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Foreword | JACOB J. SCHACTER

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Rebecca Samuel, then living in Petersburg, Virginia, wrote a letter to her parents in Hamburg, Germany, in which she explained why she was moving from that city to Charleston, South Carolina. She informed them that although her husband, Hyman, had earned the respect of their Gentile neighbors as a very successful clockmaker and silversmith, and although “one [i.e., a Jew] can live here peacefully,” she and her family were “leaving this place because of [the lack of] Yehudishkeit,” or Jewishness, which “is pushed aside here.” She explained that the *shohet*, or ritual slaughterer, buys nonkosher meat, there is no Torah scroll in town, all Jewish-owned shops are open on the Sabbath, there are no educational opportunities available for her two children, and almost none of the worshippers on the High Holidays wore ritual prayer garments. “You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all.”¹

The desire of Jews in America to be financially successful and respected by members of the community at large without sacrificing Jewish observance and communal cohesiveness has been a hallmark of Jewish life in this country from the very dawn of its existence. But those eighteenth-century Jews living in America were acutely aware that America was different than the countries from which they had emigrated and in which many of their family members and religious authorities still lived. In a letter written in 1785 to a rabbi in Amsterdam seeking guidance on a complex issue challenging their community, two lay leaders in Philadelphia noted that they were “anxiously awaiting” the rabbi’s reply “because this matter touches the very essence of our faith, especially in this country where everyone does as he pleases [*asher kol ish ha-yashar bi-enav ya’aseh*].” They wrote that in America, “the Kahal has no authority” over those who live in its midst, unlike the situation

in Amsterdam and in many of those countries and communities they had left behind.² In the old country, the community still had a hold, to a greater or lesser extent, on those who lived within its geographical boundaries. In America, by contrast, the ability of the community to exercise any power was severely limited, as its leaders were only too acutely aware. And, some half-century later, a note written to a couple leaving Bavaria for Cleveland began with the warning, “Friends! You are travelling to a land of freedom where the opportunity will be presented to live without compulsory religious education.”³

Living in America, with its emphasis on freedom, democracy, and individualism, was—and continues to be—both a blessing and a challenge to perpetuating Jewish values and practice in this country. It is a blessing because Jews have been afforded an unprecedented opportunity to exercise their religion unhindered by external controls and constraints. At the same time it serves as a real challenge because in a world without any “compulsory” prerogatives, any choices—including those to define and reject Jewish practice and identity—are possible and even celebrated. And the more traditional the values and practice, the greater the challenge to its perpetuation.

In this American world that celebrates personal autonomy and individual choice, Orthodoxy has found a place. For more than a hundred years it lived in the lives of dispersed individuals committed to it who acted alone, bereft of any institutional infrastructure or support, and then somewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century, it found expression in robust communities that were beginning to be founded and developed. True, Orthodoxy’s place in American Judaism was far from assured; even as late as the 1950s its “decay” was predicted and noted in respected circles.⁴ But American Orthodoxy has resoundingly confounded these negative prognostications. The greatest sociological surprise (or miracle, depending upon one’s perspective) of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Judaism is not only the dogged continued presence of Orthodoxy in this country, defying all odds, but the extraordinary growth that it has experienced. With increasing confidence, institutional strength and extraordinary unselfconscious-

ness, Orthodoxy has achieved a presence and prominence in America simply and literally unimaginable even fifty years ago.

But one cannot speak of one religious group identified as American Orthodoxy. Sociologists generally divide that group into Ultra-Orthodox (including “Hasidic,” “Yeshivish,” and even “Heimish”) and Modern Orthodox, each with its own set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices while sharing much in common. This book is devoted to exploring these categories in the Modern Orthodox community.

The fundamental point of departure of the Modern Orthodox perspective is generally described as combining a commitment to living a life shaped by Halakhah with an acknowledgment of the legitimacy, value, and, for some, even the necessity of “non-exclusively Torah” disciplines and cultures to enhance one’s human personality and even one’s spiritual religious persona. Of course, this combination certainly predates modern times.⁵ However, it has been brought more sharply into focus in the last decades as Orthodoxy has confronted the ever growing diminution of religious authority, the values and demands of feminism, the task of identifying the theological significance of the State of Israel, the claims of a larger and vocal liberal community, secularism, academic Jewish studies including biblical criticism, claims for the primacy of individual conscience, and cultural relativism. Inherited truths and assumptions have been challenged by a range of contemporary values, and the effort to retain a commitment to both has led sometimes to creativity and original thinking and sometimes to frustration, inconsistency, and even conflict.

We are greatly indebted to Dr. Zev Eleff, already an outstanding scholar in the field of American Jewish life, for tracing the history and current state of this social and intellectual movement through a series of carefully chosen primary texts. Blessed with a prodigious intellect, wide-ranging knowledge, firsthand engagement with his specific subject matter, clarity of writing, richness and depth of religious commitment, indefatigable energy, and generosity of spirit, Dr. Eleff has produced a volume that enables its reader to grapple with the complex issues of identity and ideology, religious practice and social behavior, rooted-

ness in tradition and openness to new ways of thinking and acting that define Modern Orthodoxy both in private as well as in public spaces. Dr. Eleff explores the inherent complexity in maintaining a commitment to both “Modern” and “Orthodox,” and he does so with great nuance and sensitivity. This work will be invaluable to those interested in the challenges of living meaningful religious lives in our contemporary world, Jews and non-Jews alike.

In the second half of his poem entitled “Tourists,” the late Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, wrote:

Once I sat on the stairs at the gate of David’s Tower and put two heavy baskets next to me. A group of tourists stood there around their guide and I served as their orientation point. “You see that man with the baskets? A bit to the right of his head, there’s an arch from the Roman period. A bit to the right of his head.” But he moves, he moves!! I said to myself: redemption will come only when they are told: You see over there the arch from the Roman period? Never mind: but next to it, a bit to the left and lower, sits a man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home.⁶

There is much wisdom here, of course, but the worldview of Modern Orthodoxy argues that Amichai is wrong. At the end of the day, both the “arch from the Roman period” (the tradition) and the “man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home” (the contemporary) need to be in conversation, both celebrated and affirmed at the same time. Our thanks to Dr. Eleff for helping us appreciate the vital necessity—and complexity—of this most important effort.

1 | Engaging Reform

INTRODUCTION

On November 21, 1824, a group of disenchanted Jews submitted a petition to the trustees of Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston. The young, sizable cohort—forty-seven men signed the “memorial”—requested a truncated Sabbath and Hebrew-free worship.¹ The letter reflected concurrent sentiments in Europe, but was unprecedented in American Jewish life from the time Jews first moved to the New World in 1654. The trustees refused, explaining that their bid was out of line and in breach of the congregation’s sacred constitution. Turned down, the “handful” of petitioners established the Reformed Society of Israelites. Led by playwright and journalist Isaac Harby (1788–1828), the Charleston circle drafted bylaws that vowed to uphold the Law and the Prophets and the Five Books of Moses but made no mention of the Talmud or any other Jewish sacred texts.² In 1825, on the first anniversary of the group’s petition to the Charleston congregation, Harby made it clear that his friends embraced the “true legitimate authority of the Bible,” but he also pledged to “throw away Rabbinical interpolations” of Judaism.³ He compared his reformist efforts to Martin Luther (1483–1546), who “shook the papal supremacy to its foundation.”⁴ This, then, was the first organized Reform-styled Judaism in the United States.

Opposition followed. Jacob Mordecai (1762–1838) of Richmond, Virginia, penned a lengthy response to Harby’s widely disseminated discourse. He accused the Charleston reformers of besieging the “fortress of Judaism” with their “banner of skepticism.” In New York, traditional Jews happily received Mordecai’s remarks in the hope that it might “steady the minds of the wavering amongst us.”⁵ In addition, Mordecai Noah (1785–1851) slammed the Charleston circle for their

work to “retrograde” American Judaism. Perhaps the leading Jew in the United States at this time, Noah’s opinion mattered, although he did not—nor could he, in all probability—refute the heterodox planks of the Reformed Society as Mordecai had tried to do in his discourse. Instead, Noah resorted to political jargon replete with rhetorical flare that had so well suited other American writers.

Neither Mordecai nor Noah stymied the reformers’ labors. Something else did. In 1828 Harby moved from Charleston to New York. To be sure, the economic decline of Charleston had much to do with the religious drain. Yet Harby’s departure deflated the society far more than his antagonists’ attacks. Still, Charleston remained the cradle of American Reform Judaism.⁶ In the 1840s, a number of the Reformed Society’s leading men helped push Beth Elohim in this direction. Led by its minister, Gustavus Poznanski (1804–79), the congregation rid itself of a number of rabbinic dicta. Most notably, the Charleston clergyman removed the second festival day from the major Jewish holidays and installed an organ in the synagogue’s sanctuary.⁷ Once again, a number of self-appointed defenders of Orthodox Judaism denounced the new wave of Charleston reformers. These efforts slowed the tide of reform, but could not block it altogether.

Moving forward, protectors of traditional Judaism engaged reform, but not always under the banner of Orthodox Judaism. In 1845 Isaac Leeser (1806–68) of Philadelphia was unconvinced that he needed to identify squarely with an “orthodox party in Judaism.”⁸ In time, Leeser accepted this designation but not until the lines between him and Reform ministers solidified. The fluid barriers of affiliation bothered a number of the staunchly Orthodox Jews in America. The other critical matter in this period was the varieties of Orthodox religious life. In fact, an affiliation with an Orthodox enclave was not a predictor of adherence to Jewish law. Desperate to provide for their families—or to earn enough to pay for their voyages to the New World—Jewish men believed that they had no choice but to labor on the holy day. Some of their more fortunate coreligionists attended synagogue on the Sabbath, but flouted Halakhah in a different manner: they married non-Jews. In

many instances, intermarried Jews would have claimed that their exogamous lifestyle was due to love or social status and had no bearing on their beliefs in Judaism.⁹ Perhaps more than matters of Jewish belief, these everyday problems were the most vexing that these Orthodox Jews faced in the United States.

SECTION 1 | Charleston Clamorings and Other “Heresies”

“Retrograde Instead of Advancing”

Mordecai Noah | OCTOBER 18, 1825

Mordecai Manuel Noah was a politician, newspaper editor, and communal leader. In his lifetime, he served as consul to Tunis and chairman of the John Tyler Central Committee and Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall. Noah was a leading member of New York’s Shearith Israel congregation and delivered the keynote discourse at the congregation’s synagogue consecration ceremony in 1818. He also led a number of Jewish charitable organizations. In this editorial, Noah responded to a question he had received about an upstart Reform movement in Charleston, South Carolina.

A weekly religious journal printed in this neighborhood lately stated that a schism had taken place among the Jews in Charleston, S.C., one portion of which had determined to relinquish the Hebrew language and adopt entire new forms. The journal alluded to expresses an opinion that it is intended to lead to a conversion from their ancient faith.¹⁰ To do away [with] such an impression, and to protect the fidelity of the pious, it is proper to state, that the reform contemplated, originated with a few persons, descended from Jewish parents, but who are unacquainted with the essential forms of the religion.¹¹

One of the new-lights is now employing himself in attempting to ridicule any effort to make the U. States an asylum for his oppressed and unfortunate brethren; and in this work he is seconded by the Editors

of the *National Gazette* and the *American*, who have never, we believe, felt disposed to aid any nation of the old world in enjoying the freedom and benefits of the new.¹²

If the works of charity and patriotism; if duty and inclination, could be checked by the sneers and ridicule of such men, we should retrograde instead of advancing, and those who were enemies to their country in time of war cannot wish to strengthen that country in time of peace.¹³

New Lights and Old Lights

A Member of the Reformed Society of Israelites | OCTOBER 28, 1825

The Charleston reformers responded to Mordecai Noah's unfavorable view of their operation. Historian Gary Zola suggested that the writer was probably David Nunes Carvalho (1784–1860) or Isaac Nunes Cardozo (1786–1855), both members of the Reformed Society of Israelites.

Mr. Editor.—I perceive that the essay, signed “Common Sense,” which appeared in your paper a few weeks past on Mr. Noah’s ridiculous proceedings at Grand Island, has excited the anger of that gentleman.¹⁴ He has given way to some intemperate remarks in his Journal, on its being published in some of the leading papers at the north, with compliments on the beauties of the composition—on the discrimination and good taste it evinced—and its being one of the best communications on the subject of which it treats, that has been yet published. Mr. Noah, without attempting to overturn any of the positions in “Common Sense,” sneers at the production, and attempts to ridicule it, because, forsooth, the author is what *he* calls one of the “*new lights*”—that is one of the large and respectable number of Israelites, who are only aiming at a few reforms in the present mode of worship in this city; whose chief object is to have a part of the service said in English (the Hebrew language being almost obsolete as a vehicle of communication, and but little understood) so that *all* may understand what is said and be able to appreciate it accordingly. They never did and never will attempt, as

it is said by Mr. Noah, to strike at the fundamental principles of their faith; they consider them as of too ancient and sacred a character to be meddled with. The Editor of the *Advocate* may rest assured that all such paltry attempts to parry the successful blows that are aimed at his foolish plans and productions are totally unavailing—they show the scantiness of his material and display his impotence. It is of no avail, we assure him, to show his anger, because his title as Governor and Judge of Israel will not be acknowledged: It is of no use when he cannot rebut argument by argument, to *call names*—such conduct is splenetic and boyish. Before we part, however, we would whisper a wholesome truth in Mr. Noah's ear. He should know that public opinion has some virtue in it, and is of great force and influence in all countries and on all occasions:—when, therefore, Mr. Noah persists in standing on such a slender foundation as *his own* talents and influence (Heaven save the mark) in spite of the very general terms of reprobation and ridicule his late conduct has met throughout the country, he must expect to be overturned, as often as the ground on which he stands is weak and untenable.

This Happy Land

Isaac Harby | NOVEMBER 21, 1825

Isaac Harby was an educator, journalist, and playwright. The extent of his Jewish education is unclear, although he did possess a number of volumes of Judaica in his library. In 1825 he joined with other disenchanted Charleston Jews to found the Reformed Society of Israelites. Harby may not have been the architect of the movement, but due to his fame in the non-Jewish world, he quickly emerged as the spokesman of the group. He delivered a discourse on the first anniversary of the Reformed Society. The published edition of his talk, of which the first pages are reproduced here, circulated among Jews and very prominent non-Jews such as Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and John C. Calhoun (1782–1850). Elsewhere in his remarks, Harby blasted “Rabbinical interpolations.” In his opening comments, though, he made it clear that his vision was to fit Judaism into the wider realm of American religion.

It is almost superfluous to inform you, my respected friends, of the purpose for which you are this day assembled. It is to celebrate the first Anniversary of a Society, whose existence—whose name alone—forms an era in the history of your race, gratifying to every Philanthropist. The great cause of Improvement in Government, in Religion, in Morals, in Literature, is the great cause of mankind. Bigotry and Despotism may rear their “miscreated fronts” to thwart your way, but the consuming beams of Truth must drive them back to their original darkness.¹⁵ In this happy land, however, you have no such obstacles to oppose;—equality of laws and freedom of conscience leave you a wide and cheerful field to act upon.¹⁶ You have no enemies then, but the inveteracy of habit, and the timidity of ignorance. Against these you have already struck a noble blow; be true to yourselves and the victory is your’s. The man who meanly crouches to mental oppression is an object to be pitied by the good, contemned by the courageous; but he that nobly breaks the intellectual chain, and stands forth the champion of Reason and of Virtue, is a being honorable to the earth from which he sprung, and approved of by that heaven to which he aspires.

In the short revolution of a single year, what a spectacle does your Society present! You began your career with only a handful of men; some of them not yet determined how far their fears or their wishes might carry them. Your opponents falsely prophecied that this “handful” would soon melt away, and the “Reformed Society of Israelites” dissolve into air.¹⁷ But the spirit of the constant among you has been diffused throughout the whole mass, and you can now enumerate a respectable number,—trifling indeed for the purpose of moving mere “brute matter”—but one of immense *moral force* in the cause in which we are embarked. The pen of Luther was the great intellectual lever which shook the papal supremacy to its foundation,—why may not the virtuous example of a few Israelites, then, shake off the bigotry of ages from their countrymen?—Your principles are rapidly pervading the whole mass of Hebrews throughout the United States. The progress of truth, however slow, is irresistible; and I should not wonder if

the principles I speak of were to settle permanently among the Jews of Europe, even before the despotic governments of that portion of the globe extended to our countrymen the political privileges of their other subjects.

But the consideration of what may be effected abroad is but of minor importance to the great and *practical* objects we have in view. Our sphere of action is at present limited to *home*. It is in Charleston, and—in its more immediate consequences—in the United States, that we are to look for the experimental development of our system. What is it we seek? The establishment of a New Sect? No; never. Let other systems of religion split into a thousand schisms; let other modes of faith present to your eyes the motley scene at which Philosophy may smile, and true Piety must weep—brethren instructed in a religion of mercy warring against each other by the arm of flesh and the weapons of theological pride. Let these examples of human error be seen in other religions—but it is the glory and test of the Jewish faith that its followers worship one God—that when they raise their hands to veil their eyes, and repeat—“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4)¹⁸—they regard only the God of their Fathers, the Lord of all creation, the Supreme Jehovah. This be your boast, this be your bond of union.

A Jewish Luther

Jacob Mordecai | 1826

One of the more learned Jews in early nineteenth-century America, Jacob Mordecai was an educator and communal leader in Virginia. Mordecai became well known for his polemics against Christian missionaries. He also prepared a handwritten twenty-five-page response to Isaac Harby's anniversary discourse delivered before the Reformed Society of Israelites in Charleston in 1825, copies of which reached Jews throughout America. Much of Mordecai's remarks consisted of detailed expositions of the Bible. This excerpt includes the first volley of Mordecai's attack on Harby, in which the author offers more general comments on Harby's "reform" program.

We have read the discourse delivered by Mr. Harby to an assemblage of persons calling themselves the Reformed Society of Israelites in Charleston transmitted to us by a member of that body. It was our first intention to let it pass unnoticed—but on further reflection the bold and unhesitating manner of the author seems to defy any explanation on the part of the congregationalists; we will nevertheless presume to examine the principles he advocated and test their solidity and their orthodoxy by the translations of Holy writ. The matter contained in the first pages of the address is a repetition of the remonstrances to the Junta, tho it is not everywhere in unison with it—this part of the subject has been already noticed in communications to the corresponding Society.¹⁹ The impression we received in sending that remonstrance has been fully confirmed by the recent address, that the object of the master spirit was to destroy the ancient fabrick of Israelite worship and to gradually undermine all confidence in their religion under the pretext of divesting it of Rabbinical impurities and interpretations; the Seal of this gentleman (who presents himself to notice in the character of the reformer) is to us a little paradoxical, for if we are rightly informed he has not been a member of the Jewish congregation for the last Ten Years or subjected himself to any inconvenience by conforming to either the Mosaic or Rabbinical laws. We fear he knows too little of the customs, their origin, force or value &/or that little is indebted to Hebrew writers.

We shall continue to remark on some parts presented to our view in a style rather too familiar for the subject, and combining topicks totally irrelevant to it. Like Luther, he is desirous of being a pioneer whose pious zeal is to clear the paths and deliver his countrymen from the bigotry of ages. We are however disposed to doubt the affinity of their respective cases, as well as the correctness of the assertion that “the pen of Luther was the great intellectual lever which shook the papal supremacy to [its] foundation.” Were we disposed to contest this position we have ample means at hand to prove the reformation cannot be solely credited to Luther, others had preceded him without success, but many power causes contributed at that precise period to

promote a change—a combination not likely to occur in favour of the present champion of Jewish reform. We refer those inclined to pursue this unpromising subject to [Abraham] Ruchat's history of the reformation, to Homer, and to other historians.²⁰ We have no wish to examine a controversy which led to blow and slaughter, to the fire and the stakes, to every degree of atrocious persecution and spiritual intolerance—we take no interest in the variant faith of the hundreds of sects to which that reformation has given birth. They should serve however as lessons to our brethren and teach them to avoid the shoals and quicksands upon which others have been wrecked.

In discussing a subject interesting only to the Jews we should studiously avoid all contact with any of the prevailing sects of the popular religion,—professing equal respect for them all. We do not mean to insinuate that the intellectual powers of the author of the discourse are inferior to those of his great prototype or that they are incapable of moving the “mountains of bigotry from the foundation in which they have been imbedded since the days of Moses,” could he exercise his powers on a less confirmed, less stubborn and less stiff necked sons? The reformation now proposed we believe has nothing to plead in common with that which is held out as an encouraging example to the disciples of his school. The synagogues possess no wealth, the Rabbis no immunities, they pretend to no vicarious authority to pardon sins, lay claim to no hereditary or miraculous powers, and wallow neither in Riches or Luxury. This ephemeral attempt may engender evil, spread divisions in families, encourage popular prejudices by diffusing erroneous statements, without producing a single benefit worth the struggle it is making to bring itself into notices. It may for a time weaken the pecuniary resources of the local synagogue, but it will add nothing to its own means. The one may fall, but the other cannot rise upon its ruins—like other reformers they will, if their views are ever realized by gaining the ascendancy over their brethren, become enthusiasts, subscribers of every established system, levellers of everything human, perverters of everything divine within the pales of the synagogue that opposes their fanciful system.

An Open Letter to Gustavus Poznanski

Isaac Leeser | 1843

Isaac Leeser was a minister and Jewish communal leader in Philadelphia. A native of Westphalia, he rose to prominence as the minister of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel and as editor of the Occident, America's first long-lasting Jewish newspaper. In his monthly, Leeser championed Orthodox Judaism against reformers like Charleston's Gustavus Poznanski and, later on, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) of Albany. In this open letter published in his newspaper, Leeser called on Poznanski of K. K. Beth Elohim to defend himself against charges of "heresy" and his supposed denunciation of the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides's (1138–1204) Principles of Faith.

Rev. Sir,

Were I to follow my own inclination, I would to a certainty not disturb you in the retirement which you have just now sought by your voluntary abdication of the office of minister, for which you had been elected during life by your late constituents.²¹ But as I have a duty to perform to the religious community of Israelites in America, who have heard of your official conduct, and as your retirement took only place, as one may judge, in consequence of the commotion which your official acts have produced in a once united congregation:

I feel myself imperiously called upon to address you in this public manner, in order to obtain, if it meets your views, a full exposition of your ideas on religion, which I herewith promise to lay before the public in the same vehicle through which I address them now.

... There is yet one subject connected, with the received doctrines of our church, to which I must call your attention.²² I alluded to your reputed opinion in the last number of the *Occident*, page 209, in the paragraph commencing "Several painful rumours"; then I could hardly credit it, though I could not doubt the veracity of my informants.²³ But since that passage was written, I received the *Charleston Observer*, a paper in the interest of the Presbyterian Society, and edited by the

Rev. B. Gildersleeve.²⁴ The number before me is that of June 17th, and contains among other things the following:

Among what we have been in the habit of regarding as the fundamental articles of the Jewish creed, are, 1st, the unity of God—2nd, the resurrection of the dead—and 3rd, the coming of Messiah. And we had always understood that the Jewish people generally interpreted the prophecies as teaching the literal return of their people to the promised land.

But if our correspondent were present at the dedication of the New Synagogue, he will probably recollect that the officiating Rabbi, in his eulogy upon this city and land, spoke of them as the only Jerusalem, and the only Palestine, which he and his people, who were enjoying our free institutions, either desired or sought.²⁵ We do not profess to give the words; but the substance of his address was reported in the *Courier*, to which reference can be had. From this we inferred that the officiating Rabbi and his people in the city did not believe in the literal return of the Jews to the promised land. And this opinion was confirmed by a subsequent interview with him less than a year since. And at the same time we received the impression that neither he, nor those attached to his peculiar views on this point, believed in the *personal* coming of Messiah. He seemed to us to take the same liberty in interpreting the prophecies of the Old Testament touching Messiah, that he had previously done touching the return of the Jews. It struck us that he regarded both not in a *literal* but in an *emblematical* point of view—and that free institutions—a cessation of hostilities—and the general prevalence of peace and good-will among men, constituted the only Messiah which he anticipated.²⁶

I have learned since, from undoubted authority, that you should have expressed similar views to my friend the Rev. Wm. T. Brantley, D.D., of the Baptist connection, and the Rev. Mr. Barnwell, of the Episcopal church.²⁷ I might, perhaps, be inclined to doubt the correctness of the memory of all these three gentlemen (which I admit would be acting very unjustly to them,) were it not that the *creed*, as affixed to

the walls of your late Synagogue, gave the amplest confirmation to the correctness of their recollection.²⁸ It seems your twelfth and thirteenth articles are in these words, the correctness of which I presume you will probably admit:

12. "We believe that the Messiah announced by the prophets is *not* come, the prophecies relating to his coming *not being fulfilled*."
13. "We believe that the soul is *immortal*, and that we shall be accountable for our actions in the life to come."

Upon this I have to remark, that if you believed in the bodily coming of the Son of David, and did not view him merely as an ideality, some philosophical image: you would not have altered the words of the usual creed, which are, "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and although he tarry I will nevertheless look for him daily that he may come." In brief, I cannot understand how not believing in the accomplishment of any thing can be a matter of belief, or creed. The wording of your profession of faith is apparently merely antagonising to Christianity. This is the first time in my life that I have learned that it is the duty of Israelites to refer to the opinions of any set of men, however respectable for talents and numbers, as a part of their profession of faith. Our religion stands independently and maintains the same position as regards doctrines and duties, which it did from the beginning. Now before the alleged coming of the Messiah, it would certainly have been singular to asseverate "that he had not come," as a matter of faith; and I really do not understand how the ideas of Christians that he has come, can affect our creed so as to require the alteration of its words which you have either introduced or countenanced. But drop your concealment if you have any; do you believe or not that the Messiah will come? Or do you believe that he has neither appeared nor will appear? For your wording is so obscure that it may bear either interpretation. Do let us know, that we may be able to understand in what light you wish Judaism to be regarded, whether as a fabric, frail and changeable, or based on the Rock of Ages, unchangingly the same.

Lastly, with respect to your thirteenth article as quoted above, it certainly is not what we have a right to expect from a Jewish divine who professes to teach religion as he has received it. Our creed is: "I believe with a perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time it may be the pleasure of the Creator, whose name be blessed, and whose memorial be exalted for ever and unto all eternity." The immortality of the soul is included in the eleventh article, which speaks of rewards and punishments, and is, by the by, an idea which many of the heathens believed in; but the *resurrection* is a peculiar Jewish doctrine, and to this we must profess ourselves as sons of Israel. Do you believe in it? or think you that they who sleep in the dust of the earth will not arise to everlasting life?

I will not weary you any longer, my letter being already more extended than I could have wished; but it is much too short yet to express all my views on the important subjects herein embraced. But when I have your views, I shall add such remarks as I may deem necessary, and if you decline answering, it will then be time enough to enlarge upon points which I have now omitted.²⁹

In conclusion, I beg leave to assure you, that though opposed to reform as carried on by yourself, I am not opposed to legitimate improvements in the manner of conducting our public worship; but I want the sanction of men who have made religion the business of their lives, whose piety is a warrant that they will do nothing to yield to public clamour which it would be wrong to yield upon grounds of law and solid reason. Yet so much has been done already without authority that I verily believe that it would be safer to retrench than to extend reform. Whatever can be done in a legal manner has or will be done by our ecclesiastical chiefs; and even their reforms I would look upon with suspicion, unless their necessity and practical usefulness were clearly established.

Probably I may be branded with the epithets "hyperorthodox, dark, rabbinist"; whilst in truth many others will believe me to be too free and bold in my opinions. Yet in the middle course there is always safety and not rarely the path of truth. Still, I shall not be terrified from that which

I consider the strict line of duty, and hope to be strengthened by that aid which we all stand in need of. I trust that you will agree with me in saying that we require no agitation. Persecution long terrified us in our houses and in the field; and now, when peace from abroad dawns upon us, let those who are the leaders endeavour to scatter peace also within the dwellings of Israel. What, are we so much wiser than our progenitors, to maintain that whatever they did was foolish and unsound? Must we for such reasons endeavour to break down the ancient landmarks and the fences of the law? May the Guardian of Israel forbend this, and may his blessing bring an increase and prosperity to the good cause of the law of his bestowal.

In the name, therefore, of our common faith, a religion dear to the heart of all Israel, I call upon you to pause, and to withdraw yourself from the dangerous course which you have, I hope thoughtlessly, been pursuing; join your efforts, Mr. Poznanski, to those of others to restore peace in the midst of your former congregation; yield the interest of a party for the good of the whole community; and receive the favour of your God, the approbation of your conscience, and the applause of thousands of honest hearts, as the reward for the sacrifice which such a step may for a moment require of you.

Yours respectfully,

Isaac Leeser

Philadelphia, Tamuz 27th, 5603.

“Some Wolves Clothed in Sheep’s-Cover”

Abraham Rice | 1848

Rabbi Abraham Rice (1800–1862) migrated to the United States in 1840, making him the first ordained rabbi (conferred upon him by Rabbi Abraham Bing [1752–1841] in Würzburg) to settle in the United States. He accepted a position at the Lloyd Street Synagogue in Baltimore. By all accounts, the pious Rice endured a miserable ministerial career and retired from the rabbinate in 1849, although he continued to play a role in the Jewish community and returned to congrega-

tional work at the very end of his life. In 1848 Rice wrote to Isaac Leeser to ask that the Philadelphia minister cease his cooperation with "Reform" leaders in the United States. To make his point, Rice drew upon traditional texts as well as recent events in Europe. In the end, Leeser's efforts to convene a conference with more religiously liberal elements were squashed, more by lack of congregational interest than by Rice's stern warnings.

BALTIMORE, 15TH DEC. '48

My Dear friend,

I think, we are acquainted enough to talk with you freely, what my humble opinion is, about the convention of Rabbis, spoken of in your last Periodical.³⁰ I know very much, that you are sincere in religious matters and you are the last who wants to make any innovation, but let me tell you as a friend you have to consider also that in your early times you were mingled with the American life; many of your ideas will not do for true Judaism, though you may think it is no harm in it. The Kuzari says: "Your intention is pleasing [to God] but your actions are not pleasing."³¹ Further you know that we have a certain class, which the word "Religion" is every moment in their mouth, but in the heart is nothing as selfishness and the true God fearer is wanting. What benefit shall arise from this "reunion"? If we all act according to our Shulhan Arukh, one Jew can live in one corner of the world and yet we have with him one rule and regulation.³²

... Is the Convention of the German Rabbis lost from your memory?³³ Are our Rabbis better men? Have we not some wolves clothed in sheep's-cover? How is it possible to establish equal reform in our prayers? And if it were possible, what is done for true religion? These all are only form and not essential parts of religion. Would or can this convention establish rules for keeping the Sabbath strictly? That every married Jewish lady has to go to mikveh?³⁴ Or will come the question from them to abolish the second day of the holidays? I, for my part, can tell this prophecy, that the latter question will come sooner off. ... In the same manner, I consider such a Convention.

We like to be like other sects. They have their convention; we must have ours too. Our Shulhan Arukh is our Conference.

. . . My Dear, I hope you will not find yourself offended by my talking. You know me—for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto. Take therefore the admonition of a true friend and consider well, before you go in for such a step; reflect seriously on the consequences of introducing such a Convention who will be attended with dangerous consequences.

I remain for ever

Your truly friend and humble servant

A. Rice

N.B. You must not laugh about my language. I write in English only for that reason, to make me more acquainted with the words.

What Prevails among the Jewish People?

Mordecai Noah | 1850

In 1850 Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise participated in a series of debates with Rabbi Morris J. Raphall at Charleston's Beth Elohim (Reform) and Shearit Israel (Orthodox) congregations. During this episode, Wise declared that he did not believe in the Resurrection of the Dead or the Coming of the Messiah. Maimonides had canonized both religious beliefs in his Principles of Faith, a widely accepted Jewish creed. This was the first major radical proclamation issued by Wise since he arrived in the United States in 1846. In turn, Mordecai Noah was asked to comment on this event and offered an incredulous response. He took the matter far less seriously than Leeser had in his letter to Gustavus Poznanski on the very same matter.

Question: "I read in one of our papers the startling fact that a learned Jewish rabbi had openly declared in Charleston that he had no belief in the resurrection of the dead or in the coming of the Messiah. Is this an isolated case with your people, or is it the prevailing belief?"

Answer: The rabbi did make that declaration, but played the hypocrite as to his own belief.³⁵ He was applying for the place of reader of a reformed Jewish congregation; but not understanding the extent of the reform, which was merely ceremonial and not doctrinal, he ventured upon this declaration and was of course rejected.³⁶ A belief in the resurrection of the dead and in the coming of the Messiah universally prevails among the Jewish people.

SECTION 2 | Living Orthodox Judaism

This Is Religious Liberty in America

Abraham Kohn | 1843

Abraham Kohn (1819–71) emigrated from Bavaria in 1842. The twenty-three-year-old began peddling, moving westward until he reached Chicago. In 1847 a now financially established Kohn served as a founding member of Kehillath Anshe Maariv. In the meantime, Kohn struggled to observe basic Jewish law. He recorded his religious failings and the guilt that came with that in his diary, a section of which is reproduced here.

God in Heaven, Father of our ancestors, Thou who hast protected the little band of Jews unto this day, Thou knowest my thoughts. Thou alone knowest of my grief when, on the Sabbath's eve, I must retire to my lodging and on Saturday morning carry my pack on my back, profaning the holy day, God's gift to His people, Israel. I can't live as a Jew. How should I go to church and pray to the "hanged" Jesus? Better that I be baptized at once, forswear the God of Israel, and go to Hell . . . by the God of Israel I swear that if I can't make my living in any other way in this blessed land of freedom and equality, I will return to my mother, brothers, and sisters, and God will help me and give me His aid and blessing in all my ways.

The open field is my temple where I pray. Our Father in heaven will

hear me there. "In every place where thou shalt mention My name I shall come to thee and bless thee." This comforts me and lends me strength and courage and endurance for my sufferings. And in only two more weeks I shall find something different.

Millerism seems to be somewhat on the decline, and I don't hear as much of it as formerly.³⁷ Mormonism is another superstition which, in the progressive and enlightened nation, seems to make strides. A certain Joe Smith, now living and preaching to the people in the western states, claims to be the true prophet of God, a priest of Melchizedek.³⁸ He purports to have found the true Bible and rejects Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed alike. He proclaims a new religion to the credulous people and, absurd as it seems to me, it is reported to have more than thirty thousand disciples. Terrible!

For more than three months I have not been in the mood to continue my diary or to write anything at all: In the middle of March I had hoped to get rid of my peddler's existence. But I was forced to take up my pack again, and from February 26th to March 11th, I journeyed towards Worcester, where I was to meet my dear brothers. On March 1st, I came to Worthington, where I met a peddler named Marx, from Albany, married and an immigrant from Frankenthal in Württemberg. Wretched business! This unfortunate man has been driving himself in this miserable trade for three years to furnish a bare living for himself and his family. O God, our Father, consider Thy little band of the house of Israel. Behold how they are compelled to profane Thy holy Torah in pursuit of their daily bread. In three years this poor fellow could observe the Sabbath less than ten times. And he is a member of the Jewish congregation in Albany. This is religious liberty in America.

Our Holy Place

Trustees of the Congregation Shearith Israel | 1847

Intermarriage was a fact of life for the Portuguese Jews who constituted the first cluster of Jews to migrate to the New World. According to one scholar's tabulation, nearly 30 percent of American Jewish marriages from 1776 to 1840 involved

a Christian partner. Many Jews married Christians because of their social status and close business dealings with non-Jewish communities. At first, most Jewish congregations tried to avoid punishing intermarried members. This document, therefore, reflects a change in tolerance and mind-set of New York's leading congregation. The first Jewish congregation founded in America (probably in the 1720s), K. K. Shearith Israel in New York, took public action against intermarriage by disseminating this message to its members.

NEW-YORK, 4TH NISSAN, 5607

Sir,

At a Meeting of the Trustees of the Congregation Shearith Israel, the following was adopted.—

Resolved, that no Seat in Our Holy Place of Worship, shall hereafter be leased to any person, married contrary to our religious laws; and no person married contrary to our religious laws, shall be entered in any of the Burying Grounds belonging to this Congregation.

Ordered, that the Clerk send a printed copy of the foregoing resolution, to each seat holder.

Extract from the Minutes.

N. Phillips, Clerk.

Strange Misbehavior

Max Lilienthal | 1854

Max Lilienthal (1815–82) arrived in the United States in 1845. His reputation as a traditionalist and university-trained scholar preceded him to the United States. In New York, he served as the rabbi of three German congregations but lost his position a few years later after a public disagreement with lay leaders. For a while, Lilienthal remained in New York, earning his living as a teacher. Shortly after he published this survey of Jewish life in a New York newspaper, Lilienthal accepted a call to lead a congregation in Cincinnati, where he began to openly explore reli-

gious reform. This excerpt of his observations offers a candid view of Orthodox Jewish life in New York in the mid-nineteenth century. It was published under Lilienthal's thinly veiled pseudonym, LD, the initials of "Dr. Lilienthal" reversed.

There is no doubt that a great disharmony, a great diversity of views and opinions, prevails in the camp of Israel. Instead of the former blissful peace and harmony, which was our shield and strength, there are now few points, upon which a unanimous verdict would be given. It is of no use to call upon the reformers with the accusations: you have proposed and introduced all kinds of innovations, and thereby estranged the hearts of the parents from the children, and the hearts of children from the parents. It is of no avail to exclaim, the orthodox party by their immovable stability have forced the opposition, to leave their doctrines and to try for themselves what they possibly could do. The disharmony exists for one cause or the other; the sickness shows itself with all its symptoms and the question arises, what remedy has to be applied in order to avoid the imminently dangerous consequences. Let us for this purpose review the different parties.

There is firstly: the large mass of the people that simply believe all and everything which has been transmitted to them from former ages. They do not inquire after the sublime doctrines of their religion; they do not investigate the difference of their creed from that of other denominations; they have no idea of the future destiny of their faith; they are satisfied that they are born as Jews; notwithstanding all kinds of persecutions they feel themselves happy as Jews; and they hope and wish and pray to die as Jews. No doubt arises in their minds; no comparison between the decayed condition of their nation and the flourishing state of other people suggests itself to their reasoning faculties; they are fully and entirely satisfied if they can live and observe the religious ceremonies as their blessed ancestors have done; and if they are enabled, to attend daily to the service in the morning, afternoon, and evening, if they can have a Kosher housekeeping, if they can observe the Sabbath and the holidays, then all their wishes are fulfilled, for they are as good Jews as their fathers of blessed memory ever have been. They like the

mystic and mystery; they are fully convinced that by reading a chapter of the Mishnah they work for the best of their soul; that by strict observance of every Minhag [religious custom] they perform a duty towards God and win especial favor. They look around them, and seeing so many changes, they sigh and long for the good times gone by, but feel themselves not in the least affected by the most astonishing alterations. They believe—and belief and faith make them happy and contented.

There is a second party that has already come more in contact with the world and that with sagacious foresight understands very well that something must be done to satisfy the wants of the time. It is the party of external order and decorum. They know that the disorder that prevailed in the synagogues of old cannot be tolerated any more; that a choir and sermon can be introduced in the service without giving up an iota of Orthodoxy; that although even this is reform and may fairly be called Chukat Hagoyim [Ways of the Gentiles], some concessions have to be made if the service shall not be disserved by a large number of their coreligionists. They are willing to add something to the services and religious ceremonies, but will never agree that anything should be subtracted therefrom. They do not wear their beard any more in the nine days of Ab; they shave them themselves on Yom-tob, &c. but consider themselves anyhow as good Jews as the first class, who are willing to banish and excommunicate at any cost and any risk, reform and reformers.³⁹

There is a third class who have made great concessions to life and its exigencies. For the sake of becoming wealthy and independent they have opened their stores and magazines and violated the Sabbath; for the sake of having a start and making their living, they went peddling in the country and ate at every farmer's table. Or there are others who have two kinds of Shulchan Aruch, one regulating them while they are at home, and the other when they are abroad. At home they keep strictly every minute ceremony, but abroad they indulge in the luxuries of the first-class hotels; they enjoy the delicacies of the watering places without feeling their religious conscience troubled or molested in the least. They do not give themselves any account of this strange misbehavior, they do not ask and do not answer who allowed or permitted

them to do so; necessity in the beginning urged them so to act, &c., they got used and accustomed to it, and habits will become our second nature. Notwithstanding these misdemeanors, they consider themselves orthodox, firmly and fiercely opposing any reform. We have to live in this way, they will assert, we cannot help it, wife and children must be supported; but as soon as we shall have accumulated some fortune we shall again become pious and will convince you that we are no hypocrites. Well, this is the party of momentary exceptions [Hora'at Sha'ah] and privileges, and this party, especially in this country, is a very large one. They may indulge in all kinds of exceptions, but would combat it with all their might if any Rabbi legally would sanction these exceptions. Their motto is: I may be drunk, but my driver must be sober.

An Aunt's Admonishment

Anna Marks Allen | 1858

Anna Marks Allen (1800–1888) was a leader of Philadelphia's Jewish community. She was active in the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society (est. 1819), and served as its treasurer for four decades. Allen was one of the founders of the Philadelphia Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum (est. 1855) and led the organization as its first directress. She also helped form the Jewish Sunday school in Philadelphia (est. 1838) led by Rebecca Gratz (1781–1869). This document sheds light on the responsibility of Jewish women to uphold their faith and to encourage men and boys to do the same.

PHILA., JUNE 28, 1858

My dear Lewis,
Accompanying these few lines, you will receive articles suitable for a Boy soon to become *bar mitzvah*, and with them accept the love and Blessing of your aunt who sincerely congratulates you on your attaining so important an Epoch in your life.

May you live to be a credit to yourself, a comfort and Blessing to your dear parents, and the Pride and protector of your sisters. As

your God Mother, my dear Lewis, I may be allowed the privilege, perhaps, of speaking to you of the Many *Duties* and *Responsibilities* which every *Day* and *Hour* of your life increases and assumes a more important character.

In the first place, my dear Boy, let the duties you owe your *Maker* ever predominate over every other. Diligently study our *Holy* laws and Ordinances, so that when you look upon the Sacred Emblem of *Faith* (The Tzitzith) you may be reminded that *no Tem[p]tation* that the world can offer may induce you to forsake your God. And when you Bind upon your Body the *Tephillin*, you Must remember that it is not *only* intended to Commemorate the Chief Commandment of the Mosaic Religion, but that we Must *Obey* and *do* them, so that the Mantle that Envelops you when in the House of God may not prove a Covering for *vain thoughts* and *Evil Imaginations*.⁴⁰

Next comes, my dear Lewis, your *duty* to your parents. I cannot point out a more impressive and beautiful passage by which to Govern your actions than that contained in the fifth Commandment: "Honor thy Father and Mother" (Ex. 20:12). What a vast amount of Duties do these Emphatic words contain! To Define them, my dear Nephew, would take a more able pen than mine, but let us hope as you advance in Youth and Manhood that the Instruction you Receive from your dear parents and Teachers, and your own good sense, may develop them. And may the *Holy One* of *Israel* *Enlighten* your *Eyes* and impress them on your *Heart* that you may "do *always* that which is Right in *His* Sight"

Is the prayer of your
Aunt Ann

CONCLUSION

In 1848 Rabbi Abraham Rice of Baltimore complained in rather broken English about Isaac Leeser's partnership with reformists. He pleaded with Leeser to narrow his circle of religious leaders, but Leeser would

not relent. Instead, the Philadelphia minister labored to convene a meeting of congregational leaders for the purpose of unifying American Judaism. That the convention did not take place is beside the point. In the earliest incarnations of Reform, the leading defenders of the “old ways” eschewed the mantle of a separatist Orthodox Judaism, even as others viewed them in that theological costume. Fluidity, then, was the dominant feature of religious discourse in this period.

Rabbi Rice’s losing battle over religious observance highlights another area of religious fluidity. Earlier, in 1840, Rice arrived in New York, the first ordained rabbi to migrate to the United States. In Gotham, the Orthodox scholar was invited to deliver a Sabbath sermon at Congregation Anshi Chesed. Of that discourse, one layman recalled much later that Rice declared “that his mission in coming to America was to establish the true orthodox faith in this country.”⁴¹ In all probability, the Bohemian preacher had in mind that his “true” form of Orthodox faith would conquer the non-observant rather than the nascent reform culture within American Judaism. Of course, many Jews remained punctilious in their religious observance and faced the consequences of their resultant social and economic limitations. These women and men insisted that God would assist them. If not, they vowed to return to Europe where they would suffer hardship, but at least they could do this together with a larger cohort of uncompromisingly vigilant Jews. Finally, probably the largest group of Jews in the United States found a middle ground. These Jews strictly abided by the cardinal obligations of Jewish law but opted out of other, more “flexible” areas of religious life, as described by Max Lilienthal. Most important, all of these types worshipped in Orthodox congregations while they frowned upon the minority of the Jewish population that wandered off to the growing number of Reform synagogues. In a real sense, Orthodox and observance had little correlation, if any at all.