

3.09—MEMORIAL TO THE PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS OF THE ADJUNTA
OF KAHAL KADOSH BETH ELOHIM OF CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA,
DEMANDING RELIGIOUS REFORM, DECEMBER 23, 1824

Frustrated by the inability of their religious leadership to keep their community engaged in Jewish religious life, forty-seven members of Charleston, South Carolina's Jewish community, led by Isaac Harby and Abraham Moïse Jr. (1799-1869), composed a document calling for a reformation of Judaism in their synagogue, Congregation Beth Elohim. While the Reform movement in American Judaism would not flourish until the second half of the nineteenth century, historians argue that this document marks the first call for reform in American Jewish history. It argues, among other things, for greater reliance on English within a more abbreviated worship service.

Gentlemen,

The memorial of the undersigned, showeth unto your honourable body, that they have witnessed with deep regret, the apathy and neglect which have been manifested towards our holy religion. As inheritors of the *true faith*, and always proud to be considered by the world as a portion of "God's chosen people," they have been pained to perceive the gradual decay of that system of worship, which, for ages past, *peculiarly* distinguished us from among the nations of the earth. Not unmindful, however, of the various causes which regulate human conduct; and at the same time, unwilling to shield themselves from any censure, to which their actions may justly entitle them, they have ingeniously investigated the reasons which may have led them from the Synagogue, and are now seriously impressed with the belief, that certain defects which are apparent in the present system of worship, are the sole causes of the evils complained of.

In pointing out these defects, however, your memorialists seek no other end, than the future welfare and respectability of the nation. As members of the great family of Israel, they cannot consent to place before their children examples which are only calculated to darken the mind, and withhold from the rising generation the more rational means of worshipping the true God.

It is to this, therefore, your memorialists would, in the first place, invite the serious attention of your honourable body. By causing the Hasan, or reader, to repeat in English such part of the Hebrew prayers as may be deemed necessary, it is confidently believed that the congregation generally would be more forcibly impressed with the necessity of Divine Worship, and the moral obligations which they owe to themselves and their Creator; While such a course, would lead to more decency and decorum during the time they are engaged in the performance of religious duties. It is not every one who has the means, and many have not the time, to acquire a knowledge of the Hebrew language, and consequently to become enlightened in the principles of Judaism; What then is the course pursued in all religious societies for the purpose of disseminating the peculiar tenets of their faith among the poor and uninformed? The principles of their religion are expounded to them from the pulpit in the language that they understand; for instance, in the Catholic, the German and the French Protestant Churches: by this means the ignorant part of mankind attend their places of worship with some profit to their morals, and even improvement of their minds; they return from them with hearts turned to piety, and with feelings elevated

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by their sacred character. In this consists the beauty of religion,—when men are invoked by its divine spirit, to the practice of virtue and morality.

[...]

Your memorialists would next call the particular attention of your honourable body to the absolute necessity of abridging the service generally. They have reflected seriously upon its present length, and are confident that this is one of the principal causes why so much of it is hastily and improperly hurried over. This must be evident to every reflecting mind, when it is seen, that notwithstanding the evil complained of, the service of the Sabbath, for instance, continues until *twelve* o'clock, although usually commencing at *nine*. It is therefore manifest, that, according to the prayer of your memorialists, should the service be in future conducted with due solemnity, and in a slow, distinct, and impressive tone, its length would certainly occupy the attention of the congregation, until two o'clock, if not later.

[...]

It is also worthy of observation, that a number of Israelites, whom it should be the special care of your honourable body to bring back under your immediate protection and influence, are now wandering gradually from the true God, and daily losing those strong ties which bind every pious man to the faith of his fathers! In these individuals, your honourable body have fair subjects for the holy work of reformation; by moulding your present form of worship to suit their comprehensions, you will instantly receive them among you; they will collect under your especial care and guardianship; they will aid in the pecuniary resources of your holy institutions; and if, from among the whole number now scattered about our city and state, either through irreligion, through disabilities imposed, or any other cause, you are enabled to make but

one convert, it will add much to those laudable ends which it should be the principal desire of your honourable body to accomplish. It should also be remembered, that while other sects are extending the means of Divine Worship to the remotest quarters of the habitable globe—while they are making the most zealous efforts to bring together the scattered of their flock, offering the most flattering inducements to *all denominations*—we, who may be termed the mere remnant of a great nation, are totally disregarding the fairest opportunities of increasing our own numbers, and at the same time neglecting the brightest prospects of enlarging our resources, and effectually perpetuating our national character.

[...]

Thus . . . it appears, that no climes, nor even tyranny itself, can forever fetter or control the human mind; and that even amidst the intolerance of Europe, our brethren have anticipated the free citizens of America in the glorious work of reformation; Let us then hasten to the task with harmony and good fellowship. We wish not to *overthrow*, but to *rebuild*; we wish not to *destroy*, but to *reform* and *revise* the evils complained of; we wish not to *abandon* the institutions of Moses, but to *understand and observe them*; in fine, we wish to worship God, not as *slaves of bigotry and priestcraft*, but as the enlightened descendants of that chosen race, whose blessings have been scattered throughout the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And your memorialists will ever pray.

Signed by forty-seven Israelites of the City of Charleston.

Source: *DHJ*, 171-77. From L. C. Moise, *Biography of Isaac Harby with an Account of the Reformed Society of Israelites of Charleston, S. C., 1824-1833* (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1931), 52-59.

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3.10—ABRAHAM RICE TO ISAAC LEESER, REGARDING RELIGIOUS REFORM,
DECEMBER 15, 1848

The following document introduces two significant nineteenth-century American Jewish personalities: Rabbi Abraham Rice (1800–1862) and Rev. Isaac Leeser. Rice holds the distinction of being the first ordained rabbi to serve as the spiritual leader of an American synagogue. Born near Würzburg, Bavaria, he immigrated to the United States in 1840 to assume the pulpit of Congregation Nidche Israel, later known as Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. In contrast to Rice, Leeser was not an ordained rabbi, but he was a very learned pioneer of the American Jewish pulpit. Born in Westphalia, Prussia, Leeser immigrated to Richmond, Virginia, in 1824 to work in his uncle's store. In 1828, the young Leeser became the reader and cantor for Philadelphia's Congregation Mikve Israel, a position from which he retired in 1850. In 1857, he became the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth-El-Emeth in Philadelphia, where he served until his death. Over the course of his long career, Leeser also distinguished himself as an author, translator, editor, and publisher.

Although Rice and Leeser shared a deep commitment to traditional Jewish practice, they disagreed over how best to preserve the ancient traditions of Judaism in America. Rice scorned any attempt to Americanize Judaism, while Leeser believed a loyal devotion to Jewish traditionalism could be preserved by adapting it to its American context. In 1848, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) urged the "ministers and other Israelites" of the United States to band together in a conference in hopes of fostering an ecclesiastical unity among American Jews. Leeser published and offered his personal endorsement for Wise's call in the pages of his newspaper, the Occident. As we see in the letter to follow, Rice, whose written English betrays his struggle to learn the language, disagreed with his compatriot and urged him to abandon any plan that might result in the modernization of Judaism.

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. I know very much that you are sincere in religious matters as you are the latest [last] who would make any innovation, but let me tell you as a friend you have to consider also, that in your early lives [life] you were mingled with the American life; many of your Ideas will not do for true Judaismen, though you may think it is no harm in it. The כוזרי [Kuzari] says כונתך רצויה ומעשיך אינם רצוים [your intentions are acceptable but not so your acts], what is by many the case now. Further you know, that we have a certain class, which the word "Religion" is every moment in their mouth, but in their hearth is nothing as selfishness & the true יראה [reverence] is wanting. What benefit shall arise from this "reunion"? If we all act according to our שלחן ערוך [Shulhan Arukh], one Jew can live in one corner of the world & yet we have with him one rule & regulation. Can we establish better rules as we find written down by our ancient [writers]? Or will we please the spirit of [the] times? if we would adhere conscientiously to our rules? Will they not say?

מאי אהני לן רבנן, מעולם לא שרי לנו עורב ולא אסר לנו יונה – [סנהדרין צט:]

[of what use are the Rabbis to us? They have never permitted us the raven, nor forbidden us the dove, *Talmud Babli—Sanhedrin 99:2.*]

Is the convention of the German Rabbis lost from your memory? Are our Rabbis better men? Have we not some wolves clothed in sheepscover? How is it possible to establish an equal Reform in our prayers? & if it were possible what is done for true religion? These are only form & not [the] essential part of religion. Would or can this convention establish rules for keeping the Sabbath strikly? That every married Jewish lady has to go to מקוה [mikveh]? Or will come the question for them, to abolish the second day of

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י"ט [festivals]? I, for my part, can tell this prophesy, that the latter question will come sooner off.

You must not charge me, that I am too sanguinish, the heaven is my witness, that I deliberate very cool, but I am afraid for such a convention ואחה ! תקרה לגדל ענבים ותקבל באושים

ויקו לעשות ענבים ויעש באושים [ישעיה ה-ב]

["And he looked that it should bring forth grapes, And it brought forth wild grapes." Isaiah 5:2]

The only result will be, we will have more permissiveness and licencies [licentiousness] & no strength at all will derive from it.

I ask you? are we better Jews, if we say not any longer פיוטים [piyyutim]? Comes more Devotion in our Synagogues if we have a Choir. I say candidly, no! All is nonsense, we have here a Choir, Our Chasan & the whole Congn dont know what is devotion. This is all spoken of to please the spirit of [the] time[s] & to be like other sects.

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 שלחן ערוך [Shulhan Arukh] is our Conference. We have no power to alter one Iod [yud—smallest letter in Hebrew alphabet][.]. Instead to call חזק ונתחזק בעד עמך [Be strong and let us be strengthened for the sake of our people] we will call קשוט עצמך וחז"כ קשוט אחרים [justify yourself and then justify others—Talmud Babli—Baba Metziah 107:2].

If every Rabbi has a true Jewish spirit & he will act according to our true religion, & keep st[r]ictly to our דין [law], than every one will bring back few to true religion וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל כאילו קים עולם מלא [one who saves one Jewish life, is as he preserved an entire world—Talmud Babli—Sanhedrin 37:1]. To bring the eyes of the world on our Convention is nothing for a man who will do nothing for the world, only for the good of his faith.

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 & consider well, before you go in, for such a step; on the consequences of introducing such a convention, who will be attended with dangerous consequences[.]

I remain for ever, Your truly friend & humble servant

A Rice

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

Source: I. Harold Sharfman, *The First Rabbi: Origins of Conflict Between Orthodox and Reform: Jewish Polemic Warfare in Pre-Civil War America: A Biographical History* (Malibu, Calif.: Pangloss Press, 1988), 239-41.

3.11—ROSA MORDECAI, MEMOIR DESCRIBING HEBREW SCHOOL EDUCATION IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA, 1850S

Rebecca Gratz (1781-1869), the Pennsylvania-born daughter of a successful merchant family, devoted her early adult life to various secular social service causes in Philadelphia. She also helped build Jewish communal life, founding the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1819. By 1838, she had turned her professional attention to Jewish education, founding what is credited

as the nation's first Jewish Sunday school—Philadelphia's "Hebrew Sunday School." Gratz served as both superintendent and president of the school, and played a central role in the development of its curriculum. In the 1850s, Rosa Mordecai (1839-1936), Gratz's grandniece, attended the school. In the selection to follow from Mordecai's memoirs, published in 1897,

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