

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

### Jewish Education in America Circa 1870

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#### Introduction

During the nineteenth century a large number of American Jews abandoned traditional religious observance. This led to the United States being dubbed “*di treifene medina*” (the irreligious land). One of the key factors in this defection from tradition was the lack of meaningful Jewish education for the young. Attempts to provide Jewish education were largely unsuccessful, because parents opted to take advantage of the free public school education which became available during the middle of the nineteenth century.

For example, in 1841 Baltimore Hebrew Congregation opened a day school that taught both *Limudei Kodesh* (religious subjects) and *Limudei Chol* (secular subjects). The school was fairly successful, and by 1851 it had an enrollment of about 200. Unfortunately, the establishment of free public school education led to a decline in enrollment and the school ceased to exist in 1870. Parents chose to send their children to public school rather than a Jewish religious school, not realizing that they were paving the way for their offspring to assimilate.

#### Jacob Jackson Noah

Pages 359 – 370 of the 1870 **Report of the Secretary of the Interior** to the Third Session of the Forty-First Congress, Volume II, under the heading “Report of the Commissioner of Education”, contains a section titled **Hebrew Education** written by Jacob J. Noah. (This report may be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/3j6x5g4>) I have no idea why this article is included in this report.

Before dealing with this report, it is appropriate to give a brief sketch of Jacob Noah’s life. Jacob (1830 - 1897) was the second son of Mordechai Manuel and Rebecca Esther (Jackson) Noah. His father was a playwright, a distinguished journalist, a politician and a proto-Zionist who served at one time as Consul to Tunis. Mordechai was also an outspoken leader of New York Jewry during the first part of the nineteenth century who unsuccessfully proposed the founding of a haven for Jews in upstate New York.<sup>1</sup>

Jacob studied law. He settled in the Minnesota Territory not long after it was established by Congress in 1849. While residing there he served in various judicial and legislative positions. In 1857 he declined the nomination for Delegate in Congress to accept the

position of Clerk of the Supreme Court of the State, to which office he was elected by a large majority.

When the [Civil] War broke out Judge Noah, who had settled in the West and become (sic) prominent in Minnesota, went to the front as Captain in the Second Minnesota Regiment, participating in several battles. In the Summer of 1862 he was connected with Andrew Johnson's Provisional Government of Tennessee, and later was appointed one of the Attorneys General and Chancellors of the State by Gov. Brownlow. He removed to Washington subsequently, and was connected with the census of 1880 and of 1890. He was also correspondent for a number of Western papers. At the time of his death he was a member of the Board of Pension Appeals in the Interior Department.<sup>2</sup>

### **The 1870 Report on Hebrew Education**

One can gain insight into the state of Jewish education in America in the 1860s from Jacob Jackson Noah's report on this topic that was cited above. All quotes below are from this document.

Judge Noah begins his report by pointing out that, "It is safe to assert that, although the Israelites are of all nationalities, and scattered promiscuously over the face of the world, they are the only people who can fairly be classed as universally educated. There may be a few who cannot read or write, but this number is insignificant. Indeed, it is asserted by those who claim to know, that no Israelite can be found who cannot read or write, if not in their modern or domiciliary language, certainly in the Hebrew."

He then goes on to give a long synopsis of Jewish history from ancient times to the present referencing Jewish education where appropriate. Noah points out that "An examination of Hebrew education presents six post-biblical developments: First, the schools of the Sopherim; second, the schools of the Mishna; third, the schools of the Talmud; fourth, the scientific schools of Spain; fifth, the exclusive talmudic schools of France, Germany, and Poland; and sixth, the modern schools of Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, and America."

Turning specifically to America during the latter half of the nineteenth century, he asserts that "The American Israelite undoubtedly rejoices in our system of free schools, and watches with anxiety and hope the progress of American education. He is grateful for the blessings of free government, and therefore is in accord with the wisdom of Aristotle, who asserts that 'the most effective way of preserving a state is to bring up the citizens in the spirit of the Government; to fashion, and, as it were, to cast them in the mould of the Constitution.'"

American Jews paid a high price for their "rejoicing" in the public school system. Noah may not have realized the full implications of what was happening to Jewish children who had little or no Jewish education. Nonetheless, he did write:

“Education, to Israelites, in the Hebrew language, now is purely secondary and only taught for the purpose of enabling them to participate in the various religious ceremonies which are given in Hebrew. Modern American reforms, introduced in synagogue worship, do away with the exclusiveness of the Hebrew and sermons or lectures are now commonly preached in the English and German languages. Some reformers insist that all the services should be conducted in English, or German, so that all the congregation should understand; for it is true that the percentage of Hebrews attending synagogue, and employing the Hebraic understandingly, is very small. In other words, it is evident that the Hebrew language is fast losing its importance among the Jews, it being no longer necessary to employ it hermetically, although the orthodox Israelites cling with great pertinacity to the old habits and customs, and refuse to be separated from the ancient landmarks. It is but a question of time, however, with orthodox Judaism-it must give way to the reformatory spirit of the age.

The Talmud is no longer taught in Jewish schools as an exclusive study. It is referred to and interwoven with other school exercises, but is not a specialty. The Israelites do not, as heretofore, compel their children to an exclusive study of Hebrew, and of Hebrew law, at the age of five and six years; but they impart to them a general knowledge of Hebrew, so that they may read it fluently, even if they understand it but imperfectly, to the end that when they become *Bar-mitzvah*, or thirteen years of age (the Oriental age of manhood, when parental authority is considered to cease), they may read their portion of the Torah, or the law of Moses, in the synagogue, as the first witness and exhibit of their entry into the mystic rite of manhood.

Of course history has proven all too well that such a scant Jewish education in no way equips Jewish youth to deal with an open American society that has tempted and still tempts them to blend in, assimilate, and hence relinquish their Jewish heritage. Given this, is it at all surprising that in the nineteenth century America became known as “*di treifene medina*”?

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<sup>1</sup> See **A Haven for Jews in New York (Part I)** *The Jewish Press*, February 3, 2006 (<http://www.jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/19161>) and **A Haven For Jews In New York (Part II): The Founding Of Ararat** *The Jewish Press*, March 3, 2006 (<http://www.jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/18013>) for a sketch of Mordechai Manuel Noah's life.

<sup>2</sup> **Judge Jacob J. Noah**, *New York Times Obituary* October 15, 1897.