

Biographical Sketch of Isaac Leeser

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"To learn and to teach,
to observe and to do."
ללמוד וללמד לשמור ולעשות

Isaac Leeser was born in the village of Neuenkirchen, which at that time was part of the Prussian province of Westphalia, on December 12, 1806. Leeser's father, Uri Lippman (Uri ben Eliezer) was a merchant of limited financial means and educational background. The name "Leeser" is reputed to have been selected for Isaac by his paternal grandfather, Eliezer (i.e., Liezer). Little is known of Leeser's mother, Sara Isaac Cohen, who died when Leeser was eight. Her name only recently came to light when a Dutch descendant, Ms. Helga Becker Leeser, discovered it while doing genealogical research in the Dulmen *Stadtarchiv* name-taking act of September 22, 1813.

Isaac was the second of three children; his one older sister was named Leah Lippman and his younger brother was named Jacob Lippman. Leah married a butcher named Hirsch Elkus who moved the family to the small town of Denekamp, Holland located near the Dutch-German border.

Leeser's younger brother Jacob died of smallpox at the age of twenty-five in 1834, one year after emigrating to America. Jacob contracted the disease from his brother Isaac after coming to Philadelphia to care for him. While surviving the disease and the trauma of his brother's death, Leeser' face remained deeply pock-marked, a disfigurement that would cause him great embarrassment throughout his life. Both Jacob and Isaac died bachelors.

Leeser received his early education in Dulmen (in Germany), where his family had moved no later than 1812. Leeser was raised by his paternal grandmother Gitla, a devout woman who strongly influenced Leeser. With the death of his father and grandmother in 1820, Leeser found himself orphaned at the age of 14. That same year Leeser left for Muenster where he attended the secular Gymnasium. While living in Muenster, Leeser was befriended by the city's district Rabbi, Abraham Sutro, who was a strong opponent of the burgeoning movement for Jewish religious reform. The relationship appears to have had a determining character on Leeser insofar as he would take up the cause of traditional Judaism against the Reformers later in America.

Leeser emigrated to the United States at the age of 17, arriving on May 5, 1824. He came on the invitation of his maternal uncle Zalma Rehine who lived in Richmond, Virginia. Rehine, who ran a fairly prosperous dry-goods business, was married to Rachel Judah, whose mother was the sister of Reverend Gershom Seixas, one of early America's most important Jewish religious leaders. Rachel Judah's sister Rebecca was married to their first cousin, Isaac Seixas, who was Hazan of the Beth Shalom Synagogue in Richmond. Seixas befriended Leeser and taught him the Sephardic rite, the dominant Jewish rite then practiced in America. Rachel's brother Isaac Judah was another Richmond relative with whom Leeser formed a strong friendship. In all, Leeser would spend five years in Richmond, a time he would later describe as among his happiest, and in that time become Americanized in one of the more traditional, conservative Jewish communities of the South.

Leeser first achieved national renown in 1828 for his moving response, published in *The Richmond Whig*, to an attack on the Jews which had appeared in the *London Quarterly Review* and then been re-printed in American newspapers. Leeser's response was widely circulated and eventually re-published in book form in 1841 as [*The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights*](#). In 1829, with his reputation established and at the urging of Jacob Mordecai, one of Richmond's leading Jewish figures, Leeser applied for and was elected to the post of Hazan (Cantor and Reader of the prayer service) of the Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia.

Leeser's tenure at Mikveh Israel was marked by constant bickering with the Board of the synagogue over the extent of the Hazan's authority, his status and independence, as well as over Leeser's on-going demands for a

life-time contract and salary increase. The Board also resisted several innovations by Leeser, such as his introduction into the weekly service of a regular English language sermon, the first of its kind of note in the United States (first begun on June 2, 1830). Even as his relations with Mikveh Israel were to sour, however, Leeser was to begin a period of intense literary productivity and remarkable organizational activity.

During the 1830's, Leeser worked closely with Rebecca Gratz, the famous Jewish educator and civic leader, to establish the Free Sunday School movement in Philadelphia. Leeser's *Hebrew Spelling-Book*, which he published in 1838 (the first Hebrew Primer for children in the United States) was created specifically for use in the Hebrew school which he and Rebecca Gratz opened that same year.

Leeser's career as a translator also began in Philadelphia in 1830 with the publication of his rendering from German of J. Johlson's [*Instruction in the Mosaic Religion*](#). Leeser, as part of his ongoing efforts to contribute to the development of Jewish education and culture in America, translated a number of important works into English from German, Spanish, French and Hebrew. Among his most important translations were Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, Joseph Schwartz' [*Descriptive Geography and Brief Historical Sketch of Palestine*](#), as well as his renowned Bible translations, first of the Pentateuch and later of the entire Hebrew Bible.

Leeser first published his own major theological work, [*The Jews and the Mosaic Law*](#), in 1834. Here can be found his expressed belief in the divine origin of the Pentateuch as well as his defence of Judaism, expanded upon from its earlier voicing in the *Richmond Whig* (1828). Over the next thirty years, Leeser produced a flood of sermons and theological works, including his two-volume (later a third volume was added) *Discourses, Argumentative and Devotional, on the Subject of the Jewish Religion* (1837) and his massive ten volume [*Discourses on the Jewish Religion*](#) published at the end of his life in 1867. In 1837, Leeser completed his English translation of the Sephardic prayer book in use at Mikveh Israel, [*The Form of Prayers According to the Custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*](#) and two years later in 1839 published a new <http://archive.org/details/catechismforyoun1839lees>.

During the 1840's, Leeser began working as an editor and publisher. Among his many contributions to American literary culture were his editions of Louis Salomon's [*The Mosaic System in its Fundamental Principles*](#) (1841), Grace Aguilar's [*The Spirit of Judaism*](#) (1842), Benjamin Dias Fernandes' [*A Series of Letters on the Evidences of Christianity*](#) (1859), and Hester Rothschild's "Meditations and Prayers" (1866). In 1843, Leeser began publishing what would become perhaps his greatest literary achievement: [*The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*](#), a monthly (with the exception of a brief and unsuccessful appearance as a weekly) journal of news and opinion, which he was to edit and publish until his death in 1868.

Leeser continued to play an unceasing role in creating the cultural foundations of Jewish life in Philadelphia and throughout North America. In 1845, Leeser founded the first American Jewish Publication Society and in the same year published his translation of the Pentateuch entitled [*The Law of God*](#), a bi-lingual edition which included the unpointed (unvocalized) Hebrew text. Three years later, in 1848, Leeser published with a local Episcopalian minister, Joseph Jacquette, a masoretic (pointed) Hebrew edition of the entire Hebrew Bible, [*Biblia Hebraica*](#), the first of its kind to be printed in America. That same year, Leeser also managed to issue his translation of the [*Ashkenazic*](#) prayer book.

In addition to his professional activities as minister, educator, writer, translator, editor and publisher, Leeser also played a fundamental role in either proposing, founding, or leading many significant civic, religious, and charitable institutions. Leeser was the proposer of a "Plan of Union" of American Hebrew congregations (to be based on shared traditional principles and featuring a "Central Religious Council" modeled after the concept of the Bet Din); the proposer of the first Union of Hebrew Benevolent Societies; founder of the American Jewish Bible Society; founder of the Hebrew Education Society; founder of the Philadelphia Jewish Hospital; supporter of the Jewish Foster Home of Philadelphia.

Leeser was also a member of the Jewish Order of B'nai Brith; member of the Board of Hebrew Ministers; member of the committee of the Hebrew Fuel Society; vice-president until his death of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites -- the first American organization devoted to the cause of Jewish defense; founder, first provost, president of the faculty, and professor of Homiletics, Belles Lettres and Comparative Theology, at Maimonides College, "The First American Jewish Theological Seminary."

Leeser's stormy relationship with the Congregation Mikveh Israel lasted through 1850, at which point he left his ministry. Undeterred by this setback, Leeser embarked on an extensive journey across the United States, travelling over 5,200 miles from November 9, 1851 through February 27, 1852.



He visited isolated and emerging Jewish communities, where he lectured on a variety of topics and spoke out on behalf of Jewish causes. After returning to Philadelphia, Leeser continued his work as editor of *The Occident*, publisher, bookseller, dealer in Judaica and translator. In 1853, Leeser completed his monumental English translation of the entire Hebrew Bible, known popularly as "The Leeser Bible." In 1857, the same year in which the second (folio-size) edition of the "Leeser Bible" was issued, a new congregation was formed for him in West Philadelphia, where he served until his death eleven years later. The congregation, called Beth El Emeth, was composed chiefly of supporters of his who had formerly belonged to the Congregation Mikveh Israel. From his new pulpit, Leeser continued to advocate his longstanding goal of bringing unity to the American Jewish community under the banner of traditional Jewish practice.

In many ways, Leeser's personal life was filled with quiet anguish. He led a lonely, often sickly life. Reports have it that he caused a stir by living in a boarding house run by a non-Jewish woman, and he was rumored to have been eating there non-kosher food. According to several accounts, one of his ill-fated romantic hopes was dashed by the father of his beloved, Simha Peixotto. Conflict was characteristic of much of Leeser's public life as well. During the divisive Civil War years, to cite one example, Leeser feared he had been placed on a

"suspect list" of southern sympathizers, and was warned by his friend Moses Aaron Dropsie that he might have to flee the city.

Isaac Leeser died in Philadelphia on February 1, 1868, at the age of 61, and was buried in the Beth El Emeth congregation cemetery in West Philadelphia located at 55th and Market Sts.

The Legacy

The Leeser legacy to American Jewish history is a well-documented life of pioneering accomplishments. As Bertram Korn succinctly puts it: "Practically every form of Jewish activity which supports American Jewish life today was either established or envisaged by this one man." Perhaps the most lasting testament to Leeser's energy and hopes can be found in the pages of his journal [*The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*](#), of which he was the founder, editor, contributor, and occasional typesetter. *The Occident* contains arguably the single most important historical record of Jewish life in the Western Hemisphere in the mid-nineteenth century. Chronicled there, for example, is Leeser's ongoing confrontation with the rising movement for Jewish religious reform. As editor of *The Occident*, Leeser was able to give voice to his belief in and defense of observant Judaism and fiercely resisted many proposed changes to traditional Jewish rituals. Leeser's editorials also document his many public battles to defend religious freedom -- such as his losing effort to revoke Sunday closing laws and resistance to widespread missionizing activity. Finally, through the agency of *The Occident*, Leeser sought to accomplish in print what he never succeeded in doing in practice: to bring together in one common forum the many American Jewish communities that were otherwise divided -- by either geography or ideology.

In addition to his journalistic endeavors, Leeser also was renowned for his many translations. His Bible translation was THE Scriptural version read by English-speaking American Jews prior to that issued by the Jewish Publication Society of America in 1917. Leeser also was actively involved in supporting Jewish causes around the world, as evidenced by his galvanizing of the American Jewish community in 1840 to protest the Damascus Affair, a blood libel leveled against Jews in Damascus, and again in 1858 in response to the Vatican's support of the notorious abduction of Edgardo Mortara, an Italian Jewish boy who had been secretly baptized and then taken from his parents. No less significant was Leeser's support of proto-Zionist Jewish settlement of Ottoman Palestine.

It is our hope that the documents made available via this website will help to deepen our understanding of the importance of Isaac Leeser's legacy and open up to the public new avenues for study and research.

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