

“In Need of the Elements of Civilization”:
American Reform Judaism, the Alliance Israélite Universelle,
and the spreading of “civilization” in the Levant in the 1860s

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In 1860, a group of French Jews founded the Alliance Israelite Universelle (Alliance), with the purpose of helping poor and persecuted Jewish communities in the Levant and Eastern Europe. The action of the Alliance involved both diplomatic intervention and philanthropic aid. In addition to traditional material relief, the latter was notably characterized by the creation of a network of schools; in the Alliance’s eyes education was the first stepping-stone to emancipation. Despite being founded in France by French Jews, the Alliance Israélite Universelle, as its name indicates, had a “universal” vocation, meaning not only that it provided relief and assistance to Jews around the world, but also that its membership was not restricted to French Jews. The organization the founders envisaged was truly transnational, a common forum within which all Jews could work together for the emancipation and relief of their brethren who needed it. Western Jewish communities joined in as Jews in England, Germany, Italy and Austria, among others, soon organized Alliance branches.

In the United States, despite the distance, Jews very quickly started cooperating with the Alliance, and a number of branches of the organization were established, starting in San Francisco in 1864. American Jews almost uniformly believed in the merits of cooperation, as they believed in the value of the Alliance’s purposes. The most prominent American Jews, including Isaac Leeser, Isaac Meyer Wise, Henrietta Szold, Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall became members.¹ What primarily attracted them to the Alliance was a sense of solidarity with less fortunate co-religionists in other parts of the world, but also the idea of bringing them “civilization” and modernity as embodied by the *mission civilisatrice* proposed by the Alliance.

¹ Other famous American Alliance members included Max Lilienthal, Bernhard Felsenthal, Elkan Cohn, Benjamin Peixotto, Oscar Strauss, Cyrus Adler.

Nevertheless, the American Jewish response to the Alliance was varied, reflecting the ideological diversity that characterized American Jewry in the 1860s on questions regarding Jewish affairs. The first issue was whether to cooperate *with* the Alliance independently, or whether to join the Alliance and work *within* it through the creation of branches. Rabbis and leaders of local Jewish communities were enthusiastic about forming branches but the men who aspired to be the national leaders of American Jewry tended to reject this course of action. For them this was a crucial question as they were themselves engaged in the process of trying to unite American Jewry and still working towards obtaining civil and political rights for Jews at home.

The American response to the Alliance was varied in another way: in the 1860s, the proponents of Reform most readily embraced the Alliance, while the partisans of Orthodoxy were more guarded. American Reform Jewish leaders such as Isaac Meyer Wise were all the more interested in the AIU's "*mission civilisatrice*" as they were engaged in the controversial and divisive process of reforming Jewish religious practices in America, giving up traditional Judaism for a new "Westernized" kind. For them, Reform was necessary, both as a tool of acculturation and because not reforming meant negating the meaning of emancipation. In contrast, Isaac Leeser, the leader of American Orthodoxy, embraced changes in the Jewish ritual only insofar as it contributed to the furthering of Jewish community interests in a context of acculturation.² Paralleling this attitude, he was concerned that the Alliance program would water down the religious practices and commitment of the communities in which it was establishing schools.

Despite generally positive responses at the outset, the progression of the American of the Alliance membership was slow. In 1864, the Alliance Bulletin listed 246 members in the United States, which represented 8.5% of the organization's total membership. By 1869, it reached 758 for a proportion of 6.6%.³ Geographically, the American membership of the Alliance was very widespread. Every significant community, such as New York, San Francisco, Charleston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati counted Alliance subscribers, but so did tiny communities such as Keokuk, Iowa.

² Lance Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).

³ AIU Bulletins.

Some American Jews joined the Alliance individually, but it was also common for entire congregations (although in almost all cases, only men) to join. Rabbis and synagogue leaders played a crucial role in spreading the Alliance's American membership: rabbis were involved in the creation of virtually all the Alliance branches that appeared in the United States. Significantly, most of the rabbis who cooperated with the Alliance and/or founded branches professed Reform Judaism.

While American Jewish communities throughout the United States were eager to form local branches of the Alliance, those who aspired to become the leaders of American Jewry and were trying to unify American Jewry through the creation of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (BDAI) in 1859 were reluctant to do so and favored cooperation on an independent basis. The main factor underlying their opposition came from the fact that they saw the Alliance as a "foreign" organization, and that they were eager to retain their independence as a national group. The question of the legitimacy of their claim to national leadership was also at stake.

Isaac Leeser was initially dubious as to the usefulness and efficiency of a Jewish union on the international scale. These reservations were the direct product of recent developments in American Jewry, and particularly the failure of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites to become the representative of all of American Jewry. Leeser, who was the editor of the Jewish newspaper *The Occident* wrote in the September 20, 1860 issue: "For our part, we do not see how a combination of our race all over the world could obviate governmental oppression and popular prejudice, especially while our own disunion in religious sentiments gives so many an excellent excuse for displaying spite and ill-will against us."⁴ Leeser thought that the national unity of American Jewry was necessary before considering uniting on a broader, international level.

In addition, American Jews were still in the process of securing their own citizenship rights at home, and they feared -wrongly- that the branches of the Alliance in the United States would arrogate the voice of American Jews when it came to appealing to the US government to act on behalf of their oppressed brethren abroad. Meyer S. Isaacs, of the BDAI, suggested that "when rights of Israelites in still semi-barbarous

⁴ Isaac Leeser, "Alliance Israélite Universelle" *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (Philadelphia), 20 September 1860.

countries of Asia and Africa are invaded, where the interposition of the authorities of civilized nations is essential to the maintenance of their liberties, the friendly offices of the representatives of the United States can be more effectively secured through the agency of an organization like ours which, composed of American citizens, may *demand* our government that which a branch of a foreign [body], however influential abroad could only *solicit*.”⁵ [emphasis mine] It was as American citizens -of Jewish faith- that they were entitled to the ear of their government. As representatives of the Alliance they would not be able to exert any influence in favor of oppressed Jews. Only as representatives of *American Jewry* would they be able to do so.

This concern also underscored their fear of appearing clannish and unassimilable, and their need to affirm their American identity. Leeser expressed his worry that joining the Alliance might tarnish American Jews’ image of patriotism. For him, “it may be advisable to cooperate as a body with our French brothers. . . without, however, even presuming to interfere in politics. . . . Kindly influences may be permitted, but nothing by which the name of Israel could be exposed to reproach.”⁶

For his part, Isaac Meyer Wise liked the idea of a union between Jews of different countries. He concurred with the AIU that the appropriate response to events such as the Mortara Case (the 1856 case of an Italian Jewish boy who had been secretly converted by a nurse and subsequently abducted by papal police to be raised as a Catholic), or persecutions in Austria, Rumania, Morocco, could “only be achieved by the united forces of all.”⁷ In 1864, he wrote that the Alliance “no doubt, is engaged in noble a work and deserves universal support.”⁸ Unlike the leader of the BDAI, Wise did not express specifics misgivings about forming Alliance branches in the United States.

The American Jewish response to the Alliance also varied in ways that paralleled the dispute between Orthodox Jews and the proponents of Reform about the shape of American Judaism. In that realm, the difference between Leeser and Wise’s responses to

⁵ BDAI (signed Cardozo, president, and Isaacs, secretary) to M. Crémieux, President of the “Universal Israelite Alliance”, July 10, 1865. AIU Etats-Unis I C.

Note how the term nation is used solely to refer to the “civilized”, while the “barbarians” only live in countries and do not constitute “nations.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Universal Jewish Alliance,” *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 27 July 1860.

⁸ *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 15 April 1864.

the Alliance focused on two issues: the presence of Adolphe Crémieux, an assimilated French Jew as president of the organization; and the nature of the Alliance schools' curriculum.

The problems which emancipated Jewish communities had to face, such as conversions and intermarriage raised the question of how to keep Judaism alive since the choice whether or not to stay religious, and how to live one's Jewish identity was voluntary. The debate between partisans of Orthodoxy and proponents of Reform about the desirable degree of assimilation of Jews was one of the main controversies shaking American Jewry in the 1860s. Isaac Meyer Wise, advocating more radical Reform, believed that since assimilation was both inevitable and desirable, Judaism should adapt, and effect radical changes to the rituals. Reform Judaism insisted on decorum and order, a clear departure from the usage of traditional Jewish services. For example, when Wise first arrived in New York in 1846, he visited a few synagogues and the city and was appalled by the chaos that reigned during services. His impressions, published in his *Reminiscences*, are worth quoting at length: "I went to the synagogue on Henry Street to hear Dr. Lilienthal. The attendance was very large, the service according to the old German ritual. 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. After the selling of the so-called *mitzvoth*, I lost all patience with the intolerable sing-song with which the reader intoned the portion and read from the *Torah* and with the innumerable *Mi-sheberakh*. 'Why is this nuisance tolerated in a Metropolis?' I asked my neighbor. 'I do not know,' he answered; 'but it takes place in all the synagogues of New York.'"⁹ A few days later, he attended services at the new temple, Emanu-El. There, he recounted, "we found about fifty men and thirty women, the latter in a section partitioned off. A boy's choir, re-enforced by a few men's voices, sang some composition of Sulzer as poorly as in a village synagogue; but dignity and decorum ruled -the beginning of a better future- and I breathed easier."¹⁰

While Leeser and Wise agreed on the necessity to impart "dignity and decorum" to Jewish services, their views strongly diverged on the extent of assimilation, and the

⁹ Isaac M. Wise, *Reminiscences*, 2nd ed. David Philipson, ed. transl., (New York: Central Synagogue of New York, 1945), 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

scope of the modernization of Judaism. Isaac Leeser, while agreeing that some changes were necessary, feared that too radical reforms would alter the nature of Judaism, and lead to its dissolution. This is not to say that Leeser was opposed to any kind of reform, on the contrary. Like Wise, he believed in organizing services in a more orderly fashion, based on the Christian model. But Wise saw it not just as a question of acculturation, but above all, as a question of “civilization” and modernity. According to David Sussman, “the key to Leeser’s program for Judaism was to control acculturation and to use Americanization selectively to further Jewish communal interests.”¹¹ Thus, Leeser translated the Bible into English and supported Sunday schools. But he was against assimilation if this idea meant losing ancestral religious practices. These practices, in Leeser’s eyes, were what kept Judaism alive in America. As a result, he was in favor of maintaining “fixed liturgy” and respect for Talmudic law.¹²

It is in this light that we can understand their divergent assessments of president Alliance president Adolphe Crémieux and of the Alliance’s educational work in the “Orient”. Adolphe Crémieux became the president of the organization in 1863, and the prestige of his name did a lot to foster enthusiasm for the organization. (He had been involved with the AIU for a very brief time in 1860, and was its president from 1863 to 1867, and again from 1868 to 1880). Crémieux’ name resonated with many American Jews as a model of what Jews could achieve in societies where they were emancipated. He was an important political figure, having been a representative in the French National Assembly under four different regimes since 1842. He had been minister of Justice of the second Republic in 1848, and would be minister again in 1870. Crémieux’ political prominence was very rare among French Jews, but it was perhaps precisely for that reason that he was so revered: he was a pathmaker.¹³ In America, no Jew had yet reached his level of prominence in government and political affairs. Crémieux had also been a tireless defender of Jewish rights, and had been member of the *Consistoire Central* (the French Jewish representative body) from 1830 to 1843. His interventions on behalf of his

¹¹ Sussman, *Isaac Leeser*, 249.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134-135.

¹³ Pierre Birnbaum, *Destins Juifs: De la Révolution Française à Carpentras* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), 64-65.

foreign co-religionists such as his efforts to rouse support for the Jews of Damascus accused of blood libel in 1840-41, enhanced his prestige among American Jews. In response to one of the Alliance appeals for Americans to join in published in *The Israelite* in May 1865, Rabbi Guinzburg of Rochester, NY expressed his admiration for Crémieux: “Since the year 1841, when you, in conjunction with the noble hearted Moses Montefiore [the leading British Jewish philanthropist], have proved yourself as the great champion of our nation, your name had become a household word in Israel, and is pronounced with a blessing.”¹⁴ Rabbi Guinzburg extolled Crémieux for his philanthropic endeavors and specifically for founding the Alliance: “as great as your merit might be about . . . what you have done in single cases in behalf of our brethren,” he praised, “still nothing can be compared with your merit, by having established ‘La Société de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle’.”¹⁵ In a letter to Crémieux, Isaac Meyer Wise also declared himself “a great admirer not only of you personally, but also of the mission and transactions of the Alliance.”¹⁶ Guinzburg and Wise were both engaged on the side of Reform, and valued Crémieux not only for his work, but also for what he represented: an assimilated Jew who had not forgotten that he was a Jew and who applied his political skills to help his brethren.

But Isaac Leeser was much more ambivalent about Crémieux, reflecting his concern with the fate of Judaism in countries where Jews were already emancipated. For Leeser, who dedicated his life to keeping American Jews attached to their religion, Crémieux’ story was the perfect embodiment of the dangers of assimilation. Indeed, in 1843 Crémieux’ wife had converted to Catholicism and had had their children baptized without his knowledge, leading him to resign from the *Consistoire* and to abstain from intervening in Jewish affairs for almost two decades.¹⁷ Leeser thus explained his hostility towards Crémieux: “politicians in France [such as Crémieux], who have given up all of Israel but the name, would only disgust all sincere men, and none of these would range themselves under the lead of a person who, whatever his merits may be, has educated his

¹⁴ Dr. A. Guinzburg (Rochester, NY) to Adolphe Crémieux, president of the AIU (Paris), 17 July 1865. AIU Etats-Unis IV B.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ I. M. Wise to Adolphe Cémieux, president of the AIU, 13 July 1865.

¹⁷ André Chouraqui, *L’Alliance Israélite Universelle et la renaissance juive contemporaine, cent ans d’histoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965.

children in another faith, and so cast off the Law of God as a useless burden.”¹⁸

Conversion and intermarriage were two of the issues affecting emancipated Jews. In America, as in Europe, the issue of Christian missionaries converting Jews had become one of the main concerns of leaders such as Wise and Leeser. But the difference of outlooks on Crémieux highlighted the difference between Wise and Leeser as to what made someone an exemplary Jew and entitled to be a leader in serving the interests of his brethren. Wise considered the man’s public activities on behalf of Jewry as paramount. For Leeser, while Crémieux himself had never converted, his private family story was so important an issue as to question the desirability of joining the Alliance, and the appropriateness of being led by a man whose personal life experience he thought belied his Jewish attachment.

The nature of the Alliance’s school programs also elicited different responses from Wise and Leeser. By then, the activities of the AIU had been clarified and the organizations’ first schools had been created in Morocco (Tetuan, 1862). By 1865, what was quickly becoming a network was comprised of primary schools in Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Irak, (Jaffa, Damascus and Baghdad, 1864), and Greece (Volo, 1865). In 1870, the network had fourteen schools and over 2,000 pupils. The AIU developed a curriculum including “the national language, the Hebrew language, history, geography, arithmetic, morals and religion.”¹⁹ Historian Georges Weill has defined the educational project of the Alliance as a “humanism of assimilation.”²⁰ Indeed, the Alliance believed that that the state of ignorance that characterized Jews in the “Orient” “corrupted them,” that “the mores and usages which perpetuate themselves in these regions are as irreconcilable with our [the Jews] true beliefs as with the spirit of progress.”²¹ Accordingly, “social improvement [could] only come after moral improvement,” which itself would come through education. The Alliance schools would “spread the lights of occidental civilization among those populations.”²² This aspect of

¹⁸ *The Occident*, 20 September 1860.

¹⁹ Bulletin AIU, Janvier 1864.

²⁰ Georges Weill, *Émancipation et Progrès: L’Alliance Israélite Universelle et les droits de l’Homme* (Paris: Éditions du Nadir, 2000), 78.

²¹ Appel en faveur de l’oeuvre des écoles, 1865. Quoted in Georges Weill, *Émancipation et Progrès*, 70.

²² Bulletin AIU, 1863.

the Alliance's work greatly appealed to American Jews. When American donors specified where the funds they gave to the Alliance should be allocated, the most common beneficiaries were the schools in the "Orient."

Yet, articles published in Isaac Leeser's newspaper *The Occident* show that the more conservative Jews were guarded toward the Alliance's educational program. In October 1864, in an editorial note following the transcription of the Alliance's annual report, Isaac Leeser appeared split between positive attitude and wariness toward the Alliance. On the one hand, he praised its aims. "There is no question," he wrote, "that habits of industry and self-dependence must be introduced into Asia and Africa to waken the people out of their sleep of misery."²³ But on the other hand, Leeser doubted "the benefits of the French system of training which it is attempt[ing] to engraft on the East." Leeser was worried about what impact Alliance schooling would have on the religious practice of the Jews it sought to help, as he feared that the change would "bring with it the modern laxity of religion."²⁴

Wise, on the contrary, fully embraced the idea of the "civilizing mission." Wise thought it "self-evident that the progress of civilization is identical with the increase of prosperity and happiness, the means to procure the comforts of life, and the opportunities to enlarge the sphere of one's mind."²⁵

"We have a duty to perform to the neglected members of the human family in the Orient," he continued.²⁶

"[Jews] in Asia and Africa," he wrote in *the Israelite*, "stand in need of the elements of civilization."²⁷ For Wise, Jews in these parts of the world were good Jews and led exemplary private lives, they "excel[led] as Hebrew scholars", they distinguished themselves by "their private and domestic virtues, by their industrious and economical habits". But they were lacking in general, secular knowledge, and in political awareness: they were not modern, enlightened Jews. But, he wrote, "by the establishment of schools, the youth has to be redeemed from ignorance and to be made familiar with all the

²³ *The Occident* (Philadelphia), October 1864.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "The Alliance and the Orient," *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 16 May 1865.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Universal Jewish Alliance," *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 27 July 1860.

requirements that make Europe the centre [sic] of civilization.”²⁸ In a letter he wrote to Crémieux in 1865, Wise pledged to help the Alliance “for the elevation and union of Israel.”²⁹ And in an article written the same year, he asked “why is this to be done by Israelites and for Israelites?” On the one hand, he argued, Jews felt “a deep interest in [their] coreligionists everywhere,” and on the other hand, “the progress of Hebrews in any country reflects credit also on [them].”³⁰

But for Wise, like for the Alliance, “elevating Israel” would not just benefit Jews but contained in itself a broader, more universal purpose: “the Hebrews,” he argued “appear to me to be the best agents for the civilization of the East.”³¹ He refused to let it be understood that this was solely a sectarian enterprise. “The oriental Israelite,” he claimed, “is the fittest and most accessible agent to carry civilization into the very hearts of Asia and Africa,” places where they lived under the “sway of semi-barbarism.”³² In that way, by being the agents of “civilization”, the Jews would help bring about the very conditions necessary to their assimilation in the countries where they lived.

But there was another dimension to this attitude: the notion, embraced by Reformers, of the end of the *galut*, and that it was as members of the nations that Jews would not only contribute to world civilization but also to fulfill their religious destiny. He thus argued that this endeavor of “civilization” was all Jews’ “religious duty” as it corresponded to the “messianic doctrine of the redemption of mankind.”³³

Wise also embraced the AIU’s methods. “Schools, in which European languages, sciences and arts are taught by civilized teachers, are the best means to promote this laudable end,” he insisted.³⁴ In the same way, schools in America, by reaching malleable children, were a crucial vector of assimilation for immigrants. This argument fit into Reformers’ ideals but also with Wise’s idea that American Judaism needed a good Jewish education system through which, by spreading the ideals of Reform, American Jews would become modern and integrated while still retaining a sense of Jewish identity.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Letter I. M. Wise (Ohio) to A. Crémieux, 13 July 1865. AIU Etats-Unis IIB.

³⁰ “The Alliance and the Orient,” *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 16 May 1865.

³¹ Letter I. M. Wise (Ohio) to A. Crémieux, 13 July 1865. AIU Etats-Unis IIB.

³² “The Alliance and the Orient,” *The Israelite* (Cincinnati), 16 May 1865.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

The Alliance was the perfect vehicle for this purpose in countries where Jews were not emancipated, Wise thought. Anticipating possible questions or objections from his co-religionists as to why they should follow the lead from abroad, Wise addressed the issue of why the initiative of “civilizing” had to “come from Paris”. French Jews, he argued, were incomparably well suited to take on the task because of their unparalleled influence, both on the press, and on their government. He affirmed: “The French Israelites connected with [the Alliance] not only can justly boast of towering talent and an influence on the metropolitan press almost unlimited.”³⁵ In addition, France in general was one of the best bases for such an operation because of its “influence on the orient.” Wise argued that “schemes like this can be carried into successful operation only from Paris or London. These are now the two great centers of the human family.” Wise placed the US on the periphery: “We could not do any such thing from Washington or New York, as our connections with, and our influence on the orient are quite limited.”³⁶ In 1865, American Jews such as Wise accepted the leadership of French Jews under the aegis of the Alliance, which was at then unquestionably at the center of world Jewish affairs.

American Jews’ response to the Alliance was influenced by their own concerns about emancipation and assimilation, ranging from their identity as American citizens and their relations to their government, to the shape of American Judaism. Jewish Reform leaders, and Wise in particular supported the project of the AIU not only because of the promise of “uplift” and emancipation for Jews “over there”, but also because it validated their endeavor “over here.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.