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Isaac M. Wise: A Century of Reform Judaism, 1919.



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER ON "ISAAC M.  
WISE--A CENTURY OF REFORM JUDAISM," AT THE TEMPLE,  
EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE, CLEVELAND,  
OHIO, SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 1919.

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This morning I desire to pay tribute to a man whom more than anyone has left the imprint of his great personality upon American Judaism. I desire to speak this morning also of the significance of his labors and of the worthwhileness of his efforts. I did not have the privilege to know Isaac M. Wise. I was not favored with the blessing of such an acquaintance. I know that it would have been a blessing, for to know him was to receive a beatitude; to come under his influence, I am told, was to grow conscious of a new consecration; one never forgot him. I did not know him and yet I was able and am able today at this moment to construct a likeness of the man; for, while his bodily presence did not move through the halls of the college during my student days, Isaac M. Wise was still a living presence there, and memories clustered around the halls and the walls, memories of Isaac M. Wise, and the very atmosphere was charged with the character of the man, his spirit moved across the face of that institution; it was almost palpably real,--his kindness, his saintliness, his humility, his patience and tolerance, his



spirit of indulgence, his wise, knowing sympathy. It was something like the echo of a song or the fragrance, the sweet aroma of a great personality. And yet it is not so much Isaac M. Wise, the man, as Isaac M. Wise, the achiever, the unifier, the great organizer that will live in history.

There is very little that could be said of the early youth of Doctor Wise. Born in a little village in Bohemia, His father a poor school teacher of that village, Isaac M. Wise passed a rather colorless, grave, and unpleasant youth. He seldom refers to it. It must have lacked most of the charm that we associate with infancy and youth. At the age of twelve Isaac M. Wise, with a bundle of clothes and twenty-seven kreutzer in his pocket, left his little village and went to Prague to continue his studies, and there for a period of twelve or thirteen years he lived the life of the typical bokha of his day, studying hard, occasionally hungry, going without many of the necessities of life, and yet inspired by zeal and desire for the study of the torah and the law of his forefathers. At the age of twenty-three he was ordained rabbi. In the same year he accepted a call to the town of Radnitz. That was in the year 1843. Isaac M. Wise was, by temperament, by association, a liberal and democratic spirit, and he soon began to fret at the many restrictions, political and social and religious that his position entailed. He was stifled, he says, in that little village, and he



sought for avenues of escape, and finally a voice seemed to say unto him, "Get thee out of the land of thy fathers unto the land that I will show thee," and Isaac M. Wise determined to sail for America.

In his reminiscences he describes just what motive made him go to America and some of his experiences on the way. He says, "Dark night, still brooded over Austria. No paper constitution stood as yet between king and people in Prussia. Germany still snored beneath the protection of thirty-six monarchs. Nicholas tyrannized over Russia and Poland and longed to populate Siberia. The pope had not yet begun to anathematize; everything was commonplace, ordinary, and exceedingly dull. On that commonplace twenty-third day of July in that commonplace year 1846, I landed in New York with wife and child and two dollars in my pocket. I had grown heartily weary of Europe, or, rather of Austria; had resigned my position in Radnitz, Bohemia, where I had preached and taught for three years; had gone with my wife and child to Bremerhaven without a passport and embarked on the sailing vessel Marie; spent sixty-three stormy days on the ocean, did what I could for small-pox patients, waited on my sea-sick wife, carried my little child about, ate onions and herrings and smoked poor tobacco, railed at the stupidity of my surroundings, and hoped for better times, until finally this twenty-third day of July released me from these ills." Thus, then, in



1846, Isaac Mayer Wise arrived in New York. He immediately began to identify himself with the religious life of America, and from the very moment of his arrival he became a powerful force, a tremendous influence in American religious life. Religious conditions in American Israel, at the time were very woeful; unorganized, without leaders, dominated by boors, retaining all the cumbersome, outlived practices and customs and notions of the olden days, unadapted to American life, Judaism in America in 1846, the kind of Judaism that Isaac M. Wise found was a very ungainly and unpleasant and uninspiring affair.

Let me quote again his own words to describe the condition of Judaism at the time: "Two-thirds of all the Israelites of America before 1848 were uneducated and uncultured. Their Judaism consisted in a number of inherited customs and observances. The less these were understood the holier they were considered. Everyone made things as easy and as convenient as possible in practice. People did not observe the Sabbath. They ate t'refah away from home, and did not lay t'fillin; but at home and in the synagogue everything had to be conducted in the most orthodox fashion, that is, in the manner in which everyone had seen it in his early home. However, the people came from all lands. Everyone had his own minhagim, and everyone wanted to have these minhagim observed generally. Hence arose a Babel-like confusion. Blows passed



in a certain synagogue in New York on Kol Nidre eve because the one party insisted that at the close of the service the certain hymn Adon Olam be sung first, and then the conventional concluding hymn Yigdal, while the other party insisted on the opposite. Rudeness goes hand in hand with ignorance; a fight at the congregational meeting, an escape of the Parnass by a window in order to avoid threatened danger, lengthy and unprofitable altercations in place of debates--such things were not rare, not particularly in Albany, but everywhere." By the way, in 1846, the year of his arrival, Doctor Wise became rabbi in the city of Albany. "Besides all this there was also prevalent the notion of the m'shubed, the rabbi, preacher, cantor, sexton, servant, man-of-all-work, coachman, and so forth, were engaged and paid by the year or for six months. It was self-understood that he had to be the servant, lickspittle, buffoon and menial, or else he was chased away. Now, I came among these people with a consciousness of independence and mastery which never deserts me, and with ideas on religion and political and social conditions so radically different from theirs that struggle and ill-feeling were bound to ensue."



The spirit of reform had just then begun to assert itself. A little before that time the congregation of Charleston, South Carolina, had been agitated by the desire on the part of a number of its members to introduce certain necessary reforms in order to modernize the synagogue. In 1824 forty-seven of the members of the congregation of Charleston memorialized the board asking for certain, to them, necessary reforms, such as the introduction of the vernacular into the service, introduction of English, abridgement of the lengthy prayers, and similar, to us, rather unimportant reforms, but at the time tremendously important. Their memorial was turned down, rejected completely, and these forty-seven men then organized what became the first reformed congregation in the United States in 1824; but from that day until 1846 reform made very little progress. There were perhaps two reform synagogues, besides this one organized, the Har Sinai congregation in Baltimore, and the Emanuel congregation in the city of New York, and all the remaining congregations were orthodox and lacked everything that could appeal to the rising generation and could insure the perpetuation of Judaism in America. With the coming of Wise and with the coming of a new group of immigrants from Germany in the forties and in the fifties, that group which carried with it emanant leaders and rabbis, such as Lilienthal, Einhorn, Adler, Hirsch and Felsenthal, and many more, a new spirit of reform began to thrill and



vitalize the life of the Jewish communities in America.

What was the general motive back of this reform movement? To my mind it was this: first, the desire to vitalize Judaism. There was a frightful, frigid indifference existing up to the late forties in all the American communities. The synagogue was not a vital force in the life of the community; it was something added to and extraneous to the vital experiences of the Jewish community. People preached one thing in the synagogue and insisted upon one ritual in the synagogue and practiced a totally different thing without the synagogue. There was need to destroy that pall of indifference that threatened to stifle the very life of Judaism in America. The first movement, then, was one of vitalization, energizing Judaism. The second movement was one of modernization, to make it fit the new conditions to adjust it to the new life and the new experiences, <sup>it</sup> to make <sup>it</sup> tally with the spirit of American life and American free institutions, to slough off, as it were, some of the accretions of the middle ages, to destroy that variegated garb of medievalism, to modernize it. That was the second movement. And the third was to refine it, to introduce a bit of the aesthetic into the service as to decorum, as to ritual, as to singing; and the fourth was to educate the children and the laymen. There was frightful ignorance on the part of both; there were no schools, there were no teachers, there were no leaders--every forward, aggressive,



impetuous Parnass ruled the congregation, and every worth-nothing adventurer became a teacher and a leader in the community; and the last motive was to broaden out, to regain the prophetic spirit of Judaism, to show that there was more <sup>in</sup> Judaism than merely formalism and legalism, to stress anew the great religion of the Jew and of the Jewish people.

These were the five driving impulses of the reform movement of the forties and the fifties, and these still remain the dominant notes of the reform movement of today. Isaac M. Wise realized it, and Isaac M. Wise set about to actualize these things. Of course he met with tremendous opposition. Remember that Isaac M. Wise became rabbi of an orthodox congregation in Albany. It was his desire to reform his congregation, just as his own views were gradually being reformed and evolved; but he met there the tremendous opposition which naturally and inevitably meets the reformer. There was the inertia, the dread of orthodox, the fear of radicalism, and Doctor Wise spent a few unpleasant and uncomfortable years in Albany.

On New Year's eve, 1850, Doctor Wise was physically assaulted in his pulpit and ejected from it because he dared to state on a previous occasion in another city that he doubted a personal messiah, or, rather, that he did not believe in one. It was not until after Doctor Wise left Albany, in the year 1854, and accepted the call of the congregation of Bene Yeshurun, at



Cincinnati, that he had a freer scope to introduce those necessary reform measures which his soul craved and which he knew were absolutely necessary for American life; and in the remaining forty-six years of his life, until the day of his death, March, 1900, Doctor Wise remained the champion of constructive American Judaism. It is worth while remembering that his passion was not reform; he was not of a negative mind. If anything, Doctor Wise' mind was tremendously and most remarkably constructive. He was not a radical, and some of his greatest and severest opponents and critics were the radical reform rabbis of the east. Isaac M. Wise wanted to have an American Judaism, a Judaism that would echo the spirit of American life, and he was ready to sacrifice anything in Judaism that did not meet the requirements of the new day, but he was also eager to retain everything that was vital and necessary to the preservation of Judaism in America.

Isaac M. Wise was fortunate, extremely fortunate, in starting out his career in America with certain definite objectives, and throughout his life he worked and drove at these objectives until he had <sup>at</sup> obtained them. It is remarkable how quickly, with what keen insight Doctor Wise sized up the situation of American Judaism. the very first year he was here, and how quickly he was able to define what was necessary to accomplish these reform measures,-----what institutions were essential to American Judaism. In 1848, two years after his arrival



in America, Doctor Wise laid down a program of work for American Judaism and never swerved from that program until he had achieved it. The very first thing that he set as his goal was unity--to organize the unorganized life of American Israel; and in 1848 he issued what has now become an historic and famous call to the ministry and other Israelites of America. I want to read to you that call, because it illustrates the prophetic gift of Doctor Wise, his wonderful grasp of the situation, and it delineates all his future activities. There is nothing that he accomplished in the fifty-two years after that but what has had its key-note and its seat in this call to the ministers and other Israelites of America; and incidently it will give you a most excellent idea of the conditions which prevailed in his day.

"To my Brother Israelites in North America, I call in the Name of my God. Be firm and let us strengthen each other in behalf of our people. The Rev. Editor of this periodical has granted me the favour to give publicity to my views about the association of Israelitish congregations in North America to produce one sublime and grand end to defend and maintain our sacred faith to the glory of God and for the benefit of Israel and all mankind. Brethren, though I am a stranger among you, unknown and unimportant, I make use of the Rev. Editor's permission to express publicly my views on this important subject. It is one of the holy demands of our religion to walk in the ways of God. God is a unity.



Wherefore all mankind will one day be united for one great end, to worship in truth the Most High, to adore His Holy Name with humanity and purity. Then will also be fulfilled that God's name will be one. To bring about this sublime unity God has selected the people of Israel. Wherefore we may justly say our cause is the cause of mankind. Now, in order to fulfil our sacred mission, to send our important message to mankind it behooves us to be united as one man, to be linked together by the ties of equal views, concerning religious questions, by uniformity in our sacred customs in our form of worship and religious education. We ought to have a uniform system for our schools, synagogues, benevolent societies, for all of our religious institutions. Let us now direct our attention to the country where we live and the circumstances in which we are placed. The majority of our congregations in this country have been established but a few years, they have been founded and are governed for the greater part by men of no considerable knowledge of our religion, and generally of no particular zeal for our cause. This naturally produces an enormous amount of indifference and each congregation pursues its own way, has its own customs and mode of worship, its own way of thinking about religious questions, from which cause it then results that one Jew is a stranger in the synagogue of the other Jew. It is a pity to observe that any man who is so happy as to have a license to slaughter, from some unknown person, can become a minister of a congre-



gation and the teacher of the youth without any proof of his knowledge or religion and in the absence of any evidence of conduct as a Jew. I will be silent about the whole casuistic theology and ask only the community at large, what will become of our synagogue? What of our youth? You see we have no system for our worship, nor for our ministry and schools, and we are therefore divided in as many fragments as there are congregations in North America. It is lamentable, but true, that if we do not unite ourselves betimes to devise a practicable system for the ministry and religious education at large, if we do not take care that better educated men fill the pulpit and the schoolmaster's chair, if we do not stimulate all the congregations to establish good schools and to institute a reform in their synagogues on modern Jewish principles, the house of the Lord will be desolate or nearly so in less than ten years. It needs no prophetic spirit to read this horrible future in the present circumstances. I lay down these lines before the throne of history as a solemn protest against the spirit of separate action and of indifferentism, which has taken hold on so many noble minds of our brethren, and I proclaim before the world, before the present and future, my sincere conviction that something must be done to defend and maintain our sacred faith. Nor is it too late. Everything can be done if we are united before God."

He concludes this remarkable appeal by saying, "And



may God the great Father of all unite and bless the house of Israel! May he enlighten all men with the shining light of truth, be gracious to all who seek Him, and be merciful to all who have forsaken him. Amen." This was in 1848. Isaac M. Wise waited twenty five years, waited and labored, and experimented and failed and tried again, until 1873 when the union of American-Hebrew congregations was finally organized; and he waited twenty-seven years until a college for the training of ministers was organized; and he waited forty-one years, until 1889, until a Central Conference of American Rabbis was finally organized, a program which he laid down in 1848 and which he toiled and labored for. He was blessed; he had seen the fruit of his labors; he succeeded. Unity--which must find expression in an organization of all the congregations; education--which must find expression in the establishment of schools for the training of the young, or a school for the training of ministers; and authority--which must find expression in organization of ministers in the United States. These were the three pillars in the great temple of American Judaism which Doctor Isaac M. Wise endeavored to rear and which he succeeded in rearing.

Added to that was his great passion for Americanization. I don't know of another spirit in American Jewish history that was so permeated, so surcharged with a love and a deep appreciation of true Americanism as was Doctor Wise. In fact, he sees in



Americanism, he saw in it at that time a cure for all the ills which existed in the household of Israel.

I want to read just one more passage for you from his own writings. I would like to have the man speak for himself and for his work--just why Isaac M. Wise was so thoroughly American. He said: "The century long oppression has demoralized the German and Polish Jew, and robbed him of his self-respect. He has no self-respect, no pride left. The hep! hep! times will weigh him down; he bows and scrapes and crawls and cringes. The Jew respects not the fellow man in another Jew, because he lacks the consciousness of manhood in himself. He parodies and imitates because he has lost himself. After diagnosing the evil I set myself to seeking a remedy. 'The Jew must be Americanized,' I said to myself, 'for every German hood<sup>k</sup>, every German word reminds him of the old disgrace. If he continues under German influences as they are now in this country, he must become either a bigot or an atheist, a satellite or a tyrant.. He will never be aroused to self-consciousness, or to independent thought. The Jew must become an American in order to gain the proud self-consciousness of the free-born man.' From that hour I began to Americanize with all my might and was as enthusiastic of this as I was for reform. Since then, as a matter of course, the German element here as well as in Germany has completely changed, although Judeophobia (hatred of the Jew) and uncouthness have



survived in many; but at that time it appeared to me there was but one remedy that would prove effective for my co-religionists, and that was to Americanize them thoroughly. We must be not only American citizens, but become Americans through and through outside of the synagogue. This was my cry, then, and many years thereafter. This, too, increased the hatred of my opponents considerably."

From 1824 to 1919 the reform movement in America grew and gained momentum. It has achieved much, principally due to the wonderful energy and statesmanship and power of organization of Isaac M. Wise. I have no hesitancy in saying that the reform movement in America has helped to bring in a greater amount of--what shall I say?--order out of chaos, dignity out of self-depreciation, that reform Judaism has elevated the standard of the Jew in America; it has achieved much; it has not completely been successful, and Isaac M. Wise realized it in the declining years of his life. American Judaism is not yet; it is something still in the process of becoming. American reform Judaism has failed signally in its program of education. The ignorance which Isaac M. Wise found prevalent among the Jewish laity in the early forties has not decreased decidedly in the second decade of the twentieth century. I mean ignorance not on general things, in secular knowledge, in cultural values, but, in other words, concerning things Jewish. Our religious school education



has not proved the success that we would have wished it, or that Doctor Wise would have wished it. American Judaism has as yet failed to produce the great scholars that German Judaism or Russian Judaism succeeded in producing after a century of schooling. Our program of education has not worked out successfully. Then, again, reform Judaism has remained as it was in the forties and the fifties--the Judaism of a group, and principally of the German-Austrian group of Jews. It has not yet pervaded the ranks and the masses of the newer immigrants that are as much in need of it as the German immigrant was in the forties and the fifties. Then, again, reformed Judaism is still the religion of a certain definite economic group of the middle class and of the well-to-do. It has not yet become, to a very marked degree, the faith of the poorer classes, of the masses, of the people.

These, to my mind, constitute the three main short-comings of American reform Judaism, but they are by no means fatal. We are still experimenting, and the influx of immigration coming from Russia and Poland and Roumania and Galicia will contribute a great deal toward energizing present day reform Judaism. It is my belief that the Judaism of tomorrow--I mean American Judaism--will be a blending and fusing of the two types of Judaism, the German type, which was brought to this country by the German immigrant in the days before the eighties, and the Russian or Austrian



European type that was brought to this country by the Russian immigrants in the days after the eighties. The German Jew has brought with him a type of religion which was prophetic in character, broad and spiritual, but it lacked a good deal of discipline, and it lacked a good deal of group-consciousness, and it lacked a good deal of content, of wealth, or richness, of cult. The Russian Jew has brought with him an orthodoxy from the eastern European countries that is perhaps narrower in view, in sweep, in outlook, but that is richer in content, more colorful, warmer. Now, these two, to my mind, will blend in the days to come, subject both of them, as they will be, to the transforming alchemy of American life.

American Judaism of tomorrow will remain prophetic in tone and in outlook. It will not confine itself to a narrow legalism and formalism; it will not surrender its missionary character, but it will at the same time take on a good deal which is necessary for its vitalization. It will not permit itself to be denuded and stripped of all its content; it will not become a dry, graceless code or system of moral abstractions. It will be a religion and not a religion of pamphlets; it will be a religion and not a lyceum platform; it will be a religion of customs and ceremonies and observances and traditions, retaining all the fragrance and the aroma of religious mysticism and of the past. And it will be free because the spirit



of America will speak through it.

The vision of Isaac M. Wise will be fulfilled. He said more than once that American Judaism will some day become the most glorious and the most perfect type of Judaism that any age or any country has ever devolved, and I believe in it. I believe in it fully just as I believe American life in general will some day evolve a type of man and a type of manhood finer and sublimer than any age or any land has yet evolved, because here on these gracious shores we have all the elements and all the hopes and all the aspirations of all the people to fuse and blend and create a nobler type of manhood. And so do I believe that the American Jew, coming from all parts of the world, bringing with him all that is fine and beautiful in his religious life, will by fusing and blending of this and subjecting it all to the transfiguration of American life,--that the American Jew will evolve a type of Judaism that will be the glory of the future. The golden period of Judaism in Spain will be as nothing compared to the golden period of Jewry in America in the days to come. That is my ideal, and as a disciple of Doctor Wise I have taken that ideal from him. I believe that it places a tremendous responsibility upon the shoulder of every Jew who lives today to see that this wonderful vision becomes a reality, and you and I will make it a reality.

The communities of Europe have become disorganized and destroyed; the schools of Europe established in the



war zone have been up-rooted, life there has been completely demoralized, everything is at a standstill. It is only here in America that Jewish life is still deep-rooted and sound, and because of that it behooves us all, as disciples of the great spirit of Wise, as believers in America and believers in American Judaism, to throw ourselves into the great task of building here in America a Judaism which will be at the same time free, unconfined, sweeping in its vision, prophetic, but also vigorous and real; capable of satisfying the spiritual hunger and thirst of man, a Judaism that will tell in the daily life of men and women, a Judaism that will be a dynamic force in your life, a Judaism that will not be relegated to the temple or to the minister, but a Judaism which every man and woman will feel himself or herself to be a priest in the sanctuary of the Lord, a servant of the Lord.

That, to my mind, is the greatest tribute that you and I can pay, the most beautiful wreath of tribute that we can place at the shrine of the memory of the great leader, of the prophetic spirit, the wonderful statesman and organizer of American Judaism--Doctor Isaac M. Wise.

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