

Abraham Rice: The First Rabbi in America

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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.”¹

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.²

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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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

Defender of Orthodoxy

As mentioned above, not long after Rabbi Rice became the spiritual leader of Nidchei Yisroel, he faced opposition from those who wanted to introduce various reforms. In 1842 some of those who felt that Rav Rice was too extreme in his insistence on maintaining halachic standards left his congregation and founded the Har Sinai Verein (Society). The first Rosh Hashanah services held by this congregation “featured” hymns sung to the accompaniment of an organ. This temple became the first lasting reform congregation in America.

The founding of the Har Sinai Verein marked the beginning of the emergence of the reform movement as a major force in American Jewry during the nineteenth century. The reform movement eventually launched an all out attack on traditional Judaism, and Rabbi Rice became an eloquent defender of Orthodoxy.

His most unique contribution, however, was his defense of Orthodox Judaism in America. Where there were so few real scholars, it was easy for pseudo-intellectuals to misinterpret the basic principles of Jewish theology and thus pave the way for the spokesmen of Reform Judaism. This state of affairs was very painful to Rabbi Rice, and he went out of his way to challenge these “erroneous doctrines” as he called them, and to set the record straight. A short time after his arrival in the United States, when English was still foreign to him, he came to the defense of the Talmud in a letter to the editor of *Occident*.⁶

As one of the few Orthodox rabbis in America, [Rabbi] Rice emerged as an important defender of tradition in the face of religious Reform. Criticizing Reform clergy, [Rabbi] Rice excommunicated Isaac M. Wise, a leading Reform clergyman, for questioning aspects of the traditional Jewish belief of messiah and resurrection. While his polemics against Reform failed to curtail the growth of Reform Judaism in America, his remarks reflected the concerns of Orthodox Jews regarding the preservation of Jewish tradition in America.⁷

Rabbi Rice became a close friend of Isaac Leeser, the Philadelphia Chazzan who was in the forefront of everything Orthodox in the United States during the nineteenth century.⁸ In addition to writing articles that Chazzan Leeser published in his monthly **Occident and Jewish Advocate**, Rabbi Rice urged him to undertake an authoritative English translation of the Bible, pointing out that the German translations then available did not appeal to the English speaking Jewish youth of America. The result was a magnificent piece of work written in accordance with Orthodox Judaism that became a standard for decades.

Leading Poseik

Rabbi Rice was one of the few men in America during the mid-nineteenth century who was qualified to deal with halachic issues. He received inquiries from Jewish communities throughout the United States about many matters. Given his personal

modesty, he was reluctant to assume responsibility for making decisions on important religious matters. However, he realized that the people had virtually no one else to turn to.

His detailed responsa were written in the typical style of the Poskim of his time. In response to a question about the use of West Indian Esrogim he replied in the affirmative. He dealt with the kashrus of the food additive shortening and the oils used in its manufacture, the proper way to write Gittin in U.S. cities where a Get had never been written before, the drawing of blood from animals immediately before Shechita (This was thought at the time to have a beneficial effect on the meat.), and many other issues.

[Rabbi] Rice's Talmudic scholarship and personal piety earned him a reputation as one of the few noteworthy scholars of Jewish law in America during the mid-nineteenth century. By responding to religious queries from congregations throughout the United States regarding matters of family law, Sabbath observance, and kashruth, [Rabbi] Rice offered direction to the small community of American Jews eager to preserve Orthodox tradition. In 1844, for example, [Rabbi] Rice was asked by a congregation in Philadelphia to advise them regarding the correct manner of installing a plumbing system for the construction of a new mikvah. Several years later, he responded to queries from a New York congregation seeking to clarify procedures for the burial of uncircumcised children or individuals who married contrary to Jewish law.⁹

The Lloyd Street Synagogue

Rabbi Rice was instrumental in the building of what became known as the Lloyd Street Synagogue. Completed in 1845, it was the first Jewish house of worship built in Maryland. Isaac Leeser, who was present at the synagogue's dedication, described in detail the synagogue as well as the dedication ceremonies.¹⁰ He wrote in part:

We will merely state for the information of our readers who doubtlessly feel an interest in the completion of the first house ever erected especially for our worship in Maryland, that its Eastern Front is ornamental with a Doric portico, through which is the entrance into the main building. A flight of steps on each side leads into the gallery which runs along the west, north and south sides. The main body is divided into two aisles, furnished with pews, in place of open seats, which struck us as something unusual in our Synagogues.

The ark is a semi-circle, reached by a flight of steps of the same form, on the plan of the Synagogues in New York. Over the ark is a circular window laid out in the shape of the so-called "Shield of David" [Magen Dovid] furnished with colored glass of various tints.

The synagogue contained a mikveh as well as an oven for baking matzos.

Problems, Resignation, and Return

The new synagogue proved to be both a blessing and a “curse.” It attracted people who were influenced by the reform movement. At first these people demanded some minor innovations, but, as time went on, they pushed for more and more changes. There were constant conflicts and dissensions.

Rabbi Rice refused to compromise when it came to Halacha. He viewed minor attempts to introduce ritual changes as the first steps on the path towards a total break with Orthodoxy, and he was not wrong.¹¹ In 1849 things got so bad that, much to the shock of many synagogue members, he resigned as the spiritual leader of the congregation. “‘I resigned’ he said, ‘because as a private citizen I expect to have greater influence with my Congregation. And,’ he continued, ‘I shall always be ready to fight the battle of the Lord.’”¹²

Despite the fact that Rabbi Rice no longer held a formal rabbinical position, he continued to have considerable influence over Baltimore Jewish life due to his religious scholarship and piety.

“In 1851 he organized a small Congregation where he officiated as Rabbi and Chazan without compensation and where he felt spiritually at home. The group consisted of a number of pious and learned people who venerated their teacher and appreciated his piety and his dedication to the study of Torah.”¹³

In 1862 the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation found itself without a rabbi, and Rav Rice was asked to again become its spiritual leader. He agreed, but refused half of the \$1000 yearly salary the congregation offered him. Unfortunately, he did not serve for very long in this position, since he passed away on October 29, 1862.

His Legacy

Notwithstanding the views of the narrow-minded and the bigoted, Abraham Rice's place in the history of American Judaism is secure. The courage and dauntlessness with which he defended the principles of historic Judaism give him a unique place among the pioneers of Orthodoxy in America. His consistent and uncompromising stand in matters of Jewish theology were the strongest factor in stemming the tide of Reform. His devotion to the study of Torah and his depth of talmudic learning made it possible for halakhic Judaism to gain a foothold on American soil, where for centuries Jewish life was spiritually barren and Torahless. His dedication to Jewish education and his personal instruction of many a youth in this community were responsible for a new generation of enlightened laymen to be raised up who changed the entire physiognomy and religious climate of the Jewish community of Baltimore.¹⁴

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

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

³ Fein, page 55.

⁴ *Ibid.* page 56.

⁵ Tabak, pages 102 – 103.

⁶ Tabak, page 111.

⁷ **Orthodox Judaism in America, A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook**, by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1996, page 174.

⁸ See **Isaac Leeser: Architect of Traditional Judaism in America**, by Yitzchok Levine, **The Jewish Press**, June 22, 2007, page 1. (<http://www.jewishpress.com/content.cfm?contentid=21906>)

⁹ Sherman, page 173

¹⁰ **Occident**, Volume III, N. 8, November, 1845, pages 362 – 363. The entire article is available at <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume3/nov1845/baltimore.html>

¹¹ The Lloyd Street Synagogue eventually became a reform temple. “The building was later sold to St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church (1889-1905), one of the first Lithuanian "ethnic" parishes in the U.S. Between 1905-1963, it was occupied by Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh, one of the leading Orthodox congregations of the East European immigrant community. The building was restored from 1963 to 1965, and is no longer used as a place of worship, but open as a historic site.”
<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/baltimore/b30.htm>

¹² Tabak, page 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 119.