

**Stephen S. Wise and the Urban Frontier:  
American Jewish Life in New York and the Pacific Northwest at  
the Dawn of the 20th Century**

by *Mark A. Raider*

**Abstract**

*The case of Stephen S. Wise provides a lens through which to examine American Jewry's transformation at the dawn of the 20th century. Not only were New York City and Portland, Oregon – places Wise called home – two geographic poles of America's urban frontier, they also highlight a spectrum of possibilities available to the New World's fledgling Jewish community. Viewed in tandem, they illustrate American society's raw, open, and pliable terrain as it emerged from a rural pre-industrial past. Moreover, by placing Wise in the context of the metropolitan growth that reshaped the Atlantic and Pacific frontiers in the late 19th century, we gain a better understanding of the relationship between the country's dynamic environmental conditions and the phenomenon of Jewish immigrant absorption, acculturation, and Americanization.*

*In withdrawing to the wilderness, Wise exposed himself to new possibilities for thinking about the place of Jews in American society and the future of American Judaism. He also honed the role of which he was to become a superlative exemplar – a 20th-century American rabbi at home in the worlds of religion and politics. Furthermore, his synthesis of liberal Judaism, American pluralism, Zionism, and Progressive-era notions of social justice anticipated the rise of a new American Jewish sensibility that would become normative in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup>*

Stephen S. Wise was arguably one of the two or three most important American Jewish leaders of the 20th century. He was brought from Budapest to the United States as a young child and grew up in the bustling metropolis of late 19th-century New York. He came to maturity in the years that marked America's shift from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era. This was a period that witnessed the explosive power of industrialization and urbanization as well as waves of mass European

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<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to the memory of Saadia Gelb (1913-2010), a Habonim and Haganah activist, founder of Kibbutz Kfar Blum, and kibbutz movement leader. In 1946, before settling in Palestine, Gelb received his rabbinic ordination from Stephen S. Wise's Jewish Institute of Religion. I would also like to thank Drs. Michael A. Meyer, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Robert M. Seltzer for reading drafts of this essay and offering many valuable and constructive suggestions.

migration to the United States, forces that radically reshaped American society and transformed American Jewry. Formerly, only a handful of Jewish communities of any considerable size could be found on North American soil. Now, in the turbulent decades that spanned the 19th and 20th centuries, what had previously been an outpost of the global Jewish diaspora emerged as a vital, distinctive, and powerful new center of Jewish life. In the post-Civil War era, a talented and determined cohort of German-speaking central European Jewish immigrants established a foothold in New York City, supplanted the remnants of the extant local Sephardi Jewish community dating back to the colonial era, and arose as American Jewry's new wealthy and influential vanguard.<sup>2</sup> For a brief period, roughly from the 1870s through World War I, much of the tenor and infrastructure of American Jewish scene was stamped by this central European Jewish sensibility, even as modern Jewish history's vast and dynamic social, cultural, and geographic landscape continued to shift and change.<sup>3</sup>

The case of Stephen S. Wise provides a lens through which to examine American Jewry's transformation at the dawn of the 20th century. Not only were New York City and Portland, Oregon – places Wise called home – two geographic poles of America's urban frontier, they also highlight a spectrum of possibilities available to the New World's fledgling Jewish community. Viewed in tandem, they illustrate American society's raw, open, and pliable terrain as it emerged from a rural pre-industrial past. Moreover, by placing Wise in the context of the metropolitan growth that reshaped the Atlantic and Pacific frontiers in the late 19th century, we gain a better understanding of the relationship between the country's dynamic environmental conditions and the phenomenon of Jewish immigrant absorption, acculturation, and Americanization.

Wise's formative years also unfold against the backdrop of his courtship of Louise Waterman, a New York Jewish heiress of central European ancestry from a distinguished liberal family. Stephen and Louise met in 1898 and were engaged shortly thereafter. In the meanwhile, Wise was approached by Portland's Congregation Beth Israel and offered its pulpit. In 1899 Stephen and Louise opted to delay their wedding until

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<sup>2</sup> There is a vast literature on the "German period" in American Jewish history. For useful studies of the context noted here see Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830-1914*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984); Barry Supple, "A Business Elite: German-Jewish Financiers in 19th-Century New York", in *The American Jewish Experience*, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna, (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1997), 99-112.

<sup>3</sup> See Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

reaching a decision about whether or not to leave New York. When in 1900, on the eve of their marriage, Wise left the eastern seaboard for Portland in advance of Louise, he had only a vague idea of what awaited them in the Pacific Northwest. He traveled as far away as he could (literally and figuratively) on a journey of personal, professional, and spiritual discovery. Louise soon followed and assumed the role of the rabbi's devoted wife and close confidant, and they started to raise a family of their own.

In withdrawing to the wilderness, Wise exposed himself to new possibilities for thinking about the place of Jews in American society and the future of American Judaism. He also honed the role of which he was to become a superlative exemplar – a 20th-century American rabbi at home in the worlds of religion and politics. Furthermore, his synthesis of liberal Judaism, American pluralism, Zionism, and Progressive-era notions of social justice anticipated the rise of a new American Jewish sensibility that would become normative in the 20th century. This development can be traced to the *fin-de-siècle* and the intersection of America's burgeoning urban scene, the displacement of America's central European Jewish elite by eastern European Jewry, and Wise's considerable reservoir of energy, talent, and ego.

### Early Years

The Wise family's pre-America history can be traced to 18th-century Hungary. Stephen's father, Aaron (Weisz) Wise (1844-1896), was descended from a distinguished line of Hungarian rabbis, and his grandfather, Josef Hirsch Weisz (1800-1881), was chief rabbi of Erlau (also known as Eger), a small town near Budapest. His mother, Sabine (Farkashazy) de Fischer (1838-1917), was previously married to Ignac Totvarosi Fischer, with whom she had two children, Emil and Vilma. After Fischer's death, Sabine married Aaron in 1870, a union that produced Otto (1871-1919) and Stephen (1874-1949).<sup>4</sup> In 1875, the Weiszs quit Budapest, Hungary's capital, and emigrated to the United States with their four children. They left behind a Jewish community some 70,000 strong and which, at the time, was split between fractious traditionalists and non-observant reformers.<sup>5</sup> Armed with rabbinic

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<sup>4</sup> The *New York Times* announcement about Aaron Wise's death indicates he and Sabine de Fischer (Farkashazy), the widow of Ignac Totvarosi Fischer, were married in 1864, but this appears to be an error. See "Rabbi Aaron Wise Dead", *New York Times*, March 31, 1896, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Southern Germany and Austria, including Hungary, Dalmatia and Bosnia*, (London: Dulau, 1891), 340; Jacob Katz, *A House Divided: Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth-Century Central European Jewry*, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 220-221.

training and a doctorate from the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Aaron, upon arriving in America, changed the spelling of the family name to “Wise.” He initially assumed the post of rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, an Orthodox community in Brooklyn, New York. A year later, he assumed the pulpit of Congregation Rodeph Sholom, an Orthodox synagogue located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Young Stephen grew up in a world where memories of the American Civil War were still fresh and New York’s urban landscape was undergoing rapid change. The Jewish community of Wise’s childhood numbered roughly 18,000 while the city’s overall population grew between 1870 and 1880 from roughly 940,000 to over 1.2 million.<sup>6</sup> Raised in a traditionalist environment, Wise’s early years were shaped by what he called “the Lexington Avenue, rather than the Park Avenue, ghetto of German-born and German-descended Jews of New York.”<sup>7</sup> His neighborhood included a mix of ethnic groups of varying social and economic status. The area’s townhouses, mostly brownstones, were home to respectable middle-class families like the Wises, while more affluent families resided in the stately households of the Murray Hill district, located between Lexington and Park Avenues. The wealthiest New Yorkers of this period built splendid mansions along Fifth Avenue.<sup>8</sup> As a child, Wise took a keen interest in the colorful secular world around him. His autobiography opens with lively and rich descriptions of “civic affairs,” beginning with the Hancock-Garfield and Cleveland-Blaine presidential contests of, respectively, 1880 and 1884, and the rough-and-tumble of municipal politics.<sup>9</sup>

Immigration was an especially powerful force in the New York setting of Wise’s youth. “Night after night as a child,” Wise recalled in his memoir, “I heard from my father’s lips the tale of cureless suffering inflicted on [the Jews of eastern Europe]... the unhappy exiles who were then landing at Castle Garden...”<sup>10</sup> Between 1880 and 1890, New York’s population grew to over 1.5 million residents, and by 1900 this number had surged

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell Gibson, *Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998), see: Table 10. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1870 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab10.txt>) and Table 11. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1880 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab11.txt>).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen S. Wise, *Challenging Years: The Autobiography of Stephen Wise* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1949), 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Norval White, Elliot Willensky, Fran Leadon, *ALA Guide to New York City*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 279-280; Edwin G. Burrows, Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 959-960.

<sup>9</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 3-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

to over 3.4 million.<sup>11</sup> In tandem, waves of eastern European Jewish immigration rocked the local Jewish community and the wider American Jewish scene. A combination of push and pull factors – anti-Jewish hostility in tsarist Russia, particularly the pogroms of 1881-82 and 1903-05, and the attraction of economic opportunity in the Golden Land – prompted some 2.5 million Jews to flee eastern Europe for the haven and opportunity of the United States.<sup>12</sup> As a result, American Jewry grew by a stunning 300 percent in just a couple decades. The late-19th century American Jewish community of approximately 230,000 souls (or .5 percent of the total American population) quadrupled to 938,000 in the late 1880s (or 1.3 percent of the population). This number would double yet again in the coming decade, reaching 1,777,000 (or approximately 2 percent of the American population) by the close of the century. In parallel, New York’s Jewish community grew to an unprecedented 417,000 strong. The net result was that it swiftly rivaled and then exceeded the six most populous Jewish centers in Europe. By 1900 New York’s Jewish community was twice the size of Warsaw (219,128), and three and four times larger than Budapest (166,198), Vienna (146,926), Odessa (138,935), Lodz (96,671) and Berlin (92,206).<sup>13</sup>

Despite these seismic changes, young Stephen had curiously little contact with or understanding of the Yiddish-speaking immigrant milieu until he reached adulthood. “I have always regretted and have been not a little ashamed,” he would later write, “that I barely knew or even touched the life of... the eastern European Jews... My contacts with these as a child and youth were few and limited, though I came to know their children in connection with the work of the Hebrew Free School Association and the Educational Alliance... My personal relationships with Jews had been largely limited... to the middle-class ghetto of New York.”<sup>14</sup> Protected by the comforts and relative insularity of the central European Jewish orbit, Wise was deeply influenced by Rodeph Sholom’s traditionalist German-speaking Jewish culture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Campbell Gibson, *Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998), see: Table 12. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1890 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab12.txt>) and Table 13. Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1900 (<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab13.txt>).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 151-152.

<sup>13</sup> Data compiled from (1) Nathan Goldberg, “The Jewish Population in the United States”, *The Jewish People Past and Present*, vol. 2 (New York: Central Yiddish Culture Organization, 1948), 25; (2) *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 1 (1899), 283-284; and (3) *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, eds. Paul Mendes-Flohr, Jehuda Reinharz, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 884.

<sup>14</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of Stephen S. Wise to Benjamin Blumenthal, November 24, 1896, in *Stephen S. Wise: Servant of the People*, ed. Carl Hermann Voss, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication

Wise was clearly the product of a new American reality, one in which the forces of modernity reached into every corner of Jewish life, giving rise to new non-traditional and secular forms of Jewish expression.<sup>16</sup> While it is clear he felt a strong sense of privilege and responsibility when it came to the rabbinic mantle of his forebears, he was also comfortable with different streams of Judaism from a very young age. His personal growth coincided with Rodeph Sholom's gradual shift in the 1870s and 1880s away from Orthodoxy and toward Reform Judaism. This was an incremental process rather than an abrupt break, and even after Rodeph Sholom formally joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations it remained one of several synagogue affiliates that were "quite traditional in character."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Wise, who in 1890 entered City College at age 15, shortly thereafter commenced his rabbinic studies under the Talmud scholar Alexander Kohut and Reform theologian Gustav Gottheil, two distinguished scholar-rabbis shaped by liberal Judaism and *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in 19th-century central Europe. By the spring 1893, the precocious young Wise – not yet ordained – was installed as "assistant preacher" to Henry F. Jacobs of Congregation Bnai Jeshurun (also known as the Madison Avenue Synagogue), one of New York City's leading synagogues.<sup>18</sup>

Like Rodeph Sholom, Bnai Jeshurun's institutional culture was shaped by the late-19th century intracommunal debate over tradition and modernity. In 1884 Bnai Jeshurun abandoned the Reform movement and in 1889, like dozens of other congregations in this period, it published its own prayer book.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after Wise assumed his post at Bnai Jeshurun, he considered finishing his rabbinic studies at Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Cincinnati. He even corresponded with Isaac Mayer Wise, HUC's venerable founder and first president, who encouraged him. Studying at HUC would have been a natural step for Wise. It was the path followed by most of his native-born and immigrant

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Society, 1970), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1982), chs. 2-3; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 101-118, 225-235.

<sup>17</sup> Michael A. Meyer, "A Centennial History", in *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years*, ed. Samuel E. Karff, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1976), 39; Jeffrey S. Gurock, "The Winnowing of American Orthodoxy", in *American Jewish History*, ed. Jeffrey S. Gurock, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1148-1151. Aaron Wise is listed a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1895; see *Year Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 6 (1895), 149. Stephen S. Wise is first listed as a CCAR member in 1896; see *Year Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 7 (1896), 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Servant of the People*, ed. Voss, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Gary P. Zola, *The Americanization of the Jewish Prayer Book and the Liturgical Development of Congregation Abanath Chesed, New York City*, (New York: Central Synagogue, 2008), 9.

peers, including Samuel Goldenson, Maximilian Heller, and Judah L. Magnes. (In time, they too emerged as major Jewish public figures. Goldenson and Heller would each serve as president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and Magnes would become the founding chancellor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.)<sup>20</sup> These young men and others simultaneously pursued rabbinic training at HUC while studying for their baccalaureate degrees at the University of Cincinnati. By contrast, in a striking display of Wise's maverick spirit, he decided against Cincinnati, a place he later asserted "offered its students an inadequate experimental station" and had "ceased to be the large and vital Jewish center it had been in [its] earliest days."<sup>21</sup> If he was going to leave New York even temporarily, he explained, he would do so "with a view to obtaining a *batarab* (authorization as rabbi) [sic] from some European scholar."<sup>22</sup>

That European scholar-rabbi proved to be Vienna's renowned preacher, Adolph Jellinek. Jellinek's liberal outlook, engagement in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and talents as an institution builder all bear a striking resemblance to Wise's trajectory. The older man's impact on Wise is, however, hard to define, especially when one considers that Wise spent only the summer of 1893 in Vienna. Moreover, the difference between Jellinek's rejection of the idea of Jewish nationhood and Wise's proto-Zionism is stark. What does seem plausible is that Wise's exposure to Jellinek influenced his developing interest in the nexus between liberal Judaism and the craft of Jewish preaching, particularly the model of edifying sermons that combined secular and religious themes. In an abstract sense, Wise seems to have been receptive to Jellinek's embrace of Jewry's diasporic condition *and* insistence on the Jewish people's "distinctiveness" and possession of special "*Stammeseigentümlichkeiten*" (ethical qualities).<sup>23</sup> This sensibility certainly meshed with Wise's dual attraction to *klal yisrael*, the traditional Jewish notion that "all Israel is one," and Reform Judaism's social justice mission. Wise later claimed to

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the atmosphere at Hebrew Union College in this period, see Daniel P. Kotzin, *Judah L. Magnes: An American Jewish Nonconformist*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), ch. 2. See also *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, eds. Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman, Malcolm H. Stern, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), 72-74, 86-87, 135-137.

<sup>21</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> "Congregation B'ne Jeshurun", *American Hebrew*, 1893, 825, 5/9, Stephen S. Wise Papers, MS-49, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio [hereafter "Wise Papers"].

<sup>23</sup> Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War 1*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34-35; Marsha L. Rozenblit, "Jewish Identity and the Modern Rabbi: The Cases of Isak Noa Mannheimer, Adolph Jellinek, and Moritz Gudemann in Nineteenth-Century Vienna", *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 35 (1990), 103-131.

have been ordained by Jellinek. This account is consistent with the rationale he offered prior to his European sojourn, although the various accounts of Wise's rabbinic training are vague. If the extent of Jellinek's tutelage remains unclear, the matter seems not to have posed a problem in Wise's lifetime.<sup>24</sup> It is ironic that Wise's uncertain credentials place him in the company of Isaac Mayer Wise, arguably the 19th century's most significant American Jewish leader, whose rabbinic training and ordination is likewise enveloped in mystery. In America, with its longstanding culture of self-invention, individual talent and force of personality were important traits in the success of both "self-made" ministers.<sup>25</sup>

In the fall 1893, Wise's rabbinic career took an unexpected turn when Jacobs suddenly died. Shortly thereafter, Wise was elevated to the position of senior minister. There was apparently no concern about his ordination or abilities. At age 20, though still relatively unknown, he was now the spiritual leader of one of New York Jewry's flagship institutions. In short order, owing to his considerable oratorical and organizational skills, he developed a strong rapport with his congregation. He also began to establish a reputation as an outspoken advocate of rights for women and immigrants. To this end, he supported the creation of Bnai Jeshurun's Sisterhood for Personal Service, a women's group affiliated with a network of likeminded activists at other synagogues.<sup>26</sup> The group in turn opened a religious school and cared for impoverished eastern European Jewish immigrant families on the Lower East Side.

Wise reached another pivotal juncture in 1896, with the death of his father, Aaron Wise. Rodeph Sholom now invited the younger man to take up his late father's pulpit, but he declined, professing it would be impossible to "forsake Bnai Jeshurun who are in every sense become 'my own people.'"<sup>27</sup> Though Wise does not dwell on these years in his memoir and the historical record is sparse, the curious mixture of his traditional upbringing, liberal religious views, and non-conformist attitudes made Wise was something of an iconoclast. His determination

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the biographical entry for Stephen S. Wise in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, which was published during his years in Portland, makes no mention of his rabbinic training with Jellinek. See "Wise, Stephen Samuel", *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (1905), 543.

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985*, vol. 1 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 676; Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22-24.

<sup>26</sup> Felicia Herman, "From Priestess to Hostess: Sisterhoods of Personal Service in New York City, 1887-1936", in *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 153.

<sup>27</sup> Letter of Stephen S. Wise to Benjamin Blumenthal, November 24, 1896, in *Servant of the People*, ed. Voss, 6.



to remain at Bnai Jeshurun may also reflect a strong desire to forge his own professional path. He could not imagine returning to Rodeph Sholem, but neither did he squarely adhere to Bnai Jeshurun's proto-Conservative and anti-establishment sensibility. In fact, at this juncture Wise joined the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform movement's countrywide rabbinic association and authoritative religious body.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, his CCAR affiliation was surprising, particularly given his public visibility as the rabbi of a major non-Reform congregation in Manhattan. On the other, viewed in the context of his generational profile Wise's decision might be understood as natural and strategic. As his contemporary Maximilian Heller explained in a private letter: "I don't think that we young rabbis are in any way separated by differences of theological education; the American influences and present-day tasks which are common to us result, in spite of ourselves, in making us feel at one. I am sure, were we two, e.g., to meet, it would not take five minutes for us to find a common level of cordiality."<sup>29</sup> In short, Wise identified generally with the liberal views of Reform Judaism and likely prized the CCAR imprimatur and its elevated sense of rabbinic authority.

In the 19th century, the notion that rabbis should acquire rigorous academic and "scientific" training, with an eye toward modernizing the rabbinic profession as a whole, became a hallmark of central European Judaism.<sup>30</sup> The premium in this regard was carried over to the American setting by German-speaking Jewish immigrants. In the New World, however, attaining a secular education was invariably informed by American opportunities and mores. Among the most salient figures in Wise's development was Thomas Davidson, a charismatic Scottish-American philosopher. Dubbed the "knight errant of the intellectual life" by William James, Davidson was a central figure in the late 19th-century "transatlantic community of discourse" with respect to questions of religion and society, ethical socialism, and Transcendentalism.<sup>31</sup> In 1889, Davidson founded Glenmore in upstate New York, a popular "Summer School for the Cultural Sciences" located in the Adirondacks.<sup>32</sup> An

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen S. Wise is first listed a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1896; see *Year Book of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 7 (1897), 177.

<sup>29</sup> Letter of Maximilian Heller to Stephen S. Wise, December 9, 1896, 3/9, Wise Papers. Ironically, despite their shared Zionist views, Wise and Heller would later become rivals; see Gary P. Zola, "Reform Judaism's Pioneer Zionist: Maximilian Heller", *American Jewish History* 73: 1-4 (September 1983-June 1984), 384-386.

<sup>30</sup> Rozenblitt, "Jewish Identity and the Modern Rabbi," 103.

<sup>31</sup> Michael H. DeArme, "Thomas Davidson's Apeirotheism and its Influence on William James and John Dewey", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48:4 (October-December 1987), 691-707.

<sup>32</sup> James A. Good, "The Development of Thomas Davidson's Religious and Social

inspirational and eloquent champion of this-worldly social action, Davidson's teachings drew on classical thought, religious sources, and humanism to create a philosophy he called Apeirotheism. For a few weeks each summer in the 1890s, Wise, joined with dozens other young men who resided at or near Glenmore and attended lectures given by scholars drawn from "the faculties of the great universities," including the philosophers William James and John Dewey, the psychological theorist J. Clark Murray, the philologist Max Margolis, and the ethicist Josiah Royce.<sup>33</sup> In sum, while not a place of rigorous study, Glenmore brought together many of the country's best minds. Wise, an eager participant hungry for intellectual and social camaraderie, found the environment intoxicating.<sup>34</sup>

Wise's contact with Davidson continued on the Lower East Side. The older man was something of a celebrity at the People's Institute, an adult education offshoot of Cooper Union that aimed to be "a laboratory for working out the practical problems of democratizing intellectual life," and the Educational Alliance, a vibrant Americanization project sponsored by "uptown" central European Jewish philanthropists.<sup>35</sup> Here Davidson came into close personal contact with New York Jewry's left-leaning eastern European immigrant intellectuals. His efforts garnered the support of Joseph Pulitzer, the publisher of the *New York World*, who was himself a Hungarian Jewish immigrant.<sup>36</sup> With Pulitzer's backing, the People's Institute and the Educational Alliance sponsored Davidson's other major initiative, Breadwinner's College, which aimed to "raise laborers to a higher level of intellectual and spiritual power by exposing

Thought", *The Autodidact Project* (August 2004), 1, 5  
[www.autodidactproject.org/other.TD.html](http://www.autodidactproject.org/other.TD.html).

<sup>33</sup> "A Course in Culture Science", *New York Times*, July 10, 1892, 17.

<sup>34</sup> "Prolonging Summer Studies: Thomas Davidson's School at Glenmore and its Work", *New York Times*, September 18, 1892. See also: Douglas R. Anderson, "Philosophy as Teaching: James's 'Knight Errant,' Thomas Davidson", *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18:3 (2004), 239-247; *Memorial of Thomas Davidson, The Wandering Scholar*, ed. William Knight, (Boston: Ginn, 1907), 31.

<sup>35</sup> "If we will but lay aside prejudice and superstition," Davidson asserted, "truth is not so hard find... Every great change in individual and social ideals – and we are on the verge of such a change – begins small... Money is but means, and economic justice can never come till men are just through and through"; "Open Letter from Thomas Davidson to the Class in History and Social Science in the Educational Alliance", May 4, 1899, in Thomas Davidson, *The Education of the Wage-Earners: A Contribution toward the Solution of the Educational Problem of Democracy*, ed. Charles M. Bakewell, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1904), 125-126. See also Tim Lacy, "Fostering Unity Amidst Diversity: The People's Institute and Great Books Idea, 1897-1930" (2008), 2, unpublished paper, [www.bu.edu/historic/conference08/Lacy.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/historic/conference08/Lacy.pdf). My thanks to Dr. Lacy for allowing me to cite this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Pulitzer's relationship with Davidson is explored in James McGrath Morris, *Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 40-42, 243-244, 483-484.

them to the best culture of the ages.”<sup>37</sup> Wise followed Davidson’s efforts closely and, partly as a result, his own attachments to the Educational Alliance deepened. He developed a strong affinity for the lively and left-leaning sensibility of the Yiddish-speaking milieu, including the Zionist preacher Zvi Hirsch Masliansky.<sup>38</sup> Above all, Wise revered Davidson as both a mentor and “Heaven’s own soldier, [who] wielded the sword of the Spirit.”<sup>39</sup> “...Judaism, like all living things, changes as it grows...” Davidson instructed Wise, “while the letter killeth, the spirit keepeth alive.” He called on Wise to “diffuse a twentieth-century Judaism, fitted to meet the needs of the present day.”<sup>40</sup>

Wise’s receptivity to Davidson’s views reflected the younger man’s developing appreciation for the ethical teachings of Christianity and the work of Christian-inspired socialists. “How readily disposed are a number of Jewish teachers, including myself, in this country,” he stated, “to recognize the place of Jesus in Jewish life...”<sup>41</sup> In subsequent decades, he was to articulate this theme most fully in a series of highly controversial sermons about Jesus.<sup>42</sup> At this early juncture, however, his views reflect his growing identification with the social gospel movement, a loose coalition of reform-minded Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish activists who imagined “a future social order based on spiritual ideals heretofore unattained” and envisioned the United States “as a redeemed nation dedicated to a just society for all its citizens.”<sup>43</sup> He was particularly drawn to the hopeful notion that “religious unity” and “the true spirit of fellowship” were “haltingly” gaining ground on the eve of the 20th century. Owing to an array of social, scientific, and industrial advances and innovations, Wise asserted, “the world is coming to believe in the

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<sup>37</sup> Good, “The Development of Thomas Davidson’s Religious and Social Thought”, 6.

<sup>38</sup> See: Mark A. Raider, *The Emergence of American Zionism*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 14-15; Gary P. Zola, “The People’s Preacher: A Study of the Life and Writings of Zvi Hirsch Masliansky, 1856-1942”, ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1982, 36-37, 42-43, 47, 75-77, 92, 98, 106; Moshe D. Sherman, *Orthodox Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 147-149.

<sup>39</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> Letter of Thomas Davidson to Stephen S. Wise, June 7, 1900, in *ibid.*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> In a widely publicized 1925 sermon, Wise asserted “Jesus was a great moral leader, whose faith and life are ‘a part of the Jewish possessions and of the very fiber of our Jewish heritage’”; quoted in Marc Saperstein, “Changes in the Modern Sermon”, *Encyclopedia of Judaism*, vol. 5, eds. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, William Scott Green, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), 2265-2283. See also Melvin I. Urofsky, “Stephen S. Wise and the ‘Jesus Controversy’”, *Midstream* 36:6 (June/July 1980), 36-40; Harold Brackman, “Jesus, Spinoza, and Jewish Modernity”, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Jesus,+Spinoza,+and+Jewish+modernity>.

<sup>43</sup> Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 94; Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective*, (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1996), 411, n. 5.

power of fellowship and the value of fraternity.”<sup>44</sup> For Wise, Judaism and Christianity were rooted in compatible ethical systems, and he believed they could be fashioned into a modern American idiom. Asserting his own version of the social gospel, Wise declaimed he would “make [his] religious work a moral force, an ethical compulsion standing for something in civic life, in education, in all things that make for the higher life of the individual and the community alike.”<sup>45</sup>

We now turn to a curious chapter in Wise’s profile, namely the accusation that he plagiarized his doctoral thesis. As with Wise’s rabbinic credentials, the issue is blurred by the haze of time and a sparse historical record. My limited aim here is not to engage in or resolve this controversy, but rather to consider its implications. What is certain is that from 1894 to 1900 Wise pursued his doctorate under Columbia University’s Richard J. Gottheil (the son of Gustav Gottheil), a well known Semitics scholar and Zionist leader. He completed a dissertation, later issued by the Jewish Publication Society of America (JPS) under the title *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities: An Ethical Treatise of the Eleventh Century by Solomon Ibn Gabirol* (1902), which combined a translation and brief analysis of the medieval Andalusian Jewish philosopher’s famous work. Wise’s study utilized a variety of primary and critical materials in Arabic, Syriac, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Latin, German, and English. Such a theoretical and linguistic achievement was, of course, no mean feat. The rub here is the allegation that one of Wise’s tutors, the scholar Henry Gersoni – who worked for JPS as a translator and is known to have been a complex, embittered, and “none-too-reliable” personality – may have improved upon or produced some aspects of the translation Wise later claimed as his own.<sup>46</sup>

There seems little doubt Wise wrote the lengthy introductory essay that accompanies the published dissertation. In fact, it is this component that offers a glimpse of the young man’s emerging *Weltanschauung*. “The doctrine that the world was created by Deity,” Wise explains, “has purely ethical significance... The idea that one man was the progenitor of the whole human race, implies the loftiest humanitarian principles that can be conceived. ...Almost all the narratives of the Bible, and, certainly, a

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in “Christian Unity Discussed by Eminent Men”, *New York Times*, April 4, 1909, SM4. Wise was the only rabbi among the group of seven prominent New York City religious leaders whose views were solicited by the newspaper. The other six men were Christian ministers.

<sup>45</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the allegation that Wise plagiarized his doctorate, which rests on assertions by the Hebrew scholar Jacob Kabakoff, see Melvin I. Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 12-15. See also Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888-1988*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 74, 320, n. 65.

large number of passages in the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, are of clear and unmistakable ethical bearing and import...<sup>47</sup> The connections and distinctions Wise makes here are significant. He esteems God's awesome power and the authority of Scripture, but emphasizes a this-worldly and humanity-centered understanding of divine will. The oral and written traditions of Judaism, he suggests, commend a life based on goodness and virtue. Next, he points to Gabirol's "new stand," which he describes as "an attempt to systematize the principles of ethics, independently of religious dogma or belief..."<sup>48</sup> Wise links Gabirol's expositions to a rational understanding of individual and collective behavior. Part of Gabirol's innovation, he suggests, was his capacity to stretch the boundaries of homiletic discourse from within the context of rabbinic tradition. In this manner, Wise argues, despite the opposition of Gabirol's contemporaries, he enhanced the ideational framework of Jewish life in its evolving temporal context and strengthened the bonds among God's human creations. It is hard to ignore what seems to be the self-reflective dimension of the foregoing disquisition. Was Wise, in his intellectual and spiritual quest, searching for an authoritative framework to support his own liberal views and activity? In time, of course, he would play an outsized role in challenging and enlarging the edifice of the American rabbinate.

Even if we assume the rumors about Wise's alleged dishonesty to be false, there nevertheless remains a curious gap between his doctoral performance and his subsequent career trajectory. Beyond the dissertation Wise did not display a penchant for academic work and his Hebrew language skills were known to be weak. Where other rabbis like Solomon Schechter, Mordecai M. Kaplan, and Abba Hillel Silver were scholars, intellectuals, and Hebraists, Wise was a gifted and talented impresario. Moreover, though prolific, thoughtful, and deeply intelligent, he was not an original thinker or systematic theologian. He may have relished the status of "Reverend Dr.," but he appears to have been ill-fitted to the contemplative life of a scholar. Rather, one historian aptly notes, Wise was "a young man in a hurry."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the salient question to be raised – as in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., who is known to have plagiarized portions of his doctorate – is what this episode might reveal about his psychology. Though we can only speculate, it may be useful to consider the following tentative hypotheses. First, against the backdrop of his Aaron Wise's advanced degree, Stephen likely viewed

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen S. Wise, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities: An Ethical Treatise of the Eleventh Century by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Printed from an Unique Arabic Manuscript, Together with a Translation and an Essay on the Place of Gabirol in the History of the Development of Jewish Ethics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1902), 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 676.

attaining a doctorate as a matter of family honor. Second, given the mix of Wise's middle-class upbringing, his ambitious strivings, and American society's general openness, he probably understood intellectual achievement (as opposed to commercial or political success) to be the ticket of entry into the leadership circle to which he aspired. Third, that he sought to burnish his personal status and professional identity with a PhD from an American university was, paradoxically, consistent with realizing German Jewish cultural expectations even as he and other "new" Americans defied the prevailing European view of American Judaism as spiritually and intellectually barren.<sup>50</sup>

Another striking illustration of Wise's maverick predisposition was his decision in 1897 to help launch the Federation of American Zionists (FAZ). Stepping into the limelight, he became the FAZ's secretary and, with Richard J. Gotheil, he served as an American representative to the fledgling Zionist Organization's Vienna-based executive committee.<sup>51</sup> At first blush, Wise's attraction to the Jewish nationalist movement appears quite natural, especially given his family's traditionalist attitudes and his paternal grandmother's immigration to Ottoman Palestine. His earliest memories, he later recalled, included collecting funds at age nine with "a little red tin box, labeled 'Jerusalem.'" In another instance, he was commissioned by the *New York Sun* to write a series of letters from Palestine during a planned (but aborted) 1892 trip.<sup>52</sup> But the politicization of Wise's proto-Zionist views came in 1896, when Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist and the founder of modern political Zionism, burst on the scene with his political treatise, *The Jews' State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*. Thereafter, Wise – in stark contrast the prevailing American Jewish sensibility – became an ardent and outspoken Zionist advocate. In 1898 he traveled to the Zionist Congress in Europe where "thrilled and grateful, I caught then a first glimpse of the power and the pride and the nobleness of the Jewish people, which my American upbringing and even service to New York Jewry had not in any degree given me."<sup>53</sup> It was at this juncture that Herzlian Zionism was fully grafted on to Wise's worldview. His expansive view of liberal Judaism and *klal yisrael* now merged with a heightened sense of ethnic national identity.

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<sup>50</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 156-159; Shuly Rubin Schwartz, *The Emergence of Jewish Scholarship in America: The Publication of the Jewish Encyclopedia*, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1991), 5-8, 168-172.

<sup>51</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 1 (1899), 36.

<sup>52</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 39.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen S. Wise, "The Beginning of American Zionism", *Jewish Frontier* (August 1947), 7.

Had Wise contented himself with playing a nominal role in Zionist affairs, his behavior might have seemed a bit quixotic but unremarkable. To be sure, other rabbis from the left and center of American Jewish life were sympathetic to Jewish nationalism, albeit in a muted fashion. What distinguished Wise was the way he openly challenged the dominant anti-Zionist trope of American Jewry's communal and institutional leadership. He not only championed the Zionist cause but emphatically positioned himself as one of Herzl's New World lieutenants.<sup>54</sup> It is hard to overstate the extent to which Wise's brand of Zionism – albeit at odds with much of the Jewish scene around him – anticipated changes in American Jewish culture that would become normative two or three decades hence.<sup>55</sup> In the meanwhile, Zionism at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was but one of many competing ideas about the Jewish future. Like other cultural and political trends that flourished in this era (e.g., Jewish socialism, territorialism, Yiddishism, diaspora nationalism, and neo-Orthodoxy), the cause of Jewish nationalism gained traction with the waves of eastern European Jewish migration to the United States and was buoyed by communal responses to the pogroms and the gradual implosion of the tsarist Russian empire.<sup>56</sup>

In practical terms, New York City, with its highly concentrated and fast growing Jewish community, provided the scope and inducement for a variety of competing Zionist groups that cut across all social, economic, and religious boundaries and produced an efflorescence of cultural, political, and artistic expression. By 1900, the FAZ, headquartered in Manhattan, claimed to have 8000 members countrywide in 135 affiliated societies. New York City and Brooklyn were themselves home to twenty Zionist societies, including one unaffiliated group.<sup>57</sup> The FAZ, noted observer Charles S. Bernheimer, “contains a goodly number of societies in various cities, with an especially large contingent in New York City. These societies are being made centers of educational effort, particularly among the recent immigrant populations, and may become an important factor in the promotion of local intellectual and religious activity, apart from the Zionist propaganda.”<sup>58</sup> Henrietta Szold, who in 1912 founded

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<sup>54</sup> Shapiro, *A Reform Rabbi in the Progressive Era*, 63-64; Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice*, 23-24.

<sup>55</sup> Evyatar Friesel, “The Meaning of Zionism and Its Influence among the American Jewish Religious Movements”, in *Zionism and Religion*, eds. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, Anita Shapira, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 180-181; Jonathan D. Sarna, “Converts to Zionism in the American Reform Movement”, in *ibid.*, 188-203; Zola, “Reform Judaism's Pioneer Zionist”, 378-379.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 463-464, 473-484.

<sup>57</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 2 (1900), 170, 176-177, 183.

<sup>58</sup> Charles S. Bernheimer, “Summary of Jewish Organizations in the United States”, *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 2 (1900), 499.

the Hadassah Women's Zionist Organization, went a step further and speculated that Zionism's potential as a unifying force portended the rise and future dominance of eastern European Jewry in American Jewish life. "Under its influence," she predicted, "the Russian Jews will give up their separate, somewhat distrustful existence, and the separate institutions... which they are creating by the score in all larger cities... They will use the institutions created by [their central European predecessors] as the stock upon which to engraft their intenser fervor, their broader Jewish scholarship, a more enlightened conception of Jewish ideals, and a more inclusive interest in Jewish world questions."<sup>59</sup>

As Bernheimer's and Szold's observations suggest, Zionism in the United States was characterized early on by the way it appealed to and permeated a broad swath of American Jewry, especially eastern European Jewish immigrants, their offspring, and first-generation Jews. Both a romantic vision of the fledgling Jewish nationalist enterprise in Palestine and a projection of American society as it ought to be, Zionism played a special role in the melding of Jewish and American traditions of cultural innovation, social planning, and imagining the future.<sup>60</sup> Such thinking was reinforced at the regional level by the rapid development of American Jewry's countrywide communal infrastructure. Never before in Jewish history had a host society provided the scope and inducement for so many Jewish communities to arise and expand so swiftly and achieve such dramatic social, economic, and political success. The meteoric growth of Jewish life in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and elsewhere demonstrated, in concrete terms, the possibility and practicality of establishing new and modern forms of Jewish expression in the American urban setting. If industry, commerce, and other secular instruments of the New World could be harnessed by America's Jews, why not also by the Jews of Palestine? Against this backdrop, Wise argued, Zionism in its Americanized form, was something of a metaphilosophy to unite American Jews of all persuasions.

### **Withdrawal to the Pacific Northwest**

In 1898, following his return from the Second Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, Wise undertook an active campaign to "win new recruits for Zionism." "We have a hard, uphill fight for Zionism in this

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<sup>59</sup> Henrietta Szold, "Introductory", in *The Russian Jew in the United States: Studies of Social Conditions in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, with a Description of Rural Settlements*, ed. Charles S. Bernheimer, (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1905), 16-17.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "A Projection of America as It Ought to Be: Zion in the Mind's Eye of American Jews", in *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews*, ed. Allon Gal, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 41-59; Raider, *The Emergence of American Zionism*, ch. 3.



country,” Wise wrote to Herzl. “The Jewish press is almost unanimous in its opposition, and I am ashamed to state that the fewest of the American Jewish ministers... are lending it any support whatever.”<sup>61</sup> He gave public lectures up and down the eastern seaboard, committed himself to editing a news update about “Zion and Zionism” for the influential English-language weekly, the *American Hebrew*, and served as a correspondent for the Zionist Organization’s German-language organ, *Die Welt*, as well as London’s *Jewish World*.<sup>62</sup> With each step, he further isolated himself from the mainstream of American Jewry.

Against the backdrop of his budding courtship of Louise Waterman, Wise now traveled to the Pacific Northwest as an emissary of the Zionist movement. He benefited particularly from the sympathetic stance of Solomon Hirsch. A generation older than Wise, Hirsch’s rise to prominence in Portland, Oregon, first in wholesale trade and imports, then in manufacturing, and finally in politics, made him one of the region’s most influential figures. He was active in the Republican party and served under President Benjamin Harrison as U.S. minister to the Ottoman Empire from 1889 to 1892. He was also willing to use his contacts to assist the Zionist Organization.<sup>63</sup>

It is important to point out that until the establishment of railway transport between Seattle and points east in the 1890s, Portland, located at the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers, served as America’s northwest’s maritime hub. The small city, “a unique combination of the inland town and the seaport,” retained much of its frontier village character well into the early 20th century.<sup>64</sup> Known as “mudtown” and “stumptown” owing to its unpaved roads and the remains of trees left in the wake of rapid municipal development, “iron-shod horses clattered along [Portland’s streets] at a good speed with light wagons and buggies.”<sup>65</sup> At the same time, according to the Oregon chronicler and Methodist minister H.K. Hines, the city was fast becoming a “a great commercial emporium.” He noted the “long rows of stores and hotels, rising six or ten stories, of massive form and splendid architecture... the ceaseless stream of comers and goers, the flashing of hundreds of electric cars... the ceaseless roar of business...”<sup>66</sup> In short,

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<sup>61</sup> Letter of Stephen S. Wise to Theodor Herzl, June 26, 1898, in *Servant of the People*, ed. Voss, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Letter of Stephen S. Wise to Theodor Herzl, October 26, 1898, in *ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Gaston, *Portland, Oregon, its History and Builders: In Connection with the Antecedent Explorations, Discoveries, and Movements of the Pioneers that Selected the Site for the Great City of the Pacific*, vol. 2 (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1911), 144-149.

<sup>64</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Shaping of a City: Business and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1885 to 1915*, (Portland, OR: Georgian Press, 1976), 224.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 222.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 4.

Portland as a whole contrasted starkly with the infrastructure and fixed social hierarchies of the eastern seaboard.

The 1890 U.S. census noted that Portland's population was "nearly an even 70,000 inhabitants."<sup>67</sup> Oregon's total Jewish population in this period was estimated at 4500 to 5500, while Portland itself was home to perhaps 500 or more Jews.<sup>68</sup> The cultural context, social status, and dynamic situation of Portland Jewry was not lost on Wise. Largely devoid of the divisions and tensions that accompanied rapid industrialization in other cities, Portland's financial and commercial scene benefited "the persistent power of the merchant class," including a small cohort of elite Jewish figures.<sup>69</sup> By the 1890s, the Fleischners, Lowengarts, Sellings, and other successful entrepreneurs of central European ancestry grouped around Solomon Hirsch had emerged as the local Jewish establishment, insiders who negotiated and defined the social and economic relations between Jew and gentile in the Pacific Northwest. The Jewish community also produced a handful of notable politicians, including Bernard Goldsmith and Philip Wasserman, "worthy" central European immigrants of "business ability" and "energetic character."<sup>70</sup> That Goldsmith was a conservative Democrat and Wasserman a liberal Republican illustrates the relatively moderate political profile of Oregon's Jews. This is also evident in the case of Joseph Simon, who became one of the region's most powerful lawyers, real estate speculators, and politicians.<sup>71</sup> Like his gentile law partner Joseph N. Dolph, Simon was among "the foremost Republican leaders of the state," and in 1898 he was elected to the U.S. senate, where he served as chairman of the Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands in the 56th and 57th U.S. Congresses.<sup>72</sup> In this capacity, Simon presided over the federal appropriation of Indian tribal lands and the expansion of the railways into the Pacific Northwest, including legislation "by which railroad companies could receive blanket approval from the secretary of the interior for rights-of-way through Indian lands."<sup>73</sup> The net result was the

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<sup>67</sup> Reported in "Three Cities in One", *New York Times*, June 14, 1891, 12.

<sup>68</sup> "Statistical Summary by States", *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 3 (1901), 147; "Table 2. Jewish Population of Selected Western Towns, 1880", in *Jews of the Pacific Coast: Reinventing Community on America's Edge*, eds. Ellen Eisenberg, Ava F. Kahn William Toll, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>69</sup> William Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class: Portland Jewry over Four Generations*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1982), 88.

<sup>70</sup> H.W. Scott, *History of Portland, Oregon with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Prominent Citizens and Pioneers*, (Syracuse: D. Mason, 1890), 196.

<sup>71</sup> Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 85-86.

<sup>72</sup> Scott, *History of Portland*, 199-200.

<sup>73</sup> Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown, *Indians of the Pacific Northwest*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 263. See also: 25 USC chapter 8, "Rights-of-Way Through Indian Lands", <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/25C8.txt>.

realization of decades of efforts by the U.S. government, the railroad industry, and various business and legal interests to disenfranchise the region's native American population and complete the area's transportation system. Like the gentile "frontier merchants who laid the business-political foundations of late 19th-century Portland," the city's Jewish elite stood to benefit considerably from these developments.<sup>74</sup>

Despite their economic and political achievements, Portland's Jewish "plutocrats" remained parvenus in a Christian milieu.<sup>75</sup> Talented entrepreneurs, businessmen, and civic leaders, their successes brought them public approbation, but not social acceptance.<sup>76</sup> A useful illustration in this regard was the Arlington Club, created shortly after the Civil War as a "social club" for the WASP upper crust to "fraternize for mutual enjoyment and relation and to provide a meeting place for discussing their own and Portland's destiny." Jews could not join this "prestigious men's club" until nearly a century later. Meanwhile, they created the Concordia Club, established in 1879 as a German Jewish gentlemen's "counterpart to the gentile Arlington Club."<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, anti-Jewish hostility in the Pacific Northwest was far less potent than other parts of the country.<sup>78</sup>

The Jewish community's foothold in Portland, combined with the Oregon's open social and economic environment, helped to attract eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The newcomers, many of whom were dispersed to the Northwest by the Baron de Hirsch Fund's Industrial Removal Office and supported by the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, were totally unlike their central European predecessors.<sup>79</sup> A low-level clash of cultures ensued between Jews of central European ancestry, acculturated, refined, and largely settled in Portland for at least a generation, and the new Yiddish-speaking arrivals. In all, Portland Jewry grew rapidly, absorbing wave after wave of newcomers in little over a decade, until by 1905 the community numbered approximately 4000 persons.<sup>80</sup> On the whole, unlike New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago and other eastern metropolitan centers, where intra-ethnic tensions ran

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<sup>74</sup> MacColl, *The Shaping of a City*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Diversity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 48-50.

<sup>77</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl, "Eight Unique Contributions to Oregon Public Life", unpublished paper (July 23, 1992), 6-7, Oregon Historical Society, MSS 2441-1.

<sup>78</sup> Steven Lowenstein, *The Jews of Oregon, 1850-1950*, (Portland, OR: Jewish Historical Society of Oregon, 1987), 66-67; Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 87-88, 96-97.

<sup>79</sup> Eisenberg, Kahn and Toll, *Jews of the Pacific Coast*, 79-83.

<sup>80</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (1909), 373.

high, the situation in Portland was fairly benign.<sup>81</sup>

This was the environment Wise encountered when he arrived in the Pacific Northwest as a Zionist emissary. On the one hand, Portland's Jewish leaders were almost all immigrants to the New World, most of whom hailed from German-speaking lands and possessed a cultural orientation akin to his own. On the other, they were pioneers whose hardscrabble origins and economic successes were bound up with the raw and unfettered openness of the American West. The combination of a familiar central European sensibility and the example of successful self-made men must have appealed greatly to Wise, especially at this juncture as he endeavored to distinguish himself and forge his own path.

By chance, Wise's speaking tour coincided with an effort by Portland Jewry's elite to recruit a new rabbi for Congregation Beth Israel. Established in 1854, Beth Israel was Portland's leading synagogue – “the preserve of the old south German families,” including the elite business cohort grouped around Hirsch, Simon, Benjamin Selling, and others.<sup>82</sup> “It has been our good fortune to hear Rabbi Stephen Wise,” Selling reported in July 1899, “and we consider him in every way the most available rabbi in the United States.”<sup>83</sup> Next, Beth Israel's trustees, “being desirous of [securing] the services of Rabbi Stephen Wise and realizing that [this] will require financial aid” pledged to pay subscriptions “annually in advance, during a period of five years” in order to generate an attractive salary.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, Wise was offered a contract to assume the post of “Minister, Reader and Teacher” for a period of five years at a salary of \$5000 per year.<sup>85</sup> The sum was more than double the salary of Beth Israel's outgoing senior rabbi, Dr. Jacob Bloch, who had served the congregation since 1883.<sup>86</sup>

In the negotiations with Beth Israel, Wise made clear his demand for a “free” pulpit and the right to speak openly on issues of the day. That he sought such assurances suggests he may have felt somewhat constrained at Bnai Jeshurun and a little apprehensive about the expectations of Beth

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<sup>81</sup> Lowenstein, *The Jews of Oregon*, 77-79.

<sup>82</sup> Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 34.

<sup>83</sup> Letter of Ben Selling to Simon Blumauer, July 22, 1899, entered into Beth Israel Log Book, 363. Special thanks to Ms. Gerel Blauer of Portland, Oregon for providing me with photocopies of these original documents in her personal possession [hereafter “Beth Israel Log Book”].

<sup>84</sup> Testimonial, July 18, 1899, entered into Beth Israel Log Book, 364.

<sup>85</sup> Minutes of a Special Meeting of Congregation Beth Israel, July 30, 1899, Beth Israel Log Book, 362.

<sup>86</sup> The Beth Israel Log Book notes that Bloch received a salary of \$175 per month; *ibid.*, 363. See also “Jewish Churches” at [www.accessgenealogy.com/oregon/multnomah/jewish-churches.htm](http://www.accessgenealogy.com/oregon/multnomah/jewish-churches.htm).

Israel's trustees. He also let his Portland contacts know that Bnai Jeshurun was ready to offer him a 5- to 10-year contract at \$6000 per year. In due course, Beth Israel's leadership acceded to Wise's conditions and Hirsch sent him a telegram stating "Board trustees unanimously agreed your terms. Commence September... Everything all right here."<sup>87</sup> Wise's acceptance of Beth Israel's "call" was accompanied by an additional request he be excused from signing a contract. The reply from Portland was courteous but firm.

Our people look forward to your coming with more than ordinary interest and will certainly cooperate with you in every move looking toward the advancement of Judaism in this Northwest Country. While we are very desirous indeed of meeting your views in every possible way, we fear circumstances prevent us from relieving either you or the congregation from signing the formal contract for your engagement. It has been the custom since the reorganization of the congregation to have a contract with the officiating rabbi, and we deem it best not to invite either criticism or questions... Another consideration influenced the board... namely, that the subscription which was made up here among the members of our congregation and which enabled us to extend you the call, contained a clause binding the subscribers... While we have not consulted any lawyer, yet as practical men of affairs, the Trustees felt that they should give no subscriber a chance of refusing his payment through a legal quibble...<sup>88</sup>

The negotiations between Beth Israel and Wise reflected a new reality in urban Jewish life that surfaced at the turn on the 19th and 20th centuries, namely the professionalization of the synagogue and the rabbinate. As with any other civic institution, the community's lay leadership expected to run the synagogue's affairs like a business. The Portlanders were certainly eager to recruit Wise, even to the point of offering him a highly remunerative package, but they also clearly delineated the nature of his employment. Unlike Europe, where rabbinic authority was sanctioned by the state, in America, owing to the principled separation of church and state, religion was a strictly private affair. The rabbi's authority derived from the consent of the worshippers and the synagogue's stability, like that of any business, depended on its financial solvency. In practice, this meant lay leaders wielded the power to hire rabbis best suited to their community's needs and tastes, the terms of which were codified in the rabbi's employment contract. In the case of Wise, the Portlanders found an attractive modern rabbi, capable of entertaining and enlightening oratory, and possessed of strong organizational skills. He would satisfy Beth Israel's spiritual and

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<sup>87</sup> Telegram of Solomon Hirsch to Stephen S. Wise, October 1, 1899, 4/11, Wise Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Letter of J. Strauss to Stephen S. Wise, November 3, 1899, 4/11, Wise Papers.

educational needs while shoring up the congregation's longterm plans to recruit and retain affluent Jewish families whose resources, largesse, and connections would cement Beth Israel as the hub of Oregon's Jewish scene. Furthermore, Wise's growing professional stature promised to elevate the congregation in the eyes of the region's gentile population. They expected such developments would benefit the institution, enhance the congregation's national standing, and be good business for the Jewish community as a whole.<sup>89</sup>

Wise was savvy enough to recognize that once Beth Israel extended its offer, he, too, possessed a measure of leverage in the negotiating process. Secure in the knowledge that Beth Israel wanted him and Bnai Jeshurun did not wish to lose him, he now pressed the terms of his future employment. He may have appeared resolute to those around him, but his private correspondence betrays more than a hint of anxiety and ambivalence. On the one hand, he wrote to his fiancée, Louis Waterman, about the "great field of labor and opportunity that awaits me in the Northwest."<sup>90</sup> He apparently viewed Beth Israel's "call" as a way to gracefully withdraw from New York, where he toiled in his father's shadow. It was also a chance to break loose of the Jewish community's emerging Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox spheres, which did not wholly suit him and made it difficult to be his own person. Meanwhile, he surely appreciated his good fortune, at age 26, to serve as Bnai Jeshurun's senior rabbi. New York City's dynamic social and political scene, including "the good will of [his eastern European] downtown brethren," portended an upward professional trajectory for one like himself who was "afflicted with an unrighteous ambition... love of fame, applause, and popularity."<sup>91</sup> In the final analysis, Wise's decision to leave Bnai Jeshurun for Beth Israel, which was accompanied by his and Louise's joint decision to postpone their wedding, was a little impulsive but not entirely unreasonable. Their strategy combined a spirit of adventure, youthful ardor, and romance with Wise's deep-seated need to break away from New York, prove himself, and expand his horizons. Though ambivalent and at times even remorseful about taking leave of the east coast, he was buoyed by Beth Israel's contractual assurances and the promise of economic security. Possessing deep reserves of confidence and optimism – what Wise called "over-ambitiousness" – he ultimately persuaded himself his "religious work" in the Northwest would be "a moral force, an ethical compulsion standing for something in civic life, in education, in all things that make for the higher life of the individual and community alike."<sup>92</sup> If the latter statement hints, albeit

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<sup>89</sup> Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 97.

<sup>90</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 20.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 25-26.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 41.

obliquely, at the personal and professional risk inherent in his Portland move it also highlights his unabashed ego, the allure of the Western frontier, and his ambition to stake a claim for himself in the Jewish public arena.

In November 1900, Wise was installed as Beth Israel's new senior rabbi. He was also the first candidate selected for the position who was not from the Northwest. The relatively untamed and open regional environment provided fertile soil for his vigorous ambitions and activity. His first order of business was to build up Beth Israel's constituency, enhance its position in the region, and assert a visible communal leadership role for himself. Much of Wise's spade work began with organizing the congregation's internal affairs, developing its religious school, and enhancing the worship services. "The services are very different from those of the Madison Avenue Synagogue, mainly in English," he reported, "but the English is mouthed and badly pronounced. I shall introduce the *Union Prayer Book*."<sup>93</sup> In doing so, he sought to bring Beth Israel squarely into alignment with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations while driving forward the Portland Jewish community's Americanization process.

He now assumed the title of "minister" – a standard designation used by American Reform rabbis. He no longer wore a prayer shawl or head covering, but instead donned dignified clerical attire, including a high white collar. In adopting the *Union Prayer Book*, first published in 1892 as the new Reform "standard," Wise established a baseline for unifying Beth Israel's ritual affairs. Opting for the *Union Prayer Book*, which contained "more Hebrew than other American Reform prayerbooks" (albeit less than a competing text by Benjamin Szold and Marcus M. Jastrow), Wise sanctioned some key theological and linguistic innovations.<sup>94</sup> First, he helped to propel the shift in American Judaism "from congregationalism to denominationalism," particularly the strategy of "replacing the divergent congregational rituals with one denominational prayer book."<sup>95</sup> Second, he embraced the rite codified in the *Union Prayer Book*, which trimmed the traditional service, introduced a modified the liturgy, featured silent devotions, and jettisoned the *musaf* service, an "additional" liturgy traditionally recited on Sabbath and holidays.<sup>96</sup> Wise also introduced the practice of voluntary dues – a novel idea that was to become a hallmark of his rabbinic leadership and, in time, a central element of the Free Synagogue in New York City. In

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>94</sup> See the entry on "Temple Oheb Shalom, Reform", *Reform Judaism in America*, eds. Olitzky, Sussman, Stern, 165-166.

<sup>95</sup> Zola, *The Americanization of the Jewish Prayer Book*, 10, 17-18.

<sup>96</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (1905), 180.

Portland, he also established special worship services for families and children, and began to regularly publish and distribute his sermons.

Wise applied himself with equal vigor to secular affairs in Portland and Oregon as a whole, particularly areas where he believed he could exercise his moral authority. Three issues at the regional level engaged the lion's share of his attention. The first was the question of gambling and prostitution, long countenanced by the city's political establishment, a few of whom were Wise's congregants and owned property that housed brothels.<sup>97</sup> In fact, Portland's city council debated the relative advantages of declaring Portland a "wide-open city," legalizing such activities, with an eye to generating additional municipal revenue. Determined to "register [his] very earnest protest against bar-room ideals and nickel-in-the-slot-machine tendencies," Wise flatly challenged Portland's Jewish community in an address titled "Shall the City Be 'Wide Open?'" "The Temple was filled and there was an impressive silence throughout the whole of my address..." he later recalled. "There were moments in the address when my hearers almost rose to me, thus when I referred to the horrors of a city sharing the profits of gambling and prostitution and said, 'This cannot be, this must not be'; when I said, 'There will always be scarlet women, that is just as long as there are scarlet men; and, 'Not to safeguard ourselves is to be overwhelmed.'"<sup>98</sup>

Inveighing against society's ills, Wise made common cause with the social gospel, the liberal religious movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that sought to solve American society's problems through "the politics of morality" and good government initiatives. "The political culture of progressive reform," it has been argued, "gave ministers of the social gospel hope they could 'Christianize the social order' and thus save the nation."<sup>99</sup> For Wise, who saw no conflict between the moral teachings of Judaism and Christianity, the social gospel was, at its core, an extension of Judaism's prophetic tradition of social justice.<sup>100</sup> Quoting the Hebrew prophet Micah, Wise asserted the maxim "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" as Judaism's foundational belief.<sup>101</sup> In due course, Wise gravitated to a cohort of likeminded liberal religious and citizen activists in Portland, including David Solis Cohen, a liberal Jewish lawyer, Joseph Teal, a steam boating

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<sup>97</sup> Shapiro, *A Rabbi in the Progressive Era*, 91.

<sup>98</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 94-96.

<sup>99</sup> Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 130.

<sup>100</sup> On Wise's attitude to Christianity, including the relation between the prophets of Israel and Jesus, see Wise, *Personal Letters*, 35, 87, 103; Wise, *Challenging Years*, especially ch. 18 ("A Jew Speaks to Christians").

<sup>101</sup> The quote is from the Book of Micah 6:8. For a discussion of Wise's understanding of Micah's teachings, see Shapiro, *A Rabbi in the Progressive Era*, 87-88.



and livestock entrepreneur renowned for his “legitimate” business conduct, Edgar P. Hill of the First Presbyterian Church, Albert Alexander Morrison of Trinity Protestant Episcopal Church, and the group’s unofficial leader Thomas Eliot of the Unitarian Church.<sup>102</sup> In particular, Wise was heartened by his clerical colleagues’ forthright public statements, despite “veiled threat[s],” “intimidation,” and the possibility of retribution from unsavory and powerful local commercial and political forces.<sup>103</sup> “I may change my plans and tackle the municipal situation after all,” he wrote to his wife Louise. “There is an opinion about that [Mayor George A.] Williams will yield to pressure and ‘open wide the town’... I cannot keep silent any longer, I must speak... I should despise myself as a coward if I remained silent... Morrison and Hill have spoken bravely and well.”<sup>104</sup> Though Portland’s brothels remained a scourge until the World War I era, Wise now joined the battle against prostitution and human trafficking, a national crusade that eventually crystallized in the Mann Act of 1910, which prohibited white slavery and sought to stamp out prostitution.<sup>105</sup>

Wise’s personal friendship with key community leaders and his broad and constructive interactions with Portland’s Christian community made him a pioneer of interfaith relations in the Pacific Northwest. He opened Beth Israel’s doors to the general community, making the most of his oratorical talents and, in the process, garnering a devoted following of Jewish and gentile admirers. He also proved to be a welcome guest speaker in churches throughout the West. Without a doubt, the message was as significant as the messenger himself. In these years, Wise turned the sermon into an art form – inspired, edifying, and entertaining. The numerous communities in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California where he spoke were hungry for his brand of cultural theater, and he earned a reputation as one who knew how to build bridges among Jews and Christians from all walks of life. Wise did not seek to proselytize. “I care so much for what men are and do,” he explained, “and so little for what they call themselves, that I abhor the conversionist zeal which oftener effects a change of name rather than of the heart.”<sup>106</sup> But neither was he unconcerned about Christian misperceptions of Judaism, most especially when age-old antisemitic canards stoked the fires of anti-Jewish sentiment and pogroms flared in tsarist Russia. He felt it his duty

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<sup>102</sup> Gaston, *Portland, Oregon*, 623.

<sup>103</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Fight Against White Slavery, 1870-1939*, (New York: Schocken, 1983), 161, 178; MacColl, *The Shaping of a City*, 408-412; David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), chs. 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 93.

as a modern American rabbi to explain Judaism to Christians, noting, “To those who think that Judaism means license to commit usurious practice, is it not sacred duty to tell of the nobleness which our faith asks?”<sup>107</sup>

By contrast, where Wise’s pioneering interfaith efforts foundered, such instances generally illustrate his predicament as an ethnic leader in a land dominated by a Protestant worldview. That he recognized the implications in this regard was evident, for example, when in 1900 he participated in a public debate about the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers (NFCCW). The new organization professed that “no one Church is the sole custodian of Christian grace,” but meanwhile explicitly limited its membership to Protestant and Catholic ministers.<sup>108</sup> Wise, who did not seek to join the NFCCW, was appalled by its lack of ecumenicism, especially its repudiation of many liberal Christian groups with whom he shared a strong affinity. “Alas, if it be possible,” he publicly despaired, “for a Church Federation today deliberately to exclude Unitarians and Universalists how are the hopes of toleration shattered – of us who are of the Jewish bond!”<sup>109</sup> In another instance, he challenged the Ministers Association of Portland, a framework that restricted its membership and generally reflected the stance of Portland’s Protestant elite. Here especially, where Wise would have welcomed the opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with his gentile colleagues, the sting of exclusion rankled. His response, on the eve of municipal elections in 1905, was to seize the moral high ground. He publicly chastised the Ministers Association for its exclusivism. “Is It Possible to Have a Fellowship of Churches?” he thundered.

Tens of thousands of children of eight and ten and twelve years are in the factories and in the mills of the South and North, the East and West. What are the churches doing to free these little white slaves? ..What in the last years have the churches of this city done together in order to suppress the boxes and stalls in the drinking places which are the nurseries of immorality? What will the churches of our city do in the impending civic contest in order that righteousness may be at the helm of our civic affairs? What have the churches in our state been doing to avert the shame and infamy that blotted our escutcheon? What are the churches in the land doing to call a halt to the lowering of the tone of

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>108</sup> The National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers was later renamed the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. See the constitutional documents and organizational reports in Elias B. Sanford, *Origin and History of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America*, (Hartford: S.S. Scranton, 1916), 429, 443, 449; also: “Union of Christian Workers”, *New York Times*, February 7, 1901, 9; Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 305-306.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Shapiro, *A Rabbi in the Progressive Era*, 104-105.

ideals of our nation?<sup>110</sup>

In a region lacking in dynamic Jewish communal leaders, Wise stood out as an especially attractive figure. With his maverick tendencies and special talents, he gradually shook loose of the rabbi-as-employee mold. Instead, he styled himself as a minister-cum-frontiersman, a champion of morality steeped in the life lessons and harsh reality of the Pacific Northwest. The appeal of such an image, even for a rabbi, was well suited to an era punctuated by Theodore Roosevelt's mantra of rugged individualism, historian Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, and the glorification of the West by artists like Frederic Remington and Charles Marion Russell. Wise, meanwhile, emerged as the Western spokesman of a new American Jewish agenda. His distinctive profile was brought into sharp relief by a meeting with Roosevelt in 1903, in the midst of a presidential tour, when the two men met privately to discuss Jewish colonization in Palestine and the potential for U.S. intervention on behalf of persecuted Jews in Rumania.<sup>111</sup>

Wise's multifaceted sensibility aligned with the idealism of the Progressive era, and his embrace of liberal religious value resonated with region's diverse and fast growing social and cultural landscape.<sup>112</sup> He also obliquely challenged America's religious hierarchies by taking his message directly to communities and groups in the West with which Jews had otherwise strikingly little contact. He went anywhere he wished and spoke out about issues of the day he deemed vital and important. He showed little, if any, concern for the interests of the region's powerful entrepreneurs and political establishment, and paid virtually no heed to religious bodies (in and out of the Jewish community) that sought to press claims of superior authority.<sup>113</sup>

Wise certainly raised the bar of expectations by insisting on a comprehensive approach to combatting American society's ills. He unabashedly and energetically applied his talents as an activist rabbi to Portland's and Oregon's unfolding political environment. In the space of just a few years, he garnered a reputation as a vocal proponent of women's suffrage, a reformer of the region's juvenile punishment system, which led him to cofound the Oregon Conference of Charities and Corrections, and a defender of the rights of workers in the shipyard, timber, fishing, and railway industries.<sup>114</sup> He also aroused the ire of

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice*, 44.

<sup>111</sup> Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 97.

<sup>112</sup> MacColl, *The Shaping of a City*, 221-226

<sup>113</sup> Meyer, "A Centennial History", 141.

<sup>114</sup> For example, see: Stephen S. Wise, "Statement on Suffrage" (1907), in *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990, A Documentary History*, eds. Michael

conservative forces by steadfastly opposing the exploitative treatment of Chinese immigrant workers in the region, which, as elsewhere in the country, was bolstered by the U.S. Congress' passage of the racist Chinese Exclusion Act.<sup>115</sup> He joined with Unitarian leader Thomas Eliot to investigate the local fishing industry and, after witnessing first-hand the exploitation of children in canneries along the Columbia River, became a fierce advocate of child labor protections. In the event, Governor George E. Chamberlain appointed Wise to the state's Board of Child Labor Commissioners. The commission did not succeed in eradicating child labor – a cause in which Wise would continue to be active for many decades to come – but it did help to secure legislation aimed at improving working conditions and eliminating the fishing industry's worst abuses. Wise's political talents, including his willingness to engage elected officials at all levels, caught the attention of the state's Democratic party establishment. On the municipal front, he was invited by Mayor Harry Lane, one of the region's outstanding Progressive figures, to serve in his city cabinet. At the state level, he was pressed to run “as a reform candidate for the United States Senate against the entrenched Republican machine.”<sup>116</sup> It is not clear how seriously Wise entertained these possibilities, but we do know he declined both. What the historical record does highlight, however, is that rather than the allure of elective office, Wise became ever more firmly convinced of religion's potentiality for good in American politics and the singular role he might play as a minister. His abiding belief in the alloy of prophetic Judaism, liberalism, and political activism was elemental to his rabbinic calling. As his reputation grew and he became increasingly influential, so, too, the stakes rose with respect to his position in American Jewish life and the public arena.

Wise's resolute liberalism drew from the wellspring of the European Enlightenment, particularly its American variant, and fused with the optimistic spirit of the new century.<sup>117</sup> As a member of an ethnic minority, he celebrated and venerated the legal and civic guarantees that upheld individual rights and liberties in America – even as he was forced to confront the fragility and powerlessness of Jewish life in the *fin-de-siècle*. As an American clergyman, he embraced the Jeffersonian notion of a “wall of separation” between state and religion and the republic's

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S. Kimmel, Thomas E. Mosmiller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 260-261.

<sup>115</sup> Jewel Lansing, *Portland: People, Politics, and Power, 1851-2001*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2005), 221. On the Chinese Exclusion Act, see Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), ch. 4.

<sup>116</sup> Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice*, 45.

<sup>117</sup> Salo W. Baron, “The Emancipation Movement and American Jewry”, in Salo W. Baron, *Steeled by Adversity: Essays and Addresses on American Jewish Life*, (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 80-105.

protection of free exercise of religion – even as he sought to use his synagogue pulpit to influence the course of contemporary events. As a Jewish communal leader, seeking to participate fully in the country’s moral leadership, he fought against retrograde forces that threatened to curtail American Judaism’s participation in the public arena – even as he toiled at the margins of society. In sum, Wise believed the promise and future growth of Judaism and Jewish life in America to be inextricably linked to the vitality and integrity of society’s liberal, moral, and democratic character. “The standards in a democracy,” he intoned at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905, “are to be based not on money, but manhood, not dissent but assent, not acquisition but aspiration, not color but character. Caste and class cannot be suffered to endure in a democracy which must needs fall as these triumph... The American democracy is a democracy of brotherhood and brotherliness.”<sup>118</sup>

### To the Jewish Cosmos

In retrospect, it appears evident Wise’s sojourn in Portland would not last. Despite his plentiful activity in the Northwest, his longing for New York continued unabated. From early on, Temple Emanu-El, the city’s flagship Reform congregation, loomed large in his imagination – a tantalizing possibility fueled by episodic contact with several of Emanu-El’s key leaders. Interestingly, being “called” to Emanu-El seems to have been both an enticing and frightening prospect for Wise. The idea, which punctuates his private correspondence with Louise, is everywhere underscored by ambivalence. For example, upon learning that Emanu-El’s president, the New York banker James Seligman, desired to read his published Beth Israel sermons, Wise caustically noted he had “been in Portland long enough to know that a man can save and lead his people well only if they honor and love him.” He added: “Emanu-El will never get a man in its pulpit until the snobs forget the millionariedom long enough to acquire some respect for a man who is not rich, but is some other things. They must learn that a ‘call’ to Emanu-El is not an ‘honor’ but a burden and responsibility, and that if ‘honor’ there be, it belongs to God whom congregation and minister should serve.”<sup>119</sup> In another instance, however, Wise told his in-laws he might opt to unilaterally quit Portland and return to New York: “...There are no more than five or six positions in the whole country that I would take... Louise thinks I ought to seek a broader sphere of activity... Still it will not be an easy matter to make an announcement so far in advance [of the end of the Beth Israel contract] which will involve a considerable loss to me. I am too far away

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice*, 44-45.

<sup>119</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 76.

from the center of things now...”<sup>120</sup> In sum, Wise was apprehensive about the idea of giving up a secure position – not an insignificant concern for young man building a family. He relished his hard won status as a significant communal figure in the Pacific Northwest and disdained New York’s dominant central European Jewish elite. Meanwhile, there are many indications he longed for the east coast. He was frustrated by being geographically remote, and he wished to play a major role in American religious life. He recognized that New York Jewry was swiftly emerging as the country’s most influential Jewish community and his own advancement would be circumscribed in the West. Last but not least, there are instances of studied self-reflection in Wise’s private correspondence, especially insofar as he contemplates his capacity to manage the stress of a bold professional move. He even hints at the physical and emotional toll such an undertaking might exact. “I shall never shirk any task in life and I would be willing to give every bit of my strength to the task of *servicing* and *leading* the Jewish community of New York,” he states. “I know that physically I could never prove equal to the strain, but the only situation that could bring me to accept such a task would be feeling that some one man is needed for it, and that I am he...”<sup>121</sup> All of these dimensions seem linked in one way or another to Wise’s complex relationship to New York’s Jewish scene, especially his inextinguishable desire for “a call and summons to duty.” “To be the rabbi of such a community as Emanu-El,” he stated, “is the highest of privileges and responsibilities.”<sup>122</sup>

The tipping point in Wise’s decision-making occurred in 1904, several months after he suffered a physical breakdown in September 1903, apparently due to overwork and nervous exhaustion. At his doctor’s recommendation, he spent an extended period of convalescence on the east coast and traveled to Europe in the summer. The degree to which Wise’s breakdown and subsequent sojourn prompted a wholesale reevaluation of his future is unclear. Did he take counsel with close friends and colleagues about new job prospects? Did his collapse prompt thoughts about his mortality and legacy? Some evidence in the historical record supports these possibilities. What is certain, however, is that by 1903 he was feeling restless in Portland and thwarted in his larger ambitions. Though he may not have possessed much, if anything, in the way of a strategy for returning to New York, a few indications of his shifting priorities are evident. First, in this period he resigned from his positions in the World Zionist Organization and American Zionist movement. The impediments of geography and the movement’s

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<sup>120</sup> *Servant of the People*, ed. Voss, 20-21.

<sup>121</sup> Wise, *Personal Letters*, 88-89, emphasis in original.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

hierarchy, he complained, had relegated him to an inconsequential role.<sup>123</sup> Second, as discussed above, he found himself in a paradoxical situation as one of the region's leading clergy. He was highly esteemed and much in demand as a public speaker. His natural constituency, however, was limited and the opportunities for interfaith activity ebbed and flowed depending upon the good will of his Christian counterparts. Third, he had discounted the idea of serving as a public official; he even declined the invitation to run as the Democratic party's standard bearer for the U.S. senate. In short, Wise's Portland years confirmed and bolstered his belief in the unity of religion and politics in America. But he meanwhile reached what he felt were the limits of his potential in the Pacific Northwest. He had also grown and matured as a result of the rough-and-tumble of the Oregon setting. In the process, he gained confidence in his own leadership abilities and positioned himself for a national role in American Jewry. He had proven himself to be an effective spokesman for a God-inspired vision of this-worldly social and economic justice. He had learned how to engage in the heat of political discourse without allowing others to diminish him. And he had honed his skills as an orator of the first rank. Finally, he was prepared on a personal level (once again) to risk the known for the unknown. It is easy to imagine how someone less adventurous and self-assured might have put down roots in Portland, yielded to the force of inertia, and made peace with his surroundings. Wise, however, was built differently and whatever he lacked in longterm planning, he made up in spades of boundless ambition, dogged determination, and peripatetic energy. As would prove characteristic of Wise for years to come, he optimistically believed that new opportunities would emerge in the fullness of time.

In 1905, the moment Wise had long been waiting for finally emerged. "I was still the youngish rabbi of Temple Beth Israel of Portland, Oregon," he wrote years later in his memoir, when "out of a clear sky came the lightning of an invitation to give a number of sermons and addresses at Temple Emanu-El of New York, known as the Cathedral Synagogue of the country... Leaving Oregon, I said to intimate friends... 'I am going to New York to preach some trial sermons at the Cathedral Synagogue. They will call me to be their rabbi. I somehow feel that I will have to decline their call. If I decline it... I will go back to New York from Oregon to found a Free Synagogue.'"<sup>124</sup> Despite its exaggerated quality, this was indeed "an accurate prediction of what was to happen," but the full historical picture was far more complex, colorful, and revealing.<sup>125</sup>

In fact, what began as a courtship quickly morphed into preliminary

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<sup>123</sup> Shapiro, *A Reform Rabbi in the Progressive Era*, 60-63.

<sup>124</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 82.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

negotiations and then, quite suddenly, flared to become a battle royal between two willful personalities – Wise, now age 32, a rising star of the American rabbinate, and Louis Marshall, the venerable New York lawyer and dominant Jewish communal leader who personified the eastern seaboard’s Jewish establishment. In courting Wise, Marshall and the Emanu-El trustees were hopeful they could install a minister who would adorn their congregation, someone whose oratory would reflect well on the congregants and serve to uplift if not ennoble their distinctive cultural sensibility, a curious mixture of imperious elitism, economic privilege, and noblesse oblige. The new rabbi, they hoped, would solidify Emanu-El’s position as the eastern seaboard’s Reform flagship and chief rival to Cincinnati’s authority. Wise’s distinctive potentiality in this regard was not lost on Marshall and his colleagues. He possessed excellent credentials. He was neither a product of nor beholden to Cincinnati. His family hailed from central Europe (albeit Hungary rather than Bohemia), he understood the “German” culture of New York’s elite Jews. He had earned his stripes as the leader of Beth Israel, one of Reform Judaism’s significant western outposts, where his organizational, fundraising, and leadership skills had bolstered the congregation’s membership, transformed it into a visible regional presence, and increased its purse to the point of erasing its debt.<sup>126</sup> What the Emanu-El leaders did not realize, however, was that the youthful and independent-minded Wise – irrespective of his interest in Emanu-El’s pulpit – was constitutionally incapable of accepting their terms, namely, in Marshall’s words, that “the pulpit should always be subject to and under the control of the Board of Trustees.”<sup>127</sup> This was partly a matter of personality. Wise bristled at the idea of submitting himself to someone else’s authority. But it was also a matter of philosophy. Like other Progressive-era spiritual leaders and social gospel advocates, Wise believed in the mission of the minister as activist. His views about the nexus between religion and politics were bolstered by his Portland experience, where he fought for women’s suffrage, workers’ rights, child labor laws, immigrant protections, railed against prostitution and local brothels, and asserted himself as a tribune of good government.

But whereas the Pacific Northwest was relatively isolated from the public eye, New York City offered a strikingly visible and voluble contrast. Indeed, the ensuing Emanu-El controversy virtually assured Wise of garnering countrywide attention. Against the backdrop of a lively turn-of-the-century debate over freedom of the pulpit in American religious life, including a decades-old parallel discussion in the Jewish

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<sup>126</sup> Toll, *The Making of an Ethnic Middle Class*, 97-98.

<sup>127</sup> Letter of Louis Marshall to Stephen S. Wise, December 1, 1905, in *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty. Selected Papers and Addresses*, ed. Charles Reznikoff, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 831.



public arena, Wise defiantly characterized his stance as a matter of “duty” and “conscience.”<sup>128</sup> In an open letter to Marshall and the Emanu-El’s trustees he declaimed: “I write you because I believe that a question of super-eminent importance has been raised, the question of whether the pulpit shall be free or whether the pulpit shall not be free, and, by reason of its loss of freedom, reft of its power for good. The whole position of the church is involved in this question, for the steadily waning influence of church and synagogue is due in no small part, I hold, to the widespread belief that the pulpit is not free and ‘subject to the control’ of those officers and members of church or synagogue who for any reason are powerful in its councils.”<sup>129</sup>

The public feud between Wise and Marshall is important for several reasons. It was, as noted above, a significant instance of the debate over freedom of the pulpit in American society. And for the first time, millions of Americans caught a glimpse not only of American Jewry’s interior landscape but also of Wise, who cast himself as a modern-day Roger Williams singlehandedly defying the Emanu-El oligarchy. Reportage of the controversy was carried by major American newspapers across the country. In an editorial, the *New York Times*, no doubt with the approval of its publisher Adolph S. Ochs, a member of Temple Emanu-El, upbraided Wise. “The rabbi speaks of ‘my pulpit,’” the *Times* stated, “but primarily it is not his pulpit; it is that of the congregation, whose affairs are in the charge of the Trustees... It appears to us that the liberty of preaching is no more sacred than the liberty of listening... Clergymen who are by temperament incapable of forming and maintaining [harmony with their congregants] appear to fall below the true standard of their calling. They are not necessarily martyrs to the cause of freedom of speech.”<sup>130</sup> The *Times*’ rebuke was grist for Wise’s mill. It gave Wise’s views a full public hearing and enhanced his growing national reputation as a champion of America’s clergy and the principle of absolute liberty of conscience.

Wise skillfully pressed his “plea for pulpit freedom” to full advantage.<sup>131</sup> “As a Jewish minister,” he argued, “I claim the right to follow the example of the Hebrew prophets, and stand and battle in New York, as I

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<sup>128</sup> Naomi W. Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said. The Public Discourse of Nineteenth-Century American Rabbis*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), ch. 1; Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 132-135, 232-264, 354-356; Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 55-58.

<sup>129</sup> Letter of Stephen S. Wise to Louis Marshall, January 5, 1906, in *Louis Marshall*, ed. Reznikoff, 833.

<sup>130</sup> “Pulpit and Pews” (editorial), *New York Times*, January 11, 1906, 8.

<sup>131</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, 87.

have stood and battled in Portland, for civic righteousness.”<sup>132</sup> His defiant stance, much to the chagrin of the Emanu-El trustees, was echoed in media outlets across the country. In fact, Wise may have cited Jewish tradition to buttress his claims, but he was also self-consciously modeling himself on the Congregationalist Henry Ward Beecher and Unitarian Theodore Parker, two iconic preachers of the generation preceding his own who were among the 19th-century’s most important activist Christian ministers, social reformers, and abolitionists.<sup>133</sup> He was, moreover, an admirer of William Jennings Bryan, whose populist blend of political and religious idealism held sway at the turn of the century.<sup>134</sup> For years thereafter, not without some justification, Wise characterized the Emanu-El contretemps as a contest between David and Goliath. His crusade was a matter of conviction, but it was also equal parts strategy and spectacle.

The question to be asked in reflecting on this curious episode is not only how it benefited Wise directly but what it illustrates about the American Jewish scene. To be sure, the Emanu-El pulpit debate, which quickly spun beyond the control of Marshall, Ochs, and others – and from which Wise emerged unscathed – underscored the contrast between the dynamic young rabbi’s Progressive-era theological and political views and the fading star of New York’s Jewish elites. The affair left Wise and Marshall permanently estranged. It also strained Wise’s personal attachments to the group he disparaged as the “Fifth Avenue aristocracy,” though the young rabbi, who was married to the heiress Louise Waterman, hardly seems to have been in any real danger of sundering his ties to the German Jewish “oligarchs.” As a visible and deliberate challenge to American Jewry’s establishment, the controversy garnered Wise a national reputation as a champion of democracy. It also ushered him closer to becoming a power broker in his own right. He now gained the support of several important uptown *yahudim* as well as the general acclaim of New York City’s “downtown” Jews – the *yidn* who identified with Wise’s outsider status and his “unshakable” liberalism,

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<sup>132</sup> “Rabbi Wise on Jerome”, *New York Times*, January 10, 1906, 2.

<sup>133</sup> See: Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America*; Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Wise, *Personal Letters*, 99.

<sup>134</sup> Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), 116. Wise’s favorable and admiring view of Bryan, evident in his autobiography *Challenging Years*, is curious. Most American Jews were repelled by Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech at the 1896 Democratic convention, which included oblique allusions to anti-Jewish themes. See Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49-50; Dennis O’Neill, “1896 – Anti-Semitic Cartoon,” *Presidential Campaign Rhetoric*, <http://campaignrhetoric.wordpress.com/2011/05/01/1896-anti-semitic-cartoon-dennis-oneill/>.

forthright ethnic pride, fervent Zionism, and general embrace of left-leaning Jewish social and political movements.<sup>135</sup>

In staking a claim for the minister's autonomy, Wise trumpeted an anti-establishment stance central to the American tradition of religious dissent and grassroots politics, a phenomenon with roots stretching back to the colonial era.<sup>136</sup> He also proved to be spectacularly effective and successful in the art of public relations – a personal talent he would exploit time and again throughout his lifetime. Meanwhile, the controversy reflected another long-established American practice, namely the desire to prevent clericalism in the New World. Inspired by a synthesis of Protestant and Jeffersonian notions of anti-clericalism, Marshall and the Emanu-El trustees were, in fact, upholding and guarding “the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship” enshrined in the U.S. constitution.<sup>137</sup> In the final analysis, though Marshall, as was his wont, treated Wise with a heavy hand, a close review of the historical record reveals he was not so much interested in “muzzling” the young rabbi as he was in ensuring the “dignity” and “co-equal importance” of both the pulpit and the congregation.<sup>138</sup>

The Emanu-El episode was like a flare that suddenly and intensely shone on the waning “German” era in American Jewish life. On the horizon, the luminous and rising tide of eastern European Jewry was about to lift Wise's fortunes. The stage was now set for Wise's triumphal return to New York in 1906 and the founding of the Free Synagogue in 1907, around which Wise rallied broad support for his vision of social justice, liberal Judaism, and Zionism. His entry into the fray as American Jewry's 20th-century urban frontiersman *par excellence* and his ensuing religious, civic, and political activity would leave an indelible mark on the rabbinate, the Jewish public arena, and American society.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Wise, *Challenging Years*, xxii, xxiii.

<sup>136</sup> Gaustad, *Dissent in American Religion*, 142.

<sup>137</sup> Louis Marshall, “Religious Freedom: Is Ours a Christian Government?” (January 1896), in *Louis Marshall*, ed. Reznikoff, 948. In this essay, Marshall makes repeated reference to Jefferson's writings on religious toleration and individual liberties. See also Sarna, *American Judaism*, 250-251; Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 34-40.

<sup>138</sup> Letter of Louis Marshall to Stephen S. Wise, December 1, 1905, in *Louis Marshall*, ed. Reznikoff, 832.

<sup>139</sup> The term “urban frontiersmen *par excellence*” was coined by Jacob Rader Marcus in an essay titled “The American Colonial Jew”; see *The American Jewish Experience*, ed. Sarna, 14.

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