

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders
V: ISAAC M. WISE AND REFORM JUDAISM
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Shabbat shalom!

It was a dark and stormy night, and Congregation Beth El was in an uproar. Rosh Hashanah was about to begin, and the Board had just fired the rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise. The year was 1850, and the congregation was in Albany, New York.

Wise, born in what is now Czechoslovakia and raised in an Orthodox household filled with the learning of Torah and Talmud, was in his first pulpit, having recently arrived in America. And though Wise was a traditionalist, he also had come to support some of the reforms then being adopted by other American congregations – reforms like mixed seating, a choir, sermons in English, and trimming the service from some of the endless repetitions that had accrued over the centuries. He had even started to talk about creating a new prayer book, adding English translations to the Hebrew! Unfortunately for Wise, his Board thought his reforms went too far, and they ordered him to stop.

Wise passionately defended his vision of a new American Judaism. In those days there were no denominations, no national organizations, no seminaries, rabbinic associations or congregational unions. Wise had a vision for a new American Judaism, and refused to stop preaching on the subject to his people.

The Board, by vote, ordered him to be silent; he wouldn't. The Board voted to stop paying his salary, but he held on. And just before Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Wise was fired, and ordered off the pulpit. They didn't have contracts in those days.

So on that dark and stormy night, when Wise ascended the pulpit, the congregation erupted. The president rushed up to Wise and punched him in the face. At which point a general riot ensued, as Wise's supporters and detractors spilled into the streets, continuing until the police came. Wise was hauled off to jail, charged by the president as instigator until a judge was able to unravel the claims and counter-claims and had Wise released the next morning.

It was still Rosh Hashanah. Some 70 of Wise's supporters found a place a few blocks away, hired him to be their rabbi and founded Beth Emet – the "House of Truth" which Wise led for several more years until called to a larger pulpit in Cincinnati. Small

footnote: The traditional congregation Beth El lingered on, finally going bankrupt in 1885, its remnants merging with the new Reform temple there.

What impresses me most about Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was his passion, and a vision of a new future that is so characteristic of the best of Reform Judaism.

Arriving in Cincinnati in 1854, Wise first revolutionized the worship and liturgy, publishing a new prayer book that he called *Minhag America*, literally “The American Tradition,” intending it to be a book of prayer for all American congregations, as indeed it was for many years. We still use some of his translations to this day. He felt that American congregations would be strengthened by uniting, and by force of will he created a national body, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, that originally included congregations across the full spectrum of Jewish practice. He founded America’s first rabbinic seminary that began ordaining rabbis in 1889 – though he had already done some private ordinations earlier. His very first, most likely the first ordination in this country back in the 1860’s, was a rabbi named Browne, whose first pulpit was at our congregation, here in Montgomery. And to top it off Rabbi Wise also founded a national organization of rabbis, which is today the largest such body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Reform Judaism is thus the oldest organized expression of Judaism in the United States. Its heritage is rich, its teachings are profound, and I am proud to be part of this great movement – the most vital, creative, and to my mind uplifting expression of Judaism on the scene today, a Judaism we can truly live by and ground our lives on.

What have we learned from Reform?

Most of the themes of today’s Reforms were already taught by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, our great institutional founder – themes such as personal autonomy in how we each practice our Judaism; the theme of responsibility, in learning enough about Judaism to make intelligent choices; the theme of egalitarianism – the absolute religious equality of all regardless of gender. Thus Isaac Mayer Wise was the first rabbi – so far as I can discover – who articulated the principle of “Patrilineal Descent” – the notion that the children of a mixed marriage have a claim on Jewish identity regardless of which parent is or isn’t Jewish, so long as the children are reared in Judaism. That was in the 1860’s. He felt strongly that boys and girls should learn together, and from the beginning he confirmed girls and boys equally.

Social action has also always been a hallmark of Reform. The resolutions adopted by the various arms of the Movement since Wise’s day in the 19th century show a far more

universalistic interest in social justice and economic justice along with progressive views on women's rights, labor law, health care, immigration rights and many others – than any other expression of Judaism.

And more than any other movement Reform has wrestled – again since the mid-19th century – with how the traditions of Judaism can help us grapple with our changing world, including scientific knowledge and issues such as bio-medical ethics undreamed of in prior eras.

Though today's Reform is not identical with that of a century or more ago – after all, that's the very nature of Reform – these underlying themes have not changed.

The best expression of today's Reform is in a platform adopted by my rabbinic body in 1999. It represents the best contemporary expression of what we think we stand for. Copies will be available on your way out of the Sanctuary after the service this evening; it's really a magnificent statement, and I urge you to read it.

So what are some of the principles Reform really stands for? The most recent platform includes these core ideas of Reform:

First is to affirm the reality and oneness of God. We differ in our understanding of the Divine presence, but Judaism is much more than a community or social grouping. We are created in the image of God, and life is sacred.

Second, the Platform affirms that Torah is the foundation of Jewish life, and we are committed – if we take our Judaism seriously – to study our texts and consider some mitzvot as truly sacred obligations. Some of these have long been observed by Reform Jews, as the Platform states; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention in the unique context of our times. A great deal of creativity is taking place in Reform communities around the country – based on tradition but speaking to us as modern Jews. To be very Reform, as I've said before, is not to be “very” non-observant – it can be quite the opposite.

Finally, we affirm that we are part of a people with a unique history, a people in covenant with God that links us to all Jews in every age and place. [That notion of peoplehood, by the way, is one of the major changes from Wise's day.]

There is much more, including a fine description of our relationship to Israel as a growing center of Jewish life.

Hillel and Shammai, among the greatest early rabbis who lived 2100 years ago while the Second Temple was still standing, once engaged in a dispute reported in the Talmud. For three years their dispute raged, the former asserting, “The law is in agreement with our views,” and the latter contending, “The law is in agreement with our views.” Then, the Talmud reports, a bat kol, a voice from heaven, announced, *Eilu v’eilu divrei Elohim Chayim*, “These and those are the words of the living God.” For even in the days of the Talmud, our rabbis knew that one of the great strengths of Judaism is our very diversity, and that despite differences of opinion we can all be one people, learning from each other and working with each other for a better future.

Isaac Mayer Wise had a vision, and great passion, and even when his opponents pushed him aside he didn’t give up. I would not have been here without his contribution to Jewish life.

My prayer this Shabbat is that all of our discussions will be in this spirit of “*Eilu V’eilu*,” that all of our points of view are the words of the living God, and that we can take pride in the Reform Judaism as bequeathed to us by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise.