

Isaac Mayer Wise

Goals:

1. To see the vision and creativity on the frontier of Reform Judaism.
2. To comprehend the beginnings of Reform Judaism in America.

Objectives:

1. The students will learn about Isaac Mayer Wise and how he started the Reform Movement in US.
2. The students will discover the changes in reform Judaism

Materials:

- 25 copies of the Appendices
- Blank Paper - stack
- Pens
- Video Camera

People:

- RMY and Madrichim
- 8th and 9th graders

Time Table:

09:30-09:40	Arrival, Attendance, Tzedakah Collection, Madrichim Check-in
09:40-09:50	Three Conferences in Europe
09:50-09:53	Shift to America
09:53-09:55	IM Wise Background
09:55-10:05	IM Wise Memoir Excerpt and Questions
10:05-10:10	News Report Prep
10:10-10:20	News Report Recording
10:20-10:25	HUC First Dinner
10:25-10:30	Wrap Up

Detailed Procedure:

09:30-09:35 Arrival, Attendance, Tzedakah Collection, Madrichim Check-in

Take attendance. Collect tzedakah. Check in Ask how everyone's week has been.

Madrich will check in with students and let them ask any questions and share stories about what is going on as madrichim.

What have we learned in the past few weeks? What was happening with reform Judaism in Europe? Was it successful? Did people like it? Was it catching on?

- Government was not comfortable with factions of Judaism in their countries
- Established Jewish leadership didn't like change
- Didn't like Jews leaving their congregations for others financially and spiritually
- People were seduced by all there was to offer in secular European society – many assimilated

What was happening in Europe to keep the reform Jewish movement moving?

- Rabbis got together in the 1840s (not just Reform Rabbis) to talk about changes and what the new generation of Rabbis would look like
- Secular and traditional studies...not just part of a Jewish studies department in a university, but free standing seminary
 - This type of Jewish institute of study was unheard of until the 1850s – it was either yeshiva (traditional Jewish school) or university, not a combination
 - Three conferences in Europe

09:40-09:50 Three Conferences in Europe

In order to teach about the three conferences in Europe, the students will get Appendix A and try to guess what the Reform Jews decided to do. After they do that, RMY will teach about the 3 conferences.

- This is a small group of people (no more than 30 Rabbis attended any of the 3 Rabbinic conferences in Europe that took place 1844, 1845, 1846)
 - By the early 1840s, a trained Reform rabbinic leadership had emerged in central Europe. Abraham Geiger, called to the Breslau Jewish community in 1839, developed into the most distinguished intellectual defender of Reform Judaism in 19th-century Europe. Reform rabbinical conferences in Brunswick in 1844, Frankfurt in 1845, and Breslau in 1846 gave rabbis an opportunity to clarify their beliefs and the practices that could follow from them. A debate over the use of Hebrew in the services led Zacharias Frankel to walk out of the 1845 conference, a moment many see as the beginning of the historical school, which advocated positive-historical Judaism. Frankel accepted the evolutionary character of the Jewish religion but insisted that the "positive" dimensions of Jewish tradition needed to be preserved. This perspective later evolved into Conservative Judaism. Although most of the rabbis at these conferences were much less traditional than Frankel, they taught in the established Jewish community, the *Einheitsgemeinde*, and therefore had to remain sensitive to and conversant with traditional rituals and observances.
 - 1844 – Brunswick – they decided that it was no longer necessary to say Kol Nidre, passed a resolution against the Jewish oath (that all Jews had to take upon oath from all the curses of Deuteronomy) – however, mixed marriage was the biggest discussion there. The answer was yes, but no. No German state would allow children to be raised as Jews, so if they were raised as Jews secretly, but had a parent who wasn't Jewish, then it was okay.
 - 1845 – Frankfurt (West) – It began with general discussion of principle in which positive historical Judaism was accepted by the assembly (something that is eternal and unchanging in Judaism), however, the subject of Hebrew was concerning for these people in the conference. 1) They tried to pass that prayer had to be in Hebrew, but they disagreed 2) Hebrew is still necessary though – then said the mission of Israel is essential to Judaism, but a personal messiah is NOT (voted on taking that out of the prayerbooks). They approved playing the organ, and maintaining a mikvah (which could use drawn water), and they would use a 3 year cycle of Torah readings.
 - 1846 – Breslau – said second day of the holiday could be abolished. Focused on hemophiliac circumcisions. Abolish tearing clothes for mourning. FOCUSED on women – they are equal religiously, need to follow time bound mitzvot, got rid of the piece that thanked God for not making me a woman, bat mitzvah – most of this tabled for next conference and there was a revolution in 1848.

09:50-09:53 Shift to America

Why did people come to the US? When do you think the first reform Temple in the US was established?

- Open frontier
- establishment not so secure yet (religious and political – good for reform)
- Freedom of Religion at America's core!

09:53-09:55 IM Wise Background

IM Wise

- He was born in Bohemia (Czech Republic now) in 1819
- Grew up in a traditional home, but studied secular subjects on the side while studying at Yeshiva
- studies to be a Rabbi but also attends the University of Prague
- He emigrated to the US around 1850

- He served as the Rabbi of Orthodox congregations in Albany, NY; Charleston, South Carolina, and Cincinnati, Ohio
- In Ohio, he introduced radical changes in the worship services.
 - men and women sat together
 - choir and organ music in the sanctuary
 - He encouraged people to read the service in English since many people did not understand or read Hebrew
 - He also made several theological changes in the prayer book.
- Founded UAHC and HUC

09:55-10:05 IM Wise Memoir Excerpt and Questions

Madrich will read the excerpts with the students and lead them in discussion.

Questions:

- What were some of the radical things he did? Are they radical to today's standards?
- Who was fighting who? (Traditionalists/orthodox vs. Reformers)
- How does this interaction differ from the closing of the synagogues in Germany?
 - In Germany the government closed the temples rather than deal with factional fighting among the Jews. In America, the government got involved and supported the right of the Jews to create new modes of worship.

Wrap-Up: IM Wise was a founder of the New American Reform Judaism. He began to change not just the way things looked or sounded, but some of the practices and beliefs – theologically and philosophically too.

10:05-10:10 News Report Prep

The students are able to create first person news accounts of this historic event. *Madrichim* will lead the students in discussions of how to report on this event.

Students should report what occurred on that fateful Rosh Hashanah day in 1850. Review the memoir excerpt and think about what made what happened in Albany so different from what happened to Hamburg Temple and others in Germany and other parts of Europe?

- Freedom of Press and Religion – Separation of Church and State

Now tell the story, by preparing a news cast based on the events re-told by Isaac Mayer Wise. Tell the whole world what happened.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER as you create your news cast:

1. Who are the key players in this debate/fight?
2. What are they fighting about?
3. What are some of the specific events that took place?
4. Are there witnesses you can interview?
5. What was the outcome?
6. What is your prediction for the future of Reform Judaism based on Rabbi Isaac Mayer's memoir excerpt?

10:10-10:20 News Report Recording

Students get the opportunity to report on this. It will be recorded.

10:20-10:25 HUC First Dinner

What happened at the HUC First Dinner? See article and pictures – students will read them together.

"The July 11, 1883 banquet in Cincinnati to honor the first ordination class of Hebrew Union College included non-kosher food: clams, crabs and more. News of this "trefa dinner", with food forbidden by ancient Jewish customs, spread quickly and widely."

What is so crazy about this? Why were people up in arms?

10:25-10:30 Wrap Up

What did you learn? How does this help you learn about the Reform movement today?

Appendices:

Appendix A – Three Conferences

Appendix B – IM Wise Memoir

Appendix C – The Trefa Banquet

Three Conferences in Europe – 1844, 1845, 1846

What do you think the Rabbis in Europe decided during their conferences on these issues? Which side did they take? What's different from today's Reform Judaism?

	Side A	Side B
Kol Nidre	Yes, it should be a part of the service	No, it should not be a part of the service
Mixed Marriage	No, there could not be mixed marriages.	Yes, there could be mixed marriages.
Hebrew – in prayer	Yes, Hebrew should be used in prayers	No, Hebrew should not be used in prayers
Messiah	No, there is no Messiah.	Yes, there is a Messiah.
Mission of Israel – a Jewish home	Yes, Israel should exist	No, Israel should not exist
Playing the organ in worship services	No, an organ cannot be used	Yes, an organ can be used.
Mikvah – water collection	Water can only be collected from natural sources only. (Rain, natural bodies of water, etc.)	Water can be collected from natural sources and be drawn by humans.
Second Days of Holidays	Maintain second day of holidays	Do not maintain second day of holidays
Tearing Clothes for Mourning	Yes, need to tear clothes for mourning	No, do not need to tear clothes for mourning

From the memoirs of Isaac Mayer Wise... Run Out of Town on a Rail?

The summer of 1850 passed without bringing about any improvement in the state of affairs. Finally all the peddlers came home for the [Jewish] holidays. I knew that the troubles would now be repeated.....a great fair happened to be held in the city during the week before the New Year (Rosh Hashanah). Business was good and no one wished to leave his place of business. [The Temple President] Spanier made use of the opportunity. Although the congregational meeting was always held after Rosh Hashanah and at night, he called the meeting two days before the New Year and by day, in order that the business men could not attend it.[but] the people attended the meeting anyway because they sensed that there was going to be trouble.

Instead of proceeding with the regular business, the meeting leader laid the charges which had been brought against me. [that I had written on New Year's eve in a lodge-room - in public, that I had ridiculed publicly the women's' ritual bath (mikvah, that I had preached a God of reason, while the congregation believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.] The debate on the subject lasted from 3 o'clock in the afternoon until 11 o'clock at night. Neither side would give in. The vice-president, Joseph Sporberg, arose at 11 pm and declared that it was his duty to vindicate the law, and he put the motion to adjourn. A vote was taken and Sporberg decided that the motion was carried to keep Wise as rabbi and he left with his friends. After they had gone, Spanier the president declared that the meeting was not adjourned and proceeded to business, it was resolved that the charges against me were sustained, that I was deposed from office from that hour, and that the back salary due me should not be paid. The orthodox party had thus won a complete victory, and I was defeated.

The following morning I received from the secretary a copy of the proceedings, although my contract had still three years to run. All this happened five months after these same people had retained me by force in Albany, and had prevented me from going to Charleston.

My friends held a meeting the following evening, and resolved unanimously that they would not sanction these acts of violence the case was referred to the Attorney General, and he decided that I must appear in the synagogue at the. Hour of the Rosh Hashanah service in my official garb; that I must try to perform my official duties, and if any violence should be attempted, I could withdraw quickly, and either call on the police for aid, or sue the congregation for the whole salary as called for by my contract. If however, I did not appear at the time of service, the contract would be considered null and void.

At first I did not wish to put the matter to a test, but my friends insisted that the law must be satisfied. Consequently I went to the synagogue on New Year's morning, appeared in my official garb, but found one of Spanier's men sitting in my chair. I took another seat. Excitement ruled the hour. Everything was quiet as the grave. Finally the choir sings Sulzer's great Ein Kamocha. At the conclusion of the song I step before the ark in order to take out the Torah as usual, and to offer prayer. Spanier steps in my way, and without saying a word, hits me with his fist so that my cap falls off my head!!! This was the terrible signal of an uproar the like of which I have never experienced. The people acted like furies. The Poles and Hungarians, who thought only of me, struck out like wild men. The young people jumped down from the choir-gallery to protect me, and had to fight their way through the surging crowd. Within two minutes the whole assembly was a struggling mass. The sheriff and his posse, who were summoned, were forced out until finally the whole assembly surged out of the house into the street.

"Louis Spanier," I said, "I will appeal to the law." Said he, "I have a hundred thousand dollars more than you. I do not fear the law. I will ruin you."

I finally reached home, bowed with pain and inexpressible grief. The constable came and arrested me as the ringleader of a rebellious mob at a public service. Upon our arrival there, the whole crowd was present in order to feast their eyes on the sight of their rabbi appearing before court on Rosh Hashanah day; but their hopes were disappointed, for the police judge went into a private room and received me there. My friends had informed him of 'what had taken place, and he dismissed me on my word of honor.

The Trefa Banquet and the End of a Dream By Michael Feldberg

Chapters in American Jewish History are provided by the American Jewish Historical Society, collecting, preserving, fostering scholarship and providing access to the continuity of Jewish life in America for more than 350 years (and counting). Visit www.ajhs.org.

On a hot and humid Cincinnati evening in July 1883, over 200 distinguished guests, Jews and non-Jews alike, gathered at the exclusive Highland House restaurant to celebrate a milestone in the history of American Judaism: Hebrew Union College, which Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise founded, had just ordained its initial graduating class. America had finally produced four homegrown, ordained rabbis. Most of the diners had just attended the eighth annual meeting of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the first association of American Jewish synagogues, which Rabbi Wise had also organized. The graduates and guests looked forward to an evening of gastronomical pleasures. What they witnessed was the beginning of the end of Wise's dream of American Jewish religious unity.

For the nearly four decades after his arrival in America from his native Bohemia, Isaac Mayer Wise envisioned creating and sustaining a unified American Judaism that balanced European tradition and New World realities. He built the Hebrew Union College to train American rabbis and created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations as a forum for traditional and reform-minded rabbis and congregations to air and resolve their differences.

By 1883, the fact that some traditionalists had introduced a degree of modernization such as English sermons and English prayers into their services and the more liberal ones even allowed organ music and mixed choirs of men and women encouraged Wise to hope for convergence. He was aided by his close friend, Reverend Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia, a leading traditionalist figure who, like Wise, focused more on uniting American Jewry than on doctrinal differences.

Other rabbinical voices were not so united in vision and purpose. Especially contentious were the so-called Eastern radical reformers, led by Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore. Veterans of the radical reform German rabbinical conferences of the 1850s, the liberals intended to expunge what they deemed outmoded religious practices such as *kashruth*—derisively called “kitchen Judaism”—and the second day of holiday observances. Some radicals even advocated observing Shabbat on Sunday. Wise himself damaged the reform-traditionalist détente in 1855 by introducing, at a meeting intended to demonstrate the harmony of American Judaism, his prayer book, *Minhag America*. Though moderate in its reforms, the book distressed the traditionalists, including Leeser, and did not go far enough for some of the radical reformers.



Isaac Mayer Wise. Courtesy of AJHS.

Wise's diplomatic genius contained these differences. By creating the UAHC in 1873 and convincing the organization to found Hebrew Union College in 1875, Wise shakily maintained the fragile traditionalist-reformer détente into the beginning of the 1880s. Historian Abraham J. Karp notes that Wise "understood that congregations could be united through participation in a project rather than through agreement on resolutions" and proposed creating the seminary as a concrete way to develop an American rabbinate and, thus, an American Judaism.

The celebratory banquet for the first Hebrew Union College graduating class on that fateful July evening tangibly confirmed for Wise the efficacy of his strategy. However, the first course on the menu was "Little Neck Clams (half shell)." According to the memoirs of Rabbi David Phillipson, the course provoked "terrific excitement" and "two rabbis rose from their seats and rushed from the room." While leaders gave unity speeches from the podium, a number of traditional rabbis sat stoically through the meal, failing to applaud, and refusing to taste even one morsel of the "Soft-shell Crabs" and "Salade of Shrimps," or the ice cream and cheese that followed the meat courses.

Historians debate whether Wise approved the menu, the Jewish caterer acted on his own, or the Einhorn faction surreptitiously ordered the *tref* courses to force a showdown. Wise claimed no knowledge of how the shellfish got on the menu. He personally kept a kosher home and claims to have ordered Gus Lindeman, the caterer, to serve only kosher food. Lindeman did serve kosher meat but "supplemented" it with the shellfish and dairy desserts. A later investigation by a panel of UAHC rabbis cleared Wise of wrongdoing, but the damage was already done.

The events of that evening, dubbed in history the "trefa banquet," forged an important link in the chain of events leading to the formal break between tradition and reform. In the three years after the banquet, a series of debates between radical Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler and traditionalist Alexander Kohut crystallized the positions of each side. In 1885, the UAHC conference in Pittsburgh, dominated by radicals, adopted a platform of Reform Jewish theology that defined the movement for over half a century. In 1886, some change-oriented rabbis who could not go as far as the Pittsburgh radicals established the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, laying the foundation for Conservative Judaism. In 1888, America's Orthodox community decided to recruit a chief rabbi from Eastern Europe to serve as a regnant authority. Later that year, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna arrived in New York City to become the first official chief Orthodox rabbi in America.

After these events, there was no turning back. American Judaism divided into organized movements, each claiming its right to define Jewish religious practices. The "trefa banquet" did not cause that division, but most colorfully symbolized the sensibilities and principles that led to it.

