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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 Abraham 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 such men, as well as some laymen who possessed better than average Jewish educations, served as the leaders of the various Jewish communities during that period.

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

Abraham Joseph Reiss (son of Meir) was born in either 1800 or 1802 in Gochsheim, Germany, a provincial town near Wurzburg. When he was about a year and half old he fell and injured his leg; he would limp for the rest of his life.

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He received an intensive Jewish education and eventually studied at the Wurzburg Yeshiva headed by Rabbi Abraham Bing. Rabbi Rice received *semicha* from Rav Bing and later continued his studies at the yeshiva of Rabbi Wolf Hamburger in Furth.

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. 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 of 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 president of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (Nidchei Yisroel), which had been founded in 1829. Weglein, realizing his congregation had the opportunity to obtain the services of a real rabbi, and

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the first rabbi in the country at that, invited Rabbi Rice to become the spiritual head of his shul. Rav Rice and his family arrived in Baltimore in late August 1840.

Rabbi Rice and His Congregation

At first glance Rabbi Rice and Congregation Nidchei Yisroel 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*. But he had not taken 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 blessings. One can well imagine the congregants' response to this.

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.⁵

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

(To be continued)

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.

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