Special Feature / By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

An Early Askan: Mr. Jonas Friedenwald, z”l, of Baltimore

S adly, American Jewish histo-
y is filled with stories about
the many who came to this land from Europe, and then abandoned much of their religious obser-
bance. Jonas Friedenwald was one of the few who faced numer-
ous obstacles, yet remained con-
stant in his commitment to Yiddishkeit.

Coming to America
Jonas Friedenwald, z”l, was born on November 9, 1802, in the small town of Altenbuseck in
Giessen, Germany. In 1822, he married the widowed of Mises Stern, Merle Bar Stern, who was
seven years his senior. The couple
owned a small farm, and Jonas
supplemented their income by
trading from time to time in vari-
ous commodities. Nonetheless,
his life was a struggle for them
and their growing family, so
they decided to emigrate to
America. They were the first Jews from their area to make this venture.

They set out in September, 1831, upon a sailing vessel, the
Louise of Bremen, with his aged
father, Chayim Friedenwald, Merle’s son [from her first mar-
riage], Bernard Stern (1820–1873) and three other children, Betzy, Joseph and Isaac Friedenwald,
the last an infant some two
months old, on the weary and haz-
ardous voyage to Baltimore. The
passegger, which lasted four
months, was attended with great
hardships. Kosher meat had been
scarcity during these months.”(Pages 17–18)

Despite this, the ship’s captain
agreed to please the Friedenwald’s strict adherence to
halachah, because he allowed
them to use his cabin for
davening, and to enable him to give freely to
the German Aged People’s Hospital, as well as offer hospitality to the stranger. Nonetheless,
his commitment to Orthodoxy
remained
constant.

An invitation to Jonas Friedenwald’s ninetieth birthday celebration in 1892.

Anumbrella menber, an occupa-
tion that he had learned shortly
before leaving Europe, with a
view to supporting himself in
America. This work from the
yielded him an income sufficient
to maintain his family, to lay aside
to the German Aged People’s
Home. His kindness to the unfor-
tuned, and hospitality to the stranger
became proverbial.”(Page 20)

Jonas Friedenwald was a man
who was uncompromisingly com-
mited to Orthodoxy at a time
when many were influenced by
the Reform Movement.

“In protest against innovations
which he considered improper and
even impious, he withdrew in 1854 from the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, and formed,

Coming to America

Under the leadership of Jonas
Friedenwald, the Beth Ha-Midrash
Hamodia was founded in 1851.

His devotion to his religion
appeared in the following extract
from a letter which his father wrote to me under date of
January 1, 1888. “I saw grandfather this morn-
ing and he inquired after you. He
had a cold, he told me, and regret-
ted very much that he could not
go to synagogue early in the
morning, particularly as for the
first time they failed to get a min-

tan. Just think of it, at his age, on
a sleety winter morning, upbraid-
ing himself for having neglected
what he considered to be a duty!
It is refreshing to see a man cling-
ing to duty throughout a long life,
and praying for strength to con-
tinue to do so.”(Pages 20–21)

According to a friend of Jonas’s 90th birthday was
marked by an imposing celebra-
tion in his beloved synagogue. A
number of prominent Rabbanim
delivered addresses praising his
services to his people and his
commitment to Orthodoxy.

Jonas Friedenwald passed
away on September 2, 1853, just
short of his 51st birthday. He left
behind a wonderful legacy. His
son Isaac established a well-
known printing press in
Baltimore. His youngest son, Dr.
Aaron Friedenwald, not only
achieved prominence in the med-
ic profession but also remained
an observant Jew throughout his
entire life, something that was,
sadly, very rare during the 19th
century. Aaron’s accomplish-
ments will be dealt with in an
upcoming Hامודיה article.

Note: All quotes are from Life,
Letters, and Addresses of Aaron
Friedenwald, M.D. by his son Harry
Friedenwald, M.D. This book was
printed for private circulation by The

Dr. Yitzchok Levine retired in 2008
from a forty-year career as a profes-
mor of mathematics at Stevens
Institute of Technology in Hoboken,
New Jersey. He is currently teaching
at Stevens as an adjunct professor.
He can be contacted at
levine@stevens.edu.