Leeser's Legacy, Library, and Letters: A Case Study in Reception History

Zev Eleff*

In May 1912, Cyrus Adler wrote to Mayer Sulzberger about the status of the "Leeser Library." There was perhaps no more active American Jewish leader than Isaac Leeser during the balance of the nineteenth century. He was a synagogue preacher, newspaper editor, translator of major Jewish texts, and formative figure in the creation of more than a dozen Jewish organizations. With an indomitable passion that compensated for a dearth of political savvy, Leeser furthered the cause of Orthodox Judaism, championed religious tolerance for Jews in the United States, and made a case for American Jewry's leading role on the international scene. He was also a local father figure; Adler and Sulzberger were raised in the Philadelphia Jewish community that Leeser had helped steward for almost four decades. Adler had studied in Leeser's Hebrew Education Society school before he, like many Jewish children at that time, matriculated to Central High School in Philadelphia. At the time of their correspondence, Adler was president of Dropsie College, and Sulzberger was the so-described patriarch of the Philadelphia Jewish leadership after Leeser had died.[1] Sulzberger led a distinguished life, as someone

* I am very grateful to the archivists and librarians at the American Jewish Archives, American Jewish Historical Society, Temple University, and University of Pennsylvania for their research support. Likewise, I express my thanks to Jonathan Sarna and Arthur Kiron for their careful review of an earlier draft of this essay and their helpful suggestions and additional citations. Finally, although he was not fully aware of the purpose of my many questions, Lance Sussman, as the leading biographer of Isaac Leeser, provided invaluable insight and direction for this research. It is a dutiful honor to contribute to Leeser scholarship in his honor.

1 David G. Dalin, "The Patriarch: The Life and Legacy of Mayer Sulzberger," in *When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish America*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: Balch Institute, 1993), 58–74.

who liked a "fine imported cigar, hobnobbing with fellow members of Philadelphia's prestigious Union League, and browsing the shelves of his own exquisite fine library."[2]

The Leeser Library was in the possession of the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia and had been, to some degree or another, ever since Leeser died in February 1868. According to Adler, the leaders of the Hebrew Education Society agreed that the library "has no usefulness in the present building of the Education Society," meaning Touro Hall on Tenth and Carpenter in South Philadelphia. Adler recommended that the Leeser Library be transferred to Dropsie as a "sort of memorial."[3] Unstated was Adler's fear that Leeser's legacy was vanishing. Adler's plan resonated with Sulzberger. The latter was perhaps the most outstanding bibliophile of Jewish books in the United States. He also worried that his teacher's legacy would fade without a suitable testament to Leeser's many accomplishments. It made sense to Sulzberger, then, that Leeser's books would be better used as an instrument to signal his perpetual influence on American Jewish life.

Sulzberger was prescient. Leeser's library and letters were key to the preservation of his historical legacy. In contrast, Leeser's contemporaries such as Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and the philanthropist Rebecca Gratz have continuously remained relevant to American Jews because of the institutions they founded. Their letters and writings have filled in historical gaps, but there was never a time when these individuals were in danger of being forgotten. Wise was the outstanding architect of Reform Judaism in the United States, and his legacy remains firmly attached to the central institutions of Reform Judaism: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873, now the Union for Reform Judaism), Hebrew Union College (1875), and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1889).[4] As one Wise biographer put it, "I knew

2 Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888–1988* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 7.

3 Cyrus Adler to Mayer Sulzberger, 6 May 1912, Box 4, Folder 6, ARC MS-25, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA (Hereafter, KCAJS).

4 On Wise as institution builder, see Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1992), 246–273.

him in his own lengthened shadow in the organizations and institutions he had brought into being," and only "later I came to know him in his own writings."[5] Similarly, Gratz established, among other things, the first Hebrew Sunday school and the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. American Jews have routinely credited her pioneering labors as the inspiration for modern-day work in the fields of Jewish education and Jewish women's societies.[6]

By comparison, Leeser's name has not remained as firmly secured to American Jewish institutions. In 1960, Maxwell Whiteman bemoaned the lack of attention paid to Leeser. He pointed out that the only scholarly article on Leeser was a conference paper delivered at a Reform rabbinical convention in 1918. The few remaining testaments to his achievements were a stained glass window (arranged by Sulzberger and other Leeser devotees) in the old board room of the Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia and a bronze plaque in the lobby of Dropsie College.[7] Many of the organizations Leeser had formed on behalf of Orthodox Judaism were overshadowed by Reform counterparts or replaced by others furnished by Eastern European migrants at the turn of the twentieth century. Leeser's many books and manuals are no longer the texts from which Jews learn about their traditions, recite their prayers, or chant the Bible.

It took many years to recover Leeser for the annals of America's Jews. Better primary materials have reassured scholars of Leeser's firm position as one of the formative figures in American Jewish history. In 1967, almost one hundred years after Leeser's demise, Bertram Korn affirmed about the Philadelphia Jewish leader that "practically every form of Jewish activity which supports American Jewish life today was

5 James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965), ix.

6 Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 239–256.

7 Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser's Letters," *Jewish Exponent* (14 October 1960): 17; Whiteman, *A History of Philadelphia's Albert Einstein Medical Center* (Philadelphia: Albert Einstein Medical Center, 1966), 58–59.

either established or envisaged by this one man."[8] Decades later, Lance Sussman, Leeser's leading biographer, tabulated a long list of Leeser's many "firsts" in American Jewish life:

> Included among his firsts were the first volumes of sermons delivered and published by an American Jewish religious leader (1837–68); the first complete American translation of the Sephardic prayerbook (1837); the first Hebrew primer for children (1838); the first successful American Jewish magazine-newspaper, the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (1843–69); the first American Jewish publication society (1845); the first complete English translation of the Ashkenazic prayerbook (1848); the first Hebrew "high school" (1849); the first English translation of the entire Bible by an American Jew (1853); and the first American Jewish theological seminary—the short-lived Maimonides College (1867). He also served as a vice president of the first Jewish defense organization—the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859).[9]

What took so long for American Jews and their historians to take stock of Leeser's legacy? No doubt, much of it had to do with the rise of Reform Judaism and the weakening of the Orthodox element that Leeser had championed during his prime. Leeser was simply not the forefather who best represented the religious attitudes of most American Jews. Sussman lamented that "Leeser remains an unsung hero in the history of Judaism in America," and that "his name often goes unmentioned in standard cultural and religious history of the United States."[10] Sussman's pathbreaking biography did much to ameliorate that condition, as did several works that appeared before his book was published in 1995. In the meantime, the near-erasure of Leeser was also due to the failure of the so-called Philadelphia Group and others to furnish a proper memorial to Leeser as well as the disappearance of the primary materials that could

8 Bertram Wallace Korn, "Isaac Leeser: Centennial Reflections," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 19 (November 1967): 133.

9 Lance J. Sussman, "Isaac Leeser and the Protestantization of American Judaism," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 38 (April 1986): 4.

10 Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 14.

ably testify to his unique impact on American Jewish life. My aim is to explicate this curious history of "legacies" and "letters."[11] The rise, fall, and rise again of American Jewish interest in Leeser suggests something very important, as the historian Jason Lustig points out, about the relationship between collective memory and the cultural currency assigned to historical documents.[12] Leeser's institutional legacy did not match that of Wise, it did not parallel George Washington's stature for American history, nor did it compare to the importance of Oliver Cromwell in the pages of British history books. It was possible to write American Jewish history without Isaac Leeser. Therefore, his appearance in American Jewish historical writing was contingent on subsequent generations of American Jews deciding to make meaning of his life and letters.

Isaac Leeser's Will and Library

Leeser died on 1 February 1868. The first item in his will called on his student, Sulzberger, then just twenty-six years old, to assume responsibilities for Leeser's monthly newspaper. The request was not at all unexpected. After all, it was Sulzberger who had drafted Leeser's will just five months prior. Moreover, Leeser had assigned Sulzberger and William Hackenburg, another Leeser devotee, as executors of his estate. Both felt duty bound to fulfill the wishes of their mentor, to make sure that Jewish culture in Philadelphia would not "decline."[13]

For twenty-five years, Leeser had shared his views on American Judaism in the pages of the *Occident*. Through it, Leeser set the standard on how Jews debated religion in the United States.[14] Owing to

11 For a portrait of the Philadelphia Group, see Leah Levitz Fishbane, "Common Bonds: A Collective Portrait," in *Jewish Renaissance and Revival in America*, ed. Eitan P. Fishbane and Jonathan D. Sarna (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 13–45.
12 Jason Lustig, *A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4–19.
13 "Philadelphia," *Occident* 25 (March 1868): 625. See also Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Making of an American Jewish Culture," in *When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish America*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: Balch Institute, 1993), 147.
14 Shari Rabin, "People of the Press: The *Occident*, the *Israelite*, and the Origins of American Judaism," in *By Dawn's Early Light: Jewish Contributions to American Culture from the Nation's Founding to the Civil War*, ed. Adam Mendelsohn (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 2016), 75–82.

this, Sulzberger dutifully honored his teacher's request. "The desire of Mr. Leeser that we should make the attempt," recalled Sulzberger a year after he assumed the editorial role, "had been so strong that we could not refuse, and the *Occident* appeared."[15] In keeping with Leeser's vision for American Judaism, Sulzberger published articles on the dangers of Reform Judaism, the value of Jewish education and the synagogue, and the importance of maintaining religious freedoms in Protestant America. The young Sulzberger also published news items, some about Leeser. He covered Leeser's funeral and printed resolutions passed by a number of American Jewish organizations—the Board of Delegates of the American Israelites, B'nai B'rith fraternity lodges, and the Jewish Hospital Association, as well as synagogues from Tennessee to Curaçao—that mourned Leeser's demise.

It was a posthumous opportunity to provide Leeser with the accolades that he had struggled to obtain during his lifetime. Sulzberger remembered how Wise and other religious leaders publicly downplayed Leeser's scholarship; he recalled how Mikveh Israel, Leeser's congregation, pushed him out of the pulpit and hurled unfounded rumors of Leeser's misdeeds; and, from a personal point of view, Sulzberger was aware that Leeser became disfigured after a bad bout with smallpox, a primary reason he never married and had children, despite his eagerness to start a family.[16] Notwithstanding all this, Leeser was undeterred and Sulzberger wished for American Jews to remember him as a major figure in American Jewish life.

Sulzberger planned to write a lengthy biographical essay in the newspaper. He wrote to Leeser's cousins in Lübbecke, in the North Rhine-Westphalia region, for information on Leeser's early life in Europe and received a detailed report about Jewish life in the area.[17] Leeser had anticipated that Sulzberger might wish to write about him. He left instructions to Deliah Cozens, a seamstress who had leased a room to Leeser and handled the business affairs of his newspaper, to transfer to

15 "Valedictory," *Occident* 26 (March 1869): 529.

16 Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*, 75–76.

17 H. Leeser to Mayer Sulzberger, 1 August 1868, Box 4, Folder 1, ARC MS-25, KCAJS.

Sulzberger some materials "presuming that it might prove valuable."[18] Sulzberger was eager to furnish a learned memorial for his teacher. However, he carried too many burdens to produce a worthy biography. He was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1865 and worked as a lawyer in Moses Dropsie's firm. Sulzberger aspired to open his own law practice, which he did in 1876.[19] Sulzberger, unable or unwilling to delay his own professional aspirations, had to shut down the newspaper after a year of labor and editorship. He remained devoted to perpetuating Leeser's legacy and retained board positions on several organizations that Leeser had established. It took Sulzberger five years before he found ample time to translate and publish the Lübbecke letter, by then in the pages of a Jewish newspaper in New York.[20]

The second item in Leeser's last will and testament also relates to the procurement of his legacy. His instructions were memorialized in the protocols of the Board of Delegates of the American Israelites, one of the many organizations that Leeser had helped found. The minutes of the Board of Delegates record: "I give and bequeath to the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia for the use of the library of the college established by them all the books and pamphlets, of my private library."[21]

Maimonides College was a major milestone for Leeser. He had spilled much ink on the need for increased rabbinic authority and rabbinical training in the United States. Leeser agonized about, in his view anyway, lay-led synagogues and reform-minded rabbis who stymied the well-intentioned efforts of traditionally trained Jewish ministers to create religious stability for all American Jews.[22] Accordingly, four months before he passed away, Leeser realized his "most cherished dream, an

18 Ellen Cozens to Mayer Sulzberger, 3 May 1868, Box 4, Folder 1, ARC MS-25, KCAJS.

19 Dalin, "Patriarch," 60.

20 "Rev. Isaac Leeser," *Jewish Messenger* (29 August 1873): 5.

21 Records of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, 9 March 1868, Box 1, Folder 6, P-20, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, New York.

22 Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 37–43.

American Jewish theological seminary."[23] Maimonides College opened in Philadelphia with eight students and a faculty roster of well-trained local rabbis such as Sabato Morais and Marcus Jastrow. The Leeser Library was meant to ensure that the school outlived him. Some reports indicated that Leeser's library totaled more than eight hundred volumes while others estimated that it contained about two thousand items.[24] All agreed, however, that the Leeser Library held the largest collection of published work on American Judaica, scores of pamphlets and books that testified to the richness of American Jewish life during the Early Republic. They shared this view even though no one had taken the time to review the contents of the collection.[25] It was also the consensus that the Leeser Library remained woefully underutilized. Ultimately, Leeser's demise derailed Maimonides College's momentum.

At least the Leeser Library was salvageable. The collection never relocated to Maimonides College, which folded after six challenging years. Constant instability wreaked havoc on all kinds of planning. Spared from the turmoil, the Leeser Library stayed in the basement of the Hebrew Education Society.[26]

The circumstances deeply distressed Sulzberger. To remedy the situation, he arranged to move the Leeser Library to his personal residence. He loaned the collection to the upstart Young Men's Hebrew Association, but observers noticed that the Leeser Library "does not suffer from over-use" there.[27] Yet, unsatisfied with the maintenance of the uncatalogued library, Sulzberger moved the books back to the Hebrew Education Society. He commissioned Adler, his cousin, who was then twenty, to conduct an audit of Leeser's books, but by Adler's admission, it had a "good many errors."[28]

---

23 Betram Wallace Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences: Studies in Nineteenth Century American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1954), 152.

24 For the largest estimate, see "Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia," *American Hebrew* (14 March 1884): 74.

25 "Maimonides College," *Jewish Messenger* (7 August 1868): 3.

26 Korn, *Eventful Years*, 182–185.

27 Observer, "Philadelphia Letter," *American Israelite* (25 May 1877): 6.

28 Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1941), 20–21.

Adler's research confirmed what most had already presumed about Leeser's literary holdings. His library was filled with Bibles and translations of Scripture. He had acquired essential rabbinic tracts and amassed a considerable number of works on Jewish philosophy, mostly in Hebrew and German. Leeser held an interest in the history of other religions and made sure to purchase the volumes produced by his American Jewish contemporaries, no matter whether he considered them a friend (Morris Raphall) or a foe (Wise).[29]

What else did the Leeser Library contain besides printed books? Unfortunately, Adler's sixty-five-page catalogue did not include a sketch of the collection's scope, and the inventory made no mention of manuscripts or personal correspondence.[30] A year after the project, Adler made a reference to manuscripts in the library but did not offer any further details.[31] It is doubtful whether the initial book bequest included Leeser's personal letters. Decades after Leeser died, Hackenburg testified that he and Sulzberger "found among his effects many strictly private letters, concerning family and business affairs. Every vestige of this correspondence," confessed Hackenburg, "was entirely destroyed."[32]

The sojourns continued. Sulzberger moved the library into Touro Hall, a building constructed by the Hebrew Education Society in 1891. There the collection eventually served the teachers and students enrolled in the nascent Gratz College (founded in 1895) before the school moved into larger quarters at Congregation Mikveh Israel. Many felt it a shame that one of the richest Judaica collections in the United States sat underused. At one point, Morais, Leeser's successor at Mikveh Israel, tried to procure the Leeser Library for the Jewish Theological Seminary.[33] Some volumes, owing to the collection's holdings in American Judaica, were loaned to the recently established American Jewish Historical Society in

29 Cyrus Adler, *Catalogue of the Leeser Library* (Philadelphia: Edward Hirsch, 1883).

30 "Maimonides College," *Jewish Messenger* (7 August 1868): 3.

31 Cyrus Adler, "The Jewish Academy of America," *American Hebrew* (14 December 1894): 181.

32 William B. Hackenburg, "Acceptance of the Custody of the Leeser Library," *Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning Register* (1913): 38.

33 "For Jewish Law and Learning," *Jewish Exponent* (1 April 1892): 2.

New York.[34] The impact was still minimal.

This explains Adler's letter to Sulzberger to reunify Leeser's books. On 10 March 1913, the Leeser Library finally received a worthy reception at the Dropsie College Founders' Day celebration. The college was the lasting testament to Moses Dropsie, another devotee of Leeser who had authorized funds in his estate to establish a school of higher learning in the same spirit, it was alleged, as Leeser's defunct Maimonides College. The local journalists noted that the annual Founders' Day was "unusually interesting this year owing to several presentations made to the College on that occasion." The speakers who moved up and down the dais were all part of the Philadelphia Group, which boasted an air of culture and tradition that it credited to Leeser's influence.[35]

The major presentation was the deposit of the Leeser Library, by then numbering 1,400 volumes.[36] Dropsie himself had made a number of book donations to grow the collection.[37] Edwin Wolf read aloud a resolution passed by the Hebrew Education Society to transfer the books, since Dropsie was "an institution established to carry on educational and scientific work akin to the work for which the Maimonides College was founded."[38] In recognition, Dropsie College's board of governors set up a plaque that likewise justified the donation and Dropsie as the heir to Maimonides College:

> In memory of Isaac Leeser, born December 12th, 1806, died February 1st, 1868, Rabbi, Author, Translator of the Bible, Editor of the Occident and of the Prayer Book, whose Library bequeathed by him, for use of Maimonides College to the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia, has been placed by that Society in the custody of the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate learning.[39]

34 Anonymous to David Sulzberger, 5 March 1909, Box 91, Folder 26, I-1, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, New York.

35 "Founder's Day Observed at Dropsie College," *Jewish Exponent* (14 March 1913): 6.

36 "Dropsie College News," *American Hebrew* (4 October 1912): 628.

37 "Literary," *American Hebrew* (17 August 1888): 21; Ben David, "Our Philadelphia Letter," *American Hebrew* (16 November 1888): 24.

38 Edward [*sic*] Wolf, "Transfer of Custody of Leeser Library," *Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning Register* (1913): 28.

39 Wolf, "Transfer," 29.

The event could not overdo Leeser's legacy. Hackenburg accepted Leeser's library as a "tribute to one whom I knew from childhood and for whom as I advanced in years my affection ripened into a very close and loving friendship."[40] Hackenburg, noted above as one of the trustees of Leeser's estate, also prepared a short lecture. "This great man in Israel," stated Hackenburg about Leeser, "was known in his time and is perpetuated in Jewish history as an eminent Rabbi, educator, author, editor and publisher of Jewish books, founder of the Jewish Press of America and the first Minister of our faith in this country to preach in the vernacular."[41] Hackenburg rehearsed the highlights of Leeser's life, from his travails at Mikveh Israel to his polemics against Wise. In closing the program, Adler, who served as president of Dropsie at the time, triumphantly proclaimed that "the name of Isaac Leeser is secure."[42]

The Search for Leeser's Letters

Adler urged Sulzberger to write a biography of Leeser. Recall that Sulzberger had started to collect biographical information on Leeser and written to the latter's relatives in Europe not too long after Leeser's death. From time to time Sulzberger was called upon to lecture on Leeser, as he did in 1881 at the local Young Men's Hebrew Association.[43] However, Sulzberger never did find time in his busy schedule—he was among the founders of the Jewish Publication Society in 1888, helped reorganize the Jewish Theological Seminary around the turn of the century, and in 1895 was elected a judge on Philadelphia's Court of Common Pleas—to compose a book on Leeser.[44] By February 1904, Sulzberger regretted aloud that "no real memoir of him has ever been published, and that

40 Hackenburg, "Acceptance," 30.

41 Hackenburg, "Acceptance," 30.

42 Cyrus Adler, "Address of the President," *Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning Register* (1913), 41.

43 See, e.g., "Isaac Leeser," *American Hebrew* (2 June 1881): 28.

44 Note that the long-lasting Jewish Publication Society was founded in 1888 but some of its founders saw themselves as a continuation of Leeser's short-lived Jewish Publication Society, established in 1845. See Sarna, *JPS*, 1–4.

phase in the history of our people remains as yet uncleared."[45]

There was a silver lining. Sulzberger's interest in writing about Leeser brought into his possession a cache of letters that might otherwise have been lost. Sulzberger had reportedly obtained a "small gathering of Leeser letters from Ella Cozens," the granddaughter of Deliah Cozens, the seamstress who had leased a room to Leeser and handled some of the newspaper editor's business affairs.[46] The Cozens women had reportedly retained a significant portion of Leeser's correspondence and, over time, transferred them to Sulzberger for his research.[47] These were evidently not the very personal letters that Sulzberger and Hackenburg had destroyed upon Leeser's demise. They were very likely, as Hackenburg later put it, among the "large number of letters relating to public affairs which were preserved and have in several instances proven of valuable service."[48] The Cozens had retained these letters because at least a good portion were important for settling Leeser's business accounts, a task that Sulzberger left for Deliah Cozens and her daughter, Ellen.[49]

Sulzberger also reached out to the descendants of Leeser's contemporaries for letters. This circle of Leeser's peers included Reverend Abraham de Sola of Montreal. His son, Clarence de Sola, wrote to Sulzberger on 17 July 1917 to ask the Philadelphian to return a series of "correspondence between my late father and the Reverend Isaac Leeser."[50] Sulzberger sent the letters back to Clarence de Sola two days later without taking any time to make copies, an indication that he had given up on his Leeser project.[51] All in all, Sulzberger's most extensive treatment

45 "Judge Sulzberger on Isaac Leeser," *Jewish Exponent* (5 February 1904): 2.

46 Maxwell Whiteman, "A Preliminary Inquiry into the Disassembling of the Leeser Collection," Draft 7 April 1994, 19, Box 144, MSS SP-018, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

47 Whiteman, "A Preliminary Inquiry," 16.

48 Hackenburg, "Acceptance," 38.

49 Ellen Cozens to Mayer Sulzberger, 7 May 1868, Box 4, Folder 1, ARC MS-25, KCAJS.

50 Clarence I. De Sola to Mayer Sulzberger, 17 July 1917, Box 6, Folder 1, ARC MS-25, KCAJS.

51 Clarence I. De Sola to Mayer Sulzberger, 23 July 1917, Box 6, Folder 1, ARC MS-25, KCAJS.

of Leeser's life was an entry in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, published in 1904. In that essay, Sulzberger made use of his correspondence collection, quoting from a letter Leeser wrote to Rabbi Solomon Hirschell of London concerning Leeser's "own want of proper qualification" as a scholar.[52] It was, as far as I can tell, the first time that one of Leeser's private letters was quoted in a published work. Whether Sulzberger derived that correspondence from Ella Cozens or another source is altogether unknown. He did not state the provenance of the letter.

Why did Sulzberger not make a Leeser biography a greater priority? Perhaps he thought that others had adequately honored Leeser's legacy. In 1888, the journalist Isaac Markens provided Leeser with two pages in *The Hebrews in America*.[53] A few years later, Henry Morais, based on a series of well-received newspaper articles, produced a work titled *The Jews of Philadelphia* that included a section on Leeser.[54] Two decades later, Peter Wiernik published his *History of the Jews in America* and was likewise generous in his treatment of Leeser.[55] Sulzberger was possibly very pleased that some traditionalists had taken up the cause and delivered lectures on Leeser's battles on behalf of Orthodox Judaism. Perhaps Sulzberger was satisfied that others penned editorials that invoked Leeser in support of the traditional Jewish rabbinate.[56]

But Leeser's star started to fade at the end of Sulzberger's lifetime. This was apparent in a number of appraisals published on the fiftieth anniversary of Leeser's death. In Gotthard Deutsch's evaluation, Leeser was "so much inferior in philosophic and theological training," and someone, alleged this Reform leader, who "did not prognosticate

52 M. Su., "Leeser, Isaac," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 7:663.

53 Isaac Markens, *The Hebrews in America* (New York: Isaac Markens, 1888), 291–293.

54 Henry Samuel Morais, *The Jews of Philadelphia: Their History from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (Philadelphia: Levy Type Company, 1894), 45–48.

55 Peter Wiernik, *History of the Jews in America* (New York: Jewish Press, 1912), 171–172.

56 See, e.g., "Tekvah Zion Society," *Hebrew Standard* (27 November 1903): 4. On a defense of the Orthodox rabbinate, see Meldola de Sola, "Jewish Ministers," *Hebrew Standard* (December 23, 1904): 1; Meldola de Sola, "Jewish Ministers?" *Hebrew Standard* (21 April 1905): 2.

the future correctly."[57] His loyal Philadelphia disciples defended Leeser against these charges that he was an "ignoramus" and incapable of reading Hebrew.[58] The claims of illiteracy were puerile, but the questions about Leeser's theological training had some substance, especially when compared to well-trained religious reformers such as Max Lilienthal and David Einhorn.[59] In a measured rebuttal, Sulzberger admitted that "there may have been greater Talmudists, there may have been more eloquent orators and more graceful writers; but no greater genius, no better Jew and no purer man than Isaac Leeser."[60]

Few other traditionalists beyond Philadelphia came to Leeser's defense. One reason for this is that most Orthodox Jews at the turn of the twentieth century hailed from Eastern Europe and not Germany, where Leeser was from. They therefore did not pay much mind to Leeser's legacy. A Reform rabbi speaking at the annual meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis mused that it was "rather strange" that Leeser, a "foremost pioneer leader of orthodox Judaism in America should have been overlooked by those who champion the very same construction of Judaism."[61] Rabbi Henry Englander continued about Leeser: "His memory certainly deserved a better fate from those who are earnestly striving to perpetuate traditional Judaism in this land."[62] In his published paper, Englander included more than two hundred citations, almost all from Leeser's *Occident*. His conclusion, after dissecting Leeser's activities and positions, was that, had his subject been in favor of the "cause of reform," then "his name would undoubtedly have been linked to-day with the great pioneer reformers as one of the most practical and energetic workers in the cause of Israel in this country."[63]

57 "Isaac Leeser," *American Israelite* (31 January 1918): 1.

58 Solomon Solis Cohen, "Isaac Leeser's Scholarship," *Jewish Exponent* (2 June 1922): 8.

59 On these university-trained rabbis, see Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 244–263.

60 Mayer Sulzberger, "Isaac Leeser: An Appreciation," *Jewish Exponent* (8 February 1918): 9.

61 Henry Englander, "Isaac Leeser, 1806–1868," *CCAR Year Book* 28 (1918): 213.

62 Englander, "Isaac Leeser," 213.

63 Englander, "Isaac Leeser," 252.

Englander surmised that Leeser had been more or less forgotten because he was a vocal champion of Orthodox Judaism.

In New York, the tradition-abiding Jewish press reproduced Englander's essay without further elaboration.[64] Yet it upset the Philadelphia Group, but not because the Reform rabbi had misconstrued the facts. Sulzberger's friend, Solomon Solis-Cohen, asked a young researcher, Solomon Grayzel, to assess Englander's research, and the latter reported back that the article was, on the whole, fair, and that, particularly beyond Philadelphia, "Leeser's influence was not as strong as it might have been."[65] Just weeks before Englander's presentation, Solis-Cohen had spoken at the commencement ceremonies of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York about the rabbinical school's "past and future." He credited Leeser as the first who "prepared the way [for] those who founded and continued the Seminary."[66] That was apparently sufficient, as he decided not to issue a formal response to Englander's low assessment of Leeser's impact on American Jewish life.

Losing Leeser in the American Jewish Past

Sulzberger passed away in April 1923. His demise signaled an inflection point for Leeser's disciples. Shortly after Sulzberger's death, Solis-Cohen spoke about his late friend at Dropsie College's Founder's Day program. He reflected on the "remarkable succession of leaders in Judaism" that he described as the "Philadelphia Group." He explained that "there are brilliant names in this dynasty of light and learning—Isaac Leeser, Sabato Morais, Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler. It has existed for more than a century, extending into the present academic year of Dropsie College. To think of Jewish educational activities local and national, is to call its roll."[67] The editor Philip Cowen, whose closest friends had

64 "Isaac Leeser and Isaac M. Wise," *Hebrew Standard* (7 March 1919): 1–2.

65 "Grayzel's Comments on 'Isaac Leeser' by Henry Englander," undated, Box 8, Folder 21, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.

66 Solomon Solis-Cohen, *The Jewish Theological Seminary: Past and Future* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1919), 39.

67 Solomon Solis-Cohen, *Judaism and Science, with Other Addresses and Papers* (Philadelphia: self-published, 1940), 246.

been raised in Leeser's circle, was likewise convinced of the importance of this group and suggested that a "whole book could be written about Philadelphia, that staunchly Jewish city."[68]

Adler was still focused on a book about Leeser. He therefore prevailed on at least one other member of Philadelphia's Jewish aristocrats to produce a biography. In 1930, Adler convinced Emily Solis-Cohen, Solomon Solis-Cohen's daughter, to write a Leeser biography. Born in 1886, she had never met Leeser but had learned about him from her father and the other Leeser acolytes of Philadelphia. She was a gifted poet and writer. She never married and, in keeping with her family's tradition, remained very active in Jewish communal affairs.

In 1930, Emily Solis-Cohen agreed to write a book on Leeser for the Jewish Publication Society (JPS).[69] She saw it as an opportunity to capture, through Leeser, an epoch in her family's history that few people still recalled. Based in Philadelphia, JPS was one of the few organizations that still recalled Leeser as part of its institutional memory. Leeser founded a short-lived incarnation of JPS in 1845.[70] In 1888, Sulzberger and Adler ranked among the founders of its new, long-lasting iteration and claimed, however much a stretch, Leeser's "false start" as part of its origin. JPS's other leaders therefore welcomed Adler's invitation to Emily Solis-Cohen. While she was aware of the bountiful material captured in the pages of Leeser's newspaper and many books, she was made aware of and had particular interest in using the many Leeser-related letters accumulated by Sulzberger. Sulzberger had transferred hundreds of Leeser letters to Dropsie College, which also hosted the Leeser Library.

On 11 July 1930, President Adler informed Dropsie's librarian, Joseph Reider, that "Miss Emily Solis-Cohen would like to examine a manuscript in printed materials with regard to Isaac Leeser with a view, at my suggestion to her, to prepare a biographical sketch of Isaac Leeser." Adler instructed Reider to fetch a "large box in the vault of Leeser's papers which have never been examined." Preserved in this way, the

68 Philip Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew* (New York: International, 1932), 421.

69 Sarna, *JPS*, 190–191.

70 See, e.g., Ephraim Lederer, "The Jewish Publication Society of America—Its Origin and Growth," *Jewish Exponent* (11 April 1913): 9.

Leeser letters were likely spared from the mismanagement and disorder that struck other archival collections at Dropsie.[71] Adler provided her with near-carte blanche access to the untapped correspondence. "If she wants to put them in order," Adler wrote to Reider, "I think that the best place for her to do so would be in the north basement, which is cool; or maybe in one of the unoccupied rooms upstairs."[72]

Emily Solis-Cohen worked fastidiously and with the considerable support of her doting father, one of the few remaining Leeser students and members of the Philadelphia Group. She reproduced copies of hundreds of pieces of Leeser correspondence and other useful archival materials such as synagogue board minutes and bylaws of Philadelphia agencies. To do this, she commissioned translations of materials written in Hebrew and German.[73] She busied her father's medical office assistant with the task of transcribing the original texts and successfully beseeched Adler to permit her to remove the archival materials from Dropsie College. She wrote to Adler: "Until Miss Jamison goes on her vacation, father has placed her services at my disposal on the days that he does not come to the office. I should like your permission, therefore, to bring some of the Leeser letters etc., here in order to have some typing done. We shall both be very careful of them."[74]

Emily Solis-Cohen desired to add to Dropsie's collection of Leeser's correspondence. She placed an advertisement in Philadelphia's Jewish press asking the whereabouts of additional Leeser letters. "I shall appreciate any information your readers have relative to Mr. Leeser's works," she explained to a local newspaper publisher. "Any original letters or papers

71 For a brief description of the poor archival preservation at Dropsie, see Moshe Davis, "Sabato Morais: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography of His Writings," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1947): 60.

72 Cyrus Adler to Joseph Reider, 11 July 1930, Box 5, Folder 16, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.

73 Emily Solis-Cohen to Cyrus Adler, 14 July 1932, Box 8, Folder 22 ARC MS-18, KCAJS; Solomon Grayzel Hebrew-to-English renderings in Box 7, Folder 19, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.

74 Emily Solis-Cohen to Cyrus Adler, 14 July 1932, Box 8, Folder 22, ARC MS-18, KCAJS. For Adler's reluctantly agreeable response, see Cyrus Adler to Emily Solis-Cohen, 15 July 1932, Box 8, Folder 22, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.

sent me will be copied and returned."[75] Like Sulzberger before her, she wrote to the children of Leeser's contemporaries for papers.[76] She also commissioned the American Jewish Historical Society in New York to transcribe and (when authored in a non-English language) translate correspondence related to Leeser in its repositories.[77]

In the end, however, Emily Solis-Cohen struggled to synthesize the vast primary material she had accumulated about Leeser. She endured starts and stops for two different Leeser manuscripts; one she titled "Leeser: American Beginner" and another "Isaac Leeser: The Man and His Destiny." In December 1939, the JPS publication committee reported that she had completed a rough draft and that "if the manuscript met the approval of our readers, it could be scheduled as the first book for 1941."[78] But when the committee met in 1941, the group learned that her work was not ready for production. She had only recently "delivered part of her manuscript on the Biography of Isaac Leeser and that this section would be submitted to readers." No timetable was offered for an expected publication date.[79] Two years later, there was not much optimism shared among the committee members:

> The Editor and Executive Director have had several meetings with Miss Solis-Cohen and informed her that her manuscript must be completed in 1944, so that it may be published in 1945. The one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the first American Jewish Publication Society will fall in 1945 and, since this Society was organized by Isaac Leeser, it is essential that the biography appear in 1945.[80]

75 Emily Solis-Cohen, Jr., "Isaac Leeser Data Desired," *Jewish Exponent* (4 March 1932): 10.
76 See, e.g., Emily Solis-Cohen to Rienzi de Cordova, 13 August 1934, Box 6, Folder 2, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.
77 Isidore S. Meyer to Emily Solis-Cohen, 9 April 1941, Box 6, Folder 2, ARC MS-18, KCAJS.
78 Minutes of the Publication Committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, 11 December 1939, Box 132, Folder 5, SCRC-38, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
79 Minutes of the Publication Committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, 11 May 1941, Box 132, Folder 6, SCRC-38.
80 Report of the Publication Committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1 May 1943, Box 132, Folder 6, SCRC-38.

Emily Solis-Cohen never published the biography. In fact, very few people wrote about Leeser during the interwar period. If authors wrote about him at all, he was cast as a sidelight or foil in American Jewish history. The American Jewish Historical Society and its patrons considered themselves antiquarians and preferred to focus on the Colonial Era.[81] Writers interested in Leeser's nineteenth century were piqued by the religious leaders who prospered in the period, but the lion's share zeroed in on Reform Jews. For instance, Lee Levinger, author of a popular children's book commissioned by the Department of Synagogue and School Extensions of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, devoted a few pages to Leeser in order to provide context for the much more extensive discussion on Wise and Reform Judaism.[82] Leeser did not provide the usable past that animated those eager to explore the yellowed pages of American Jewish history.

Rediscovering Isaac Leeser

In December 1940, the historian Moshe Davis published a pair of articles on Leeser in the American Hebrew press declaring that Leeser "had raised the flag of Conservatism for American Judaism."[83] Leeser, of course, described himself as an Orthodox Jew. Yet it was altogether clear that the synagogue-focused German-style Orthodox Judaism that Leeser professed did not match the Eastern European Orthodox (i.e., yeshiva/day school-focused) folkway that had supplanted it in the twentieth century. For most of his career, Leeser led a Spanish-Portuguese congregation that prayed in the Sephardic rite. His interests in Judaica were vast, and he wrote long essays on the Bible and Jewish philosophy. The Eastern European Orthodox Jews, by contrast, were focused on the Talmud. To these newcomers,

81 Jeffrey S. Gurock, "From *Publications* to *American Jewish History*: The *Journal of the American Jewish Historical Society* and the Writing of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (Winter 1993–1994): 174.

82 Lee J. Levinger, *A History of the Jews in the United States* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1930), 219–223.

83 Moshe Davis, "R' Yitzhak Leeser: Ma-Roshei-ha-Bonim shel Yahadut America," *Hadoar* 20 (December 1940): 119. The earlier installment appeared under the same title in *Hadoar* 13 (December 1940): 100–102.

Leeser was much too eclectic, even modern. Davis therefore argued that Leeser was more aligned with his brand of Conservative Judaism. Once again, Leeser represented a usable past for American Jews, at least for those associated with the Conservative movement.[84]

Davis was determined to leverage Leeser. A decade later, in a Hebrew monograph, Davis drew a straight line between Leeser and Solomon Schechter, perhaps the most pivotal figure in the formation of Conservative Judaism in the twentieth century.[85] To make a claim for greater authenticity, Davis—in yet another book, one based on the earlier Hebrew volume—described Leeser, although not without eliciting criticism, as the "first spokesman of the Historical School," a group that the historian traced to the nineteenth century, and that in due time evolved into the Conservative movement.[86] Davis's work elicited much conversation, a signal to historians at that time that he had successfully and provocatively, through Leeser and others, made American Jewish history "meaningful," "relevant," and "timely."[87] With somewhat more subtlety, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative movement's flagship, produced, in conjunction with NBC, a dramatic radio broadcast about Leeser for its popular *Eternal Light* series. The short radio episode presented Leeser and the organizations he founded as precursors to the seminary and its myriad partner Conservative institutions.[88]

84 Michael R. Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 153–154.

85 Moshe Davis, *Yahadut America Be-Hitpathutah* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), xxi.

86 Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: The Historical School in 19th Century America* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), 19. On criticism of Davis's argument, see Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in Nineteenth Century America," *Tradition* 6 (Spring–Summer 1964): 132–140.

87 Jonathan D. Sarna, "*Achavah* and History: Reflections on the Historical Emphasis of Moshe Davis," in *America and Zion: Essays and Papers in Memory of Moshe Davis* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 26.

88 Joseph Mindel, "Portrait of a Man," *Eternal Light* 678 (6 November 1960): 11–12. On the radio series, see Jeffrey Shandler and Elihu Katz, "Broadcasting American Judaism: The Radio and Television Department of the Jewish Theological Seminary,"

Others also rediscovered Leeser in the postwar era. The historian Hyman Grinstein cited Leeser's published works and articles throughout his 1945 tome on New York's Jews in the 1800s.[89] Three years later, Anita Lebeson published a popular work on American Jewish history and devoted large sections of chapters on "An Age of Titans and Anonymous Men" (to her, Leeser was a "Titan") and on the battles between Reform (Wise) and the Orthodox (Leeser) to Leeser.[90] In 1954, Lebeson, in commemoration of the American Jewish tercentenary, included a slide of Leeser in a filmstrip of thirty-six images and captions that told the story of American Jewish life since the first group had arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654.[91] However, none of these writers, including Davis, made Leeser the focal point of their research.

The most pivotal (and complicated) figure in the reemergence of Leeser was a book dealer, Maxwell Whiteman. Whiteman was the twelfth child of an immigrant Orthodox rabbi who, like many other Eastern European emigrés, settled in Philadelphia's Northern Liberties neighborhood. Like Leeser, Whiteman was short and boasted few professional credentials. He dropped out of Temple University because his impoverished parents could not pay his bills, and he did not see the point in working to cover his tuition.[92] Whiteman, now a college dropout, spent much of his time in the secondhand bookstores in South Philadelphia. He had found blue-collar work at a leather factory but quit within a year, as he could not handle the rigid hours of labor. Instead,

---

in *Tradition Renewed: A History of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997), 2:365–401.

89 See citations in Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654–1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), 629.

90 Anita Libman Lebeson, *Pilgrim People* (New York: Harper, 1950), 296–333 and 334–375.

91 Anita Libman Lebeson, "The Jews in America: A Filmstrip, Part II" (New York: Jewish Education Committee of New York, 1954). On the 300th anniversary of American Jewish life, see Arthur A. Goren, "A 'Golden Decade' for American Jews: 1945–1955," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 8 (1992): 3–20.

92 Jim Sanford, "An Interview with Maxwell Whiteman," 13 December 1994, 6, Box 121, MSS SP-018, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

he spent his time around books. His favorite spot was Leary's Books on Ninth and Chestnut. He divided his time between reading and discussing the book business with the close-knit circle of men who plied and peddled rare and interesting books and manuscripts. He also made time to meet Elizabeth Delano; the pair married in the mid-1930s.[93]

The Philadelphia secondhand book scene was unique. Particularly before World War II, Philadelphia was full of old buildings. "Philadelphia was expanding," Whiteman once explained, "but it wasn't constantly being rebuilt. So that many of the older establishments in the original parts of the city were able to produce an unbelievable volume of books, paper, and manuscripts." Many old buildings in downtown Philadelphia had housed the residences and offices of noted families during the Colonial Era and Early Republic. The most entrepreneurial individuals in the local book buying scene, Whiteman among them, explored these sites and made deals with the present occupants for caches of documents hidden in cabinets and other rather innocuous places. When there was no one available to make a purchase, Philadelphia's bookdealers made their own judgments on whether a trove was free for the taking.[94]

Whiteman kept eclectic company. He testified that some of his colleagues and business partners had gone to jail for transacting with counterfeit goods.[95] Yet he also counted some of the most elite collectors among his acquaintances, a status he acquired from his wife, Elizabeth, the daughter of a prominent New England family.[96] One such individual was Edwin Wolf II, a book collector who traced his own bibliophilism to his father's friendship with Sulzberger.[97] The elder Wolf was a "life-

93 Ron Avery, "Maxwell Whiteman, Historian," *Philadelphia Daily News* (13 May 1995): 20.

94 Avery, "Maxwell Whiteman," 19. See also Jeffrey A. Cohen, "Evidence of Place: Resources Documenting the Philadelphia Area's Architectural Past," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 124 (January–April 2000): 145–201.

95 Sanford, "Interview," 12.

96 Elizabeth Delano Whiteman was not Jewish. Whiteman's marriage to Elizabeth, during a time when intermarriage was a rare thing in American Jewish life, alienated Whiteman from much of Philadelphia's Jewish establishment. My thanks to Jonathan Sarna for pointing this out.

97 Edwin Wolf, "From Edwin Wolf," *Jewish Exponent* (27 April 1923): 9.

long member of Rodeph Shalom," Philadelphia's leading Reform congregation, and was therefore a degree or so removed from the other Philadelphia Jewish leaders who had gravitated around the tradition-affirming Mikveh Israel. Still, Wolf was a respected member of that group and a major figure within the leadership of Dropsie College (he spoke at the 1913 Founder's Day event at which the Leeser Library was transferred to Dropsie) and the Jewish Publication Society.[98] Edwin Wolf II held an affinity for the Philadelphia Jewish aristocrats, among them his first employer, the rare book dealer A. S. W. Rosenbach. Before he met Wolf, Whiteman had traveled with dealers who liked to voice their "scorn for Philadelphia's high-end antiquarian booksellers" and swap stories about "treasures snatched at flea markets, of first editions rescued from junk bins, of snooty, upper-crust booksellers bearded in their dens."[99] Now Whiteman maintained a foothold in both, very different social circles.

Edwin Wolf II befriended Whiteman in the 1940s and brought the latter into close contact with the most affluent Philadelphia families such as the Wideners, the Elkins, and the Stetsons.[100] In return, Wolf asked Whiteman to help him write a series of newspaper columns on Philadelphia Jewish history.[101] For each installment, Whiteman "prepared copy consisting of six to eight pages," and Wolf "reviewed them, catching grammatical slips and punctuation and occasionally introducing a clever twist of phrase."[102] Whiteman and Wolf issued effusive praise of Leeser in their final installment, published in the pages of the *Jewish Exponent*:

98 "Edwin Wolf," *Jewish Exponent* (21 December 1934): 4.

99 The quotation concerns Sam Kleiman, one of Whiteman's mentors. See Gregory Gibson, *Hubert's Freaks: The Rare-Book Dealer, the Times Square Talker, and the Lost Photos of Diane Arbus* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), 35.

100 Edwin Wolf II and John F. Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography* (Cleveland: World, 1960), 62–63.

101 Edwin Wolf II, *An Autobiographical Sketch* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1991), 15. See also Sanford, "Interview," 26–27.

102 Maxwell Whiteman, *Edwin Wolf 2nd and History of the Jews of Philadelphia: A Riposte* (Hatboro: Amber Beattle, 1992), 6. Whiteman produced this slim, eight-page pamphlet to respond to what he perceived as slights by Wolf to him in the former's autobiography.

> With his coming, a new era opened for the Jews of Philadelphia. Leeser emerged as not only the leading Jew of the city, but of the whole country. The years of American Jewish history from 1830 until the close of the Civil War are, in fact, the "Age of Leeser." He wrote schoolbooks for children, prayer-books for his congregants, an English translation of the Bible, and treatises on Judaism. He published the most influential and most widely-read Jewish periodical, the first really national Jewish magazine, in the United States: the *Occident*. He worked to promote Jewish education on all levels, from a Hebrew Sunday School Society to Maimonides College, the first American Jewish theological seminary. He fostered a plan to unite all the Jewish congregations in the country into a single national body. He stimulated and guided new philanthropic institutions in Philadelphia, the Hebrew Education Society, the Jewish Hospital, and the first Jewish Publication Society. And he was the effective and tireless defender of traditional Judaism against the incursions of the new spirit of liberalism, as well as of all Jews against invasions of their rights at home and persecutions abroad. In brief, a formless, drifting, haphazardly growing American Jewish community was given leadership and direction and substance by Isaac Leeser.[103]

Whiteman's work caught the interest of Jacob Rader Marcus, the founder of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Marcus's interest surprised Whiteman, since Korn had initially discouraged the Whiteman and Wolf project on the grounds that "the period was carefully covered by Dr. Jacob R. Marcus in *Early American Jewry*, which had just appeared."[104] Yet Marcus recognized Whiteman's facility in accessing rare newspapers and manuscripts and ability to further the literature pioneered by Marcus.[105] Whiteman moved to Cincinnati to

---

103 Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, "The History of the Jews of Philadelphia: A Period Ends," *Jewish Exponent* (8 July 1955): 17. Republished in Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 372–373.

104 Whiteman, *Edwin Wolf 2nd*, 5.

105 It is unknown if Marcus believed Whiteman's claim that he had "read the entire colonial Philadelphia press, both German and English and had extracted every Jewish reference including many of the numerous advertisements from shopkeepers to socialites, and the ephemeral wanderers of the day." See Whiteman, *Edwin Wolf 2nd*, 4.

serve as Marcus's assistant. Marcus found value in Whiteman's facility with German texts and thought it was a rather good thing that "Mr. Whiteman has been identified intimately with the antiquarian book trade."[106] Marcus tasked Whiteman with editing the AJA's journal and dispatched him to acquire or make copies of materials to add to its growing repository. One of Whiteman's first projects was to return to Philadelphia and visit Dropsie College's collection of Leeser letters that Emily Solis-Cohen had examined.[107] Whiteman also made time to work with Edwin Wolf II to turn their serialized articles into a book on Colonial Jewish life in Philadelphia. Marcus graciously described the volume as "one of the very best" in the field. Certainly, opined Marcus, the "best history yet written of Jews in any American city."[108]

Whiteman developed an affinity for Leeser, a veritable "underdog" in American Jewish life. That point of view resonated with Whiteman, who constantly felt underappreciated as one of a small number of productive scholars in the nascent field of American Jewish history. In Cincinnati, he felt overshadowed by Marcus. Despite his articles and books in American Jewish history, Whiteman still struggled for recognition among better-trained scholars such as Davis, and Grinstein, and Salo Baron.[109] Unlike those historians, as well as his boss (Marcus), Whiteman lacked a doctorate.[110] For Whiteman and Marcus, the consternation festered into a shared "mutual dissatisfaction with one another."[111] Marcus fired Whiteman from the American Jewish Archives in 1959.

---

106 "Archives Appoints Maxwell Whiteman Aide to Director," *American Israelite* (13 October 1955): 7.

107 Whiteman, "Preliminary Inquiry," 43.

108 Jacob R. Marcus, "Leading American Jewish Historian Says Wolf-Whiteman Book 'Best' City History," *Jewish Exponent* (22 March 1957): 15.

109 Gurock, "From *Publications* to *American Jewish History*," 228–230.

110 Many years later, Whiteman revealed his discomfort, especially since none of these learned men had any formal training in American Jewish history: "Those with all their Ph.D.s and all their experience in history and so on—I learned that most of them who might have a lot of experience of Jewish history have damned little knowledge of American history, and certainly the combination and amalgamation of both are essential." See Sanford, "Interview," 26.

111 Whiteman, "Preliminary Inquiry," 45.

Whiteman returned to Philadelphia and the "old book trade."[112] He also continued his research on Leeser and plumbed the Dropsie College library for the Leeser letters with which he had become familiar during his work for Marcus. In February 1959, Whiteman shared his research at the American Jewish Historical Society's annual meeting and published a longer version of that talk in the society's journal.[113] Whiteman's painstaking article included 223 footnotes to make the claim that Leeser, through his own efforts and tutelage of the Philadelphia Group, "projected most of the basic ideas to which present communal life owes its spiritual origin."[114] The emphasis on Leeser's role in furthering all sectors of Jewish life in the United States went far beyond Davis's assertions about the Conservative movement. Soon after, Dropsie College hired Whiteman to serve as librarian, a part-time position meant to provide stable income and enable him to diversify his other, more frenetic work.[115]

In that role, Whiteman assumed the mantle of custodian of the American Jewish past, going so far as to police, in private correspondence, how Marcus and the American Jewish Archives used the Leeser letters and other materials copied from Dropsie College.[116] To the public, Whiteman touted the Leeser letters to sound the alarm on the importance of preserving American Jewish history. "The Leeser collection documents every endeavor to establish a center of Jewish life," wrote Whiteman in the Philadelphia Jewish press. To those who recalled the speeches delivered by the Philadelphia Group, this was standard fare. But to many others, it was a rather new thing that Leeser was one of the major figures of American Jewish history. Whiteman testified to the usefulness of the Dropsie collection for studying all areas of American life, "ranging

112 Whiteman, "Preliminary Inquiry," 47.

113 Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia: A Study in National Jewish Influence," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 48 (June 1959): 207–244.

114 Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser and the Jews of Philadelphia," 207.

115 "140 Students Expected for New Dropsie Term," *Jewish Exponent* (18 September 1959): 15.

116 Maxwell Whiteman to Jacob R. Marcus, 21 September 1962, MS-687, Box 96, Folder 2, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

from the New England states to the deep plantation South, from the urban communities of the Atlantic seaboard to the passes of the Sierra Madres."[117] In other words, Leeser's letters and legacy were ubiquitous, perhaps even grander than erstwhile figures such as Wise and Gratz. That Whiteman desired to become Leeser's pied piper is understandable, as his personal predicament drew him to Leeser. "Isaac Leeser," announced Whiteman at an annual meeting of the Jewish Publication Society, "envisioned books as the gateway to Jewish life." Whiteman saw in Leeser a like-minded, indefatigable spirit. "Occasionally his efforts met with success and frequently they were blocked by apathy and indifference."[118] That evaluation applied to both Leeser and Whiteman.

The Leeser Letter Diaspora

Whiteman also lamented that much had been lost. He expressed dismay that Dropsie's American Judaica collections ought to have been much larger. To local Jewish leaders, Whiteman confessed that "irreplaceable records of the community had been lost or destroyed for lack of adequate means of preserving them."[119] He described the "great tragedy" of archival amateurism and the "junking" of materials that had "dumped" historical artifacts into the secondhand marketplace. In his recounting of the situation, Whiteman traced the archival malfeasance at Dropsie College to the 1950s:

> At that time the presidential secretary, eager to clean out the boiler room of cartons of paper that were considered a fire hazard, sent the following materials to the nearest junk shop: a portrait in oil of Sabato Morais; a folio scrapbook of Morais; a complete collection of the pamphlet and circular literature of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel, including much material on Rebecca Gratz; approximately 160 letters of Cyrus Adler and a similar number of Judge Mayer Sulzberger, the grand bibliophile;

117 Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser's Letters," 17.

118 Maxwell Whiteman, "Isaac Leeser: Moulder of American Jewish Life," *JPS Bookmark* 3 (June 1956): 4.

119 "Whiteman Calls for Preservation of Historic Data on Jewish Life," *Jewish Exponent* (27 October 1961): 3.

AJA Hanukkah party attendees: Etheljane Callner (front); Sarah Grossman (left); Jeanette Weiss (middle); and Maxwell Whiteman (right); 13 Dec. 1955.
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

> and seven known genizah fragments, including the Unique Egyptian Haggadah…. The most unfortunate outcome of this blind divestiture was the dispersal of letters of Isaac Leeser.[120]

Dropsie's head man told the full tale a different way. In 1951, President Abraham Neuman wrote to Whiteman about a stash of correspondence and books that had come into the latter's possession "through one or more book dealers." Whiteman claimed that Meyer Furman, the dealer who had sold him the papers "introduced me to Isaac Leeser

120 Maxwell Whiteman, "The Association of Jewish Libraries in its Cultural Milieu," *Judaica Librarianship* 5 (Spring 1990): 151.

of whom [Furman] knew nothing and I perhaps less."[121] Neuman ascertained that the documents were sold by Dropsie's janitor to a junk dealer and requested that Whiteman return the materials to him for full reimbursement of his purchase.[122] Whiteman promptly restored the materials, a gesture of trustworthiness that was part of the reason Neuman later hired him to work in Dropsie's library.

However, Whiteman did not last all that long in the role. By his own admission, Whiteman lacked "political savvy."[123] This was yet another quality that Whiteman shared with Leeser. According to Neuman, Whiteman was "given to violent displays of temper, foul language, [and] creating intolerable scenes." Neuman fired Whiteman principally for overstepping his professional jurisdiction. Later on, Neuman alleged that Whiteman had used his access to Dropsie's files for his own gain. "The janitor," recorded Neuman, "told me of many instances when he was directed by Whiteman to take out packages of library books to one or more persons who were waiting outside close to the building in cars." Whatever the case, Dropsie and Whiteman parted ways, and the College issued Whiteman an ironclad release from legal action "in connection with or growing out of his employment as Librarian."[124]

Ironically, Neuman replaced Whiteman with Rabbi Saul Wisemon.[125] Two decades later, Wisemon was arrested for stealing from Lutheran Theological Seminary in a Philadelphia suburb. Policed seized a cache of thirty thousand books, microfilms, and Torah scrolls in a warehouse Wisemon rented in Vineland, New Jersey. The district attorney alleged that Wisemon's "love for Torah and books" became pathological, leading

121 Whiteman, "Preliminary Inquiry," 38.

122 Abraham A. Neuman to Maxwell Whiteman, 30 November 1951, in "Motion of Defendant Maxwell Whiteman for Summary Judgment: Appendix," 13 November 1992, Box 144, MSS SP-018, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

123 Whiteman, "Preliminary Inquiry," 55.

124 "Letter of Release," 30 June 1965, in "Motion of Defendant Maxwell Whiteman for Summary Judgment: Appendix," 13 November 1992, Box 144, MSS SP-018, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

125 "Rabbi Wiseman [*sic*] Named Librarian at Dropsie," *Jewish Exponent* (3 September 1965): 6.

to a crime spree of book heists at Dropsie College and Brandeis University, as well as "synagogues and libraries along the East Coast."[126] Dropsie recovered missing books from Wisemon. The college never retrieved rare materials from Whiteman, who quickly reformed his reputation as a librarian and archivist for the Union League of Philadelphia. The league appreciated Whiteman's work to "bring [its] material together," "restore fragile, dust-laden documents," and "catalog[ue] them."[127] No one has ever accused Whiteman of wrongdoing in his work for the Union League.

In 1992, Dropsie, rebranded as the Annenberg Research Institute, served Whiteman with an action of replevin. The school, poised to become part of the University of Pennsylvania, possessed a formidable library, numbering 180,000 volumes, 6,000 precious books, and 250 Judaica manuscripts by the time it was acquired by the University of Pennsylvania in 1992.[128] The Annenberg Research Institute's leaders believed that the library would have been larger, if not for Whiteman. Its holdings included about 1,300 correspondences to and from Leeser while another 800–1,200 Leeser letters remained on the open market, in the possession of dealers and collectors in the burgeoning American Judaica market.[129] The institute sued Whiteman in hopes of reclaiming some of that collection. However, the Philadelphia County Court of

126 Lawrence Harmon, "Police Arrest 'Fugitive' Rabbi in Fall River," *Jewish Advocate* (9 June 1983): 1; Marie H. Orodenker, "The Rabbi Spends Yom Kippur in Jail," *Jewish Post and Opinion* (5 October 1983): 6; "A Yom Kippur Tale," *Philadelphia Daily News* (20 September 1983): 13.

127 Maxwell Whiteman, *Pieces of Paper: Gateway to the Past* (Philadelphia: Union League of Philadelphia, 1967), 5.

128 Craig R. McCoy, "Annenberg Institute, Courted from Abroad, Will Stay in Phila.," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (29 October 1992): B3.

129 E-mail correspondence from Arthur Kiron to the author, 28 June 2023. The curious manner in which Leeser's letters entered the marketplace has created unceasing interest in his rare publications and correspondence, among other Leeser memorabilia. In February 2009, Sotheby's auction house sold Leeser's gold-topped, ebony walking stick for $37,500. The notice of sale piqued the curiosities of at least one scholar of American Judaism, who wondered aloud about the "hefty price" for an "odd bit" of American Jewish history. See Jenna Weissman Joselit, "Walk Softly, Carry a Big ($37,500) Stick," *Forward* (13 February 2009): 10.

Common Pleas dismissed the suit because of the formal release Dropsie had issued to Whiteman that made him, in the court's judgment, immune from all legal action.

After Whiteman, Leeser had become a central figure in American Jewish history. Korn and then Sussman followed Whiteman in producing scholarship on Leeser, although without the benefit of the primary materials that Whiteman had at his disposal.[130] A poll of American Jewish historians in 1988 voted Leeser and Wise the "greatest" Jewish leaders of the nineteenth century.[131] In 2022, the American Jewish Historical Society's journal, *American Jewish History*, devoted an entire issue to Leeser. The journal's editors had not planned to arrange the issue around him, however. "But in fact, Leeser's overarching presence in this issue is a happy accident," they explained. The next sentence betokens just how far Leeser had come: "It's also indicative of his unabated relevance for historians of American Jewish religion and culture."[132] The Leeser letters have also been restored. In 2013, the University of Pennsylvania launched the Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository, under the leadership of Arthur Kiron.[133] To date, the digital archive possesses 2,092 entries.[134] Kiron, a librarian and curator at University of Pennsylvania, and a scholar of nineteenth-century Jewish Philadelphia, and his staff partnered with other libraries and collectors, most notably Arnold Kaplan, to restore the Dropsie collection, perhaps to the level that Emily Solis-Cohen had first encountered it when Adler directed his librarian to open the "large box in the vault of Leeser's papers" for her research back in 1930.

130 On post-Whiteman writing on Leeser, see Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*, 246–247. For one of the lesser-known pieces by Korn that focuses on Leeser, see Bertram Wallace Korn, "Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh bi-Zeh," *Jewish Exponent* (12 March 1976): A5.

131 Benny Kraut, "American Jewish Leaders: The Great, Greater, and Greatest," *American Jewish History* 78 (December 1988): 201–236.

132 "A Note from the Editors," *American Jewish History* 106 (July 2022): vii.

133 Adam Mendelsohn, "Website Review," *Southern Jewish History* 17 (2014): 225–228.

134 Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository, Penn Libraries, http://leeser.library.upenn.edu/.

A Postscript

In 1983, Max Whiteman authored a final article on Leeser. He wrote that Leeser's "personal world was lonely, a mere handful of the laity supported him, and the clergy was unable to keep pace."[135] Whiteman died of a heart attack in May 1995 at the age of eighty-one. He had told a few friends that he was working on a biography of Leeser, which explains why he refused to provide Sussman with access to his personal collection of Leeser letters.[136] In his deposition, Whiteman claimed that he received letters from Emily Solis-Cohen, which would have derived from the Dropsie collection.

Upon his death, Whiteman was remembered less charitably than Leeser. One memoirist wrote that he was a "cantankerous chain-smoking, grudge-holding bantamweight who would fight for a principle until hell froze over." That same writer also noted that Whiteman was "among the nation's foremost scholars of early American Jewry. He was an expert on books and publishing, and was fluent in several languages."[137] His paper delivered before the American Jewish Historical Society was a watershed article on Leeser, and other essays by him popularized the work of the Philadelphia Group.[138] Another eulogist missed an opportunity to compare Whiteman and his favorite historical subject. "During his lifetime as the historian of the Jewish community of Philadelphia," wrote Murray Friedman, "he received little recognition. In part, this was due to his crusty personality."[139] Friedman addressed Whiteman's lack of academic degrees and alluded to his frustrations with employers. By comparison, Leeser was an unordained Jewish minister, an autodidact, who resented the overbearing oversight of Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel's trustees and was eventually fired by the lay leaders for

135 Maxwell Whiteman, "The Legacy of Isaac Leeser," in *Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830–1940*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1983), 47.

136 Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Judaism*, 295.

137 Avery, "Maxwell Whiteman," 20.

138 Jonathan D. Sarna, "Alternative to New York," *Commentary* 78 (October 1984): 74–76.

139 Murray Friedman, "Giant in Local Jewish History: Max Whiteman, in Memoriam," *Jewish Exponent* (9 June 1995): 27.

repudiating their authority over the synagogue. Despite a record of community organizing and public writing, Leeser suffered indignities and unfair insults hurled at him by Wise and other rabbinic elites.[140]

There are elements of memory-making and psychoanalysis in Whiteman's sad story. He never confessed to robbing Dropsie College, and it would be a case of conjecture to suppose that all the personal and professional parallels between Leeser and Whiteman somehow motivated the latter to steal Leeser's letters. This whole ordeal is not without peculiar precedents. In some respects, the Whiteman case mirrors the tragic life of Zosa Szajkowski, a Jewish historian who rescued Judaica from Nazi-occupied Europe. As the scholar Lisa Leff wrote, Szajkowski, underappreciated and underfunded, lost his way and stole documents from American repositories until he was caught at the New York Public Library.[141] I will leave it to other, better trained psychologists to pontificate on Whiteman's motives.[142] While his interests in Leeser were very different than Sulzberger (and other members of the Philadelphia Group), the desire of both to make meaning of Leeser's life and of the materials that could best attest to Leeser's legacy did much to revitalize attention paid to Leeser and transform him into a central figure in American Jewish history.

Zev Eleff is president of Gratz College and professor of American Jewish history.

140 Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue*, 37–41, 89.

141 Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

142 On this curious topic, see Zev Eleff, "Psychohistory and the Imaginary Couch: Diagnosing Historical and Biblical Figures," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 80 (March 2012): 94–136.