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## LOST TO ORTHODOXY: THE FATE OF BALTIMORE HEBREW CONGREGATION

Dr. Yitzchok Levine  
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*Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from A History of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation: 1830-1905 by Adolf Guttmacher, Lord Baltimore Press, 1905. I am indebted to Sally Plumbaum, assistant to the executive director of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, who provided me with a copy of this rare book.*

Not many Jews lived in Baltimore during the eighteenth century; by 1796 the entire Jewish population of the city consisted of about 15 families. As late as 1825, Solomon Etting, one of the first Jewish residents of Baltimore, estimated the Jewish population of Baltimore to be about 150.



Rabbi Abraham Rice

Given this, it is not surprising that the *minyán* that led to the organization of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was not established until the autumn of 1829. It first met in the home of Zalma Rehine, who had recently relocated to Baltimore from Richmond. On January 29, 1830 the Maryland House of Delegates passed an act incorporating the congregation as an official entity within the city of Baltimore.

The Hebrew name of the congregation was *Nidchei Yisrael*, "The Scattered of Israel." In its early years it was often referred to as "the first Hebrew Congregation" and later as the Stadt Shul.

"This latter designation was used to distinguish it from 'The Fell's Point Hebrew Friendship Congregation' (later the Eden Congregation), which was organized in 1838 by a number of co-religionists who had settled in what was then an outlying and, at first, [a] separate district, while the Mother Congregation was located in the center of town."

The early membership was largely made up of Jews originally from Holland, many of whom had previously settled in the West Indies. There were commercial ties between Baltimore and the West Indies that explain the settlement of Dutch Jews from the West Indies in Baltimore.

Beginning in 1835 a number of Bavarian Jews settled in Baltimore and soon outnumbered the Dutch Jews.

"In 1832 the roster of the Congregation contained the names of 29 heads of families; in 1835 there were 41 families, and in 1839 the membership had grown to 59."

The synagogue "was organized by Orthodox Jews, and for many decades the services were carried on according to the old Orthodox ritual. The people lived strictly Orthodox

[lives], observing the very minutiae of the Rabbinical Law. The dietary laws were conscientiously carried out. The Sabbath and the Festivals were consecrated to worship and to rest, and the ceremonies connected with them were observed in every home.

"The Congregation, in those early days, was the center of all communal activity; it reflected, far more than today, the religious and social status of its

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members, for the Congregation entered into the life of everyone. It regulated the religious affairs of the community by appointing *Shochtim*, maintaining a *Mikvah* (Ritual bath), and looking after the baking of *Matzoth*."

\* \* \* \* \*

It is important to keep in mind that those who supported the congregation were, with few exceptions, relatively poor. Most of them struggled to earn their livelihood. Still, help was never refused to those who asked, and the members of the congregation made sure the poor were cared for in many ways. The congregational minutes indicate that at almost every meeting the board voted to give relief to some poor stranger or to someone "who had grown poor in our midst." Twice a year the congregation sent money to charities in the Holy Land that assisted the poor.

In addition to the revenue from dues, the congregation was funded through the selling of aliyahs, *Mishebeirachs* and *Kale Malei Rachamims*. Until 1847 the aliyahs were sold before the Torah was taken out via bidding run by the sexton in a manner similar to what is still done in many synagogues on *Yomim Tovim*. Later the board fixed the amount to be paid for aliyahs.

According to Maryland law, it was required to proclaim an upcoming marriage on three successive Shabbosim before the wedding.

"The sexton proclaimed the marriage, and the Congregation charged for such proclamation from \$1.00 to \$4.50. The last recorded proclamation is dated May 28' 1881."

A curious system of fines existed in the synagogue and was in effect until 1893:

"For the purpose of fining, three kinds of tickets were used. A white ticket was sent through the sexton by the president, or one of the officers, to the offender as a warning. If this was not heeded, a blue or red ticket followed, the former being a fine of 25 cents, the latter of 50 cents.

"There were fines for talking during services; for chewing; for gathering on the pavement in front of the Synagogue; for bringing children under five years of age to services; for putting away the talith before services were over; for leaving the Synagogue during services without the permission of some officer; for singing *L'Dovid Boruch* louder than the Chazan at the going out of the Sabbath."

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1840 Rabbi Abraham Rice, a *talmid chacham* and the first Orthodox rabbi to settle permanently in America, became the spiritual leader of the congregation. He realized something we take for granted today, namely, that the future of Judaism depended on children receiving a thorough Torah education. Sadly, opportunities for Jewish education in 1840 in Baltimore were minimal at best. (The same was true throughout America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.)

The proper education of Jewish youth was Rabbi Rice's first and major concern, and he set out to remedy the lack of Jewish education in Baltimore in what was then a bold and innovative manner.

He therefore established a Jewish all-day school that taught both *limudei kodesh* (religious subjects) and *limudei chol* (secular subjects). In 1841 he opened a Hebrew day school under the auspices of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation named the Hebrew and English Benevolent Academic Association of Baltimore.

It was the first Jewish all-day school in America under the auspices of an Ashkenaz congregation. The religious curriculum focused on Hebrew language and grammar, the Siddur, *Tanach*, Rashi, biblical history, and *mitzvah* observance, while in the afternoon English reading, writing and spelling were taught, as were mathematics and geography.

"It is noteworthy that the selection of an English teacher was considered of such great moment as to be entrusted to a committee of American-born and educated Christians, who were supposed better to understand the needs of the future citizen."

Rabbi Rice realized that while most of his congregants spoke German, their offspring were more likely to use English in their daily lives and hence should be able to read, write and speak English properly.

Although originally only for boys, within a few years the school also admitted girls, since it was realized that they too needed a Jewish education. 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 function in 1870. Parents at that time chose to send their children to public school rather than a Jewish religious school, not realizing they were paving the way for the assimilation of future generations.

While it functioned, the school managed to educate a number of young people who remained observant Jews. One such person was Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, who attended the school and remained an observant Jew throughout his life - something nearly unheard of for a nineteenth-century physician.

"The Baltimore Hebrew Congregation outgrew its quarters every few years. At first it occupied a room, corner of Bond and Fleet streets, over a grocery; then it moved in 1832 to North Exeter Street, near what is now Lexington Street. In 1835 the Congregation occupied a one-story dwelling on High street near the bend, between Fayette and Gay Streets. In 1837 the Congregation had grown sufficiently prosperous to buy a three-story brick dwelling, corner of Harrison Street and Etna Lane."

Within a few years, however, this facility also became inadequate, and the membership erected the first synagogue building in Maryland. The result was a beautiful structure located on Lloyd Street that, in addition to a magnificent main sanctuary, housed in the basement a *bais medrash*, four classrooms, a *mikveh*, and an oven for baking matzahs. The building was completed in 1845 and dedicated with much fanfare.

By 1860 the original building had become too small to seat all of the Congregation's members and their families, so the structure was enlarged by a 30-foot extension on its eastern end.

**Lloyd Street Synagogue**  
(Today the Lloyd Street Synagogue Building is an historic site.)

\* \* \* \* \*

Increased membership proved to be both a blessing and a curse, as it attracted some who were influenced by the Reform movement. At first the newcomers demanded minor innovations, but as time went on they pushed for more substantial changes. There was constant conflict and dissension. Reform was affecting most synagogues in America by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Baltimore Hebrew Congregation was no exception.

The effects of Reform were evidenced by the fact that in 1850 the synagogue found it necessary to pass a bylaw requiring all officers not only to be personally *shomer Shabbos* but also to keep their businesses closed on *Shabbos* and on the first and last two days of *Yom Tov*.

Every attempt at innovation was fought by those members committed to Orthodoxy, but they were soon in the minority and could not stem the rising tide of Reform. In 1853 confirmation of girls was introduced; in 1857 *duchening* was abolished; in 1860 many of the *piyutim* traditionally said in German congregations were omitted; and in 1866 the *haftarah* was read in German instead of in Hebrew.

In 1870, a petition was presented to the congregational board asking for the introduction of "moderate" reforms - including a mixed choir.

"The petitioners begged for a speedy introduction of moderate reforms [so] 'that the religious life of the Congregation may not suffer.' "

A special meeting was called to consider the petition, and it was defeated by a vote of 32 for and 39 against. It looked like the Orthodox members of the Congregation had won.

A few months later, however, the spiritual leader of the congregation proposed a number of sweeping ritual reforms. These included elimination of any references to the restoration of the Temple sacrifices and the recitation of all selections from the Talmud - as well as the elimination of the repetition of certain prayers by the cantor. Despite the earlier rejection of similar reforms, these passed by a vote of 56-22. Further, a resolution for a mixed choir was reintroduced and approved.

Twenty members of the congregation took the matter to civil court, seeking an injunction preventing the board from carrying out the reforms.

"An agreement was finally entered into and the case allowed to sleep on the dockets of the court. The majority of the complainants then resigned from the Congregation in December 1870, and January 1871."

Shortly thereafter they established Congregation Chizuk Amuno, which adhered strictly to *halacha*.

Other reforms followed in 1873, including mixed seating and a three-year cycle for reading the Torah. The wearing of *talleisim*, the calling up for aliyahs and the reciting of *Mishebeirach* and *Kale Malei Rachamim* were all discontinued.

In 1878 the use of the venerable Rodelheim siddur was done away with.

A few years later, observance of the second day of the festivals became a thing of the past.

Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, once a bastion of Orthodoxy, was now a full-fledged Reform temple. In fact, it bills itself today as "the largest Reform congregation in Maryland."

On February 3, 1889, the old synagogue building, which had once been the centerpiece of traditional Judaism in Baltimore, was sold to the newly organized Lithuanian Roman Catholic Parish and became the Church of St. John the Baptist.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fate of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation is not unique in the annals of American Jewish history. Many synagogues that started out as Orthodox institutions became Reform temples during the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. Ostensibly their goal, as the petitioners for reforms in the rituals of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation had claimed, was "that the religious life of the Congregation may not suffer."

We know, of course, that they failed miserably. Instead of preserving Judaism, they opened the door to the abandonment of Jewish observance and the assimilation of hundreds of thousands of Jews through intermarriage.

It seems that even Dr. Adolf Gutmacher, who wrote the history of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, realized this to some extent:

"The present religious conditions of the Congregation require some notice. While the material

prosperity of the Congregation is all that can be desired, spiritually there is, indeed, much room for improvement. The conditions are the same here that obtain in all other large cities. On the great Holydays the seating capacity of the Temple is taxed to the utmost. The Sabbath services are well attended by women and children, but the men are in a woeful minority.

"But what is most discouraging is the fact that as the fathers, who attended services regularly, die, the sons, though retaining the membership, do not come to the House of God except on rare occasions."

Time and again it has been demonstrated that the only way to ensure the preservation of Judaism is by strict adherence to *halacha*. Other approaches, no matter how well intentioned, are doomed to failure.

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