

GLIMPSES INTO AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

BY DR. YITZCHOK LEVINE



Sabato Morais – Forgotten Advocate For Orthodoxy

(Part Two)

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from “Dust and Ashes: The Funeral and Forgetting of Sabato Morais” by Arthur Kiron, American Jewish History 84.3 (1996) 155-188.)

Last month we sketched the life of Reverend Dr. Sabato Morais and discussed his spiritual leadership of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia as well as his involvement in a wide range of communal activities. Here we outline some of his many other accomplishments and describe his huge funeral.

Jewish Education

Reverend Morais realized that the key to the survival of authentic Judaism was meaningful Jewish education. From 1867 through 1873 he was professor of biblical exegesis at Maimonides

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College. Founded in 1867 in Philadelphia by Isaac Leeser, it was the first Jewish theological seminary in America. (It lasted only six years, closing in December 1873.) He “also tutored children throughout his life, often for little or no remuneration, and regularly taught for the Hebrew Sunday School movement, started by Rebecca Gratz.”¹

In 1886 Dr. Morais played a key role in the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. (Many readers may not be aware that JTS was founded as an Orthodox institution.) “Although a certain proportion of the organizing delegates and participating rabbis belonged to the Conservative wing of Judaism, the principles of the seminary, as declared in its charter of incorporation, granted by the Legislature of the State of New York on the ninth of May, 1886, were those of uncompromising adherence to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism.”²

Scholar and Writer

Morais transplanted to America a distinctive Anglo-Livornese “rabbinic humanist” outlook whose formative elements await further study. The sources of Morais’s

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worldview and literary interests are extraordinarily diverse, and his political views are steeped in the teachings of Mazzini and in his admiration for Abraham Lincoln.... Morais was a sensitive student of medieval Jewish philosophy (particularly that of Maimonides) and Hebrew poetry, the entire range of the Italian Jewish literary tradition, the historical studies and Hebrew writings of the nineteenth-century Galician maskil Solomon Yehudah Rapoport, and the teachings of the renowned Jewish biblical exegete from Trieste, Samuel David Luzzatto.

For halakic rulings Morais turned to Haham Abraham Baruch Piperno, his teacher and chief rabbi in Livorno. He was tutored in Semitic languages and was exposed to the wider Italian and European literary heritage by Salvatore De Benedetti of the University of Pisa. Morais nurtured a deep love for music, particularly Italian opera, composed Hebrew poetry, and was perhaps the most outstanding Hebraist in America in the nineteenth century.

"Morais was a frequent contributor to local and regional newspapers. He was called upon regularly to deliver public lectures (in addition to his regular regimen of weekly Synagogue sermons) on a variety of subjects, addressing such topics as the prevention of cruelty to children, the prevention of cruelty to animals, the need to give to the poor and needy, and the improvement of the status of women."³

Huge Funeral

Dr. Morais was ill during the summer of 1896 but seemed to have fully recovered and served as *chazan* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 1897. However, on Wednesday evening, November 10, he suffered a stroke and passed away on Thursday, November 11, 1897.

His funeral, which took place on November 15, was attended by thousands of Jews and non-Jews from all strata of society who wanted to pay homage to this unique Orthodox Jewish leader.

The size of the funeral and the details of the service and burial mark a historical transformation in the character of public Jewish funerals in the United States and hint at fundamental changes then underway within American Jewish communal life.

Morais's funeral occurred five years prior to the first mass public Jewish funeral in New York City. It was an unprecedented event in Philadelphia as well as in American Jewish history and was recognized as such at the time. The Reverend Henry Pereira Mendes, leader of New York City's most prestigious Jewish congregation, the Sephardic Shearith Israel, proclaimed that "no such minister in this country ever had such a magnificent funeral."

The prominent New York attorney Daniel Peixotto Hays (1854-1923) movingly recorded the impact Morais's funeral made on him:

I was so impressed by the occurrence at the funeral of the late Rev. Sabato Morais, on the fifteenth instant, that I cannot refrain from writing about it.... I refer to the ovation paid to his memory by thousands of Russian Jews for whose advancement he had worked and who remembered him as a true friend.

The scene in front of the house was a most memorable one. Men, women, and children from the Russian quarter had gathered there long before the hour fixed for the funeral ceremonies, and with sorrowful faces, waited regardless of the rain, until his body was brought from his house and placed in the hearse. It was not idle curiosity that held them there, it was no expectation of witnessing impressive funeral ceremonies, but an honest desire to pay the last tribute or respect to one whom they regarded as a father. And when the hearse and carriages moved way from the house, they followed it on foot, not in any regular order, but as if each one realized that they

would never again feel the kindly influence of his presence and could not bear to have him thus abruptly taken out of their lives. It was a crowd such as follows a departing hero on his way to battle for their cause, except that they were subdued and overawed by the magnitude of their grief.

At the cemetery, a like scene was being enacted. Masses of these people lined the adjoining streets and waited patiently for the funeral to arrive. They knew they could not enter the cemetery grounds, because the space was too limited to admit them. But there they stood, women holding their children by the hand and babies in their arms, men with grey hair and others in the prime of life – a quiet, sad tearful assemblage, waiting for *their* dead [emphasis in original]. For he was "theirs." They had been welcome at his house at all times during his life, and he had been a constant visitor at their humble homes. He had been their guide, counselor, and friend in a strange land.

Sadly, the accomplishments of this great man were soon forgotten. Within a century after his death he had "become almost invisible in standard accounts of the American Jewish past. In a recent survey of scholarly opinions about the 'Greatest American Jewish leaders' in American Jewish History Morais did not merit a single mention."

¹ ARC MSS - Sabato Morais Papers - Finding Aid prepared by Arthur Kiron, manuscripts curator and assistant archivist, December 1992, available at <http://www.library.upenn.edu/cajs/morais.html>

² *The Unfailing Light*, Bernard Drachman, Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948, page 181.

³ ARC MSS - Sabato Morais Papers

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