REFERENCES


A TALE OF TWO ISAACS: NINETEENTH CENTURY PIONEERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY


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It is indeed a rare pleasure to be presented with two such well-written biographies of two fascinating individuals who represented two contrasting approaches to dealing with the challenges presented to Judaism by modern
American society in the nineteenth century. It is not mere coincidence that both of these fine works are revisions of doctoral dissertations done at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion under the supervision of Jonathan Sarna.

In large measure, Isaac Harby may be viewed as a culturalist and Isaac Leeser as a structuralist in their alternative approaches to dealing with the clash between Judaism and American society and culture. That is, for Harby, the way to resolve the tensions between Judaism and modernity was to "modernize" Judaism, to strip it of what he viewed as its archaic character which was a relic from an ancient era but which was entirely inappropriate to modern American society and culture. Leeser, on the other hand, was a structuralist in that he engaged in structural innovations while attempting to preserve as much as possible the religio-cultural tradition. In many respects, these two nineteenth century individuals represent the differences between tradition and modernity that mark American, indeed world, Judaism today. Ironically, Harby was unsuccessful in the short-run, but what he sought has come to fruition. Leeser had much more direct influence on nineteenth century American Judaism. He was undoubtedly the most significant force in traditional Judaism in his time. From the perspective of the present, however, it appears that Harby was more in tune with the future of American Jewry than Leeser.

Isaac Harby's father's background is somewhat unclear. However, he was undoubtedly from a Sephardic family. His father arrived in Charleston in 1781, and remained on the periphery of the Jewish community. Isaac received a good liberal education in Charleston, but had virtually no formal Jewish education and was Jewishly ignorant. The meager familiarity with classical Jewish sources which he acquired was derived from secondary, and usually non-Jewish, sources.

He seems to have been a restless individual. He changed careers, beginning as an educator, then became a journalist, and intermittently, was a part-time playwright. Throughout, he seems to have been driven by a thirst for fame. His active involvement with Judaism was episodic and relatively brief. For reasons as yet unknown, Harby somehow became committed to the objective of reforming Judaism. He was an important figure in the first major attempt to deal with the widely perceived decline in the quality of Jewish life (which coincided with a general socio-economic decline) by introducing reforms into the synagogue service. That attempt was made in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824, when forty-seven members of Congregation Beth Elohim, who were unhappy with the synagogue's services, organized themselves into "The Reformed Society of Israelites," and attempted to reform Beth Elohim's services by abbreviating them, having some parts read in both Hebrew and English, eliminating the practice of auctioning synagogue honors, and having a weekly discourse, or sermon, in