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Ryan Fox

Isaac Wise and the path to American Jewish Unity through American Nationalism

When the founding fathers established the United States of America, they understood that the survival of the new nation was entirely dependent on future leaders who shared their core beliefs in basic democracy, freedom, and humanity. They envisioned their dreams and goals for the Union to be passed down to future generations by men who shared their passion for these enlightenment ideas. They likely did not envision these leaders to fit the profile of Jewish Rabbis from small orthodox Bohemian villages. However, it was a Jewish influence that indirectly shaped the country decades prior to the first Jews' political involvement in the country. Although the founding fathers were not at all Jewish in faith, their respect for the Hebrew Bible and the influence it had on the establishment of their new nation is noticeably clear in a variety of early political texts and historical events. The early years of the republic are filled with metaphorical biblical connections to ancient Israel. As Eran Shalev indicated in his book, *American Zion*, Old – the leaders of the country frequently used Testament Biblicism in political rhetoric.¹ Revolutionary War-era Americans' political theology was demonstrated when identifying the United States as the God-Chosen Israel, with its people seeing themselves as the Israelites fleeing Egyptian captivity, crossing a sea to reach freedom and take possession of the Promised Land. Values and morals based on the scriptures within the Old Testament shaped the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution.

¹ Eran, Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament As A Political Text From The Revolution To The Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) 7

Therefore, it is only highly appropriate that a poor Jewish immigrant continue on the American legacy into the 19th century. Isaac Mayer Wise was a pivotal American nationalistic figure in the small, growing, and evolving American Jewish community of the mid-to late 1800's. He emphasized the need for Jews to embrace American nationalistic values and public service, noting, in 1847, that many immigrant German Jews had already begun to value their Judaism equally with their newly acquired status as American citizens; many volunteered for military service, avidly voted, participated in charitable societies, and pursued public service.² His encouragement of public participation separated him from more traditional American Jewish leaders like Isaac Leeser and more radical David Einhorn who were less civic minded and more inward looking, focusing on their respective followers in the Jewish community at the expense of the broader society. Wise stood on the middle ground and thus developed into the leading figure of the reform movement in 19th century American Judaism. While his beliefs remained relatively static over his fifty-four year tenure as a citizen, the method in which he delivered these beliefs varied over time. Wise's life story of pragmatic Nationalism, attempts to answer the greater question of what the American Jew is, and stands for in society today.

Historiography:

Scholarly literature on Wise's place and influence alongside other Jewish leaders is abundant but has changed since the mid-20th century. Many earlier scholars like Naomi Cohen categorized Wise with more radical figures such as Einhorn and Hirsch. Cohen's book,

² "[Letter Concerning the Progress of German-American Jewry] translated by Sefton D. Temkin." *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 12 (December 13, 1847): 741-43.

“Encounter With Emancipation”, describes all the men as being equally committed in their missions to encourage civic good into their ideology, only differing in their Metaphorical connections to Jewish texts.³ However, in recent decades, there has been a growing presence of ideological separation between these historical figures in the literature stemming from their positions on American Nationalism. Christian Wiese presents Einhorn as an enemy of Wise differing sharply on his views of Jewish national identity. Sefton Tempkin further propagated Wise as a nemesis of other Rabbis in the American Jewish community by analyzing reactions to the Cleveland Conference platform of 1855 as well as the *Mihag America*, Wise’s first prayer book distributed in America. Tempkin mentions the book as a huge source of contention in the Reform community, citing it as a key factor that furthered the divisions between the Wise’s followers, and the more populous orthodox followers of Rabbi Isaac Leeser.⁴ The literature lacks complete clarity on the extent to which Wise’s American civic involvements and influences played in unifying these groups under one American Jewish umbrella.

The origins of Wise’s philosophies

Following his arrival to the United States in 1846, Wise moved quickly to embrace and involve himself in the American rabbinical scene. In 1849 he began writing the *Asmonean*, a weekly publication that preceded his more well known, *American Israelite*. It was in the *Asmonean* that Wise began to express his praise for America as a land of opportunity for Jews to unite themselves. He conveys this message by using America as a metaphor for Israel, the Jewish Promised Land. “In respect of promoting truth, I thought it proper and advantageous that

³ Christian Wiese *Redefining Judaism in the Age Of Emancipation* (London: Brill, 2007), 220.

⁴ Sefton, Tempkin *Creating American Reform Judaism: The Life And Times Of Issac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 134.

Israel form a religious unity of his little republics (Congregations).”⁵ He continues in this praise by expressing the disappointment he felt in himself for not embracing his new nationality to the fullest extent, and simultaneously encouraging his fellow American Jews to take initiative. “I am ashamed and disappointed I had to retire from the stage of public activity...I am scarcely able to read and write the language of the country...but with a glorious triumph of union, I will triumph too, when this grand statue shall be erected amidst the American Israelites, I will rejoice likewise.”⁶ This is one of the first of many times that Wise would use this newly coined term, “American Israelite.” By ideologically uniting the holy land of Israel with America, Wise presents his motives to followers loud and clear: America will not be another blind alley for the wandering Jewish people in the diaspora. It will be a haven of opportunity, for which they should invest themselves in.

In the years that followed, Wise sought to spread his ideas and values of civic engagement to the American Jewish community. However, this proved to be a highly difficult task with the community very divided at the time. The main crux of division stemmed between reformers like Wise, and traditionalists such as Isaac Lesser. If Wise wanted to securely influence the majority of America’s Jews, he would need to satisfy Lesser, who held a strong influence on the majority of Jews in the country through his publication *The Occident*. In an article discussing the status of the American Jews in the antebellum period, Bertram Korn describes the magnitude of this division: “They fought with each other for personal primacy, or on theological grounds, or for geographical control...they went from one defeat to another...abandoned one attempt after another, but still each was unwilling to surrender.”⁷ The political side of these theological disputes

⁵ *Asmonean*, I (9, Nov, 1849) 17.

⁶ *Ibid* ^ 18

⁷ Bertram, Korn, “FACTORS BEARING UPON THE SURVIVAL OF JUDAISM IN THE ANTE-BELLUM PERIOD.” *American Jewish historical quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1964) 350

can be traced back to their respective European origins.

Origins In Europe:

The social and religious atmosphere directly surrounding Wise in his early life before America can be credited for shaping most of his ideology and viewpoints on American politics and Judaism that he held later in life. Understanding the roots behind his emphasis on uniting American Jews can best be understood by uncovering the status of the Jewish people in Wise's pre-existing home of Bohemia. Sefton Tempkin, among other scholars, have asserted that Wise departed his native land with no love lost. The most obvious indication of this is in Wise's autobiography, *The Reminiscences*, an autobiographic story which narrates his life beginning with his 1846 arrival to New York. There is hardly any mention of life prior to emigration. There are a few instances in which Bohemian life is described with a negative connotation: "My father was not permitted to call even a handbreadth of land his own; therefore, I had never had a fatherland."⁸ The harsh reference to his homeland across the pond indicates that this is a subtle and taboo topic for the rabbi.

Wise's grandson, Max May, stated explicitly that, "He could not be induced to talk about his early years and often they were too terrible to contemplate."⁹ The outlook for Jews in Bohemia at this time was dim. Despite continues settlement through the mid 19th century, heavy restrictions were placed on Jewish mobility in the early years of Wise's life. While Jews had basic freedoms to practice their religion, class mobility and the spread of knowledge were very limited: Bohemian Jews, according to Judaic scholar Sefton Tempkin, had "very narrow

⁸ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 83.

⁹ May, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, p. viii. In the *American Israelite* , 62 (1 Feb 1917)

horizons.”¹⁰ Small communities were impoverished and could not even afford Rabbis; they were restricted to employing “Religions-Weiser,” men who were far less educated than actual Rabbis and whose only role was to perform the basic duties of the faith such as performing circumcisions, slaughtering animals, instructing children in basic Talmud, and praying for the sick. Railroads and telegraphs were also rare in Jewish areas, and newspapers were heavily discouraged. Consequently, there was a major socio-cultural gap that separated Jews from gentiles in Bohemia. “Jews decided that a society which treated them as Pariahs could have nothing worthwhile for them, but they had shown a restricted, albeit intense, interest in their own heritage.”¹¹ Thus, the Bohemian Jews were an inward looking community that made few attempts to engage with society in any civic way.

An interesting trend identified by Katerina Capkova in her book, *Czechs, Germans, Jews?: National identity and The Jews of Bohemia*, was that unlike elsewhere in central and eastern Europe, the orthodox community was shrinking despite the direct number of Jews in the region rising from internal migration.¹² Although Wise himself grew up in an orthodox family, it was obvious that, overall, religion did not play a huge role in the lives of the Jews of Bohemia. Therefore, when Wise traveled to America, he was under the strong impression that if Judaism was to survive, it needed to change. In particular, the relationship with gentiles had to be strengthened.

¹⁰Sefton, Tempkin *Creating American Reform Judaism: The Life And Times Of Issac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 14

¹¹ *Asmonean*, 3 (15 May 1857), 357

¹² Katerina, Capkova *Czechs, Germans, Jews? : National Identity and the Jews Of Bohemia* (Prague: Paseka Publishing House, 2005) 22

Establishing a reputation with the *Minhag America*

It is essentially undisputable that in order for a leader to develop followers, a solid reputation is highly necessary. As with any new immigrant to the United States, Wise's reputation was not handed to him, although his status as an ordained Rabbi gave him a slight leg up to the thousands of other immigrants alongside him to arrive in New York during the mid-nineteenth century. In his first few months as a New Yorker, Wise chose Max Lilienthal, a fellow recent Jewish immigrant, as an ally. As a rabbi himself, Lilienthal shared similar aspirations of bringing American Jews together under a common goal of gradual reform. It was Lilienthal who had the connections in Albany, New York that gave Wise his first full time position as a Rabbi in America.¹³

The congregation existing in Albany was typical of most traditional Jewish communities of the time. Congregation Beth El, as it was known, brought together the small but growing Jewish community in upstate New York. Almost immediately following his arrival to the capital region, Wise worked feverishly to work beyond the scope of his small pulpit on South Pearl Street. One way he went about this was by continuing his relationship with Lilienthal, accepting an invitation from him to work with several New York area Rabbis that Wise described as: "a synagogal authoritative body, a sort of consistory that was to go by the old Jewish name of Beth Din."¹⁴ Lilienthal hoped that the Beth Din would play a role in the development of young congregations across the United States.

The Beth Din ultimately failed in their objective because of several factors. Bruce Rubin suggests that there was an ideological split between the men, citing some of Wise's comments in

¹³ Ruben, Bruce L., "MAX LILIENTHAL AND ISAAC M. WISE: ARCHITECTS OF AMERICAN REFORM JUDAISM." *American Jewish Archives* 2003 Vol 55, 2

¹⁴ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 50.

his *Reminiscences* in reference to Lilienthal. “I began to comprehend, through the medium of interchange of views with my colleagues, that reform could be accomplished only by introducing reforms; that is, that the act must accompany the spoken word, because the general run of people understand the act better than the clearest word.”¹⁵ In short, Wise craved more than just discussions on change, he needed real allies that were willing to push reforms forward beyond the scope of the paper. Lilienthal and his colleagues were simply not meeting that expectation.

Despite the split, Wise’s involvement in this short lived group directly led to one of his most notable publications, the *Minhag America*. Wise’s assumption of this responsibility was an early reflection of the Rabbi’s high level of pragmatism. Constructing this prayer book offered him a direct line of influence into the temples across the United States. As Philipson states in the opening lines of his article, *The Reform Prayer Book*, “The Siddur is the expression of the religious life and aspiration of the Jewish people. It represents a growth. It is the product of many centuries and many generations.”¹⁶ Wise was essentially developing a common ritual for all Jewish American congregations to adopt. In one of the very first editions of his newspaper the *American Israelite*, he encourages congregations from all sects of Judaism to embrace the book, “Let this new prayer book be as short or as long as the communities wish it...that makes no difference to us, but let it be one for all of us, one and no more.”¹⁷ Above all, this book was to be focused on uniting its readers under one anthem of American Judaism, and to make the practices expressed in the book become part of the American tradition. The word ‘Minhag’ translated literally means ‘custom.’ The Rabbi was literally trying to break into traditions of his followers.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ David Philipson *The Reform Prayer Book* (Cincinnati 1919) 32

¹⁷ *The Israelite*, no. 4 (23 Oct 1857): 24

Initially produced in 1851, the prayer book would go under several revisions over the course of the next several years, but the essence of the book remained the same. Wise eliminated many traditional elements of the worship service that he believed to be contradictory for Jews actively involved in the social, cultural, and political life of modern America. These exclusions included service calls for a return to the land of Israel, the Restoration of the Davidic dynasty, and repetitions of calls for sacrifice.¹⁸ By removing these portions, the Rabbi indicated that the Jews of America had already found their true home in the United States. The desire for a return to Israel had thus become irrelevant. Throughout his career, Wise did very little to entertain the Zionist fantasies expressed by other Jewish leaders of his time. Traditional calls to Israel had been a driving force behind Anti-Semitic riots in Europe. The gentile mob mentality insisted that an allegiance to Israel, could not be accompanied with a faith in the home country, and so the Jews were persecuted as outsiders.

Another notable feature of the prayer book was the removal of the traditional blessings that, "Thank God who hast not made me a women."¹⁹ Throughout his career, Wise displayed a passion for the equality of the sexes in ritual practices. Upon the finishing of construction of the new building for congregation Anche Emth of Albany in 1851, Wise introduced family pews that eliminated the traditional barrier between men and women in service. In his article, "Isaac Mayer Wise: A New Appraisal", Areyeh Rubenstein discusses the subject in greater depth. He notes the heavy criticism from the orthodox factions that questioned Wise's decision of mixed seating, claimed that the separation of Sexes was a time honored custom from the days of the old Temple. The Rabbi was pragmatic in his own defense, using modern logic, "But suppose that it

¹⁸ Sefton, Tempkin *Creating American Reform Judaism: The Life And Times Of Issac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 149

¹⁹ Ibid ^ 275

be not so; do our synagogues bear the least resemblance to the temple of old? On the contrary, the Talmud prohibits the imitation of vessels or vestments used in the Temple.”²⁰ Here, the Rabbi refers back into the very same text that his opponents used to attack him with. This is also indicative of Wise’s respect for the emerging equality movements for women, which in its entirety is truly American to the core. In her chapter on, “Feminism And American Reform Judaism”, Ellen Umansky described the progress that American Jewish women have made largely from the reform movement. She cites numerous decisions that resulted both directly and indirectly from Wise’s viewpoints on women’s equality throughout his lifetime. In particular, she cited the portion of the *Minhag America* that calls for the allowing of both men and women to count for a ten person prayer minyan. The decision to be more inclusive to women in public prayer advanced over the next few decades. At the 1885 Pittsburgh congress organized by the Hebrew Union College, it was declared by President David Philipson, “Reform Judaism will never reach its higher goal of spiritual and moral elevation without having first accorded to the congregational council and in the entire religious and moral sphere of life, equal voice to women with man.”²¹ An equal position for women was thus integrated into the reform movement’s agenda, and inevitably was incorporated into modern feminist’s movements a century later.

To complement these several reforms, the *Minhag America* also placed a value on the role of music in the prayer service. Dating to his first arrival in New York, Wise had great respect for the role of music in American culture. His Reminiscences describes, “In the first five days I heard the sound of music but once in the street; this was produced by a wandering Bohemian band, which thundered Turkish music.” He carried his passion for quality sound to

²⁰ Rubinstein, Aryeh. “Isaac Mayer Wise: A New Appraisal”, *Jewish Social Studies*, 1977 vol 39, no. ½, 55

²¹ Umansky, Ellen, "Feminism in American Reform Judaism" in *The Americanization Of The Jews* ed. Robert M. Seltzer, Norman J. Cohen, (New York: 1995) 267 .

his congregation, where he implemented a choir and band. Naturally, his desire for more music transitioned into the ritual service and into the *Minhag America*. Once again, Wise defended the use of these new practices, asserting that the organ among other musical instruments was commanded by the Hebrew Bible and nowhere in the Talmud was it stated otherwise.

Perhaps the most notable element of the new book was its implementation of the English language translations. Wise's choice of adapting his new home countries tongue into the prayer book implies the high value he placed on United States influence onto the traditional service. His belief in the usage of the English language a sign of unity for congregations is reflected in correspondence with fellow Jewish leaders over the following years. In a letter to Adolph Huebsch, Wise states, "If we publish a prayer book that is appropriate for some congregations and not for others, then we have contributed and sanctioned a separation of the congregations from each other.... The English section should be added later once the congregations have been won over to accept the principle. This is how and why Minhag America made its way... I am firmly convinced that Minhag America will create liturgical unity among American Israel." It's important to note from this quote that Wise believed that the language process should be more of a transition for the synagogues rather than an immediate immersion. Clearly, he understood that if the Minhag America were to advance the English language too quickly into the Jewish house of worship, the immigrants would be less inclined to welcome and in cooperate it as part of their service.

Continuing Admiration for the English Language

Wise's praise for acquiring the English language as a means of integration for the Jews in America expanded beyond the scope of the Minhag America. In the early pages of the

Reminiscences, he describes an interaction he had in New York shortly after arriving off the boat in which he is approached by a fellow German immigrant who appears distressed crying out, “I have Lost everything, I have lost my English Language! The country speaks English, and I do not. How in the world can I get along?”²² The man continued to explain that despite paying his debts, he is unable to communicate properly amongst his neighbors and is struggling to establish himself in his new home. Wise proceeds to comfort the man, writing down for him English translations to German terms. To the Rabbi, Acquisition of the English language was important beyond the doors of the synagogue. English was an essential part of the American experience.

. Following the Rabbi’s move Westward and simultaneous publication of his newspaper the *American Israelite*, (to be discussed at length later in this paper), Wise amassed a greater amount of followers. His followers across the country listened attentively his message on language. In the *American Israelite*’s, *Letter To The Editor* section from November of 1858, an individual states he, “was much pleased when I read an article some time ago in your valuable paper reading : "We need English preachers in our Synagogue The sentiments expressed there are of the utmost importance to every friend of our holy religion. I become convinced every day more and more that our holy religion is appreciated more when expounded in its proper spirit.”²³

As brought up previously, Wise’s fellow Jewish leaders did not share his native pride for English conversing amongst themselves. Occasionally, The *American Israelite* addressed the issue, as it did on December 31st of 1858 with a section entitled, *Opposed To German Prayer Books*. In the section, Wise questions the persistence of men like Einhorn to retain German in their religious and everyday lifestyles. In a rather comical way, Wise states, ““We see no cause

²² Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 31.

²³ I. WECHSLEIt., letter to the editor, *The Israelite* 5, no. 20 (19 Nov 1858): 156.

for why the synagogue should be identified with the German element, an element as indeed to Judaism as Chinese is.”²⁴ On a deeper level, he insists that Jews who retain German heritage and culture, will indirectly infringe their complications onto the Jewish community as a whole. “Strange, very strange indeed is the fact of our radical reformers insisting upon Germanizing our synagogues in the heart of America when they must be aware of the disadvantages this must produce... They cannot tell why we should have a prayer book at all, unless some of them consider themselves the mouthpiece of all Israel, still, against every sound principle, they attempt to impose a German prayer book on the synagogue just to impede the course of reform.”²⁵ In many ways, Wise is alienating his own people’s heritage with this statement. Yet, to him, personal culture was subservient pushing forward Jewish agenda of unity.

These troubles are further articulated in the article, “Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise: His Language Of Anti Anti-Semitism.” Robert Kully analyzed the language Wise used in his sermons, lectures, editorials, and articles that embodied the issue of religious prejudices and discrimination to assert significant factors in his style that contributed towards his success of fighting Anti-Semitism.²⁶ One of Kully’s major points was the assertion that Wise spent a considerable amount of time both prior and after his arrival in the United States studying the English language and rhetorical works primarily because he desired to be read and heard by both Jews and gentiles alike. The author asserts that the main issues facing the Jews of the nineteenth century took three forms, “1: Those arising from the attempt to Christianize the Jews, 2: Those attempting to Christianize the United States. 3:

²⁴ *The Israelite* 5, no. 26 (31 Dec 1858): 204-205

²⁵ *Ibid* ^ 205

²⁶ Kully, Robert, “Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise: His Language of Anti Anti-Semitism”, *The Quarterly Journal Of Speech*

Those arising from an overt anti-Semitism, prejudice, and discrimination towards the Jewish people.”²⁷ Kully cites several forms of news media such as the Cincinnati Daily Gazette, Wise’s hometown paper, to defend the prevalence of these issues. The article suggests Wise as having capabilities beyond simply grasping English, but using it in a way that displayed a high mastery of it, particularly when attacking those seeking the downfall of his people. Kully writes, “His sentences varied in length, syntax, and voice...he used figurative language to impart some color to his rhetoric.”²⁸ The author also mentions that while his language may have been eloquent, he also held a standard of simplicity, in order to more clear and communicative with his audiences. Therefore, he avoided using “Flowery language” in his series of emotional epithets attacking Christian missionaries.²⁹ For Wise, Comprehension of English was the most powerful vehicle that Jews could use to advance their place in American society.

However, not all reformers shared this belief with Wise. Several other Jewish leaders, most notably, David Einhorn, did not value English and other exponents of American culture to the same degree of Wise. Also hailing from Germany, Einhorn, drew his inspiration from the radical views of fellow German Samuel Holdheim. Holdheim is viewed by most Judaic scholars as being the first true leader of the global reform Judaic movement. He consistently countered threatening anti-Jewish rhetoric by implying in his lectures to his community that all influence of ancient Jewish law and religious life had to be abandoned.³⁰ In the face of a highly resistant orthodox community, he expressed open distaste for the traditional Halakah system. Halakah had been the legal system derived from Jewish texts such as the Talmud, followed by the Jews of

²⁷Ibid ^

²⁸ Ibid ^

²⁹ Kully, Robert, “Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise: His Language of Anti Anti-Semitism”, *The Quarterly Journal Of Speech* 55

³⁰ Christian Wiese, *Redefining Judaism in the Age Of Emancipation* (London: Brill, 2007) 56

the diaspora in their European communities for centuries. The system mainly consisted of rules and laws concerning the proper ways to behave and interact with the surrounding gentile world. Holdheim insisted that these rules and laws were at odds with an individual becoming a true, subjected German citizen in a rising era of nationalism in Europe. Alternatively, Holdheim preached very radical ideas that were based on the separation of religious law and modern institutions in everyday life. For instance, he believed that marriage was based more on the morality of a union between man and woman in love and thus intermarriage was acceptable. Einhorn attempted to carry the momentum of the movement over to America when he respectively immigrated to the place they viewed as “The land of the future.”³¹ Einhorn was primarily concerned with using newly acquired freedoms to expand Jewish influence and ideas to the existing Jewish community there, rather than integrate into the greater American community. Einhorn did not ever feel America was his true home, only a place that allowed him to spread his reformist ideas. Evidence of this is in his sermons which are almost entirely in German. “The German language is the spirit of our heart.” He believed that at heart, American culture was superficial, shaped by idolatry. “Proud as I am of this adaptive citizenship...I cannot and shall not forget the old country: The land of thinkers. The birthplace of reform Judaism.”³² Einhorn's comfort with delivering his sermons in his native tongue of German, implies a lack of care for how his congregants spoke both in and out of the synagogue. As a powerful influence to east coast reformers, his viewpoint was mirrored by his many followers, and thus furthered the divide of Jews on American nationhood.

³¹ Ibid ^ 345

³² Ibid ^ 247

The Looming Power of Isaac Leeser

Despite these growing reform movements, traditional, orthodox Jews still remained the dominant faction in American Judaism through the mid nineteenth century. Rabbi Isaac Leeser was the growing leader and face of this group. Cohen regards Leeser's role as prestigious within the community. His role in the lives of American Jews extended beyond the boundaries of faith alone, and it was common for him to use elements of Jewish law to direct how Jews should proceed with living their lives. During a large wave of German immigration in the 1850's, he encouraged his followers to seek employment in agriculture because, "A farming population could keep the Sabbath...the settlers...should be supplied with a Hazan and Shochet, with proper books and synagogue furniture; and a teacher for their children should accompany them in their first settling down in their new homes"³³ Most of Leeser's influence went through his monthly publication, *The Occident*. The newspaper was written in Philadelphia and distributed throughout the United States. There are numerous accounts of other Jewish leaders giving thanks to Leeser for having their own work published in *The Occident*. In a letter from January 1849, Isidor Bush of St. Louis implies his gratitude stating, "Many thanks for your efforts to distribute my journal."³⁴ The publication's valuable influence stretched out to leaders of the reform community as well, indicated in an 1859 letter from Samuel Adler to Leeser, "We feel the monthly appearance of your Occident, and swarming as this country is with proselyte scrip, it cannot refresh and strengthen the mind of every Israelite reader."³⁵ Even Wise had a full

³³ Naomi Cohen, "The Americanization of American Judaism" in *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews In The United States 1830-1914*, (Philadelphia: 1984) 165

³⁴ Is. Bush to Leeser Jan 16 1849

³⁵ *Ibid* ^ 3

understanding of the magnitude that the publication held as he noted in an 1849 letter to Leeser, “I Found The Occident in almost every house in Charleston.”³⁶ No one could deny the grasp that Leeser had over American Jewish literature. Therefore it was only strategic that Wise collaborate, not attack him.

Leeser’s powerful reputation became a tool to effectively spread his ideology to a larger audience than his own congregation in Philadelphia. Despite his newly gained US citizenship, Leeser continued to be open about the dangers that America could potentially hold for new Jewish immigrants. He described these threats in an 1845 Sermon delivered to Temple Mikve Israel of Philadelphia entitled, *God Of Our Benefactor*. “It is time for us to wake up from our long sleep; we have too long laid drunk from our intoxication of sudden liberty, to which for centuries we have been strangers.” He explained that religious freedom is a high level threat for Jews in the United States. Later in the Sermon, he goes on to imply the Jewish American people are drifting from their core Jewish values. “Ease and liberty induced us to value ourselves upon our own wisdom; to trust on our own means for temporal happiness, forgetful that there is a future full of bitterness if our deeds condemn us before the judgement seat of the everlasting Judge.”³⁷ This signifies a notable differing view from Wise, who as previously mentioned, believed that the Jews would overwhelmingly benefit from having an involvement with their government.

Naturally, a source of tension began developing between Leeser and Wise’s respective followers. Wise believed this tension to be threatening to the togetherness of the American Jews as a collective.

³⁶ To Isaac Leeser From I.M. Wise, March 22, 1849

³⁷ SERMON 1845: GOD OF OUR OWN BENEFACTOR

Go West

Wise's involvement in American political life gained serious momentum during the Civil war era. Sefton Tempkin discussed Wise's involvement with the major mid-century conflict in his article, *Isaac Mayer Wise And The Civil War*. He noted that Wise's chosen residence in the city of Cincinnati, a place that sat on the geographical border between the slave south and free north, was the source for a variety of unique circumstances. By almost all accounts, the city was economically, socially, and demographically truly northern. At the dawn of the war, only 6,000 native southerners resided in the Queen City, a far smaller amount than the immigrant population that made up 46% of inhabitants.³⁸ In addition, none of the 103 churches in the city were of southern denomination. Although the city had initially been intertwined with southern industries earlier in the century, by the 1860 census it was evident that the Cincinnati economy was comprised of northern elements like industrial manufacturing, most notably in meatpacking. Tempkin notes that the high immigration rate, combined with a comparatively large Jewish population of 10,000, "lead one to infer that life in Cincinnati was, to put it cautiously, as vigorous as the climate allowed, turbulent and excitable would probably be expressions especially apt."³⁹ Wise was not only well aware of all these circumstances, but they are precisely what attracted him prior to his arrival at congregation B'ne Yeshurun. His Reminiscences recall his impressions of Cincinnati as a promising place of the future, "There in the West is a new world that comes into but little contact with the East...the people are young and aspiring and not yet cast into a fixed mold."⁴⁰ It is no coincidence that Wise's sentiments

³⁸ Charles R. Wilson "Cincinnati's Reputation During the Civil War" *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Nov., 1936), pp. 468-479

³⁹ Sefton, Tempkin *Creating American Reform Judaism: The Life And Times Of Issac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 152

⁴⁰ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 234

here are reflective of the Manifest destiny ideology sweeping the nation at the time. The push to move west and live beyond the boundaries of the cramped European-like cities of the East began to define the American spirit to which Wise encouraged his followers to embrace.

The Cleveland Conference: First Major Attempts at Unity

In the years between 1854 and the outbreak of the Civil War, Wise continued to push forward his message to the greater American Jewish population. While he maintained likewise goals as those in Albany, his approach in achieving them was adjusted. Rather than work exclusively within the moderate reform movement as he had with the old *Beth Din*, Wise sought the collaboration of both radical reformers and traditional orthodox individuals. He also understood that in order to establish the alliances he craved, work needed to be done beyond the limits of fine printed paper. In his *Reminiscences*, he admits that he'd already made unification efforts with the *Beth Din*, yet, "the first attempt to accomplish this, in 1848, had proved unsuccessful; but, although the plan had failed owing to indifference and disharmony, yet the ideal remained unaffected and attractive as ever."⁴¹ Wise understood that words delivered to men dispersed over the far-reaching American landscape could not alone bring about the results he sought. As a devout countryman by this period, Wise had a clear understanding how individuals with power were able to produce a change in society. Most notably, the Constitution, a document to which he refers to quite often in his writings, was the direct product of likeminded individuals collaborating in the same physical location. Wise's reverence for the constitution can be cited as early as 1847 in his "Letter Concerning the Progress Of American Jewry", in which he describes an ideal congregation that bases its laws, "In conformity with the United States

⁴¹ Ibid ^307

Constitution.” Scholars such as Jacob Marcus have picked up this aspect of Wise when studying his life’s work. Marcus’s, *The Americanization Of Isaac Mayer Wise*, claims the Rabbi had, “An almost worshipful attitude towards the constitution, that democratic instrument which guaranteed civil equality and religious liberty.”⁴² His fellow Americans had proved to him that personal interaction was the most effective way to conjoint ideas. Thus, the Cleveland Conference was initiated, intensely reflective of American influence.

Following this model, Wise declared in his newspaper in January of 1855 that, “We propose a conference, a personal interview of all men who take an interest in the progress of Judaism and its institutions...a colloquial and friendly interview can exercise only a benevolent influence on our affairs, and must necessarily tend towards prompt and united action.”⁴³ In his analysis of the time leading up to the conference, Tempkin noted the changes that Wise underwent to piece together this meeting. Most notably, he identified that the Rabbi labeled the event as one of, “Progress”, rather than, “reform.” This is significant because it symbolized a collective approach instead of his usual individualistic tendencies. This approach was necessary to encapsulate the most ultra-orthodox religious authorities. The Reminiscences recall, “The very fact that the orthodox rabbis joined with the reformers in signing the call justified the most glowing expectations.”⁴⁴ Wise’s bold confidence in the group’s future after this apparently simple collaborative step, suggests how daunting the friction had presently been amongst the men. In reference to the actual goals of the conference his plan was twofold: “To achieve general agreement on liturgical questions, and a strong united action in all other undertakings,

⁴² Jacob Marcus *The Americanization Of Isaac Wise* (Michigan: 1931) 12

⁴³ *Israelite*, 1 (26 Jan 1855), 229

⁴⁴ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 308

notably public institutions.”⁴⁵ In resemblance of other major figures in American history, Wise continuously maintained a value for unification at the sacrifice of taming his own personal bias. This is evident in the second important article of the conference that declared the Talmud as the legal and obligatory commentary of the bible. This is contrary to previous statements by Wise that declared following Talmudic law as an irrational means for Jewish living in America. The statement proved to be well worth expressing when he received a positive response from the Orthodox attendees, “The reading of this sketch produced an immense effect....Isaac Leeser beamed with delight, the orthodox ministers were much surprised.”⁴⁶ The conference continued to possess structural elements similar to those in American government with the establishment of committees. Just as the United States congress is composed of several different committees, the Cleveland conference appointed three committees as well consisting of one to settle a constitution of common liturgy, one to answer ritual questions, and one for schools and textbooks. Just as committees in congress unite republicans and democrats together, each of Wise’s committees conjoined orthodox and reformers.

The apparent success that the conference had provided for uniting American Judaism was limited in long term impact. In the aftermath, reports of the conferences events were reported in the *American Israelite* for the wide reaching American Jewish audience to view. Among those who received a translated German copy was the newly immigrated David Einhorn. As a radical reformer who followed the teachings of Samuel Holdheim, Einhorn was a firm believer that the teachings of the Talmud were altogether obsolete. Therefore he was highly critical of the conference decision on Talmudic law accommodation in modern society. His brutality is

⁴⁵ Ibid ^ 309

⁴⁶ *Israelite*, 2 (26 Oct, 1855), 132

amplified when he doubts the legitimacy of the conference for that particular reason. “Instead of unlocking with great pomp every door and closet for the entrance of the Talmud....we on our part prefer to deny in the most unreserved and emphatic language, the legislative legitimacy as an opinion.”⁴⁷ However, it is not the content of Einhorn’s statement, but where it appears that makes it especially significant. The statement of scrutiny was projected in an issue of Wise’s own publication in the *American Israelite*.

Despite his growing rivalry with Einhorn, Wise wished to keep his readers honestly informed of the circumstances. This demonstrated his passion for free press and the influence of enlightenment ideas on his policies and is reflective of the famous quote from enlightenment thinker Voltaire, “I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write.”⁴⁸ In his response to the scrutiny, Wise defends the principles for which the conference was built upon. “Is it right or wrong that Israel should be united in this country to build up institutions for the prosperity of Israel....that we meet on a platform which every Israelite can acknowledge...that the Cleveland conference refused to depart from the historical basis of Judaism?” Once again Wise established that his followers are the true patriots in their commitments to both America and Israel. In his analysis of Cleveland and its aftermath, Tempkin titles the period, “Cleveland Platform: Quick Victory – Lengthy War.” He interprets the meeting as a positive move forward for Wise’s unification efforts, but was organizationally disjointed due to resistance from the orthodox and radicals. The product of the Cleveland Conference would re-emerge in the form of the Hebrew Union College and the simultaneously established Union Of American Hebrew Congregations.

⁴⁷ Sinai, 1 (Feb 1856), 28, referring to *Israelite*, 2/16 and *Occident*, 13 (Dec 1855), 448 ff.

⁴⁸ Voltaire

Increased Political Involvements Beyond the Jewish Community and attempted college

In addition to the Conference in Cleveland, the mid 1850's saw Wise make strides towards another major scheme: The founding of a college. From his extensive experiences as a student himself at the University of Prague, and the University of Vienna, the Rabbi knew that education would be his most powerful vehicle for change. It was during this period that Christian denominational colleges and Universities were springing up across the Northeast. According to the 1860 census, Universities with a religious affiliation far outnumbered public institutions. This included 49 Presbyterian, 34 Methodist, 32 Congregationalist, 25 Baptist, 14 Catholic, and 11 Episcopalian schools compared with just 21 public schools. Evidently, theology played an integral in educational function. Therefore, the lack of Jewish schools was a major hindrance to progress in religious circles.

In just its twelfth edition, *The American Israelite* called for, "A general meeting of all Israelites of this city for the purpose of consulting on what measures are the most efficient and practicable to establish a University in this city." The column continues on to express the editors understanding that the endeavor would be one of great challenge, "The Scheme is both grand and honorable...we must begin in time, Rome was not built in a day." The sheer optimism for a successful operation was unquestionable. Wise insisted there was both money and interest for the project, all that remained needed to piece everything together was support from other American Rabbis. Looking back in his *Reminiscence*, the rabbi humbly recalls his lack of preparation at the time. "I was too impractical had no executive ability, by far too inexperienced." These problems would surface more as the college materialized over the coming year.

Ultimately, the college failed to succeed. In his analysis of the college's downfall, Tempkin asserts that this failure was attributed to the loss of support from the Rabbis in the east, many of whom were highly critical of the intuition from its inception. However, Tempkin also indicates that the temporary failure displayed one of Wise's strongest characteristic, perseverance. In his promotion of the school, the rabbi embarked on a major speaking tour that brought him all across the country to spread his ideals and what the college represented. By giving these tours and traveling as he did, Wise was an exponent of American nationalism in antebellum society. His travels were powered by newly emerged American technology in steam engines and railroads. In this regard, the Rabbi was truly an exponent of American identity as he explored and conquered the far reaches of his audience from every corner of the United States. He remained optimistic towards his goals, and at the end of one of these campaigns across America, he declared that, "Our people everywhere are susceptible of intelligent instruction...the result of our tour has convinced us that us that a national university will be established."⁴⁹ Thus, a united educational institution was in his view, a tangible achievement for the Jews in America

Another product that came from the attempted constructing of Zion College was an increase in Wise's correspondence with a series of prominent American public celebrities and political figures. In return, many of these individuals eventually provided him more recognition within the American Jewish community. Shortly after arrival to Cincinnati, Wise was reached out to by Samuel Chase, the soon to be governor of Ohio. Chase was in attendance at the Zion Collegiate Associations banquet in November of 1855. The governor's support for the institution was highly impressionable. Wise was very appreciative of the governors apparent concern for the Jewish community indicated in the following weeks printing of the American

⁴⁹ *The Israelite* 5, no. 20 (18 Nov 1854): 133

Israelite, “Among those attendance....the governor of Ohio , just upright, and plain, dear to his fellow citizens and an ornament to his state.”⁵⁰ Tempkin interprets Chase’s actions as less genuine than perceived, regarding it as a political attempt to attach Wise to the newly born Republican Party. The party formed from a conjoining of Anti-slave Whigs, and Free soil Democrats. The men strongly advocated a modernized United States that emphasized the value of free market labor over slave labor. Most of the parties base came from the Northeast, so securing the support of more Midwestern leaders was strategic to their popularity growth. Chase’s attempt to bring Wise into the party would be in vain, as the Reminiscences states, “True, Salmon P. Chase called my attention several times to the fact that it would be much better to attach myself to the young progressive party...than to work for a religious idea in a narrow circle; but I did not listen, I would not listen.” One can make many ideological speculations why Wise refused to oblige himself to the party; however, the clearest reason for his resistance was in his commitment to his home congregation, Bene Yerushalem.

Upon Wise’s arrival to the synagogue a few years prior, congregation Bene – Yerushalam had made clear to Wise that they disapproved of any intentions he may have to engage in public politics. A statement from the synagogue’s board in November of 1854 affirms that, “[In regards to] social and public life, whenever a subject of some magnitude presents itself...we consider this matter as one of vast importance, but would violate one of the most sacred principles.”⁵¹ At this early point in his career, Wise found it in his best interest to honor this policy. He wrote in a letter to Jacob Ezekiel, “I care little for all the offices and popularity in the United States and Europe, hence I desire no office in the Zion Collegiate Association”, the

⁵⁰ *The Israelite* 2, no. 18 (09 Nov 1855): 148-149

⁵¹ *From* Congregation Bene-Yeshurun To I.M. Wise, November 25, 1854

organization which he founded.⁵² The action displayed Wise's trust in the members of his community to lead the special organization.

However, Wise's reluctance to involve himself in political matters lasted only for a brief period of time. Just a year later, Wise openly condemned the governor's Thanksgiving proclamation in which he made numerous Pro-Christian and Anti-Semitic statements. "The governor desires us to Thank God, 'for the merits of redemption and for the hopes of immortality...fall upon your knees ye Jews, deists, infidels, atheists...and thank God that Jesus died on the cross to redeem the people of Ohio.'"⁵³ This deeply offended Wise who always remained a staunch advocate for first amendment religious freedom. "Addressing himself to a Christian people....he ought to know that the people of Ohio are neither Christian nor Jewish, they are free and independent."⁵⁴ Going forward, Wise's relationship with Chase deteriorated, as did with that of the Republican Party. Tempkin attributes this deterioration partially to due with the parties associations with the infamous, "Know-Nothing", party, whose agenda was firmly opposed to immigrants having any involvement in government affairs which for obvious reasons, Wise desired no part in.

Yet Chase was far from the first political person in America to shape Wise's own political persona. According to his *Reminiscences*, Wise had developed quite the history with the men in Washington from his early days in Albany. He describes with eloquence his attendance to the funeral of John Calhoun, a man who embodied the Pro-slave south in the antebellum senate. "I was the first visitor to come and the last to leave, and listened with

⁵² To Jacob Ezekiel *From* I.M. Wise, March 28, 1855

⁵³ *The Israelite* 3, no. 19 (14 Nov 1856): 148.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* ^ 149

undivided attention to the greatest speeches of the greatest statesmen of that time.”⁵⁵ This admiration may be interpreted as symbol of Wise’s sympathies for racism. Although he never openly sanctioned institutional racism, the power of race played favorably into his hands as a White male. Considering that practically all American Jews were white at this time, race played favorably in Jews defense from Anti-Semitic Christians who ultimately favored Jews over non-whites.

Wise goes on to express his admiration for the other presiding senators in the room. He states in a near romantic way, “I listened to the powerful and eloquent words of these aged, gray-headed intellectual giants....I dreamed a new dream, and my imagination soared to other heights, and disported itself in new fields.”⁵⁶ It was during this visit to Washington in 1850 that Wise became acquainted with the president at the time, Zachary Taylor, another notorious southerner. This encounter faired extremely well for Wise, who was given his first major publicity, as the message “The First Rabbi to Visit a President” headlined the Washington papers the following day.⁵⁷ Wise fostered his early interests in politics back in his Albany home at the time.

Upon hearing that the state legislature had a custom to open their sessions with an offering of prayer, which typically only came from a Christian minister. The Rabbi ushered to lawmakers that they were not truly representative of all citizens of every religious faith. Despite opposition from several Christian Fundamentalists in the senate who claimed that, “The United States is a Christian Nation”, Wise remained on the offense. He cited the opinion of George Washington on the matter, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,

⁵⁵ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 130

⁵⁶ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 132

⁵⁷ Ibid ^ 134

or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”⁵⁸ Subsequently, Wise received one of his small early victories in American public politics when he was granted the right to offer his prayer to the chamber. This victory was only a minor precedent to the large-scale political battles that were yet to come.

Clearly Approaching War: Unclear Allegiances

The final years of the antebellum period produced a strange and uncomfortable atmosphere for the existing American Jewish community, particularly in Cincinnati. Despite its deeply northern characteristics, at the threat of war, Cincinnati was heavily invested in preserving the Union and expressed a share of sympathies for the south. In Charles Wilson’s, *Cincinnati before the Civil War*, he describes the city’s values as having been, “neither pro-Southern nor pro-Northern. Whatever sectionalism she revealed was Western... She was unionist to the core...she had intimate ties and friendly intercourse with all.”⁵⁹ The threat of war only enforced this sentiment. Wilson describes the immense consequences if the north and south would be separated, “Cincinnati would become a border city exposed to paralyzing attack whenever a disagreement should arise between the United States and the Southern Confederacy.”⁶⁰ He furthers his argument by turning to the economy, “capital would retire to a safe spot in the interior of the North, and the Queen City’s greatness would become a thing of the past. Cincinnati, together with the remainder of the West, would be reduced to a mere tail on the Eastern kite, subject to merciless exploitation at the hands of dominant New England.”⁶¹

Wilson’s concerns over the western economy articulate the worries that Pro-Union patriots in the

⁵⁸ Ibid ^ 135

⁵⁹ Charles R. Wilson “Cincinnati’s Reputation During the Civil War” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Nov., 1936), pp. 470

⁶⁰ Ibid ^ 472

⁶¹ Ibid ^ 475

city had towards the threat of the union's collapse. Unlike the industrial powerhouse's of the Northeast, Cincinnati held tight bonds with the southern economy. As an emerging leader in the local community, Wise felt it his obligation to stand with his city and the criers for peace and stability.

In the years approaching the war, Wise continued to maintain contact with influential Jewish individuals from both the free north and slave south. In 1854 Wise received a letter from famed writer of the novel, *Uncle Toms Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, expressing her admiration for him as a symbol of American Jewry, "I never meet a Jew, or enter a synagogue without feeling my mind borne down by these revelations...accept then my thanks and kind wishes for the final successful accomplishment of your interesting work."⁶² Stowe's appraisal for his accomplishments indicated the powerful role that he had in the liberal north. This praise complicates scholars' interpretation of Wise's position on race. Clearly, Stowe was an ideological opposite to Calhuan, who as previously mentioned, was highly admired by Wise. Thus, the situation implies that Wise had pragmatically secured a positive reputation among many abolitionists, despite his clear sympathies for slavery.

Likewise, Wise's personal connections in the south ran deep as he had on numerous occasions spoke at the famed Temple Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, the oldest synagogue in the United States. The people of the south held respect for him, and he would do everything in his power to maintain that bond. Upon the inevitable outbreak of war, Wise consequently lost all southern readers when the post master discontinued news circulation southward. Now limited in reach, the *American Israelite* displayed frustrations frequently over

⁶² From Harriet Beecher Stowe To I.M. Wise, August 4, 1854

the next few years. In an article from January 1862, he creates an, “Us vs Them”, calling out his enemies for attempting to silence his freedom of speech. “Let us alone...they attempted and still do to impair us and weaken our efforts as much as in their power.” Throughout the wordy attack, there is not one specifically named target mentioned. Although, in an analysis of the column, Tempkin asserts that Wise is alluding to the difficulties associated with working together with the orthodox and reformers to successfully unite the congregations of America when he is constantly scrutinized by these enemies every step of the way. “We proposed a synod...a union of the synagogues by the Minhag America...and were attacked like a criminal with passionate fury as if we had proposed the destruction of the world.”⁶³ This is perhaps one of the boldest claims yet made by Wise. This is an obvious pre-cursor to the disharmony that was to follow in the coming years between the American Jewish communities.

The Slave Reality:

As Wise ascended farther into the public atmosphere, the issue of slavery became more difficult to sidestep in his writing. Tempkin cites a few occurrences in which Wise discussed his moral view of slavery. The most notable of which comes from the *Die Deborah* in December of 1859, “We are not apologists for slavery....It was the union, blemished slightly though it might be by negro servitude, which had guaranteed freedoms to whites who had fled the shores of Europe and that came first.”⁶⁴ Thus, he sustained a belief that the morality question was inferior when the threat of national disunity was at stake. The *American Israelite*, hardly indicated any

⁶³ *The Israelite* 8, no. 28 (10 Jan 1862): 220.

⁶⁴ *Die Deborah*, 5 (16 Dec 1859), 94.

allegiance to either side of the isle in the conflict, particularly on the issue of slavery. This begs a deeper analysis as to why no issues were raised on the seemingly obvious controversial topic.

Several scholars interpret Wise's neutrality towards slavery as a display of his lack of regard for it as a real issue. Yet based on his Jewish national unity agenda, it's far more likely that Wise held onto his neutrality position in order to maintain his followers in the south. At the dawn of the Civil war, there was still a substantial amount of Jews who owned slaves. Up until this point, Jews had played as large of a role in American slavery as their fellow Christians in the American south. As discussed in Seymour Drescher's, *Jews and New Christians In The Atlantic Slave Trade*, Jews had been participating in the slave economy of the new world since their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula in 1497. There are several accounts of Jews as harsh taskmasters, slave traders, and as perpetrators of miscegenation. Bertram Korn cites several notable Jewish plantation owners who were typical exponents of southern views of states' rights and slavery expansion.⁶⁵

Wise shared his complicated views on slavery with several notable public figures with whom he corresponded with. One of these individuals was the reputable Democrat senator Stephen Douglas. In contrast, Douglass had a more defined view of slavery than Wise did, notoriously championing the concept of popular sovereignty as a means of solving the issue of expanding slavery into western states. In simple terms, popular sovereignty gave power to individuals within their respective new states to vote on whether or whether to allow slavery. The position was arguably middle ground, as I did not technically promote unrestricted slave

⁶⁵ Korn, Bertram W. "FACTORS BEARING UPON THE SURVIVAL OF JUDAISM IN THE ANTE-BELLUM PERIOD." *American Jewish historical quarterly* 1964 Vol 63, 4 PP 342

expansion, yet it did not limit it either. In a letter written shortly after Douglas's victorious 1858 election, Wise reaches out to him stating, "I hope the Democracy will shape the future policy in accordance with the lessons they have lately received in almost all the northern states. By referring to a paper of mine which I hereby send you, you will see, that I fought with the democracy in favor of your policy in regard to slavery and territories"⁶⁶ This is a clear indication of Wise's open support for the candidate and his policies on popular sovereignty.

On a deeper level, Wise connected to the senator through his belief in the young America movement. The political and cultural movement which sprouted in the mid-19th century, heavily advocated for free trade capitalism, better infrastructure, and spread of American expansion into the territories of the west and south. Douglas happened to be one of the main proponents of the movement, particularly the nationalistic elements of it that promoted American exceptionalism. As a frequent traveler who relied on canals, railroads, and roads to remain in communication with his followers and rivals across the United States, Wise understood the value of these projects more than most. As previously mentioned, Wise also was a firm believer in American exceptionalism. This belief is ultimately embodied in his frequent references of America as Israel, the Promised Land for the Jews. Although Douglas never formally responded to any of Wise's letters, Wise continued to see him favorably in American politics, producing a memorial tribute to him upon his death a couple years later.

Politics continued to encroach Wise in the final years of the antebellum era. During November of 1860, the Rabbi declared the impending issue of disunion as a, "Plague on Both Your Houses", describing the situation as an artificial panic resulting from state politics and that

⁶⁶ To Stephen A. Douglas *From* I.M. Wise, November 9, 1858

the two factions would cool by the years end. A few months later Wise more outspokenly blamed the northern abolitionists for the demise of the country. Wise viewed abolitionism as a threat to stable democracy describing them as, “Demagogues who sought offices at any price, red Republicans, and habitual revolutionists...hired criers in the South and North succeeding in breaking down the fortress of liberty.”⁶⁷ When describing the abolitionists in this way, he is most likely referring to their tactics of securing political positions through delivering moral qualms to Americans on slavery. The following week he explicitly called out Republicans claiming that they only desire separation with no coercion or compromise for the south. He believed that by doing this, they were breaking the constitutional guarantees that southern slave owners had to their property. Once again, Wise’s primary motive in this preaching was to encourage a middle road for both slave owning southerners and Anti-slave northerners to maintain unity.

As he established himself more with one side of the issue, Wise became more susceptible to scrutiny from other Jewish leaders whom did not share his views. The role of Jews as David Einhorn was among those in the Jewish community who were most outspoken against the evils of slavery. In his inaugural sermon to his new congregation in 1861, he expressed passion for abolitionism when he claimed that all people are free and born with inalienable human rights, “Can one think of any more specific proclamation of the innate equality of all rational beings than the doctrine, ‘bidmut Elohim asah oto’ ‘God created man in his image’”⁶⁸ Where Wise viewed disunion as the greatest threat, Einhorn equally despised of slavery deeming It, “The

⁶⁷ *Israelite*, 7 (30 Nov, 1860), 172.

⁶⁸ Dr. David Einhorn, *Inaugural Sermon*, 1955 (Translated from the German by Dr. Abraham B Arnold), *David Einhorn Memorial Volume* (New York 1911) pp. 33

Cancer of the union” on multiple occasions.⁶⁹ As a result of these openly expressed controversial beliefs, Einhorn marginalized both himself and his followers in their city of Baltimore where slavery was still legal. In his article, “Baltimore Rabbis During The Civil War”, Issac Fein describes Einhorn’s radical statements of slavery as a display of lacking sense of responsibility for his community.

His followers were not passive to the situation, and were well aware to the rising negative reputation that Jews associated with Einhorn were receiving. Max Soutro, the Lead reader of the Har Sinai Vorein, suggested that the congregation resist commemorating the Ninth of Ab, a traditional calling for a return of the Jews to Zion. This action was not foreign to the Jews of Baltimore, who had to implement the same precaution fifteen years prior in response to growing Anti-Semitism. The congregant stated, “Our Christian brothers with whom we form our one social body may think that since we mourn and wail for the destruction of Jerusalem, that we yearn to return there, and that our patriotism for our abode is not genuine.”⁷⁰ The appeasing statement reflects the rising tensions with the greater Christian community in the area and the Jewish people’s sincere value for maintaining their collective bonds with their neighbors.

Yet, Einhorn did not back down from any of his statements on the matter. He defended his reasoning to counter his concerned congregants to claim, “for the crime of one of us, the entire community is held responsible.”⁷¹ The political environment of Maryland continued to negatively develop following the 1860 presidential election in which Abraham Lincoln received a tiny fraction of the votes. Despite wide calls for succession and immense riots, the state remained within the Union. Einhorn and anyone associated with him faced imminent danger.

⁶⁹ Sinai, vol 1, no. 9 (Oct., 1856), p. 259

⁷⁰ HSC, Minute Book, Aug 3, 1845.

⁷¹ David Einhorn, “Sermon”, April 30 1863, in Kaufmann Kohler, ed., David Einhorn Memorial *volume*, p. 120.

Therefore, he caved into pressure from his congregants to flee town for Philadelphia in April of 1861. Had Einhorn displayed a more cautious approach similar to Wise, his forced leave may not have occurred. In his departure from Baltimore, he carried no sympathies for the people he left behind. In a letter to one of his closest supporters, he recalls his time in Baltimore, “Baltimore made me practically, unsociable...I hope that the interval of three months will have been sufficient to cleanse myself from the dirt which the Baltimore orthodox and reformers have thrown on me.”⁷² Einhorn's act of departure conveyed his lack of real connection to his pulpit in Baltimore. His loyalties to himself triumph any beliefs of sustaining the community together. Whereas Wise was bridging multiple Jewish communities together, Einhorn's pride clearly disrupted his abilities to keep his own stable

Abolitionism was not the only outspoken slavery platform by Jewish leaders in the late antebellum years. As with a majority of theological discussions, the orthodox faction in America had a staunch disagreement on the matter of slavery from the reformers. Orthodox Rabbi's throughout the north and south carried a status quo agenda when determining position on most national issues, and slavery was no exception.

Rabbi Morris Jacob Raphall best characterized the position in the delivery of his sermon on January 4th 1861. Raphall, a distinguished New York City Orthodox rabbi, took the task of investigating the origins of slavery in the Hebrew Bible. His findings concluded that, “Slavery had existed since the earliest time” and that, “Slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments.”⁷³ Although it is true that in biblical times, slave labor as an institution was rampantly utilized, Raphall likely used this point as a cover for his more racist

⁷² Einhorn letter to Oppenheimer, Philadelphia, Aug 17, 1861

⁷³ *Publications Of The American Jewish Historical society*, V (1897), 150.

ideologies against African Americans. Raphall's position was supported by Issac and Leeser, and thus spoke for the collective of orthodox American Judaism at the time. Naturally, the claims were not taken with silence from Einhorn's followers, and a series of publications harshly condemning the statements were produced in his monthly magazine, *Sinai*. However, accustomed to his style, Einhorn's attacks were futilely written in German, and therefore had a limited reach in audience. The only outspoken rebuttals to Raphall's statements appeared in Wise's *American Israelite* to which he only alludes to the comments stating, "Among all nonsense imposed on the bible, the greatest is to suppose the Negroes are the decedents of Ham, and the curse of Noah is applicable to them."⁷⁴ Wise remained pragmatic in his words by neglecting to call out Raphall or any of his constituents explicitly. Whether Wise himself was truly racist remains unclear based on these statements, however what is clear is that by taking this approach, he averted more divisions at a time when unity was especially difficult to come by.

The diversity of opinion on the slave issue within the Jewish community was comparatively very divisive compared to other religious sects who were far more unified on this front, namely the Christian Quakers and Evangelists. Jewish disagreements did not go unnoticed, and in 1853 the American and Foreign Anti-Slave Society criticized the Jews for their lack of linear opinion, "The Jews Of the United States have never taken any steps whatever with regard to the Slavery Question." The statement continued by shaming the community as hypocrites, pointing out that the Jews themselves have been victims of, "unrighteous oppression for ages, more than any other denomination...they ought to be the friends of Universal Freedom."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ *The Israelite*, Jan 18, 1861. P, 212

⁷⁵ Naomi Cohen, "The Proper American Jew" in *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews In The United States 1830-1914* (Philadelphia 1984), 37

Scholars have thus begged the question of how little an individual's Jewish background actually played in their decision making on slave matters. Naomi Cohen attempts to answer this question in the chapter, "The Proper American Jew", from his book *Encounter with Emancipation*. Cohen insists that geographic location trumped all other deciding factors. "Overwhelmingly, Jews responded as did their compatriots demonstrating both how integrated they really were and how regional loyalties during the crises eclipsed ethnic politics."⁷⁶ However, this argument is not entirely valid in Wise's case: he resided north of the Mason Dixon line on free soil, yet advocated for neutrality on all issues regarding disunion.

Political Neutrality: Not quite

Throughout the war, the *American Israelite* was continually utilized as a vehicle for spreading views on anything concerning current events. From early on, Wise established an emphasis of neutrality in the conflict declaring just five days after the attack on Fort Sumter, "Silence must henceforth be our policy."⁷⁷ For months Wise honored this policy and restrained from virtually any discussions of the conflict in his paper or lectures. He defended his abstinence by declaring a separation of politics and religious preaching in June of that year, "Spread eagle and star and stripes may sound agreeable at political gathering...however it appears to me a violation of the contract between minister and congregation, and a misapplication of the Sabbath and the pulpit., there are plenty of opportunities for almost anybody to make patriotic speeches outside the pulpit."⁷⁸ To a certain degree, this statement is itself patriotic and a reflection of the American value of reverence and a separation of state from

⁷⁶ *Israelite*, 7 (19 April 1861), 334.

⁷⁷ *The Israelite*, June 14, 1861, p. 396

⁷⁸ *Ibid* ^

house of worship. Wise utilized his synagogue and newspaper as place for his followers to seek solace and comfort from the stresses of war.

Defining Step into Politics

By the core period of the war years, Wise's political reputation was significantly developing. In September of 1863, the county convention cited Wise as a formidable candidate for the ballot, "Dr. Wise is a gentlemen of learning and accomplishments – is well known as an esteemed Hebrew Rabbi in this city. He would make an excellent senator."⁷⁹ Following their policy towards politics a decade earlier, his congregation did not view the prospects of a, "Senator Wise", as favorable, and they requested that he decline any nominations. However, one should also note that earlier in the same letter the congregational board states that they "feel honored by this demonstration of confidence...of your sincere attachment to our common country."⁸⁰ This statement alone indicates that civic mindedness was looked on more favorably by laypeople than it once was. Wise obliged to the requests of his congregants, and ultimately dismissed all possibilities of a senatorial run addressing his supporters, "I feel obliged to decline a nomination so honorably tendered as those who nominated me know well my sincere attachment to this country and government. God will save the Union and the constitution."⁸¹ The relatively small event was not in vain. By collecting publicity at a time in which the news was flooded with recordings of great battles being fought over the largest threat to disunion ever experienced in American history, Wise gained the confidence necessary to carry the momentum of his movement.

⁷⁹ *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* (6, September 1863)

⁸⁰ *Ibid* ^

⁸¹ *Israelite* 8 (19 July 1861), 23.

Wise's step towards American politics also brings about several other questions from scholars on the appropriateness of a Jewish religious leaders political neutrality or lack there of. The dormant years following the failed Zion College and Cleveland conference were reaching an end. The moment in the spotlight would become a prescient for the groundwork of another major attempt to bring together the American Jews under one united institution.

Ambitions of Unparalleled success: unforeseen obstacles.

It was in the years immediately following the conclusion of the Civil War that the prospect of Wise's ultimate goal was finally taking shape. There were several driving forces that brought his goals to fruition, all of which were motivated by his nationalistic mentality. One major challenge that Wise faced from his previous attempts at unification was perpetuating Germanic influence onto the American Jewish way of life. As mentioned earlier, his protests against Germanization in American synagogues were extraordinarily bold, once even claiming that, "The German prayer book only destroys the union of the synagogue and makes it a stranger in this country."⁸² Once again, Wise has portrayed German as a hindrance to the Jewish people. Yet, the challenge of combating the foreign element in the American synagogue was only growing.

Following the civil war, a large wave of immigrants entered the country from German speaking places in Europe, many of them were Jewish. Among them were a great number of ordained Rabbi's who utilized their powerful German education to attract large congregations in major American cities ranging from New York, Philadelphia, Louisville, and Chicago. Tempkin describes the period as one of, "Renewed strength and energy for the reform movement."⁸³

⁸² Ibid ^ 27

⁸³ Ibid 273

Wise's longtime foe on this issue, David Einhorn, now had a growing pulpit and strength in numbers. He utilized this strength by establishing a new paper, *The Jewish Times*, which unsurprisingly was written in both German and English. Granted his rising opposition, Wise did not fold towards his opponents. He continued to omit German elements from Jewish ways of life in a more collaborative way than he had done previously.

. He used a strategy of appeasement to grasp some of the influential members of the movement. In 1866, he began a series of correspondence with the recently immigrated Adolph Huebesch. Huebesch and Wise share a common background as they both hailed from Prague. Wise states,

“It certainly would have been my duty, as colleague and countryman, to welcome you to American soil.... You probably don't have a more pleasant environment in your new position than you did in Prague, for Prague is educated, New York is not....America, however, is bigger than New York and offers a broad, fruitful, and rewarding environment to keen and energetic souls.... The intelligent world is so judaized, without knowing it, that only the right approach is needed to win hundreds of thousands for Judaism.... My experience has taught me that we need friends. This is why I am now working on an English-German section of public worship.”⁸⁴

There are a few significant takeaways from this opening letter. Firstly, Wise refers to Huebesch as a “countrymen and colleague”, indicating that American citizenship effectively binds the two foreign gentlemen together. Here, we also see Wise disgracing the reputation of New York by marking it as a place of inferior intelligence to Prague. Wise's unenthusiastic attitude

⁸⁴ To Adolph Huebsch *From* I.M. Wise, November 28, 1866

towards New York, was comparable to two decades prior when he arrived in the city in 1846. The opening pages of his *Reminiscences* describe the event, “The first impression the city made upon me was exceedingly unfavorable....I had never before seen a city so bare of all art and of every trace of good taste.”⁸⁵ Yet, the comments to Huebesch conclude with a much more positive outlook, encouraging him to reach out and absorb more of what America had to offer beyond the boundaries of New York. To Wise, the big city tucked away on the far east coast did not accurately reflect the limitless potential that the American frontier had for Judaism. New York was crowded, and had boundaries, that resembled the Old World’s European cities. Far western cities like Cincinnati were limitless, and thus the potential for growth was much higher. This letter also reveals Wise’s views on overly intellectual speech placing a hindrance on Jewish leaders in America communicating effectively with laypeople. Wise inherited this idea from the 18th century Enlightenment Rabbi Moses Mendelssohn. As discussed in Tempkin, Mendelssohn had been a major inspiration for Wise in his early years. The German rabbi preached that the fundamental truths of Judaism were true for all common men. For Mendelssohn, Jewish emancipation was reliant on involvement in civil society. In Europe this was a minimal occurrence as most lived secluded amongst their own communities.

. The closing words of Wise’s letter to Hubesch in which he states that, “We need friends”, are clearly reflective of Mendelssohn’s philosophy of integration into the community.

As discussed in Koehler’s aforementioned article, *Issac Mayer Wise: His language of Anti-Anti Semitism*, the Rabbi insisted that to successfully preach to the people, “words are clear, grammatically correct, and concise and phrased in short simple sentences...never go

⁸⁵ Isaac Mayer Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans, and ed. By David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), 33

beyond the comprehension of the public.”⁸⁶ While Koehler’s assertions are true, his argument fails to encompass the larger reason for why Wise focuses on perfecting the syntax of his own writing. The Rabbi is motivated to unite the Jews under one shared element, which he believes language is best for. The final piece of this letter that is perhaps most exhibitivive of his renewed strategy of uniting American Jews is his active work towards a German-Jewish section of public worship. This comment was followed up in another letter to Huebesch two years later, “I want one united Israel, the reform efforts are merely a means to re-establish unity under the pressure of the times and stormy circumstances.....The German and English section should be added later once the congregations have been won over to accept the principle.” In his previous attempts at unification, Wise shamed those who retained the German language in their prayer books, while encouraging the Minhag America as one of true worth for the American Jew wishing to unite together and assimilate culturally into the United States. Although he still maintained these beliefs after the American Civil War, his desire for unification of the American congregations was so strong that he now was willing to allow some Germanizing to remain if it meant attracting the Radical reformers to his platform. Thus, Wise’s pragmatic approach to achieve his goal is expressed.

Following a similar tangent, Wise’s sense of pragmatism was also displayed in a new level of adherence and respect for his former enemies. Following the death of Isaac Leeser, he provided a respectful tribute to him in the February 14th 1868 addition of the *American Israelite*, “He was the banner-bearer of American Jewish conservatism...he had a cause to plead and he did It without fears or favors...he unfurled his true color on every

⁸⁶ Kully, Robert, “Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise: His Language of Anti Anti-Semitism”, *The Quarterly Journal Of Speech* 12

occasion...Peace be to his ashes, happiness to his soul, and blessing to his memory”⁸⁷ The statement can be interpreted as both strategic and revealing of the underlying unity that existed between all Jews triumphing over theological and political disagreements. From the strategic standpoint, Wise’s reverence for Leeser is a ploy to appease the vast numbers of Orthodox Jews who looked to Leeser as their spiritual and political leader. Tempkin asserts that most of his contention for national leadership came from Leeser up until the moment of his death. Therefore, the opportunity for a wider amount of followers was now open and the first, easy step at attracting them was by expressing gratitude and grief towards their former idol. On a broader scale, Wise was displaying an attitude of American companionship with the Orthodox community. Unlike most other Rabbi’s of the time, he saw past their theological differences, and tried to engage them in a way that would bond them together.

Another pragmatic strategy utilized by Wise at this time in his quest for unity was through global outreach for Jews living beyond the United States. In his book, “Encounter With Emancipation”, Naomi Cohen describes this component as, “Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh”, “All Israel are responsible for one another.” Intervention in foreign affairs for the betterment of suffering peoples abroad is at the core of American values and ideals. The examples he provides describe the role of American Jews in the mid nineteenth century increasing levels of humanitarian support for Jewish communities abroad, particularly to the countries in Europe from which many of them recently emigrated. Cohen describes, “The tasks they undertook joined orthodox with reform, synagogue with free thinker. They resolutely affirmed their loyalty to their foreign brethren.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *Israelite* 8 (12 Feb 1868), 45

⁸⁸ *Israelite* 5 (17 Sept 1858)

One such circumstance in which Wise displayed his support for the international Jewish community prior to the civil war was in the Mortara Case, in which a Jewish child in the Italian Papal states, had been forcibly abducted by the pope from his home on the grounds that the child had been secretly baptized at birth. The Popes decision to take the child sparked outrage throughout the world, and led to the trial of Father Feletti, the man directly responsible for the abduction. For several months the *American Israelite* continuously kept its readers informed on both the developments of the case, and the injustices that were reflected from it. “The Pope and his numerous, soulless lackeys never cared whether the boy is Christian or Jews.” Wise went on to encourage congregations across the country to take civic action by writing to congressmen to take more of an initiative on the issue. The Swiss trade Treaty of 1850 was another such international issue that more directly impacted American Jews. One provision of this treaty accepted the Swiss restriction to refuse entry and commercial privileges to American Jews.

In one of his many letters to Stephen Douglass in 1858, Wise demanded that there be a political response to this injustice, “The Israelites have especially been frightened away from the democracy of the Swiss treaty.”⁸⁹ These events played well into Wise’s platform that the Jews of America needed to respond as a singular, defensive unit to the threat of Christianization playing a role in governmental authority at home and abroad.

Alas, the push for change was not far reaching. Despite acknowledgment from the office of the President on multiple occasions the unorganized, Jews prior to the Civil War failed in making any real change to the legal boundaries afflicting them at home and abroad. Cohen

⁸⁹ To Stephen A. Douglas From I.M. Wise, November 9, 1858

summarizes the failure later in the chapter, “Too late did the Jewish leaders agree that unity among American Jews, instead of scattered and duplicatory efforts, would have brought about a different result.”⁹⁰ In the years following the Civil War, Wise hoped that the failed efforts of unification from the antebellum years would inspire Jewish leaders to better collaborate with one another and prevent those failures from going in vain. His hope was fulfilled when the radical reformers called together a conference in June of 1869. The leaders initiating the conference; Samuel Adler and David Einhorn, desired for the conference to focus on solving practical questions on modern rituals such as marriage.

Yet, there was one element to the conference that did not sit pleasantly with Wise, prompting him to write of it in that week’s edition of the *American Israelite*. “We rather look upon it as a meeting of colleagues with a theological education who favor decided progress in religion, there number is limited.” By limiting the scope of participants, the Rabbi insisted that the radical reformers were set up for failure. The success of the movement required participation from more than just rabbinic leaders. In order to truly be successful, the majority of American Jews would need to have an equal opportunity to voicing an opinion at the conference. In contrast, Wise articulates this later in the description, “The conference advocated by us, is the conference of all congregations and their ministers, to unite all and exclude none, for the solutions of great practical questions, of which the public worship and marriage laws are two and the Union of the American Israelite is main.”⁹¹ Wise’s voice is a reflection of the truly American principle of democracy,

⁹⁰ Naomi Cohen, “The Americanization of American Judaism” in *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews In The United States 1830-1914*, (Philadelphia 1984) 209

⁹¹ *Israelite* 18 (29 July 1870), 8

allowing the people's voice to be heard, not just their leaders. Thus, it was not the content of the meeting that displeased Wise, but the method of conducting it that upset him.

Ultimately Wise attended the reformers conference in Philadelphia anyways. In his most pragmatist fashion, he used several of the conferences debates to direct the rabbis towards investing their congregations in the *Minhag America*. The fusion of prayer books was a major subject to which the delegates devoted discussion towards. As previously mentioned, Wise's original prayer book had undergone several revisions including one that provided multiple editions that were produced in both English, German, and Hebrew to accommodate the various levels of orthodoxy and reformers. Overall, Wise seemed more patient in his approach to the delegates. In fact, he states in December of that year, "We are not ready to give our argument on the congressional conference to the public...and we desire to let others speak first...We will stand back until all have spoken who desire to be heard"⁹² In a move to appease the radicals, Wise voted in favor of resolutions that supported revisions on the laws of marriage and divorce, the recognition of circumcision, and the elimination of Hebrew from certain texts. As mentioned in previous texts, these were not usual positions that he supported. For example, for decades, Wise advocated for the retention of Hebrew in the American prayer book. The decision to support resolutions refuting this indicated a decisive move of pragmatism. Rubenstein noted that readers of the American Israelite did not respond favorably to his decision, questioning his support. In response to those readers, he remarked that he did not interpret any conference resolutions as abrogating those practices, which it disregarded as unessential to being a practicing Jew.

⁹² Israelite 16 (24 Dec 1869)

This new, seemingly easy going attitude towards initiating progress on the unification movement, reflects the Rabbis new strategy of allowing his hard left leaning colleagues to insert themselves into a conversation that he had been leading for over two decades. In his article, Rubenstein interprets Wise's brief moment of apathy as highly pragmatic. The author cites Wise's previous circumstances during the Cleveland Conference fifteen years prior, in which he was overtly vocal in siding with the mostly orthodox positions on Talmud established at the meeting. In the wake of that event, he received heavy criticism from the radicals. A heavy load of this criticism came from Einhorn, who ironically was now the man leading the conference in Philadelphia. Therefore in a move of pure pragmatism, under new similar circumstances, Wise chose to back off in an attempt not ally himself with the conference platforms. "Einhorn and the thoroughgoing Reformers... admittedly cared not a whit about unity."⁹³

As the nation was building itself back together during the Reconstruction, so was the Jewish community. Wise's preaching and writing over the next couple years gained him favorability amongst the majority of Jewish leaders from both factions. Once again, an onlooker of the unity movement could easily interpret the changes in Jewish newspaper publications interacting with one another. For example, Wise's *American Israelite* now more frequently quoted *The Jewish Messenger*, a highly orthodox paper. One of Wise's newly emphasized points that attracted the attention of the Orthodox was his belief in constructing multiple seminaries of Hebrew education rather than one as he previously had abdicated for. The belief was backed by a new concept that Judaism was ultimately about much more than a defined label. "There is something infinitely higher and holier in Judaism than all forms,

⁹³ *Isaac Mayer Wise: A New Appraisal*

modern or ancient.”⁹⁴ Therefore, a Jewish school would expect its students to have a comprehensive knowledge of all types of Judaism in practice in America. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Jews were making their own respective attempts at a school, to which Wise distanced himself from. Maimonides College, established in Philadelphia in 1867, was headed by Isaac Leeser and staffed with a majority of faculty from a heavily Polish background primarily focused on teaching Judaism as it was in Europe.

This European Jewish style of learning emphasized the need for Jews to remain enclosed within their communities, and not concern themselves with surrounding nations or other Jews who did not share their own Talmudic interpretations. *The Israelite* cautioned its readers to stray from the establishment, “We must raise our view against the establishment which is called the Maimonides College of Philadelphia.”⁹⁵ Wise’s distaste for the school was likely due to its more close-minded agenda that was irrelevant to success in modern America. “The first object of education is, must be, practical knowledge...the main object of education is to liberalize the mind.” Wise was a frequent supporter of American-ordained Rabbis leading his future school. Clearly the Maimonides school lacked these traits. Evidently, the school folded within just a couple years, and with it yet another attempt at establishing a permanent American Jewish Educational institute.

Alas, faith in a workable solution for all corners of Jewish faith did not cease to exist. Over the next few years, several conferences convened on Wise’s account. Calls for revisions of the Minhag America, and seemingly agreed upon theological beliefs, were followed up by attacks and further disagreements. All the while, Wise stepped carefully, avoiding blows from

⁹⁴ *Israelite*, 16 (25 February 1870)

⁹⁵ *Israelite*, 15 (21 August 1868)

either side at every opportunity possible. Tempkin describes the period in the early 1870's, "The onslaught was a lengthy one, and the editor of the Jewish Times (Einhorn's paper) pulled all his stops for an angry roulade, playing the themes of Wise perfidy, ambition, and lack of scholarship."⁹⁶

Final Push towards Success

It was after one major gathering of Jewish leaders in Cleveland in 1871 that spawned a new glimmer of hope that shined onto the unification movement. The meeting, which convened several major synagogues together in Cleveland, declared a resolution passed to create a conference. The group was to be known as the, "Union Of American Hebrew Congregations." The idea of creating a Union, in addition to the college, had been bubbling among various groups for the last several years. In the same spirit of founding the Zion College, Wise declared, "We will not lay down our pen until there shall stand firmly the Union Of the American Hebrew Congregations, until we shall have the Hebrew classical and rabbinical college on American soil." The final push required support from all parties associated with Wise, including that of his loyal congregation, Bene-Yerushurun. In a letter to his congregants in 1871, Wise wrote to them, "But I can not die in peace before I have secured to the American Israel the Union, Seminary, and Synod, a lasting union and security for its perpetuation and nobody knows, how long he lives."⁹⁷ In return, Wise's loyalty to his home synagogue remained despite his now famous reputation. This loyalty presented itself clearly in 1873 when an offer from Congregation Anshe Emith requested the Rabbi move for a salary of \$8,000, twice what he was earning at

⁹⁶ Sefton, Tempkin *Creating American Reform Judaism: The Life And Times Of Issac Mayer Wise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 240

⁹⁷ To Congregation Bene-Yeshurun *From I.M. Wise, August, 1871*

Bene- Yeshurun. In addition, the job offer provided a possibility to hold a more commanding position to a much larger audience which meant more exposure for the Minhag American prayer book. Despite these temptations, the Rabbi turned down the offer.

The college finally appeared ascended to fruition in 1874 with Wise as its president. The choice of home for the college was set to be Cincinnati, which conveniently had been Wise's base of operations for the last twenty years. Similarly, Cincinnati was at this time a centrifugal location for the Jews, at least from Wise's perspective. There was also the belief that it was a place that was truly American, in the sense that those residing in the city were fully immersed in American culture compared to other locations such as New York. In addition to his Reminiscences, there are numerous letters Wise sent to recently immigrated Rabbi's apologizing for the city's first impression. Since his departure from the "big apple" shortly after arriving to America, Wise frequently belittled the city. In defending Cincinnati, Wise claimed that the town was a, "successful hot-house for the tender plant of American Judaism...the Zion of the New World...Judaism is nothing outlandish, it is no exotic curiosity, it is neither German, French nor Polish, it is American, and fully so in language, spirit and form."⁹⁸ Essentially, Cincinnati was a city of the American West.

On a deeper level, Cincinnati was truly a special place at this period in American history. At the time of the college's founding, many far western American cities had yet to have a substantial Jewish community, or at least one that sought any interest in Wise's schemes. Los Angeles had only built its first synagogue just a decade earlier in 1862, and San Francisco's community was far more progressive than the reformers of the east, and thus disconnected in many ways. Wise expresses his upsetting attitude for these communities in

⁹⁸ *Israelite* 8 (19 July 1873), 33

his paper in 1873, “What is the matter with our brethren in California and Oregon? During all these communications in our midst in favor of constructing a union of congregation ...not a word of encouragement...we feel mortified that none of them has to say anything about this great scheme.”⁹⁹ The far west lack of participation thus placed Cincinnati as the Western frontier for American Judaism. Just as the Manifest Destiny entitled the American people to conquer the frontier, the American Israelites looked towards the west as potential to spread their influence and grow more communities. Frequently referred to as, “The Queen Of The West”, Cincinnati held significant potential for the Jews to spread beyond the limits of the east coast.

The establishment of the college was only one fold of Wise’s plan to secure Cincinnati as the hub for American Jewish activity. In the fall of 1873 the Israelite proclaimed, “We will not lay down our pen until there shall stand firmly the Union Of American Hebrew Congregations.”¹⁰⁰ The Union was to be utilized as a vehicle to sanction common communication amongst synagogue leaders, and more importantly, congregants themselves. Once again in the style of the enlightenment leader Mendelssohn, Wise declared the success of the community came down to the individuals themselves. It was their personal role to bring about change in their own respective communities, “Every Israelite, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, must be a member of some Hebrew congregation...every Hebrew child must be sent to a well conducted Sabbath school...Every Israelite must keep the Sabbath.”¹⁰¹ These statements are closely similar to the American values of Individualism

⁹⁹ Ibid (5 Sept. 1873) 4.

¹⁰⁰ Israelite, 21 (8 Aug 1873), 4.

¹⁰¹ Israelite, 25 (24 Sept 1875), 4.

and Democracy: Beliefs that all individuals regardless of status play a role in how society is operated.

Most of Wise's radical reform rivals ceased to have much relevance to the movement by this period. Samuel Adler, the prominent leader from New York, was retired. According to most accounts Einhorn sheltered himself within his own congregation, leaving the public sphere almost entirely. For the remainder of his life, Einhorn wrote and spoke primarily in German. Without the leadership of Adler, Einhorn and several other major speakers from the Philadelphia conference, the radical reform movement lost a lot of its momentum and for the most part, folded under Wise's new college and organization. To secure this hold, Wise continued his regular travels to the East, speaking on behalf of the Minhag America and power of the Hebrew Union College to congregations everywhere.

The Establishment of the Union Of American Hebrew Congregations and the accompanying Hebrew Union College was a remarkable event beyond the previously perceived limits of the Jewish community. By proving that an immigrant could come to America and garner support for the constructing of a major religious organization speaks to the freedoms and liberties allowed to individuals in this nation. Other nations across the globe with comparably large Jewish populations have struggled, and still battle with anti-Semitism that prevents them from organizing outside local boundaries. Wise's legacy continues to thrive well over a century after its inception.

The story of Wise speaks beyond the bounds of his own lifetime. The story embodies the direction of the Jew's status in America. By studying his work and contributions to American Judaism, scholars can view the present divisions in the community with less negativity, and more optimism. In times of trouble and volatile disagreements, the

pragmatists of the community will find a way to rise up and be the leaders for tomorrow.

Therefore, patience and the study and devotion to history is the clear answer to how we can define the existence of the Jew in the American setting.

