

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part -)**

### **Sabato Morais – Forgotten Nineteenth Century Advocate for Orthodoxy**

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **ARC MS8 - Sabato Morais Papers - Finding Aid** Prepared by Arthur Kiron, Manuscripts Curator and Assistant Archivist December, 1992 available at <http://www.library.upenn.edu/cajs/morais.html>

During the nineteenth century there were certain individuals who valiantly attempted to stem the rising tide of reform in America. Reverend Sabato Morais (1823 – 1897) was one such man. Despite the fact that his obituary in the New York Times referred to him as “the most eminent rabbi in this country . . . a powerful and aggressive factor in discussions of vast import and interest to millions of people; a deep, incisive, fearless thinker, speaker, and writer,”<sup>1</sup> his accomplishments have been forgotten by most people. Indeed, a perusal of almost any book on American Jewish history yields only a few short references to him.

#### **Brief Biography of Reverend Morais**

“Sabato Morais was born on April 13, 1823 to Samuel and Bonina Morais in the northern Italian city of Leghorn (Livorno), in the grand duchy of Tuscany. Morais was the third of nine children, seven daughters and the older of the two sons. The Morais family descended from Portuguese Marranos. Morais’ mother, Bonina Wolf, was of German-Ashkenazic descent.”

Encouraged by his mother to pursue a religious vocation, Sabato “received rabbinical training from the Chief Rabbi of Leghorn, Abraham Baruch Piperno, as well as from Rabbi Abraham Curiat, Rabbi Isaac Alveranga, and Rabbi Angiolo Funaro” and was ordained in 1845. However, he never used the title of rabbi and, as was common with most Jewish religious clergy in the nineteenth century, was referred to as Reverend Morais. “In addition to his rabbinical training, Morais also studied Semitics with Professor Salvatore De Benedetti, of the University of Pisa and was thoroughly versed in the full range of the broader European cultural and intellectual heritage.”

In 1846 Sabato moved to London and became a Hebrew instructor at the Orphan’s School of Congregation Shaarey Shomayim, the famous Bevis Marks Sephardic Synagogue. In addition, he privately tutored students in Hebrew and Italian and worked on improving his mastery of the English language. While “in London, Morais was befriended by the famous Jewish philanthropist, Sir Moses Montefiore, who was (like Morais) a native of Leghorn in Italy.”

“In 1851, after some hesitation, Morais left London for the United States to apply for the position of Hazan (Cantor and Reader) at Philadelphia's oldest and one of America's most prestigious congregations, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel. Morais arrived in New York on March 14, 1851 and in Philadelphia three days later. On his birthday, April 13, 1851, Morais was elected Hazan of the Congregation, and sixteen years later on September 18, 1868, he received a life-time contract.” He served as Mikveh Israel’s Hazan until his passing in 1897.

In 1855 Reverend Morais married Clara Esther Weil, a teacher he met at the Hebrew Sunday School that was founded by Rebecca Gratz in 1838 in Philadelphia. Clara gave birth to seven children before her untimely passing in 1872. Sabato, who never remarried, raised these children by himself. “Of the children, Henry Samuel Morais became a founder of the **Jewish Exponent** of Philadelphia, a contributing editor to the **Philadelphia Jewish Press** and authored two books. Morais’ daughter Nina [Bonina], the oldest child, was a respected literary figure and civic leader, who eventually would move with her husband Emmanuel Cohen from Philadelphia to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Morais’ other children were his daughters Mrs. (Rebecca) Eugene Lyon, Mrs. (Gentile) Herman Loeb, [Matilda] Esther and Miriam and his son Leon.” Apparently Henry, Leon, Esther, and Miriam never married.

### **Orthodox Spiritual Leader**

Reverend Morais “was one of the most affectionate and faithful of pastors, and with all his many interests and occupations never neglected his congregation or the immediate work connected with it. He was a daring and liberal thinker and a radical in Italian politics. Yet he was the foremost champion of American Hebrew orthodoxy. With eloquent voice and forceful pen, with earnest piety and the strength of profound conviction, he fought against innovation and upheld the ancient tenets of the law. As a Hebraist and Biblical scholar, he had few peers in the world. He studied Talmudic polemics and literature deeply. Fully equipped and able to use his weapons well, he was by many recognized as the most powerful opponent of innovation and change, the clearest, ablest, and most convincing defender of conservatism and orthodoxy in this country, the recognized leader of that element of his religion and race.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Strong Communal Leader**

Dr. Morais played was active in virtually every civic and charitable cause in the city of Philadelphia. However, his interests were not limited to the city in which he resided. He “carefully followed the political issues of his day both throughout the United States and around the world.” His outspoken support of President Lincoln and the North during the Civil War resulted in him being given honorary membership in the Philadelphia Union League. He maintained his public opposition to slavery and his support of the Union in the face of extreme pressure,” some of it from his own congregants.

“Notable among Morais’ other controversial stances as minister of Mikveh Israel was his support of the right of women to vote on all congregational issues, a policy which was adopted by vote in 1882.”

When, in 1881, thousands of Jews began immigrating to America due to pogroms taking place in Eastern Europe, it was Reverend Morais who was in the forefront of efforts to re-settle them in the United States.

### **Jewish Education**

Reverend Morais realized that the key to the survival of authentic Judaism was meaningful Jewish education. From 1867 through 1873 he was professor of Biblical Exegesis at Maimonides College. Founded in 1867 in Philadelphia by Isaac Leeser, it was the first Jewish theological seminary in America. (It lasted only six years, closing in December 1873.) He “also tutored children throughout his life, often for little or no remuneration, and regularly taught for the Hebrew Sunday School movement, started by Rebecca Gratz.”

In 1886 Dr. Morais played a key role in the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. [Many readers may not be aware that the Jewish Theological Seminary was founded as an Orthodox institution. “Although a certain proportion of the organizing delegates and participating rabbis belonged to the Conservative wing of Judaism, the principles of the seminary, as declared in its charter of incorporation, granted by the Legislature of the State of New York on the ninth of May, 1886, were those of uncompromising adherence to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism.”<sup>3</sup>]

### **Scholar and Writer**

Sabato Morais was perhaps the most outstanding Hebraist in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “He was renowned as a translator and master of Hebrew literature. Of particular note in this regard are Morais’ translations from Italian into English (for the first time) of several works of Samuel David Luzzatto (ShaDaL), the famous leader of Italian Jewish learning, including Luzzatto’s critical introduction to the Pentateuch.”

“Morais was a frequent contributor to local and regional newspapers. He was called upon regularly to deliver public lectures (in addition to his regular regimen of weekly Synagogue sermons) on a variety of subjects, addressing such topics as the prevention of cruelty to children, the prevention of cruelty to animals, the need to give to the poor and needy, and the improvement of the status of women.”

### **Huge Funeral**

Dr. Morais was ill during the summer of 1896, but seemed to have fully recovered and served as Chazzan on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in 1897. However, on Wednesday evening, November 10<sup>th</sup> he suffered a stroke and passed away on Thursday, November

11, 1897. His funeral was attended by thousands who wanted to pay homage to this unique Orthodox Jewish leader.

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<sup>1</sup> **The New York Times**, Saturday, November 13, 1897, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> **The Unfailing Light**, Bernard Drachman, The Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 181.