MARCUS

The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise

JACOB RADER MARCUS

The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES
On the Cincinnati Campus
of the
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

This study, an address, was delivered in honor of Isaac Mayer Wise on Founder's Day, March 28, 1931, in the Chapel of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio. It was privately printed that year. In 1969 it was revised and copyrighted.

Published on the

ERNA KROUCH FUND

BIOGRAPHY

ISAAC MAYER WISE was born in Steingrub, Bohemia, March 29, 1819. After a brief career as a rabbi in Radnitz, Bohemia, he came to the United States in 1846, and was elected rabbi in Albany, New York. He entered upon a career of religious reform, and soon became one of the outstanding Jewish religious leaders in this land. In 1854, he was elected rabbi of Congregation Bene Yeshurun in Cincinnati, and occupied this position for the rest of his life. The very year of his arrival in Cincinnati, he founded *The Israelite,* an Anglo-Jewish newspaper; the following year, *Deborah,* which was published in German. He was a prolific writer: belles lettres, histories, theological works, polemics, and rituals flowed from his fluent pen. Wise's efforts were chiefly directed, however, toward the organization of American Jewry and, after years of intensive labor, were marked by success. In 1873, he inspired the founding of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and two years later this association of Jewish synagogues established the Hebrew Union College, a rabbinical seminary for American Jews. Finally, in 1889, the alumni of the College, now decidedly Reform, and other rabbis joined to create the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In all three institutions Wise's will was influential. He was easily the most distinguished organizer and leader of American Reform Jewry. He died in Cincinnati, March 26, 1900.

In February, 1850, Isaac Mayer Wise visited Washington. He was on his way South in search of health. Although only thirty-one years of age, he was already a neurotic, torn by morbid fears, racked by an incessant cough. He visited and impressed the President, Zachary Taylor, chatted with Senator Seward, and dined with Daniel Webster. The topics of conversation at that dinner were Unitarianism and Herbartian psychology. When that young rabbi left Washington, America had become for him "my" country; its people "my" people. What was this Americanism of Wise, one of the most eminent American Jews of the nineteenth century? Was

it a complacent conceit engendered by the flattering attention of the great, or was it reasoned conviction? What had brought him to America?

This young Bohemian came here because to him America was the source of all political liberalism. His every intellectual and political experience conspired to bring him to this land. He was very unhappy in the Austrian Empire. He was born in the decade that marked the downfall of the Napoleonic system and of French liberalism. The year of his birth, 1819, saw the "hep-hep" riots, a wave of anti-Jewish hatred that swept through the Germanic lands, bringing destruction and even death in its wake. In 1830, when he was but a child of eleven, the people of Central Europe protested in vain against the monarchial conservatives who governed them. It was then that young Wise began to sense the full humiliation of his civil and political status; it was then that he discovered the writings of Gabriel Riesser. Riesser, a young liberal, twenty-four years old, had been refused an academic post because he was a Jew, and with a heart full of bitterness wrote *The Condition of Those Who Acknowledge the Mosaic Faith in Germany. To the Germans of all Confessions.* The boy Wise heard this cry of an outraged soul with tears in his eyes. "I was quite a boy when that book appeared and most likely understood it quite poorly," he later said, "still I read it for nine long weeks every evening, as long as the stump of my candle would hold out and moistened each page with my tears."

The whole life and thinking of Wise are foreshadowed in Riesser's essay. The devil, said Riesser, could not have invented a more diabolical system of law than that which subjects the rights of citizenship to religious conformity. The great principles of our century are equality before the law, the natural right of all men to humane treatment, and unlimited opportunity for all our moral and intellectual development. This book and the other writings of its author were of the most profound influence on this young lad. Wise was begotten politically by Riesser, and the liberal views he acquired from him were supplemented from other sources.

The greatest influence throughout South Germany at this time was exercised by the two historians Karl Wenzeslaus von Rotteck and Friedrich Christoph Schlosser. They wrote the bibles of German liberalism. This didactic school went back to Rousseau, the American and French Revolutions, and Kant for its political ideals and its moral judgments. It evolved a philosophy of history that conformed to its own prejudices; it preached popular sovereignty, government by the will of the people. It insisted on the right to revolt and hoped for a coming liberal revolution everywhere.

Practically all of Wise's intellectual forbears had their roots in the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century. Their political guide was Rousseau; their literary light was Lessing; they preferred cosmopolitanism to nationalism; they demanded full,

unlimited political and religious liberty for all, without regard to established tradition. Their political philosophy was that of the middle class, which had for the first time successfully effected a revolution in France in 1789. The American state was their ideal.

Wise early turned with affection to this school of thought. Its glorification of the new American republic especially impressed him. Moreover, he learned to understand America at first hand through the novels of Cooper and the political writings of Richard Henry Lee. "I was already an American in Bohemia," he once said.

He was determined to leave the country. Conditions were unbearable. He chafed at every restraint, for he was by nature fiery, restless, earnest, fearless, without tact or moderation. He lacked perspective. Like most self-taught vigorous men he envisaged his ideals in an absolute sense, apart from their relation to society—ideals to be realized without qualification or hesitation. He was by instinct a fighter.

After the failure of the revolution of 1830, the political reaction increased in severity. The Jew in Bohemia was hampered in his choice of residence, was subject to ignominious Jewish taxes, limited even in the human right of marriage, and withal compelled to profess a fervent loyalty to an emperor who tolerated these inhumanities. Wise was galled by these indignities. He was reprimanded by the officials for his lukewarm loyalty. They were right. He felt no loyalty to the Austrian Empire; he felt that it was immoral to

be loyal to a land that denied him the "rights of man," that encouraged a bigoted State-Church, that "treated its serfs worse than the slaves in the South." He bitterly resented his status as an imperial-royal Bohemian Tolerated-Jew. "My father," he said, "was not permitted to call even a handbreadth of land his own, therefore I never had a fatherland." He was too impatient waiting for the revolution that might never come to recognize that his disabilities were the result of historic conditions having their roots in the centuries. Many of his later German rabbinical colleagues who came to America as a land of refuge were so woven into the texture of German life that they never surrendered their love for the state that virtually exiled them. Wise, who was never subject to a systematic public school education, escaped the German political influence and had the courage to break with his Germanic loyalties. Refused a passport, he smuggled himself across the border. He came to America as a political pilgrim; he came to these shores not to found a new religion, but to live as a free man politically. He landed in New York with two dollars in his pocket, and a wife and a child. The first Americans he met were German hack-drivers, who demanded six dollars for the trip to the East Side and reviled him as a Jew because he refused to pay it.

When he came here in 1846, he was not really open to new political influences. Most of his thinking had already been done in Bohemia. He came here to find his ideas in practice, and took note only of that

which was in consonance with them. He found much that pleased him: American Revolutionary ideals and Jeffersonian democracy were professed by every man. Wise knew these same teachings as French and German liberalism. They meant much to him; he had suffered to realize them. As rabbi of Albany, he associated with political liberals and religious radicals, and out of the broad arena of American political life he chose as his heroes those men who gave him what he came here to find. Senator Seward, of Civil War and Alaska fame, Stephen A. Douglas, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Horace Greeley were his friends or models. Seward influenced him to stand alone and to fight for principle; Douglas preached the great eighteenth-century doctrine of popular sovereignty; Webster encouraged him to admire the Constitution; Greeley was sympathetic to aliens and Catholics. All of them loved the Union, and most of them were determined to hold it together even if it meant the continuance of slavery.

Wise began as a Whig, but developed into a fervent States' Rights Democrat. He became a true Jeffersonian. At one time in the 50's, in Cincinnati, he almost joined the new Republican party, but held aloof because of German atheists who were associated with it. He had an almost worshipful attitude to the Constitution, that democratic instrument which guaranteed civil equality and religious liberty. America's great contribution, he believed, was its separation of Church and State, its promise of freedom of

conscience to all. The dominance of the Catholic Church in old Austria had made of him an implacable opponent of any sectarian influence in the state. "This is a democratic republic," he reiterated, "and must be governed without God's special police." To maintain religious liberty in this land, he was willing to pit Catholics against Protestants until they had learned to become liberal American citizens. "We want the democratic republic, now and forever, no Christian stock company."

It is not surprising that Wise, who worshipped the concept of liberty and lived most of his life on the border line between the North and the South, laid the utmost stress on personal and states' rights that were not to be limited except to hold the Union together. He was a free trader. He was opposed to partisan politics and the vicious spoils system. It was inevitable that he should join the Democratic party, though it, too, did not always escape his criticism. Yet he was not such an extremist. He looked askance at the uncouth Jacksonian democrats, as he did at the mild socialism of the intellectuals. He had much in common with the typical American radicals of his day like Emerson and Lowell, who were largely antiwar, antislavery, antiliquor and antipoverty; but he could not go the whole way with them, for he was essentially a middle-of-the-road man, not only in religion, but also in politics. The only exception was where politics touched Jewish emancipation and liberty. Then he was an implacable extremist and de-

manded immediate change. He refused to wait placidly for a dilatory evolution to solve the Jewish problem. The State and the Jew must do it now.

The early Wise was not a nationalist; he was a cosmopolitan. "We do not love one section of the earth or one class of people better than others," he once said. "The world is our country and humanity is our politics. Cosmopolitanism is the highest object of humanity. We love this country's institutions, because they approach nearest to the principles of absolute justice . . ." He was an eighteenth-century European liberal on nineteenth-century American soil. Young America, nationalistic, looked West. Wise, here in America, looked eastward, to Europe, and dreamed of a universal republic.

When in 1848 all Europe was aflame with revolt, Wise thought for a time of returning to aid in the establishment of a European republic. He was not altogether happy in America. He was looked upon as a radical religious agitator, and for a while Temple Emanu-El of New York even closed its pulpit to him. In order to be absolutely free he determined to give up the rabbinate and study law. His insistence on secular education for the young and modern music in the service had aroused his own people against him. In this conservatism, Jewry was at one with Christianity. It was only fifteen years before Wise's arrival that the most intelligent Gentile group in Albany had even tolerated a choir. The choir leader then had dared to bring a tuning fork into the loft in order to

give the correct pitch. "An old, gray-haired pillar of the Church, who heard and saw the unfortunate tuning fork, arose in the midst of the service and cried out with a loud voice: 'I demand that this instrument of hell be removed from the house of God.'" And it was.

Seward, Greeley, and others prevailed on the impetuous Wise to remain. He stayed because he realized that Europe was not ripe for freedom. Moreover, he cherished the hope that the principle of liberty coming from America would ultimately make the whole world free. "America," he declared, "is the most perfect realization of the idea of human rights in the world." This land, he taught, has a mission: "Providence reserved this sea-girt continent for the last and highest triumphs of humanity; no power on earth can change this manifest destiny." Possibly before the end of the nineteenth century, all monarchies will be gone and there will be but "one mankind, one liberty, one fraternity." These are the dreams of a young man of thirty, an impractical doctrinaire if you will, but one deadly in earnest.

He was very anxious for all Jews to be thoroughly Americanized, that is, to possess an understanding of the principles of political liberty. He believed it necessary above all for them to know the vernacular. In his day, over two-thirds of the German Jewish immigrants spoke no English. Wise tells us that the only phrases many of the peddlers knew were: "You fant to puy somdink? Can I shtay mit you all nacht?"

These phrases were written on a slip of paper, and it was no minor tragedy when the unfortunate peddler lost his "English language." English was necessary, Wise believed, not only to bring the Jew into contact with American ideals, but also to restore his self-respect. The Jew in Europe had been crushed through long oppression, and it was now urgent that he divorce himself from the German tongue with its rich vocabulary of anti-Jewish invective, which only served to recall the old disgrace. This explains his impatience with the great German-American rabbis of the 60's who Germanized instead of Americanized, and, as he said, "made Israel a stranger forever in this country." Through English, the immigrant Jew can again "gain the proud self-consciousness of the free-born man." His political thinking colored his religious practice. It is not improbable that his religious liberalism sprang from his political orientation. He had a horror of religious despotism and thanked his God that in America there were no petty tyrants, like the chief rabbis of England and Germany; and he cherished a cordial hatred for the old-fashioned autocratic parnas.

While the concept of America's political mission was running through his head, he went to Washington in 1850. The democratic attitude of the leaders toward him, an alien of only four years' residence, convinced him that his ideals were possible in this truly democratic land and sealed his loyalty to America. This new American never seemed to realize,

however, that his political idealism, so childlike and humane, was already antiquated on the American scene. He failed to understand that America in this middle period was already in transition from a liberal state built on cosmopolitan ideals to an Anglo-Saxon conservative republic. The new tendency was a self-centered nationalism. Wise's teachings were obsolescent.

It would be unfair to assume, however, from the naive enthusiasm of young Wise that he was completely enthralled by American life and culture. He was a discriminating critic, for in Europe he had experienced not only autocracy, but also efficient government and a broad culture. Public morals, he preached, were poisoned by centralization of power, church influence in politics, high tariffs, and that to which he later refers as "the disgrace of the great nation'"—corruption in office. Like Emerson he had little faith in parties. "The country is safe," he said sardonically, "whoever shall be nominated or elected. The main question is, who shall divide the spoils and how it shall be divided." He had a profound contempt for the party in power. "If we had not here and there an honest man among them," he said curtly, "the whole crew would be ripe for hell, and the sun would shine on them only by virtue of the horses, dogs, and cats depending on them." He stormed against demagogism and the ignorance of science and literature. "That thing which the Germans call *Bildung*, real and thorough culture, is at a considerable discount

here." And in a sterner mood he writes: ". . . it appears to some observers that the nation which chews tobacco, drinks whiskey as a common beverage, swears most unenlightened, bets on elections, horses, fighting-men, dogs and cocks, has so many and so well-filled jails, penitentiaries, gambling houses, brothels and other low dens, is none too enlightened."

But he reserves his most bitter indictment of America for its worship of money. "It cannot be the destiny of a nation to make money,'" he said. Like James Russell Lowell and others, he was unsympathetic to the industrial revolution that was transforming America. Wise had grown up under a *kleinbuergerlich* economic system of live and let live, and did not really understand the inevitability of the machine civilization. He saw its bad results, and wanted a return to a more primitive economic system, where, he imagined, huge fortunes and dire poverty were both unknown, where tradition and custom and law protected the economic status of the lower middle classes. His concepts of extreme political individualism, on the one hand, and of economic protection of the middle classes, on the other hand, were completely at variance. His uncritical economic philosophy was inspired by democratic considerations. The rich were bad; "we have already an alarmingly large number of millionaires, much too large for a sound republic, and much too influential for the public welfare." "In the *HaMagid*," he said facetiously, "we find the phrase: *ish 'ani abal yashar*, poor but honest, but

how would you render in Hebrew or in any other language: rich but honest?" He saw no reason to be proud of the wealth of the Rothschilds, for their money was no proof of the excellence of Judaism. He was opposed to the building of factories, large mercantile establishments, and the proletarianization of the workers. Like the dramatists and liberals of his day, he stood with the masses against the classes. Yet Wise did not favor a social revolution, because he saw no need for it. His interest, too, lay primarily in political improvement. Emerson believed that free trade and "the access of the young and poor to the sources of power and wealth" would aid the people materially. This was the attitude of Wise also. America, he said, was rich enough to provide for all, and the unions "would redeem the laboring man from the oppression of hard labor and the despotism of capital." He saw no solution in the "serpent" communism or in socialism, for he was opposed to extremes. He resented the economic teachings of the radicals, probably because they jeopardized the political goals of the liberals. Yet later in life, he was frank to admit that some day the Socialists Marx and Lassalle might be considered the greatest among nonreligious Jews, and he once said prophetically: "Possibly the future lies largely with them."

Wise's economic and political liberalism had little influence on his contemporaries because as men of trade their fortunes were bound up with the new party of centralization and "big business." His plea,

however, for cultural adaptation and religious liberalism was eagerly received by a generation of Germanic immigrants who recognized in him their first articulate leader.

In the 50's, Wise, now in Cincinnati, turned his attention to the impending Civil War. He saw it coming. It depressed him, because he felt that it was unnecessary. He was of the opinion that all differences could be settled if the extremists were disregarded—the secessionists of the South and the abolitionists of the North who preached "the irrepressible conflict." The issue of slavery, he insisted, was only a pretext of the new Republican party to get into power, and get at the spoils of office; speculators, both slavery and antislavery men, were creating strife in order to line their pocketbooks in the new western and southern territories. But his keenest suspicions were directed at "the grand chorus of black coats and white cravats," the Protestant clergy, who, he feared, were using the slave question to gain political control and Christianize the American Constitution.

He had gloomy forebodings as to what this war would do to his ideals. "Liberty never suffered a more fatal blow than this," he mourned, when South Carolina seceded. He saw clearly the dangers of disunion, for he knew the fate of disunited Italy and Germany. In his mind's eye, he saw the rise of three or four republics here; his feverish imagination saw standing armies in these small states, despotism, bureaucracy, huge taxes, poverty, European mockery.

The war threatened to shatter all his hopes of bringing democracy to a Europe that was still largely monarchical and autocratic. In 1860, he wrote again on his favorite theme: "America has a great future"; it must grow to such heights that all nations may see us and learn the great lesson of liberty. "Our country's future, for this reason, is the future of all humanity." A compromise, he pleaded, can and should be made. Wise, like his Kentucky neighbor Henry Clay, was a great compromiser. Like Vallandigham and thousands of other Ohioans, he was a Peace Democrat. The problem of slavery was not insurmountable. It was a "political question." Though Wise was correct in laying bare many of the material causes that drove the North and South to war, he failed altogether to sense the outraged moral indignation of the masses in the North against the institution of human slavery. He begged that constitutional guarantees be given to the South to protect slavery, or the Union would be dissolved. Here we have the motive of Wise's attitude: with so much at stake no price was too big to pay for union and peace.

The tragedy of disunion was a real one to him, for it endangered the liberalization of all the world; only a powerful United States of North America could bring liberty to Europe. To some of his Democratic friends, only the future of America itself was involved, and they, like Stephen Douglas, had a solution: force, war. This was no solution for Wise. He was opposed to violence, he abhorred the idea of

war. Not only did he have friends and relatives on both sides, but as he said: "We are the servants of peace, not of war." It was "depravity to admire the bravery of the warrior who kills scores and to condemn the murderer to the gallows." Not only was he opposed to war, and saw no solution on that score, but he believed that free states must not be coerced. Free states have the right to secede when their rights are infringed upon. His studies of Richard Henry Lee's writings back in Bohemia had made him an anti-Federalist. Here was his dilemma: Success to his hopes could come only through a united America, but he refused to encourage the only means whereby the Union could be held together—war. Here are his words: "Force will not hold together this Union; it was cemented by liberty and can stand only by the affection of the people." When the war broke out, he had no recourse but a sullen resentful silence. When his patriotism was suspected, he answered that the "pulpit is no place for star and stripeism"; it was his business to teach religion.

Wise was gratified by the results of the war; the Union was saved, and slavery was abolished. Although he would have been willing to tolerate slavery in order to save the Union, he was by no means in sympathy with slavery. He was now anxious that the United States manifest its high purpose as an exemplar of equality, not only abroad, but here at home; that it allow no abuses of the Jew. For there were such abuses. The Civil War had demoralized the na-

tion; the new political cliques in Washington, recruited from the towns and villages, brought in prejudice and contempt for the Jew. Wise turned his titanic energy and enthusiasm to combating this danger. His zeal in the fray was all the greater because the target of many of his attacks was the political party he detested.

In defense of the Jew, his policy was one of unbridled belligerency. He was determined that no man should dare to attack the Jew with impunity. Wise protested against the boorishness of the German-American press, the brutality of Boerne's polemics, but it is obvious that he had read them all to good advantage. He had learned much from the embittered Riesser, and he admits himself that his articles were "filled with fire and brimstone," and that he fought like a wounded boar. The *Cincinnati Gazette* had called a Jewish merchant a Shylock. The first paragraph of Wise's answer to these "scrofulous mongers," as he called them, will not bear repetition, but he continued in a milder vein: "We will . . . square accounts with the *Gazette*. We only wait for an opportune time to chastise again that priest-ridden, codfish aristocracy, designated the Cincinnati Gazette Co., who are British in politics, Henry VIII in religion, and Peter Amiens in fanaticism. Our time will come again to pay 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' " "These tactics proved efficacious," he once said of his vigorous journalism.

Wise believed that the source of prejudice lay in

the teachings of Christianity, "for every child was taught in school that the Jews had crucified 'our Lord' and every parson repeated it as often as possible." The realization of the consequences of this age-long accusation induced him to make the strong statement: "The world has sinned more against the Jews than a hundred Christs could atone for on the cross." But he felt that the Jews were at fault, too, because they did not encourage intelligent leadership, because of the low cultural plane of the newly rich among them, and because of the lack of Jewish pride. When in June, 1877, Joseph Seligman, one of America's wealthiest Jewish bankers, was excluded from the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga, Wise wasted little sympathy on him. He was impatient with Jews who patronized the eastern water resorts and associated with "gamblers," "hollow heads," and "the scum of society." "It is not indispensable to show one's marriageable daughters at Saratoga." "Keep away from places where you are not wanted." Wise had little sympathy for Seligman, the "money-prince," but he was indignant at the insult offered to the Jew, and preached an economic boycott against the offending owner, a boycott that was apparently effective.

Even as he tolerated no social discrimination against the individual Jew here, so he demanded full recognition of the civil rights of the American Jew abroad. Citizenship, as he understood it, imposed duties on the recipient, but also an obligation on the State, and he was determined that the State should

meet its obligations in the fullest sense. When, in 1857, the rights of American Jewish citizens were not respected in Switzerland, he said: "Slaves and cowards only will submit to such an outrage; we are men and must be treated as such." He visited President Buchanan to protest against this mistreatment of American Jews in Switzerland; he asked Lincoln in 1863 to withdraw an army order of General Grant expelling the Jews from the territory the general had occupied in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky; and he went to President Hayes seeking protection for the rights of American Jews in Russia. "If we had any political influence," he said, "there would be no American minister at St. Petersburg and no Russian minister in Washington." If he was one of the great Jews of the last century, it was not only because he was the organizer of American Jewish Reform and all its institutions, but also because he was great in courage.

Wise was unrelenting in his attacks on those who wished to Christianize the Constitution, insinuate their Christianity into Thanksgiving proclamations, introduce the Bible into the public schools, and turn Christian holydays into national ones. The timorous Jews were frightened by his frankness for he was no respecter of official persons, and had the courage to call even those in the highest positions "imbeciles." When told to keep quiet—"It will do you no good," said a friend—he answered that his attacks in the *Israelite* had given courage to many a Jew who before

this had denied his origin; that he had put the attacking clergy on the defensive by boldly refuting their dogmas; that the only way to handle demagogs and politicians who insulted the Jews was to attack them when they sought office. "They must realize that the Jew can defend himself."

In an editorial appearing August 23, 1872, in which he discusses the theme: "We are first Americans and then Israelites," he says: "It is a phrase and no more. . . . No honest man can or will sacrifice his convictions to any . . . human institution. . . . There is a law higher than all made by man. . . . If my government enact laws . . . contrary to conviction, I am an Israelite first and would treat my country as being in a state of rebellion against me. . . . I am a loyal citizen because it does not prevent me being an Israelite according to my conviction. . . . Therefore, first my God and then my country is as good a motto as any." The Americanization of Isaac Mayer Wise was now consummated.

Bibliographical Note

The material for this study was drawn from the memoirs and writings of I. M. Wise himself. In the *Asmonean* of March 17–24, 1854, he wrote of his life in Bohemia; in his *Reminiscences*, translated and edited by David Philipson (Cincinnati. 1901), he covered the period from his arrival in America in 1846 to 1857. The life of Wise since the Cincinnati days is illuminated in detail by editorials, occasional addresses, and autobiographical reflections which appeared in the *Israelite*.