ISAAC LEESER: A JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE IN ANTEBELLUM PHILADELPHIA

By Maxine S. Seller*

ISAAC LEESER, German-Jewish immigrant from Westphalia who lived in Philadelphia from 1830 to 1868, was one of the most widely known and respected Jewish leaders of his day, not only in Pennsylvania but throughout the United States. He served as religious leader first for the very old Sephardic Philadelphia congregation, Mikveh Israel, and then for a new congregation, Beth El Emeth, created by his friends especially for him. Dedicated to the survival of the growing Jewish community of nineteenth-century America, Leeser published ten volumes of lectures and sermons, at least seven textbooks, an original translation of the Bible, new editions of the Hebrew Liturgy, and numerous translations of European scholarly works for the American Jewish community. His name was associated with the origin of practically every Jewish institution in Philadelphia—the Jewish Publication Society, the Jewish Hospital, the Hebrew Education Society, and the Young Men's Hebrew Association, to name but a few. He traveled constantly and widely throughout the United States,¹ and for twenty-six years was the editor of an influential national Jewish periodical, the Occident. Through these and other activities, Leeser was instrumental in creating the institutional and intellectual patterns followed by the Jewish community of Philadelphia and indeed of the entire country to the present day.

Isaac Leeser is of interest not only for his activities within the Jewish community, but also for his role as a bridge between that community and American society as a whole. His career spanned

*Dr. Seller is a member of the department of history at Bucks County Community College, Newtown, Pa.

¹In the winter of 1851-1852 alone, he traveled over 5,200 miles, stopping in at least twenty-five communities from Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico. Jacob R. Marcus, Memoirs of American Jews, 1775-1865 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1955), II, 58.
the first large scale encounter between the native-born American, English-speaking, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon in culture if not in origin, and the immigrant who, like Leeser's group, the German Jews, might be none of these things. The arrival of so many "different" immigrants between 1830 and the outbreak of the Civil War was not without its accompanying tensions. In these emotional decades which saw the burning of the Ursuline convent in Boston, bloody riots between Catholics and Protestants in Philadelphia, and the rise of nativist societies and the Know Nothing party, the status of religious and ethnic minority groups was by no means certain.²

Despite sporadic outbreaks of bad feeling, the native American and the immigrant had generally made a peaceful adjustment to one another by the Civil War. One factor contributing to this adjustment was the efforts of minority group leaders who served as intermediaries, interpreting the one group to the other.³ Such a leader was Isaac Leeser. By participating energetically in American life and encouraging the growing number of Jewish immigrants to do the same, he played a large part in the successful Americanization of the nineteenth-century Central European Jew. Moreover, by constantly explaining and defending this minority, he helped to clarify the status of all minorities and insure for them an equal part in the extension of the American democracy.

Leeser's education in Europe helped prepare him for his role as intermediary between Christian America and the Jewish immigrant. After receiving a traditional Jewish education in Hebrew, Bible, and Talmud, Leeser spent several years at The Catholic College at Muenster. He attributed his easy and cordial relationships with non-Jews in the United States to his early and pleasant association with Catholic clergy and students at this institution. Leeser ascribed his later skill in explaining and defending Judaism to non-Jews to his experience at the Muenster college, where he frequently found himself doing just this.⁴

Leeser was suited for his role as a go-between by temperament and outlook as well as by education. He was a devoutly religious

⁵ Isaac Leeser, ed., The Occident and American Jewish Advocate, XII (1854-1855), 39.
Orthodox Jew, but never a fanatic. His interests were surprisingly broad. He read widely in economics, ancient and modern history, literature of all kinds, and the new discoveries in the natural sciences. Religion remained his major concern. Leeser enjoyed controversy in religion as in other subjects and took a genuine interest in the views of those who disagreed with him. The pages of his monthly journal, The Occident, were always open to his opponents or supporters, whether Jew or Christian. Open-mindedness and an ability to separate issues from personalities were among his greatest assets.

Another element in Leeser's success as mediator between the Jew and America was his deep devotion to his adopted country as well as to his own group. Having grown to young adulthood in the repressive atmosphere of Metternich's Germany, Leeser was gratefully aware of the blessings of American democracy and civil liberties. Like so many of his fellow Americans, he believed that the United States was a great and sacred experiment to prove for all time to a doubting world that free men could govern themselves. He believed that the success of the American experiment depended not upon the riches of the nation, or even upon its laws, but rather upon the attitudes of its citizens toward one another, their mutual respect, and their constant striving for domestic peace. It is in this context that he labored for the peaceful integration of the Jewish immigrant.

Leeser began his work of Americanizing the Jewish immigrant with the very basic matter of language. Most of the Jewish immigrants of his day spoke German. Like many non-Jewish German immigrants, they loved their native tongue. Some considered it a cultural vehicle superior to English and tried to perpetuate it by teaching it to their children. Leeser used all his influence to oppose the creation of a permanent German-speaking Jewish community in the United States. He began the use of the English rather than the German sermon in the synagogue, an innovation

which was copied throughout the country.\textsuperscript{8} Difficult as it was for him at first, he published his books and his periodical in English, though he might have done better financially writing in German. Reminding his coreligionists of the political and economic restrictions still in force against Jews in many parts of Germany, Leeser considered the German language a tie to the past that should be broken as rapidly as possible. He urged immigrant Jews to learn English, to use it, and to teach it to their children.\textsuperscript{9}

Leeser encouraged Jewish immigrants to adopt the institutions as well as the language of the United States whenever possible. He was especially interested in the Americanization of the synagogue—although always within the framework of Orthodox Judaism. Accordingly, he worked to shorten the worship service, obtain greater decorum, democratize the organization of the synagogue, and raise the status of the Jewish religious leader. These reforms were designed to make Judaism conform outwardly to other American forms of worship and be better able to survive in the new land.\textsuperscript{10}

Through his own participation in Philadelphia community life as well as congregants such as Rebecca Gratz who were active in that life, Leeser became familiar with local charitable and educational associations. With the help of Miss Gratz and others, he was responsible for initiating many voluntary American-style associations within the Jewish community.\textsuperscript{11} These were important innovations in Jewish life. The traditional European Jewish community had occupied a quasi-legal status as an autonomous political unit within the country in which it lived. It solved its philanthropic and educational problems by compulsory taxation of all its members rather than by voluntary associations for specific purposes.\textsuperscript{12}

Some of Leeser's associations still survive in Philadelphia while others passed from the scene before their originator. Yet all were


\textsuperscript{9} The Occident, XII (1854-1855), 529 and XXV (1867-1868), 326.

\textsuperscript{10} The Occident, II (1844-1845), 171-172 and X (1852-1853), 426, 440-443; Isaac Leeser, \textit{Discourses}, II, 175.


important Americanizing agents. In addition to meeting the needs of the Jewish community in the manner generally accepted in American society as a whole, these associations provided the first training in public life for many individual immigrant Jews who later were to play a role in the public affairs of their city and nation.

Leeser used his pen, his pulpit, and his personal influence to encourage Jewish immigrants to become part of the mainstream of American life. He called their attention to the social problems of poverty and crime arising out of the growing industrialization of the country. He utilized occasions such as Passover, the celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, to discourse on the advantages of the American system of free government. As an example of his efforts to Americanize fellow Jews, Leeser introduced his congregation, Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia, to regular religious services honoring the American Thanksgiving.13 "In the synagogue and in congregational meetings we want Jews; in political matters, only American citizens," wrote Leeser.14 He wanted Jews to participate in public life whenever possible, but always as individuals rather than as a religious bloc. While he disapproved of the nativistic Know-Nothing Party in the 1850's, he believed that Jews should oppose it, if they so desired, as individuals rather than as a religious or immigrant group.15

Leeser was so eager to see Jews as individuals active in public life that during the Civil War he praised southern Jews for their support of the Confederacy at the same time he praised northern Jews for supporting the Union.16 Leeser himself was a staunch Unionist, but his refusal to condemn all southerners, Jewish or otherwise, as sinners and traitors led to an interesting misunderstanding. Leeser's friend and coreligionist Moses Dropsie was one of the organizers of the Republican party in Philadelphia. In the spring of 1861 Dropsie visited Leeser and threatened him: "You better take care of what you say; you are on the suspected list

13 Isaac Leeser, Discourses, III, 17-18; V, 123; VIII, 344; The Occident, XV (1857-1858), 558-560.
14 The Occident, XII (1854-1855), 563.
and you may be compelled to quit the city before long." Thoroughly
alarmed, Leeser wrote to the mayor of Philadelphia, Alexander
Henry. Mayor Henry assured him that there was no "suspected
list," and the "your loyalty has never been impugned so far as
I am aware."¹⁷

Leeser set an example of participation during the war years.
Too old for military duty, he served as a chaplain for wounded
soldiers in the Philadelphia hospitals. Despite rapidly failing
health, he made several good will tours into the South as soon
as the war was over, renewing old ties and urging Jews through-
out the country to "contribute all in your power to the healing
of the fratricidal strife."¹⁸ Speaking in Washington on the tragic
occasion of Lincoln's death, Leeser summarized his lifelong efforts
to bring the Jewish immigrant into American life:

> Israelites should labor to identify themselves with all the
other inhabitants of the country and prove the justice
of their claims to an equality of rights by cheerfully
sharing all the burdens and conforming faithfully to the
laws enacted for the government of all. When evil be-
falls the land, let us also share in the grief which afflicts
all others; but above all, let us cultivate good will and
peace toward our fellow men of all creeds.¹⁹

While Leeser explained America to the Jewish immigrant and
urged him to participate in American life, he was at the same
time explaining the Jewish immigrant to America and laboring
to assure his complete religious and civil equality within Amer-
ican society. Anti-Semitism was not a major problem during
Leeser's lifetime. Nevertheless certain difficulties did arise. Some
problems developed simply because Jews were so small a minority
in a predominantly Christian country that the majority, scarcely
aware that they existed, overlooked their rights by mere over-
sight. Other problems were written into old, half-forgotten state
laws setting up religious qualifications for office holding. Maryland
denied the Jew the right to hold office until 1826, Rhode Island
until 1842, North Carolina until 1868, and New Hampshire until

¹⁷ Isaac Leeser to Mayor Henry, June 3, 1861; Henry to Leeser, June 5,
1861, Leeser Letters, Dropsie College, Philadelphia.
¹⁸ *The Occident*, XXIII (1865-1866), 164.
Still other problems arose out of centuries-old religious prejudice against Jews as the people who rejected and crucified Jesus.

Leeser addressed himself to all of these problems, and on the whole his efforts were successful. One reason for his success was his ability to distinguish among the various problems mentioned above. He did not look for anti-Semitism where it did not exist. He operated on the basic assumption of the good will of most Americans. Thus when the legislature of Georgia decreed that only magistrates and “ministers of the Gospel” could officiate at marriages, Leeser considered the exclusion of rabbis “entirely accidental” and was pleased but not surprised when the law was liberalized.

At the same time Leeser did not hesitate to take a public stand against any legislative or civil enactment which seemed to discriminate either intentionally or unintentionally against his minority group. When the governors of Pennsylvania and New York issued their annual Thanksgiving Day proclamations in Christian terminology, Leeser protested vehemently until subsequent proclamations were issued in nonsectarian terms. In like manner, when Congress failed to commission Jewish as well as Christian chaplains to serve in the Union army during the Civil War, Leeser was one of the Jewish leaders who started a campaign for Jewish chaplains in the press and brought the matter to Lincoln’s personal attention. The oversight was soon corrected.

One of Leeser’s most interesting campaigns was his effort to win for the Jews of North Carolina the right to hold public office, a right denied to them as well as to Quakers and atheists under the existing state constitution. In 1855 Leeser was invited to dedicate a new Jewish cemetery in Wilmington, North Carolina. Finding his audience composed mainly of non-Jews, several hundred of whom had come out of friendly interest, Leeser used the

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21 *The Occident*, VII (1849-1850), 525.
22 Ibid., XIX (1861-1862), 39.
occasion to denounce the discriminatory constitutional provision.  

Leeser's speech in Wilmington is an excellent example of his approach to the question of civil rights for the American Jew. He spoke as a Jew to Christians, as a German immigrant to native Americans, and as a Pennsylvanian criticizing the North Carolina constitution only a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet he presented his case boldly, acting as usual on the assumption of the good will of the majority. He did not evade the fact that Jewish religious beliefs were different; but as long as Jews obeyed the laws of the state, paid their taxes, and defended it in time of danger, Leeser maintained that they were entitled to the same rights and privileges as other citizens. Characteristically, he based his claims not upon "tolerance" but upon justice and his understanding of the American political system. The majority could claim no merit in not interfering with the minority, according to Leeser, because in a free country like the United States every citizen was equally entitled to freedom limited only by the demands of public order.

Leeser's efforts were rewarded. When, at his urging, the Wilmington Jewish community petitioned for a change in the state constitution, they had the backing of both the Christian community and the press of Wilmington. Leeser supported the campaign in The Occident and in letters published in the Philadelphia Evening Journal. Nothing could be done during the Civil War, but in 1868 the constitution was finally amended to give Quakers, Deists, and Jews the right to hold office in North Carolina.

More controversial and less successful were Leeser's efforts to protect what he considered violations of Jewish rights as a result of Sunday "blue laws" and religion in the public schools. Pennsylvania, like most states, had laws prohibiting all labor on Sunday. These laws were generally enforced. In 1851, for example, the courts upheld the conviction of Seventh Day Adventists for working on their own farms on Sunday. Leeser objected


26 Leeser's speech is recorded in full in his Discourses, X, 82-95.


28 The Occident, VIII (1850-1851), 54-55.
to Sunday "blue laws" because they imposed an economic hardship on the Orthodox Jewish immigrant who observed his Sabbath on Saturday. But of even greater importance, Leeser condemned these laws as a violation of the Constitution. "There are in the words of the Declaration of Rights no earthly supports for the opinion that Christianity is the law of the land," he wrote. He saw the United States as a nation of citizens religiously as well as politically equal by law. The Christian majority, then, had no more right to insist that the Jew cease work on Sunday than the Jewish minority had to insist that the Christian stop work on Saturday. Arguing that Sabbath observance was a religious matter to be left to the conscience of the individual rather than to the authority of the state legislature, Leeser sent a petition to Governor Joseph Ritner of Pennsylvania to abolish such legislation. The petition was ignored. Despite a lifelong campaign, Leeser was never successful in getting such laws abolished. The issues raised remain controversial, but Leeser has the distinction of being among the first to raise them.

Equally controversial and almost as unsuccessful was Leeser's campaign against religious instruction, prayer, and Bible reading in the public schools. Leeser based his objection on the welfare of the children as well as on constitutional grounds. Because of the great diversity of religious views even among the Protestant majority, he argued, the religious life of many students might be weakened by the presentation of any one religious view. Since public school religious activity was Protestant in tone, the growing Catholic population of Philadelphia also opposed religious observances in the public schools. Mainly because of the increasing weight of Catholic numbers rather than the efforts of Isaac Leeser, sectarian religious activities did decline somewhat in the Philadelphia public schools during the years before the Civil War. At least one small victory can be specifically attributed to Isaac Leeser. After hours of arguing with the principal of a public high school, he won for the Philadelphia Jewish student the right to be absent without penalty on Jewish holidays.

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23 Ibid., VI (1848-1849), 217.
25 The Occident, XX (1862-1863), 150-153.
26 Leeser, Discourses, X, 131.
Leeser’s efforts to protect the political and civil rights of the Jewish immigrant was part of his lifelong self-imposed task of explaining the religion of that immigrant to native-born Christian Americans. In 1828, when he was twenty-two years old, Leeser began his career of explaining Judaism to Christians by publishing a series of letters in the Richmond *Whig* to refute a defamatory article reprinted from the *London Quarterly Review*. Leeser expanded these into his first published book, *The Jews and the Mosaic Law*, which appeared in Philadelphia in 1833. Between 1830 and 1839 Leeser wrote a series of letters to the Philadelphia *Gazette*, again explaining and defending his religion. These letters were published in Philadelphia in 1840 as a book, *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights*.

Part of Leeser’s purpose in explaining Judaism was to counteract the anti-Jewish propaganda of overzealous Christian missionaries. During the decades when Americans crusaded for everything from the abolition of slavery to the consumption of Graham flour, the conversion of the American Jews to Christianity became one of many interrelated religious crusades to hasten the coming of the millenium. Missionary societies were especially active in New York and Philadelphia, the main centers of the immigrant Jewish population."3 While Leeser believed in the freedom of all religious groups to propagate their views, he opposed the tactics of these missionaries—use of bribes to lure impoverished immigrants, offers of gratuitous Hebrew and English educational opportunities which were then used to make conversions, and uncomplimentary presentation of Judaism in such lurid tracts as *The Memoirs of Maria, the Converted Jewess*.4 Leeser spoke against these activities from his synagogue pulpit. He investigated the claimed conversions of Jews in Philadelphia and found most of them to be fraudulent. In both the secular and the Jewish press, he waged a one-man war on these societies.5

While the missionary societies had little effect on Philadelphia Jewry, they provided Leeser with another opportunity to assume leadership. His activities refuting the claims of the missionary

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groups, as well as his articles and books explaining Judaism, earned for him a more than local reputation as a dignified and knowledgeable spokesman for Judaism. Leeser was especially well known and well liked by the Christian clergy of Philadelphia, who cooperated with him on many projects. In 1848 he published a new edition of the Hebrew Bible in collaboration with the Reverends Joseaph Jacquette and August Hahn. In 1840 he assembled a representative group of Philadelphia ministers at Mikveh Israel synagogue to join him in a public protest against the persecution of the Jews in Damascus. Among his warmest friends and correspondents was the Reverend Mathew Miller, a Presbyterian minister from Cumberland, Ohio.

Leeser’s relationship with the Christian community, aside from the more zealous missionaries, was good because of his readiness to respect Christian beliefs if Christians would do the same for his. This cordial relationship was not based upon a minimizing of differences but rather upon mutual esteem and an honest exploration of differences. In his personal correspondence Leeser engaged in religious dialogue with clergymen of several denominations. In the pages of The Occident, Leeser and one of his colleagues, Isaac M. Wise, conducted a public dialogue with interested clergymen on such controversial religious topics as the Trinity, original sin, the Messiah, and the validity of Mosaic Law. This Christian-Jewish dialogue, possibly the first of its kind in the United States, was distinguished by its forthrightness, by the scholarly level upon which it was conducted, and by the friendly spirit of the participants towards their religious opponents.

When non-Jews wanted information about Judaism, they contacted Isaac Leeser. Israel Daniel Rupp, the Pennsylvania historian, called upon Leeser to contribute the chapter on American Jewry in his Original History of Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States. The curious wanted explanations of Jewish ceremonies and practices. Others, such as the young Pennsylvania boy who was “not satisfied that the Scriptures had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ,” wanted theological

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26 Leeser, Discourses, III, 256.
27 The Occident, XXI (1863-1864), p. 152.
28 Ibid., II (1844-1845), 156-158; VI (1848-1849), 131; XIV (1856-1857), 160-167; XXI (1863-1864), 152. Leeser, Discourses, VII, 204-208.
Leeser was happy to answer all questions to help Christians gain a better understanding of Judaism, and incidentally the Jewish immigrant.

Though Leeser, like most traditional Jews, discouraged Christians from converting to Judaism, there was one unusual conversion in which he played the determining role. In 1840 he met Warder Cresson, a Pennsylvania gentleman farmer and a Quaker, who became a personal friend. Lesser helped Cresson acquire a profound knowledge of Judaism. Cresson served as American consul in Jerusalem, studied the Talmud there, and in 1848 converted to Judaism. His wife and five of his six children immediately sued for control of his property on the grounds that he was insane. The case was tried by the circuit court of Pennsylvania with over one hundred witnesses called to testify. Leeser's reputation as well as his testimony contributed to the court's decision that conversion to Judaism was not in itself evidence of insanity. Cresson, or Michael Boas as he now called himself, kept his property and returned to Palestine.

Leeser's acceptance by the Christian community of Philadelphia made it easier for many other Jewish immigrants to become accepted members of the community. His death, like his life, brought Christian and Jew, native American and immigrant a little closer together. Clergy and laymen of all denominations attended the austere Orthodox Jewish funeral making the procession so long that "it was impossible for the eye to reach from one end to the other." To the general historian, Isaac Leeser was and will remain an obscure figure. Nevertheless he and immigrant leaders like him played a significant if unspectacular part in the building of nineteenth-century America. By promoting mutual understanding and respect between the Jewish minority and the greater American community, Leeser made his contribution to the successful working of the American democracy.

B. M. Hall to Isaac Leeser, March 1, 1858, Leeser Letters, Dropsie College, Philadelphia.

The Occident, XII (1854-1855), 79; Bertram Korn, American Jewry, p. 158; Harry Simonhoff, Jewish Notables in America, Links of an Endless Chain (New York: Greenberg, 1950), pp. 306-309.

Mayer Sultzberger describing Leeser's funeral in The Occident, XXVI (1868-1869), 607.