The Viennese Rite and American Moderate Reform Judaism

Bruce Ruben

In the mid-nineteenth century, a group of immigrant rabbis, including Isaac Mayer Wise and Max Lilienthal, believed that they could unite the majority of American Jews around moderate Reform. In the 1870s, after decades of effort, they succeeded, and they established the enduring institutions of Reform Judaism: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Hebrew Union College, and, ultimately, the Central Conference of American Rabbis. To achieve this unity, Wise and Lilienthal used elements of the Viennese Rite, particularly the music of Salomon Sulzer.[1]

The Viennese Rite had developed in the early nineteenth century when Isaac Noah Mannheimer and Sulzer, his cantor, unified the polarized Viennese community through a moderate liturgy, increased decorum, and a new musical treatment of *nusaḥ Ashkenaz* (a local chant tradition).[2] Its leaders successfully found a middle way between the advocates of radical reform from Berlin and Hamburg and the traditionalists, who wanted nothing changed. I will argue that this moderate reform approach was transferred from Europe and successfully adapted in mid-nineteenth century America.

In 1976, Leon Jick challenged the view that rabbinic elites created American Reform in his important book, *The Americanization of the Synagogue*. It was Americanization that was the basis for the success of Reform Judaism in America. Only after Jews had learned English, climbed the socioeconomic ladder, and adapted to local norms did they create a Reform Judaism that matched their new American values. Reform came

1. Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard…: The Sacred Songs of the Ashkenazic Jews* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 318 n. 14 first suggested this influence.

2. The term *nusaḥ* has multiple meanings. It can refer to a particular community's liturgical tradition. Musically, it is the traditional way a community sings its prayers. It may be characterized as a series of prescribed melodic motifs associated with a specific modal scale. This article will use the term in its musical sense. See Jeffrey Summit, "Nusach and Identity: The Contemporary Meaning of Traditional Jewish Prayer Modes," in *Music in American Religious Experience*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 271–72, and Macy Nulman, "Nusach" in *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975)

from the laity, from below, not from the rabbinic leadership.[3] Other scholars have developed this Reform-from-below approach. For instance, Hasia Diner argues in her 1992 survey of German Jewish immigration that "the impetus for Reform came mostly from the laity and its focus on practical ritual problems." The rabbis introduced a theoretical rationale to justify and spur the process of reform already taking place.[4]

Naomi Cohen, in her *Encounter with Emancipation*, challenges this Reform-from-below position. She argues that without active rabbinical guidance there might have been anti-Orthodoxy but never Reform. Instead, she insists that "two streams fed concomitantly into the development of American Reform, one pragmatic and one philosophical." Without the theoretical framework supplied by the rabbinic leadership from Germany, American Reform would never have been created.[5] Similarly, Michael Meyer asserts in his history of the Reform movement that "the rise of the Reform Movement in America…must be attributed to both Germanizing and Americanizing trends. Neither trend alone will explain it."[6]

Karla Goldman examines the process of reform in Cincinnati, specifically, and argues that religious acculturation was not the slow, steady process of Americanization Jick outlined but depended upon the presence of spiritual leaders who were in tune with the congregation's desire for respectability and acceptance. "Wise and his colleagues provided the intellectual and spiritual authority for what Cincinnati Jews may have wanted to, but could not, do alone."[7] Zev Eleff also argues that power transferred from lay leadership to rabbis in the wake of the Civil War, when the laity looked to their elites as symbols of authority and "defenders of the faith." With this new power, clergy were able to shape the reform of the American synagogue.[8]

---

3. Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1976), 191. For a thorough discussion of the impact of Jick's book, see Pamela S. Nadell, "The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820–1870: An Historiographical Appreciation," *American Jewish History* 90, no. 1 (2002), 51–62.

4. Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 117–18.

5. Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States 1830–1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 164–51.

6. Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 235–36.

7. Karla Goldman, "The Path to Reform Judaism: An Examination of Religious Leadership in Cincinnati, 1841–1855, *American Jewish History* 90, no. 1 (2002), 37.

8. Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

To be sure, rabbis asserted an ideological influence on nineteenth-century American Reform Judaism. Even Jick implicitly allows for this in the post–Civil War period.[9] These leaders helped provide the structure and content for a new Americanized modern Judaism. I have not, however, encountered any historian of the American Reform movement who assigned a significant role for the Viennese model in its development. David Philipson's *History of Reform Judaism* cites its influence throughout central and Western Europe. Meyer also discusses its wider European influence in *Response to Modernity*. Neither indicates that it was a factor in American Reform history. The Viennese Rite is also not treated as a model in Cohen's *Encounter with Emancipation* or the more recent *American Judaism* by Jonathan Sarna.

If Vienna's ritual is narrowly defined as a liturgy, it is true that it had little influence on American moderate Reform. Yet the Viennese Rite is understood by musicologists such as Eric Werner and, more recently, Philip Bohlman as much more than a liturgy. It also offers inspirational sermons and formal decorum that establishes devotion (*Andacht*, or "spiritual edification").[10] This devotion was supported and enhanced by dignified, four-part choral music and settings of the *nusaḥ* sung by a professional cantor and choir, which modernized and uplifted the service.[11] Taken as a whole, the Viennese Rite became a "symbol of religious, social and musical transformation" for its community.[12]

This rite served the same function in post–Civil War America. A recent book by Judah Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music in Nineteenth Century America*, provides a detailed picture of the role of Sulzer's music in Wise's reform efforts as well as his collaboration with Sulzer-trained cantors to achieve his goals.[13] This new material strengthens the connection between Vienna and Wise. I will build on Cohen's research to

9. Leon A. Jick, "The Reform Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 85–110. Nadel, "Americanization," 57 argues that Jick's view moderated later in his career. In the "Reform Synagogue" he implicitly concedes that German Reform and its rabbis had a greater influence on the development of American Reform.

10. See Alexander Altmann, "The New Style of Preaching in Nineteenth-Century German Jewry," in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981), 220–21 for Mannheimer's approach to "Andacht."

11. Meyer, *Response*, 151 also acknowledges other elements of the Viennese Rite, noting that, "in its attention to decorum, aesthetics, and socially relevant preaching, the Minhag of Vienna clearly represented a reform of previous practice and values," yet he attributes its influence primarily to synagogues in the Austrian Empire.

12. Philip Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 99.

13. Judah M. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music in Nineteenth-Century America: Restoring the Synagogue Soundtrack* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

show how Wise used Sulzer's music and other elements of the Viennese Rite to unite American Jewry around moderate Reform long enough to create Reform institutions that would survive and flourish in America.

THE CREATION OF THE VIENNESE RITE

Vienna was one of several European Jewish communities deeply divided over reforming liturgy and music in the early nineteenth century. In 1820, about 135 Jewish families were allowed to live in the city, together with their employees and temporary residents. Among them were some who were very wealthy and mingled freely with the powerful Christian elite. Indeed, one-tenth of them earned aristocratic titles. They were descendants of rabbinic and intellectually elite families, bankers and philanthropists, and influential merchants.[14]

Of this group, about fifty individuals were in favor of modernizing worship, having witnessed Reform services in Berlin, Hamburg, and during the Leipzig fairs. As they were setting out their plans for a separate Reform congregation, Emperor Francis I independently issued a personal decree on January 22, 1820 that all Jewish services must be conducted in the vernacular. The reformers and the government entered into negotiations to develop liturgy and music modeled after the Hamburg Temple.[15] The government, however, was afraid of heterodox religious ideas, so it ultimately reversed itself and withdrew its support. The community remained split between its traditional and reform factions.

Around this time the synagogue building was deemed structurally unsafe, and the Jews were given permission to replace it with a new building. Michael Biedermann, a financier and entrepreneur who was sympathetic to radical reforms, was the driving force behind the plans. A prominent architect, Joseph Kornhäusel, designed the new building with Ionic columns and a domed roof. It symbolized a new status for Judaism in Vienna. By the time it was formally dedicated in April 1826, Biedermann had also succeeded in attracting the dynamic leadership team of Mannheimer and Sulzer.[16]

Isaac Noah Mannheimer (1795–1865) was born in Copenhagen, the son of a Hungarian hazan. He received a general secular education and was tutored in Jewish literature and Talmud by the liberal teacher Rabbi Gedaliah Moses. He continued studying Talmud while at the

14. Meyer, *Response*, 146. Tina Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer: Reformer, Cantor, Icon* (Berlin: Hentrich and Hentrich, 2012), 13 places the number at closer to one thousand inhabitants.

15. Meyer, *Response*, 147.

16. Meyer, *Response*, 147.

University of Copenhagen. He was trained in the new approach to rabbinic preaching, influenced by an inspirational Protestant style that emphasized edification and devotion. He believed that "the preacher's word is uttered and listened to as the word of God."[17] He strove for spiritual communion with his congregation through nobility and depth of feeling. According to Alexander Altmann:

> Mannheimer's view of *Erbauung* [edification] and *Andacht* [devotion] flowed from his inspirational concept of preaching.... True edification and devotion—the two were treated by him as practically synonymous—are possible only when the preacher's word is uttered and listened to as the word of God. The heart of man is likened to a "temple of devotion," and a "sacred fire" is seen to be lit upon its altar only by the glow of the Divine word.[18]

In 1816, Mannheimer was given the job of *Hauptkatechet* (chief teacher of religion) in Copenhagen, and with it the primary responsibility of training students for the ceremony of confirmation, a rite of passage copied from Christian denominations. He also led and preached at Reform services every Wednesday night, which eliminated Hebrew and used music by Christian composers. Embroiled in a multiyear, vicious intracommunal struggle between reform and traditional groups, he looked elsewhere to relieve his frustration. He was given the opportunity to preach in the Reform synagogues in Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Vienna.[19] In an 1821 memorandum to the Viennese community, Mannheimer advocated for a shorter service, removal of many *piyyutim*, increased use of the vernacular, and the omission of prayers that contradicted modern sensibilities such as prayers about the messiah.[20]

Mannheimer was invited to officiate at the new *Seitenstettengasse* synagogue in 1825, where he took up his position as a preacher, headmaster of the school, and civil servant of the state. The government did not allow him to take the title "rabbi," nor did they want him to innovate or modify the traditional worship beyond the negotiated government guidelines. The constitution of the community dictated the details of these constraints. He also had to avoid any hint of "naturalistic religion" (deism) in his sermons or lectures.[21] Despite these limits, Max

17. Altmann, "New Style," 220.

18. Altmann, "New Style," 220–21.

19. During July of 1821, Mannheimer preached in Vienna on three Sabbaths; see M. Rosenmann, *Isak Noa Mannheimer aus seinem Leben und Wirken*, 2nd ed. (Vienna: Löwit, 1915), 12.

20. Marsha Rosenblit, "The Struggle over Religious Reform in Nineteenth-Century Vienna," *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 184.

21. "Deism" was a generic term for an Enlightenment theology that rejected many elements of traditional faith, including divine providence, and often posited a God limited by natural law.

Grunwald, who would serve as a rabbi in Vienna in the early twentieth century, recalled that Mannheimer became the "soul of the Jewish community." Grunwald went on to note that "he had the unusual faculty for mediating between the most divergent people, who represented the conflict between the old and the new.... He exercised power over the community by sheer personality—aided by his oratorical gifts, his pedagogic abilities, organizing talents and extraordinary zeal."[22] Mannheimer worked extremely hard to craft his long, passionate sermons, and they attracted large crowds. He was even more beloved as the community's pastor, officiating at their life-cycle events and bringing them comfort and support. Later he also spoke out for social justice, advocating for the poor and downtrodden. He was a truly beloved spiritual leader.[23]

A year later the community recruited Salomon Sulzer (1804–90) to become their cantor. Sulzer was a wunderkind. His earliest training was as a choral singer (*meshorer*) in his hometown by Salomon Eichberg, who was in turn a disciple of the French innovator Cantor Israel Lovy.[24] Sulzer had served as cantor of his local synagogue in Hohenems, Austria since the age of thirteen.[25] He was thoroughly trained in Western music. Tina Frühauf suggests that he was drawn to Vienna by both a higher salary and the opportunity for greater artistic expression.[26]

Sulzer was more moderate than his rabbinic partner. He loved the "ancient and venerable continuity of the liturgy" and disparaged the "failed experiments of Hamburg and Berlin "to reduce the entire service to a German song before and after the sermon."[27] He also took credit for steering Mannheimer toward a more moderate liturgical stance. He

22. Max Grunwald, *Vienna* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1936), 344.

23. Meyer, *Response*, 150. See also Marsha Rosenblit, "Jewish Identity and the Modern Rabbi: The Cases of Isak Noa Mannheimer, Adolf Jellineh, and Moritz Gudermann in Nineteenth-Century Vienna," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 35, no. 1 (1990): 103–31.

24. Israel Lovy (1773–1832) served as a hazan in Mainz, Strasbourg, and London before settling in Paris in 1818 as the chief hazan for the newly formed Reform Synagogue, Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth. A trained musician, Lovy introduced four-part choral music in Paris in 1822, before Sulzer had arrived in Vienna; see "Israel Lovy," Jewish Music Research Centre, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, https://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/israel-lovy.

25. Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 1 indicates that he was appointed at thirteen but continued his studies until the age of sixteen as a chorister and apprentice to a Cantor Lippmann, with whom he travelled through Alsace-Lorraine. He also gained further musical training before returning to the Hohenems pulpit at the age of sixteen.

26. Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 13.

27. S. Sulzer, *Denkschrift an die hochgeehrte Wiener israelitische Cultus-Geminde* (Vienna: Brüder Winter, 1876), 7.

recalled the moment when the "great and noble preacher Mannheimer, who had for so long adhered to radical Reform [as in Berlin]," came around to his viewpoint. It was one of the most beautiful memories of his life.[28] Working together, the rabbi and the cantor forged a liturgy that served as the basis for Sulzer's musical service, combining Ashkenazi *nusaḥ* and contemporary compositional style that reunited the divided community.[29]

Later historians did not consider Mannheimer's prayer book part of the history of Jewish Reform. Jakob J. Petuchowski's *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* does not include the Viennese Rite. Marsha Rosenblit explains:

> Despite their eagerness for aestheticizing Jewish worship, Viennese Jews never did reform the content of Jewish liturgy. In the1820s a combination of government opposition and traditionalist pressure precluded radical religious innovation. The Viennese Rite, first composed in 1826, and published in Mannheimer's 1840 prayer book, remained a traditional service conducted entirely in Hebrew.... Thus, Jews in Vienna continued to pray for a Jewish return to Zion, and for the restitution there of a Davidic dynasty and the sacrificial system of worship.[30]

If the liturgical innovations did not rise to the level of even moderate Reform, then it was really the music that established the Viennese Rite as the element that bridged Reform and Orthodox positions. Sulzer, a master of traditional southern German melodies, dressed them in the musical characteristics of Viennese classicism.[31] He writes in his preface to *Schir Zion I*: "to consider as far as possible, the traditional tunes bequeathed to us, to cleanse the ancient and dignified type from the later accretions of tasteless embellishments, to bring them back to the original purity, and to reconstruct them in accordance with the text and with the rules of harmony."[32] Sulzer overstated his use of traditional melodies (only thirty-six). He also composed eighty-six original pieces that were not dependent upon *nusaḥ*, and thirty-seven more were original works

28. Sulzer, *Denkschrift*, 8. Meyer, *Response*, 149–50 confirms this shift in Mannheimer's position.

29. Sulzer, *Denskschrift*, 7, looking back on those early days on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary, described the situation upon his arrival as chaotic. There was no discernible principle in the maze of opposing opinions.

30. Marsha L. Rosenblit, "Jewish Assimilation in Habsburg Vienna," in *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Jonathan Frankel and Steven Z Zipperstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 229.

31. Sulzer also incorporated elements of Eastern European cantorial music, particularly in the *Schir Zion* II (1865); see Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 38–40.

32. Quoted in A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 249. See original in "Vorwort," *Schir Zion. Gesänge für den israelitischen Gottesdienst von Salomon Sulzer* (Frankfurt am Main: Kauffann, 1922), 4.

by other composers.[33] That said, his collection "mirrored the aesthetics urban Jews were acquiring through mingling with the non-Jewish population."[34] It proclaimed their successful acculturation, claiming that they could pray with the dignity and sophistication of their Christian neighbors. Combined with Hebrew liturgy, *Schir Zion* musically bridged tradition and Reform.

To fulfill this aesthetic vision, Sulzer worked hard to form a chorus of Jewish boys and older male voices to support his musical program. The synagogue board invested heavily in the choir, hiring outside teachers and choir directors, and established a special institute in 1834 to provide the choristers with intensive musical training.[35] Sulzer's choral writing often featured simple homophonic textures, which maximized the comprehensibility of the text. Sometimes the choir responds to the cantor, sometimes it is presented alone. His compositions reflect the desire to inspire *Andacht*, or devotion. This was the goal of Sulzer's cantorial vocation. He concludes his preface to the 1840 edition of *Schir Zion* by praying that his chants promote true devotion (*Andacht*) in the houses of worship in Israel.[36] Mannheimer and Sulzer were equally devoted to this ideal.

An excellent example of Sulzer's devotional approach is his setting of "Shiṿṿisi" (Psalm 16:8–9). "I have set the Lord always before me: surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore, my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices: my flesh also dwells secure."[37] It begins with a series of chords in root position that support a simple rising melody. The melody and harmony become most expressive as the tenor sings "Lochein somaḥ libi" ("My heart is glad"). It reaches its dynamic climax at "Ṿayyogel kevodi" ("My glory rejoices"). And it ends in a more subdued fashion, creating a satisfying musical arch form.[38]

---

33. Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 30. Included were non-Jewish composers Joseph Drechsler, Franz Schubert, Ignaz Ritter von Seyfried (Sulzer's composition teacher), Wenzel Wilhelm Würfel, and Franz Volkert. See also Abraham Lubin, "Salomon Sulzer's *Schir Zion*, Volume One: A Survey of its contributers and its contents," *Musica Judaica* 8, no. 1 (5747/1985–86): 29.

34. Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 36.

35. Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 18. A male choir was necessary to avoid violating the traditional restriction against hearing a woman's voice in worship.

36. "Vorwort," *Schir Zion*, 2 vols. (Vienna: M. W. Kaufmann, 1905), 1:3–4. Joseph, his son, included this introduction in the centennial edition but indicated that his father had written it in 1838.

37. *The Holy Scriptures* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1988), 733.

38. Salomon Sulzer, *Schir Zion* (Vienna: Engel, 1838), 1:210.Sulzer's Shema, Aleinu, and majestic Torah service are his most lasting legacies, given that a folklorized version of them is still heard weekly in many synagogues..

People streamed into the temple to hear Sulzer. Adding to his popularity was his powerful singing voice and charisma. He rendered the prayers with great dignity and exultation. He introduced a bel canto style that emphasized the inner meaning of the liturgical word. Composer Franz Liszt, music critic Eduard Hanslick, and romantic travelogue writer Frances Trollope all came to hear Sulzer.[39] Liszt commented: "Seldom… had we experienced in such an overwhelming manner the vibration of the chords of divine worship and of human sympathy as we did on this evening."[40] It is even rumored that Emperor Ferdinand himself visited the synagogue.[41] Sulzer became the model for a new, classically trained cantorate. According to A. Z. Idelsohn, "for a half a century he not only reigned over the entire caste of *chazzanim*, but held the veneration of the entire modern rabbinic and scholarly world…. Hundreds and hundreds of *chazzanim* were his pupils."[42]

One other element was central to the Viennese Rite: decorum. The synagogue passed a series of statutes in 1829, principles that would guide them for many decades. Rosenblit summarizes the intent of the sections on decorum: "Viennese Jews committed themselves to order and decorum during a traditional service."[43] The rules demanded order and silence during the prayers, especially during the silent Amidah. The traditional swaying and shaking during worship are forbidden. The cantor had to lead the service in a dignified manner that was faithful to the meaning of the Hebrew. Nothing was to disturb the devotional atmosphere in the sanctuary. Congregants were not allowed to walk in and out of services. They were permitted to sing aloud only at communal moments and even then had to follow the choir's lead. The rules also abolished the long-standing tradition of publicly selling synagogue honors because of the undignified commotion it caused. Even mourners were to follow the cantor's recitation of the Kaddish prayer.[44]

---

39. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Jewish Liturgical Music in the Wake of Nineteenth-Century Reform," in *Sacred Sound and Sacred Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), 62.

40. Grunwald, *Vienna*, 354–55.

41. Grunwald, *Vienna*, 353. Emperor Ferdinand I of Austria ruled from 1835 until his abdication during the Revolution of 1848.

42. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 256–57. Idelsohn has a generally negative appraisal of Sulzer's musical accomplishments: "not a single tune that he created anew has a genuine Jewish character. In none of his compositions is there to be found a Jewish motive employed and evolved" (258).

43. Rosenblit, "Struggle," 185.

44. Rosenblit, "Struggle," 185.

The rules appear to have been effective. A German-born music critic, Joseph Mainzer, visited the synagogue between 1826 and 1828 and reported:

> To whatever religion one may happen to belong, I declare that it is impossible to bear witness without emotion, and even not to be actually edified by the conduct of the service which is so simple, so noble, so elevated, and purified from all vain display by a reform in accordance with the times in which we live.[45]

The Viennese *Stadttemple* became a symbol of religious, social, and musical transformation during the nineteenth century, primarily through the innovations of decorum and musical sophistication of Sulzer's *Schir Zion*.[46] The Viennese Rite combined a dignified, decorous service with inspiring music and sermons in a beautiful setting, presented by a charismatic clergy team. It succeeded in unifying the divided community by keeping the traditional liturgy but clothing it in a modern aesthetic.

For much of the nineteenth century the community placed unity above ideology.[47] But unity did not mean unanimity. Vienna's traditional and reform elements did not give up their ideological positions. The traditionalists accepted the new music as long as there was no accompaniment, and as long as women did not sing. The reformers accepted traditional liturgy even when it included theological assertions they had rejected.[48] The Viennese Rite gave them something more important: a modern aesthetic that allowed them to feel proud that they could worship as acculturated Viennese.

The Viennese model would impact Jewish worship in both Eastern and Western Europe in profound ways, and it would also find its way to the United States. On his fiftieth cantorial anniversary, Sulzer proudly acknowledged: "The Vienna Ritual became a model and standard, our melodies were kindly received and recognized even beyond the ocean."[49]

---

45. Goldberg, "Jewish Liturgical Music," 62.

46. Bohlman, *Jewish Music*, 101.

47. Meyer, *Response*, 193.

48. These differences gave rise to tensions at various times throughout the nineteenth century, especially after emancipation in 1867; see Rosenblit, "Struggle," 200–201 and Meyer, *Response*, 192–93. See also Tina Frühauf, *The Organ and Its Music in German-Jewish Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38–39.

49. Sulzer, *Denkschrift*, 8.

IMPORTING THE VIENNESE RITE TO AMERICA

Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) spent an important part of his Jewish and university education in Vienna. According to James Heller's biography:

> On arriving in Vienna, Wise went first to the home of Isaac Noah Mannheimer.... Here he was accorded the kindest of receptions. Mannheimer insisted upon his remaining in his home until he could find permanent quarters. This was in 1842, when Wise was twenty-three years old. He remained in Vienna for two years, the last two years of his studies. Every Shabbos he took dinner at Mannheimer's house, and spent every Sunday with Salomon Sulzer.[50]

Wise may have been exposed to the Viennese model during his youth in Prague as well. In 1835, during his teenage years, one of the community's synagogues, the *Altshule,* was modernized on the model of the Viennese Rite, briefly under the leadership of Leopold Zunz and then, after 1837, under the moderate reformer Michael Sachs. The services included a German sermon, a few German prayers and songs, and organ accompaniment.[51]

Wise's colleague in the effort to unify American Jews around moderate Reform was Max Lilienthal (1814–82). Trained in the traditional Fürth Yeshivah and earning a Ph.D. from the University of Munich, he made a point to correspond with Mannheimer in the years before he went to Riga on his ill-fated quest to modernize Russian-Jewish education.[52] He would represent the Viennese impulse toward unity throughout his entire career.[53]

Lilienthal arrived in New York in the fall of 1845 and was almost immediately named "Chief Rabbi" of its three German-immigrant synagogues, Anshe Hesed, Rodeph Shalom, and Shaarey Hashamayim. He worked hard to impose order and decorum in his congregations. He set up a committee on synagogue order and had notices posted at the entrance of the synagogue: "For the purpose of getting more order

---

50. James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work, and Thought* (New York: UAHC Press, 1965), 75. In his more recent biography, Sefton Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22 says that Wise spent one or two years at the University of Vienna, although there is no evidence that he actually enrolled.

51. Meyer, *Response*, 153–54. In Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences*, trans. David Philipson (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Company, 1901), 296, Wise noted the similarity between the two during a visit to Saint Louis in 1855. "The B'nai El congregation had learnings towards reform, *a la* Prague, or rather Vienna" (296).

52. Bruce Ruben, *Max Lilienthal: The Making of the American Rabbinate* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 19.

53. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 233.

in the service…during the prayers."[54] Wise, who arrived in the spring of 1846, described the situation Lilienthal was trying to correct: "The Congregation was orthodox, and just as ill-behaved as in Germany. The cantor had on a Christian gown, trilled like a mock nightingale, and leaped about like a hooked fish."[55]

It was Lilienthal who, in 1847, first tried to introduce Sulzer's music to America. Wise recounts a fight between Lilienthal and his president at Anshe Hesed over the introduction of Sulzer's *Schir Zion* in the German congregations of New York.[56] When the president refused to allow the choral music, Lilienthal gave the volumes to Wise who brought them to Beth El, his congregation in Albany. Wise worked hard to establish a choir there. In his *Reminiscences*, he recalled thinking: "Sulzer's songs! Who will not worship?"[57] He found two basses and trained the children in his religious school to sing the other parts. After a few months they made their highly anticipated debut. Wise describes the event:

> The whole community was in a state of feverish excitement; men, women, and children flocked to the synagogue; yes the choir sang; but, I pray you, do not ask how. It made no difference to our *chazan* whether he began or ended a few notes lower or higher; he passed with surprising ease from one key to another, and the choir was expected to keep pace with him. The shipwrecked notes were mixed up fearfully and wonderfully, until finally every one sang *ad libitum*, and stopped only when the text was finished. However, there had been singing; there was a choir, and everyone took for granted that the singing would improve.[58]

Poor as it was, this choir was his first step toward modernizing the service. Soon after the choir's debut, Wise argued that there was a need to eliminate many of the medieval *piyyutim*. In part, it was a matter of practicality. If you added choral music and a lengthy sermon, something had to go. Wise says as much in his *Reminiscences*: "Now the serious question arose as to what was to be done with all the prayers, since the music and the sermon took up so much of the time. We held a *post mortem* on the *piutum* [*sic*], *qinnoth* and *s'lichoth*."[59] He recommended that all of those liturgical selections be dispensed with. His traditional congregation concurred at the next general meeting, except with regard to the liturgy of the High Holy Days.

---

54. *Anshe Hesed Trustee Minutes*, March 6, 1846.
55. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 22.
56. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 51.
57. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 52.
58. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 53.
59. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 53.

Wise left Beth El as a result of an epic brawl on Rosh Hashanah, which he describes vividly in his *Reminiscences*.

> Finally the choir sings Sulzer's great *En Komokho*. At the conclusion of the song I step before the ark in order to take out the scrolls of the law as usual, and to offer prayer. [President] Spanier steps in my way, and without saying a word, smites me with his fist so that my cap falls from my head. This was the terrible signal for an uproar the like of which I have never experienced.[60]

The sheriff and his men had to be called in to break up the melée. Wise and his followers broke away from Beth El and formed Anshe Emet, an openly Reform synagogue.

Wise was proud of two important innovations implemented by the new congregation: family pews and the use of the organ even on the High Holy Days. Regarding the former he claims that the move was tantamount to the emancipation of the Jewish woman. In a related move, he allowed Jewish girls to sing in the choir. Wise also advocated using the organ on Yom Kippur, although some members expressed reservations. Wise's view prevailed: "The organ was heard on Yom Kippur, accompanying the songs of Sulzer and Naumbourg."[61] Both of these innovations were far beyond the cautious approach of Mannheimer and Sulzer. Sulzer would not fully embrace use of the organ until he advocated for it at the Jewish synod in Leipzig in 1869.[62]

Lilienthal was also favorably inclined toward the Viennese Rite. In 1850, New York's Congregation Anshe Hesed was moving to a large new building further uptown on Norfolk Street. The leadership felt pressure to compete with the up-and-coming Temple Emanu-El. In order to retain its wealthier members, it decided to institute some changes in its traditional ritual. The leadership turned to Lilienthal for guidance. He recommended the Viennese Rite, a logical choice for a traditional synagogue that wanted to present a more modern aesthetic.[63] The synagogue posted a set of regulations for service decorum and sent out letters of inquiry to several European cantor-composers—Sulzer in Vienna, Samuel Naumbourg in Paris, and Hirsch Weintraub in Königsberg—for advice and to recommend a musically skilled cantor. Sulzer was the only one

60. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 165–66.

61. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 213. Samuel Naumbourg (1817–80) was the chief cantor of Paris and composer of the multivolume setting of the entire Jewish liturgy, *Zemirot Yisrael* (1847).

62. Werner, *Voice*, 212. See also Meyer, *Response*, 151 and Frühauf, *Salomon Sulzer*, 20–21. She notes that Sulzer introduced the organ for weddings and youth services as early as 1851.

63. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 103

who answered. They instituted a mixed choir with professionals and hired Cantor Leon Sternberger. Sternberger was born in Bavaria in 1819 and trained with Sulzer from 1840 to 1843, until Sulzer placed him in a progressive synagogue in Warsaw. He arrived in the United States in 1849 and applied for the cantorial position at Anshe Hesed.[64] He reshaped the choir on a Sulzerian model. The congregation authorized the purchase of Sulzer's *Schir Zion*.[65] The synagogue leadership, which only three years earlier had rejected Lilienthal's request to introduce Sulzer's music, now willingly incorporated many aspects of the Viennese Rite: decorum, liturgy, and skillfully composed music. This sequence of events reveals the complex interplay of the pragmatic need of the lay leadership to project a modern worship style (Americanization) and their receptivity to rabbinic and cantorial expertise.

Over the next decade, more upwardly mobile urban synagogues willingly expanded their music budgets to accommodate well-trained choirs, directors, and organists in order to attain the standard set by the Viennese musical model. In 1856, the traditionalist Isaac Leeser noted in the *Occident*: "Temple Emanu-El devoted such a large portion of its annual expenses to its choir—a sum equaling nearly half of the combined salaries of 'the ministers, readers, secretaries and sextons'—that the 'officers have a right to complain of inadequate compensation.'"[66] As more Sulzer-trained cantors came to America, that expense grew even more as they demanded salaries comparable to rabbis.[67]

In 1854, Wise accepted a lifetime position at Cincinnati's B'nai Yeshurun and immediately began the task of building a choir. He organized a group of young people into a choral society and spent the summer teaching the parts using his violin. He also hired a singing teacher. The choir performed portions of Sulzer's Friday evening service as well as some pieces by Naumbourg, the chief cantor in Paris.[68] Wise exclaimed: "That was a great Friday evening for Cincinnati. Members of all the congregations flocked to the synagogue, and filled it. The harmonious

64. Sternberger was only the first of a wave of over a dozen Sulzer-trained cantors to arrive in the United States between 1849 and 1865; see Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 175.

65. Hyman Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654–1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 279–80. See also Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 41.

66. *Occident* 14, no 13 (June 1856) 148, quoted in Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 186.

67. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 186.

68. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 44. See Wise's letter to Congregation Bene Yeshurun, August 1854, in which he described the musical details of the service. Isaac Mayer Wise Digital Archive, *American Jewish Archives*.

strains of Sulzer's music resounded for the first time in a synagogue in the western part of America, to glorify the dawn of a new era."[69] Wise would later explain the choir's centrality to his reform agenda: "It is scarcely conceivable now what a victory for culture and progress the introduction of a synagogue choir was at that time. No reform of the Jewish service was possible until the Jewish ear had again become accustomed to harmony and beauty."[70] He understood the traditional German immigrants who made up his congregation. They were not ready for wholesale reforms but had to be prepared through the aestheticizing Viennese approach. A year later, Wise's synagogue expanded the sanctuary to make room for a large pipe organ and hired professional singers to create a more polished musical aesthetic.[71]

Lilienthal, who joined Wise in Cincinnati a year later, worked hard in his first months to establish a choir at his synagogue Bene Israel. He risked upsetting the widow of the congregation's founder by taking over her seat to construct a choir loft.[72] A mixed choir, which premiered during the festival of Sukkot, became a permanent feature of the synagogue.[73] He also got the congregation to adopt his liturgical reforms, limiting the number of *mi sheberakh*s, or special blessings chanted during the Torah service, and eliminating some of the *piyyutim*. Lilienthal also replicated the Viennese model of aesthetic reform within an essentially traditional congregation.

WISE'S *MINHAG AMERICA*

Wise and Lilienthal also reflected the unity impulse of Vienna in ideological terms. In the fall of 1855, they organized the Cleveland Conference, under the banner "Shalom 'al Yisrael," yet Wise had raised the crucial need for unity even earlier: "Israel as a nation had a sacred mission to perform to humanity, and in order to discharge that mission needed to be united."[74] Lilienthal argued in Wise's periodical *The Israelite* that the Reform party wanted to end the divisions within Judaism.[75] He asserted: "There is no doubt that the gentlemen who have promised

69. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 259.
70. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 259.
71. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 44.
72. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 141.
73. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 142.
74. Isaac Mayer Wise, "The Conference," *Israelite* 1 (March 2, 1855), 268, cited in Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, 132.
75. Max Lilienthal, "The Reformers Want to Uproot All!," *Israelite* 2 (August 17, 1855), 44.

to be present at the next Convention in Cleveland will represent the most diverging opinions. The Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, moderate Reformers, Ultra-Reformers, all these parties have already declared to send their representatives."[76] Avoiding an "all or nothing approach," they tried to strike a moderate position, acceptable to traditionalists like Leeser, Bernard Illowy, and Aaron Guenzburg, as well as to radical Reformers including recent arrival David Einhorn, around a platform that made both biblical and talmudic precedent the basis for reforming and unifying American Jewry. They truly believed they could craft an approach that would unite the full range of ideological diversity. That did not happen. All but Leeser backed out from the traditional camp, and Einhorn boycotted the conference. In spite of the disappointing lack of full diversity, Lilienthal made a rousing speech citing "the deplorable confusion, disunion and lack of religious observance that characterized American Jewry and the powerful need for unity."[77]

Minhag America, one of the key foci of the Cleveland Conference, was their important effort to unite American Jewry around a moderate Reform liturgy.[78] This was an ongoing project that Wise had first introduced at Lilienthal's short-lived *bet din* in 1847. At that time, Wise had defended the need to "bring unity among…all the American Synagogues" and to "uphold the Word of the Living God…in the free country of America." The creation of this liturgy, a *minhag* for America, would be based on *halakhah* and the demands of modern times.[79] At that point, however, even his moderate Reform effort had been enough to scare away the others on the *bet din*.[80]

Wise did not give up. In the weeks leading up to the Cleveland Conference, Lilienthal, now a moderate Reformer, advocated for the liturgy using citations from traditional legal texts to justify the proposed changes.[81] At Cleveland, Wise was appointed head of the committee to formulate a uniform American liturgy.[82] The commission, made up of Rabbis Wolf Rothenheim and Isadore Kalisch in addition to Wise himself, met in Wise's library for over thirty-eight sessions. Wise's *Minhag America*, first

76. Max Lilienthal, "Do not come prejudiced to the Conference in Cleveland," *Israelite* 2 (September 21, 1855), 84.

77. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 148.

78. Wise is inconsistent in his spelling of "America." The official title was "Minhag Amerika" in Hebrew letters, but he regularly referred to it as "Minhag America"; see *Israelite* 2 (August 17, 1855), 44 for instance. I will use the English spelling.

79. Isaac Mayer Wise, "American Liturgy-Albany," *Occident* 5 (May 1847), 107-8.

80. Isaac Mayer Wise,"American Liturgy-Albany," *Occident* 4 (May 1847), 107–9. See also Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 82.

81. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 147.

82. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 149.

published in Cincinnati in 1857, shows respect for traditional prayers while expressing his reform sensibilities.[83]

Liturgist Eric Friedland identifies important influences upon Wise, including the German rabbinical conferences of the mid-1840s and the Hamburg Temple's 1819 *Gebetbuch*. He also asserts that Wise was inspired by Sephardic liturgical formulations.[84] Vienna's liturgy does not seem to have been an important model for his committee's efforts. An analysis of some of the themes of the 1857 edition of *Minhag America* bears this out. While Mannheimer was constrained by the Austrian government and by the traditionalists in his community from altering core liturgy, Wise felt much freer to follow his reform impulses. He says as much in his *Reminsicences*:

> It was out of the question to retain the old prayers unchanged, because the belief in the coming of a personal Messiah descended from the house of David had disappeared from among the people. The return to Palestine, the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, of the sacrificial cult, and the accompanying priestly caste, were neither articles of faith nor commandments of Judaism, while the lamentations over the oppression of Judaism and persecution, and the accompanying cry for vengeance were untrue and immoral as far as American Jews were concerned.[85]

Here are a few examples of his more innovative approach, in contrast to the traditional text of the Viennese Rite. In the Avot prayer, the word *goel*, "redeemer," is replaced by *geulah*, "redemption," in order to avoid the notion of a personified messiah. In the Aleinu, he simply deleted the particularistic *shelo 'asanu kegoye haaratsot* ("You have not made us like the other nations of the earth") and replaced it with *shehu noṭeh shamayim veyosed arets* ("who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth"), taken from the next paragraph of the prayer.[86] Wise also sidestepped the issue of bodily resurrection by leaving intact the traditional formulation *meḥayei hametim* ("who revives

83. Eric L. Friedland, *Were Our Mouths Filled with Song: Studies in Liberal Jewish Liturgy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997), 50. According to Friedland, *Minhag America* differed little in doctrinal terms from the more radical eastern reformers. The later 1872 edition moved in an even more liberal direction.

84. Friedland, *Were Our Mouths Filled With Song*, 50–54.

85. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 343-4. For Mannheimer's more conservative approach, see Meyer, *Response*, 150. All of these liturgical themes were retained in Mannheimer's siddur.

86. *Tefilot bene Yeshurun: Minhag Amerika* (Cincinnati: Bloch Publishing Company, 1857), 37.

the dead") but altering the English translation to be ambiguous: "who grantest perpetual life to the dead."[87]

In spite of Wise's Reform ideology, his goal in this 1857 edition was to create an American siddur that even traditional congregations could use. Wise recalls:

> They adhered anxiously to tradition; they had no desire to found a new religion, or to institute a new cult. They wished to recast the old and traditional prayers reverently, so they might be brought into accord with the religious consciousness of the time, and the democratic principles of the new fatherland.[88]

Although the structure and themes of *Minhag America* deviated from Mannheimer's liturgy, the overall goal was the same: unity. In an *Israelite* article that echoed Sulzer, Wise explained:

> The Synagogal laws and customs are faithfully regarded, the old substance is regenerated in a new and beautiful form.... The orthodox has the substance of the old Hebrew prayers, the reformer is not offended by [it]...*Minhag America*, for it is as throughout American, republican and cosmopolitical [*sic*], as it is thoroughly Jewish and pacificating [*sic*] the conflicting theories on Jewish worship. Every man of any creed can now pray with us.[89]

When Wise introduced *Minhag America* to his synagogue, he wanted to make use of the significant musical program that he had built. He hired Gustav Ensel (born in 1827 in Bavaria), a trained pianist and a choral and instrumental conductor, to be the congregation's professional organist. Ensel was tasked with mounting a major musical event that set the liturgy for Friday night and Saturday morning. Working with a large volunteer choir and students from the synagogue day school, they presented a musically demanding service, including many of Sulzer's compositions.[90] Vienna's aestheticizing Reform was his strategy within his still-traditional congregation.

THE CIVIL WAR AND AMERICANIZATION

Over the ten years following the publication of *Minhag America* Wise and Lilienthal worked hard to implement moderate reforms in their

87. See Wise, *Reminiscences*, 344 for his rationale for this approach.

88. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 345.

89. Isaac Mayer Wise, "The New Prayer Book Minhag America K K BeneYeshurun," *Israelite* 4 (October 23, 1857), 24, cited in Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise*, 152.

90. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 122–23. In Isaac Mayer Wise, *The World of My Books*, trans. Albert Friedlander (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, n.d.), 23–24. Wise also revealed his concern that the spiritual impact of the service be emphasized. Referring to his Memorial Service, he claimed: "The impression is powerful; all doubts disappear, a holy sense of consecration transfigures the entire congregation" (Wise, *World*, 26).

synagogues. Wise had a relatively easy time incorporating changes, yet B'nai Yeshurun's services remained entirely in Hebrew for many years, women and men sat separately, and a second of day of festivals continued to be observed. Lilienthal struggled even more, encountering traditional opposition to his innovations at every step. Joseph Abraham, a traditional congregant, bragged to Isaac Leeser in 1863 that Lilienthal had been "thwarted in all of his projects," with the exception of women in the choir.[91] The traditionalist immigrant leadership remained in control there as well as in other synagogues. The Civil War was important in breaking that control. As Bertram Korn notes:

> In less critical periods of the national life the immigrant tends to assimilate the atmosphere of his new home slowly, cautiously, unhurriedly…. In some periods and areas, several generations have had to pass through the assimilatory process before the change-over from immigrant to American has been completed. During the fratricidal blood-bath of the Civil War…almost every inhabitant—citizen, immigrant, visitor—was drawn into the fray…. Jews, like other immigrants, felt that they had earned their stake in the country. They belonged to it. This feeling of being a part of America played a major role in the inner life of American Jewry in the post-war generation.[92]

The pace of change also increased during the Civil War period because of the drastic reduction in the influx of immigrants who might have reinforced tradition. During the war years German Jewish immigration fell off sharply during the war years and did not increase significantly after the war ended. Jick argues that "the experience of having shared in the trials of America during the war transformed the wish to belong into a feeling of belonging." By the 1870s, there was increased homogeneity among American Jews.[93]

Jews also participated in a postwar prosperity that affected all American religious institutions (at least in the North). As Jick notes:

> Everywhere there were signs of expansion and prosperity in churches. Where once there was a simple frame meetinghouse, there now stood a majestic edifice testifying to the affluence of the its congregation. Robed choirs, strengthened by professional singers, march with dignity to their stations…and ministers… devoted more attention to conducting their services decently and in order.[94]

In the 1860s, "there was hardly a congregation in America which did not build a large and sumptuous new edifice."[95] Keneseth Israel of

91. Goldman, "Path," 48.

92. Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 258–61.

93. Jick, *Americanization*, 175, 190.

94. Jick, *Americanization*, 178–79 quoting Clifton Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1960), 447.

95. Jick, *Americanization*, 178–79.

Philadelphia built a new building in 1863. B'nai Yeshurun in Cincinnati dedicated their new Byzantine-style building in 1866. Its sister congregation, Bene Israel, dedicated its new building in 1869.[96] In New York, there were "nine commodious houses of worship" above Twenty-Eighth Street by 1865. The wealthiest was Temple Emanu-El, now the home of investment bankers and merchant magnates, which dedicated a magnificent new building in 1868.[97] Wise was present when Ahawath Chesed, a Bohemian synagogue in New York, laid the cornerstone for its new building at Fifty-Fifth and Lexington (now Central Synagogue) in 1870. He noted that the congregation had paid $65,000 for the land and was preparing to spend $200,000 to construct what would be "the second largest edifice of the kind in New York."[98] The building "epidemic" of the 1860s "was a highly visible manifestation of the attitudes and aspirations of the new breed of American Jewry."[99]

According to Eleff, the Civil War also shifted the power dynamic between lay and rabbinic leadership. The war's perils pushed Jewish ministers into more visible positions of power. They benefited from "a wartime spirit that moved so many Americans to seek out their ministers as sources of religious authority."[100] Eleff notes several causes for the shift, including more independence of American clergy from Europe, a desire for more rigid ecclesiastical order, and a new synagogue architecture that promoted the role of the rabbi within the congregation.[101] The new buildings empowered clergymen, especially those on the side of reform. The rabbis asserted their authority by adopting revised prayer books and leading more decorous services. An increasingly homogenous American Jewish community looked to their clergy to supply the content for a new, Americanized Judaism. In the postwar period, that content was inspired by the Viennese Rite—not so much by its liturgy, but by its decorous dignity and particularly its majestic music. Just as the *Stadttempel* had served as a symbol of religious, social, and musical transformation in Vienna, the Viennese Rite would be used to express the same sense of Americanization and acculturation in the United States.

---

96. Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 190.

97. Jick, *Americanization*, 181. Temple Emanu-El spent a whopping $650,000 to construct its new building, according to Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 113.

98. Isaac Mayer Wise, "On New York," *Israelite* 17 (December 23, 1870), 8.

99. Jick, *Americanization*, 181. In spite of a five-year global depression sparked by the panic of 1873, increasingly affluent German Jews continued to gain influence and power in the American economy.

100. Eleff, *Who Rules?*, 131, 184.

101. Eleff, *Who Rules?*, 131.

SULZER CANTORS: BRINGING THE VIENNESE RITE TO AMERICANIZING SYNAGOGUES

These shifts also presented an expanded opportunity for the highly trained Sulzer cantors, along with professional choirs and organs. "The prosperous congregations saw in Sulzer a tantalizing vision of a musical specialist-liturgist, whose artistic refinement, reputation and conspicuous expense could elevate Judaism's cultural capital in the American landscape."[102] Well over a dozen Sulzer disciples had arrived by the mid-1860s. Among them was Samuel Welsch (1835–1901). Born in Prague, he trained in Vienna with Sulzer and eventually came to Ahawath Chesed. Alois Kaiser (1840–1908) was born in Hungary and sang in Sulzer's choirs in the 1850s. After serving as Sulzer's star soloist, he officiated at pulpits of his own before coming to Shaar Hashomayim in New York in 1866 and finally settling in Baltimore. Morris Goldstein (1840–1906), also from Hungary, studied in Vienna and sang in Sulzer's choir. Anshe Hesed hired him in 1868.[103]

These cantors did more than introduce Sulzer's music. Rather than slavishly limiting their musical choices to his compositions, they followed his lead and composed works of their own.[104] They established a high musical level that produced a spiritually uplifting and musically fulfilling service about which these Americanizing congregations could feel proud. Wise was a big supporter, calling them "scientific musicians," presumably to distinguish them from the musically illiterate older style of service leader with whom he had struggled for decades.[105] He would soon turn to the Sulzer cantors to work with him on his project to unify American Jewry.

AN EPHEMERAL UNITY

It was in this prosperous and optimistic time that Wise and Lilienthal returned to the goal of national unity. They were still inspired by Vienna's emphasis on unity over ideology, although they had left Mannheimer's conservative views far behind. By the 1870s, they had become much more liberal, differing little from the radical reformers in substance. However, unlike Einhorn's camp, they embraced the strategy of engag-

102. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 186.

103. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 188–95.

104. As we saw above, Sulzer also included many original compositions and commissioned other composers, both Jewish and Christian, to contribute to *Schir Zion*.

105. Isaac Mayer Wise, "Synagogal Music," *Israelite* 17 (September 2, 1870), 8. See also Wise, *Reminiscences*, 223–24.

ing with the lay leadership to foster unity. They organized a series of lay-rabbinic conferences, at first ostensibly to revise *Minhag America*. Wise believed that solving the liturgy problem would remove "a major stumbling block on the path to national union."[106]

By now Wise and his fellow rabbis were no longer constrained by his earlier need to satisfy the traditionalist camp. The convention agreed that Jews could pray bareheaded and that a second day of holidays was unnecessary. Nor was there equivocation about Reform positions in the text.[107] The treatment of the daily Amidah reveals their increasing radicalism. They left out the notion of reviving the dead in the second blessing. They rewrote the prayer asking God to sound the great shofar for our freedom so that it becomes universal: "Let sound the great trumpet for the liberty of all nations." In line with Americanization, a key focus of the revision was an English translation of the prayers. The younger generation of Jews no longer read German or Hebrew. Wise declared: "We can never expect a union of the American synagogues with German prayers and hymns, which in a few years will be obsolete in our midst."[108]

Following the first meeting in Cleveland in June 1870, Welsch, one of the Sulzer cantors, sent a letter in September to Wise offering "to convene a meeting of *Hazanim* favorable to modern Synagogue music, to agree upon a selection of compositions for the American synagogue."[109] Wise responded enthusiastically:

> Important as it is for the American synagogue to have one common liturgy, it is probably no less important, to establish also a uniformity of melodies and songs. Music, in numerous instances, is a more adequate expression of prayer, petition, supplication, thanksgiving, repentance, mourning, gladness, adoration, praise and glory, than words can do it.[110]

He invited Welsch and any other interested musicians to the second *Minhag America* meeting in New York on October 24, 1870. The rabbis agreed to appoint Cantor Welsch, along with two other experts, to prepare the music for the Hebrew portion of the new prayer book. The

106. "A Perfect Union," *Israelite* 17 (July 29, 1870), 8.

107. Eric L. Friedland, "Isaac Mayer Wise and his Minhag Amerika," *Hebrew Abstracts* 14 (1973): 89. See also *Minhag Amerika*: *The Daily Prayers for American Israelites*, *as revised in conference* (Cincinnati: Bloch, 1872).

108. Eleff, *Who Rules?*, 185.

109. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 195–96.

110. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 196. For the entire article, see "Synagogal Music," *The Israelite* 17 (September 2, 1870), 8.

goal was a unified American musical liturgy.[111] This was the genesis for *Zimrat Yah*, published in four volumes, beginning in 1871. It combined new editions of European classics by Sulzer, Naumbourg and others with over thirty-four new liturgical settings, organ preludes, and accompaniments by the Sulzer-inspired cantors reflecting the spirit of the more progressive American Jewish liturgy.[112] In order to maximize the market for their music, the cantors geared their settings toward the full range of contemporary liberal prayer books, thus taking "unity" even further than Wise.[113] Wise was thrilled with the first volume, especially the new compositions. He noted:

> The American synagogue has a peculiarly American character, which can best be expressed and enhanced by American compositions. Sulzer's immortal compositions, as also Naumburg [*sic*] and Weintraub's and others contain much for our benefit; but they are insufficient for our wants because they have no hymn music, no organ accompaniment, no preludia.[114]

By the second volume there were even fewer European compositions as these cantors created a version of the Sulzer's musical style for their American congregations.

Although Wise was not successful in making a revised *Minhag America* the prayer book for all of the nation's synagogues, he and his moderate Reform partners expanded the purpose of the conferences to fulfill other unifying goals and ultimately created two of the enduring institutions of Reform Judaism: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873) and Hebrew Union College (1875). They achieved this by prioritizing unity over ideology.

---

111. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 197. Welsch and his committee reported back to the convention on their progress; see, e.g., "The Conference. Concluded", *Israelite* (June 16, 1871), 8.

112. *Sabbath Service*, *Zimrath Yah*, ed. Cantors M. Goldstein, A. Kaiser, S. Welsch, I. L. Rice (New York: [n.p.], 1873). Three more volumes came out in installments in March and May 1874 as well as a volume 3 in 1875–77 and a volume 4 in 1886; see Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 200–208.

113. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 197. For instance, they offered four versions of Mi Chamocha to reflect the variations in the Huebsch and Einhorn liturgies and seven versions of the Kedusha, setting the texts of Szold, Einhorn, and Huebsch (200).

114. Isaac Mayer Wise, "Zimrath Yah," *Israelite* 17 (March 17, 1871), 9. Volume 1 of *Zimrath Yah* had all of these, including an organ prelude before the Barchu (27), an anthem before and after the sermon (128–29), and a mourner's hymn "Gottes Ewigkeit" ("God's Eternity," 135), set to a text in Szold's prayer book. Louis Lewandowski, the great Berlin synagogue composer and music director, is missing from this list. According to Judah Cohen, "Searching for Louis Lewandowski in Nineteenth Century America" (unpublished manuscript), Lewandowski had few advocates in the United States until the late 1880s. My thanks to Cohen for his generosity in sharing his work.

The founders of these institutions took the "union" in their names seriously. The Union's original call advocated a code of laws to uphold circumcision, Sabbath observance, kosher slaughtering, and dietary laws. It was traditional enough to attract Cincinnati's Orthodox congregations. The original curriculum of the Hebrew Union College avoided biblical criticism and hewed to a traditional set of courses that would attract a range of students along the spectrum of observance. So, too, its rabbinic supporters reflected that range from proto-Conservatives like Frederick de Sola Mendes to radical reformer David Einhorn, who served as members of the Board of Governors of the College. According to Meyer, Einhorn and Samuel Hirsch participated in the work of the Union and the College alongside de Sola Mendes, Sabato Morais, Benjamin Szold, and Marcus Jastrow—men who would soon become pillars of American Conservative Judaism.[115] Similarly, Sulzer cantors served congregations across the ideological range of liberal congregations. For instance, the more traditional Szold worked with Kaiser at Avodat Yisrael in Baltimore, and Einhorn partnered with Sternberger at Adath Jeshurun in New York.

CONCLUSION

As in Vienna, the unity that brought about the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Hebrew Union College was not the same as unanimity. Radical reformers like Einhorn and proto-Conservatives like Szold did not agree on ideology or liturgy, yet they were able to look beyond their ideological differences to achieve pragmatic goals important to them all. This unity of the 1870s produced the key institutions that established the Reform Movement in America. It was a result of the increased postwar homogeneity that I have described above. A rapidly Americanizing laity looked to their clergy to fulfill their wish to acculturate by supplying the content of that transformation: liturgical and ritual change and new music that mirrored the trends they saw around them. In other words, they Americanized the various elements of the Viennese Rite.

This Viennese-inspired unity, to use Meyer's term, was "ephemeral." By the mid-1880s, the Conservatives would be driven away by the Trefa Banquet of 1883 and the radical reformers, having gained control of the Reform movement, would finalize the split with the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Yet that period of relative homogeneity was a crucial one because, after decades of failure, it produced the core institutions

115. Meyer, *Response*, 263 and Ruben, *Max Lilienthal*, 214.

of Reform Judaism: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College.[116]

The Viennese Rite, the combination of moderate liturgy, uplifting music and sermons, and decorum served to unite the Viennese Jewish community for many decades. Its charismatic leadership continually chose unity over ideology. American exponents of the Viennese approach extended the spirit of creativity evident in the work of Sulzer and Mannheimer by composing their own music and liturgy in order to better serve the needs of their American congregants. Rabbis and cantors used the Viennese Rite to make the statement that their congregations—with their acculturation, affluence, and new buildings—had arrived. For a brief moment, American Jewry chose unity over ideology and, as a result, it achieved important, pragmatic goals that had long been elusive.

116. Similarly, the unity to which *Zimrath Yah* aspired was ephemeral. Cohen, *Jewish Religious Music*, 210–11 describes a "turn towards congregational singing" in the 1880s and the eventual adoption of the *Union Prayer Book* as the bases for its obsolescence.