

The Formation of American Judaism

A book display for



May 2022

Prayers for Shabbath, Rosh-Hashanah and Kippur, or; The Sabbath, the beginning of the year, and the Day of Atonements ..., according to the order of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews

Translated by Isaac Pinto (American, 1720-1791)

J. Holt, New York, 1766

BM675.S3 Z62713 1766

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

Isaac Pinto published the first English translation of the Jewish prayer-book for the High Holidays. Pinto was a Sephardi immigrant in New York and a member of Shearith Israel; the first Jewish congregation in North America. He soon discovered that many of the congregants were unfamiliar with the Hebrew language. Realizing the need for a prayer-book in the vernacular, he set about the translation himself. The result reflected British colonial rule and included a prayer for King George III. Yet, the fact that the first Jewish prayer-book to be published in English emerged out of a tiny Jewish community in colonial New York suggests that it represented the will of the American Jewish community to determine their own independent religious practices.

Biblia Hebraica

Hebrew Bible

Dobson & Fry, Philadelphia, 1814

BS715 1814

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

The impetus behind the publication of the first Hebrew Bible printed in America came from Jonathan Horowitz, a Dutch Jewish printer. Based on rumors of a growing market for Hebrew print in the New World, Horowitz left Amsterdam in 1812 with his Hebrew type. He constructed his text of the Bible based on Joseph Athius' famous 1661 edition, and he set about gaining financial support for the printing through a list of New England subscribers. But others were hot on his heels, including several missionary groups. Determined to bring his project in first, Horowitz sold his Hebrew type to the Philadelphia printer William Fry, and his list of subscribers to the book dealer, Thomas Dobson, who saw it through to its successful conclusion.

The Book of Jasher: referred to in Joshua and second Samuel. Faithfully translated from the original Hebrew into English.

Biblia Hebraica

Edited by Mordecai Manuel Noah (American; 1785-1851)

Noah and Gould, New York, 1840

BS1830.J2 A3 1840

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

Mordecai Manuel Noah was an important early Jewish leader in the United States. Born in Philadelphia of mixed Ashkenazi and Sephardi descent, he became a lawyer, playwright, politician, judge, journalist and, for a short time, a sheriff of New York City. In these various roles, he was the first American Jewish man to reach national prominence. He strongly advocated for America's war with Britain in 1812, and he was afterwards appointed as United States consul to Tunis. But in 1815, he was removed from the role on the basis that his religion formed "an obstacle to the exercise of [his] Consular function." Noah vociferously contested this, and gained letters of support from Adams, Jefferson and Madison confirming separation of church and state and paving the way for greater acceptance of Jewish involvement in American political life.

Noah's later career in journalism led him to edit the *National Advocate* and afterwards he founded the *New York Enquirer*, and the *New York Evening Star*. He wrote numerous plays for the theater, and he was one of the founders of New York University. He was also fully engaged in various aspects of Jewish community life and in advocating for his fellow Jews. In 1825, he famously helped purchase land on Grand Island near Buffalo with the idea of building a colony for Jewish refugees. He named it Ararat after the biblical story of Noah and the flood.

In addition to plays, Noah authored numerous essays on the Jewish condition, as well as discourses that he delivered at the major synagogues in New York. In 1840, Noah published this translation of *The Book of Jasher* (Book of the Upright), a text that was mentioned in the Bible and believed to be one of the lost non-canonical biblical works. The translation was by a Moses Samuel of Liverpool who failed to get it published in England due to widespread suspicions regarding the authenticity of the Hebrew text. Samuel sold his translation to Noah who enthusiastically supported it. Noah declared it to be "a work of great antiquity and interest" and he added many endorsements to the preface leading Hebrew scholars and ministers of the day, including Isaac Nordheimer of New York University and H. V. Nathan of Jamaica. Contemporary critical notices noted the quality of the translation but denounced the text itself as "a sheer forgery from beginning to end."

Torat ha-Elohim (the Law of God)

Translated and edited by Isaac Leeser (American, 1806-1868)

C. Sherman, Philadelphia, 1845

BS1222 1845a

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

Isaac Leeser is considered one of the most important American Jewish figures of the nineteenth century. At the age of 17, he emigrated from Germany to America where he gained a position as the cantor, and eventual leader, of the oldest Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Philadelphia. Over the course of his lifetime, Leeser became one of America's most influential Jewish religious leaders, in addition to being a scholar, writer, educator, and publisher. He is also remembered as major advocate of religious liberty, Jewish civil rights, and for promoting better Jewish-Christian relations. Beyond Philadelphia, Leeser reached wide audiences through the publication of his monthly journal, *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*.

In the sphere of publishing, Leeser helped found the Jewish press of America and provide the American Jewish public with access to scarcely available foundational Jewish texts, such as prayer-books, works on Judaism, and the Bible. In 1845, he produced this five-volume English/Hebrew edition of the Pentateuch; the first in America. Leeser set to work on this project, partly in response to the opening of a Sunday School in Philadelphia by Rebecca Gratz (1781-1869), a pioneering Jewish philanthropist and religious educator. Gratz's students were having to use the King James Bible for their religious studies as no Jewish alternative was available. Leeser's translation was held in high regard and it became the standard English translation used by American Jewry.

Grace Aguilar (British; 1816-1847)

Shema Yisrael. The Spirit of Judaism

Edited by Isaac Leeser (American, 1806-1868)

[1842]

Philadelphia, 3rd edition, 1864

BM580. A341 1864

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

Grace Aguilar was an English Jewish poet, novelist and writer on Jewish history and religion, in addition to being a religious reformer and educator. She was descended from Spanish-Portuguese Jews: her grandparents had been merchants in Jamaica before moving to England. Having a delicate constitution, Aguilar was educated at home where she afterwards dedicated herself to the world of writing. Her first novel, an historical romance set during the Inquisition, was written in 1831, at the age of fifteen, and published posthumously in 1850. Among the first of her twelve published books, was a book of poems, a translation, and a novel about British domestic life. Her works drew wide attention for appealing to Jews and Christians alike.

Her first major work on Judaism, *The Spirit of Judaism*, was compiled in the late 1830s. After its completion she sent the manuscript over to Isaac Leeser for him to include it as a series in his periodical, *The Occident*. The manuscript was unfortunately lost at sea, and Aguilar had to reconstruct it from her notes. Leeser eventually published it as a book in 1842. However, despite his admiration for her work, he could not resist attaching a editorial preface to the book in which he laid out his disagreements with some of Aguilar's points that tended towards religious reform. Aguilar was upset by the editorial; nevertheless, it did not reduce its success: the book quickly became a standard teaching tool in synagogues and churches in England and America. In fact, thanks to Leeser's championing of her work, Aguilar became an important figure in American Jewish life. Her death at the age of 31 was described as "a national calamity" in Jewish newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Grace Aguilar (British; 1816-1847)

The Women of Israel

Volume II

[London, 1844]

D. Appleton: New York, 1860

BS575. A3 1860 Vol. 2

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

In 1844, Grace Aguilar wrote a series of biographical accounts of Jewish women from the biblical period to modern times, under the title *The Women of Israel*, for a She used this work to explore her deep interest in elevating the role of Jewish women in Jewish history and to give voice to her desire that women should be allowed full access to Jewish religious texts including the Talmud. She also sought to advocate for Jewish emancipation and for greater acceptance of Jews in Christian social circles. The work was immediately recognized as her masterpiece, and it was hailed in America by Rebecca Gratz who distributed Aguilar's books in her Hebrew Sunday School (HSS). Gratz had founded the HSS, the first Jewish Sunday School in America, in 1818 under the sponsorship of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. It provided American Jewish women with their first public role in teaching and directing Jewish religious education outside of the synagogue setting.

Isaac Mayer Wise (American; 1819-1900)

History of the Israelitish Nation: from Abraham to the present time

Volume 1

Albany, NY, 1854

DS121.W77

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

Popularly known as the father of American Reform Judaism, Isaac Mayer Wise was also an educator, editor, author, and the organizer of several major institutions in American Jewish life, including the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the National Conference of American Rabbis.

Born in Bohemia, Wise emigrated to America in 1846 at the age of 27. He first settled in New York where he was appointed rabbi of the Congregation Beth El in Albany. As an early supporter of religious reforms, he soon introduced many innovations, such as allowing women into the *minyan* (a quorum of ten adults required for religious obligations in Judaism). These reforms met with great opposition, and the community split into two congregations. Wise eventually became the rabbi of Bene Yeshurun in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he remained for the rest of his life. In addition to publishing numerous works on Judaism, he also sought to write about Jewish history in a way that separated history from religious dogma “in a spirit of philosophical criticism, independence and impartiality” and using “the same method as if it were the history of any other nation.” The book was intended to reach a wide audience and, in some ways, serve as a defense of the Jewish people. Wise also wrote several books on Christianity, as well as works promoting greater understanding between the two faiths.

Minhag Amerika: the Daily Prayers for American Israelites

Edited by Isaac Mayer Wise (American, 1819-1900)

Revised in Conference

Bloch, Cincinnati, 1872

BM674.34 1872

Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica

While Isaac Mayer Wise was still serving the congregation of Beth El in Albany, New York, in the late 1840s, he began to compile a new prayer-book for American Jewish congregations. This prayer-book, which he entitled *Minhag America* (American custom), aimed to provide a middle ground of worship between the more radical supporters of Reform Judaism and the more traditional worshipers. Wise described his project in *The Occident* as a solution to the confusion of worship being compounded by recent Jewish immigrants to America who were bringing their various customs and rituals with them. An official American Jewish prayer-book would supersede the Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Polish customs, by creating a synthesis of customs that would unite American Jews rather than divide them.

Wise's prayer-book was adopted by many congregations across America until it too was superseded four decades later by the Central Conference of American Rabbis' *Union Prayer Book*, the official prayer-book of Reform Judaism.