

American Jewish History
Handout - Lesson #3

1. Introduction & The Jew Bill
2. Askenazic Influence
3. Early Religious Reformation
4. A Strong Call for Unity and Decorum
5. Finding Work in America
6. Helping the Poor
7. The Next Big European Influx
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Reading #1 – Maryland “Jew Bill”

Whereas, it is the acknowledged right of all men to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. And whereas, it is declared by the 36 section of the bill of the rights of the state, “that the matter of administering an oath to any person ought to be such as those of the religious persuasion, profession, or denomination of which such a person is one, generally esteem the most effectual confirmation by the attestation of the divine being. And whereas, religious test for civil employment, though intended as a barrier against the depraved, frequently operate as a restraint upon the conscientiousness; and as the Constitution of the United States requires no religious qualifications for civil office, Therefore,

Sec. 1. Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Maryland, that no religious test, declaration or subscription of opinion as to religion, shall be required for any person of the sect called Jews, as a qualification to hold or exercise any office or employment of profit or trust in the state.

Sec. 2 And it be enacted, that every oath to be administered to any person of the sect the people called Jews, shall be administered on the five books of Moses, agreeably to the religious education of that people, and not otherwise.

Reading #2

"[T]he lure of gold," he wrote, "which brought people from all lands in 1849, also brought with it a number of Abraham's progeny, who have in the meantime expanded their population to such an extent that there is no town in California where not a few of our brothers are settled...[T]he number of them in San Francisco alone is probably around seven thousand."

Reading #3 - The Founding of B'nai B'rith

The 12 men who gathered in the Sinsheimer Cafe in New York City on October 13, 1843, were Jewish immigrants from Germany tired of the heavy-handed dogma that surrounded synagogue life, they founded an organization based in Jewish ideals that could unite all Jews in a fraternal setting.

The Independent order of B'nai B'rith, in a preamble to its constitution, stated its dedication to "uniting Israelites in the work of promoting their highest interests and those of humanity; of developing and elevating the mental and moral character of the people of our faith; of inculcating the purest principles of philanthropy, honor, and patriotism; of supporting science and art, of alleviating the wants of the victims of persecution; providing for, protecting and assisting the widow and orphan on the broadest principles of humanity." They form themselves as a secret organization with regali degrees, and passwords, adopting rituals commonly used by other fraternal organizations. But 1880 there were over 300 B'nai B'rith lodges throughout the country with thousands of members.

Reading #4 - Isaac Mayer Wise

Although there was no single founder of American Reform Judaism, Isaac Mayer Wise is credited with organizing the movement. He arrived in the United States in 1846 to become rabbi of congregation Beth El in Albany New York, an appointment that was not without controversy. From the beginning, Wise was a force to be reckoned with, asserting rights as a rabbi at a time when Lehman ran American congregations in a manner largely ignorant of the niceties of Jewish law. He instituted the use of family pews, abolishing separate seating for women; counted women in the minyan; gave sermons and English; and presided over confirmation ceremonies. After enduring a series of conflicts with the congregation - including a punch on the nose delivered on the bimah on Rosh Hashanah by the congregation president - Wise assumed the new pulpit at congregation Anshe Emet.

After nearly 8 years in Albany, Wise was named rabbi of congregation B'nei Yeshurun in Cincinnati, Ohio, and there he spent the last 46 years of his life. In 1857 he published a new prayer book, Minhag America, in both English and German additions, which was widely used. He hoped that all American congregations were adopted, leading to a single ritual throughout the country that would unite all American Jews under a single religious umbrella. In this he was not totally successful, as more traditional congregations rejected the idea. Certainly, though, Rabbi Wise attracted a large following among the upwardly mobile, rapidly Americanizing Jewish burghers who were his people.

In 1873, Wise created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, uniting 34 reform congregations. Two years later, his ring for an American rabbinical school became a reality with the establishment of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, with 13 students.

Reading #5 - Rabbi Max Lilienthal

Dr. Lilienthal's reputation in Europe had preceded him to America. A graduate of the University of Munich, he was named principal of a Jewish school in Riga, Latvia, in 1839. Induced by the Russian government to help establish schools throughout the country that would teach Jewish students secular and religious subjects, he soon discovered that the ulterior motive of the Russian government was not benevolence but conversion. In discuss, he left for America. In an unusual arrangement upon his arrival, due to financial considerations, three German congregations in New York hired him as their joint rabbi. In the sermon on the occasion of his installation he noted that Judaism was "split, at present into two parties... The one exclaims: hold fast to the ancient institutions while the other says, 'onward, onward, is our motto; "onward is the watchword of our times." He called for the support of schools to provide religious education to children and told his congregants it was his duty to introduce order and quorum into our houses of worship. He quickly divides a rotating system that allowed members of all the synagogues to assemble on the Sabbath to hear his sermons. Like Rabbi Wise, Dr. Lilienthal underwent an American baptism by fire before his leadership became excepted, but ultimately both these rabbis legitimized new modes of Jewish practice that enable congregants to feel the Jewish observance did not have to undermine their American respectability.

Under Einhorn's outspoken liberal leadership, the nation's first strictly Reform congregation began to make major changes in its practice. He composed the creative prayer book, Olath Tamid, which removed all references to Zion, the Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei prayer, and the Musaf service for Shabbat and weekdays. In 1894, his prayer book became the model for the Reform movement's classic Union Prayer Book.

Reading #6

"We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine nor sacrificial worship..."

We hold that all such Moses and rabbinic laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dressed originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state...

We accept as binding only the Torah's moral laws and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives."