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WAS THE 'RABBI' REALLY A MISSIONARY?

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Nov 05 2008

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The story of Jacob Mayer is one of the most bizarre in the annals of American Jewish history. In order to understand how such a thing could have occurred, one must keep in mind that for many years America was a Jewish free-for-all. Anyone who came here could declare himself a rabbi. Short of going to Europe to investigate his credentials, there was no way to know if someone was a truly qualified rabbi.

It was not until 1840 that an Orthodox-ordained rabbi, Abraham Rice, came to settle in America. All other so-called rabbis who settled here before him, were, in truth, not qualified rabbonim. Even as late as the third decade of the 20th century, one could find a plethora of unqualified men claiming to be authentic rabbis.

Reverend Dr. Jacob Mayer was the spiritual leader of (Reform) Har Sinai Congregation in Baltimore from 1874 to 1876. He had come to America from Europe and had served congregations in Cincinnati and Cleveland before his arrival in Baltimore. He had an engaging personality and was a sensational preacher who filled the temple at every service. It did not take long before he became very popular among Jews and non-Jews alike.

All went well for him at Har Sinai until two other Baltimore Jewish clergymen, Dr. Benjamin Szold and Dr. Henry Hochheimer, dropped a bombshell, claiming Mayer had once been a convert to Christianity and had worked for a London Missionary Society preaching the gospel in Africa.

This information soon became public knowledge and created a huge scandal. The congregants of Har Sinai were outraged and could hardly believe their spiritual leader had once been a missionary. For his part, Mayer vehemently denied the charge, going so far as to avow his innocence before his congregation at a Sabbath morning service while holding a Torah. Despite this denial, many congregants were not convinced.

Not long afterward, Mayer called on William Rayner, a founder of Congregation Har Sinai who played a prominent role in Baltimore Jewish affairs. Mayer asked Rayner if he could speak with him in utmost confidence. The two men went to Rayner's private office where Mayer, according to the account below, told an amazing story:

He said that he had a twin brother, whose resemblance to him was so close that they could not be told apart. It was this brother who had apostatized to Christianity and had been a missionary to the Jews. He had thought never to reveal this incident in his brother's life, but now he was compelled to do so to clear himself of the disastrous charge. Upon Mr. Rayner's inquiring whether he had any proof of the truth of his statement, he said, "Oh, yes, there are people in Europe who could and would substantiate what I have said." If he could go to Europe and see these people, he was sure that he could obtain all the necessary evidence.

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Mr. Rayner, usually one of the shrewdest of men, permitted himself to be hoodwinked. He even advanced the money for a trip to Europe. What did the rascal do? He arranged the following plan with a confederate in Europe. He sent to the confederate letters addressed to Mr. Rayner. He himself remained in Canada. The confederate remailed the letters to Mr. Rayner in Baltimore. When he returned to Baltimore and gave out the cook-and-bull story about his twin brother, quite a number of the members of the congregation refused to credit it, although another faction, headed by Mr. Rayner, swallowed the tale hook,

line, and sinker. A split ensued in the congregation.

Before long it appeared that the tale was fabricated out of whole cloth. The apostate disappeared and had a sorry end in great destitution. The differences were healed in the course of time. The apostate-rabbi became a memory, but there were men even years afterward who raved about the eloquence of Dr. J. M[ayer]."¹

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Others, however related a different version of the above story. When a certain David Kemper first heard Mayer speak, he immediately recognized him as the brother of his former teacher, Jesaias Mayer. He also recalled having met Jacob Mayer when he visited his brother Jesaias in Westphalia, Germany. Furthermore, he confirmed that the two brothers were identical twins.

Kemper was pleased that Dr. Jacob Mayer had been hired as the spiritual leader of Har Sinai. In his opinion he led services in an effective manner. In addition, many were impressed with his sermons and lectures. Mayer had the ability to speak effectively not only in German, the language in which sermons were most often given, but also in English, French and Italian. When he lectured in German, he always spoke to an overflow crowd.

According to some, Mayer's popularity made some of the other Jewish spiritual leaders in Baltimore so jealous that they started the rumor that he had been a convert to Christianity. This, of course, created turmoil in Mayer's congregation, with the result that two factions were formed - one that believed the accusation and one that did not.

The congregation appointed a committee to investigate the matter. They sent a letter to Jesaias Mayer asking him to go to Glasgow, Scotland, where authorities would identify him as the brother who had converted to Christianity. Jesaias, however, refused to make the trip, saying he was not in good health and did not like the people in Glasgow to whom he was to report. Given this, the committee felt it had no choice but to recommend that Mayer be relieved of his duties.

Despite this, Mayer still had his supporters:

"The minutes of the congregation reflect a strong belief in Dr. Mayer's integrity. On March 16, 1876 a Mr. F. Stern of Albany, Georgia, appeared before the Board, testifying to the truth of Mayer's claims. A month later a letter was read from a Mrs. Elsie Fuchs of New York City, also supporting the rabbi's integrity. The money sent to the brother amounted to \$50 in gold, with a letter of credit on a London bank in the amount of \$200.

"At more than one meeting the Board seemed ready to join the rabbi in filing suit against those parties who, they claimed, were guilty of slanderous charges. Finally it was decided to hold a congregational meeting on May 21, 1876. In the meantime a number of members withdrew from the congregation and began to hold their own services at the Masonic Temple."² In the end, Mayer tendered a letter of resignation that was accepted. However, the truth of the matter was never really resolved.

"It is not fair to pass judgment on Jacob Mayer without additional information on his background. He may have been guilty as charged or he may have been a victim of circumstances. It also was unfortunate that the congregation was victimized by conditions not of their own making and largely beyond their control."³

"The Jewish Times (New York) invited a suit; it stated bluntly, 'Let convert Mayer appeal to the courts.... We defy him or the congregation [Har Sinai] to bring a libel suit or any other suit.' Mayer did not sue, nor was he able to prove his innocence; finally, he resigned [on August 31, 1876]."⁴

As they used to say, "Nur in Amerika" (only in America).

(I wish to thank Roberta Saltzman of the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library for her assistance in locating the materials on which this article is based.)

Dr. Yitzchok Levine recently retired after serving for forty years as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at //levine@stevens.edu.

1 My Life As An American Jew, An Autobiography, by David Philipson, John G. Kidd & Son, Inc., Cincinnati, 1941, pages 40-41.

2 "The Legacy of a Liberal" by Abraham Shusterman, Har Sinai Congregation, Baltimore, 1967, pages 32-35.

3 Ibid.

4 The Making of an American Jewish Community: The History of Baltimore Jewry from 1773 to 1920 by Isaac M. Fein, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1971, page 111.

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