Gratz to Maria Gist Gratz: "Rachel is still unable to walk more than a square or two, she rode down to Mr. Phillips last month that she might go to the Synagogue during the holy days but it is not probable will be so far from home again this winter--her spirits are good, she was always an enthusiast and having survived the object of her youthful devotion is now not so exclusively--but still with zeal attached to other considerations--she patronizes our young pastor who is certainly more attractive to those who are indifferent to the OUTER MAN--there is a witticism on record of a mean looking sage who in reply to a high born damsel's remark on the freak of nature in placing so much wisdom in so ugly a creature, demanded what kind of vessel her father kept his wine in--she said a common earthen, for wine kept in precious metal became sour he observed wisdom is safest with ugliness--for there are fewer provokatives to VANITY--which is an enemy to wisdom--this anecdote is most aptly applied to Mr. Leeser--who is ugly & awkward--but so sensible & pleasant as well as pious--that all the old ladies are charmed, while the girls are obliged to persuade themselves to be pleasant..."<sup>32</sup>

This entrance into the ministry opened a period of unceasing devotion and activity in Leeser's life. Despite

all of this initial enthusiasm, Leiser became sadly disappointed after several meetings of the congregation and Board of Managers. He found that nothing was said or done to authorize him to assume the role of preacher, and that the laws of the congregation conferred on the presiding officer alone the power to direct the Hazan or any other person to deliver sermons on special occasions. Leiser was the first to inaugurate English discourses in American synagogues, the first being delivered on June 2, 1830. Perceiving the want of union among Jews in this country and the need of a literature essentially religious. Leiser was determined to meet those wants.<sup>33</sup>

The exact course of action that he followed in obtaining the right to speak may be noted in his following statement. "Though I had no power bestowed on me to speak, it was perfectly clear that the people desired pulpit instruction. After being, therefore, nearly nine months in office, I was induced to address a circular letter to the several members of the Board of Adjunta, asking them whether my speaking in Synagogue would meet with their consent. Without holding a formal meeting, a majority of the board signified in unofficial letters their approval of my intention. With this permission thus conveyed, I had to be satisfied, and I accordingly prepared myself with an address which was spoken on Sabbath Nasso, 5590 (1830), and was the first original composition I ever delivered in public. It was a painful experiment, the issue of which I greatly dreaded;

but the kind approbation and encouragement bestowed on me by some intelligent ladies, especially, after it had been spoken, admonished me that I ought to persevere; and the result had been that while faithfully discharging all the duties proper of the Hazanship, I added public instruction as part of our service. Since the year noted above, the custom has extended almost everywhere, and no congregation thinks itself thoroughly organized without a preacher; but then speaking in Synagogue was something new, and far from being acquiesced in by many even well-meaning and pious persons."<sup>34</sup>

Leeser felt it so regrettable that the public addresses on religious topics had constituted such a small portion of the devotional service in most countries where English was spoken, that he thought it important that his synagogue be the first to attempt such a new venture. He stated that it could easily be imagined that there were many difficulties in the way of a successful pursuit of the calling of a public teacher among the Jewish people of the United States owing chiefly to the fact that most of the Jews then in the United States were from every European nation, and that to many of them the English language was partially unintelligible, this was especially true in such an oration where the ideas cannot always be conveyed in simple language, without divesting the subject of all dignity.

Leeser also felt that the people seemed to forget that perhaps religion had no part to play in the mighty and terrible dramas which had been reacted of late. (This

reference is to the revolutions of 1830 and 1848). Using examples such as this, Leeser started his campaign to continue having the English sermon preached in synagogues. These sermons, or discourses as they were then called, usually spoken at the conclusion of the service--at first after, and later before the concluding hymn.<sup>35</sup>

His first three volumes of sermons, in a series of ten, were published at two different times. They first appeared in 1837 and again in 1841.<sup>36</sup> These were not the first of Leeser's publications, his first work having appeared in 1830. It was a translation of Johlson's "Instruction in the Mosaic Religion." In 1833, he published a work entitled "The Jews and the Mosaic Law," containing also the articles first written in defense of the Jews.

In 1834 Leeser suffered a severe attack of small-pox, which halted some of his writing for the time being. In a letter of Miss Rebecca Gratz to Maria Gist Gratz dated February 2, 1834 we find mention of this illness that befell Isaac Leeser. "There is another evil under the sun that has been making havoc in our city varioloid--poor Mr. Leeser is one of its present subjects, his attack has been unmitigated small-pox, and tho his life & eye sight have been spared I am told his countenance will bear many marks of its ravages--he has always been so sensitive on the subject of personal disadvantages--that his former humility will appear like vanity to this present state--and unless some Desdemona

shall arise to see his visage in his mind--all his future expectations must be confined to solitary studies (Isaac Leeser remained a bachelor)."<sup>37</sup> Miss Gratz' interest in Mr. Leeser was originally based on her educational designs, for she induced the writing and compilation of Leeser's textbooks for the instruction in the Jewish religion. The Reverend Leeser had already dedicated his catechism to her, as a mark of esteem and veneration for a Jewess so exemplary and so eager to promote religious knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

In 1837 we find him issuing some more of his sermons in a two volume publication together with his "Spelling Book" the following year. A series of articles written in 1839 and 1840 for the Philadelphia Gazette against the strictures of the London Quarterly Review concerning Hebrews was published in 1841 under the title of "The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights."

The years 1832 to 1835 were not as important in Leeser's career. His sermons during those years reveal few facts of interest. In 1832 Leeser wrote a sermon concerning the fast day that was proclaimed by Governor Wolf because of the cholera epidemic that was raging throughout America. It seems that the first outbreak occurred about June 8th of that year (1832) at Quebec, Canada, and by the beginning of August it had reached its high point of malignity in Philadelphia. It declined about the middle of that month, but returned two years later in 1834 although in a much milder form. Leeser notes in his sermon concerning this fast day that, remarkably enough, not one adult died of the

disease among the Jews of Philadelphia.<sup>39</sup>

In a sermon of 1833 we find him mentioning the fact that during that summer there arrived an accredited messenger from Jerusalem, by the name of Rabbi Enoch Zundell. His presence directed attention to the state of suffering Israelites in Palestine, in whose behalf he had been sent.<sup>40</sup> Other examples of Leeser's preaching in 1834 include remarks made at the dedication of Shearith Israel in New York.<sup>41</sup> and in 1835 he mentions a great fire that laid waste a considerable portion of New York on December 16th and 17th.<sup>42</sup>

A tragedy befell Isaac Leeser in 1834. During one of epidemics that swept through the states in that year, Leeser was taken seriously ill. His only brother, Jacob Leeser, came to visit him during his illness and contracted Isaac's illness. On March 14, 1834 Jacob Leeser died at the age of 25. His brother said the following in a sermon on December 12, 1834. "It pleased our heavenly father to afflict him with the same disease. Although robust, and to all appearance of that physical construction, as to render his long surviving be almost a matter of certainty, he yet sunk under his sufferings, and tranquil and resigned he breathed out his pure spirit in the hands of Him who gave it, in the 25th year of his age on the March 14, '34, beloved by many and hated by none. The recollection of his death is doubly agonizing, because he had to receive from friendly strangers the kindness and attention that ought to have been rendered by his brother, who was kept from his couch of sickness by

sufferings of unspeakable intensity and horror. I ask the indulgence of the reader for this digression; but I could not let this opportunity pass, without passing a slight tribute to one so worthy and innocent as my deceased, my only brother, Jacob Leaser."<sup>43</sup>

\* \* \*

The first stand against Reform Judaism by Leaser came in 1836. When Leaser arrived in the states there were only six or seven organized congregations, all of them following the orthodox ritual. As mentioned in an earlier part of this work, Reform Judaism started in the United States about the time that Leaser arrived in Richmond. But now (1836) a religious leader by the name of Reverend G. Poznanski was elected preacher and reader in Charleston, S. C. He urged certain reform measures which were introduced after much bitter opposition. The ridiculous part of this whole situation is seen in the fact that Leaser recommended Poznanski in the belief that Poznanski was a "strict conformist and orthodox believer." Therefore Leaser now took this new reformer severely to task: for introducing instrumental music into the service, for favoring the abolition of the second day of holidays, and for his non-belief in a personal Messiah and in the destined restoration of Israel to Palestine.<sup>44</sup> Here Leaser had initiated his life-long battle with Reform Judaism, and as that Judaism grew in these United States his battle against it was destined to become even more acrid.

Though born into the Ashkenazic ritual Leaser generally

advocated the adoption of the Sephardic Ritual. On this matter he wrote, "we are free to confess to our view the Portuguese form is better adapted to the Israelites of America, owing to its greater simplicity and absence of the long poetical prayers, than the other two (referring to the German and Polish rituals), and that could our advice avail, we would honestly counsel every new congregation to adopt from choice the prayerbook of the Sephardim." Leiser felt that it was a woeful thing that a few "immaterial" differences in the ritual should divide congregations. Amazingly enough, he even went so far as to believe that Reform could adopt this ritual in place of its new rituals. Leiser published a translation of the ritual according to the German and Portuguese rites in 1837. The plates used in printing these particular works of Leiser were later bought from his executors by Dr. De Sola who was in close literary relations with Isaac Leiser. The plates principally included the forms of prayer, according to both the Spanish-Portuguese and the German Rituals.

The discourses continued to pour forth from his pen week after week, month after month. He took special note of a ship disaster in 1837. It seems that the steam packet "Home, Captain White," departed from New York for Charleston on her second voyage on Saturday, October 7, 1837, and after encountering a gale went ashore on one of the North Carolina capes. Out of the ninety passengers on board twenty reached shore.....three of that group being Jewish women and one a Jewish man. The one man that was saved however, saw his



brother swept off of the deck of the sinking ship.<sup>45</sup> Leeser also stated that 1837 saw panic in the commercial world, precipitated in the United States by the banking crisis caused by Jackson. Speaking of the panic that befell many of the countries in that year, he said, "that it was his feeling that this proves the inefficacy of human means to insure success, if divine blessing is not sent to prosper the labour of our hands."<sup>46</sup>

February 22, 1839 saw the cessation of Leeser's function as minister. The following account of what happened will serve to show the precarious tenure of the office of preacher. It seems that on the evening preceding Sabbath Zachor (February 22, 1839) (after delivering his discourse) he happened to visit the home of the Parnass. After a friendly social evening Leeser left without stating his intention of speaking on the following day. It always seemed repugnant to Leeser to publish his purpose of giving a lecture, since he did not wish to draw people especially to hear a discourse, and thereby make preaching of more consequence than the reading of the service. It appears that the female portion of the Parnass's family were not at Synagogue on Sabbath morning. At the conclusion of the service, <sup>the</sup> Parnass asked Leeser, in a somewhat angry tone, why he had not been informed of Leeser's intention to speak that day, as his family would then have had the option of attending. The answer, as stated before, failed to satisfy Parnass, and he informed Leeser that he would hear of this whole matter. Several

days later a written order for Leeser stating that he should give notification at least one day before he intended delivering a discourse, which made Leeser's doing so the condition on which he could act as preacher. Leeser became very indignant at this whole affair, as he considered this act a "most degrading act of the ministry, as it would be in effect to render public teaching dependent on the preacher's subserviency to the temporal authorities, and not willing to act without their consent, I (Leeser) refrained from addressing the people until the president revoked his order, when I resumed my lectures at once. It must be observed that I was engaged as Hazan only during my entire connection of twenty-one years' duration with Mikve Israel Synagogue; consequently the president could at any time, if he chose, stop me in voluntary preachership. The congregation moreover, did not interfere as far as known to myself, to induce a revocation of the obnoxious order, though several members desired me indeed to resume speaking; but while the onerous condition lasted, my mouth was sealed, and it was only at a later period that, by public resolution, authority was conferred on me to speak, and I continued then to do so till a few months before my office expired, but no by-law had after all been passed, instituting the office of preacher, leaving therefore the whole matter subject to the control of Parnass, even to the extent of interdicting it if it had pleased him to do so. There has been a great change with regard to religious discourses since that time, and preachers are now

sought and well endowed, instead of their almost forcing the public to listen to them gratuitously.--The change is truly gratifying."<sup>47</sup>

\* \* \*

The winter of 1840 saw the persecution of Jews both at Damascus and Rhodes, under the false pretext that the Jews were employing human blood at their festival of Passover. Isaac Leaser took cognizance of this fact in a sermon of July 24, 1840. He stated that "such an absurdity should never have been advanced, not to mention its finding credence with so many whose opportunities of knowing the truth must have been ample, is truly a phenomenon in the history of follies to which the human mind has at times been known to cling, with a pertinacity and avidity which would have been honoring the cause of virtue and benevolence. And it appears to me (Leaser) that the serious refutation bestowed upon this calumnious charge by so many distinguished men of our people is almost superfluous; were it not that, despite of its absurdity, it has worked immense mischief and caused incalculable suffering to thousands of Israelites at different times. Yet as the world has advanced so far in civilization and as a knowledge of our laws and ceremonies is now so extensive, it is to be hoped that its late revival, and the consequent persecution, may be the last we shall have to witness.--In another address I had occasion to dwell more at length upon this melancholy occurrence stripped of the above application to religious improvement, and to exhibit some

more of the especial features which presented themselves in connection with it, although it amounts by no means to anything like a history of the event which however I could hardly give in the course of two or three lectures, and which I have no doubt will at some future day be furnished by some one of the gifted sons of our people."<sup>48</sup>

This was not the only sermon by Leeser on this subject. During that year he preached at least three other sermons explaining the serious implications of the Damascus Affair. On August 27, 1840 his main address on this affair was delivered, entitled "The Persecution of the Jews in the East." All of the Jews of Philadelphia met that evening drafting resolutions stating the problem and asking for immediate assistance. The following are several extracts from the main body of resolutions made by Leeser:

RESOLVED: That the crime charged upon the Israelites of Damascus, of using Christian blood for their festival of redemption from Egypt, is utterly at variance with the express injunction of the Decalogue and other parts of the Pentateuch, and incompatible with principles inculcated by the religion they profess, which enjoins them to "love their neighbor as themselves," and "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God."

and further RESOLVED: That this meeting highly appreciates the prompt and energetic measures adopted by our brethern in Europe, and elsewhere, for the promotion of the object of this meeting, and the noble undertaking of Monsieur Crémieux and Sir Moses Montefiore, in coming forward not only as champions of the oppressed, but also as the defenders of the Jewish nation; and this meeting expresses the hope that the God of Israel will shield and protect them, and restore them to their families in the enjoyment of unimpaired health.

and finally, RESOLVED, That in conjunction with our brethern in other cities, a letter be addressed to the President of the United States, respectfully requesting him to instruct the representative of the United States at Constantinople, and the United States' Consul in the dominions of the Pacha of Egypt, to cooperate with the Ambassadors and Consuls of other powers to procure for our accused brethern at Damascus and elsewhere an impartial trial; and to urge upon the Emperor of Turkey and the Pacha of Egypt to prohibit further use of torture in their judicial proceedings; and further that he be requested to instruct the representatives of this country to urge the governments to which they are accredited to exert their influence for the same purpose."<sup>49</sup>

About November, 1841, Leaser stated that it was most gratifying to receive the news that through the agency of Sir Moses Montefiore and Mr. Crémieux, the Pacha of Egypt had ordered the liberation of all the prisoners confined in Damascus, and had given permission to those who had fled to return to their homes. "Still the favor of a public trial, which would have demonstrated their innocence, has been refused, and the torture has not yet been abolished, although it was urged by the 'representatives of the Jews of all the globe.' In Rhodes also the falsity of the charge has been made apparent, and the authors of the wrong have been punished for their daring violation of the rights of humanity. Thus have they, who had at first no one to aid them, been snatched from destruction, and thus has divine Goodness raised up friends and advocates to plead the cause of the oppressed.--LAUS DEO!"<sup>50</sup>

The year 1841 was important for several reasons in the life of Leaser. That year saw Isaac Leaser the first Jewish

leader in the United States to call a meeting urging a Union of American Jewry. He urged that the Portuguese, German and Polish congregations rise above their petty indifferences in regard to the matters of ritual and custom. We find that Rabbi Louis Solomon of Temple Rodef Shalom in Philadelphia also participated in a meeting that same year which urged the union of all Jews of the United States. In a speech written in July 1845 Leeser said the following in regard to a union, "It was with such a view to promote peace through union and a greater religious conformity through the powerful agency of public opinion, that we joined, now four years ago, in a movement which was projected in this city, to promote, first, the union of all American Israelites under a common Ecclesiastical Council, which should have supervision of the spiritual affairs of our various congregations; secondly, the establishment of schools, and thirdly, periodical assemblies of deputies of all American congregations."

\* \* \*

No doubt Isaac Leeser may have been called the first traveling Rabbi. On three different occasions he lectured in different parts of the country. On February 19, 1841 he delivered a sermon before Shearith Israel Congregation of South Carolina. This congregation was recently organized because a bare majority of the old Congregation Beth Elohim, adopted the practice of having an organ placed in their synagogue, as well as adopting other "fancies of modern reform."

On a speaking engagement in Savannah, Georgia, Leeser stopped in Charleston and spoke in the temporary synagogue on the upper floor of a warehouse on Meeting St. Twenty-six years elapsed and once more the two bodies united under the old name.<sup>51</sup> Again, in February, he spoke at the dedication of Mikveh Israel in Savannah,<sup>52</sup> and later that year he delivered a lecture at the Crosby St. Synagogue in New York before the Young Men's Literary Association.

During this era there was quite a demand for good preachers and lecturers. Since the tendency was to expound on a text from Scripture and Hebrew was the language of prayer, few men were found competent enough to expound the text correctly, since very few were versed in the original dialect of the Bible and at the same time able to deliver a decent, intelligible discourse in English. During this period there were only four Jewish preachers known to speak English with any fluency. They were Mr. David Isaacs, of Liverpool and Manchester, England; Mr. Samuel M. Isaacs of the Congregation Benai Yeshurun, of New York; Mr. Moses N. Nathan, of the German Congregation, Kingston, Jamaica; and Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia.<sup>54</sup> It is also a fact that on occasion lectures were delivered by such public teachers as Reverend Gershom Seixas, of New York; the Reverend Emanuel N. Carvalho of Philadelphia; the Reverend A. H. Cohen of Richmond; Dr. Jacob De La Motta of Charleston, and other ministers together with some laymen.

Outside of the United States, Leeser states that in the

larger cities like Hamburg, Berlin, Glogau, Prague, Frankfort, Munich, and other places, Rabbis and lecturers had been appointed chiefly with the view of delivering weekly or occasional sermons; and of these the fame of Bernays, Salomon, Kley, Plessner, Sachs and others had been heard in the United States. "Lately Miss Goldsmith of London has rendered service to our literature by translating twelve sermons of Dr. Salomon into English, although it must be remarked that occasionally this learned preacher endeavours to force his own peculiar views rather too glaringly upon our attention."<sup>55</sup>

April 18, 1843 may well be considered an important date for American Jewry, for on that day Isaac Leeser founded his monthly paper, The Occident and American Jewish Advocate. It was published for nearly twenty-five consecutive years with the motto "To learn and to teach, to observe and to do." It quickly became known as a valiant defender of Judaism and Jews, with a scholarly and fearless editorial tone and dignified standing. Its purpose was to educate Jews to offer a platform for discussing pertinent problems; and to serve as an official Jewish news organ. Leeser started out by sending his publication to all of the names he had. Two years later he had limited his publication to five hundred subscribers which meant approximately five thousand readers. His editorial ability which he displayed in publishing his Occident is comparable to many of the fine publications



which appear today. Not only did he publish a large amount of his own material in his publication, but also included many noteworthy translations from the German and Hebrew of his friends.<sup>56</sup> Many of the sermons and addresses of the reformers of that time may also be noted in his publication. Its notes and comments on early Jewish American history in our country have caused it to become an important reference work. Philipson states that "the pages of the Occident present a vivid picture of the opposition superinduced by every step toward reform anywhere in this country." The Occident was not the only publication of that time. In 1849 Isidor Bush started the first German paper, in the United States, while the oldest English Jewish paper was The Jew issued in New York City, by Mr. S. J. Jackson in 1823. Again, in 1849, the Asmonean, edited by Robert Lyon, appeared, with a German supplement being added in 1854. The supplement was soon dropped when there were not sufficient readers to warrant continued printing of that special section. In 1854 the Israelite appeared, in 1855 the Deborah, and in 1856 the publication of the Sinai, which was the only German paper to keep on printing.

While Leaser published the Occident he ran into much criticism. He was quite temperate when attacking persons, but became quite severe when it came to attacking principles. He himself stated the following concerning the ethics that one should observe governing the press: "opponents must be so treated as though they one day might become friends and

supporters." He did what many of the other writers of the time failed to do in attacking offensive personalities. He was of course, not blameless, but did manage to employ a fine gentlemanly spirit and to use temperate language in heated controversy. He even went so far as not to accept articles for paid publication if they seemed to cast aspersions on other people. There were exceptions to his niceties, too, for the opposing factions of Judaism expressed no love for him either in print or by mouth. He termed Reform Judaism as a "destructive movement" making "treasonable progress," and further identified it with such terms as "Incipient infidelity" and "progressive wickedness." "False prophets," "false shepherds," "teachers of infidelity," and "liturgy doctors," are some of the choice invectives he hurled at those who he believed were "sedulous in uprooting the ancient faith," and to whom he did not hesitate to impute the base motive of changing the old faith into a new system probably with a view to making it acceptable to the gentiles."<sup>57</sup> Though Leeser literally hated Reform Judaism he often paid tribute to two of its leading men at that time, namely Lillienthal and Wise. On the occasion, Leeser highly praised a sermon delivered by Isaac Wise in Philadelphia. To quote the Occident, "the whole subject was set so beautifully that no one seemed to be wearied though the sermon was by no means a short one.....Dr. Wise had made quite an impression as an orator." Leeser even referred to Wise as a "gifted son of Israel," and as the "learned Rabbi of Albany." These

sweetnesses of early times were soon forgotten, and as each man went his way each being a contender for his set of principles for Judaism, criticisms became less sparing.

In Wise's Reminiscences, he states in regard to a letter received from Leeser: "Leeser's answer to my letter was cold, decided and frank. He looked upon progress in Judaism as unjustifiable; reform he considered to be destruction, the German rabbis innovators, desirous of tearing down. As for my references to authorities, he informed me that he did not read unpunctuated Hebrew, and besides he cared but little what different rabbis may have written, for his Judaism was laid down in the Bible, the prayer-book and general custom. No one has the right to oppose these. He said that I would have to retrace my steps, or else Judaism would leave me in the lurch."<sup>58</sup>

This example of Wise's treatment of the so called Leeser Letter may be justified; however, Wise's statement that Leeser informed him that he did not read unpunctuated Hebrew leads the reader to believe that this is a gross exaggeration on Wise's part. In two clear instances we do have proof that Leeser could read rabbinic Hebrew. In preparing a sermon entitled "Sin and Repentance," Leeser states that he used part of עוללות אפרים ("The Vintage of Abraham) by Rabbi Ephraim Luntshetz, which is a medieval Hebrew text, in arranging material for this sermon. Leeser further states that "the book itself I have not seen for many years, in fact, not since I was a boy, but the general

idea of the learned preacher is still ground work for my sermon, and owes to it any merit it may possess."<sup>59</sup> Further evidence is found in a letter of Rebecca Gratz to Maria Gist Gratz on November 5, 1837 which will prove that Leeser did know JUST A LITTLE HEBREW. Miss Rebecca Gratz refers to a certain "Reverend Joseph Wolfe, the famous converted Jew-- I read a book he published some years ago, his journal in Palestine which is as little to the purpose of religion as are the discourses I have heard he preaches--but the novelty of a Jew preaching Gospel is irresistible and the churches are crowded--Leeser went to hear him, and was simple enough to write him a note in Hebrew, pointing out some misquotations he made from a learned German author-- which he turned to good account, by reading from his pulpit as from a Rabbi wishing him to retract--." <sup>60</sup> To all of this constant bickering it still must be noted in good faith that Leeser's criticisms were directed against the principles and platform enunciated by Wise, or against his history and his Minhag America, rather than against his person.

\* \* \*

Many were the needs of charities during the lifetime of Leeser, and to this great social cause he added much. As early as April 31, 1843 Leeser preached a sermon asking for aid to the earthquake sufferers in Guadaloupe. Amazingly enough, the congregation Mikveh Israel contributed about one-tenth of the funds that were collected as relief for those sufferers.<sup>61</sup> This small beginning in charity blossomed into

many another socially meritorious deed. He urged and successfully initiated the organization of the United Jewish Charities in Philadelphia. Leaser comments in the Occident of 1844, that the most successful social affair of that winter season was the Hebrew Charity Ball, given by that same association. Upwards of \$21,000 was collected at this one ball, for with the increasing needs of the different societies every penny they could gather would help meet the heavy demands upon the society.

In 1855 Leaser suggested in a sermon that the relief system started in Philadelphia be followed in Baltimore, Cincinnati, Chicago. Perhaps it finds its counter part in the Board of Guardians in London, but, as said, poverty is yet on the increase simply because the increase of luxuries makes it hard for the poor to procure sufficient food and clothing. Although this appeal for a relief system was made in behalf of Jews in other cities, Leaser further states that "there is a perfect understanding among beggars as regards those whom they may appeal to in order to get money, while they instinctively avoid the houses of the occupants of which are known as those who turn the poor away from their doors." To this he later states that the poor were often visited right in their own homes by the Relief Association.

Leaser also advocated the care of orphans in homes, rather than placing them in some asylum. A Home for Jewish Orphans was finally opened in 1855. After much agitation the

people were finally impressed with the necessity of providing some sort of a home for the destitute and unprotected Jewish children. Leaser stated in the Occident that "The establishment of this institution (The Jewish Foster Home) had been advocated by A Daughter of Israel who pointed out the need and the desirability for an orphan home. This communication came from Miss Rebecca Gratz and five years later practical results were obtained."<sup>62</sup>

Though Leaser was quite conservative in his religious thinking, his attitude varied in many national observances. An example of this is found when he delivered a memorial address before his congregation when Lincoln died. This sermon was entitled, "How to Mourn," and was delivered in the synagogue of the Washington City Hebrew Congregation of April 22, 1865.<sup>63</sup> Shortly thereafter he was called to Washington to be the principal speaker at a Lincoln Memorial service. Once when asked if he would comment on the politics of Lincoln, he stated that "respecting Mr. Lincoln's career and character it does not become me to speak; politics is not the province into which a minister of religion should enter."<sup>64</sup>

As early as December 21, 1844 (Thanksgiving Day), in a special service at Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia Leaser dwelt appreciably on the beneficent form of the American Government. "In one country say Russia, or Iran, it is the force of the civil authority aided by the power of the sword, which is to compel us to forsake our faith through fear of our life;

in another such as Prussia, or Austria, or Italy it is depriving us of civil liberty which is freely offered us as a recompense for apostacy....but some countries do recognize Jewish equality.....this has been accomplished in America, France, Belgium, Holland, and Britain where Jews are now Judges and members of Parliament." To the above mentioned countries, Leeser added eastern Canada where French is the vernacular; however, here in the states great changes have taken place in political relations, but private prejudices still remain as potent as ever.<sup>65</sup> Much of the intolerance in Philadelphia during 1844 was centered around riots against the Catholics, which, of course, afforded Leeser an excellent opportunity to speak and fight for racial equality. Leeser was also ready to evince his Americanism through certain innovations, PROVIDED that these did not interfere with the letter of tradition. On August 3, 1849 Leeser delivered a sermon entitled "The Plague," on the occasion of the public day of humiliation proclaimed by President Taylor because of the third cholera epidemic.<sup>66</sup> Leeser announced that he could not comply with the presidential proclamation, because the day set for the fast was the 15th day of Ab, which was a semi-holiday according to the Jewish Calendar.

One of Leeser's great "first" was his translation of the Hebrew Bible. He first translated the Pentateuch into Hebrew and English in 1845. This work consisted of five volumes. Later in 1853 he completed the entire Bible in a

one volume work. Leaser's work held its place in Jewish usage for about a half century. He had based his style on the King James Version, which is considered most simple; but the changes that were introduced by him are so many and so great that his translation may certainly lay claim to being a truly independent work. Leaser was not a great Hebraist, nor did he consider himself as such. However his fluency in German afforded him unlimited opportunity in using previous translations done by Biurists, Zunz, and the notes in Philipson's Bible. On one occasion Leaser stated that Matthew Henry's commentaries were a favorite in his Old Testament interpretation.<sup>67</sup>

\* \* \*

Early in Isaac Leaser's career he pointed out a need for a Jewish publication society as a means of stimulating the publication and writing of Jewish books, and at the same time selling them at a price convenient to all. Therefore, it is not surprising that he founded on November 9, 1945 the first Jewish Publication Society in America of which we have any record. This society resulted in Leaser's introducing a number of Jewish writers before the public. One was the renowned Grace Aguilar, an English-Jewish authoress, whose charming works of romance as well as of history and religion portended a brilliant career which was however cut short at a very early age. Leaser, being one of the foremost men of Jewish affairs at this time continually urged in the Occident the formation of such a society. The result has



been mentioned above as the American Jewish Publication Society, under Mr. Abraham Hart's able direction, with a publication committee embracing Messrs. Leaser, Hart, and Solomon Solis, which proved itself worthy of general encouragement and practical support. An auxiliary society was also organized in Richmond, Virginia. Some of the following works first issued by this society were "Caleb Asher;" "Hebrew Tales," by Professor Hyman Hurwitz; "The Prophet's Daughter," by Mrs. Marion Hartog; "The Path of Israel," in three parts, translated from the French novel, Le Sentier D'Israel, of J. Ennery of Strasbourg, by A. I. H. Bernal, Hebrew teacher of the Congregation Mickveh Israel, of Philadelphia--this work being a descriptive history of the Holy Bible; "The Jews and their Religion," by Isaac Leaser; etc."<sup>68</sup> Eventually the Society was disbanded for it met with severe losses from a fire which occurred on the night of December 27, 1851. The fire destroyed the building owned by Mr. Hart, which contained nearly all of the works and for which no insurance was had. This was the first Jewish publication society, anticipating the organization of today by over forty years.

Sometime around the week of March 22, 1850 some of the opponents of Leaser in Congregation Mikveh Israel succeeded in inducing the congregation to pass a vote of censure on Leaser without granting him a hearing. The censure arose because of an article which had appeared about six months previously in the Occident, which Leaser states "could not

by any reasonable assumption be regarded as subject to the supervision of my constituents." Though Leeser had suffered previous indignities during his twenty-one year ministry, this appeared to be its severest and most uncalled for manifestation. As a result of this, he gave up the function of preacher, for which he had NOT been elected. He "could not with any feeling of true kindness continue to address an audience, who had deemed it advisable to pass a public vote of condemnation, as their expression of what was due to one who had served them faithfully in every sense of the word." Leeser did not resign the office of Hazan for which he HAD been elected and did continue in this capacity until the end of his term on the following September 27th.

Though Leeser had anticipated his retirement from office on September 27th, he did not count on the sudden termination of his ministry in the manner previously indicated. However, even on quitting his office he did not even address the congregation with a farewell sermon, so that (as Leeser states) "no one might accuse me of the least desire to soften their ill-will by an appeal to former services." The regrettable thing to Leeser was that he had to curtail his series of sermons on Atonement which he had prepared and was delivering to the congregation. Yet, he managed to finish the work for publication and it is contained in his "Discourses." It took another seven years before Leeser again resumed the active ministry to continue his lectures and by this time he was writing all of his works

before preaching. His comment on this situation is noteworthy: "though I have not for this reason neglected to urge the belief in God's power and willingness to pardon the sins of his people on my hearers in many places in my extemporaneous addresses."<sup>69</sup>

More officially, it was stated that Mr. Leeser retired from office in 1850, and held no clerical position until 1857, when Beth El Emeth Congregation was organized by some of his warm friends and he became pastor of this new group.

When the Mikveh Israel ministry was vacated by Leeser the Divine Services were conducted by Abraham Finzi, who later became Shamash of that synagogue. It was early in 1851 that candidates for the pulpit at Mikveh Israel were sought. Of the large number who applied Sabato Morais, a native of Leghorn, Italy, who had lived in England for five years, was induced to come to Philadelphia. He brought with him the highest credentials, as to character, and fulfilled the requirements as to Chazan and Hebrew scholar. It is interesting to note that at the April 13, 1851, election of Mikveh Israel for their minister, thirty-seven votes were cast, and six ballots were necessary before an election could be declared. Eleven members voted on each ballot for Reverend Isaac Leeser--although he was not named as a candidate--and others voting for a Mr. Rosenfield. On the sixth ballot the vote stood:

Leeser	11
Rosenfield	6
Morais	20

So it was, that in this fashion Isaac Leeser's term of ministry officially expired with Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia.<sup>70</sup>

During the next few years Leeser traveled extensively throughout the United States, lecturing and preaching to many Jewish groups. He preached a sermon at Nefutzeh Yehudah in New Orleans, and during a winter's journey in 1852 he stopped in Louisville, Kentucky, for several days. As a token of their esteem, the people of the congregation presented him with a silver cup.<sup>71</sup> Later that year, on a homeward journey, the people of Charleston insisted on his accepting a gift from them, he not deeming himself at liberty to decline. "I (Leeser) had refused money--compensation for the various addresses I had made them, a simple token of respect was something different. Mr. Nathaniel Levin, at a meeting held at the synagogue, February 17th, 5612 (1852), made the remarks given above, on the part of the people, to which I replied extemporaneously, nearly as printed here." (The text of this address may be found in Leeser's "Discourses" in Vol. 10, page 321)

At a dinner given for the benefit of the Jews' Hospital in New York, on January 26, 1854, Leeser was asked to respond to one of the toasts, "Union in Israel; may the Hebrew Congregation in this free land, by zealous cooperation in works of charity, and by unswerving adherence to our ancient faith, strengthen the cords which bind us together as a nation." This he did, and did continue to plead for union in American

Israel. Throughout this work I have attempted to show that Leiser did possess and put to use his good organizing spirit. This spirit burned within him when he realized that the idea of the desirability and the necessity of union in American Israel must be more than just a dream. Further, he felt that in such a union American Judaism might better serve as a constructive force, and through that force better religious education could be achieved. It could raise the standard of all Jewry by creating a more effective rabbinate and ultimately resolve itself into missionary efforts bringing about a fusion between the older and newer forces in Judaism.

\* \* \*

It was with this intent of bringing together all elements of Jewry that Isaac Wise called the famous Cleveland Conference in December of 1848. Wise had issued a call for union through the Occident. "To the Ministers and other Israelites." Wise called attention to the fact that "it behooves us to be united as one man; to be linked together by the ties of equal views concerning religious questions, by uniformity in our sacred customs, in our form of worship and religious education. We ought to have uniform system for our schools, synagogues and benevolent societies--for all our religious institutions." Wise also mentioned the fact that there existed inadequate educational facilities for the training of Rabbis and laymen. Wise's call for union had touched many of the issues that were dear to Leiser and which he had so frequently expounded in his paper. In issuing his call

Wise made one statement which caused Leiser to take issue with him. He stated that "if we do not stimulate all the congregations to establish good schools, and to institute a reform in their synagogues on modern Jewish principles, the house of the Lord will be desolate, or nearly so, in less than ten years." This, of course, excited Leiser no end; and to which he replied; "But we say in all candor, that any synagogue reformation, except such a one as looks to raising the standard of decorum and propriety, cannot be supported by us or by our journal." There is little doubt that Leiser was for union, as long as it did not dare to meddle in the affairs of ritual or the doctrines that were traditional to Judaism.

In regard to the actual conference that convened on October 1855 much might be said. Some of the extreme conservatives such as Adler and Isaacs refused to attend. The outstanding figures were Wise and Lillienthal. Leiser did come, but remained quiet for a while in order that he might see which way things would develop. Wise proposed that the Bible be accepted as the revealed and inspired word of God, and that the Talmud the logical and legal development of the Bible. Leiser countered with a proposal to the effect that "The Talmud contains the divine tradition given to Moses, and that all Israelites must decide all questions according to its decision." A compromise agreement was obtained to the effect that the Talmud contained the traditional, logical, and legal exposition of sacred Scriptures." Leiser felt that

the compromise could be accepted with the reservation that the word "traditional" imply "divine" exposition. Leeser further felt consoled by the fact that the view was taken that if all Jews accepted the principle that the Bible was the rule of faith and that the Talmud was the rule of practice and interpretation of the Holy Writ, then October 17, 1855 would be a national holiday for all American Israelites. But as luck would have it, Leeser had to leave early, and not without some skepticism, for he felt that the majority present were more sympathetic with reform. He further felt that had more of the orthodox element been present, it would have saved the conference from committing itself to any unjustified reforms. After Leeser left, the group introduced a new liturgy with an explanation of its principles. Though no definite action came of this Leeser wrote later that "I doubt very much whether I should have assented to a single one of those propositions." Eventually he condemned the entire conference as one "gotten up to promote the interests of reform."

Leeser attributed many of the religious ills of his day to a lack of religious education. Month after month in many of the editions of the Occident he complained that the young people of his generation were being "gentilized." He believed that had there been more of an acquaintance with Judaism's character and principles, there would have been less failure on the part of Orthodoxy. His honest and sincere effort to bring education to all, sometimes under difficult circum-

stances, is shown most clearly in the following section which attempts to pattern his continued pursuit of religious education.

Leeser's earliest plea for religious education is found in a sermon that was delivered on June 2, 1835. He states the need for education because "our people suffer much in the estimation of the Gentile world by such inexcusable negligence; and those who value such a position and fame among the non-Israelites so highly, may rest assured that their indifference towards their own brethern and their own religious interests does by no means raise their standing; on the contrary, if we exert ourselves for our religion a little more energetically than we do, we may certainly succeed in obtaining the admiration of the Gentiles, although their love may be denied us, which I must sincerely declare is hardly attainable by an opposite course even."<sup>72</sup>

The year 1836 saw one of Leeser's education projects come into fulfillment. Note the laws of the Society for the Education of the Poor Children: "The funds of the society shall be applied to the following purposes:

- 1st. Relief to the orphans and widows of deceased members.
- 2nd. Elementary and religious education, and trades to such orphans, and to the children of indigent Jews, giving a preference to those of indigent or deceased members. And in all cases, where evidence of superior talent in any child shall manifest itself, to extend, if practicable, a liberal education.
- 3rd. Aid to all Jews in distress under such regulations as may hereafter be prescribed."

After quoting these laws in his sermon Leeser further states,



that "it is seen from the foregoing, that the founders of the society contemplated such an institution as I have been urging upon your attention; for it is not to be supposed, that religious education could be obtained at any other than our own schools, nor is it credible that, after a child has been religiously educated, he should be bound out to a stranger, and compelled to eat of food prohibited by the law, and to labour on the days which, as he was taught, are consecrated of Heaven."<sup>73</sup> In a sermon on December 9, 1837, Leeser again mentions that several of the measures that he suggested "have been carried out in New York, and the free schools as well as the Orphan Asylum, the latter the work in part of the Society before which I spoke on the above date, show that the good work is at length progressing."<sup>74</sup>

"To implant the seeds of real progress in the Jewish community and to promote mental and physical culture," are the aims of the Hebrew Education Society. This organization was conceived by Isaac Leeser. It had its origin in 1847, and was called into existence to keep alive the study of the Hebrew language. This group dedicated the Hebrew Education Society school house on Sunday, November 12, 1855. Isaac Leeser, of course, gave the opening address. Amazingly enough, he stated that "it was indeed with some fear that we resolved to open our school on the 7th of April, 1851; (A later explanation will be given for this date.) Had we listened to the counsels of the timid who predicted an inglorious failure, we would have desisted from making the

attempt. But the progress of our work has proved that we were in the right to judge the matter both practicable and useful, and that it would have been wrong not to have commenced at the precise moment when the public mind had apparently become ripe for the enterprise. For see, go where you will now, IN BOSTON, NEW YORK, ALBANY, BALTIMORE, RICHMOND, CHARLESTON, CINCINNATI, CLEVELAND, LOUISVILLE, ST. LOUIS, NEW ORLEANS, SAVANNAH, MONTREAL, AND EVEN SAN FRANCISCO, where Jews a few years ago were unknown, efforts have been made, or are making at this moment, to impart religious instruction, either separately, at stated times, or daily in connection with the usual elementary branches in the manner we are doing; thus proving that Israelites have at length been awakened to the paramount necessity devolving on them to rescue our young members from the curse of indifference which rests like a deadly pall on the sick spirit of so many who are of Israel....it is foreign to my plan to enter into elaborate calculations; but you can readily judge that even with the most niggardly economy, nearly all our funds would have been consumed within two years, had not a brave public spirit come to our aid....and let it be here stated here once and for all, that not an applicant has ever been refused admittance whether Jew or Gentile, whether he came with the fees usually charged, or without means to satisfy the regular demands." As far as financing the Society for the first three years, the Portuguese Congregations appropriated two hundred dollars for the use of the school.<sup>75</sup>

The first school of the Society met on Monday, April 7, 1851. This was the date mentioned by Leeser in his address in the previous paragraph. It was held in the hall of the Phoenix Hose Company on Zane Street in Philadelphia. Instruction was offered in the secular branches, in Hebrew, Latin, French, and German. There were twenty-two pupils enrolled in the first class, and in a months time the enrollment had jumped to 63. The Hebrew Sunday School also held its classes in the same building. The regular Hebrew Education Society school had sessions five days of the week, excepting Jewish holidays and holy days. The higher classes of this school were advanced enough to permit the society to secure permission from the Board of Education to have their school placed on the same status as other Public Grammar Schools in regard to promotions to the Girls Normal School, and the Boy's Central High School.<sup>76</sup> It may be well to note here that Leeser mentioned on occasion the fact that several Jewish boys obtained a lower average for scholarship in the Philadelphia High School than they were justly entitled to, because of their non-attendance on the Holy Days. Upon remonstrance by Leeser with the principal, the injustice was remedied.<sup>77</sup> Just another good reason for a private religio-secular school!

In the spring of 1857 a new congregation, Beth El Emeth, "the House of the True God," was formed in Philadelphia. This new congregation was composed of some of Isaac Leeser's very close friends, and it was not long before he was elected

Hazan and Preacher, on the 11th of Nissan. Immediately, arrangements were made to acquire a synagogue, and until it was finally opened on the 14th of Elul (September 3) the new group never officially met as such for public worship.<sup>78</sup> The opening service was a remarkable one, for Leeser in his sermon gave reasons why a Kahal should be formed. He stated that its sole purpose was the union for promotion of religion and the cultivation of good feeling for all Israelites. Leeser stated his idea had been carefully kept in view, and the result obtained had justified the movement, which may have been looked on at first with jealousy and suspicion.

There is no doubt that Leeser had much influence in the Philadelphia community, and there were many that grew up under his wing. There were many, too, who felt that Leeser was not treated justly at Mikveh Israel. Possibly, the younger set who learned from him felt that a great injustice was done to their teacher by the unjust censure which the congregation placed on him; and with this shame in their minds they resolved to present their teacher with some token of their regard for him. So it was that on March 11, 1861, that various pieces of silver were presented to him as a token of their esteem. The presentation was made in the form of an address by Mr. Hart, president of the congregation. Leeser answered the many laudatory remarks spoken of him with a short speech, and with the following closing paragraph; "what my future course may be, is only known to

him, who measures all our steps; into his hands I commit my ways, and I trust in his mercy, that his light will not be wanting to guide me right; but whatever may betide me, be it weal or wo, his past mercies shall not be forgotten.... as regards you, gentlemen, your friendship which I hope always to enjoy, shall ever be highly prized by me. The gratification of this hour shall long remain a bright period in my recollection, and I trust that you, too, will not forget him who came at your call to officiate in the sanctuary which you had consecrated to the God of Israel, where he has been permitted to earn that reputation which your kindness has so handsomely acknowledged this day. And if this be the last time we shall ever officially meet again, I bid you all, Farewell."<sup>79</sup> Isaac Leeser had finally been recognized by Mikveh Israel for his tremendous contribution to their lives....ONLY 11 YEARS TOO LATE!

\* \* \*

One of Isaac Leeser's last and great contributions to American Judaism was his Maimonides College. This was a theological college established jointly under the auspices of the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia. This institution, opened in October, 1867, had long been advocated by Leeser. He became the first president of the faculty, and taught homiletics, Hebrew literature, and comparative theology. Other instructors were Marcus Jastrow and Sabato Morias. The school eventually failed because of a lack of public support. Isaac Wise, too, worked against this school

because of a dislike for those connected with it. The school lasted six years and in that time graduated only one student, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Mendelsohn.

Towards the end of 1867, while still engaged as a Minister of Beth-El Emeth, Isaac Leeser was seized with an illness that proved fatal to him on February 1, 1868.

With Leeser's death a great period in American Judaism ended for it was deprived of a fearless champion, a stout-hearted friend, and a noble benefactor, whom generations will not forget.

### CHAPTER III

#### A SURVEY OF ISAAC LEESER'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

A SURVEY OF ISAAC LEESER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS  
IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

When Isaac Leeser died, Isaac Mayer Wise published the following obituary in the Israelite honoring him; "A zealous advocate and expounder of Judaism, untiring in his efforts to benefit the cause of Israel, honest and consistent to the last day of his life."<sup>80</sup> This was a fine tribute, for Leeser certainly was a man ahead of his time, and in the long run certainly the equal of Isaac Mayer Wise.

Throughout his life and even to the end, Leeser tried to form some kind of a union to insure the maintenance of Orthodox Judaism. He, of course, stuck by his principles, stating that all must be in the rigid orthodox style, but he would permit the Reform element to join his body. He realized only too well that Reform was storming the country; and though he was most outspoken against Reform it appeared that this new movement was blocking his union attempts. The very things that Reform Judaism stressed in its union, the change in the ritual and dogma, were the exact things that he opposed. Though the gulf between Reform and Orthodoxy was widening, Leeser still hoped that there would be some chance that a union might still take place "for the good of American Israel." He continually proclaimed his desire and readiness to cooperate with the Reform element "in all matters which can promote general charity and the interest of Judaism," but he would readily oppose all reforms not in accordance with the orthodox religious authorities.



Though Leeser was uncompromising in his insistence on the binding character of the oral law, he showed progressive tendencies in non-doctrinal and non-ritual matters. We may note that an article by Leeser on Practical Reforms caused Lillienthal to write the following in the July 1856 edition of the Israelite. "We always expected a man like Reverend I. Leeser who is neither struck with blindness, nor guided with a lust for opposition, nor carried away by an ignorant predilection for old and outworn customs--we always expected, that after having taken all matters of fact into consideration, he would come forward and recommend reform, and we feel no little gratification in perceiving that we have not been disappointed." On the basis of the above quotation Leeser may not be called a Reformer, but was inspired by the thought of gathering some of the most learned rabbis for an international conference on the introduction of reforms that would not violate the spirit of tradition. Leeser at a very early date did advocate some changes, but nothing comparable to those of Reform Judaism. He stated that some customs originating with the "impracticable piety of Hasidism might be eliminated." Furthermore, he stated that "if some slight modifications, which are perfectly in consonance with Scripture and Talmud could be introduced" further reforms would be unnecessary.

Like the early reformers, he advocated the necessity of bringing dignity and decorum to the service. He cites in one of his "Discourses" the following incident. "(Here

the speaker Leiser) paused, because at that very moment there was much confusion, owing to several entering the synagogue, and causing some interruption in procuring seats; resuming his sermon he said:) The very disorder that has just taken place may perhaps be seized upon to prove that a change is requisite in our mode of worship (observing some token of merriment the speaker paused and resumed) This is no subject for laughter, but one for weeping; yes, from the bitterness of my heart do I speak at the contemplation of such profaning of our sacred worship. What are we to have, instead of prayer, the strains of a hired choir, who sing a few words without feeling what they utter for our amusement?"<sup>81</sup> The irregularities and bad habits that the people brought to the synagogue did receive Leiser's attention, but unlike the reformers he failed to find the cause of the people's indecorum and indifference.

Leiser's The Jews and the Mosaic Law proved the rigidity of his orthodoxy in doctrine and practice. He defended the literal belief in all the recorded miracles, and even went so far as to condemn those who may have questioned God's having spoken in an audible voice. The Maimonidean creed was to him as a "column that supports the roof of the noble structure of our belief. Furthermore he did not apply the liberal principle of "dina d'malchusa dina" to the question of divorce, and one of his most notable instances in his application of the rigid orthodox rule is seen in the fact that he even justified the granting of a Get before the

courts had granted the divorce, on the ground that the parties once having obtained a legal divorce, might not have observed the requirements of the Jewish law in respect to divorce. He added further that "it would be wrong here when both parties live in America, to let the divorce take place without final action on the part of the courts."

In view of the fact that Reform Judaism denied many of the orthodox customs and ceremonies, he devoted many editorials and addresses in The Occident to the defense of the distinctively orthodox customs. Commenting on the Sabbath, he said that "the spirit of gain now often induces labor on the seventh day even; yet may we not hope, that a speedy change will come over this evil spirit of our age?"<sup>82</sup> He further took issue with the view that ceremonies and the sacrificial cult would end with the coming of the Messiah. To this end he devoted seven sermons in his collected sermons entitled "The Discourses on the Jewish Religion."

With Leeser's belief in the coming of the Messiah was bound the hope of the Restoration of Israel to Palestine. Though he believed the Jews to be charged with the mission of being the world's teacher and to serve as a guide for religious truth, he completely rejected the Reform view which stated that Israel's dispersion had been divinely ordered in order that their mission might be fulfilled. He did not agree with a literal interpretation of those passages which made Israel's Restoration a spiritual one, that being the view that the whole world is a Palestine and every city

a Zion. Leaser rather defended his belief in national restoration on the basis of scriptural prophecies.

Here, too, we may consider his attitude towards Proselytism. Though Orthodox in attitude, he was not a racialist. For on one occasion he stated that "we do not seek to make proselytes ourselves, though for my own part, and I say it with due deference to the opinions of wiser and better men than myself, I cannot see any good reason for being opposed to receiving them (proselytes) if the sincerity of their professions cannot be reasonably doubted, as some of our people, nay the greater majority of them are."<sup>83</sup>

There were many reforms that Leaser opposed. Some of the more specific ones include the introduction of music into the service, the reading of the law in a three year cycle, the introduction of hymns or prayers in the vernacular, and the repudiation of any beliefs that were considered part of traditional Judaism. "Again an objection is made to the time of service which according to our tradition is for the reading of the Seemang before expiration of the third hour of the day, that is according to the calculation of modern time, nine o'clock in the morning. Now this has been found too early for convenience and every effort is made to postpone the commencement of the service to a more suitable hour ...."<sup>84</sup> so Leaser continued this warning to the "new teachers who are now among us."<sup>85</sup>

Leaser considered the reading of the Haftarah in the vernacular without the traditional blessing as "revolutionary." The family pew innovation brought forth from him only

a mild protest, and as for the Confirmation ceremony, he termed it as "being not yet useful. We deem it...an innovation....borrowed from the Protestants in Germany." Worshipping bared headed was condemned and it removed another landmark which distinguished Judaism hitherto. Leeser expressed horror at the suggestion of observing a Sunday Sabbath and calling those who advocated such an observance a "non-Jew."

It would be most unfair to end all of this without some classical statement by Leeser as to his attitude on Reform. On June 21, 1844, Isaac Leeser delivered a discourse entitled "Our Religious Teachers" from which the following quotation is taken. "Popery had had its reformers and opponents,--men who, whether from ambition or sincerity it matters no, attacked, and in a partial degree overthrew, in many countries, the political power of the pontiff who claims to this day his authority as the vicegerent of Heaven. And now our modern Jewish leaders would gladly be each a Luther, a Melancthon, a Zwingli, or a Calvin; they must needs contest the tradition of the fathers, as the Nazarene reformers did with the early doctrines of their church."

True it is that Isaac Leeser was "a zealous advocate and expounder of Judaism....honest and consistent to the last day of his life." He bore the banner of American Judaism in all of his efforts, whether religious or secular. Truly, there will be none to replace Isaac Leeser in his "unfeigned attachment to Judaism."

APPENDIX A

A CHRONOLOGY OF ISAAC LEESER'S LIFE

A CHRONOLOGY OF ISAAC LEESER'S LIFE

- 1806 Born - December 12, 1806 in Neuen Kirchen, Westphalia.
- 1808 Jews granted full rights of citizenship under Jerome,  
Brother of Napoleon.
- 1810 Jacobson founds the first Temple in Sessen.
- 1813 Leeser's mother dies.
- 1815 Leeser's life affected by Abraham Sutro, author of  
Milhamot Adonai, in which he severely denounces  
reform in general and the introduction of the organ  
into the synagogue in particular -- Leeser's editorial  
utterances also contain many references to the evils  
and dangers of Reform Judaism even in the spirit of  
Sutro's book -- Leeser had been partially educated  
in a Catholic college -- very tolerant of Christians.
- 1824 Leeser's life in Westphalia for eighteen years was  
"tense and crowded with conflicting religious  
opinions".....this is the year that Leeser arrived in  
Richmond, Virginia prepared to follow a commercial  
career.
- 1829 Leeser gained a reputation as a forceful writer of  
English and controversialist.....also elected reader  
of Mikvah Israel in Philadelphia.....inducted into the  
ministry without seeking it and served for over twenty-  
one years.
- 1830 Introduced the English sermon on June 2nd.
- 1833 The Jews and the Mosaic Law, his first original work  
published.

- 1836 Posnanski elected in 1836 as reader in Charleston, S. C. with the idea that he would be a "strict conformist" and orthodox believer, but Posnanski introduced instrumental music into the service, favored the abolition of the 2nd day of the holiday, a non-belief in a personal Messiah, and a destined restoration of Israel to Palestine..... therefore Leeser's life-long battle with Reform was begun, and a continued hatred that grew as Reform continued to grow.
- 1837 Leeser translates the ritual according to the German and Portuguese rites.
- 1841 Meeting held to urge a Union.
- 1843 to 1849 Leeser founds the Occident and American Jewish Advocate--edited it from April 18, 1843 to February 1, 1868.
- 1844 Thanksgiving Service at M. I.; need for Rabbinic school in U. S.; predicted that in a score of years Reform will have spent itself.
- 1845 The Leeser Bible; founded the first J.P.S.
- 1848 Leeser's rare remark on Zionism; Leeser was inclined to regard the denial of the belief in the ultimate restoration of Israel to Palestine as the result of a vain desire to prove one's individual loyalty to the country of one's birth or adoption.
- 1849, May...Union not to sanction reform for it would be "the greatest evil to befall our people."
- 1849, August 3rd.....Cholera day fast proclaimed--Leeser said NO because the day was the 15th of Ab.



- 1850 to 1857 Severed connection with his congregation and devoted himself to literary and public activities; also translated Descriptive Geography of Palestine, J. Schwartz and published it.
- 1854 Leeser hoped for a Union in efforts of two parties in matters not pertaining to doctrine and ritual.
- 1855 October 17.....Leeser at the Cleveland Conference..... later condemned it as one gotten up to promote the interest of Reform Judaism.
- 1857 K. K. Beth El of Philadelphia elects Leeser as a minister.
- 1860 Before 1860 he advocated circuit preaching.
- 1866 K. K. Beth El honors Leeser with life election.
- 1867 Discourses Argumentative and Devotional on the Jewish Religion (10 Vols.) Maimonidies College founded with Leeser as head.
- 1868 Continued his literary labors in connection with the Occident until his death February 1st.

APPENDIX B

A LIST OF LEESER'S PUBLICATIONS

LEESER'S PUBLICATIONS

- 1830 (August) Johlson's Instruction in the Mosaic Religion
- 1833 The Jews and the Mosaic Law
- 1837 Discourses.
- 1837 Portuguese Prayers with his own translation 6 Vols.
- 1838 Hebrew Spelling Book.
- 1829 His Catechism.
- 1841 The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights.  
Discourses 1 Vol.
- 1843 The Occident.
- 1845 The Pentateuch (Hebrew and English) 5 Vols.
- 1848 Daily Prayers-German rite.
- 1853 His translation of the Bible.
- 1857 Second edition of the Bible.
- 1859 Dias' Letters.
- 1860 The Inquisition and Judaism.
- 1864 Meditations and prayers. Aguilar's "Jewish Faith" and  
her "Spirit of Judaism."
- 1867 Collected Discourses. 10 Vols. Mosaic Religion. 2 Vols.

APPENDIX C

ISAAC LEESER'S EXPOSITION OF THE  
RABBINIC SOURCES OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

ISAAC LEESER'S EXPOSITION OF THE  
RABBINIC SOURCES OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

The phrase Abinu Shebashamayim is so entirely Hebrew that no one can mistake it for a moment for one of foreign origin. The Talmudists loved to regard God as their Father, in conformity to the Scripture phraseology in a great variety of passages. "Hallowed be Thy name" are the identical words with which the Kaddish commences--Yithgaddal, Veyithkaddash Shemay Rabbah, etc., "May His great name be extolled and hallowed in the world which He hath created according to His will." "Thy kingdom come" are the words which follow "May He establish His kingdom." "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is almost identical with the form of the usual weekday Kedushah, of the German form, or of the Portuguese, for the ninth of Ab, which commences, "We will sanctify Thy name in Thy world as they sanctify it in the highest heaven." "Give us this day our daily bread" is the prayer of the sage--"Give me my daily bread"--which is interwoven in many portions of our devotional exercises. "And forgive us our debts" is "Forgive us, O our Father! for we have sinned" of the 'Amidah; "as we forgive our debtors" is almost the same formula:

"Forgive, O Lord! the one who aggrieveth me." "And lead us not into temptation" is the same as in the Shacharith, "And lead us not into the power of sin, transgression, temptation, nor contempt." "But deliver us from evil" is identical with "Deliver us from a bad name--evil occurrences," etc. And

lastly, "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever," is only a paraphrase of the words of David, in I Chron. XXIX.11: "Thine O Lord! is the greatness, power, glory, victory, and majesty; for all that is in the heaven and earth is Thine."

(This may be found in Volume 10 of Leeser's Discourses on the Jewish Religion, pp. 55-56.)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

# NOTES



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Articles from the J. E. and U. J. E.

Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook XXVIII 77,  
p. 213 Isaac Leeser 1806-1878 Henry Englander.

Davis, Moshe. (An essay) Jewish Religious Life and Institutions in America (A Historical Study), 2 vols., Harper & Bros., New York, 1949.

Finkelstein, Louis. The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion.

Grinstein, Hyman. The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York: 1654-1860. Philadelphia, J. P. S., 1945.

Israelite, the. Selected Readings from the editions.

Korn, Professor Bertram W. Notes from History 4 Course.

Leeser, Isaac. Discourses on the Jewish Religion, 10 Vols., Philadelphia, 1869.

Leeser, Isaac. The Jews and the Mosaic Law. n. d. n. p.

Levinger, Lee J. A History of the Jews in the United States. Cincinnati, 1935.

Masserman and Baker. The Jews Come to America. New York, 1932.

Morlas, Henry Samuel. Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century. Philadelphia, 1880.

Morlas, Henry Samuel. The Jews of Philadelphia. Philadelphia,

Philipson, David. Letters of Rebecca Gratz. Philadelphia, J. P. S., 1929.

Wise, I. M. Reminiscences. Translated and edited by David Philipson. 2nd edition 1945. Central Synagogue of N. Y.

# NOTES

1. Finkelstein, Louis, The Jews, Vol. 2., pp. 361-362.
2. Ibid., p. 363.
3. Masserman and Baker, The Jews Come to America, p. 139.
4. Ibid., p. 140.
5. Levinger, Lee J., A History of the Jews in the U. S., p. 180.
6. Ibid., p. 181.
7. Finkelstein, Louis, op. cit., p. 363.
8. Grinstein, Hyman, Jews in New York, p. 58.
9. Ibid., p. 58.
10. Levinger, Lee J., op. cit., p. 145.
11. Ibid., p. 147.
12. Masserman and Baker, op. cit., p. 177.
13. "Vereine"--Societies of Young Liberals.
14. Masserman and Baker, op. cit., p. 117.
15. Ibid., p. 123.
16. Ibid., p. 124.
17. Leaser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 10, p. 231.
18. Levinger, Lee J., op. cit., p. 160.
19. Ibid., p. 173.
20. Morley, Henry Samuel, Jews of Philadelphia, p. 159.
21. Masserman and Baker, op. cit., p. 150.
22. Ibid., p. 152.
23. Ibid., p. 161.
24. Leaser, Isaac, Jews and the Mosaic Law, p. 243.
25. Englander, Henry, CCAR Year Book XXVIII, 77, on Isaac Leaser, p. 215.

26. Ibid., p. 216.
27. Ibid., p. 217.
28. Morias, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 46.
29. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 2, p. 142.
30. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 1, pp. 1-2.
31. Morias, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 46.
32. Philipson, David, Letters of Rebecca Gratz, p. 108.
33. Morias, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 46.
34. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 2.
35. Ibid., p. 119.
36. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 4, p. 5.
37. Philipson, David, op. cit., p. 193.
38. Morias, Henry Samuel, Eminent Israelites of the 19th Century, p. 112.
39. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 324.
40. Ibid., p. 410.
41. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 62.
42. Ibid., p. 387.
43. Ibid., p. 34.
44. Englander, Henry, op. cit., p. 218.
45. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 3, p. 118.
46. Ibid., p. 16.
47. Ibid., p. 76.
48. Ibid., p. 170.
49. Ibid., p. 363.
50. Ibid., p. 171.

51. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 12.
52. Ibid., p. 13.
53. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 1.
54. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 6.
55. Ibid., p. 8.
56. Englander, Henry, op. cit., p. 225.
57. Ibid., p. 226.
58. Wise, I. M., Reminiscences, p. 57.
59. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 114.
60. Philipson, David, op. cit., p. 246.
61. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 5, p. 18.
62. Morlas, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 121.
63. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 9, p. 192.
64. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 237.
65. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 94.
66. Leeser, Isaac, Discourses on the Jewish Religion, Vol. 8, p. 185.
67. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 298.
68. Morlas, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 175.
69. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 369.
70. Morlas, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 48.
71. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 315.
72. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 169.
73. Ibid., p. 401.
74. Ibid., p. 405.
75. Leeser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 121.
76. Morlas, Henry Samuel, op. cit., p. 155.

77. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 130.
78. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 12.
79. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 315.
80. Israelite, Vol. 14. No. 32.
81. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., pp. 82-84.
82. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 90.
83. Leaser, Isaac, op. cit., p. 398.
84. Ibid., p. 250.
85. Ibid., p. 35.