

Until the 1880's the Jewish community in Baltimore was almost exclusively of German origin, Bavarian German in particular. Bavaria in southern Germany was always a much more conservative region than the northern sections of Germany. Hitler ym"sh found his early support in Bavaria while he remained unpopular in Berlin. When Napoleon defeated the Prussian Armies, he brought emancipation to Germany. While the new attitudes took sway in Northern Germany, Jews living in Bavaria were denied any rights and continued to suffer a host of restrictions. It is not surprising then that Jews seeking to escape persecution would originate in Bavaria. Why did they go to Baltimore as opposed to New York or Boston?

In the nineteenth century Bremerhaven was the primary port servicing Germany. The major import from the United States was tobacco. Tobacco was shipped out of the Port of Baltimore. As Germany did not have a major commodity to ship to the US, ships had to return empty, incurring a major cost to German tobacco importers. As a consequence, German tobacco importers became travel agents selling cheap tickets to the US Port of Baltimore to fill their ships. By 1840 there were over 200 German Jewish families in Baltimore numbering some few thousand souls. In 1871 the patchwork of some 300 German states unified and drew up a federal constitution which among other things granted Jews equal rights. At that point emigration from Germany to the US ceased.

Abraham Joseph Rice (born Abraham Reiss) (c. 1800 – 1862) was the first ordained rabbi to serve in a rabbinical position in the United States He was born in the village of Gochsheim, Bavaria. When he was one-and-a-half years old, a nurse carelessly let him fall from a table, and he became lamed for life. The accident may have been a blessing in disguise, for since his earliest childhood he devoted himself to intensive study of Torah. He studied at the Würzburg yeshivah and was ordained by Rabbi Abraham Bing. He later continued his studies at the yeshivah in Fürth, and then headed a small yeshiva. In 1840, he and his wife immigrated to the United States. After a brief attempt at reviving the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island, he accepted an appointment as the first rabbi of Congregation Nidche Israel in Baltimore.

The German Jews in America found it extremely difficult to maintain their observance. Especially difficult was the lack of Jewish communal leadership. Rabbi Rice attempted to fill this role. He began to write responsa to the numerous inquiries he received with a dedication to halacha but with a firsthand understanding of the reality of his contemporary America. Some examples of his responsa are the status of esrogim from the West Indies and the status of a slave who was freed from a Jewish owner (does the Torah consider them Jewish). His fearless battles against assimilation and lax observance brought him into conflict with many of his congregants. In 1849, finding it impossible to resist the demand for reforms at Nidche Israel, he resigned his position and founded his own synagogue which was strictly orthodox. Unable to support himself as a rabbi he opened a dry goods store, and then a grocery. In 1862 he was invited back to Nidchei Israel with promises that they would return to orthodox observance. Six months later Rabbi Rice died on the 5th day of Cheshvan. Nidchei Israel subsequently became Reform.