

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 15)

The Trefa Banquet

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Note: All quotes in this article are from one of the following sources:

Isaac Mayer Wise https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Mayer_Wise referred to as IMW

The Trefa Banquet, John J. Appel, **Commentary**, February 1, 1966, available at <https://goo.gl/tWTZ8R> referred to as TB

The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism, Lance J. Sussman available at <https://goo.gl/2gKjPw> referred to as Myth

The Trefa Banquet and the End of a Dream by Michael Feldberg available at <https://goo.gl/UGrnQK> referred to as End

Isaac Mayer Wise, HUC and the UAHC

In order to properly understand the context in which the trefa banquet took place one needs some background regarding Isaac Mayer Wise, Hebrew Union College, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Isaac Mayer Wise (1819 – 1900) was born in Steingrub (now Lomnička), Moravia, which was then part of the Austrian Empire. His father, Rabbi Leo Wise, was a school teacher, and Isaac received his early religious education from his father and grandfather, later continuing his religious and secular studies in Prague. “He may have received the *hattarat hora'ah* from the Prague bet din, composed of Rabbis Rapoport, Samuel Freund, and E. L. Teweles, or from Rabbi Falk Kohn. However there is debate as to whether he was an ordained rabbi at all. In 1843 he was appointed rabbi at Radnitz (now Radnice, by Pilsen), Bohemia, where he remained for about two years” (IMW)

In 1846 Wise immigrated to the United States, arriving in New York on 23 July, In October he was appointed rabbi of the Congregation Beth-El of Albany, where he soon began agitating for reforms in the service. “His was the first Jewish congregation in the United States to introduce family pews in the synagogue. Wise introduced other innovations, including confirmation, a mixed-gender choir, and counting women in forming a *minyan* or religious quorum.

“In 1850, a fistfight between Wise and the synagogue’s president caused a split in the Albany community, and the consequent formation of a new congregation, the Anshe Emeth, by the friends and supporters of Wise. Wise remained with this congregation until April 1854, when he became rabbi of the Bene Yeshurun congregation of the Lodge Street Synagogue of Cincinnati, Ohio, where he officiated for the remaining 46 years of his life. Wise was above all an organizer, and called numerous institutions into being.

“As early as 1848, Wise issued a call to the ‘ministers and other Israelites’ of the United States, urging them to form a union which might put an end to the prevalent religious anarchy. His call appeared in the columns of *The Occident*, and was ably seconded by its editor, Isaac Leeser. Wise suggested that a meeting be held in the spring of 1849 at Philadelphia, to establish a union of the congregations of the entire country. This meeting did not take place; but the originator of the idea never ceased advocating (for) it, especially after he had established his own newspaper, *The Israelite* (July 1854, restyled *The American Israelite* in July 1874), in the columns of which he tirelessly expounded his views upon the subject. His persistence won its reward when in 1873, twenty-five years after he had first broached the idea, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) was organized at Cincinnati.

“Earnest as he was in proclaiming the necessity for union among the congregations, he was equally indefatigable in insisting upon the pressing need of a theological seminary for the training of rabbis for American pulpits. In his *Reminiscences* he gives a vivid picture of the incompetency of many of the men who posed as spiritual guides of the congregations during the early days of his residence in the United States. He had scarcely arrived in Cincinnati when, with his characteristic energy, he set to work to establish a college in which young men could receive a Jewish education. He enlisted the interest and support of a number of influential Jews of Cincinnati and adjacent towns, and in 1855 founded the Zion Collegiate Association. The venture, however, proved a failure, and the society did not succeed in opening a college. Not daunted, Wise entered upon a literary campaign, and year in and year out he presented the subject in the columns of *The American Israelite*. His indomitable perseverance was crowned with success when, on 3 October 1875, the Hebrew Union College opened its doors for the reception of students, four of whom were ordained eight years later.” (IMW) Their ordination was marked by a gala banquet.

The Trefa Banquet

“On Wednesday evening, July 11, 1883, some two hundred persons gathered for dinner at the Cincinnati Highland House, a hilltop resort and restaurant overlooking the Ohio River and the Kentucky hills. Sponsored by a group of Cincinnati Jews who preferred to remain anonymous, the event was meant to honor the delegates to the eighth annual council meeting of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and the first graduating class of the Hebrew Union College. Among the guests were members of Cincinnati’s Jewish upper class as well as non-Jewish judges, clergymen, and professors from the local university.” (TB)

“The caterer for the evening was well known in the Cincinnati Jewish community. Gustave Lindeman (d. 1928) was the food manager of the Jewish Allemania Club in Cincinnati and, subsequently, a swanky non-Jewish club in Dayton after a flood destroyed a restaurant he operated in the Queen City. Lindeman,

who lived most of his life in Dayton, viewed himself as ‘just Jewish’ and steered clear of denominational labels.” (Myth)

“The Cincinnati *Enquirer* described the affair as a ‘Jewish Jollification’; in American Jewish history it has become known as the ‘*trefa* banquet,’ an important link in a chain of events that was finally to lead to a break between Reform and Conservative Judaism.” (TB)

What led to this dinner being labeled the *trefa* banquet was the fact that “The menu shows that Little Neck Clams had the distinction of first offending those diners who observed *kashruth*. Nor did clams constitute the only violation of *kashruth*; the menu included soft-shell crabs, shrimp salad, frogs’ legs, and *milchig* desserts (ice-cream and assorted cheeses) served after the meat courses. Even a cursory knowledge of what hotel men call ‘mass feeding procedures’ should convince anyone that this array of ritually forbidden dishes for an important ceremonial dinner was not simply the result of a caterer’s oversight.” (TB)

“Word of the Trefa Banquet spread quickly throughout the Jewish press, with East Coast critics of Wise pressing the attack, demanding both an explanation and an apology. Wise, who in his own publications depicted the banquet along the same positive lines as suggested by The Cincinnati *Enquirer*, was soon placed on the defensive. However, instead of apologizing, Wise stonewalled and then retaliated with charges of hypocrisy, pointing to the dismissal of several leading Orthodox rabbis in the United States and Europe on the grounds that they had eaten forbidden foods. Wise also offered arguments defending the inclusion of seafood on the menu and, at one point in the discussion, even referred to oysters as ‘ocean vegetables.’” (Myth)

“Historians debate whether Wise approved the menu, the Jewish caterer acted on his own, or the Einkorn faction (espousing radical Reform Judaism) surreptitiously ordered the courses to force a showdown. Wise claimed no knowledge of how the shellfish got on the menu, and claimed to have ordered Gus Lindeman, the caterer, to serve only kosher food. Lindeman did serve kosher meat but ‘supplemented’ it with the shellfish and dairy desserts. A later investigation by a panel of UAHC rabbis cleared Wise of wrongdoing, but the damage was already done.

“The events of that evening, dubbed in history the ‘*trefa* banquet,’ forged an important link in the chain of events leading to the formal break between tradition and reform. In the three years after the banquet, a series of debates between radical Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler and traditionalist Alexander Kohut crystallized the positions of each side. In 1885, the UAHC conference in Pittsburgh, dominated by radicals, adopted a platform of Reform Jewish theology that defined the movement for over half a century. In 1886, some change-oriented rabbis who could not go as far as the Pittsburgh radicals established the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, laying the foundation for Conservative Judaism. In 1888, America’s Orthodox community decided to recruit a chief rabbi from Eastern Europe to serve as a regnant authority. Later that year, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna arrived in New York City to become the first official chief Orthodox rabbi in America.

“After these events, there was no turning back. American Judaism divided into organized movements, each claiming its right to define Jewish religious practices. The “*trefa* banquet” did not cause that division, but most colorfully symbolized the sensibilities and principles that led to it.” (End)

