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ISAAC LEESER: ARCHITECT OF TRADITIONAL JUDAISM IN AMERICA

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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Who was the one person most responsible for perpetuating traditional Judaism in 19th century America? The indisputable answer: Isaac Leeser.

Leeser translated both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic versions of the *siddur* as well as the *Tanach* into English. In 1843 he started *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, the first Jewish periodical published in America. He founded the Jewish Publication Society of America, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, and Maimonides College.

He also vigorously opposed the Reform movement, doing his utmost to convince American Jews that the religion of their fathers could and should be practiced in the New World. In short, during his lifetime he was in the forefront of everything related to traditional Judaism in America.

Who was this unique and strong advocate for Orthodoxy?

Isaac Leeser was born on December 12, 1806, in the tiny rural village of Neuenkirchen near Rehine, Westphalia in Prussia into a family of humble means. His father died in 1820, when Isaac was fourteen. After attending a traditional *cheder* as a boy, Isaac studied at the *gymnasium* (university) of Munster, where he obtained a secular education. In addition, he studied some Gemara with private tutors. But his Jewish education was not particularly substantial, and he readily admitted he was not a great Talmudist. Indeed, he once wrote, "[I] had not the best opportunities of acquiring [Jewish] knowledge."

Apparently feeling that there was little opportunity for his success in Germany, he accepted his maternal Uncle Zalma Rehine's invitation to immigrate to America. Rehine, a respected and prosperous merchant who ran a dry goods business in Richmond, Virginia, promised Isaac a good life in America. As a result, Leeser arrived in Richmond on May 5, 1824, and spent the next five years in his uncle's employ. He quickly became acclimatized to life in America and within a few years was thoroughly Americanized.



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Career as a Chazzan

Leeser did more than just work for his uncle while he resided in Richmond. He mastered the Sephardic mode of worship, which was then used in all synagogues in America. He also assisted the *chazzan* of Richmond's Congregation Beth Shalom, Isaac B. Seixas, in the congregation's Sabbath and day school.

He interacted with Jacob Mordecai, *the parnas* (president) of the congregation, as well as with the foremost Torah scholar in America at the time, Israel Baer Kursheedt, who was then residing with his family in

Richmond. (See "Jacob Mordecai: Pioneer In Women's Education," [http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19310/Glimpses Into American Jewish History %28Part 18%29.html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19310/Glimpses%20Into%20American%20Jewish%20History%20Part%2018%29.html) and "America's First Torah Scholar: Israel Baer Kursheedt," also at www.jewishpress.com).

In 1828 Joseph Wolff, a well-known apostate and missionary, published a scurrilous article about Judaism in the London Quarterly Review. The article came to the attention of Leeser, and he decided "that its circulating without a reply would be extremely injurious to the interest of my brethren in this country."

"Without assistance, he wrote a fiery reply to Wolff's article. He began his essay by defending Jewish honor. He systematically reviewed Jewish history, Talmudic literature, and the socioeconomic progress of the Jewish people since the Enlightenment. He also went on the attack. 'How can any man then have the audacity to style our religion a false one,' Leeser challenged his readers, 'without at the same time admitting that he does not believe the sacred truths of the Bible.'" (*Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* by Lance J. Sussman, Wayne State University Press, 1995.)

Leeser's writings on this issue brought him to the attention of the American Jewish community. Therefore, when Jacob Mordecai recommended him for the vacant position of *chazzan* at Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel, Leeser soon found himself living in Philadelphia and serving the congregation.

More Than a Chazzan

Leeser served as Congregation Mikveh Israel's *chazzan* from 1829 until 1850. His career there was stormy. Given his unflattering appearance and abrasive personality, it is not surprising that he did not enjoy friendly relations with the members of the synagogue. He was often embroiled in battles with the congregants regarding his remuneration and contracts.

Despite this, Leeser enhanced the traditional role of *chazzan* far beyond what it had been in the past. In most synagogues the *chazzan* led the prayers and instructed the members' children in the rudiments of Judaism. Leeser felt that, given the sad state of Judaism in America at the time, there was considerably more that he should and could do. Over the years he embarked on a broad spectrum of activities until he emerged as the leader and spokesman of traditional Judaism in America.

"Leeser," wrote Yosef Goldman in *Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926*, "was the most outstanding figure in the movement to strengthen Jewish life in America. His activity on behalf of Judaism spanned almost the entire second period of Jewish immigration and the allied publishing, and he may be credited with assuring the survival of Judaism in America while the community expanded from a few thousand individuals living in the major coastal cities to about 200,000 living in cities and towns across the country.

"Although Leeser lived in Philadelphia for most of his life, he was not a local leader; all of America was his field of operation, and communities from all over the country turned to him for help and guidance. Unlike any other contemporary Jewish clergyman in America (or in Europe), Leeser contributed to every aspect and stage of a Jew's life, from childhood to old age."

Pioneer Preacher

Leeser felt his role as *chazzan* at Mikveh Israel required more than simply leading the prayers at services and teaching the congregants' children. He considered it his obligation to educate his congregants in a manner that would improve their commitment to Judaism. As a result, shortly after he assumed his duties as *chazzan*, he introduced the then-radical innovation of regularly delivering a sermon during services on *Shabbos* morning.

While some appreciated his sermons, most of the congregational leaders felt that they were not necessary. His preaching was a point of contention for a long time, and it took thirteen years before the board of Mikveh Israel formally sanctioned his work as a preacher.

Publishing

Most of Leeser's endeavors on behalf of *Yiddishkeit* were tied to the writing and publishing of a wide variety of books and *seforim*. Many of these publications were "firsts," for both American and worldwide Jewry.

"Leeser realized that the Bible in its original language was incomprehensible to most Jews in America, and he was disturbed that they were compelled to rely on the Christological translation of the King James Version." (Goldman, *Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926*.)

His translation of the *Chumash* into English was published in 1845. It took him seven years to complete this task. His Pentateuch included the Hebrew text, an English translation on facing pages, as well as the *haftorot* together with a translation. Given that the Jewish community in England was much older and better organized than the one in America, one would have expected that someone in England would have been the first to accomplish this momentous task. However, the Jews of England used the King James Version until Leeser's translation appeared.

In 1848 Leeser published a complete Hebrew Bible (*Chumash, Neviim and Ketuvim*) with pointed text and cantillation. His *magnum opus*, an English translation of the entire Bible, appeared in 1853. This work remained in use in some American synagogues into the 21st century, despite the appearance of many other translations in the years after Leeser's.

The Occident

In 1843 Leeser began publishing *The Occident* and *American Jewish Advocate*, described as "A Monthly Periodical Devoted to the Diffusion of Knowledge on Jewish Literature and Religion."

The first general Jewish periodical in America, *The Occident* dealt with a broad array of subjects, including sermons by Leeser and others; obituaries; scholarly research; theology; spiritual poetry; domestic and foreign news of Jewish interest; book reviews; resolutions adopted by congregations and organizations throughout America; and even juvenile literature. (Issues of the *Occident* published between 1843 and 1851 are available at www.jewish-history.com/Occident/.)

"The *Occident* . . . reshaped Leeser's career. Until 1843, he had functioned primarily as a hazzan-preacher and writer. By 1840 he had emerged as [a] religious leader of national

consequence but still had no organizational support or direct means of communication to the masses of American Jews. The appearance of his journal changed all that." (Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*.)

"The Occident's pioneering status, its continuity (particularly during six years when there were no other American Jewish journals) and its broad subject content make it invaluable 'not only as an intellectual biography of its editor but [as] the most important record of American Jewish life in the middle decades of the 19th century.'" (Goldman, *Hebrew Printing in America, 1735-1926*.)

Jewish Education

Leeser was a strong proponent of Jewish education. "Perhaps his most cherished dream was to develop a Jewish day school system that would use modern pedagogical methods to provide its students with comprehensive Jewish and general educations both. The traditional heder and yeshiva were, in Leeser's opinion, totally out of place in America.

"On the other hand, public schools, which took root in American society during the course of Leeser's career, were, in his opinion, inimical to Jewish interests. He maintained that public schools weakened Jewish identity and undermined Jewish religious convictions. For Leeser, modern Jewish day schools were essential to the future of Judaism in America." (Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*.)

Few Jewish parents agreed with him, however, and his attempts to start a Jewish day school in Philadelphia were short-lived and met with failure. In increasing numbers, Jewish children were sent to public schools to receive their general education. The result was that Jewish education was reduced to a few supplementary hours a week. Given the natural cultural adaptation and integration into mainstream American society that this approach fostered, it is little wonder that so many Jewish children grew up without solid ties to the faith of their ancestors.

Realizing that some Jewish education is better than none, Leeser fully supported the Jewish Sunday School movement that began in Philadelphia in 1838. He hoped that by focusing its curriculum on the doctrines of Judaism and the Bible, Sunday Schools would be able provide a satisfactory minimum amount of Jewish knowledge.

Leeser understood that American Jewry needed to train its own religious leaders. Therefore, in 1867 he was instrumental in the founding of Maimonides College in Philadelphia. This, too, was an idea far ahead of its time. Enrollment was minimal, and the school collapsed several years after Leeser's death in 1868. Nonetheless, Maimonides College established the basic model for rabbinic education in the United States. Many of Maimonides's supporters subsequently helped found the (originally Orthodox) Jewish Theological Seminary in 1887.

* * *

The spectrum of Isaac Leeser's activities involved more than preaching, publishing, and education. He had a genuine concern for the poor and downtrodden. He was instrumental in the founding of a Jewish foster home and a Jewish hospital in Philadelphia and organized the city's Jewish relief work.

Leeser was a difficult man to whom people were not naturally attracted. Often he was defensive and argumentative, and his homely physical appearance did not endear him to others. He never married and basically lived a hard, lonely life. He had little more than his work on behalf of American Jewry.

Nonetheless, in the words of his biographer Sussman, "Isaac Leeser was a remarkable human being. He was indefatigable in his drive to make Judaism flourish in the United States. He taught American Jews that they could be leaders in the wider Jewish world.

"He managed to influence the development of nearly every aspect of Jacksonian and antebellum Jewish life in the United States to the point where Henry Samuel Morais's observation that 'the history of American Judaism and that of Isaac Leeser are one and the same' cannot be dismissed as hyperbole but is, in a very significant way, an accurate assessment of the American Jewish experience from the day Leeser first led a religious service at Mikveh Israel in 1829 to his death in Philadelphia in 1868."

Leeser was in the forefront of everything Jewish in America during the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is difficult to find another Jewish leader in history who can rival Leeser for the sheer breadth of his activities.

He believed that America was a place where Jews and Judaism could flourish, and that an exciting Orthodoxy could be created here. Where many others saw only gloom and doom, he saw hope and success. He was certain that the laxity in Jewish religious practice so prevalent during the nineteenth century could be overcome if American Jews would only develop the proper organizations to meet the challenges of the times.

Today, fortunately for us, we see how right he was. His efforts helped lay the foundations for the vibrant Orthodox communities that presently exist throughout the United States. Observant Jewry owes Isaac Leeser a tremendous debt of gratitude.

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