

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Reverend Samuel Myer Isaacs – Champion of Orthodoxy (II)

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*Note: Unless otherwise noted all quotations are from **The Forerunners – Dutch Jewry in the North America Diaspora** by Robert P. Swierenga, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1994, pages 74 – 87.*

Last month's column sketched the life of Reverend Myer Isaacs concentrating primarily on his efforts to preserve and foster Orthodoxy in New York City, where he served as the spiritual leader of Congregation Shaaray Tefila from its founding in 1845 to his passing in 1879. Reverend Isaacs's sphere of influence was not limited to New York. His efforts encompassed a broad range of activities throughout America designed to strengthen Orthodoxy in its battle against Reform.

The Jewish Messenger

“In 1857 Samuel Isaacs carried the fight against Reform to the wider Jewish community by launching a periodical, the **Jewish Messenger**, which he made an effective organ for Orthodoxy. He set the tone and established his themes in the initial ringing editorials, ‘Mammon Worship,’ which condemned materialism; ‘Our Divine Law,’ which commended true religion as the ‘boon and boast of Israel throughout the dispersion’; and ‘The Want of Union,’ which advocated a super board to safeguard Judaism in democratic America. The **Jewish Messenger** also promoted unified Jewish charities, day schools and seminaries, and orphan asylums. The rabbi turned journalist enlisted in the struggle his sons Myer, Abram, and Isaac as writers and assistant editors.”

In addition to editing The **Jewish Messenger**, Reverend Isaacs was a contributor to the Jewish newspaper the **Asmonean** as well as to Isaac Leeser's monthly Jewish journal the **Occident**. Many of his articles criticized those who wanted to introduce reforms into religious practice that were against *Halacha*. Reverend Isaacs began his article “The Reform Agitation” with

In an age like the present, when the most startling theories are mooted, the most pernicious doctrines disseminated, and the strangest systems propagated regarding our religious polity, it becomes every man in whom the latent spark of religion is not extinct, to employ all the means in his power to prevent the theorist from putting his visionary schemes into practice, to thwart the worldling [One who is absorbed by worldly pursuits and pleasures.] in his dangerous doctrines, and to counteract the copyist in his onward course. Carrying out this principle to its

fullest extent, I take up my pen, not to exhibit the “cacoethes scribendi” [insatiable desire to write], nor to cater to the taste of the innovator, not for self-aggrandizement, nor for fleeting popularity; but for the sole aim and purpose of demonstrating to the Judaic world, that the system we have followed in our dark days, and our brighter ones, has performed all it was destined to accomplish; and to adduce evidence to prove that reforming our system of worship as regards its spiritual affairs, will entail danger on our nationality, and mainly tend to remove the landmarks which were erected by prudence and caution, and which hitherto have been sufficient to guide the pilgrim of hope to the regions of immortality.¹

Jewish Education

Samuel Myer Isaacs realized that the future of Judaism depended on Jewish youth receiving a meaningful Jewish education. However, the reality was that during his lifetime most Jewish children were often educated by non-Jews in public schools. “We betray a culpable negligence in the proper religious training of our children,” he charged.

Realizing the importance of what we call today a Jewish Day School, “In 1842 Isaacs converted his congregation’s afternoon school into an all-day English and Hebrew school, the New York Talmud Torah and Hebrew Institute, with the Dutch-born Henry Goldsmith as teacher of Hebrew. Although the school began strongly with 80 boys and was one of only three in the entire country, it failed within five years because of financial difficulties. Isaacs was not easily discouraged. In 1852 his congregation again founded a day school, the Bnai Jeshurun Educational Institute, which boasted an enrollment of 177 pupils within a year; but it too had to close after three years (1855) because of insufficient students.”

These attempts to maintain a day school were undermined by the fact that the New York State legislature had secularized the public schools. Christian textbooks were eliminated and local school boards could choose daily Scripture readings. In predominantly Jewish neighborhoods only passages from the Jewish Bible were read. The result was that Jewish parents sent their children to public school where they, of course, received no Jewish education. Reverend Isaacs correctly “considered this an unmitigated tragedy.”

However, he was not deterred by failure and in 1857 established a Hebrew high school where he served “as principal and Hebrew teacher for many years. The school thrived as a boarding institution and offered a college preparatory curriculum.”

“Isaacs finally in 1864 gained support to establish the all-day Hebrew Free School No. 1, which was soon followed by three evening schools that taught only Hebrew. Isaacs’s fellow Hollanders, Hazan M. R. de Leeuw and associates of the Dutch congregation Bnai Israel, spearheaded the effort. The schools enrolled five hundred students by 1869 and provided a ‘sound religious education’ for many decades. Nevertheless, Isaacs described the battle for religious education as ‘uphill work’; advocates faced a constant battle against the ‘hostility and indifference of the community.’

“The Dutch rabbi particularly decried the lack of Hebrew seminaries and colleges to provide educated leaders, ‘Synagogues are crying aloud for ministers,’ he said, ‘and there are none to respond to the call. Jewish children are hungering for religious food ... and there is none to supply the desideratum; and this in free and happy America! Where are our collegiate establishments? Where our theologian institutes?’ In 1867 Isaacs achieved his goal by helping establish Maimonides College of Philadelphia, the first theological seminary for Jews in the United States. Unfortunately, the college failed after a few years through no fault of Isaacs. In 1872 the **Jewish Messenger** sadly lamented the fact that ‘there is not a single Jewish pulpit in America occupied by a minister instructed on our soil.’”

Other Activities

Reverend Isaacs was in the forefront of many charitable activities. [Sabato] “Morais² aptly characterized him as a ‘humble Jew to whom the needy turned with confiding looks; with affection.’ Isaacs worked assiduously to combine all Jewish charities in the city by organizing the United Hebrew Charities in 1873. He also helped establish Mount Sinai Hospital (1852) and served as its first vice president.”

“Internationally, Isaacs crusaded for Palestinian relief and as early as 1849 began long term fund-raising efforts. In 1853 he became treasurer of the North American Relief Society for Indigent Jews in Palestine, a position he held for many years. When news came of a massive famine in Palestine in 1853-1854, Isaacs was the ‘first to take action; the other ministers followed his lead.’ He mounted the first national campaign in the United States for the relief of Jews overseas. Reverend Isaacs's exceptional efforts earned him the accolade ‘champion of charitable institutions.’”

“Although never formally ordained, Isaacs was one of the leading Jewish ministers in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. One of his colleagues called him the ‘father of the American Jewish clergy.’ His funeral service at Temple Shaaray Tefila in 1878 was the largest Jewish funeral of the century. Every synagogue and Jewish organization in the country sent representatives. Isaacs was a religious leader of major influence, a renowned journalist, and a mover and shaker in Jewish affairs.”

¹ The **Occident**, Volume II, No. 6, <http://www.jewishhistory.com/Occident/volume2/sep1844/agitation.html>

² **Sabato Morais** (April 13, 1823 - November 11, 1897) was an Italian-American rabbi, leader of Mikveh Israel Synagogue, pioneer of Italian Jewish Studies in America, and founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabato_Morais)