

Rabbi Avraham Rice - The First Rov in North America

Talk given at R. Frankel's Shul on 7/18/09

I. No qualified rabbis settled in North America until 1840

A. Chazzanim

B. Learned Baalei Batim – sent sheilos to Europe

C. Jewish education suffered

D. Conversion or divorce done in America not recognized in Europe

II. Periods of Jewish Immigration

A. Spanish/Portuguese (many Marranos), some Ashkenazim

B. Beginning in the late 1830s Jews from Germany, particularly Bavaria, began coming here in relatively large numbers.

C. Eastern European immigration beginning in 1881 – millions came

D. Jewish immigration after WW II

III. German Immigration beginning in late 1830s

A. Many anti-Semitic laws – special taxed on Jews, exclusion from professions, etc.

B. Bavaria worst

Bavaria, a paradise for Christians, proved to be a purgatory for Jews. After the defeat of Napoleon in Leipzig, Prussia, in 1813, as a reaction against the French Emperor's liberalism, the Kingdom of Bavaria enacted in its Edict of June 10, 1813 over three hundred restrictive laws governing its Jews. These included Pharaonic legislation intended to limit their numbers. Only the first-born son of a family was allowed to

marry “because the number of Jewish families in places where they are living should not be increased; it is rather the intention to reduce them wherever the number is excessive.” Sons other than the first-born could marry upon payment of a thousand florins [about \$5000] or be granted the privilege if their elder brothers died or departed the country.

Young Bavarian Jews had yet another incentive to emigrate. Of all the 50,000 Bavarian Jews none could have a profession other than that of peddling. All other trades and professions were closed to them, obtainable only on payment of a high tax that could be refused.

That anti-Semitism had been deeply rooted within the populace was evidenced by the fact that many Bavarian towns had no Jewish inhabitants; once having been expelled, they were forbidden to return.

In 1819 students at Wurzburg University vented their hatred of the Jews by assaulting their Jewish classmates. They incited the townspeople to attack Jews, leading them with the cry, "HEP! HEP!" - the three initial letters of Hierosolyma Est Perdita [Latin for Jerusalem is lost].

In the summer of 1836, two-to-three hundred Jewish young men sailed from Bavaria to America. In the summer of 1837, three-or-four hundred reached the port of New York, with an equal number reported on the way. The mass migration of German Jews had begun from Bavaria; also the South German states of Baden and Wurttemberg.

Bavarian Jewish youths, among them many betrothed couples, embarked from German ports en masse.

In 1825, there were 6,000 Jews in America; by 1848, there were 50,000; and by 1860, their number reached 150,000.

IV. Concern for religious welfare of these immigrants – send qualified rabbi to America.

V. Rabbi Abraham Yosef (Reiss) Rice – born 1800 or 1802 near Wurzburg

A. Accident when young – limped

B. Studied in Wurzburg yeshiva of Rabbi Abraham Bing (1752 – 1841), a Talmud of R. Nosson Adler and then in yeshiva of Rabbi Wolf Hamburger (1770 – 1850) in Furth. Received semicha. Strong commitment to traditional Judaism.

C. Arrived in NY on July 25, 1840. Advised to go to Newport.

D. Returned to NY, met Aaron Weglein, president of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (Nidchei Yisroel). Weglein offered Rabbi Rice position of Rov of his shul.

VI. Rabbi Rice and his congregation

At first glance Rabbi Rice and Congregation Nidchei Yisroel, which was also known as the “Stadt Shul” of Baltimore, since it was at this time the only shul within the city boundaries, seemed to be the perfect match. Many of congregants were from Bavaria as was the rabbi. The synagogue was Orthodox and so was the rabbi. Rabbi Rice considered it his mission to strengthen Orthodoxy in America, and the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was proud of its observance Jewish religious tradition.

However, Rabbi Rice soon found himself at odds with many of those who davened in his shul.

The misunderstandings began with the question of Sabbath observance. True, the Baltimore Jews were Orthodox and would have loved to observe the Sabbath as befits traditional Jews. Peddlers, however, very often found it impossible to keep the Sabbath or, for that matter, kashrut. There were also members of the congregation who surreptitiously - and some even quite openly - kept their stores open on Saturdays.

Aliyahs – only Shomrei Shabbos, later no Omein

An uneasy peace prevailed in the congregation. Two years after [Rabbi] Rice's arrival in the city, however, a minor revolt of great historic significance broke out. To a funeral service for a member of the congregation, one Jacob Ahrens, at which the rabbi officiated, came

friends of the deceased who were members of Masonic and Odd Fellows lodges to which Ahrens belonged. These gentlemen performed at the grave certain rites customary in their societies. The rabbi remonstrated there and then. In protest against [Rabbi] Rice's action, some members left the congregation and formed the Har Sinai Verein, which was destined to become the first lasting Reform congregation organized in Baltimore and, indeed, in the United States.

Things deteriorated to the point where Rabbi Rice wrote the following despairing letter to his former teacher, Rav Wolf Hamburger:

I dwell in complete isolation (obscurity) without a teacher or a companion in this land whose atmosphere is not conducive to wisdom; all religious questions (shaalos) are brought to me for solution. I have to carry the full load on my shoulders and have to assume the authority to render decisions in Halachic questions in both private and public matters.

And one more thing I wish to disclose to you my revered master and teacher . . . and my soul weepeth in the dark on account of it, namely, that the character of religious life in this land is on the lowest level; most of the people are eating non-Kosher food, are violating the Shabbos in public . . . and there are thousands who have been assimilated among the non-Jewish population, and have married non-Jewish women. Under these circumstances, my mind is perplexed and I wonder whether a Jew may live in a land such as this.

Nevertheless in my own home - thank G-d - I conduct myself as I did in days of old in my native country. I study Torah day and night, and my devoted and G-d fearing wife is always standing by and helping me with all her strength, in spite of privation and difficulties. Yet in spite of all this, life has lost all meaning here on account of the irreverence and low estate of our people. Alas, therefore, my master and teacher, impart to me of your wisdom, and let me have your august opinion in the matter; for often times I have made up my mind to leave and go from here to Paris and to put my trust in the good Lord.

VII. Accomplishments – eventually made peace with his situation

A. Defender of Orthodoxy

The founding of the Har Sinai Verein marked the beginning of the emergence of the reform movement as a major force in American Jewry during the nineteenth century. The reform movement eventually launched an all out attack on traditional Judaism, and Rabbi Rice became an eloquent defender of Orthodoxy.

His most unique contribution, however, was his defense of Orthodox Judaism in America. Where there were so few real scholars, it was easy for pseudo-intellectuals to misinterpret the basic principles of Jewish theology and thus pave the way for the spokesmen of Reform Judaism. This state of affairs was very painful to Rabbi Rice, and he went out of his way to challenge these “erroneous doctrines” as he called them, and to set the record straight. A short time after his arrival in the United States, when English was still foreign to him, he came to the defense of the Talmud in a letter to the editor of Occident.

As one of the few Orthodox rabbis in America, [Rabbi] Rice emerged as an important defender of tradition in the face of religious Reform. Criticizing Reform clergy, [Rabbi] Rice excommunicated Isaac M. Wise, a leading Reform clergyman, for questioning aspects of the traditional Jewish belief of messiah and resurrection.

B. Occident

Rabbi Rice became close friends with Isaac Leeser, the Philadelphia Chazzan who was in the forefront of everything Orthodox in the United States during the nineteenth century. In addition to writing articles that Leeser published in his monthly Occident and Jewish Advocate, Rabbi Rice urged Leeser to undertake an authoritative English translation of the Bible, pointing out that the German translations then available did not appeal to the English speaking Jewish youth of America. The result was a magnificent piece of work written in accordance with Orthodox Judaism that became a standard for decades.

C. Poseik

Rabbi Rice was one of the few men in America during the mid-nineteenth century qualified to deal with halachic issues. He received inquiries from Jewish communities throughout the United States about many matters. Given his personal modesty, he was reluctant to assume responsibility for making decisions on important religious matters. However, he realized that the people had virtually no one else to turn to.

His detailed responsa were written in the typical style of the Poskim of his time. In response to a question about the use of West Indian Esrogim he replied in the affirmative. He dealt with the kashrus of shortening and the oils used in its manufacture, the proper way to write Gittin in US cities where a Get had never been written before, the drawing of blood from animals immediately before Shechita (This was thought at the time to have a beneficial effect on the meat), and many other issues.

[Rabbi] Rice's Talmudic scholarship and personal piety earned him a reputation as one of the few noteworthy scholars of Jewish law in America during the mid- nineteenth century. By responding to religious queries from congregations throughout the United States regarding matters of family law, Sabbath observance, and kashruth, [Rabbi] Rice offered direction to the small community of American Jews eager to preserve Orthodox tradition. In 1844, for example, [Rabbi] Rice was asked by a congregation in Philadelphia to advise them regarding the correct manner of installing a plumbing system for the construction of a new mikvah. Several years later, he responded to queries from a New York congregation seeking to clarify procedures for the burial of uncircumcised children or individuals who married contrary to Jewish law

D. Day school, Lloyd Street Synagogue, mikveh and matzo bakery

VIII. Resignation

Rabbi Rice refused to compromise when it came to Halacha. He viewed minor attempts to introduce ritual changes as the first steps on the path towards a total break with Orthodoxy, and he was not wrong. In 1849 things got so bad that, much to the shock of many synagogue members, he resigned as the spiritual leader of the congregation. “I resigned’ he

said, ‘because as a private citizen I expect to have greater influence with my Congregation. And,’ he continued, ‘I shall always be ready to fight the battle of the Lord.’”

“In 1851 he organized a small Congregation where he officiated as Rabbi and Chazan without compensation and where he felt spiritually at home. The group consisted of a number of pious and learned people who venerated their teacher and appreciated his piety and his dedication to the study of Torah.”

A. Asked to return in 1862. Passed away on October 29, 1862

B. Shul became reform temple in the early 1870s and was sold to a church in 1889. In 1905 the building was purchased by Orthodox Jews and became Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh, one of the leading Orthodox congregations of the East European immigrant community. Restored in 1960s and is now a historic site.

IX. Shraga (Phil) Rice