

Michael A. Meyer

LETTERS OF ISAAC MAYER WISE TO JOSEPH STOLZ

When Isaac Mayer Wise founded the Hebrew Union College in 1875, the noted rabbi gained a type of influence which he had not previously enjoyed. The editorials and articles he had written for his two newspapers, the English-language *American Israelite* and the German *Deborah*, his frequent trips to various parts of the country, his dedication of innumerable synagogues, and his own prestigious position as rabbi of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun in Cincinnati had made Wise more widely known than any other rabbi in the United States during the nineteenth century. But his influence over his colleagues had remained limited. Some of them were more radical than he in their interpretation of Reform Judaism; their generally better secular education gave them a vantage point from which to look down upon their fellow rabbi from the Bohemian countryside. Others regarded Wise as insufficiently traditional or envied him his patent success in the rabbinate. Nearly all were jealous of their own status and regarded themselves as Wise's peers, even if they gave him credit for a productive energy which exceeded their own.

It was only with the establishment of the seminary over which he presided for nearly twenty-five years that Wise could hope for genuine disciples, men who would be loyal to him as their teacher and who would share a common training if not a totally uniform approach to Judaism. Since no other rabbinical training institution existed as yet in the United States, he could expect that the men ordained by the College would in time assume nearly all of the important pulpits in the United States, bringing their congregants a personal variation of the American Judaism they had learned at his feet.

Thus, with the ordination of the first class of four rabbis from the Hebrew Union College in 1883, Wise took upon himself a task which he continued to perform until his death: the placement of his graduates in pulpits around the country and their advancement from small congregations to larger ones when they were ready for a greater challenge. Little is known today about this area of Wise's activity. A considerable portion of it must have been carried on orally

at the councils of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and in conversations Wise held with former students. Since the negotiations involved personalities and delicate tactical ploys, Wise naturally did not express himself publicly on such matters. Since, moreover, so little of Wise's correspondence has been preserved, it is not surprising that his relationship to his students and graduates as adviser and counsellor should today be only very incompletely known.¹ The following letters of Isaac Mayer Wise to Joseph Stolz may therefore help to document an unfamiliar branch of Wise's activity as well as to illuminate an important aspect of his personality.

Joseph Stolz was a member of the second graduating class of the Hebrew Union College, the class of 1884.² Born in Syracuse, New York, on November 3, 1861, he received his public schooling there and was prepared in Hebrew studies by the local rabbi before entering the College in 1878 at the age of sixteen. Being of a poor family, as were most of the early students, the young man was lodged in a boarding house at the school's expense. Officiating for the Jewish holidays at small congregations and teaching in the Sabbath School of Wise's Plum Street Temple, Stolz was able to provide himself with a small income of his own. Since he had received a high school education in Syracuse, he managed to complete the normal eight-year course at H.U.C. in six years. Upon ordination, he went first to Little Rock, Arkansas, where he served for three years as the rabbi of the B'nai Israel Congregation, and from there to Chicago, Illinois, as successor to Bernhard Felsenthal (1823-1908) at the Zion Congregation. Later he formed Temple Isaiah on the south side of Chicago where he was soon able to erect a building and have it dedicated by Isaac Mayer Wise in 1899, just a year before Wise's death. Stolz remained the rabbi of this congregation until his retirement in 1927. He died in 1941.

Though quite well versed in Hebrew sources, Joseph Stolz did not achieve fame as a scholar; nor was he known as a fiery orator, though he held large pulpits for forty years. Stolz was best remembered by colleagues and con-

¹ The most recent treatment of Wise's life is James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise—His Life, Work and Thought*, New York 1965. Pages 549-550 contain a few brief excerpts from letters Wise wrote to younger colleagues offering them his practical advice.

² On Stolz see *American Jewish Yearbook*, XLIII (1941-42), pp. 441-444; *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, LI (1941), pp. 249-253; *The American Jews' Annual*, 1890-91, pp. 93-94; and the pamphlet 'A Victorious Life' and *Words of Appreciation*, published by Temple Isaiah-Israel, Chicago, at the time of Joseph Stolz's seventy-fifth birthday in 1936. He was a first cousin of Louis Marshall, with whom he was personally close.

gregants as a pastor to his flock and as a leader in civic activities. Humility and diffidence seem to have been his most outstanding personal qualities. In the spirit of Wise, he was not a radical reformer; his veneration of tradition made him look askance at colleagues who travelled or smoked on the Sabbath. In later years he sympathized with the Zionist movement, though he played no role in its leadership.

Hebrew Union College awarded Stolz a Doctor of Divinity degree in 1898 for his lecture to the Central Conference of American Rabbis on the subject of Jewish funeral practices and an honorary Doctor of Hebrew Law degree when he reached the age of seventy. Over the years he played a leading role in all three of the national organizations which Wise had founded: he served on the Executive Board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Board of Governors of the H.U.C.; from 1905 to 1907 he was president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Stolz was definitely one of Wise's "boys" (a term Wise himself liked to use) through whom his teacher's influence was perpetuated in the American Jewish community.

The ten letters which follow are taken from the Joseph Stolz Collection of the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College. They are all in Wise's own handwriting and bear the marks of a hasty pen. Unfortunately, the Archives does not possess Stolz's communications to Wise; these have apparently been lost or destroyed along with nearly all of the mail which Wise received. The letters we do have, those from Wise to Stolz, reveal the older man's genuine fatherly interest in his student and later young colleague. At the same time, they manifest his hard-headed approach to rabbinical salaries and prerogatives. Personal experience in Albany and Cincinnati had taught Wise a great deal about lay leadership, and he wanted to provide his young friend with the benefit of his experience. He knew what would impress a congregational board and was more than willing to impart advice. He also wanted to give the young rabbi some pointers on how to deal with elder colleagues in Chicago; their attitude to Stolz, he realized, would be influenced by their not entirely friendly sentiments toward himself.

Taken as a whole, these letters shed light on Isaac Mayer Wise as a man well acquainted with the practical realities of congregational life in America and determined that one had to face them resolutely. It was indeed the very acumen he manifests here, combined with his broad vision of American Judaism, that accounts for Wise's success in first bringing a degree of unity to Jewish religious life in America.

DOCUMENTS

1

Cincinnati, August 7, 1882³

My Friend Stolz.

I am glad to hear that you rose to the pinnacle [sic] of fame among the Syracuse brethren, and think you will you will [sic] do well.⁴ About Utica I can hardly advice [sic] you. Still I think, if it does not give you too much trouble you ought to go there לשם שמים It is certainly a דבר טוב to do something for those of our faith, who need it most.

Please tell Mr. Rosenback that his ספר תורה is here with Mr. E. Simon and will be deposited in the College as soon as re-opened.⁵

We are all well here and deeply engaged in Russian colonization.⁶

Yours

Isaac M. Wise

³ About a month earlier Stolz had completed the Second Collegiate Class of the Hebrew Union College and was now to enter his Junior Year.

⁴ Stolz had apparently returned home for the summer where he may have been asked to officiate and deliver sermons in his home congregation. The following reference to nearby Utica, New York, would indicate an additional call for his services either during the summer or perhaps for the High Holydays.

⁵ On December 17, 1881, the Hebrew Union College dedicated a chapel in its new building. The Torah scroll here referred to was donated for the chapel by Henry Rosenbach (not Rosenback). It was consecrated and placed into the ark at the opening ceremonies for the following academic year.

⁶ The reference is to the establishment of farming colonies for Russian Jewish immigrants coming to the United States. Some of the leaders of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations were at this time active supporters of such projects. Wise himself had just written an editorial (*American Israelite*, August 4, 1882, p. 36) advocating colonization and calling for the donation of funds. See 'A Colony in Kansas—1882', *American Jewish Archives*, XVII (1965), pp. 114–139; Lipman Goldman Feld, 'New Light on the Lost Jewish Colony of Beersheba, Kansas, 1882–1886', *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, LX (1970), pp. 159–168.

2

Rabbi Joseph Stolz

Cincinnati, July 11, 1884

My Dear Friend.

If you want to accept Quincy Ills. with \$ 1200 per annum, please let me know. It is a nice peacable [sic]) congregation, and you might spend there a year or two till you are D.D.⁷ and have a beard. With my best wishes

Yours

Isaac M. Wise

3

Rabbi Joseph Stolz

Cincinnati, July 18, 1884

My Dear Friend Stolz

I congratulate you to your election in Little Rock, and hope your first place will be to your satisfaction. Although your salary is small, I believe you have a splendid field to work and a good chance to build up. You have a great future before you, and I am confident you are prepared and capacitated to do a vast amount of good for the cause of Judaism and for yourself.

Go to your post with the assurance of my friendship and my best wishes for you

ה' עמך גבור חיל

Yours

Isaac M. Wise

4

Rabbi Joseph Stolz

Cincinnati, Nov. 28, 1884

Dear Sir & Friend.

I want first to inform you that Louis Grossman⁸ was elected in Detroit to

⁷ The Doctor of Divinity was during this period an earned degree given to graduates of the College who had been ordained for at least two years. Its requirements included a dissertation and an oral examination on one book of the Bible, one tractate of the Talmud, and one book of Hebraic philosophy or theology.

⁸ Grossmann (1867–1927) (not Grossman) was a classmate of Stolz at the College. He served as the rabbi of Temple Beth El in Detroit until 1898, when he succeeded Isaac Mayer Wise in the pulpit of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun in Cincinnati.

succeed Dr. Zirndorf.⁹ He was elected against Mr. Illich of New York,¹⁰ which is considered a triumph of the college. And now to the object of this letter.

You will see from the Am.[erican] Israel.[ite]¹¹ that San Francisco advertises for an assist. rabbi with a salary of \$2500 per annum. The one elected I have no doubt will supercede [sic] Dr. Cohn¹² in a very short time, and the Emanuel of San Francisco is one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in this country.

Besides in May next Galveston will be vacant with a salary of \$3000 to \$4000 per annum.¹³

I imagine you could get either of those places at the end of your year. I would, however, in your place prefer San Francisco on account of the position and the climate.

Now if you are of the same opinion, please let me know at once, and send me your application to the Emanuel congregation in San Francisco, to enter upon the position sometime after your year is out. If you prefer to stay where you are or to go to Galveston, let me know at your earliest convenience.

We are all doing well here, and the only trouble is that we have not graduates enough.

With my best love
Yours
Isaac M. Wise

⁹ In 1884 Heinrich Zirndorf (1829–1893) left the pulpit of Beth El in Detroit to become professor of history and literature at the Hebrew Union College. He was, however, not successful in the latter position and was relieved of his duties in 1890.

¹⁰ The reference is to Abraham Ilch (not Illich) (1858–1885), a brilliant young radical who had received his doctorate in Germany. In April 1885, he was elected Junior Rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, assisting the ailing Elkan Cohn. Of a weak constitution, he died shortly thereafter.

¹¹ November 21, 1884, p. 2.

¹² Elkan Cohn (1812–1889), rabbi of Temple Emanu-El since 1860, first introduced Reform Judaism to San Francisco.

¹³ The reference is to Congregation B'nai Israel. In 1885 Joseph Silverman (1860–1930), another classmate of Stolz, accepted this position, but held it only until 1888.

5

Rabbi Joseph Stolz

Cincinnati, December 7, 1884

Dear Sir & Friend

I am in possession of your letter of the 2d inst. and after mature reflection I see that you can not and ought not to leave Little Rock anyhow not before you have become sure that you can do no more good there. I have given up the idea in San Francisco as I heard that one of our graduates applied there,¹⁴ against whom, of course, I can do nothing. Abide your time, and you will have plenty of chance.

We are all well here and wish you well

Yours
Isaac M. Wise

6

Cincinnati, Feb. 14, 1887

My Dear Friend Stolz.

I made a mistake, sending a letter to you which was intended to Rubenstein in Pine Bluff.¹⁵ Burn the letter. I will write to B.¹⁶

You probably know by this time of Heller's election in New Orleans,¹⁷ which pleases me hugely. Now comes your turn. You must make your Doctorat to come out again before the people. Prepare as fast as you can. Excuse my mistake.

Yours
Isaac M. Wise

¹⁴ There is no evidence that a graduate of the College applied. The position was given to Abraham Ilch (see note 10).

¹⁵ Isaac Rubenstein, who was not a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, in 1887 was succeeded in the pulpit of Congregation Anshe Emeth of Pine Bluff by Ferdinand Becker, likewise not an H.U.C. graduate.

¹⁶ An apparent error for R(ubenstein).

¹⁷ Maximilian Heller (1860–1929), who was ordained with Stolz at the Hebrew Union College in 1884, was at this time called to the pulpit of Temple Sinai in New Orleans.

7

Rabbi Joseph Stolz.

Cincinnati, March 18, 1887

My Dear Friend Stolz.

Yours of the 15. came just in time to save me the trouble of writing to Chicago, for it was my intention to open correspondence with the Zion people of Chicago in your interest. Most likely Heller¹⁸ suggested your name to some of his friends there.

I think you might do well in the Zion congregation, if you have no colleague to concur with, as Heller had. As an assistant or associate rabbi, I would not have that place for any price, alone you might do well. Anyhow, if you should ever intend to leave again you rank much higher as Rabbi of the Zion cong. than in your present position. You would have to keep up opposite Hirsch¹⁹ and Sale,²⁰ but I think you can, and the Zion congregation is not difficult to manage.

If you accept, let it be with a salary of no less than \$ 3,000 per annum and for no shorter a time than five years.²¹ In five years you have plenty of chance

¹⁸ Heller had served as associate to Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal at Zion Temple in Chicago from 1884 to 1886. He had known Stolz from their student days at the College.

¹⁹ Emil G. Hirsch (1851–1923), a rabbi of the Sinai Congregation in Chicago, was ordained at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. Though he cooperated with Wise, Hirsch held the Hebrew Union College and its president in genial contempt.

²⁰ Samuel Sale (1854–1937) was the first American-born rabbi to occupy a pulpit in the United States. Like Hirsch a graduate of the Hochschule in Berlin, he too—perhaps reluctantly—allowed Wise to draw him into the work of the Union and the College. At this time, Sale was serving in the pulpit of Anshe Mayriv Congregation.

²¹ Six years earlier, writing in the *American Israelite* for June 24, 1881, Wise had set forth the conditions under which rabbis should receive employment:

‘If the congregations degrade the rabbi’s position below that of an ordinary clerk, they must be taught that that will not do, and they will learn it fast enough. If the rabbis were united, and those coming from one college will be, they would agree to these simple points:

(a) None must apply for any position. The congregation must make up its mind whom they want, and then call him.

(b) None must accept any position without a respectable salary, and under no other condition than a probationary term of at least three years, and then during good behavior.

(c) No rabbi must leave a congregation unless he resign the ministry altogether

to establish yourself permanently in the affections of the congregation, and to build up a large body. The field on the west side is larger even than on the south or north side of Chicago.

As regards the questions proposed to you, you can only tell them the plain truth. You preach English, but I have no doubt with a little more work you could also preach occasionally German, if required. As regards the standpoint, tell them the truth again. Tell them in plain English, that you are an American and a teacher in Israel who considers it his duty to edify, enlighten and elevate the community, to preserve and honor Judaism among the free and intelligent; hence you are no orthodox rabbi of former days and no destructive reformer of yesterday. You are always ready to preach and to do that which unites and elevates the congregation and brings honor and glory to Judaism and its votaries. So I would write and give them prudently to understand that they after all know very little about that which they call standpoint.

It is ערב שבת עם חשיכה and I must close.

Yours
Isaac M. Wise

8

Rabbi Joseph Stolz.

Cincinnati, April 28, 1887

My Dear Friend.

I am much pleased with your call to Chicago and hope you will succeed well, although, you will forgive me, I am not so positive about your German scholarship; but you must know that best.

You want me to make some suggestions, and I have hardly any to make, except perhaps this: Do not speak from MS.; give the Zion congregation due credit and its teachers and leaders due credit for the work done to the glory of Judaism in Chicago; tell them clearly your own standpoint as a teacher in Israel, not as an autocrat; when you come to Chicago, send your card to

or receive a call from another congregation, and then not before six months after tendering his resignation.

This would at once remedy the evil, wherever it exists; but to this end the rabbis must be rabbis, for which the college must take proper care.'

Adler,²² Hirsch, Sale, Norton,²³ Felsenthal,²⁴ receive them well, if they call, return the visits in a carriage, but have nothing official to say to them, ask no favor and no advise [sic] of any, and accept no special invitations, keep as cool and polite as you can with all of them; for they are all false, Adler excepted.

On your way home you might just as well pass through here, and see your friends.

Yours
Isaac M. Wise

9

Cincinnati, June 7, 1888

My Dear Friend Stolz.

I was very glad to receive good tidings from you and your work, although I have heard it before, except the one point, that you are satisfied and feel yourself at home in your new post. Go ahead **צלח ורכב על דבר אמת**.

I hope to see you here end of this month, when the examination comes on,²⁵ or any other time, to spend a few days in my house. Your friends here would like to shake your hand.

With my best wishes
Yours
Isaac M. Wise

²² Liebman Adler (1812–1892) was the rabbi of Congregation Anshe Mayriv in Chicago from 1861 until 1883. At the time of this letter he was living in retirement. Upon Adler's death in 1892, an effort was made to establish a chair in his memory at the Hebrew Union College.

²³ Aaron Norden (1844–1905) (not Norton), was the rabbi of North Chicago Hebrew Congregation.

²⁴ Bernhard Felsenthal was the rabbi whom Stolz was about to succeed at Zion Congregation in West Chicago. Felsenthal remarkably combined radical reform with a warm espousal of Zionism.

²⁵ During this period in the history of the College an oral examination of all classes was conducted annually by a panel of outside examiners. Guests were invited to attend.

Cincinnati, Jan. 16, 1900²⁶

My Dear Friend Dr. Stolz

You put more confidence in my judgement than I myself would, who have made so many mistakes in my life in my private affairs. But you want me to speak and I will.

I know next to nothing about that N.Y. congregation. I presume it is that of St. S. Wise.²⁷ If so you would gain very little financially or in position if you would go there. I also hear that they invited Rosenau,²⁸ Heller and others, against whom you would not like to run. But I may [be] misinformed in either case. Anyhow, I would go to preach there only on condition, that you be invited and without any application and furthermore, that a meeting of the congregation on next Wednesday after your officiating be previously convened, to decide at once and on your name only, to elect or reject. I would not go there under any other condition; and you cannot go there for less than 10 years and \$5000 a year, as the rent is at least \$1800 a year and everything cash 10 to 20 percent more than in Chicago.

With love to all
Yours
Isaac M. Wise

²⁶ This letter was written three months before Wise's death. The handwriting is wobbly and uneven, very different from the firm hand which characterizes the earlier letters.

²⁷ Stephen S. Wise (1874–1949), later the founder of the Jewish Institute of Religion, in 1900 left Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City to become rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon.

²⁸ William Rosenau (1865–1943) was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in 1889. In 1900 he was serving as rabbi of Oheb Sholom Congregation in Baltimore, Maryland. Neither he nor Maximilian Heller ever accepted a pulpit in New York.