

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History**

### **Abraham Rice: The First Rabbi in America – Part I**

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
**Department of Mathematical Sciences**  
**Stevens Institute of Technology**  
**Hoboken, NJ 07030**  
[llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu)

#### **Introduction**

It is well known that the first Jews arrived in North America in 1654. What is not so well known is that the first qualified rabbi to settle here, Rabbi Avraham Rice, did not arrive until 1840. One might refer to the first 186 years of American Jewish history as the “Reverend and Cantorial Age,” since these men, as well as some laymen who possessed better than average Jewish educations, served as the leaders of the various Jewish communities during this period.

Needless to say, the lack of qualified Orthodox rabbis during these early years created all sorts of problems in religious matters such as marriage, conversion, divorce, kashrus, etc.

And even half a century after the arrival of the first rabbi in 1840, a prominent American rabbi said about the condition of the American rabbinate that, “Here a man qualifies himself, ordains himself; he is his own college, his own professor, his own diploma. He is what he claims to be.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **The First *Musmach* to Settle in America**

Abraham Joseph Reiss (son of Meir) was born in either 1800 or 1802 in Gochsheim, Germany, a provincial town near Wurzburg. (His name was later Americanized to Rice.) When he was about a year and half old he fell and injured his leg, resulting in him limping for the rest of his life.

He received an intensive Jewish education. His parents introduced him to the study of Chumash and Gemara at an early age, and he eventually studied at the Wurzburg Yeshiva headed by Rabbi Abraham Bing (1752 – 1841). Rabbi Rice received semicha from Rav Bing and later continued his studies at the yeshiva of Rabbi Wolf Hamburger (1770 – 1850) in Furth. In short, Rabbi Rice became a first rate Talmid Chocham who was imbued with a deep sense of loyalty to Torah values.

At the age of thirty he became a Talmud instructor in the yeshiva in Zell, where in the mid-1830s he met and married Rosalie Leucht (b. about 1810). In 1840 Rabbi Rice, his wife, and his sister sailed from Hamburg on the *Sir Isaac Newton*, arriving in New York on July 25, 1840.

Soon after his arrival in the United States, he followed the advice of his friends and settled in Newport, R. I. He heard about the historic Congregation of Newport, the first Congregation that was founded in Colonial days and became famous as a result of the visit of George Washington. It was that Congregation which received the historic letter from the first President in which he said that “the children of the stock of Abraham” may happily live in this land “by right” and not by sufferance. Rabbi Rice soon learned to his deep disillusionment that in spite of the historic Synagogue, the Jewish community in Newport had dwindled to a handful of people, and there was little prospect of rejuvenating this Congregation.<sup>2</sup>

Rav Rice then returned to New York where he met Aaron Weglein, a landsman of his who was the president of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (Nidchei Yisroel) which had been founded in 1829. Weglein realized that his congregation had the opportunity to obtain the services of a real rabbi, and the first rabbi in the country at that! He invited Rabbi Rice to become the spiritual head of his shul, and Rav Rice accepted. So it was that Rav Rice and his family arrived in Baltimore in late August of 1840.

### **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 of 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.<sup>3</sup>

New immigrants began to arrive in Baltimore during the 1840s, and many of them were not fully observant. Still, they wanted to be called to the Torah when they came to shul. The problem of giving Aliyos to those who were not Shomer Shabbos became a source of serious irritation between the rabbi and many of his congregants.

Refusing to accept these double standards, Rabbi Rice at first directed that those who did not keep Shabbos should not be given Aliyos. However, he did not take into account how many of his congregants did not keep Shabbos. The minutes of some of the shul meetings relate that even some of the officers of the synagogue were charged with doing business

on Shabbos. In addition, Aliyos meant donations, and these played a crucial role in the finances of the synagogue.

Rabbi Rice was forced to rescind his original directive. Instead, he allowed non Sabbath observers to be called to the Torah, but forbade the answering of “Amen” to their Brochos. One can well imagine how this was “accepted.”

Some wanted other changes and Rav Rice often found himself and his commitment to Orthodoxy under attack.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

Despite all of this Rabbi Rice was able to make some sort of peace with his situation and accomplish much for Orthodoxy. (To be continued.)

---

<sup>1</sup> **The Making of an American Jewish Community**, by Isaac Fein, the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971, page 54.

<sup>2</sup> **Rabbi Abraham Rice of Baltimore, Pioneer of Orthodox Judaism in America**, by Israel Tabak, Tradition, 7, 1965, page 101.

<sup>3</sup> Fein, page 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. page 56.

<sup>5</sup> Tabak, pages 102 – 103.