

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Reverend Arnold Fischel *Unsung Hero*

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Arnold Fischel: “Unsung Hero” in American Israel** by Jonathan Waxman, **American Jewish Historical Quarterly** (1961-1978); Sep 1970-Jun 1971; 60, 1-4; AJHS Journal.

Last month’s column outlined the struggle that took place at the beginning of the Civil War to get Congress to allow the appointment of Jewish army chaplains. Originally only Christian clergymen could serve as chaplains, and it was only as a result of pressure from the American Jewish community that in 1861 Congress passed a new law allowing ordained clergy of other religions to serve as chaplains. The Reverend Arnold (Adolph) Fischel (1830 – 1894) played a key role in this effort. Below we sketch some details of the life of this forgotten man who did much for the Jewish Community during the Civil War.

Activities in England and America

Very little is known about Fischel’s early life, save that he was a native of Holland and from an Ashkenazi family. We know that by 1849 Fischel had settled in England, because the March 23, 1849 issue of *The Jewish Chronicle* carried the following article about a talk that he gave before the Brighton Royal Literary and Scientific Society.

“. . . on Tuesday evening, the thirteenth inst., Mr. Fischel delivered, at the Albion Room, a very excellent essay on the Peculiarness and Beauties of the Hebrew Language ... and entered into much curious philological research connected with his subject, clearly indicating his own knowledge of the learned languages, Oriental and Occidental. He next entered into some critical observations showing the harmony between science and revelation, whilst he clearly demonstrated the ignorance of Hebrew in those infidel writers who used ingenuity instead of learning in attempting to find contradictory texts, but which he showed, not only harmonised with true philosophy, but were consistent with the biblical doctrines.

“Three items in the article should be noted: one that Fischel has no title, such as ‘Reverend’ or ‘Dr.’; two, despite this, he appears to have been a man of some erudition; and three he appears as Orthodox in his views. At a later period Fischel is addressed as ‘the Reverend Dr.,’ and we may indeed question the source of his *semicha* and doctorate.”

Other scholarly activities by Fischel followed. Several months after his first talk he gave another one before the same Society titled "Sublimity of Hebrew Poetry compared with that of the Greek and Roman classics." He also published several letters in *The Jewish Chronicle* about the Hebrew language and Psalm 110 using only his initials A.F. He "was subsequently identified by Hertz Ben Pinchas, a leading Anglo-Jewish scholar of the period, as 'the learned and friendly A.F.' Fischel's reputation as a scholar was further enhanced when *The Jewish Chronicle* commented favorably on his offer to lecture, gratis, at Sussex Hall, home of the British Literary Society, and perhaps the most prestigious institution for adult Jewish education in Great Britain at this time."

"Over the ensuing year-and-a-half we note continued literary activity, in the course of which Fischel contributed a series on 'The Cosmogony of Moses' and 'The Laws of Israel as Represented by the Greeks and Romans,' essays on such diverse topics as 'King Solomon on Plants' and the etymology and application of the word Selah, as well as translations with extensive notes on *Bikure ha-itim* and parts of the first volume of the *Moreh Nebukim*. The latter was translated from the Arabic original rather than from Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation. Fischel also continued as a correspondent, commenting on the work of others."

In 1852 Arnold Fischel was elected to the position of lecturer at the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation.

"Within a month of his election we note an elevation in status when the *Reverend A. Fischel* was elected an honorary member of the Board of Management of the Liverpool Hebrew Education Institute. Fischel's main duty was delivering an English sermon on a regular basis as well as preaching on special occasions such as the Day of National Humiliation and Prayer called by Chief Rabbi Adler in April, 1854. It is quite likely, however, that his functions were broader."

In December 1855 Congregation Shearith Israel of New York invited "Dr. Arnold Fischell, a Dutch Jew in England, to be candidate for lecturer."¹ In September 1856 Fischel sailed for New York. After delivering some sermons, he was appointed to the position of lecturer at Shearith Israel. He also taught at the Congregation's Polonies Talmud Torah School. It should be kept in mind that Fischel's position of Lecturer put him on a slightly lower status than that of the Reverend J. J. Lyons, who was the Congregation's Chazzan. Indeed, Fischel essentially became Lyons' assistant.

"But Dr. Fischel had his difficulties. He had learning and devotion, but he had not the personality or the eloquence of an effective preacher. More than once he was earnestly requested by the board of trustees to write out his lectures and read them from the manuscript. Furthermore, Hazzan Lyons was not given to viewing his efforts sympathetically. Nevertheless, Dr. Fischel was steadily reelected until in October, 1861, he declined reelection."²

The Chaplaincy

In September 1861 Michael Allen, a Jew, was forced to give up his position as chaplain of the 65th Regiment of the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry, because the law at the time said that only a Christian could be an army chaplain. The American Jewish community mounted an effort to change this discriminatory law with protests in the press. On December 4, 1861, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, the only Jewish national organization at the time, invited Fischel to come to Washington to meet with government officials and to lobby to have the law changed.

“Fischel immediately accepted the invitation - he regarded it as a privilege of inestimable worth to be selected to render such a service in behalf of American Jewry. It was understood that his expenses were to be paid by the Board, but he would receive no salary. To assist him in his task the Board provided him with personal credentials and with letters of introduction to important political figures in Washington.”³

Fischel met with President Lincoln, who received him cordially and acknowledged the unfairness of the present law that excluded anyone who was not a Christian from serving as a chaplain. He also lobbied congressmen regarding this issue. The net result was that Congress did amend the law on August 3rd.

“The second task which had been entrusted to Fischel by the Board of Delegates was the fulfillment of the duties of a civilian chaplain in the Potomac area. He undertook this religious phase of his mission with as much enthusiasm and efficiency as he did the political phase, and rendered a service which could not have been more admirable even if he had been in uniform.”⁴

“Fischel's mission ended abruptly in April. The Board of Delegates had promised Fischel twenty dollars per week, a sum which it was able to allocate only through borrowing from another fund. This was to cover Fischel's expenses. There had been no talk of remuneration. Fischel soon discovered that he was spending twenty dollars above his allowance, but he did not break the agreement. The Board, however, was in such financial trouble that despite repeated appeals, only four congregations were recorded as having contributed in April. Not even half of the twenty-two member congregations of the Board appropriated funds for Fischel's two-fold mission. Fischel departed because of the indifference and outright antagonism to the appeal for funds and his mission in general.”

Efforts were made in October 1862 to have the government officially appoint Fischel as a Jewish chaplain to the hospitals in and around Washington, but they were not successful. “Having failed to obtain the appointment, Fischel returned to his homeland, Holland, to live with his mother, sometime at the end of 1862.”

“This is the brief story of a man who came out of nowhere to receive acclaim as a scholar versed in matters ranging from Greek classics to Maimonides to American Jewish

history, who devoted his energies and money for the benefit of the American Jewish community, and who in the end returned to that land of historical murkiness: the Rev. Dr. Arnold Fischel.”



Reverend Dr. Arnold Fischel (1830 – 1894)

¹ The question arises as to whether “Dr.” in Fischel’s case was also an honorary title as “Reverend” apparently was. There are three contemporary documents which list Fischel as having obtained a doctorate: the first is the gift presented to Fischel by the See! Street Congregation on the eve of his departure which was inscribed “Presented to the Rev. Dr. A. Fischel, by his friends, members of the See! Street Congregation, Liverpool, in token of their respect. August 1856” (*The Occident* XIV #7, p. 866), the second is Benjamin II’s diary (p. 63), and the third is the program for the dedication of the 19th Street building of Shearith Israel in 1860 where he is listed as “Reverend A. Fischel, Ph.D.”

² **An Old Faith in the New World, Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654 – 1954** by David and Tamar De Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, 1955, page 190.

³ **American Jewry and the Civil War** by Bertram W. Korn, A Temple Book, Atheneum, New York, 1970, page 68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 75.