

SAMUEL MYER ISAACS: THE DUTCH RABBI OF NEW YORK CITY

By Robert P. Swierenga

Dutch blood runs thick in the veins of American Jewry. The first Jews to settle in New Amsterdam in the 1650s were Dutch and a continuing trickle of Jews from the Netherlands followed in the next centuries.¹ During the great period of European migration, 1800-1915, an estimated 10,000 Dutch Jews immigrated to the United States. Most came from the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam, which was the largest in all of Europe, and they settled in New York City, where half of all Dutch Jews in America lived in 1880.

Just as the Dutch comprised a minor part of the European emigration to America, so the Jews made up a small portion of the Dutch emigration. But Dutch Jews were far more likely to emigrate than other Netherlanders.² They were a highly mobile, urban people who began emigrating to England and America during the Napoleonic conquest (1795-1813), at least three decades before the Van Raalte-Scholte group migrations of 1846-1847.

One of these early emigrant families was Meyer Isaacs, a prominent merchant-banker in Leuwarden, who suffered great financial reverses during the Napoleonic wars because of international trade restrictions and naval blockades.³ By 1814 Isaacs was so strapped that he decided to emigrate to London with his family, leaving his property and debts behind. The family settled in Spitalfield, a district of East London that was a Dutch Jewish center.

The Isaacs family were devout Jews, members of the Leeuwarden Synagogue whose 600 seats made it the largest in the Netherlands outside of the main centers in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague.⁴ Meyer Isaacs entered the rabbinate in London and four of his five sons also became rabbis, including Samuel, who was 10 years old when the family moved to London. This age was young enough for Samuel to learn to speak English without a Dutch accent. This ability later earned him many speaking engagements in America, where sermons and public addresses in English were much preferred to the customary Yiddish or German tongue.

Samuel attended public school, but as an orthodox Jewish teenager he also studied Hebrew, the Talmud, and Jewish history in the synagogue school and under the tutelage of his father. After completing his education Samuel taught Hebrew for a time at the Jewish Orphanage of London and then in the 1830s he became principal of a Jewish day school. This position enabled the young man to become well-connected in the wider Jewish community. He developed a life-long friendship with the famed Anglo-Jewish banker Sir Moses Montefiore, who shared his devotion to Palestine. He also became acquainted with Solomon Hirschell, the Chief Rabbi of the Great Synagogue of London, and the leading rabbi in the entire British Empire.

The year 1839 marked the major turning point for the 35-year old Hebrew educator. He was married in the Great Synagogue by Rabbi Hirschell himself, and shortly before this he had decided to emigrate to America with his bride, in response to a call from the newly founded Ashkenazi (Germanic) congregation Bnai Jeshurun (Sons of Israel) of New York to be its first preacher and cantor. The synagogue trustees had offered Isaacs the position without an interview but only after a "scrutinizing vigilance" of his credentials and upon the recommendation of a trusted intermediary in London. Undoubtedly, Isaacs' unique ability to preach in perfect English was a major factor in his appointment. A few days after his wedding, Isaacs and his new wife took their "honeymoon" trip to New York aboard the Brig *Emery*, arriving on September 10, 1839, after a lengthy two-month voyage on stormy seas.⁵

Isaacs' title was chazzan, which signified the chief religious leader who acted as reader (cantor) at the services and conducted weddings and funerals. The chazzan was recognized by the Gentile community as the "minister" of the congregation. Isaacs also preached on special holidays and every Sabbath service before the New Moon. Regular preaching in the vernacular language, following the model of Protestant ministers, was just entering the synagogue at this time.

Rev. Isaacs ministered at Bnai Jeshurun Synagogue for five years, until a schism rent the congregation due to ethnic rivalries. Isaacs and at least twelve other Dutch Jewish families, in addition to a number of English families, withdrew from the increasingly German synagogue, and formed a new congregation Shaaray Tefila (Gates of Prayer).⁶ Such splintering over Old World nationality differences was endemic in America among both Jews and Christians. By 1860 New York had 27 synagogues and each nationality or sub-regional group worshipped according to their customary ritual.

Isaacs served Shaaray Tefila for 33 years and his tenure marked the high point of Orthodoxy in New York Judaism. He devoted his pulpit to the defense of pure religion undefiled, calling the faithful to observe the full

Mosaic law, the Levitical dietary rules and purification rites, and especially to keep the Sabbath. Honoring the Sabbath was difficult for Jewish retail merchants because Saturday was the major American shopping day, and state and local Sunday-closing laws often kept Jewish businesses closed on that day as well, until they won legal exemptions.⁷

Rev. Isaacs' second theme was to uphold Orthodoxy against the new Reform Judaism that German Jews were bringing to America in the 1840s. Among other worship practices, Reform introduced mixed choirs and instrumental music, integrated seating, prayers in English, abolition of head coverings and calling men up to the Torah, and confirmation for young women as well as young men. Reform congregations also were lax in enforcing religious discipline.

Isaacs challenged these new ideas "from the fertile fields of Germany, where everything grows fast, although not always wholesome." What is at issue, he warned, is that Jews are "assimilating our system to that of Christianity. . . Shame on those Rabbis who have A.D. in their thoughts." In 1840, within a year of his arrival, Isaacs led a movement to exclude non-observing Jews from membership in Bnai Jeshurun. But the majority favored benign tolerance and Isaacs had to bide his time. He lamented: "In the days of yore, violators were. . . publicly stoned to death. . . but now. . . we court their society, give them the first honors in the Synagogue, [and] call them up to hear that law recited which anathematizes the Sabbath-violator. . . We behold the hands of sacrilege destroying the ten commandments. . ." There is no place for a doctrine of "the *minimum* God, the *maximum* man," he thundered. Such strong sentiments led historian Hyman Grinstein to declare that Isaacs was "without doubt the most ardent exponent of Sabbath observance in New York City prior to the Civil War."⁸

Isaacs also admonished the women of his congregation for not washing in the ritual pool (*mikveh*), which he had carefully constructed in 1833. He even attributed the recent deaths of several young married women in the congregation to God's anger at their direct disregard of the law of purity.⁹

Isaacs' goal was to safeguard the rank and file of American Jewry from Reform. "My object is...to prove, from facts, that our system of worship, apart from its *temporalities*, is the best of all systems; and to adduce evidence that adding or diminishing, abrogating, or altering our form of prayers, handed down to us from the Men of the Great Synod,...at the will or caprice of men, who, however well intentioned, are yet tinctured with the spirit of the age and are not capable of judging correctly or dispassionately--that reforms so instituted--will lead to inevitable ruin in our polity, and tend to unfetter the chain by which we have ever been riveted in union and in love. . ."¹⁰ Clarion calls such as this put Isaacs at the forefront of the defense of Orthodoxy in New York and throughout the country.

Shaaray Tefila prospered under Rev. Isaacs. In the 1860s the congregation relocated from midtown to uptown Manhattan, following its members to newer upscale neighborhoods. Because of the "flourishing condition" of the congregation, their chazzan's workload was so heavy that the trustees in 1865 hired an assistant "to conduct the service according to the ancient liturgy with the accepted tunes, leaving the duties of Preacher more especially to the veteran of the New York pulpit."¹¹

In 1857 Samuel Isaacs carried the fight against Reform to the wider Jewish community by launching a weekly periodical, *The Jewish Messenger*, which he made an effective organ for Orthodoxy. He wrote ringing editorials against Reform and enlisted others, including his son Myer S. Isaacs, to contribute essays, stories, and poems that nurtured Orthodoxy.¹²

The Messenger also promoted Jewish charities, day schools, orphan asylums, and the creation of a national board to present a united front for American Jewry.

A few years before his death, Isaacs took yet another bold step to save historic Judaism. To stem the growing secularization among the young, he agreed somewhat reluctantly to support a radical plan proposed by another Orthodox rabbi to prepare a liberalized and simplified Ashkenazic worship rite (*minhag*) acceptable to all American synagogues. The time for nationality synagogues with distinctive rites had passed, Isaacs believed: "Portuguese and German, Polish and Hollander, in connection with the manner of worshiping Israel's God, are names that should, long ere this, have been erased from our nomenclature. . . The badge we all should have proudly worn is that of 'American Jews'. . .signifying that the circumstances which had given origin to marked differences in ritual had ceased to exist, and that the necessity for reconstructing another, perfectly uniform, and more conformable to our changed condition, had arrived."¹³

Isaacs in 1875 published the revolutionary proposal and warmly endorsed it in his *Jewish Messenger*, but the plan was stillborn, even though it stimulated widespread debate. It pleased neither the ardent Orthodox nor Reform movements. And Isaacs' declining health and approaching retirement made it impossible for him to carry

the crusade. Apart from a universal worship rite, he opposed any change in law or custom that deviated from the traditional ritual of worship, and he especially opposed any plans to remove Hebrew from the prayer book. Judaism was a religion based on traditional law that could only change slowly with the authority of generations and it must keep its link to the ancient land of Israel.¹⁴

In addition to his ministerial and journalistic work, Isaacs promoted the customary Jewish tenets of charity, Palestinian relief, and religious education. His motto was "not to touch the worship, but to improve the worshipers." A colleague aptly characterized him as a "humble Jew to whom the needy turned with confiding looks; with affection." His early editorials in *The Messenger* advocated the founding of Hebrew orphanages by harping on the disgraceful case of a Jewish orphan placed in a Christian institution and converted there, all because no Jewish asylum existed. The Hebrew Benevolent Society of New York was smitten by this charge and established the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in 1859. Subsequently, Isaacs worked assiduously to combine all Jewish charities in the city by organizing the United Hebrew Charities in 1873. He also helped establish Mount Sinai Hospital (1852) and served as its first vice-president.¹⁵

Internationally, he crusaded for Palestinian relief and as early as 1849 he began long-term fund raising efforts. In 1853 he became treasurer of the North American Relief Society for Indigent Jews in Palestine, a position he held for many years. When news came of a massive famine in Palestine in 1853-1854, Isaacs was the "first to take action; the other ministers followed his lead." He mounted the first national campaign in the United States for the relief of Jews overseas. Reverend Isaacs' exceptional efforts earned him the accolade of "champion of charitable institutions."¹⁶

Isaacs also promoted Jewish education, decrying the fact that Jewish children sat under Gentile teachers in the public schools. In 1842 he converted his congregation's afternoon school into an all-day English and Hebrew school, called the New York Talmud Torah and Hebrew Institute, with the Dutch-born Henry Goldsmith as teacher of Hebrew. Although the school began strongly with 80 boys and was one of only three in the entire country, it failed within five years because of financial difficulties. Isaacs was not easily discouraged. A few years later he opened a Hebrew high school and taught Hebrew there himself. In 1852 his congregation again founded a day school, the Bnai Jeshurun Educational Institute, which boasted an enrollment of 177 pupils within a year; but it too had to close after three years (1855) because of insufficient students. The Hebrew free school movement struggled because the New York state legislature had secularized all public schools by eliminating Protestant textbooks and allowing local school boards to choose daily Scripture readings. In Jewish neighborhoods only Old Testament passages were read. Jewish children began flooding to the public schools thereafter and all Jewish schools had closed by 1860. Nevertheless, in 1865 Isaacs finally succeeded in establishing the Hebrew Free School in New York, which flourished for many decades.¹⁷

The Dutch rabbi particularly decried the lack of Hebrew seminaries and colleges to provide educated leaders: "Synagogues are crying aloud for ministers, and there are none to respond to the call. Jewish children are hungering for religious food. . . and there is none to supply the desideratum; and this in free and happy America! Where are our collegiate establishments? Where our theologian institutes?" In 1867 Isaacs achieved his goal by helping establish Maimonides College of Philadelphia, the first theological seminary for Jews in the United States. Unfortunately, the college failed after a few years through no fault of Isaacs.¹⁸

Besides his religious activities, Isaacs also involved himself in "political" issues, especially efforts to defend Jews worldwide against anti-semitic outbursts and to unify Judaism in America. Only a year after his own immigration, the famous Damascus Affair of 1840 provided the first opportunity. This international crusade, which aimed to rescue a number of Jews imprisoned in Syria, is sometimes considered the beginning of modern Jewish history because it aroused a latent national consciousness and identity. Isaacs and Henry Hart, another Hollander at Bnai Jeshurun, served on a seven-member committee of correspondence to coordinate a petition drive calling on the American government to intervene. Out of this effort, Isaacs joined with Rabbi Isaac Leeser, the conservative leader of Philadelphia, to help unify all American Jews. In 1849 and 1850 Isaacs sent out numerous appeals for an all-Jewish convention or synod to promote the "welfare of Israel" by developing a uniform synagogue government and by establishing Hebrew seminaries and colleges to provide educated leaders for the future. Reform leaders refused to cooperate and the unity movement failed.

At the outset of the Civil War Isaacs made yet another attempt to restore law and order to the disjointed and religiously confused Jewish community. He proposed through the pages of *The Jewish Messenger* that the learned and esteemed Orthodox Rabbi Abraham Rice of Philadelphia be elected Chief Rabbi of the United States, since American Judaism was a body without a head to guide it. The proposal met with a storm of criticism from

independent-minded Jewish leaders and Isaacs was forced to abandon his plan.¹⁹

Isaacs also joined the Jewish protest chorus against the Papacy in the famous Montara affair of 1858-1859, which involved the supposed "child stealing" and baptism of a Jewish child by Italian Catholics. Isaacs chaired a combined committee of all twelve synagogues in New York City, which sponsored a mass meeting of 2,000 persons, both Jews and Protestants, to petition the American President to intervene with the Vatican. When this effort proved unsuccessful, because American Jewry was too disorganized, Isaacs in 1859 led in the founding in New York of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites. This Board expanded into a national organization of all Orthodox congregations that safeguarded Jewish civil and religious rights at home and abroad.²⁰

Reverend Isaacs' public activities and unusual facility in the English language gave him a high visibility. Jews and non-Jews alike greatly esteemed him, and Protestant intellectuals and clerics particularly respected him. In 1845 several professors at Yale College and the mayor of New Haven invited him to lecture on the topic: "On the Present Condition and Future Spiritual and Temporal Hopes of Jews." When Shaaray Tefila dedicated their new Wooster Street Synagogue in 1847, many Protestant clergymen attended and several spoke to the congregation.²¹

In the 1850s, Isaacs endeared himself to the northern public by using the pages of *The Jewish Messenger* ardently to advocate the anti-slavery movement, even at the expense of losing his Southern readership. "We want subscribers," he editorialized, "for without them we cannot publish a paper, and Judaism needs an organ; but we want much more truth and loyalty." Isaacs was well acquainted with prominent anti-slavery leaders, such as Professor Calvin E. Stowe, husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe and a prominent philo-Semite, and in 1856 Isaacs campaigned for the anti-slavery candidate, John C. Fremont. But Isaacs refrained from preaching anti-slavery sermons, not wanting to bring "politics into the pulpit." During the Civil War, he strongly defended the Union cause "with or without slavery," and after President Lincoln's assassination he was one of two ministers selected to give prayers at the public memorial services in Union Square.²²

Although never formally ordained, Isaacs was one of the leading Jewish ministers in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. One of his colleagues called him the "Father of the American Clergy." His funeral service at Temple Shaaray Tefila in 1878 was the largest Jewish funeral of the century. Every synagogue and Jewish organization in the country sent representatives. Isaacs was a religious leader of major influence, a renowned journalist, and a mover and shaker in Jewish affairs. Throughout his long career he was the featured speaker at some 47 synagogue dedication ceremonies across the country.²³

But he was most honored for his defense of Orthodoxy. Colleagues eulogized him as "a faithful proponent" of Judaism who "lamented the increasing defection amidst our ranks; the prevailing disloyalty to the sinaitic covenant." An eminent Christian clergyman, in a glowing tribute sent to Isaacs' sons, described their father as "a bulwark of strength against the infidelity and godlessness that are growing upon us in this great city. His firm devotion to God's holy word brought him into direct and cordial sympathy with us Christians. . . May his mantle rest on his children. Your father's death is a public calamity. Who shall fill his place? Our city could better spare millions of its money than one such resolute watchman and soldier in its moral defense."²⁴

Ironically, within two years of Isaacs' death, Congregation Shaaray Tefila began going over to Reform, led by the new minister who not surprisingly described his predecessor as "rigidly, obstinately orthodox." The conservative Dutch contingent resigned in the face of this revolution, along with their English and Polish compatriots. Most of the German Jews, who tended toward Reform, remained. Thus, the end of Dutch leadership marked a crucial turning point in the history of the Shaaray Tefila congregation.²⁵ More broadly it signaled the waning influence in American Jewish life of the traditional British-Dutch-Polish amalgam, which had succumbed to the overwhelming numbers of German immigrants.

Reverend Isaacs, like his Dutch Calvinist counterparts in the Midwest, was a fiery champion of the old ways in religion. He was largely responsible for shaping unorganized New York Jewry into a coherent, articulate and respectable community. As the first English preacher in Ashkenazic congregations, Isaacs used the pulpit to preserve historic Judaism through strict religious observance, Hebrew education, and community self-help organizations. In the early years he was second only to Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia as the most influential orthodox rabbi in America. This son of Friesland, whose family fled the oppression of Napoleon, cut a wide swath within American Judaism. He placed public, pen, and podium in the service of Orthodoxy and valiantly fought against the forces of secularism and liberalism that were rotting the roots of the Jewish faith in the rising age of unbelief.

Editor's note: The author is writing a book on Dutch Jewry in the United States, and this article is based on that research.

Endnotes

1. The best surveys are David De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers 1682-1831* (New York, 1952); Hyman G. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia, 1946).
2. The Netherlands ranked tenth among European nations in overseas emigration and seventeenth in the USA among nationality groups. Of an estimated 86,000 Dutch immigrants to the USA 1800-1880, Jews numbered about 6,500 or 7.5%. For the period 1880-1920, Dutch immigration totaled 165,000 and Jews comprised 3,500 or 2.0%. Their overall proportion of the Dutch emigration was 4% or twice their percentage of the Dutch population.
3. On the Isaacs family and son Samuel, see E. Yechiel Simon, "Samuel Myer Isaacs: A 19th Century Jewish Minister in New York City" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1974); Charles Rezsickoff, "Samuel Myer Isaacs," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, 10 vols. (New York, 1948) 5:594; Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: The Historical School in 19th Century America* (Philadelphia, 1963), 340-342. Davis and all other Jewish historians erroneously describe Isaacs as an Englishman or English-born.
4. On the situation of Jews in Friesland, see H. Beem, *De Joden van Leeuwarden* (Assen, 1974).
5. Israel Goldstein, *A Century of Judaism in New York, B'nai Jeshurun, 1825-1925: New York's Oldest Ashkenazic Congregation* (New York, 1930), 76, 80-81, 92-93.
6. Simon Cohen, *Shaaray Tefila: A History of its Hundred Years, 1845-1945* (New York, 1945), 22-25.
7. Davis, *Emergence*, 134-38, 340; *The Occident V* (1847), 382-94.
8. *The Occident IV* (1847), 542, 239; Cohen, *Shaaray Tefila*, 9; Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 340, 342.
9. Rabbi I. Harold Sharfman, *The First Rabbi: Origins of the Conflict Between Orthodoxy & Reform* (Malibu, CA: 1988), 145-46.
10. *The Occident II* (1844), 284.
11. *Ibid.*, XXVI (1868), 93; Cohen, *Shaaray Tefila*, 18-26.
12. Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 216-17, 366-67.
13. Davis, *Emergence*, 162-65.
14. *Ibid.*, 165-67, 431-32, 298, 308.
15. *The Jewish Messenger*, May 31, 1878; Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 160-61, 436; Davis, *Emergence*, 60-64, 70, 78, 129-130.
16. Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 446-47; *The Occident X* (1852), 170, 263; XI (1854), 503-04; XVIII (1860), 202-03.
17. *The Occident I* (1843), 470-73; XXIII (1865), 190, 238; Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 231-34, 244-45; "Samuel Myer Isaacs," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols. (New York, 1901), 6:635; Davis, *Emergence*, 38.

18. *The Occident* VII (1849), 137-39; Simon, "Samuel Myer Isaacs," 107, 131-32.
19. Sharfman, *First Rabbi*, 687-88.
20. Grinstein, *Jewish Community*, 217, 430-35; *The Occident* XVII (1859), 83, 86-7, 193-94, 218-20.
21. *The Occident* III (1845), 526; IV (1847), 224; VII (1849), 614; Bertram Wallace Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences: Studies in Nineteenth Century American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, 1954), 50-51, 57.
22. *The Occident* III (1845), 526; IV (1847), 224; Davis, *Emergence*, 110-11.
23. Simon, "Samuel Myer Isaacs," 1; Davis, *Emergence*, 2.
24. Obit. in *New York World*, May 21, 1878; *The Jewish Messenger*, May 31, 1878.
25. Cohen, *Shaaray Tefila*, 28-35; *The Jewish Messenger*, May 31, 1878.