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Sabato Morais: Forgotten Advocate For Orthodoxy (Part One)

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(Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from ARC MS8 – Sabato Morais Papers – available at <http://www.library.upenn.edu/cajs/morais.html>.)

There were certain individuals during the nineteenth century who valiantly attempted to stem the rising tide of Reform in America. Reverend Sabato Morais (1823-1897) was one such man. Despite the fact that his obituary in The New York Times referred to him as “the most eminent rabbi in this country . . . a powerful and aggressive factor in discussions of vast import and interest to millions of people; a deep, incisive, fearless thinker, speaker, and writer,”^[i] his accomplishments have long been forgotten by most people. Indeed, a perusal of almost any book on American Jewish history yields only a few short references to Morais.

“Sabato Morais was born on April 13, 1823 to Samuel and Bonina Morais in the northern Italian city of Leghorn (Livorno), in the grand duchy of Tuscany. Morais was the third of nine children, seven daughters and the older of the two sons. The Morais family descended from Portuguese Marranos. Morais’ mother, Bonina Wolf, was of German-Ashkenazic descent.”

Encouraged by his mother to pursue a religious vocation, Sabato “received rabbinical training from the Chief Rabbi of Leghorn, Abraham Baruch Piperno, as well as from Rabbi Abraham Curiat, Rabbi Isaac Alveranga, and Rabbi Angiolo Funaro” and was ordained in 1845. However, he never used the title of rabbi and, as was common with most Jewish religious clergy in the nineteenth century, was referred to as Reverend Morais.

“In addition to his rabbinical training, Morais also studied Semitics with Professor Salvatore De Benedetti, of the University of Pisa and was thoroughly versed in the full range of the broader European cultural and intellectual heritage.”

In 1846 Sabato moved to London and became a Hebrew instructor at the Orphan’s School of Congregation Shaarey Shomayim, the famous Bevis Marks Sephardic Synagogue. In addition, he privately tutored students in Hebrew and Italian and worked on improving his mastery of the English language. While “in London, Morais was befriended by the famous Jewish philanthropist, Sir Moses Montefiore, who was (like Morais) a native of Leghorn in Italy.”

“In 1851, after some hesitation, Morais left London for the United States to apply for the position of Hazan (Cantor and Reader) at Philadelphia’s oldest and one of America’s most prestigious congregations, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel. Morais arrived in New York on March 14, 1851 and in Philadelphia three days later. On his birthday, April 13, 1851, Morais was

elected Hazan of the Congregation, and sixteen years later on September 18, 1868, he received a life-time contract.”

In 1855 Reverend Morais married Clara Esther Weil, a teacher he met at the Hebrew Sunday School that was founded by Rebecca Gratz in 1838 in Philadelphia. Clara gave birth to seven children before her untimely passing in 1872. Sabato, who never remarried, raised these children by himself.

In 1887 Sabato Morais became the first Jew to be granted an honorary doctorate of laws from the University of Pennsylvania in recognition of his outstanding scholarly achievements.

Dr. Morais “was one of the most affectionate and faithful of pastors, and with all his many interests and occupations never neglected his congregation or the immediate work connected with it.... With eloquent voice and forceful pen, with earnest piety and the strength of profound conviction, he fought against innovation and upheld the ancient tenets of the law. As a Hebraist and biblical scholar, he had few peers in the world. He studied Talmudic polemics and literature deeply. Fully equipped and able to use his weapons well, he was by many recognized as the most powerful opponent of innovation and change, the clearest, ablest, and most convincing defender of conservatism and orthodoxy in this country, the recognized leader of that element of his religion and race.”[ii]

In his inaugural Sabbath address delivered at Congregation Mikveh Israel on March 22, 1851, Reverend Morais used this occasion to express his fundamental beliefs regarding the meaning and purpose of Jewish worship, of prayer and ritual observance:

True worship resides in the heart, and truly it is by purifying our hearts that we best worship God; still the ordinances which we are enjoined to perform aim but at this object: to sanctify our immortal soul, to make it worthy of its sublime origin.... We must also be upon our guard lest the essential should become secondary; we must take heed not to confound true devotion with false piety. The former is simple, modest, it does not strive to attract the attention of men, but like the devoted Hannah, it speaks with the heart, the lips move and the voice is scarcely audible. The latter is clamorous, affected, full of ostentation.[iii]

Dr. Morais was active in virtually every civic and charitable cause in Philadelphia. However, his interests were not limited to the city in which he resided. He “carefully followed the political issues of his day both throughout the United States and around the world.” His outspoken support of President Lincoln and the North during the Civil War resulted in his receiving honorary membership in the Philadelphia Union League. He maintained his public opposition to slavery and his support of the Union in the face of extreme pressure, some of it from his own congregants.

Morais identified true power and authority with God, not with worldly accomplishments, political muscle, entering the public sphere or gaining public recognition. As Morais once put it, “to exercise social and domestic virtues is to serve the Lord and Redeemer.” For Morais, communal and charitable work functioned as a form of worship, a sacrificial service of the heart (*Avodah*). Morais followed the biblical writings he read so carefully, such as Jeremiah and Ecclesiastes, in pronouncing earthly achievements “vanities.”

.... In principle Morais objected to...political Zionism because he judged the essentially secular call for a Jewish return to the Land of Israel to be in conflict with the traditional religious doctrine that only God, not Jews, should initiate a messianic restoration. But Morais’ opposition also reflected a religious sensibility rooted in the idea that

true piety involved humble submission to God's will. Three months later, in August 1897, political Zionism was born at Basle, and three months after that Morais died.[iv]

“Notable among Morais’ other controversial stances as minister of Mikveh Israel was his support of the right of women to vote on all congregational issues, a policy which was adopted by vote in 1882.”

When, in 1881, thousands of Jews began immigrating to America due to pogroms taking place in Eastern Europe, it was Reverend Morais who was in the forefront of efforts to re-settle them in the United States.

[i] The New York Times, Saturday, November 13, 1897, 7.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] “**Dust and Ashes**”: The Funeral and Forgetting of Sabato Morais, Arthur Kiron *American Jewish History* 84.3 (1996) 155-188.

[iv] Ibid.

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