

Some Baltimore Jewish History

Talk given at Flatbush Ladies' Group on 8/15/09

I. Maryland and the Jews

In 1629 George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore, applied to King Charles I for a charter to found what was to become the Province of Maryland. Tobacco had proven to be a profitable enterprise in Virginia, and Calvert was hopeful that the same would prove true in this new venture. In addition, Calvert, who was a Catholic, hoped to found a religious haven for his co-religionists who were often persecuted in predominantly Protestant England.

George Calvert died in April 1632 before the charter he sought was granted. However, on June 30, 1632 the king granted a charter to his son, Cecilius, the second Lord Baltimore. The colony was named in honor of King Charles' Queen, Henrietta Maria. The name given in the charter for this new colony was "Terra Mariae, *Anglice*, Maryland."

A. Friction between Protestants and Catholics

B. Maryland Toleration Act of 1649

The Maryland Toleration Act, also known as the Act Concerning Religion, explicitly dictated religious tolerance, but this was limited to Trinitarian Christians. Anyone who denied this belief was to be put to death and have all of his property confiscated.

In 1723 the act was "liberalized." Instead of paying with one's life for an offense against the Christian religion, a first time offender was subject to a fine and to having his "tongue bored." For a second offense the offender's forehead was branded with a letter "B," indicating that he was a blasphemer. Anyone who committed a third offense was to be put to death.

While Maryland's Toleration Act provided for religious toleration for Christians, it clearly did not provide religious freedom for those who practiced other religions. The Act was not aimed specifically at Jews, because at the time of its passage there were no Jews living in

Maryland. However, it was clear to any Jew that if he settled in Maryland, his life might well be in danger.

C. Dr. Jacob Lumbrozo – came to MD in 1656. Accused of blasphemy in 1658. Ten days after his arrest he was released as a result of a general amnesty proclaimed in honor of Richard Cromwell becoming the Lord Protector of England.

D. Even the constitution of the new state of Maryland, adopted in 1776, did not provide for religious freedom for non-Christians. Its preamble, known as the Declaration of Rights, stated:

It is the duty of every man to Worship God in such manner as he thinks most acceptable to Him: all persons professing the Christian religion are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty.

Furthermore, in order to hold any office in Maryland one was required to take an oath stating “belief in the Christian religion.” The requirement to take such an oath excluded Jews from holding any municipal or state office. Little had changed for Jews since the Toleration Act of 1649.

E. Finally, in 1826, after considerable effort and debate, the Maryland Legislature passed what became known as “The Jew Bill.” It did away with the requirement to take an oath professing belief in Christianity and guaranteed religious equality for Jews.

Rabbi Abraham Joseph Rice

I. No qualified rabbis settled in North America until 1840

A. Chazzanim

B. Learned Baalei Batim – sent sheilos to Europe

C. Jewish education suffered

D. Conversion or divorce done in America not recognized in Europe

II. Periods of Jewish Immigration

- A. Spanish/Portuguese (many Marranos), some Ashkenazim**
- B. Beginning in the late 1830s Jews from Germany, particularly Bavaria, began coming here in relatively large numbers.**
- C. Eastern European immigration beginning in 1881 – millions came**
- D. Jewish immigration after WW II**

III. German Immigration beginning in late 1830s

- A. Many anti-Semitic laws – special taxed on Jews, exclusion from professions, etc.**
- B. Bavaria worst**

Bavaria, a paradise for Christians, proved to be a purgatory for Jews. After the defeat of Napoleon in Leipzig, Prussia, in 1813, as a reaction against the French Emperor's liberalism, the Kingdom of Bavaria enacted in its Edict of June 10, 1813 over three hundred restrictive laws governing its Jews. These included Pharaonic legislation intended to limit their numbers. Only the first-born son of a family was allowed to marry “because the number of Jewish families in places where they are living should not be increased; it is rather the intention to reduce them wherever the number is excessive.” Sons other than the first-born could marry upon payment of a thousand florins [about \$5000] or be granted the privilege if their elder brothers died or departed the country.

Young Bavarian Jews had yet another incentive to emigrate. Of all the 50,000 Bavarian Jews none could have a profession other than that of peddling. All other trades and professions were closed to them, obtainable only on payment of a high tax that could be refused.

That anti-Semitism had been deeply rooted within the populace was evidenced by the fact that many Bavarian towns had no Jewish inhabitants; once having been expelled, they were forbidden to return.

In 1819 students at Wurzburg University vented their hatred of the Jews by assaulting their Jewish classmates. They incited the townspeople to attack Jews, leading them with the cry, "HEP! HEP!" - the three initial letters of Hierosolyma Est Perdita [Latin for Jerusalem is lost].

In the summer of 1836, two-to-three hundred Jewish young men sailed from Bavaria to America. In the summer of 1837, three-or-four hundred reached the port of New York, with an equal number reported on the way. The mass migration of German Jews had begun from Bavaria; also the South German states of Baden and Wurttemberg.

Bavarian Jewish youths, among them many betrothed couples, embarked from German ports en masse.

In 1825, there were 6,000 Jews in America; by 1848, there were 50,000; and by 1860, their number reached 150,000.

IV. Concern for religious welfare of these immigrants – send qualified rabbi to America.

V. Rabbi Abraham Yosef (Reiss) Rice – born 1800 or 1802 near Wurzburg

A. Accident when young – limped

B. Studied in Wurzburg yeshiva of Rabbi Abraham Bing (1752 – 1841), a Talmud of R. Nosson Adler and then in yeshiva of Rabbi Wolf Hamburger (1770 – 1850) in Furth. Received semicha. Strong commitment to traditional Judaism.

C. Arrived in NY on July 25, 1840. Advised to go to Newport.

D. Returned to NY, met Aaron Weglein, president of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (Nidchei Yisroel). Weglein offered Rabbi Rice position of Rov of his shul.

VI. Rabbi Rice and his congregation

At first glance Rabbi Rice and Congregation Nidchei Yisroel, which was also known as the “Stadt Shul” of Baltimore, since it was at this time the only shul within the city boundaries, 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 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.

Aliyahs – only Shomrei Shabbos, later no Omein

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.

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.

Nevertheless in my own home - thank G-d - I conduct myself as I did in days of old in my native country. I study Torah day and night, and my devoted and G-d fearing wife is always standing by and helping me with all her strength, in spite of privation and difficulties. Yet in spite of all this, life has lost all meaning here on account of the irreverence and low estate of our people. Alas, therefore, my master and teacher, impart to me of your wisdom, and let me have your august opinion in the matter; for often times I have made up my mind to leave and go from here to Paris and to put my trust in the good Lord.

VII. Accomplishments – eventually made peace with his situation

A. Defender of Orthodoxy

The founding of the Har Sinai Verein marked the beginning of the emergence of the reform movement as a major force in American Jewry during the nineteenth century. The reform movement eventually launched an all out attack on traditional Judaism, and Rabbi Rice became an eloquent defender of Orthodoxy.

His most unique contribution, however, was his defense of Orthodox Judaism in America. Where there were so few real scholars, it was easy for pseudo-intellectuals to misinterpret the basic principles of Jewish theology and thus pave the way for the spokesmen of Reform Judaism. This state of affairs was very painful to Rabbi Rice, and he went out of his way to challenge these “erroneous doctrines” as he called them, and to set the record straight. A short time after his arrival in the United

States, when English was still foreign to him, he came to the defense of the Talmud in a letter to the editor of *Occident*.

As one of the few Orthodox rabbis in America, [Rabbi] Rice emerged as an important defender of tradition in the face of religious Reform. Criticizing Reform clergy, [Rabbi] Rice excommunicated Isaac M. Wise, a leading Reform clergyman, for questioning aspects of the traditional Jewish belief of messiah and resurrection.

B. Occident

Rabbi Rice became close friends with Isaac Leeser, the Philadelphia Chazzan who was in the forefront of everything Orthodox in the United States during the nineteenth century. In addition to writing articles that Leeser published in his monthly *Occident* and *Jewish Advocate*, Rabbi Rice urged Leeser to undertake an authoritative English translation of the Bible, pointing out that the German translations then available did not appeal to the English speaking Jewish youth of America. The result was a magnificent piece of work written in accordance with Orthodox Judaism that became a standard for decades.

C. Poseik

Rabbi Rice was one of the few men in America during the mid-nineteenth century qualified to deal with halachic issues. He received inquiries from Jewish communities throughout the United States about many matters. Given his personal modesty, he was reluctant to assume responsibility for making decisions on important religious matters. However, he realized that the people had virtually no one else to turn to.

His detailed responsa were written in the typical style of the Poskim of his time. In response to a question about the use of West Indian Esrogim he replied in the affirmative. He dealt with the kashrus of shortening and the oils used in its manufacture, the proper way to write Gittin in US cities where a Get had never been written before, the drawing of blood from animals immediately before Shechita (This was thought at the time to have a beneficial effect on the meat), and many other issues.

[Rabbi] Rice's Talmudic scholarship and personal piety earned him a reputation as one of the few noteworthy scholars of Jewish law in America during the mid- nineteenth century. By responding to religious queries from congregations throughout the United States regarding matters of family law, Sabbath observance, and kashruth, [Rabbi] Rice offered direction to the small community of American Jews eager to preserve Orthodox tradition. In 1844, for example, [Rabbi] Rice was asked by a congregation in Philadelphia to advise them regarding the correct manner of installing a plumbing system for the construction of a new mikvah. Several years later, he responded to queries from a New York congregation seeking to clarify procedures for the burial of uncircumcised children or individuals who married contrary to Jewish law

D. Day school, Lloyd Street Synagogue, mikveh and matzo bakery

VIII. Resignation

Rabbi Rice refused to compromise when it came to Halacha. He viewed minor attempts to introduce ritual changes as the first steps on the path towards a total break with Orthodoxy, and he was not wrong. In 1849 things got so bad that, much to the shock of many synagogue members, he resigned as the spiritual leader of the congregation. “‘I resigned’ he said, ‘because as a private citizen I expect to have greater influence with my Congregation. And,’ he continued, ‘I shall always be ready to fight the battle of the Lord.’”

“In 1851 he organized a small Congregation where he officiated as Rabbi and Chazan without compensation and where he felt spiritually at home. The group consisted of a number of pious and learned people who venerated their teacher and appreciated his piety and his dedication to the study of Torah.”

A. Asked to return in 1862. Passed away on October 29, 1862

B. Shul became reform temple in the early 1870s and was sold to a church in 1889. In 1905 the building was purchased by Orthodox Jews and became Shomrei Mishmeres HaKodesh, one of the leading Orthodox congregations of the East European immigrant community. Restored in 1960s and is now a historic site.

IX. Shraga (Phil) Rice

The Friedenwald Family

Source: 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/>

I. 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.

A. Became a successful businessman – by 1854 was able to retire

B. Pillar of the Baltimore Orthodox Jewish Community – Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. Rabbi Rice was a close family friend.

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.”

C. Jonas Friedenwald passed away on September 2, 1893, just short of his 91st birthday.

Dr. Aaron Friedenwald (1836 - 1902)

I. Youngest son of Jonas – attended day school that Rabbi Rice established at the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.

His early religious training was received at the congregational school. His [religious] instructors were Mr. Weil, Mr. Dannenberg, Mr. Sachs, and, later on, Reverend Dr. Henry Hochheimer, who, soon after his arrival in this country, prepared my father for the *Bar-Mizwah* (*Mitzvah*) ceremony, and introduced him to the study of Rashi's Biblical commentary. He early acquired for the study of Hebrew a love which he retained throughout his life. He was an apt scholar, and in later years looked back to his school days as pleasant memories.

An important influence upon the formation of his character was that exerted by the late Reverend Abraham Rice, the first Rabbi of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation and an intimate friend of the family. [Rabbi] Rice was a very pious man, whose congenial nature and religious fervor attracted the thoughtful boy, and it is to his influence rather than to any other that I should ascribe the

consistent [Orthodox] religious views which marked the whole course of my father's life. His loving veneration for [Rabbi] Rice appeared in his frequent references to him and in his unvarying custom of having the prayer for the dead recited in his memory on the Day of Atonement. He mentioned on several occasions his intention of publishing a biography of the rabbi, together with a selection from his sermons, some of which my father transcribed; this intention, however, was never carried out.

II. Schooling ended at age 15. Went to work as bookkeeper in his brothers' business. Hated it.

A. Studied secular subjects at night and announced at age 21 that he was going to college. Enrolled in University of MD (established 1856) in 1858.

B. Europe

Upon completion of his studies at the University of Maryland, Aaron decided to continue his medical education in Europe before returning to Baltimore where he intended to practice medicine. This was a most unusual step to take in those days, given the difficulties of travel to Europe. Nonetheless, on May 1, 1860 he sailed from New York on the steamship *Hammonia*.

C. Studied ophthalmology – returned to Baltimore and opened practice. Member of many medical societies and presented many papers

D. Remained Orthodox

As we have seen, my father was brought up in accordance with the traditions of Orthodox Judaism, and he remained a consistent observer of the ceremonial as well as of the spiritual side of his religion. He was a regular attendant at the services of the synagogue, and took a deep interest in the welfare of the congregations with which he was connected. He was one of the founders and an officer of the Shearith Israel congregation, and later joined the Chizuk Emoonah congregation, which his father had been chiefly instrumental in organizing, and in 1892, at the earnest desire of his father, succeeded

him as president. He filled this position until his death, and it was during his incumbency that the congregation removed from the synagogue on Lloyd Street to its present edifice at the corner of McCulloh and Mosher Streets.

E. Visited Palestine in 1898. Letters and talks about the visit are in book. Give picture of Eretz Yisroel at this time.

Dr. Friedenwald died on August 26, 1902. His obituary that appeared the next day in the New York Times said in part

Dr. Aaron Friedenwald, an eminent physician and noted philanthropist, died today, aged sixty-five years. Last Wednesday he underwent a surgical operation for cancer.

Dr. Friedenwald took an active interest in Jewish affairs, and held many offices in (the) various organizations. At the time of his demise he was President of the McCulloh Street Temple, a Director of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York, Vice President at the Jewish Publication Society, a Director of the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, and the President of the local branch of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.

As a lecturer he was extensively known and contributed frequently to the medical journals and proceedings of medical societies.

Such were the many accomplishments of this renowned 19th century Orthodox Jewish physician.

