

Religious Periodicals
and Publishing
in Transnational
Contexts:

The Press and the Pulpit

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PEOPLE OF THE PRESS:
RELIGIOUS PERIODICALS AND THE CREATION
OF AMERICAN JUDAISM

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In March of 1867 a merchant named Joseph wrote to Isaac Leiser from Cleveland, Ohio, praising his publication, the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*. As he described it,

there came late [into] my hand the book of the Occident containing all the interests of the Israelites of these lands, words of truth and peace, something [of] the news of various communities, their numbers and customs and gathering wise valuable [information] for the explanation of the Scriptures . . .

This appreciation reveals some of the diverse functions of the press for American Jews in the nineteenth century. In a period when many congregations were new and many Jews lived far from one another, Jewish newspapers became the central institution of American Jewish life. They educated and entertained, but also shared news and facilitated access to religious resources, helping Jews like Joseph to experience and to imagine “the Israelites of these lands” as a distinct social body.

The American Jewish press is usually studied as a feature of early twentieth-century urban life. Historians argue that the Yiddish-language press created transnational ties among those with the same hometown or

A version of this article was originally published as “People of the Press: The Occident, the *Israelite*, and the Origins of American Judaism” in *By Dawn’s Early Light: Jewish Contributions to American Culture from the Nation’s Founding to the Civil War; Essays by Thirteen Contributing Scholars and Interpretative Notes Published on the Occasion of the Exhibition at Princeton University, 14 February 2016 to 12 June 2016*, ed. by Adam Mendelsohn (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 2016), 75–82.

¹ March 3, 1867, Isaac Leiser Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (from here, AJA).

ideological bent and facilitated the Americanization of immigrants.² Earlier publications, by contrast, were published in English and were intentionally national in scope, including subscribers from diverse European backgrounds. Little attention has been paid to the deeper roots of American Jewish newspapers in the nineteenth century because this era is usually studied in terms of congregationalism, acculturation, and denominational competition between Reform and Orthodoxy, with press sources used as colorful illustrations.³ And yet, newspapers played a crucial role in constructing a national religious community among far-flung Jews, including many who had no congregational ties. American Jewish newspapers served not only as records of activities and thoughts in formation, but as facilitators, regulators, advocates, and lifelines.

Between 1820 and 1877 the Jewish population of the United States swelled from 3,000 to 250,000—fueled largely by immigration—and moved westward from east coast port cities into the American hinterland.⁴ Many of the new arrivals were young single men from German-speaking lands who were seeking their fortunes as peddlers and small-town merchants. Unlike in Europe, where Jewish identity was government-ascribed and religious communities were government-supported, Jews in the United States went undocumented and unregulated, even as they moved into places with little Jewish infrastructure and few religious authorities. Recast as anonymous individuals, Jews had to recreate religious life in the context of mobility, voluntarism, and capitalism. They did this on their own and in small communities, but also through newspapers.⁵

² Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Annie Polland, "May a Free-thinker Help a Pious Man?": The Shared World of the 'Religious' and the 'Secular' Among Eastern European Jewish Immigrants to America," *American Jewish History* 93.4 (2007): 375–407; Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

³ Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover, N.H.: Published for Brandeis University Press by the University Press of New England, 1976); Karla Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 375.

⁵ Shari Rabin, "Manifest Jews: Mobility and the Making of American Judaism, 1820–1877," (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2015).

Imported European Jewish newspapers like the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* and the *Archives Israelites* found readers in the United States, but an indigenous press also flourished. The first newspaper in the United States to explicitly focus on Jewish concerns was Solomon Jackson's short-lived *The Jew*, an anti-missionary "defense of Judaism" that appeared between 1823 and 1825. The first American Jewish newspaper to last beyond a few issues, however, was Leeseer's *Occident*, founded in Philadelphia in 1843. Eleven years later it was joined by the *Israelite*, founded in Cincinnati by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise amidst a flowering of American Jewish newspapers, including the *Asmonean* (1849–1858) and the *Jewish Messenger* (1857–1922) of New York, the *Voice of Israel* (1856–?) and *Weekly Gleaner* (1857–1865) of San Francisco, and German-language papers including Baltimore's *Sinai* and Wise's own *Die Deborah*, which he described as the *Israelite's* feminized "help-meet." By the 1870s, a newspaper published especially for children, *The Sabbath-School Visitor*, was established under Rabbi Max Lilienthal's direction in order to compensate for the facts that "our children hear very little about religion in their homes; that the Bible is very seldom opened or read by our firesides; that the glorious history of our nation is almost a sealed book to most of our young ones."⁶

The *Occident* and the *Israelite* were the most popular, widespread, and important Jewish newspapers, in large part because of the ambition of their editors. Leeseer, editor of the *Occident*, had immigrated to Richmond, Virginia, from Westphalia in 1824 at age eighteen and later moved to Philadelphia. Wise, editor of the *Israelite* and more than a decade younger than Leeseer, had arrived from Bohemia in 1846, and after a tumultuous tenure in Albany, New York, he settled in Cincinnati in 1854. Although these men are typically presented as ideological antagonists—with Leeseer epitomizing Orthodoxy and Wise embodying Reform—both were concerned that the conditions of American life were rendering Jewish religious life

⁶ Jonathan Sarna, "The American Jewish Press," in *Oxford Handbook of Religion and the American News Media*, ed. Diane Winston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Daniel Levy, "Letters about the Jews of California: 1855–1858," trans. Marlene Rainman, *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 3 (1971): 86–112; George L. Berlin, "Solomon Jackson's 'The Jew': An Early American Jewish Response to the Missionaries," *American Jewish History* 71.1 (September 1, 1981): 10–28; "A New Publication," *Israelite* (December 26, 1873): 6; Naomi Wiener Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of Nineteenth-Century American Rabbis* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

hopelessly irregular and diverse.⁷ Through organizational efforts and publications, both sought to make Judaism stable, reliable, and portable throughout the nation.

Although the *Occident* was heavier on sermons and lengthy editorials and the *Israelite* more fond of serialized novels, both newspapers were eclectic in their contents and included advertisements, poems, international news, travel reports, and letters from subscribers. Like other newspapers of the day, both printed religious and political opinions through sermons and editorials. Although there was always a diversity of views among readers, especially on the topic of religious reform, editors had particular points of view and hoped to spread what they saw as correct forms of belief and practice. In the *Occident*'s first volume, for instance, Leeser expressed hope that it would stymie the efforts of missionaries: "Could we not by diffusion of knowledge among the people arrest the mischief which artfully contrived publications have perhaps caused to some little extent?"⁸ And yet not all Jews were delighted with such direct instruction. Leeser received complaints that "the *Occident* is very dull" because it was heavy on "sermons + essays [which] are beyond [readers'] comprehension."⁹

These Jews were bored because the real religious work of newspapers was taking place elsewhere: on the "Domestic News" page and in the advertising section. By focusing on these sections, rather than on the sermons and editorials, this essay points to the dialogic relationship between readers and editors and to the role of the press in creating identity, community, and even the conditions of religious life. Although he was a vocal polemicist in favor of religious reform, Wise still insisted in 1854 that his newspaper "is a religious paper, but not a sectarian or a sectional one."¹⁰ Leeser admitted in the first issue of the *Occident* that reading his journal was not a substitute for gaining a deeper knowledge of Judaism, but conceded that "though the stream be in this manner more shallow than when it flowed between confined banks, still it is diffused over a much wider space."¹¹ The press was, for Wise and for Leeser, both a first step toward national organization and proof of its necessity. Their newspapers preceded denominational institu-

⁷ Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996); S.D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸ "The Apathy of Israel," *Occident* 1 (1843-1844): 295.

⁹ Joseph Jonas to Isaac Leeser, Aug. 15, 1852, Box 1, Folder 4, MS 197, Isaac Leeser Papers, AJA. Leeser was aware of this complaint, "What Shall We Write," *Occident* 15 (1857): 361-69.

¹⁰ "To the Reader," *Israelite* (July 15, 1854): 4.

¹¹ "Introductory Remarks," *Occident* 1.1 (April 1843): 1-6.

tions and even congregations, arguably making them possible in the first place. American Jews were not alone in using the press to religious ends, although, as a spottily organized immigrant community, it was particularly important to them. Long before the famous Yiddish-language newspapers of the Lower East Side, the *Occident* and the *Israelite* served a crucial role, creating community and enabling Jewish life—in and out of congregations—throughout the American continent. These Jewish newspapers not only recorded American Judaism, they actively created it.

Facilitating American Judaism

As Isaac Leeser wrote in 1843, "The country is fast filling up with Jews . . . from the newly gotten Santa Fe to the confines of New Brunswick, and from the Atlantic to the shores of the western sea, the wandering sons of Israel are seeking homes and freedom."¹² Jews moved and settled in new places because, as migrants officially classified as white, they could, and because, as actors in a nascent capitalist system, they often needed to. The 1777 Articles of Confederation had guaranteed that "the people of each state shall have free ingress and regress to and from any other state," and while this was not mentioned in the Constitution of 1787, it continued to be affirmed as consistent with the "privileges and immunities" clause.¹³

In this period, the nation was expanding rapidly westward even as the ongoing processes of industrialization created a robust but chaotic free market capitalism in which individual success was paramount and often required relocation. Young Jewish men peddled throughout the hinterland, hoping to find sufficient capital and a desirable place to establish themselves as merchants. Mobility beckoned with promise of economic success, but it was also risky and lonely. The threat of "freaks of fortune" and of "confidence men" lurked around every corner, and it was difficult to know anyone's true identity.¹⁴ These factors exacerbated existing challenges to tradi-

¹² "On Association," *Occident* 6 (1848): 317, cited in Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 43.

¹³ Zechariah Chafee, *Three Human Rights in the Constitution of 1787* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1956), 186; Passenger Cases, 48 U.S. 283 (1849); George Wilson Pierson, *The Moving American* (New York: Knopf, 1973); Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Rutledge, 2006).

¹⁴ Hasia Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class*

tional Jewish life. While on the road, it was difficult to find fellow Jews for a prayer quorum or proper religious resources to fulfill commandments and perform rituals. It was in this context of confusion and scarcity that newspapers became a crucial component of American Jewish life.

For most of its run the *Occident* came out monthly and looked like a magazine, with a simple masthead and a single column on each page. The *Israelite* was a weekly broadsheet newspaper with a more elaborate masthead and multiple columns on each page. Many Jews first found these newspapers through word of mouth and purchased subscriptions directly from the editors or from agents deputized in specific localities.¹⁵ There were always, however, publication and delivery issues as well as considerable financial instability. Subscribers, who often moved from place to place, could be hard to find when it was time to collect payment. Some wanted only trial subscriptions, or struggled to pay. At least one pair of men sent three dollars for an *Occident* subscription, "having no other money but such as we send you here enclosed, therefore we hope it will be acceptable."¹⁶ And yet despite these struggles, newspapers were widely distributed and read by far-flung Jews.

One historian estimates that there were around 1,100 subscribers to the *Occident* between 1843 and 1861, and that the *Israelite* had over 5,000 subscribers between 1856 and 1861, numbers that are small, but that belie their further geographical distribution as well as their influence and reach among non-subscribers.¹⁷ Wise was probably not far off when he argued that the *Israelite* had "at least double the number of readers that we have subscribers."¹⁸ For instance, S.M. Mayer from Marysville, California, wrote to Leeser in 1853, "I have just found in one of my friend's houses one of your little books called *Occident* . . . he is not a subscriber he brought it with him from New Orleans."¹⁹ Even if one limits the count to actual subscribers,

Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ News, *Israelite* (April 28, 1856): 347; "Agencies," *Israelite* (July 4, 1856): 423.

¹⁶ Harmon + Levinson to Leeser, December 1st, 1857, Isaac Leeser papers; P 20; Folder 33, American Jewish Historical Society, Cambridge, MA and New York, NY (from here, AJHS).

¹⁷ R. Glanz, "Where the Jewish Press Was Distributed in Pre-Civil War America," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 5 (1972): 1-14.

¹⁸ "I Will Stand My Post" *Israelite* (July 11, 1856): 4. On another occasion, Wise argued that readers amounted to "five times the number of its actual subscribers."

"Facts and Results," *Israelite* (August 1, 1856): 28.

¹⁹ January 8th, 1853, Isaac Leeser Papers, MS 197, Box 2, Folder 2, AJA. See also, Letter from Shasta, *Israelite* (May 4, 1855): 341.

during the antebellum period Jewish newspapers reached an estimated 1,000 American localities, most of which had few Jews, no synagogues, and little in the way of Jewish religious life.²⁰ In 1855 it was reported from Boston that "Sunday morning is the usual time for arriving of the *Israelite*, and all are anxious for receiving it."²¹ That same year, Sam Goldstone of Shasta, California wrote to Isaac Mayer Wise recounting his first encounter with the *Israelite*: "I grasped at it with the eagerness of a hungry wolf, I devoured every word on these scraps," he wrote, adding, "I feel proud that there is such a journal as the *Israelite*."²²

The *Occident* and the *Israelite* entertained through stories and poems and educated through sermons, speeches, and editorials, but they also printed news and advertisements. Both publications were filled with notices of Judaica stores, kosher caterers, and other Jewish resources. For instance, M. Light of New York advertised in 1854 that he had a wide range of Judaica objects and texts at his store on Oliver Street: "The printed books are of the best editions, and will be supplied on reasonable terms."²³ As religious wares became marketed goods in the pages of the newspapers, sellers touted their aesthetic appeal as much as their ritual authenticity. In 1862 readers were directed to contact H.R. Da Costa in Philadelphia if they were interested in purchasing from "a fine lot of Lulabim and Citrons, [plant species used ritually during *Sukkot*, the feast of Tabernacles] just received in prime order." In 1861 J. Middleman of New York informed the *Occident*'s readers that he had obtained kosher wine, which, he made sure to point out, was "excellently adapted for every religious purpose" (emphasis added), a nod to the rarity of wine consumption, the neglect of proscriptions on wine made by non-Jews, or both.²⁴

Leeser and Wise also advertised for their affiliated publishing concerns. Leeser established a Jewish Publication Society in 1845, the same year that he published his five-volume Hebrew-English Pentateuch. The Society published a periodical anthology called *The Jewish Miscellany*, secured 450 subscribers throughout the country, and eventually published fourteen small English-language tracts. Its goal was that "literature of a Jewish kind might be diffused all over the land, at a cost so trifling that the poorest man might be able to participate in its benefits."²⁵ The enterprise struggled

²⁰ R. Glanz, "Jewish Press," 1-14.

²¹ *Israelite* (February 2, 1855): 238.

²² "Letter from Shasta," *Israelite* (May 4, 1855): 341.

²³ *Occident* (October 1862): 2; Ads, *Weekly Gleaner* (February 20, 1857): 47; Ads, *Israelite* (July 15, 1854): 7.

²⁴ *Occident* (October 1862): 2; *Occident* (September 1861): 2.

²⁵ "The American Jewish Publication Society," *Occident* 6 (1848): 411.

financially and was unable to survive an 1851 fire that destroyed its stock, although a new organization under the same name was created in the early 1870s.²⁶ Bloch & Co., founded in 1855 by Isaac Mayer Wise's brother-in-law Edward, published Wise's *Minhag Amerika* prayer books, as well as his newspapers, but also sold other books in Hebrew, German, and English. Bloch & Co., which described itself as "Importers and Dealers in Hebrew Books of Every Description," also published documents for Jewish organizations, blank forms for Jewish marriage contracts (*ketubot*), and a variety of Jewish books, both imported and written in the United States. By 1874 Bloch & Co. was being advertised as the "American Hebrew Publishing House."²⁷ Newspapers spawned a broader American Jewish print culture, which they then promoted to their subscribers.

Markets emerged not only for Jewish books and materials, but also for ritual expertise. Perhaps the most common advertisements of all were those for ritual circumcisors, Jewish educators, and especially *hazanin*—functionaries hired by new congregations—mostly to officiate at prayer services. Typical was the ad placed in 1862 by Congregation Bene Israel of Davenport, Iowa, which sought "the services of a married man competent to fill the situation of [reader] and [kosher slaughterer], and able to give religious instruction, and teach the German language."²⁸ *Hazanin* placed ads for their services as well: "A situation is wanted as *hazan*, teacher and lecturer, by a man recently from Germany . . . capable of instructing and leading a choir."²⁹ Especially common were advertisements for individual ritual circumcisors. When Rev. M. Wolff left his Boston post in 1858 for Hartford, he informed the *Occident's* readers, "if I can be of service to any in performing the rite of circumcision, I shall be happy to accept any invitation that may be extended to me, and will perform that ceremony, as heretofore, without compensation."³⁰ The press helped congregations and families find much-needed functionaries and ritual experts and vice versa.

²⁶ C.H. Meyer to Leaser, April 15, 1854, Box 2, Folder 4, MS 197, Isaac Leaser Papers, AJA; H.A. Henry to Isaac Leaser, June 10, 1862; Box 1, Folder 4, *ibid*; Sama, *American Judaism*: 82; Bettram Wallace Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences: Studies in Nineteenth Century American Jewish History* (American Jewish Archives, 1954): 45; Sama, *American Judaism*, 82; *ibid.*, *The Jewish Publication Society, 1888-1988* (Jewish Book Council of America, 1987).

²⁷ Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences*, 45; Singerman, "Bloch & Company," 120.

²⁸ "Wanted," *Occident* 20 (February 1862): 2.

²⁹ Ads, *Israelite* (July 15, 1854): 7.

³⁰ News Items, *Occident* 16 (1858): 262-3; Ads, *Israelite* (March 6, 1874): 7.

There were constant advertisements for Jewish boardinghouses, where the odds of finding kosher food and a prayer quorum, not to mention trust and companionship, seemed higher than in other living situations. In a representative issue of the *Israelite* published in December 1858, there were two columns of ads for Jewish boardinghouses in Rochester, Syracuse, New York, Cleveland, San Francisco, Detroit, Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Evansville, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago. The proprietor in Harrisburg, Lazard Bernhard, promised "a good table . . . and also Lagerbeer, choice wines, etc."³¹ Advertisements were also used to make work arrangements and for personal concerns. In 1873 Henry Herff of Wabash, Indiana advertised in the *Israelite* seeking for his "country dry goods and clothing store an experienced clothing salesman."³² Less common was the strategy of S. Franklin of Silver City, Idaho, who tried to use the press toward matrimonial ends. In 1873 he described himself in the *Israelite* as "a young co-religionist, doing a large business in the wilds of Idaho [who] would like to form the acquaintance of some young lady and therefore politely requests correspondence . . . in English, French or German."³³ At least one family used the press to search for their lost relative "Sarah, daughter of Hyman Malches, of Brisk, Lithuania [sic], who is said to have resided many years in Charleston, S.C."³⁴ In the maelstrom of nineteenth-century America, the press played a crucial role in helping Jews find the tools of religious life, including one another.

Readers could learn about—and access—Jewish resources, materials, and people not only on the advertising page, but also through local news and travel reports. In one representative issue of the *Occident* from 1855, there were reports about Jewish life in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Portsmouth, Ohio; St. Louis; New Orleans; Lafayette, Louisiana; and La Pointe, Michigan.³⁵ These gradually took on a kind of formula, describing at a minimum the population and its communal institutions. In 1856 a terse

³¹ *Israelite* (December 3, 1858).

³² For example, "Wanted"—In a country dry goods and clothing store an experienced clothing salesman. A permanent situation to one who gives satisfaction. Good reference required. For further particulars address soon, Henry Herff Sr. P.O. Box 694, Wabash Ind." *Israelite* (March 7, 1873): 7. They also included ads seeking information about long-lost loved ones. See Ads, *Occident* 19 (1861).

³³ *Israelite* (January 10 and 17, 1873): 7. Unfortunately I have found no other such personals ads. In 1873 a correspondent from Helena, Montana, reported "I am sorry to say that we have not one Jewish young lady in our midst. But three were ever in this city and they were engaged to be married within a few months." *Israelite* (June 13, 1873).

³⁴ Ads, *Occident* 19 (1861).

³⁵ News Items, *Occident* 13 (1855): 368-72.

report was published in the *Israelite* about the Jews of St. Paul, in the Minnesota Territory: "There are but eight Jewish families and some young men of our persuasion in this new city in the far west. Still they organized a congregation and elected a *hazan*."³⁶ Typical was a note from Leeseer that appeared in the *Occident* in 1857. After hearing of a new congregation in Davenport, Iowa, he wrote:

Would Mr. Eiseman, the Secretary, have the kindness to inform us with regard to the number of Israelites in his city, the state of the congregation, and the names of its officers and also those of his society? We should also be happy to obtain authentic information respecting other settlements of Israelites through Iowa, where we believe they are numerous in many towns.³⁷

Eiseman quickly responded, saying that "we, the young men of this city and Rock Island, Illinois (just opposite), started a Society known as the 'Young Men's Hebrew Literary Association' . . . We number at present twelve members." He listed the officers but reported that unfortunately there was no congregation, because even though "there are enough Israelites in both places for three times Minyan [thirty men] . . . the married men keep aloof." There were Jewish congregations, he reported, in Dubuque, Burlington, and in Keokuk.³⁸ To read such news was to acquire new and possibly helpful information, but it was also to understand and imagine the simultaneous work of unknown co-religionists in far-off places.³⁹

Other reports described local real estate and/or the character of local Jews. In 1854 Nathan Abraham—likewise responding to a request for information—reported from Norfolk, Virginia, "We have no synagogue of our own, but have rented a house to this purpose and also for a school-room, where our young are instructed in Hebrew and other branches. We have a burial-ground of our own."⁴⁰ Henry Loewenthal, then a religious functionary in Macon, Georgia, wrote to the *Israelite* in December of 1860 about the Jews of Florida, where he had recently performed a circumcision. Of Tallahassee, he summarized, "In short our brethren here are

³⁶ Correspondence, *Israelite* (August 22, 1856): 53.

³⁷ *Occident* (1857): 46.

³⁸ News Items, *Occident* (1856): 550–1.

³⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1998); James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

⁴⁰ Correspondence, *Israelite* (August 4, 1854): 30.

healthy and wealthy."⁴¹ Editors sought out information about Jewish communities, but unsolicited reports also came from locals and travelers alike, who wanted to fill in the emerging map of American Jewry. Some reports included more detail, such as resolutions and accounts of recent holidays, ceremonies, or special events. When the president of the congregation of Madison, Indiana, moved away, a set of resolutions was passed thanking him and offering him a lifetime honorary membership in the congregation. The final resolution was "that these resolutions be recorded in our minutes, published in the *Israelite* and a copy thereof handed to Mr. Wehle." Many societies and congregations sent resolutions to the newspapers as a rule, so much so that editors occasionally had to notify readers that not all news would make the paper.⁴²

Bridging the divide between advertisement and news report were death and marriage announcements. Elaborate eulogies and obituaries were published, serving as a means to publicly commemorate deceased coreligionists even when it was not a family member whom one was obligated to mourn.⁴³ An 1846 obituary in the *Occident*—written by "B.E.M." of Bellville, Alabama (likely a close friend of the deceased) described the "melancholy, unimely, and most painful death of David Sanders, late of Claiborne, Alabama," a thirty-two year-old who had fallen from a horse.⁴⁴ More joyful were the announcements in the *Israelite* in 1867 of marital connections made between brides and grooms from across the country: from Philadelphia and Omaha; Yazoo City, Mississippi, and New Orleans; Courtland, Alabama, and "Louisville, Ky, formerly of St. Louis, Mo."⁴⁵ Jews reported regularly and in detail about what was happening in their communities and in their families. Some seemed to think that if their locale did not appear in the Jewish press, it was as if they did not exist. In

⁴¹ "Our Brethren in the West and San Francisco," *Israelite* (June 2, 1876): 4.

⁴² Letter, *Israelite* (April 28, 1856): 347; Notice, *Israelite* (June 27, 1856): 412.

⁴³ "Eulogy on Ill: Bro: Gershon Kursheedt. 33 delivered by Ill: Bro: Abraham Epharim Frankland: 33 at Lodge of Sorrow held by Supreme Council of Southern Jurisdiction at Saint Louis, Missouri, Saturday Night, September 19, 1868. A and A. S. R." and "Eulogy on Lewis Wexler at Lodge of Sorrow held at Bnai B'rith Hall under auspices of IOBB Memphis." Writings, MS 464, Abraham E. Frankland Papers, AJA. November 21, 1866. Minutes, Columbus, Georgia, B'nai B'rith, Mss 88, Cuba Archives. A sampling of press obituaries: Obituary, *Weekly Gleaner* (February 6, 1857): 27. Obituary, *Occident* (February 1865): 47. Obituary, *Occident* (June 1863): 47. Obituary, *Israelite* (December 1, 1854): 167. On death culture, see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America*.

⁴⁴ Obituary, *Occident* 4.1 (1846): 60.

⁴⁵ *Israelite* (July 12, 1867): 3.

1870 a Jew from Chicago wrote to the *Israelite* complaining that "hardly any notice of us and our doings appears in" American Jewish newspapers. He worried this "may induce the belief among our brethren abroad that we are inactive here in the discharge of the obligations devolved on us by our mission as Israelites."⁴⁶

Wise described local news as intended "for the instruction and amusement of our readers," but they were also intended, in the words of Leeser, to "prompt good-will and unity among all Israelites" by "furnish[ing] a connecting link to distant congregations by informing them of the passing events in which all are interested."⁴⁷ For far-flung Jewish migrants, news reports and advertisements helped enact key elements of traditional Judaism, including ritual practice and community life. And yet, as Leeser noted, they were not merely informative or transactional. A Dakota Jew described his relationship the press in 1869: "I read and imagine to be a member of society . . . A little jump of the imagination overcomes the geographical difficulties."⁴⁸ In facilitating Jewish life, newspapers served as a form of connection and community-building amidst confusion and isolation.

Curating American Judaism

The Jewish press was not a neutral open forum, however. Individuals used the press to demand accountability and air grievances, while the popularity of the newspapers helped make Leeser and Wise the most important—if not necessarily the most qualified—authorities in the American Jewish community. They used this new power to editorialize as well as to print information. Local reports and advertisements helped Jews know where to find one another for business, worship, or other connections, but they also argued—explicitly and implicitly—for the integrity of certain products and people over others, as well as for the superiority of certain modes of Jewish communal life.

There were few ordained rabbis in the United States and considerable concern in the Jewish press about the authenticity and quality of Jewish materials. For instance, in 1853 a note of "Caution" appeared in the *Occident*, warning against fraudulent ritual objects that were being imported from Eastern Europe at low prices. "We trust that those who desire to possess them will not begrudge a few extra cents as a compensation for

⁴⁶ Correspondence, *Israelite* (July 22, 1870): 6–7.

⁴⁷ "The Press and the Pulpit," *Occident* 15 (1857): 3. "The Occident," *Occident* 4.1 (1846): 5.

⁴⁸ "A Radical Voice," *Israelite* (August 13, 1869); Letter, *Israelite* (June 17, 1870): 6.

their labor, and not buy those which have only cheapness to recommend them," Leeser wrote.⁴⁹ Such concerns also plagued kosher meat markets, which competed with congregational butchers who had once enjoyed local monopolies. For instance, in 1869 a letter was printed from "Yehudi," who complained that "most people do not seem to understand how easy it is for a butcher to hang out a sign indicating that he sells [kosher] meat . . . Butchers can be dishonest as well as grocers and other tradesmen."⁵⁰ In the absence of official oversight, the press became a clearinghouse for warnings both specific and general.

These kinds of interventions were not limited to material goods; people, too, could be fraudulent. In 1849 Leeser wrote: "We deem it our duty to call public attention" to the case of a certain professed rabbi. He had lied to the Jews of Pittsburgh, telling them that his non-Jewish wife had converted in Philadelphia so that they could be married in a Jewish ceremony, when in actuality they had already been married in a civil ceremony.⁵¹ This kind of newspaper vetting was especially common and important in the nascent American Jewish labor market. Few *hazanin* had formal qualifications apart from their ability to fulfill their tasks, and there was no overarching institution to regulate and verify their qualifications or organize job placements. Through their newspapers, Wise and Leeser increasingly served as arbiters of the integrity and skill of *hazanin*. Gershon Kirsheedt wrote a private letter to Leeser to ask about a Mr. E. Konan: "I want to know from you entre-nous if he is a safe man + . . . is he a good . . . preacher. What also of Mr. Rosenfeld?"⁵² On the other side of such transactions, Henry S. Jacobs, just arrived in New York from Jamaica, wrote to Leeser in 1854 declaring his presence, qualifications, and experience, and requesting "the kind insertion of the same in the 'Occident' together with any remarks which may prove serviceable to me in this country."⁵³ When Rabbi Elias Eppstein of Milwaukee was applying to positions in Hartford and Baltimore, he insisted that "by the Jewish press [people] know that I am an acknowledged Rabbi."⁵⁴ The newspapers and

⁴⁹ "Caution," *Occident* 11 (1853): 128.

⁵⁰ *Israelite* (July 30, 1869): 11; Jeremiah J. Berman, *The Trend in Jewish Religious Observance in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Press of the Jewish Publication Society, 1947), 32–9.

⁵¹ "Shall We Meet?" *Occident* 7 (1849): 61–70. Shari Rabin, "Working Jews," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 25, no. 2 (2015): 178–217.

⁵² Gershon K. to Leeser, Isaac Leeser Papers, MS 197, Box 1, Folder 3, AJA.

⁵³ January 13, 1854, Box 1, Folder 4, MS 197, Isaac Leeser Papers, AJA.

⁵⁴ March 23, 1874, MS 220, Elias Eppstein Diaries, AJA.

their editors took the place of other kinds of credentials, serving to verify identities within long-distance markets.

Local news also informed and evaluated. For instance, in 1863 Leeser described a report he had received from Dubuque, Iowa: "They number seven families . . . For their size and means they give the minister a respectable salary . . . every member is taxed very much to keep up this new society; but we believe the sacrifices are cheerfully brought in the interest of religion."⁵⁵ Many news reports were subject to this kind of editorial gloss. Newly established congregations and elaborate synagogue buildings were loudly celebrated, while other individuals and communities were scolded for insufficient unity, piety, or consistency.⁵⁶ In 1860 Isaac Mayer Wise wrote from his travels in upstate New York, criticizing Jews in Syracuse: "Compare Syracuse to Albany or Cincinnati, to Louisville or Chicago, to Milwaukee or Rochester," he commanded, pointing out that while they were supposedly orthodox, Syracuse's congregation had "no school, no minister, no funds, and plenty of disunion."⁵⁷ Locals also wrote in to condemn and to praise. The letter from Madison, Indiana regarding Mr. Wehle described him as

the man, to whose zeal and exertion we owe our thanks, that the Jews of this city formed a congregation, that every Sabbath and Holyday divine service is held, that the necessary utensils for the Synagogue, a Cemetery, &c. have been purchased, that school for Israelitish children has been organized and a teacher appointed.⁵⁸

The development of congregational life was the most significant contribution a community member could make. There was less harmony in Downieville, California, where there were twenty Jewish men, "[fourteen] of whom observed [Yom Kippur] with becoming solemnity," while the remaining six, the correspondent reported, "mocked us for upholding the faith of our fathers here in this country. Can you imagine anything more despicable?"⁵⁹

Comparisons flourished in the press, both among and within communities, written from nearby and far away. Local grievances and preferences were no longer private, but were printed for people throughout the nation to read and to incorporate into their understandings of proper Jewish life. Wise

⁵⁵ Dubuque, Iowa, *Occident* (July 1863): 43.

⁵⁶ Typical is "The Consecration at New Orleans," *Occident* 8 (1850): 109-19.

⁵⁷ Editorial Correspondence, *Israelite* (July 27, 1860): 30.

⁵⁸ Letter, *Israelite* (April 28, 1856): 347.

⁵⁹ Letter, *Israelite* (November 16, 1855): 155.

and Leeser oversaw everything, choosing what to include and exclude and regularly offering their frank opinions. Advertisements and local news played a crucial role in helping Jews and Jewish communities and local news each other from afar, but they also taught them how to evaluate Jewish life. Not all materials or communities were equal, and in the absence of other overarching authorities, the press helped establish the terms of the hierarchy. Congregations still provided Judaica objects, and newspapers remained a primary religious affiliation for many Jews. And yet together, the editors and readers of the *Occident* and the *Israelite* helped guarantee the centrality of impersonal-but-regulated Judaica markets and of congregations that could be counted, measured, and compared to others.

Beyond the Page

Even as the press shaped the outcomes of American Jewish life, both Leeser and Wise sought to formalize the functions of their papers. In editorials they proposed and debated ambitious new experiments that would jump off the page and take over the tasks that newspapers had fulfilled. The verification of ministerial credentials and complete information about American Jewish congregations became central priorities for both editors, wrapped up in their larger goal of a Jewish "union," a national institution that could build up in their but also supersede—newspapers by uniting and regulating all Jews throughout the land.

As Wise succinctly put it, "scholars are wanted, and no quacks": while the press helped to distinguish between the two, Wise and others undertook to institutionalize such efforts.⁶⁰ By 1841 Leeser had already written a plan of union, which demanded, "Whenever a new *Hazani* is to be elected, he must be examined as to his qualifications . . . so as to prevent any incompetent person being forced upon the respective congregations."⁶¹ The founding of the *Occident* two years later gave him a new platform to expound upon this goal, and by 1852 he was advocating in its pages for "a college of Rabbins," which would exert authority in religious matters, including "examining candidates for the ministry."⁶² Wise agreed: "We must have a place to teach or to examine our teachers, ministers, and rabbis that the outrageous imposition now practiced on congregations be forever stopped." Both men managed to achieve this goal, and yet Wise's Zion College (which opened

⁶⁰ "Miscellaneous," *Israelite* (September 8, 1854): 70.

⁶¹ Appendix 1, Joseph Buchler, "The Struggle for Unity: Attempts at Union in American Jewish Life, 1654-1868" (American Jewish Periodical Center, 1947).

⁶² "Thoughts on the Jewish Ministry," *Occident* 10 (1852): 225-38.

in the fall of 1855) and Leeser's Maimonides College (founded in 1867) were both short-lived.⁶³

Leeser especially used the press to argue for an expansion of the anecdotal information provided by local reports. He suggested as early as 1852 that "the respective officers of the congregations throughout this country" send him their data, "that we may be able to publish hereafter a complete table of all the localities of the various Synagogues in the country, so accurately designated that strangers could readily find them."⁶⁴ This directory would help Jews locate one another in a more organized fashion than through news reports, but the project was slow to materialize. That same year Leeser and a friend counted congregations "from the imperfect data at our command," in the pages of the *Occident* and found about eighty congregations.⁶⁵ Four years later he repeated this effort, boasting of Jewish "worship in more than a hundred and ten localities."⁶⁶

The rationalization of local reports and rabbinic credentials was subsumed under the constant refrain of "union." Leeser and Wise insisted that American Jews needed a national institution that would unite them both socially and religiously. In Leeser's words, such an alliance would be "the universal voice of Israelites in all parts of America."⁶⁷ Wise described that goal in similar terms: "to preserve the union of Israel and its religion by a mutual understanding."⁶⁸ Extensive lobbying by these editors both in and out of their newspapers did result in the creation of national institutions, first the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859), which subsequently was joined (and then overtaken) by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873).⁶⁹ The Board's very first stated objective was "to obtain all kinds of statistical information respecting American congregations and to have the same duly recorded."⁷⁰ Despite their high hopes, however, relying on individual congregations to report data on a form, rather than in a narrative account, proved imprecise at best. Within the next year survey data had been received

⁶³ "Our Protest," *Israelite* (October 31, 1856) and *Israelite* (January 4, 1856), cited in May, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, 263-5. Wise argued for a college as early as 1853. "Plan for a Hebrew College," *Asmonean* (August 19, 1853) cited in *Ibid.*, 137; Letter, *Israelite* (August 24, 1855): 54; S.D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism*, 139; Sama, *American Judaism*, 80.

⁶⁴ "A Suggestion," *Occident* 10 (1852): 262.

⁶⁵ "What Can Be Done," *Occident* 10, 1852: 371.

⁶⁶ "Congregations," *Occident* 14 (1856): 409.

⁶⁷ "Union," *Occident* 6 (1848): 529-33.

⁶⁸ "The Conference Again," *Israelite* (September 28, 1855): 92.

⁶⁹ Sama, *American Judaism*, 132, 145.

⁷⁰ Proceedings (Box 1, Folder 1), 1859-1877, Board of Delegates, American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

from only forty of the one hundred and sixty congregations addressed, returns that were deemed to "have been so imperfect as to prevent their being of practical advantage," although that did not keep them from trying again.⁷¹ In 1880 the UAHC, which had subsumed the Board, published the results of the first American Jewish census.⁷²

In 1876 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations put forth a proposal requiring congregations to hire only ministers whose credentials had been registered with the Executive Board. Its sponsor argued that this measure "would save the Congregations from any chance of being imposed upon, and also protect the rabbis from the perils of slander." The proposal was declared by the committee to be "inexpedient," and was again defeated the next year.⁷³ Jews rejected this kind of direct oversight and instead supported the idea of a college as a way to establish rabbinic credentials. Wise convinced Henry Adler to donate \$10,000,⁷⁴ and due to the financial support of this one man, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati formally opened in October of 1875, graduating its first class in 1883. Six years later the Central Conference of American Rabbis was founded, allowing rabbis throughout the country to band together and regulate their own standards and credentials.⁷⁵

In their eagerness to regulate, however, Leeser, Wise, and their allies failed to understand the significance of dialogue and autonomy to their Jewish constituents throughout the continent. While Jews continued to write to the newspapers, eagerly describing their communities, many did not feel compelled to fill out an impersonal statistical form. And while congregations had been quick to ask Wise or Leeser directly for their opinion, they were slow to accede to a formal plan of credentials. National institutions like the UAHC built on the communal expectations and sense of community developed by the press, yet American Jews would never be exclusively represented or influenced by them. Instead, they continued to express their identity and organize their religious lives in other forms, especially through media and print culture.

⁷¹ Second Annual Report (Box 1, Folder 1), 1859-1877, Board of Delegates, AJHS.

⁷² Fox, "On the Road to Unity," 187, 190.

⁷³ "Third Annual Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations," *American Israelite* (July 21, 1876): 4; "Fourth Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations," *American Israelite*, July 20, 1877, 4.

⁷⁴ Fox, "On the Road to Unity," 149.
⁷⁵ Sama, *American Judaism*, 132, 145; May, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, 297; "The Central Conference of American Rabbis," *American Israelite* (July 11, 1889): 4; Gary Phillip Zola, "Southern Rabbis and the Founding of The First National Association of Rabbis," *American Jewish History* 85.4 (1997): 353-72.

Conclusion

Before there were congregations or institutions, American Jewish life was created and imagined in the press, especially in the *Occident* and the *Israelite*. More than any given sermon, the cumulative effect of advertisements and news reports was to create community and develop expectations about American Jewish life, goals that are achieved today by the Internet. Although most rabbis are trained through denominational seminaries, there are some whose credentials are obtained entirely online. Jews find mates on JDate, as well as on Match.com, and they purchase religious resources from both Judaica.com and Etsy. Reports of local Jewish life flourish online in the websites of newspapers and magazines, but also on blogs, Twitter, Facebook posts, and podcasts. Regulation and oversight continue, but in new and more diffuse forms, and authenticity is once again uncertain and contested. What is certain, however, is that for many Jews consumption and connection online are more significant religious activities than congregational worship. Leaders regularly decry decreasing levels of affiliation among American Jews who are nonetheless reading *TabletMag.com* or buying a menorah online. Looking at our current post-denominational moment through the lens of American Jews' pre-denominational newspapers demonstrates the enduring importance of resources, information, and identity to religious life. In short, in the Jewish press, as elsewhere, markets are never neutral and news is never idle.