

# THE WORLD OF MY BOOKS

ISAAC MAYER WISE



TRANSLATED,  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATORY NOTES,  
BY ALBERT H. FRIEDLANDER

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AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES • CINCINNATI

# The World of My Books

## INTRODUCTION

Autobiographies are written for many reasons. Primarily, they are a justification for the present. All the memories of the past are drawn up in battle array, arranged to suit the author, and then are marched forward to witness to the glory and the justice of the present.

But then something happens. Age has mellowed the fighter; recognition has been attained. And then the memories become entities in themselves, are relived, are enjoyed for their own sake. They become reminders that dreams are still being dreamed, that the vigor and the ardor of youth are not lacking in old age. And then—well, in the case of Isaac M. Wise almost anything could happen.

This is one of Wise's autobiographies. It is not the official version, and there is a story attached to that. When Wise first published *The Israelite*, one of his greatest dreams was realized: an articulate voice for Reform Judaism had been established, one that could speak to the larger public. But Wise soon realized that he may have moved too fast. An organ of expression in English *was* needed, but his first support was in the home of the German Jew within his community—and the larger, Gentile, community enabled new settlers to continue speaking the language of their native European land. Cincinnati was partially a German town, and so *The Israelite* received a supplement, *Die Deborah*, which repeated in German what *The Israelite* called out to the community in English. But did it repeat the same things? Wise's opponents, with a slight tinge of maliciousness, suggested that *Die Deborah* had a perverse personality of its own, that it often showed a completely different Wise. In a way they were right, of course, but unwittingly they paid tribute to the personality of a man who was firmly de-

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Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the great organizer and creator of American Reform Jewish institutions, came to the United States in 1846 and died in 1900. He was the prime figure in establishing the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Rabbi Albert H. Friedlander is the minister of United Hebrew Congregation in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

terminated to be a unifying influence in American Jewry, and had his own way of achieving this.

"The World of My Books" ("Meine Bücherei") appeared in *Die Deborah*. This is a fact that must not be forgotten. Wise here displayed himself to his German parishioners. He evoked old memories of a by-gone era that were shared by his readers. Does not every emigrant share in the dreams and successes of his fellow-journeyer? Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* deals with these people, with the poignancy that is part of the dreams of the past. Wise knew the power of those dreams. He conjured them up from the depths, and thus another link was forged between Wise and his devoted followers, who felt themselves represented in all his actions in the fields of politics and religion.

There were other reasons, of course, that caused these columns to see the light of day. For one thing, Wise needed material to fill the paper. By turning to incidents of his own life, he eliminated the research work which any other topic would have entailed, and in those days he had little time. The reminiscences flowed from his pen onto the paper; then, scarcely dry, they were transmitted to the printer. Often they were not even checked; a variety of errors attests to the fact that neither printer nor writer was a perfectionist in this work. Surprisingly enough, however, Wise rather faithfully followed a general outline. He might number the columns wrongly (there are two "Reminiscences No. X"); some long story from the Midrash or the Bohemian woods would fill up needed space; or a continuation would be promised, only to be blithely forgotten. But the overall plan was there and found expression in the title.

"Meine Bücherei" is more accurately translated as "my library"; but Wise was actually speaking of "the world of my books," for this is a literary autobiography, tracing the forebears, birth, and growth of every book that the amazingly versatile Isaac M. Wise wrote. It is his contention, expressed in these pages, that this versatility was forced upon him. He constantly repeats that he detests writing books, and yet there is a strong pride implicit in the defense which he puts up for every one of his writings.

Books lived for Wise; they had a definite life of their own. Only on that basis can we understand this work. He constantly speaks of the conspiracy of silence which "tries to kill" his writings. Each of his works is shown in a world of its own: *The Cosmic God* lives in the world of the natural sciences which Wise felt he had to enter; *The Origin of Christianity* emerges out of a field of polemics Wise wanted to avoid; the *History of the Israelitish Nation* lives in a world of books which Wise entered through the portals of the State Library in Albany; and so forth. Wise wandered among these worlds. For that reason the title

"The World of My Books" is proper; it gives us a clue to the content of these pages.

The humor, striving, and ambition that are part of Wise also belong to his words. Sometimes they show us the all too human side of a great man: contempt for the masses who follow atheistic mountebanks, who will not listen to him. But the irritation the reader may sometimes feel when he reads what seems to be a partisan discussion of Wise's life quickly gives way to affection for a man who had so deep and strong a love for the traditions of Judaism, for the traditions of liberalism, and for what we may term the hopes of the common man.

This is a casual autobiography. It is incomplete; sometimes it strays into pedanticism, and often it lacks objectivity. But why should it be objective? As it stands, it is a most enjoyable and instructive occasion, a stroll with Wise into the Ohio Valley, one hundred years after the event, letting us see a strong and vibrant personality unfold the pages of a history that is an important part of our life today.

## THE WORLD OF MY BOOKS

### I

Bulky books and tight shoes have always been most uncomfortable for me. "How in the world is this going to end?" I would think to myself, and I preferred not to start reading at all. Folios—I was accustomed to them from the talmudic academy, and I knew that they were not too dangerous. For they have little content; most of it is commentary and sub-commentary, and little enough space is left for the text. Moreover, there are ways of dealing with the text. One arrives at a long piece of *Aggadah* [non-legal material] and skips it. But a book of eight or nine hundred octavo uniform-sized pages filled with dried out, arid, and boiled-down scholarship was always most painful for me. The end is too far removed from the beginning, and life is short. In the case of voluminous novels, novelettes, or other kinds of stories, I simplified my task. In the fashion of book reviewers, I simply read the beginning, middle, and end, leaving the in-between to my imagination. But scholarly books, which cannot be treated in this fashion, demand a complete reading, and I lacked the courage to do this.

Finally, it occurred to me to do my reading like a homeopathic dosage, in approximately the same manner as an average man might read Klopstock's *Messiah*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Hartwig Wessely's *Shire Tifereth*. That way, I succeeded in reading many a thick, scholarly, and dry book to its *finis*. This took time, twice as much as usual. First of all, I read slowly; secondly, time itself passed all too slowly

during this occupation. Furthermore, I had the unpleasant habit of always reading with pencil in hand, of quarreling with every author, and of throwing my displeasure into his face in marginal notations.

Hence a cruelly long time was needed to finish a bulky volume. On top of all, I would then have to read the book again, and generally I would then like it! I probably liked my marginal annotations, just as every fool delights in his cap. After I had brought all these sacrifices to the altar of the thirst for knowledge, nothing could induce me to look at the book again. I had no further need of it and laid it to eternal rest upon the shelf, next to its comrades. This drudgery mellowed my resolution never to torture humanity with a book; if at all possible, I would never write one.

When I had tortured myself long enough, I even acquired the wild insight that most of the heavy volumes contained very little that was unique and original; most of the contents had been plagiarized. The best often could not be said, and what they had copied was not always germane to the issue. It often happened with them as with the old Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who, according to the Talmud, declared that he himself had never taught anything which he had not heard from his teacher. There, at least, was a modest and frank man, who deserves the gold medal of merit.

I often remembered an old *maggid* ["teacher"] who interpreted this verse from Psalms: . . . "Then all the trees in the forest will rejoice."<sup>1</sup> "This," he thought, "must refer to the coming of the Messiah and of the day of judgment, for the trees of the forest do not now rejoice. But why should they rejoice then? he asked himself. What will the trees of the forest gain from that which God will do for us? Surely, the *maggid* said, it has to be understood thus: On the day of judgment all the dead will have to appear before the judgment seat of the Most High and enumerate the merits which might justify their resurrection. All men will be called up by occupations; the authors, too, will present themselves. Proud and sure of himself, each writer will indicate the book, or even books, which he has written, and claim the merit of having directed humanity to the true understanding of God and his works. The Almighty Judge then orders: 'Let every one of you take from his writings that which is his; to that which he has borrowed, he has no right. He who can show anything which is his own shall be resurrected; the others will return to the silent grave. Whatever is original in each book will be preserved for eternity; all else will be burned.' Such gigantic heaps of books will have to be burned that the resurrected will have fuel for a century, without having to fell a single tree in the forest! For this reason the prophet tells us: "Then all the trees in the forest will rejoice.'"

I've always liked that. I marvelled at the old *maggid* who plumbed the depths of the seas of writing. Were the old man now alive, and had to see how the hypnotized professors and doctors repeat each other's words, and how they, standing over their ears in the waters of current theories, boast of their wisdom—how maliciously he would mock them: "Comes the resurrection, and they'll all be left lying!"

Pardon! I've strayed from my theme. All I wanted to do was to relate how I came to hate bulky books and how the decision against writing books grew within me.

Decision and instinct are two different drives of the will. We can make a decision, but we are seized by instinct. Decision is a product of the mind, which we can trace back to its causes; instinct is a secret of nature, a riddle which cannot be solved by reason. I made a decision, but I was seized by an instinct which took hold of my will. Early in life there awakened within me an unutterable instinct to achieve something in the world, preferably in Judaism, and that not words, but works. Passion in man grows stronger much earlier than does reason; hence I was forced to act contrary to my resolve. I had to write, without a material reason; often without desire and against my conviction I had to write. How this drive developed in time, and what resulted from it, I will tell you presently.<sup>2</sup>

## II

If a man lives long enough, he can meet many learned gentlemen who are able to do everything better than they can keep their promises. Already before the evening arrives, they forget what they have promised in the morning. This sickness eventually becomes so bad that the patients do not keep word with themselves; within the day they forget their own decisions and purposes, and every day, every month, or at least every year, they become so completely changed that they can barely recognize themselves. My schoolmaster, essentially a pedant, said to me: "Boy, if you want to amount to anything, pray to God three times a day to teach you to keep your word to others and to yourself." I have done this diligently, and I wrote into my prayerbook, after the first verse in [the prayer] *Elohai Nezor*: [O my God, guard my tongue from uttering evil, and my lips from deceitful speech.] . . . "Teach me to watch the utterances of my lips."

I therefore at least kept word with myself: I wrote neither book nor articles for the press while I was still in my salad days, which in my case lasted quite a long time.<sup>3</sup> During that period, I strictly observed the well-meant instructions of my schoolmaster, something not every lout can do.

Dr. Starkenstein was more than a medical practitioner and a witty writer, as most doctors were at that time. He was also the husband of a great lady, the older sister of the director of the present rabbinical seminary in Budapest. He had the audacity to claim that he had discovered poetic talent in me, something he said right to my face. This flattered my vanity considerably, and I wrote poems (German-Hebrew and Hebrew-German), all of which I condemned to a fiery death, without even submitting them to the judgment of my friendly doctor. Apparently I was already an improver of prayerbooks and a philanthropist at an early age. I wanted to save suffering humanity the trouble of having to read my poems. How beautiful this world could be, if all the products of the mind created during one's cubhood were fed to the fire as soon as they are produced! How the many unfortunate persons who are now ashamed of what they once wrote, and the many others who will later be ashamed of what they are now writing, would rejoice in the memory of the generous, joyfully sacrificial deed: "I burned the junk"!

Need breaks iron. The soil under my feet grew cold; the soles of my boots wore out. My garments were threadbare; no money, no credit, no staunch friends who had anything to spare. All this topples the principles of a man in his cubhood. What should one do? Stop! Had not Starkenstein said—but of course! And so I wrote a story, "The Siege of Milan," full of gun smoke, the clash of sabers, and the thunder of cannons, gallant deeds of heroism and cruel pangs of love, rude soldiers' songs, and delicate women sutler episodes, in such profusion that the publisher of a weekly paper called *Bohemia*, then issued in a little country town, paid me a nice price for the stuff and published it anonymously. I was saved, and so were my boots. In deep contrition, I begged my schoolmaster for forgiveness and in the alphabetical list of sins for the Day of Atonement I changed the letter *Zayin* in "ko-zavnu" ("we have lied") to a *Sav* "kosafti" ("I have written" extraordinary junk), which, after all, amounts to the same thing. I have never been able to read that story again, from fear that my conscience would force me to return the honorarium to the publisher who had paid for the worthless stuff.

To my not inconsiderable surprise, I was called, some time later, naturally, to a respectable rabbinical position, although I was still in my cubhood. (S. L. Rapaport, then chief rabbi of Prague, was responsible for this.)<sup>4</sup> Then all the clownishness ceased. Each day I was tortured by the heat of the classroom, and by the chill of the writing, revising, decanting, memorizing, and reciting of sermons. For I had a prejudice against public preaching and writing. I lacked the necessary self-confidence for both these functions.

There was another misfortune. A close friend and relative of mine had wasted his youth as a teacher by doing nothing for his own development, a common failing among the teachers in Bohemia at that time. The whole week he did nothing save learn the *tropp* [melody] for the *sidra* [pentateuchal portion] of the coming Sabbath, read novels, and play cards with his people. He married, got some money, went into business, and lost it. Now he wanted to resume congregational work. But he lacked the [rabbinic] *morenu* diploma; and his previous learning was all but forgotten. Every day I had to devote several hours to help him review the required sections in the codes *Orach Chayim* and *Yoreh Deah*. But these dry, legal paragraphs did not satisfy the man. He wanted to know the origin and development of every law, and I was forced to accompany him through the whole Talmud and to read the codices of different centuries in their chronological sequence. My professional duties in addition to these talmudic studies left me time not even for the thought of writing anything. I was happy if I had time for reading the German-Jewish literature, along with Jean Paul, Herder, and the current poets. This was the end of my salad days.

The worst was yet to come. My friend received his *morenu* diploma from District Rabbi Kufka and speedily found employment. In the meanwhile, however, I had started on the wrong track. The Talmud, not as a scientific but as sheer legalistic study, had again captivated me to such an extent that I entertained every impoverished traveling talmudic scholar in my house for weeks (and at that time the number of those expelled from Russia was great), so that I might spend countless nights quarreling over talmudic subjects. Once again, I became a Talmud student in the strictest sense of the word. To this day this infuriates me.

Chance led me into another pathway. The only little daughter of one of my teachers, the famous "appealer" [judge?] (Dayan) Rabbi Samuel Freund of Prague, was sent by her parents to me in the country. (I had married long before this.) The dear girl, reared in the center of talmudic atmosphere, soon observed my favorite occupation with the Polish Talmud students, and reported this to her father. In a letter, opening with the scriptural verse: . . . "May the Lord order blessing upon you" (Deut. 28:8), the erudite father praised me so extravagantly for my "industrious study" that I realized that I was on the steep track to oneness.

"I must give up my concern for the Talmud," I thought, and changed my library. I threw myself into the arms of Samuel Hirsch, Formstecher, Reggio, Krochmal, Mendelssohn, and Spinoza, until I thought I was convinced that I had mastered Spinoza and had survived Mendelssohn.<sup>5</sup> By means of such detours I returned to the Jewish



thinkers, poets, and commentators of the Middle Ages. I reveled and waxed enthusiastic in this literature until my desire to emigrate drove me out of old Bohemia and out of the world of letters. An extended journey in Germany and then the sixty-three days on the ocean brought me back to my first love: to make some substantial contribution rather than to write something. While on the ocean, I forged mighty plans for the future. I read English literature but a few hours a day; the rest of the time I reveled in plans and ideas for the future, until my nightly dreams were filled with them. Thus, half sleeping, half waking, always dreaming, I crossed the ocean, and in this abnormal condition I reached land. The first chapter of my world of books was ended. A new life and new strivings begin for everyone in the New World.<sup>6</sup>

### III

My first purchases in New York were Addison's *Spectator*, in eight volumes, and Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric*. In my dreams aboard ship I had decided to conquer America, but since no weapons save the living word were at my command, I had to acquire the means of gaining some skill in the language, at least in its style and form. A teacher from Boston, whose closer acquaintance I had made aboard ship, directed my attention towards these books, and I later came to realize that, next to the Bible, Addison was, in his day, the writer of classical prose, and that Blair was the only master of the form of speech; he had developed rhetoric into a science.

My conquests proceeded slowly and tediously. My first conquest consisted in my becoming a tutor. A number of earlier emigrants, mostly factory workers, promoted me to be the English teacher for their night school of sixteen students. After a few days I was known [in New York] throughout the German quarter, from Houston Street to Grant [Grand?] Street, as a tutor. The only man to introduce me to the public as a rabbi was the late Dr. Max Lilienthal. I ruled my conquered terrain for four weeks; then I retired. My successor in the field was a tailor's apprentice from Posen, whom I met again two years later, when he was an itinerant salesman of artistic objects and attempted to sell me various phylacteries, prayer fringes, and mezuzoth [biblical passages on parchment, attached to the doorposts].

My second conquest was more brilliant; I became an extemporaneous speaker. This happened in the following way: before I left my old fatherland, I presented a relative, the religious teacher (*moreh zedek*) in Stannowitz, near Pilsen, with all my written sermons which had not been annexed by my neighboring colleagues. To this very day I still re-

joice in this stroke of genius; there must have been over a hundred of them. Thus I came to America without sermons. Dr. Lilienthal sent me to New Haven to dedicate a synagogue—thus I lost my office as teacher—and I wrote two German sermons. No sooner had I returned thence when Lilienthal again chose me to dedicate the synagogue at Syracuse. J. D. Walter, the Croesus of New York at that time and president of a congregation, was present when Lilienthal made me an “assistant bishop.”<sup>7</sup> “You’ll have to travel through Albany,” Walter told me. “Albany has a considerable congregation, and my brother-in-law, Moses Schloss, is its president. Those people have never heard a preacher in America; they’ll be happy to hear you. I’ll write Schloss to meet you in Albany and to invite you to preach the following Sabbath.”

No sooner said than done. He wrote to Schloss, and I had to write three sermons, one for Albany and two for Syracuse. On Thursday of the following week I took a steamship up the Hudson to Albany, with three finished speeches in my traveling bag. Moses Schloss gave me a regular reception, and invited me to preach, and so I preached on the Sabbath (Ki Seze [when the biblical portion beginning at Deut. 21:10 is read]) and dined with the parnass [“president”]. He told me how much he liked my sermon, and regretted only that so few of the congregation were able to understand much of it. “Your language is too lofty and your thoughts too deep for these people,” Mr. Schloss said, adding: “If you wish to preach for us during the coming high holidays, I can promise you an honorarium of \$100.” I merely promised to write something definite from Syracuse, because, in the first place, his criticism was unpleasant to me, and secondly, I contemplated making a trip to Cincinnati.

I went to Syracuse, but arrived almost two weeks too early. The building had not been completed, and I had to walk about in idleness a fortnight. During that time, I established close contacts with the members of the congregation and made ethnological studies, in which I was assisted by Mr. Stein, a brother-in-law of the Henochsberg brothers of Fuerth [Bavaria]. This Mr. Stein was a highly educated and intelligent person. He had closely studied his environment and taught me to know it thoroughly.

Gradually I began to see that the parnass of Albany might have been right. While I was still in Syracuse, I reworked my written addresses so as to give them a more popular form.

On the night before Erev Rosh Hashanah [“New Year”], I boarded the train for Albany. I had earlier informed Mr. Schloss of my decision, since, after the dedication, I could no longer arrive in Cincinnati before the holiday. Sleepers were unknown then, nor were any writing materials to be had on the train. I reached for the calling cards I had

received in Syracuse, and in pencil wrote upon their backs a memorandum of all the sins and shortcomings that could possibly have been committed by people at this cultural level and under the prevailing circumstances. Before I fell asleep, I had a long list of sins ready. When I awoke, I also had the texts for two sermons, taken from the passages from Genesis which are read on these holidays. "Now it's in God's hands," I thought.

I reached Albany early in the morning. Next day I preached to a packed house on the first half of my register of sins. When I had finished, I was the hero of the day. I had conquered Congregation Beth El. The following day I finished my register of sins in the second synagogue, and the effect was the same as on the first day.

After this victory I never again wrote a sermon. Holiday lectures, which generally appeared in the newspapers, had to be written ahead of time, so that the reporters might have them immediately after the holiday. My printed sermons, however, were not written down until they had been delivered from the pulpit. Thus I became an extemporaneous speaker. And that was a conquest for me, for I hated to write.

The third conquest which I made in America was this: while I was on the steamer, going downstream towards New York and my family, to share with them my laurels and the great sum of money I had earned, Congregation Beth El of Albany, without my consent and without any suggestion on my part, elected me its rabbi, at a yearly salary of \$250. When, early in the morning, I entered my temporary home in Elizabeth Street, Friedmann, my good-natured landlord, handed me a telegram which informed me of my third conquest. The next evening the official letter arrived, wherein I was told also that the congregation expected me to establish a school to which all the members had pledged to send their children and to pay an annual tuition fee of six dollars per child.

I had no idea how much a family needed in order to live decently; still reckoning in terms of the Austrian standard of currency, I considered this to be a great deal of money. Therefore I accepted the position, brought my family to Albany, preached abundantly, and opened a school in which instruction was given also in Hebrew and German. Once again I was in my old workshop, with the single difference that, while in [my Bohemian pulpit in] Radnitz I had to change an old fashioned *cheder* [school] into a real school, in Albany I had to make a new start, for there I found a *tabula rasa* ["clean slate"] and complete freedom to act in accordance with my own judgment. I did have to spend my days again in the classroom, but I wrote no more sermons, was not beleaguered by talmudic students, because there were none there, and after five o'clock was a free man.

I was satisfied. I could even earn as much money as I desired, for in a short while I was recognized by the non-Jewish aristocracy, which was of considerable importance in that Knickerbocker city, as a teacher in certain fields, and the people paid well. How did I achieve this fourth conquest?

It happened like this: in America a rabbi was an unknown quantity, and to the Bible-loving Americans he was an interesting personality. It was assumed that I was a great scholar, since I was the rabbi of the Jews, and the only one these good people had ever seen. Added to this was the miracle that the "greenhorn German" could speak a passable English which did not offend the sensitive ears of educated persons. All this was so new and unusual that the new rabbi became a phenomenon. Furthermore, the city had two important libraries: the New York State Library, in the Capitol, and the library of the Young Men's Association (no Christian institution of that type existed then). Within those friendly walls I at once made myself at home as a member of the Association and as a regular guest of the State Library. I rapidly became acquainted with the staffs and with the best readers, that is to say, with the educated world. These well-meaning people made a great man out of me, long before I had the faintest idea of my "greatness." Thus, in all innocence, I made a fourth conquest in America. I was thus, as it were, drawn into the best society of distinguished American minds, and thus, through these detours, I have returned to my theme, "The World of My Books." We will see each other again in the libraries of Albany. Adieu!<sup>8</sup>

#### IV

My dreams aboard ship and the enthusiastic phantasies that had delighted me on my ocean voyage vanished into the mist as I slowly settled back into the same old rut of weekday teaching and Saturday preaching. This filled up my time, it is true, but not my mind. I yearned after a nameless Something, which I found nowhere. Earlier, the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages had been the most suitable means by which I temporarily overcame my vague longings. But I had left my library in the old country, and in the entire city of Albany, with its two large libraries, no Jewish book, except the *Chumash* [Pentateuch] and prayerbooks, was to be found. Even the monthly *Occident*, the only Jewish organ in the country, had no readers in the capital of New York. I lamented my needs to Lilienthal, and begged him to lend me a few books, and the dear friend sent me an *Eben Ezer* [a legal code], which I have never returned to him, and a *Nachlath Shivah*, which I have never again seen since that time until, a few

weeks ago, I was reminded of it by lawyer Amram's book on the tal-mudic laws of divorce, as this study of his draws heavily on both books. And there I had the eternally feminine: the rabbinical marriage and divorce laws in the first [*Eben Ezer*], and their legal formulations in the second, volume [*Nachlath Shivah*]. I did not even attempt to entertain myself with these volumes. I wrote to Joachimsen, who sold Jewish books on Houston Street in New York. He sent me a copy of the cabbalistic *Reshith Chochmah* with the excuse that he had nothing else in stock which might interest me. This was very good, for I had even less money in my pocket to pay for it than he had books in stock.

The situation was painful. In my need I searched out all the historical writings in the libraries, but found nothing substantial on Jewish history or culture. Not even my Maimonides, my Albo, or my Abarbanel was mentioned in any place. The Bible had been deformed at the hands of baptized theologians; *Josephus* and *Josippon* were the historical sources to which recourse was had. I became furious, rushing impetuously through the materials on hand, but in vain. I found nothing, for there simply was no Jewish literature in the English language. And then the desire to write awoke in me, weakly at first, then ever more strongly, until I had overcome my dislike of writing and had forgotten my lack of knowledge. I wrote. But what did I write? Articles in the *Occident*. God forgive me!

A young Presbyterian clergyman published a series of articles in the *Occident* which sought to prove, from the cabbalistic writings, that the Christian dogmas were *sub rosa* Jewish teachings. I was invited to enter the lists against the learned gentleman, and in order to do this, I had to write. But I had no library, and my opponent displayed a fairly good acquaintance with cabbalistic literature. What could I do? In my need I turned to the *Reshith Chochmah*, wherein I found enough citations from the *Zohar* and similar [cabbalistic] works to undercut a dozen quarrelsome priests. When I was again in possession of my library, a peace treaty was speedily agreed upon by my opponent, M. R. Miller, and me. We remained friends throughout his lifetime, although he often joked about the things we had perpetrated in our innocence.

Another cause which forced me to overcome my hatred of writing was my reformer's instinct. It had mocked and tortured me from my earliest youth, and I was unable to overcome or to palliate it. I found enemies, was attacked, and we had no organ of expression through which we could bring our cause before the public. I had to cringe and bow low, so that once in a while I might humbly say an audible word in the *Occident*. I boasted to myself in my lonely study (but only when completely alone), uttering the threat: "Just wait, you goosequill-

heroes, till I get a chance to write. I'll teach you manners!" But the chance was not to come for several years.

However, this was not what I wanted. I was only involuntarily drawn into the field of polemics. What I really desired was to write something that would transplant Jewish Science [the scientific knowledge of Judaism] into the English language. My first thought was to translate, into English, Jost's history of the Jews, the last volume of which had appeared just then.<sup>9</sup> But I soon saw that this would be a foolhardy beginning, for the public certainly would not read such a many-volumed work as this. I then conceived the desire to write a general history of the Middle Ages, that I might show, in its true light, the influence of the Arabs and the Jews on the general development of humanity. Although everything I needed was available in the two libraries, or perhaps precisely because of it, I soon realized that with my occupation I would need a decade to work through the material. Finally, the thought occurred to me to write a history of Jewish literature from the tenth to the fifteenth century.

On this history, which also determined the nature of my lectures, I henceforth concentrated my attention. History and philosophy became my favorites, gaining ascendancy over me to such an extent that I lost all other interests. It was understandably easy for me, walking in this ecstasy, to wander into mythology and the Asiatic religions, particularly since English literature tapped the richest sources from India, China, and Persia. For years I sat behind this Chinese Wall, cut off from the world, dreaming, thinking, weaving phantasies, and speculating. That was my desire, my world, with which I was connected only in my capacities as schoolteacher, preacher, and reformer, a somewhat stale, prosaic, strange person. This was my library, until new circumstances called me back to life out of my mummy-like existence.

My dear friend Dr. Joseph Lewi was the trumpet of my resurrection. He had just arrived from abroad and stayed in my home for a while. Dr. Lewi found me so run down, and so neglectful of myself, that he forced me to eat, drink, sleep, and live in a normal manner.

An association of scholars, bishops, and statesmen had been founded in Albany. Its purpose was the founding of a United States University. This did not materialize, but a teachers' college, a school of medicine, a law school, and a geological museum were established. I was drawn into this group quite early, had to join in everything, and, besides, keep the minutes, deliver talks, participate in debates, and represent the sciences. Since the natural sciences occupied the chief position within this scholarly body, I felt compelled to leave my heavenly abode for a while and to look squarely into nature's face. For a while, this changed my world of books.

I did not experience a complete revolution until the year 1850. I was a guest preacher in the Reform congregation in Charleston, S. C., and was a non-participating witness to the public debate between Dr. Raphael [Morris J. Raphall] for Orthodoxy and Posnanskie [Gustavus Poznanski] for Reform.

I said nothing until Dr. Raphael invited me to state my opinion on the disputed points. Then I spoke clearly, freely, and with determination. The result was that all the Orthodox, both Jews and Christians, attacked me relentlessly, charged me in the press with heresy, and secretly agitated against me, so long and so fanatically, that on New Year's Day I was thrown out of my temple in Albany.<sup>10</sup> That wakened me from my dreams, and I put new strings on my bow.

Once the new Reform congregation was founded [in Albany], I turned to my pen, not in order to avenge myself, but rather to establish Reform within Judaism. A few weeks later, Robert Lyons' weekly paper in New York [*The Asmonean*] had a new section entitled "Theological and Philosophical Matters," edited by Isaac M. Wise. I had an organ of expression in which I could say anything in the way I wanted to say it. And I did this, showing consideration for others, but with complete honesty. A few weeks later I thoroughly altered my library and decided to write the history of Israel, or rather, to gather the material. The desire for action had once again awakened within me. Old plans revived in my soul; the ponderer became once again the enthusiast. I was freed from my bonds. Had these experiences of mine not awakened me, it is likely that I would have taken American citizenship as a professor, or as a lawyer, or perhaps as an impractical enthusiast."<sup>11</sup>

## V

A German scientist once posited: "Man is what he eats."<sup>12</sup> This is not absolutely true, since our inner laboratory decomposes everything and changes it into human fluids and blood. It would be better to say: "Man sometimes is what he drinks—drunk!" Experience teaches that, apart from his spiritual and ethical activities, man is what circumstances make him. They made me a teacher, a preacher, a journalist, and an author, without my volition, and I did not even know whether I was fitted for such tasks. I entered into apprenticeship for these occupations because circumstances impelled me. It was not easy for me, with my universal and cosmopolitan outlook, to limit myself to Jewish problems, to attain one specialty, but I accommodated myself to the despotic force of circumstances.

As a journalist, I considered it my task to found Reform in Judaism and to win adherents among the public for the Science of Judaism.

Both were lacking. Reform had many adherents, but it lacked an English or German organ, and Jewish science was limited to a few men who were incapable of writing. As far as the public was concerned, neither had any real existence, but the two factors seemed to me to belong together. Reform without science seemed capricious and not without danger to the religion which was to be elevated by such reform. And the teaching of Jewish knowledge without new foundations and modern points of view, without reform attitudes, I considered to be no more than a second edition of the Polish Jewish [unscientific] methods, which life in the new world teaches us to overcome, and which the majority of our Jews had already accomplished. I thus had to follow in both directions. This I did every week also in the *Asmonean*, without going beyond the comprehension of the public or the needs of the time. I wrote simply, democratically, popularly, evenly, and thoughtfully.

Professor Amos Dean [of Albany], a student and friend of the late statesman Daniel Webster, who became a very close friend of mine, told me how his master, famous for his rhetoric, had been elected to Congress soon after finishing his studies. In those days, a certain wealthy Virginia planter, who could neither read nor write, attended the sessions of Congress in order to acquaint himself with the important happenings in America. After Webster had made his maiden speech in the House and had delighted his public, this illiterate man came over to him. He thanked Webster profusely for his fine speech, and said: "Mr. Webster, I understood exactly everything you said!" Webster used to tell his students that this was the highest praise he ever received as a speaker: "He understood everything I said." Mr. Dean added: "In Webster's speeches, the most exalted aspect was their simplicity." I always held to this dictum, and was therefore able to satisfy the public, and in this way I started to write in the *Asmonean*.

My contributions were, however, read also because of their novelty. The open and free discussion of the Reform question was not only new, but was congenial to the majority of my readers. The [higher] Bible criticism, which was a by-product of my historical studies, was not so new, but it was original, and was read by many in order to arouse their ire. As an antidote I presented, under the heading "Talmudic Selections," a weekly selection of talmudic and midrashic sayings, particularly such as were characteristic of the moral and social viewpoint of their time, many of which were assimilated into English literature. Less widely read, in all probability, were my larger essays, of which I can now recall only three: (1) "The Nature and History of the *Bath Kol* ["Divine Voice"] Which Is Believed to Have Replaced Prophecy"; (2) "The Life and Teachings of Hillel 1, the Reformer of



His Time" (I treated this material before Graetz and Geiger did); (3) "The Constitution of Ancient Israel According to the Code of Maimonides."

This brought me into correspondence with the late Zecharias Frankel. I came into contact with the late Abraham Geiger by translating his *Judah Halevi* into literary English, which I published serially in *The Asmonean*. I had given Geiger's book to a poetically gifted lady whom I taught German, for practice in translation. She executed the assignment most elegantly but did not wish to appear before the public as its translator. The same talented lady wrote, on a manuscript which I had given her to read: "Truth and clarity, logically arranged, is classic style in all languages."

Shortly after the appearance of the first articles in *The Asmonean*, I began to write history. My intention was to write the complete history of Israel in four volumes: volume one, up to the destruction of Jerusalem [586 B.C.E.]; volume two, up to the second destruction [70 C.E.]; volume three, up to the discovery of America [1492]; and volume four, up to 1850, as may be seen in the general introduction to the *History of the Israelitish Nation*.<sup>13</sup> The first volume, of nearly 600 octavo pages, became quite bulky. I made the mistake of beginning my history with Abraham and of adding a great deal of exegesis. Rothek's [Rotteck] *History of the World* was my pattern in arranging my material. For each period there was to be an outline of the literary and cultural history of that time span, since the entire life of the people had to be portrayed within this framework. I entered into all the details of national life and attempted to show origin, causes, and results, and that took up a great deal of space.

My position, in English literature at least, was new and unique. I treated the biblical history as secular history, establishing in the preface that only God creates miracles; it follows that these fall into the category of theology, for history is limited to the acts of men. But then I made the mistake of explaining miracles from a rationalistic viewpoint, and this diluted my history with exegesis. Trade, finance, shipping, factories, customs, morals: all that which is a part of a people's life is as important an aspect of history as are religion, ritual, and liturgy. This was not only new, but also strange and surprising, in Jewish history, which had always been approached and presented as history of religion.

The most novel, however, was the democratic point of view from which I examined and depicted this part of history. Like the prophet Samuel, I viewed the introduction of the monarchy as a revolt against the Mosaic theocracy, which I could not consider as anything save democracy. I considered the division of the kingdom as the natural

consequence of the sin of a hereditary dynasty [of David]. Justice was on the side of Israel, not Judah. With the exception of Ahab, who was a weakling, the kings of Judah were even worse than the kings of Israel. The line of David was completely destroyed in Athaliah's time. We have no conclusive evidence for the Davidic descent of the boy Joash. Ahaz and Manasseh are responsible for the utter destruction of the nation. Joash murdered prophets; and the last Davidic descendant [Ishmael], the murderer of Gedaliah, completed the dissolution of the old kingdom. This approach deprived the monarchy of any justification, played up the dark side of the Davidic dynasty, and removed all support from the messianic expectation. No room was left for messianism, either in the Mosaic law or in history.

In the late autumn of 1853, two thousand copies of this bulky volume were distributed throughout the country. The storm that broke over me can easily be imagined. I was reviled, cursed, called a heretic, and literally destroyed in the same measure by Jews and by Christians, or rather, in the same measureless fashion. I was condemned, rejected, and damned. After three years of hard work, and in spite of all my conscientiousness and my "truth and clarity, logically arranged," of which I was aware, I stood there like a scolded street urchin who has stolen his playmate's lunch.

Only one man came to my defense: Dr. Arnold, the Baltimore physician, whose article . . . "The Philistines Are upon You, Samson!" appeared in the *Occident*. No one else spoke up to defend my honor. I have never been able to forget that cowardice. I could not answer my opponents, since none of them had discussed my book critically. Not a single mistake, no grammatical error, no careless conclusions, no mistake in source quotation, nothing of that sort was alleged against me. Heretic! heretic! heretic! was their entire battle cry, and no thinking person can answer that. I replied to only one person, my friend and countryman, Dr. [Bernard] Illowy. He attacked me in a letter in Hebrew, published in the *Occident*, probably thinking that I could not answer it. I wrote an answer in Hebrew, for him exclusively, and Isaac Leeser was decent enough to publish my letter, too, in the *Occident*.

One day I received a letter from Theodore Parker, the famous Unitarian preacher in Boston. He praised my book exceedingly, but added that it was still a bit too orthodox for him. It seems there are those who are even worse than I! Only a few days later, Horace Greeley wrote to me that his paper, the *New York Tribune*, was at my disposal, should I want to bring my defense before the public. He added that he was in complete agreement with me, and then paid me some more compliments. This sufficed me, for these two men were the only

Americans known to me who were familiar with German philosophical literature. Their judgment satisfied me, and the shouts of "heresy!" no longer embarrassed me. I have always been easily satisfied.

But my fellow-Jews, for whom I had really written, what did they say to this uproar? Within my community I did not have to fear, for close ties of brotherhood united us. But abroad, had I not lost all confidence, all influence, had I not written the death sentence of my sacred task and myself? That was the thought that tortured me. "What's this?" "A telegram." I read and read, motionless, as if struck by lightning. I read again; there it was, and so it was written: "In the congregational meeting of K. K. Bene Jeshurun of Cincinnati just concluded, you have just been elected unanimously as rabbi for life, on your own terms." Signed: Fischel, Secretary.

Well, the gentlemen with their shouts to the Jews of "heretic!" have accomplished nothing. The congregation, except for one or two members, has never seen me, never heard me. They know me only through press reports. It seems, then, that the heresy hunt has failed. Good night! We'll meet again in Cincinnati.<sup>14</sup>

## VI

When a man who could do better turns journalist, the angels in heaven weep for his lost soul. His dear ones appear to him in his dreams, symbolically showing him how he will be attacked, torn ripped apart, and spattered with filth, while a grateful public is highly amused and applauds. "Nonsense," the stubborn man replies to this; "it's just hypersensitivity. No one with hair on his teeth will be bothered by anything of the sort." And the angel turns angry and shouts into the ear of the dreamer: "Go your way then, fickle fool! Become superficial, sink in the morass of journalism, become a slave of the times. Write on everything, without thinking, without investigating, as quickly as the typesetter demands it, and as tersely as space permits."

All this is quite true, but I had already been trapped, and my best friends demanded that I found an independent organ for Judaism. They had no money, and I had an excess of debts. It was impossible to find a publisher for such an undertaking, since Reform Judaism had not proved its right to exist. To realize the impossible is the passion of the adventurer, from which I had not been emancipated. Thus I went to work. Before I left Albany, I visited my friends in New York and acquainted them with my project. I received very encouraging promises, many of which were even kept, but money simply was not available at the time, at least not for me. I was amply supplied with

fine promises in Albany as well, where, because of my debts, I could not hope for money. I visited also Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo, and everywhere received encouraging promises, many of which became actualities. Thus did I arrive in Cincinnati, in April, 1854, with a great many promises.

Everything was favorable for me in Cincinnati. Bene Jeshurun Congregation was young, barely twelve years old. The members were young South Germans, mostly from Bavaria, and belonged to the better element that had been taught by Rabbis Levy, Rosenfeld, Aub, Stein, and Gutmann in Bavaria, and by Mayer and Frankfurter in Württemberg. Of course, everything was still officially Orthodox, but the leaders of Orthodoxy were weak and clumsy and never got in my way. In a short time they even became my friends, for they found that I was not as bad as was my reputation. The petty quarrels and jealousies between English and German Jews I had met and conquered earlier, through my acquaintance with Elias Mayer, Louis Abraham, and other English [-Jewish] leaders. The Germans of all congregations followed me immediately, and the Poles, or rather, the Poseners, then already aspired to be Germans, something they already were in thought and speech. I therefore was among friends.

I planned the publication of the new organ together with Louis Abraham. He and his brother-in-law, A. Louis, succeeded in getting Dr. Schmidt, the publisher of the *Republican*, to publish the paper for a year, after Mr. Louis had guaranteed to make good any losses incurred during the year. By the end of May the advance notices for the new organ, called *The Israelite*, appeared. By the middle of June enough subscriptions had been secured to cover the immediate costs of the undertaking. On the first of July the first number of *The Israelite* saw the light of day. The gripping motto, "Let there be light," appeared on its masthead, and it received a friendly reception in all cities, east, west, and south.

The *Occident* predicted a brief existence for the Reform organ. The *Asmonean* thought that there was not much to it. Christian organs found it ridiculous that *The Israelite* should assert that the core of Judaism was the brotherhood of man and a universal religion. The daily press contented itself with praising the patriotic sentiments of the Fourth of July speech. Thus did the Reform organ of expression enter the world, without fuss or fanfare.

For me, however, this was the beginning of a new era, for it radically changed my library. Henceforth I had to deliver a certain number of lines of manuscript to the typesetters, for I had given my oath to Gutenberg and Dr. Faust [the first two printers] not to wield the scissors, but to assume full responsibility. *The Israelite*, as earlier the

*Asmonean*, each week contained lead articles rationalizing the founding of Reform and spreading the Science of Judaism. These articles were not challenging, neither did they urge people to convert to Reform; they were didactic, intended to enlighten. Then there were the national and international news, poetry, and a story on the first and second pages. Everything had to be written or edited, except the contributions of Louis Abraham, who wrote a pure English. I thus had enough to write.

My lead articles were by no means tame, but they were carefully considered. I did not act hastily. Many friends of Reform, including the *Asmonean*, which was then in the hands of Dr. Lilienthal, expected that, now that I was completely on my own, I would act as did my neighbor, Karl Heinzen, with whom I shared an office. I would move mountains, break off granite blocks, and throw them about myself; I would thunder Reform and cast forth lightning-bolts of progress.

They felt cheated. I was never one to storm heaven; I no more wanted to change the world than I was weary of it. The schoolteacher still resided within me; I wanted only to teach, and that in my own fashion only. To me, Reform never was an end in itself; I considered it only a necessary means to clarify the teachings of Judaism, and to transfigure, exalt, and spread these teachings. I never assumed the role of a Reformer, and never called *The Israelite* a Reform organ; it was an organ for Judaism.

Success proved the merit of my method. From the very beginning, therefore, I not only had to write a great deal; I had to read a great deal more, and I had to study the public. Boredom never bothered me. I followed the same method in my pulpit lectures. I did not want to moralize or even to edify. The way to the heart appeared to me to be through reason, and Judaism seemed to me to be a religion of reason. I therefore turned to exposition and to enlightening, to the explaining of Judaism with and through Reform.

All this was very good, but poems and stories had been promised the public in the advance notices of *The Israelite*. Where could they be found, if in all of English literature nothing useful could be found? Except for Grace Aguilar, Penina Moise of Charleston was the only Jewish poetess here or in England. Both of them were already very much on the decline, and little could be expected of them. No one had entered the field of English Jewish fiction. My closer friends, who had urged me to found an independent organ, had promised me translations from the German and French, but nothing was there when it was needed. In this desperate situation, nothing remained but for me to do the work. God forgive me for writing ten short stories and historical novels in English and German, and later, for manufacturing

rhymed verses in both languages. I did not lend my name to them, called the author the "American Jewish Novelist," and to this day I would deny their authorship had Mr. Edward Bloch not published two of the short stories with my name on the title page, viz., *The First of the Maccabees* and *The Combat of the People, or Hillel and Herod*,<sup>15</sup> and did the hymnal of my congregation not mention my name. That was an entirely new world of books, which I had entered only out of dire need. And I had to keep writing novels until I was relieved by Dr. Nathan Mayer, M. M. Moos, and Lichtenberg in New York, by which time I had collected from the history of the Jews and sketched out material for twelve more Jewish historical novels. One part of my material I gave to some friends to work up, namely, "Menasseh ben Israel and His Times." No one dared to tackle it.

How did I write my novels? Each week I wrote a chapter exactly as long as the space in the paper permitted. Usually the manuscript went red hot from my pen to the printing press, often without being checked, and generally without even having been outlined in advance. Once I forgot the name of the sweet heroine and gave her a different one the following week. It became plain that I had given the good Oppenheimer [the hero] two sweethearts. One of them had to go, and so, in spite of all the efforts of the rabbi, Naphtali Cohen, I let the poor girl burn to death in the Frankfurt fire. That Friday, when this terrible chapter appeared, I spoiled the appetites of my dear lady readers for their fish. But Oppenheimer was saved; he had to marry only one girl.

Thus, to my regret, I became a journalist and novelist, changing from the high-spirited steed of the historian to the lean nag of the daily press, something I wouldn't, and probably shouldn't, have done had not circumstances forced me to do so. I am not responsible for this excursion.<sup>16</sup>

## VII

In a village on the emperor's highway, near the Bavarian border, before 1848, one had the particular pleasure of seeing many wagons, mail coaches, and Austrian soldiers, all coming from or going to Mainz. The wagons and coaches angered only the dogs that chased them, barking and howling. The soldiers, however, were a plague to the poor inhabitants of this miserable village in the Bohemian Forest. These uninvited guests were billeted with the peasants, who had to give food and lodging to one or more soldiers, a task for which they were repaid with brutalities and often with a slap in the face. The peasant was helpless and powerless, while the soldier had his rifle,

bayonet, or saber, and so the peasant had to honor the imperial uniform, just as in Germany, lest he offend the emperor. Already at that time an insult to the crown was a capital offense, which was then already construed to include the imperial coat and undercoat, and the peasant was just as stupid as the soldier was coarse and arrogant, while possessed of no more reason than the peasant.

The mayor, who was the judge and pasha of the village, fared worst of all. He had the honor of receiving, in advance, orders demanding room and board for a certain number of soldiers, horses, dogs, and personal attendants for a certain day. Should those billeted find things not to their liking, he was the more exposed to their mistreatments and brutalities. Although no one was ever killed for insulting the uniform, a large number of kicks were distributed.

It happened in that village that a lieutenant was quartered in the mayor's home, and neither the soup nor the whiskey was to his liking. The dolt in the imperial coat became furious and started to rail and shout in Bohemian, whereof the mayor could not understand a word, which angered the soldier even more. He cursed in broken German, the children laughed at him, and he became very angry. He drew his saber, waved it in the mayor's face, and drove the wife and children out of the house. The mayor stood there, rigid with fear, and whimpered: "Gracious sir, I am the mayor, and I can't stand for that sort of treatment." The lieutenant blustered on and continued cursing until he had somewhat cooled off. Then, pityingly, he asked the man how much salary his office brought him. "Not a kreutzer," was the answer. "Then why, in the devil's name, are you mayor?" "Well, kind sir, you see, it's really for the bit of honor," the mayor smirked. "Well," [said the soldier] "I guess you had enough of it this time!"

I have just remembered this story . . . because I recall the publication of *The Israelite*, the first year of which, apart from the work I put into it, cost me \$600. I had to pay this in cash to Dr. Schmidt, out of my own pocket. In return, I had "the bit of honor" to be an editor, to sit with Karl Heinzen in an office, to drink beer with [Emil] Klau-brecht, and to argue with [Frederick] Hassaurek. These men were German-American leaders. All of them were prophets of salvation, who did not respect me just for my black coat, although they and their followers were strongly atheistic and anti-clerical.

Practical people, when they have lost money in an enterprise, give it up or limit their expenditures. But I did not belong to that group of reasonable people and did just the opposite. Because I had lost money, I added a German supplement in the second year, which I named *Die Deborah*. I also added my brother-in-law, Edward Bloch, as a business partner, so that I would not be alone in losing money in

the coming year. Thus was founded Bloch & Co., printers and publishers, the first Hebrew printing firm west of the Atlantic seacoast cities, with a *deficit* of six hundred dollars and two partners rich in imagination.

In the field of writing, I could expect collaborators in Rabbis Lilienthal, Kalisch, and Rothenheim. All of them had poetic talents, although Rothenheim could write in German only. Thus I had enough time left for the defunct Zion College, and could work on it and on the Cleveland Conference [of 1855] without neglecting the two papers. With the Cleveland Conference, however, my world of books again changed considerably, and once more against my will. Man is not what he eats, as Buechner asserts; he is what circumstances and conditions make of him. I was not forced into a new field by the violent polemics which followed the Cleveland Conference. I left all polemics to the above three rabbis. My sole contribution to the long literary war was but one completely objective lead article, wherein I defended talmudic morals, as I had previously done against non-Jewish opponents.

What forced me to change my world of books was my election as chairman of a three-man committee which was to formulate and submit to a forthcoming synod a *Minhag America* ["The American Ritual"], a new liturgy with a modern ritual suitable for America. The synod never convened, but the *Minhag America* was developed, printed, and introduced in about one hundred congregations. [This was the most widely used Reform prayer book before the adoption of *The Union Prayerbook* in the early 1890's by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.]

While the polemical storm outside raged furiously, the three of us, Kalisch, Rothenheim, and Wise, were at work together almost every evening, engaged in this task. First we determined how much Hebrew we would use for the annual cycle of the prayers. The services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, however, were not touched. Nothing new was created; the old was shortened, in consideration of the length of the services. The *piutim* ["liturgical poems"] were, of course, discarded; everything cabbalistic and everything dealing with the sacrificial cult, the messiah, the return to Palestine, and the prayers for the heads of the Babylonian academies, as well as all laments about persecutions, were simply eliminated and were replaced by modern concepts. We had to sacrifice everything related to throne, crown, and dynasty to the land of freedom, and lifted the narrow nationalism as much as possible to universalism. Thus, in the Eighteen Benedictions . . . "redeemer" was changed to . . . "redemption" and . . . "loving deeds of our fathers" became . . . "covenant of our fathers." The *teka* [prayer for the return of Israel to Palestine] became the prayer for



the deliverance of all nations and their brotherhood. In the *Alenu* [Adoration] the fourth [universalistic] sentence replaced the second [particularistic] one. That which did not conflict with basic principles remained unchanged, and we kept the old form.

Now the book had to be provided with a free translation into German and English, so that, as had been planned, congregations could hold services in one of the three languages [English, German, or Hebrew]. I could, with an easy conscience, leave the German to Messrs. Kalisch and Rothenheim, and they did it quite well. The English I had to do myself. Thus did I enter a new world of books, to which I brought little knowledge and less practice.

When it became necessary, in response to congregational pressure, to publish the second part, for New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement, Kalisch procrastinated and Rothenheim was no longer able to work. I had to undertake the task by myself. The Hebrew text was exactly determined, according to the above principles. I had to rewrite, in its entirety, only the Hebrew *Abodah* [the part dealing with the old sacrificial system], for the mention of the sacrificial cult had to be discarded. But I could translate into English only. The German had to be left out, with the exception of a few sections I had translated earlier, such as the introduction to and conclusion of the evening service of the New Year, the memorial service on the evening preceding the Day of Atonement, and a few hymns. I did not want to translate into two languages. The congregations, however, seemed quite satisfied with this second part.

However, a third and final section had been promised to the public: hymns, psalms, and prayers, in English and German, for alternate use in worship and for other ritual acts. The plan had long been known. Several selections, for the introduction to services, for the conclusion of worship on evenings, mornings, sabbaths, and feasts, and for the taking out and returning of the Torah were to appear in the book, as well as songs before and after the sermon, for Chanukah and Purim; and rituals for confirmation, burial, synagogue dedication, cornerstone laying, and also school songs.

When I was ready to start this work, to keep faith with the public, my hair rose up straight, although it was quite long and unkempt. Rhyme, write poetry? I? And in two languages! To steal and plagiarize went against my nature and against the honor of Israel. The nations sing the songs of Zion, but we did not borrow from them. The Trinitarians can't be trusted [for their songs are often Christological], and the Unitarians are themselves poor in original contributions. Even so, I went to work, for I had to. How I moved about in this new world of books, I will relate soon.<sup>17</sup>

## [VII A]

## CONCERNING MY WORLD OF BOOKS

"Poets are born, not made," the poets assert, not because the prophet Jeremiah said so, but to make excuses for their poor poetry: "I can't help it if you don't like my poetry; God is to blame!" It is certain that poets are not trained, since even without Blumauer, Heine, and Byron, there are many untrained sons of the muses who have composed pretty nice poems. We are therefore forced to conclude that there are two kinds of poetic souls: (1) those who have to write because they are born for this, and (2) those who rhyme because necessity drives them. After all, children are born, people marry, men die; and all that has to be rhymed in and out of the world. The boots of an imaginative youth are torn; he writes a poem and pays the cobbler. A man or a woman is in love—and they create verses as quickly and roundly as the baker makes matzos. Everyone can rhyme; why not I?

These and similar reflections gave me the courage to undertake the work on the third part of the *Minhag America*.<sup>18</sup> Walking alone in the dark forest, beset by fears and anxiety, one whistles a gay melody to deceive oneself. Conscious of the fact that I was not born to be a poet, I began the work as I had formerly begun, to write novels. (Interruption! Having written this, I left the house for a little while, went into the street, fell flat on my face, and—no more writing for the time being. As soon as possible, the continuation will follow.)<sup>19</sup>

## VIII

What I wrote for the New Year and for the Day of Atonement breathes forth a completely different spirit and met with more recognition. The cause of this, it seemed to me, was that I approached the sanctification of these holidays in a different, far more joyous manner than did the old prayer books. The depressing, dark, crushing aspects retreated into the background. . . .

My greatest success, I am told, is my memorial service. On the eve of the Day of Atonement I replaced the many Hebrew prayers and songs in the old *machzor* ["holiday prayerbook"] . . . with the memorial service. It begins with a meditation in three parts, appropriate to the day and the occasion. It closes with the simple, sigh-like words, repeated by the choir: "What is man, O Almighty, what is man?" Then follows the song, "Immortality." . . . Now follows the silent meditation, the actual *Mazkir Neshamoth* [commemoration of the dead]. A holy silence reigns in the light-filled temple. Then a mighty choir

intones: "Thy dead live. . . ." The impression is powerful; all doubts disappear, a holy sense of consecration transfigures the entire congregation.

This is followed by the service for the members of the congregation who died during the past year, as well as for all men and women of special importance, regardless of their religion or their place of origin, who departed from the earth during the past year, and then by the *Alenu* [closing prayer] and the *kaddish* [prayer for the dead] for all by all the congregation.

I still detest long prayers, ceremonies, and hymns, particularly the last, because they repeat a boring, monotonous melody tiresomely. I therefore wrote a number of short hymns and prayers. . . .<sup>20</sup>

## IX

"The students of the wise have no rest either in this world or in the next," the old book (*tractate Berachoth* [in the Talmud]) tells us. It never occurred to me to be one of those students. My learned opponents speedily disabused me of any little self-esteem I may have had. And yet—even today I am angry because of it—I could never find peace in this life. Fate threw me from one fight into the next, from one work to another, and granted me no hours of relaxation. I am sure there must be, like myself, many other badly paid lackeys of Providence, who do not conceive of themselves as students of the wise [scholars]. I call them as witnesses against the old scholar, to prove that the old man didn't know what he was talking about. He should have said: "There are court jesters of Providence who never find peace." For we restless idealists are none other than the court jesters of Providence, who even pay for their own fools' caps. And still, theirs is not the worst lot, for they expect no reward, no gratitude. Worst off are the day-laborers of Providence when they have not received their daily wage for services rendered. They whine the loudest, as, for example, the Neo-Orthodox pious hypocrites in the "Far East." [Some New York Jews? Followers of Samson Raphael Hirsch in Europe?]

But I did not want to talk about that at all. I wanted only to tell how, having barely finished the work on the *Minhag America*, and the poor publisher Bloch having thrown his money to the wind, I was forced to return to my world of books. Questions from Christians kept pouring in, as to what this so-called Reform Judaism might be, and there was nothing in English which could answer those questions, in some measure, in a clear and concise fashion.

The poverty of American Judaism in apologetic literature was disgraceful (England was no better), but even more disgraceful and im-

poverished was Reform Judaism. Except for that which had reached the public through *The Israelite* and a few English sermons published elsewhere (and that wasn't much), there wasn't a thing. Letters, regardless of how many were written, could not fill the need. Moreover, there were the teachers who wanted to give religious instruction in English and from a Reform position. Among these were the teachers in my congregational school, who wanted, and, as they said, needed, a manual. Worst of all were the frequent reproaches by our opponents, to the effect that only the Reformers desired to destroy Judaism, that only they preached and talked about what not to do, what not to believe, that only they offered a negative program and had nothing positive.

I pleaded with several friends, who I knew could write in English, to undertake the work; I even offered some of them an outline of the work. No one would touch it. To this day I am ashamed when I think of how I shirked my tasks in those days. Everyone thought the duties of his office occupied him completely. Every teacher, like every congregation, considered himself a secluded isle unto himself, connected with the rest of the world in some watery fashion only.

A rabbi may not curse; I, too, could but swallow my anger. Whether or not I did then and often later secretly curse the lack of community spirit and willingness to work is something I really cannot remember.

For better or worse, therefore, I had to go to work, to write a short booklet which would cover the subject. A short booklet which would still cover the subject: that was the worst of the task. It is much easier to write a long book than a short one. My friend in Paris, with whom I corresponded, once wrote a rather long letter. At the end was a post-script: "I beg your pardon, but I really had no time to write a short letter."

The art of defining, short and pointed, was, to my mind, best understood by Spinoza. I imitated him the best I could and thus I succeeded, after a great many erasures, in writing a short booklet. Here are a few examples:

God is the cause of all being, the source of life, of love, and of reason, the ruler and preserver of all.

God's love is revealed to us in the eternal rule of his justice and holiness.

Man is a son of God, endowed with attributes similar to God.

Through the teachings of God, humanity is delivered from its sins and mistakes and from their evil consequences, and is united

in truth, freedom, justice, and love, and formed into one brotherhood.

God is almighty. He is the eternally active First Cause in all creation.

God is all-wise; all possible consequences of all causes are known to him.

God is omniscient, because he is almighty and all-wise.

God is holy; all moral perfection is united in him; etc.

The booklet has these peculiar features: each sentence is biblically supported by a proof text and by a reference to other texts. It is a portrayal of biblical Judaism in its entirety. The Talmud is neither used nor quoted, except in the preface, where the Talmud, the New Testament, and the Koran are referred to as three different expositions of the Holy Scripture.

The foundation of Judaism is the threefold covenant of God: with humanity (Adam and Noah), with the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and with Israel. The Sinaitic revelation contains the conditions which have to be met. The laws and teachings of the Sinaitic revelation are unchangeable, as are all other laws in principle, if they derive from the Sinaitic law. All laws, ordinances, regulations, commands, etc., which are not grounded in the Sinaitic principles are not included in the covenant laws and are not valid for eternity. This is the basis of our teachings on obligations, ceremonials, and holidays (except for the rabbinic [post-biblical] holidays), and the worship service.

This was the first time that Reform Judaism appeared to the world completely and basically founded upon the Bible. Christian friends said that this was a philosophy of religion. Our Orthodox thought that the doctrinal theology was strictly Orthodox, the moral theology and ceremonial teachings ultra-radical. The press was silent, and this time the silence seemed significant, although a few years later Rabbi Mayer, of Hartford, published an Orthodox textbook in the same form and closely following my definitions.

My booklet was called *The Essence of Judaism*.<sup>21</sup> But even before the end of the first year, I had to rework it into a catechism, entitled *Judaism, Its Doctrines and Duties*.<sup>22</sup> It was printed by a stereotype method, and, from that day on, not a word in it was changed, although it received a nation-wide distribution of many thousands of copies, and even today [1897] it is used in the schools, as well as by Christians eager for knowledge. During this large span of time a great number of catechisms have appeared here; but none of them could replace this little booklet.

I went to work under compulsion, and, as I have said, it cost me no little trouble to put out this little booklet. But I have never regretted it, even though on this, as on previous occasions, silence surrounded me. After all, I had the knowledge of having been the first to base Reform Judaism on the Bible and to define its forms. The influence on the development of American Judaism which this little book exercised is a memory I shall never forget.<sup>23</sup>

## X

Even today I cannot understand how this patient Bohemian child of Jews [I, Isaac M. Wise] managed to fight and argue with the whole world, without being forced to abandon his narrow views on the world and on man. The most bitter need could not budge me from my limited position.

Only once, as a schoolboy of tender age, did I dare to defy the world, and I was gruffly scolded. A rich butcher lived in our neighborhood. His son Peter, who was a few years older than I, found pleasure in beating Jewish children. His allies were many, and they were more pugnacious than the Jewish children. One day we met outside the village. Peter attacked me, stick in hand, and was ready to rain blows upon me. Like Moses in Egypt, I looked about, and, perceiving that no one saw me, I wrested the stick from his hand, and Peter got a good thrashing. Bawling, he rushed home and told his mother exactly how, when, and where he was beaten. Enraged, his mother stormed into our house, even before I returned (filled with guilt, I was afraid to come home), and recounted to my blessed father the misdeed of his son. My good father, a completely humble imperial-royal-Bohemian protected-Jew [a second-class citizen] and schoolmaster, was horrified at the misdeed of his son and promised the butcher's wife that I would be properly punished as soon as I got home.

I came home and was called to account. "Don't you realize, you bad boy," said my dear father, "that we mustn't create any *rishus* ['prejudice']? Don't you know that we are in *golus* ['exile']?" I did not quite understand the word *golus*; I thought it meant that we were to be beaten, and became defiant. I answered my father: "I've been in *golus* long enough. Let Peter be in *golus* from now on. If I catch him again, he'll be beaten!" Although my father had to laugh at my misunderstanding, he continued to preach to me regarding the morals of *golus*. Finally, he proved to me from the Talmud that those who are beaten and do not fight back are the favorites of God, shining with the splendor of the sun at its fullest. I had the greatest of respect for the Talmud, and the argument convinced me that I must never again

thrash Peter. Hence I must indeed have been a very patient Bohemian Jewish child, but still I subsequently fought and argued with the whole world, even if only with the pen. How did that happen? Circumstances determine the man. Every man must do what his surroundings force upon him.

On the thorny path of a Jewish teacher there was many a stumbling block which I could not bypass. I had to remove it, and that puts calluses on soft hands. When I had to sink or swim in the floods of Reform, I encountered stumbling blocks, boulders, and floes that repulsed me and often hurt severely. On the one side was Orthodoxy; on the other, ice-cold indifference; next to both, thoughtless radicalism. They fought me at every step; I had to fight back, and courage grows with the battle. The long-suffering Bohemian youth became a ruffian, who gave a sound thrashing to every Peter who, stick in hand, dared to attack him. Circumstances forced him to this.

I have always treated the Christian religion and its founder with appropriate respect, not only because I had so many dear friends, honored teachers, and able allies within Christianity, but also because I understood and appreciated the civilizing work of Christianity. At the time when Dias [Benjamin Dias Fernandes], [Selig] Newman, [Isaac] Leeser [Jewish apologists], and others polemized against Christianity, using their biblical approach, Kalisch, Schlesinger, and I were also drawn into this conflict, but I confined myself to dogmas, and my polemics were exclusively philosophic. This did not alienate me from my opponents, as we never had anything unpleasant to say to each other. Where reason speaks rationally, malice cannot exist.

It was not until the arrival of Christian missionaries from England, mostly baptized Jews in the pay of the English conversion society, that the tone changed, first among the Christians, then also with me, who was considered the representative of Judaism. First, the missionaries appeared with soft and pitiful pleas concerning the persecuted, downtrodden, conversion-hungry Jews, who had to be saved. That evoked sympathy among the people and their preachers, who knew the Jew and Judaism from hearsay only, or, in rare cases, from the Bible and from Flavius Josephus. For a while this worked nicely; the missionaries received the money, and the preachers always had a ready subject on hand: "the poor Jews!"

When this theme lost its appeal and the influx of money decreased, the missionaries adopted another tone. They painted Judaism as despicable, mocked Jewish customs and ceremonies, and deplored the ignorance of the Jews. "The Jew hates Jesus and Christianity because he does not know the New Testament!" "We must have money to teach the New Testament to the Jew; then he will gladly be chris-

tened!" That attracted the people for a while and gave the pulpit a new slant, so that each Sunday every little cleric and his female devotees had something unpleasant to say about Jews or about Catholics. This tone permeated even the literature, and the rabbis could not answer in English. Hence I was conscripted for the battle. Against my wishes, against my aesthetic inclination, in disregard of my pecuniary and moral interests, I had to appear in the public arena as an author against Christianity.

My plan of battle never changed. It consisted of these basic rules:

1. To change the scene of battle to Egypt, in the land of the enemy; always to wage an offensive, rather than to fight a defensive, war.

2. To let nothing move me from my broad, liberal, humane, and independent position, no matter how I was treated, or condemned, or ignored by the critical or non-critical world.

3. To discuss all questions in a purely objective and factual manner, as clearly and concisely as possible, and staying within the boundaries of the argument, without any mockery, sarcasm, bad jokes, scorn, or empty play on words.

With the exception of hasty newspaper articles, often written in the heat of the moment, I believe that I have followed this plan of battle consistently, particularly in the fight against dogmatic Christianity, wherein I found more of St. Augustine than of Jesus.

I opened my campaign with the translation of the second part of [G. A.] Wislicenus' work on the New Testament, which I published serially in *The Israelite*, as a temporary answer to the accusation of Jewish ignorance . . . . Then I published at short intervals:

1. *The Origin of Christianity, and a Commentary to the Acts of the Apostles* [1868], a critical investigation of this book with the aid of the rabbinic sources.<sup>24</sup> In this [Wise's] book there first appeared the claimed identity of Paul as the rabbinic Acher [Elisha ben Abuyah].

2. The origin of Christianity, in three lectures on Jesus, the Apostles, and Paul, which I presented to the larger public in most of the big cities of the country [*Three Lectures on the Origin of Christianity*, 1873].

3. *The Martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth* [1874], a critical treatment on the last chapters of the gospels, and compared with the rabbinic sources.<sup>25</sup>

4. Similarities and dissimilarities in the teachings of Judaism and Christianity [*Judaism and Christianity, Their Agreements and Disagreements*, 1883], a criticism of dogmas.<sup>26</sup>

5. A protest of Judaism against Christology and the conversion



mania [*A Defense of Judaism Versus Proselytizing Christianity*, 1889].

I could not complete a work on the life of Jesus, part of which appeared serially in the *Am.[erican] Israelite*, since once more surrounding circumstances forced me into another field of literature.

The discussion of that aspect of my world of books I will reserve for the coming week. I wrote until the expression, "The Jews do not know the New Testament," was dead. I exploded the notion that "The Jews hate Jesus and Christianity." To the Jews I brought a milder, purer, and more conciliatory view on Christ and Christianity, the while I induced all of liberal Christianity to adopt a friendly and brotherly attitude towards Judaism. Perhaps I owe all this more to my plan of battle than to the whole work itself. I offended no one, insulted nobody, left the sacred unprofaned, and cheerfully recognized every truth. And I stopped the missionaries, so that outside of New York they could accomplish nothing with the immigrants.<sup>27</sup>

## X [*sic*]

God's police in uniform, mostly Jews converted in England in consideration of money and fine words, and then sent to America on a soul-hunt, were no problem for me. I stopped them from pursuing their task in any part of the country. For many years no missionary has succeeded in bringing an American Israelite to baptism. The converts in New York are all immigrants from the European East. The part played by the world of my books in this connection will never be established, for no one will undertake the task of studying the pertinent contemporaneous [Christian] literature, to portray truthfully this chapter in our cultural history. One would have to work through the relevant Christian literature in order to determine how, year after year, it became more tolerant and fair-minded towards Judaism. The contemporaneous Jewish literature could be discarded unread, for no trace of this conflict can be found in it. The Jews remained completely neutral, which was the best they could do.

Even while this battle was going on, Judaism had to face another enemy, one which attacked it even more violently: that was atheism, which later rebaptized itself as agnosticism. Our contemporary literature is silent on this score, too. No trace can be found in it of the fact that the cultured classes of its time were crisscrossed by the poisonous arrows of atheism. Without saying a word, as if dumb and blind, they walked past this dangerous, threatening cliff. I felt alone, lonely, deserted, without support in my own camp. But I could not reject the assignment, at least to try to attack this Goliath.

This was not so easy as the battle with the missionaries. There I

was much better equipped than my opponents. Here, however, I had to face all of the natural sciences. On the one hand, there was materialism in the form of the atom theory, the complete denial of the indwelling spirit in man and in nature. In educated circles, in literature, and in the pulpit, words such as God, immortality of the soul, or soul, spirit, teleology, theology, life-force, metaphysics, or philosophy were scrupulously avoided; that was the blind faith of the peasant.

On the other hand, Darwinism reared its head, as it did in Germany, where it was driven to its ultimate consequences, and in England, where it philosophized itself into the Unknowable, exalting or debasing itself to the highest point of agnosticism, ultimately culminating in Schopenhauer's pessimism, in Hartmann's Unconscious, and in Dühring's phantasies. A gaping public gathered around these monuments, babbling atheism in every nook and cranny.

Of course, these people knew precious little of the natural sciences which were supposed to provide the foundation for these philosophic formations, and of the total picture they understood still less. But that did not prevent them from gaping and babbling, each repeating the other's words, dipping into atheism until they had convinced themselves that all intelligent men were atheists, although many of these soft-pedalled their beliefs, but only in order to be exalted by the stupid people. They often claimed that Dr. Wise, whom they recognized as the representative of liberalism, was also an atheist, who was unable to say so publicly since he would lose the support of his Jews.

This spirit of the times had to be opposed, but in our circles not a single voice was raised which seemed to accept the challenge. The preachers preached in their old ways, the journalists followed the old patterns, and beyond that there was no literature. Then something happened to me, as it did to many others who are aware of their shortcomings. I felt the need, I felt the ineffable compulsion to speak up strongly, but I was keenly aware of my ignorance in the new natural sciences. In our day we learned little of them in school, and once only, for a little while, in Albany, did I look a bit more closely into the face of nature. I was well aware of my weakness. One cannot enter into battle with people by means of the Bible, Talmud, history, and philosophy; they don't understand anything of this; and teachers and students cannot be convinced with them. There I stood, like Moses before the burning bush.

It was Purim. I had stayed in the city overnight, to participate in the evening and morning services. A heavy storm raged over town and country that night, uprooting trees along the highway, and the logs blocked the road. A number of workers were occupied in removing them. They looked hot, but I was freezing in the carriage. There I

learned that the heaviest blocks can be put out of the way if one has the right kind of strength for the task, and that, if the work is strenuous enough, one does not freeze, however cold it may be. After passing several obstacles, I finally reached my home. The first thing I did was to compile a list of books that I wanted to read, and sent it to the bookstore. Then I gathered together everything in my library which dealt with the natural sciences. I, too, can work; I can remove the blocks from the way, and I'll certainly get hot doing it.

For quite a long period of time, whenever I happened to be free from my official duties, I devoted myself to this study. I read, visited several laboratories, made my own experiments, thought, investigated, and formed hypotheses in competition with Buechner, Vogt, Haeckel, Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer. Half the night, or even entire winter nights, I sat at my desk. Whole nights? Yes, whole nights. The most painful misfortune of my life occurred to me in those days: pain, a nameless sorrow, embittered every pleasure of life and would not let me sleep at night. There I sat, whole nights long, by my lamp, immersed myself in the sciences, and deadened my pain with fatiguing intellectual work. In the dedication and the closing words of my book, *The Cosmic God*, I revealed some of this to my readers.<sup>28</sup>

In time I achieved a certain insight into the various branches of the natural sciences to which I had paid particular attention. But a considerable amount of time was still needed to connect the results thus won with earlier studies to form a whole, and to turn them into evidence supporting my final aim.

Having completed the sweating-cure of this long process, I felt sufficiently warmed, strengthened, and encouraged to turn to my pen for the fifth time, to try to fashion a firm foundation in opposition to the deviating spirit of the time. Again I did this not because I wanted to, but because I had to, not to discover the Golden Fleece, but to follow the drive of my heart: my conviction, which I have never deserted. That my convictions were tantamount to the teachings of Judaism was, of course, no coincidence; but in the writing of the book, it was nevertheless coincidental, for I had emancipated myself from all preconceptions (as much as it is possible to do this), before I wrote the first line, and I was strongly determined to write and to assert only that which, by the strict logic of the inductive method, was obtained from the results of the sciences.

Thus was created the 181-page book, *The Cosmic God, A Fundamental Philosophy, in Popular Lectures*, in the year 1876, containing a so-called accounting with the sciences, leading to the conclusion that the true recognition of God emerges clearly, plainly, and certainly from the results of science, a concept of God which is in full

accord with Judaism, of God who reveals himself in world history as the Creator and Guide of the world, and as exalted moral Ideal.

On twenty-two Friday evenings of the winter 1875-76 the twenty-two chapters were presented as independent lectures before a large public, at least half of which consisted of persons with some atheistic leanings. The book achieved its goal; from that time on we were no longer plagued by atheism. To the men of science it proved that the theistic world-view is justified. From the heights of science, as from the top of Mount Sinai, one can, without being a split personality, be a believer in and worshipper of God, living and moving in faith, at the peak of morality, in confidence and hope.<sup>29</sup>

## XI

No thunder of cannon, no ringing of bells announced to the world, which cared little enough, the great event when, in October, 1875, the Hebrew Union College opened at Bene Israel Temple in Cincinnati, one story below the surface of the earth. There sat the wise men of Israel, namely, the good old teacher Solomon Eppinger and fourteen noisy boys, most of whom had come only to kill time and at the command of their parents. Four of them wanted to study; ten wanted to make noise.

Since Mr. Eppinger could not manage the class by himself, the exalted president [Rabbi Wise] had to condescend to become a schoolmaster and to share the joys and sorrows of a schoolteacher with good old Eppinger. The class was divided into two sections. The president and the faculty alternately took each group. No one who failed to see the embryonic college can imagine how ridiculous was this little hole-in-the-wall of a school, in its not-too-bright cellar, carrying the pompous name of a college. Fortunately, we did not have to be ashamed in front of visitors, for none came. Also, no book was stolen, since each evening the whole library was locked up in a two-and-one-half-foot box, not because of thieves, but because of mice.

What we lacked most of all was English textbooks [on Judaism], and the students did not understand German [in which language there were many books on Jewish subjects]. No useful Hebrew grammar, no Jewish history, nothing except the English Bible, was available. We had to help ourselves. The grammar was dictated, and Josephus replaced the history. But when we got to the Talmud, we were in a bad way. Things went from bad to worse when we reached Maimonides. Nothing had been prepared in English. We had to create a new English to make these old writings available to our students. Never before had the Talmud been translated into English anywhere

for the students; everywhere the old Polish-German jargon [Yiddish] prevailed. After much hesitation and delay, although overwhelmed by work, I once more had to take up my pen. I long rebelled against it, but it had to be, for no one was interested in us (except for our opponents, who attacked or mocked us), and again I went to work.

I began by translating haggadic [non-legal] portions of the Talmud, and selections from the [Maimonidean] *Sepher Hammada*, *Moreh Nebuchim*, and other philosophical writings. But since I had to have the translations for the classes, I could make a sufficient supply of duplicate copies only by printing them each week in *The Israelite* (as I did later with the [discussion of the] *Massorah* and the theological lectures as well), so that every student could have a copy at hand. That was a rewarding task for me. First of all, the students rapidly busied themselves with the difficult task of translating these selections into English; secondly, I was criticized mercilessly and learned from this that haste makes waste; and thirdly, the readers of *The Israelite* complained about the unreadable material. This gave me the proud consciousness that my writings were even read, something of which few religious periodicals could then boast. It did not stop me from engaging in this profitable business as long as it was needed.

Meanwhile, I worked on a textbook on history from 536 B.C.E. to 70 C.E., and had it printed at my own expense. The book is entitled *History of the Hebrews' Second Commonwealth*.<sup>30</sup> Actually, it is the second part of my *History of the Israelitish Nation*, which was published in 1854, but I had to change the form, since this book was primarily required as a textbook on history. I made critical use of the investigations of Jost, Graetz, Frankel, Herzfeld, Zunz, Geiger, Rappaport, Loew, Weiss, Bruell, Salvador, Raphael [Raphall], Prideaux, Munk, and others, together with the findings of geographers and numismatians. To all this I added my own researches, particularly those on the origin of Christianity, and scattered notes in the Talmud. The material was digested in a strictly logical and pragmatic manner, and condensed into short paragraphs to avoid a heavy volume. I succeeded in presenting a history of six centuries clearly and completely in this thin volume, although I devoted much space to literature and culture.

I now had an exhaustive and complete textbook for this important period of history, and that was all that I wanted. It never occurred to me to consider whether or not anyone would read or buy the book. Nevertheless, the critics got hold of it — how, I do not know — and did their best to destroy it, but they did not succeed. One was highly incensed that I translated *pammalya shel maalah* as “the family on high,” and called this a profanation of the Holy One. A second one

felt hurt because I depicted Agrippa I as a law-abiding king, and there were dozens of similar trifles. Best of all, however, was the contention of a native-born Jew who did not like my English. I did not laugh, neither was I angry at the reviewers; but I have learned to despise them and, because of their weaknesses, to pity them, and I did not reply. The book has gone through several editions, and will long remain as a textbook.

Now I had a period of rest and I did not have to write a book. Dr. [Moses] Mielziner had relieved me. At the college I could use my earlier books and take from *The Israelite* what I had put into it for that purpose. I did not want to publish sermons and other lectures, since most of them had already been distributed by the press. Then came the Pentateuch or Hexateuch criticism and it aroused me once again. When the scholars and half-scholars had gone so far as to portray the Books of Moses as a late creation and as a patchwork, stitched together by deceitful priests, and as to deny the existence of Moses, and to explain all biblical history down to David, or even later, as myth, and to declare all of biblical Judaism to be a product of the Babylonians and Aryans [Persians], I was seized with fear for historical Judaism on the one hand, and on the other hand I had to speak against this to the students of the college.

If the Pentateuch was a lie on which all of historical Judaism based itself, then all our great spirits were either deceived deceivers or despicable hypocrites. If this is so, why is there Judaism in the nineteenth century? Why all the sacrifices offered on the altar of our faith, so often with bleeding hearts, not only by our fathers, but also by us? If this is so, whence do I know that there is an only, unique, and eternal God, who is merciful, just, loving, and true? Whence do I know that justice, righteousness, and virtue are what we claim them to be? Whence do I know that there are a moral order of the universe and immortality, when all the world has gone off into materialism, all philosophy into the unconscious and into agnosticism?

Like Koheleth [Ecclesiastes], I was almost forced into despair. I was pushed to the very edge of the abyss of pessimism, of nihilism, from which suicide alone can free one. I had to speak, I had to write again, once again pushed and forced by tormenting circumstances. It took a long time for me to work through the constantly growing critical literature. It took me even longer to oppose the apparatus [of biblical criticism], rich in hypotheses and contradictions, with a system [of my own]. When I had found out how to confront the documentary hypothesis with a priori proofs, I went to my desk and produced the introduction to the Holy Writ under the title *Pronaos to Holy Writ*,<sup>31</sup> which is still [1897] used as a textbook at the Hebrew

Union College. Since I am still in a unique position in relation to this book, I shall have to give more information about it, which shall be done soon.<sup>32</sup>

## XII

The year 1889 brought to us American rabbis a new institution: an association of rabbis, exclusively for them and independent of the whole world. The minutes tell us that thirty rabbis, who were present in the city of Detroit as delegates of congregations to the council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, formed the Central Conference of American Rabbis. It is true that I had written, and ordered to be printed, the first draft, but it was presented to the pre-convention group anonymously. Dr. Philipson assumed the chair, Dr. Berkowitz acted as secretary, and the constituent committee appointed by the convention consisted of Drs. Mayer, Mielziner, Sale, Berkowitz, and Aaron. My name was not mentioned at all, and in the first draft the late Dr. S. Adler, of New York, was nominated for the presidency.

I was happy that I was going to escape this time without any further responsibilities. I had passed my seventieth year and had no desire to enter upon new obligations. My colleagues, however, were of a different opinion. Once the conference was organized and proceeded to the election of officers, Dr. S. Adler was elected honorary president, and, against my will, the presidency was placed upon my shoulders. "In spite of his strenuous protests," the minutes read, "the unanimous sentiment was in favor of Dr. Isaac M. Wise, of Cincinnati, as president." I could not escape, although this seemed to be a new burden for me.

I made the job easy for myself: I let the gentlemen of the conference do everything while I learned to be silent in the chair. With the exception of the opening speech I did only one thing, and that was the commission's report on the abolition of circumcision for proselytes, which was approved by the Conference in New York on July 8, 1892. The report took up twenty-six pages in the yearbook, and I had to work it out by myself, since my dear colleagues Moses and Landsberg were in Europe at that time.

But matters soon changed. The Conference decided that this body would have to represent Judaism at the religious congress of the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. That stirred me greatly and woke me from my lethargy. I well knew that we had enough strength to do justice to the task. But I was not ignorant of the extent to which opinions differed among us. It was to be feared that, instead of

Judaism, we would present a hybrid before the world. That had to be prevented at any price, and it was at least in the main stopped by deciding on a program of what was not to be discussed, and on who was to work on the suggested themes. Since we, that is to say the commission, knew our people well, the apportionment of the themes worked out quite well, as may be seen from the collected addresses in the book, *Judaism at the World's Parliament of Religions*.

With brotherly love the commission overwhelmed me with work. It entrusted me with three subjects: "The Theology of Judaism," "The Ethics of Judaism," and "The Bibliography of the Jewish Periodical Press." The last mentioned, despite the help of Dr. Louis Grossmann, I could not cover completely. For the two other works, which filled twenty-five pages of the above book, I hold myself responsible. The difficulty I had to consider in this work lay not in the material; that was easy and readily at hand, since I had moved in this atmosphere for fifty years, and for the last eighteen I had taught these subjects at the Hebrew Union College.

The difficulty was in the method. How could I present these important teachings truly and intelligibly to a public consisting of the learned representatives of almost all the religions of the world without suppressing what I should and must say, and without giving offense? Furthermore, how could I present all that I had to say to the public in the short time allotted to me? Added to this was my awareness of the great importance of this assignment. For the first time in the history of Israel, I was to glorify and worthily present the God and the teachings of Israel before the adherents of all religions, on an occasion that had never happened before and which was unlikely to recur.

I appeared to myself as the high priest on the Day of Atonement, who fearfully and tremblingly enters the holy of holies. I was afraid to approach the task; with trepidation I wrote every sentence, only to improve and shorten it the moment it was written down. As I, in the silence of the night, alone in my room, reread what I had written the previous night, the painful thought came upon me: "You are not big enough to master this task." It took a long time before my enthusiasm for the high task, and my conviction that I would only have to tell the truth, overcame my fearful timidity and I could approach the task with joy and love.

Thus I did not come to Chicago unprepared. If I did not carry out my assignment completely, it was only because I could do no better. But I do know for certain that I was the only one at the congress who spoke on the theology and the ethics of Judaism as a



system, thus bringing the Jewish teachings to the larger public through the proceedings of the congress. My colleagues accomplished much that was good and beautiful; but it was always separate segments that were treated and presented. No one had gone so far as to submit a complete system of theology and ethics. They all spoke as Jewish scholars; none spoke as a Jewish theologian, not because they could not, but because they would not. The scholar and the apologete were heard in every lecture, but positive Judaism always remained in the background, often almost concealed from the view of the uninitiated.

I was very much satisfied with the achievements of my colleagues, if only because they did not speak of all that which divides us, of that which runs counter to the idea of Judaism as a world religion, or which devaluates other religions or incites to polemics. I cannot, however, say that they were satisfied with my contributions; that I discovered only later. Had I known it right then and there, I would have been even more satisfied with my achievements, for it would have convinced me that I must have said something which the scholarly gentlemen did not know before, and I would have been quite proud of that.

Anyway, except for establishing theology on a philosophical foundation, I did not wish to present anything new in Chicago, and I will report on that matter later.<sup>83</sup> [Wise never completed these memoirs.]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I Chronicles 16:33; Ps. 96:12. If we view Wise's notes and comments in their actual context, we can realize that he often draws on the vast storehouse of his mind in a casual manner, quoting from the Bible with easy assurance. (The modern scholar, in contrast, may be visualized in the cartoon of a writer surrounded by dozens of open books, penning the sentence, "if memory serves, the following quotation . . .".) Wise correctly shows the verse to exist in two versions.

<sup>2</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 12, September 17, 1896, pp. 5-6. This is No. I in the series "Meine Bücherei." In it Wise makes some basic contentions which he maintains throughout the series. They are: that he did not

want to write, preferring deeds to words; that circumstances always impelled and forced him to enter the field of literature; and that a man is forced to follow the influences of his environment, even against his will.

<sup>3</sup>"My salad days," in the German, is *Flegeljahre*. "Cubhood" is an English equivalent; but in context, and as a literary allusion, the Shakespearean term brings us closer to Wise's intentions.

<sup>4</sup>The pulpit was in Radnitz, Bohemia. And Rabbi Rapaport, here mentioned, was one of the three rabbis of the Prague *beth din* from whom Wise received his *hattarat hora'ah*; the other two rabbis were S. Freund and E. L. Teweles.

- <sup>5</sup>In this literature we find Wise discovering the Science of Judaism, which he considered such a basic part of Reform Judaism.
- <sup>6</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 14, October 1, 1896, p. 5.
- <sup>7</sup>The friendship and strong ties uniting Lillienthal and Wise form part of the larger history of Reform.
- <sup>8</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 15, October 8, 1896, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>9</sup>Jost was originally a member of the Verein fuer die Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden. Wise's desire to transplant Jewish Science into English, and even his preoccupation with the Middle Ages, made him a kindred spirit.
- <sup>10</sup>Wise had already introduced many important innovations at Albany. Family pews, sermons in the vernacular, mixed choirs, and confirmation were some of his achievements before this unhappy occasion. A new congregation, Anshe Emeth, was quickly formed by his supporters, and Wise served it until his departure for Cincinnati.
- <sup>11</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 17, October 22, 1896, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>12</sup>Apparently a favorite bete noire of Wise, repeated later on and credited to Buechner.
- <sup>13</sup>*The History of the Israelitish Nation from Abraham to the Present Time*, Albany, 1854.
- <sup>14</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 18, October 29, 1896, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>15</sup>Other novels included: *The Convert*; *The Catastrophe of Eger*; *Fidelity, or Life and Romance*; *Romance, Philosophy*, and *Cabalah, or the Conflagration in Frankfort-on-the-Main* (in which Wise committed the literary murder alluded to later); and *The Last Struggle of the Nation*. Some of the German novels published serially in *Die Deborah* were: *Die Juden von Landshuth*; *Der Rothkopf, oder des Schulmeisters Tochter*; and *Baruch und sein Ideal*. There were also two plays: *Der Maskierte Liebhaber* and *Das Glueck Reich zu Sein*.
- <sup>16</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 19, November 5, 1896, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>17</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 21, November 19, 1896, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>18</sup>The actual beginnings of this can be placed in 1847, when a committee appointed by Lillienthal heard one of its members, Wise, make the plea for a *Minhag America*, to end the confusion in American liturgy. The Cleveland Conference of 1855 saw the committee formed. As might be surmised, Wise was the guiding spirit of the group.
- <sup>19</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 23, December 3, 1896, p. 4. This, strictly speaking, is an interlude. Wise apologizes for the poetry he has created, and, mentioning that he has had an accident, explains the absence of his column, "The World of My Books." The inclusion of Blumauer with Heine and Byron was a contemporary failing. Alois Blumauer (1755-1798) was a very popular Austrian poet, chiefly noted for his travesty of Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- <sup>20</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 27, December 31, 1896, pp. 4-5. This is the only selection which is cut; however, the greater part of the material deleted is poetry from the German edition of the *Minhag America*, and the continuity of the narrative itself is preserved.
- <sup>21</sup>*The Essence of Judaism*, Cincinnati, 1861.
- <sup>22</sup>*Judaism, Its Doctrines and Duties*, 1872.
- <sup>23</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 28, January 7, 1897, p. 5.
- <sup>24</sup>*The Origin of Christianity, and a Commentary to the Acts of the Apostles*, 1868.
- <sup>25</sup>*The Martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth: A Historico-Critical Treatise of the Last Chapters of the Gospel*, 1874.
- <sup>26</sup>*Judaism and Christianity, Their Agreements and Disagreements*, 1883.
- <sup>27</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 30, January 21, 1897, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>28</sup>*The Cosmic God*, 1876. The event referred to is the death of his first wife.
- <sup>29</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 32, February 4, 1897, p. 5. A simple mis

take gives us two successive issues marked as chapter ten. Apart from making us realize that this is, and has to be, a casual autobiography, it seems to have no significance.

<sup>30</sup>*History of the Hebrews' Second Commonwealth*, 1880.

<sup>31</sup>*Pronaos to Holy Writ*, 1891.

<sup>32</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 34, February 18, 1897, pp. 4-5. Some interesting sidelights on the beginnings of the Hebrew Union College can be

seen here. Withal, it is a reminder that this must be read in the context of his *Reminiscences* and of other histories of the time.

<sup>33</sup>From *Die Deborah*, Vol. XLII, No. 38, March 18, 1897, pp. 4-5. This ends the reminiscences, as informally as they were begun. Yet, in their own way, they touch on the important aspects of Wise's life. And they leave him, at the peak of his career, surveying a past which any man might prize.