

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

### Jonas Friedenwald of Baltimore (1802 – 1893)

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

*Note: All quotes are from **Life, Letters, and Addresses of Aaron Friedenwald, M.D.** by his son Harry Friedenwald, M. D. This book was printed for private circulation by The Lord Baltimore Press in 1906. The book may be downloaded at no charge from <http://books.google.com/>*

Sadly, American Jewish history is filled with stories about families who came to America and then abandoned much of their religious observance. Jonas Friedenwald was one of the few who faced numerous obstacles and yet remained constant in his commitment to Yiddishkeit.

#### Coming to America

Jonas Friedenwald was born on November 9, 1802 in the small town of Altenbuseck in Giessen, Germany. In 1822 he married Merle Bar Stern, the widow of Moses Stern, who was seven years his senior. The couple owned a small farm, and Jonas supplemented their income by trading from time to time in various commodities. Nonetheless, life was a struggle for them and their growing family, so they decided to immigrate to America. They were the first Jews from their area to take this venturesome step.

“They set out in September, 1831, upon a sailing vessel the *Louise* of Bremen, with the aged father, Chayim Friedenwald, Merle’s son [from her first marriage], Bernard Stern (1820 - 1873), and three other children, Betzy, Joseph, and Isaac Friedenwald, the last an infant some two months old, on the weary and hazardous voyage to Baltimore. The passage, which lasted four months, was attended with great hardships. Kosher meat had been smoked and packed for the long trip, but unfortunately the captain of the vessel demanded that it be placed in his charge; and though it was explained by my grandfather that if this were done the Jewish law would forbid the use of the meat, the order was obeyed. The entire family did not taste a morsel of meat during all those months.” (Pages 17 – 18)

Despite this, the ship’s captain apparently respected the Friedenwalds strict adherence to Halacha, because he allowed them to use his cabin for davening and other religious observances.

The ship arrived at the mouth of the Patapsco River on Thursday, January 15, 1832. The river was filled with ice, and this slowed the ship's progress so that it did not reach Baltimore until Friday, shortly before sunset. Not wanting to be in the position of having to seek lodging on Shabbos, Jonas left the ship on Thursday night, walked over the ice to get to the city, and rented two small rooms from a fellow Jew.

### **Life in Baltimore**

Jonas Friedenwald had found lodging for his family, but he had expended all of his money during the journey to America. Furthermore, there was no family or friends to assist them, since at this time Baltimore had only three of four German Jewish families. Things looked bleak indeed.

“But better times soon dawned. In a few days Jonas Friedenwald, who had decided mechanical ability, started out as an umbrella mender, an occupation which he had learned shortly before leaving Europe, with a view to supporting himself in America. This work from the first yielded him an income sufficient to maintain his family, to lay aside enough to begin a general junk-business, in which the entire household aided him, and, not long after, to open near-by a grocery of which his wife took charge.

“Success crowned their efforts, and a ledger of the years 1840 and 1841, which is in the hands of the writer, shows numerous accounts running into several hundreds of dollars. This progress was aided by the father's early acquisition of the English language, which he learned to use with ease, partly by practice, and partly by reading the Baltimore Sun, to which he remained a subscriber for sixty years.

“He later entered the hardware business, in company with his son-in-law, and by the year 1854 was in a position to retire upon a competence sufficient to maintain his family in comfort and to enable him to give freely to all the needy who applied to him, as well as to various societies and institutions.” (Page 19)

### **A Model Orthodox Layman**

Jonas Friedenwald became a pillar of the Orthodox Jewish community of Baltimore and became involved in a myriad of charitable activities. He was a founder of the Hebrew Assistance Society, which later became known as the Hebrew Benevolent Society, serving as the organization's treasurer for many years. He was instrumental in the founding of the Baltimore Hebrew Orphan Asylum, and re-established the Hebrew Free Burial Society. For many years Jonas distributed matzah to the poor before Pesach.

[After his retirement] “He devoted himself almost entirely to communal and religious affairs, for he had a deep love for his faith and for his people. His wise counsel aided many a Jewish newcomer to establish himself. His benevolence, however, knew no bounds of race or creed; his will, for example, contained, among other bequests, liberal legacies to the Baltimore Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, to the German Orphan Asylum, and to the German Aged People's Home. His kindness to

the unfortunate, charity to the poor, and hospitality to the stranger became proverbial.”  
(Page 20)

Jonas Friedenwald was a man who was uncompromisingly committed to Orthodoxy at a time when many were influenced by the Reform Movement.

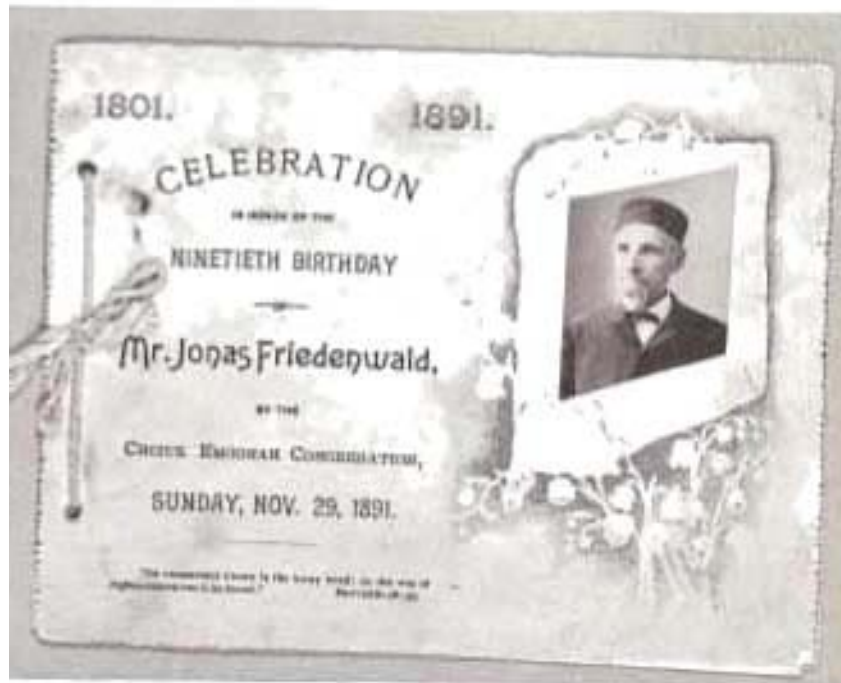
“In protest against innovations which he considered improper and even impious, he withdrew in 1871 from the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, and formed, together with a few associates, the Chizuk Emoonah Congregation, which built a synagogue in Lloyd Street. In connection with this synagogue he aided in establishing and maintaining a *Beth ha-Midrash*, together with a rabbinical library.

“His devotion to his religion appears in the following extract from a letter which my father wrote to me under date of January 1, 1888.

“I saw grandfather this morning and he inquired after you. He had a cold, he told me, and regretted very much that he could not go to synagogue early in the morning, particularly as for the first time they failed to get a minyan. Just think of it, at his age, on a sleety winter morning, upbraiding himself for having neglected what he considered to be a duty! It is refreshing to see a man clinging to duty throughout a long life, and praying for strength to continue to do so.” (Pages 20 – 21.)

Jonas’s 90th birthday was marked by an imposing celebration in his beloved synagogue. A number of prominent rabbonim delivered addresses praising his services to his people and his commitment to Orthodoxy.

Jonas Friedenwald passed away on September 2, 1893, just short of his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday. He left behind a wonderful legacy. His son Isaac established a well-known printing press in Baltimore. His youngest son, Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, not only achieved prominence in the medical profession but also remained an observant Jew throughout his entire life, something that was, sadly, very rare during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Aaron’s accomplishments will be dealt with in two future articles.



**JONAS FRIEDENWALD**  
*on his ninetieth birthday, 1891*