

Antebellum Judaism

Summary: More Ashkenazi (Central and Eastern European) than Sephardic (Iberian) Jews immigrated to the U.S. in the 19th century, leading to the fracturing of singular synagogue-communities into multiple congregations with varying levels of Americanization. The Jewish American landscape shifted from synagogue-communities to a community of synagogues.

The arrival of a new wave of Jewish immigrants from Central Europe in the 19th century ushered in a new stage in the history of American Judaism just as the Sephardic Jewish community was becoming Americanized. The influx of immigrants, primarily Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe, dissolved the hegemony of Sephardic Jews, transforming a somewhat homogeneous Sephardic synagogue-community into an ethnic plurality of Jewish subcommunities. From the 1820s to the 1870s the Jewish population of America multiplied by nearly fifty times, increasing from an estimated 6,000 in 1824 to an estimated 250,000 in 1878. The newcomers expanded existing Jewish communities and founded new ones. The first congregation west of the Allegheny Mountains was established in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1824 and the first congregation west of the Mississippi in Chesterfield, Missouri in 1837.

One of the most visible effects of this period of social and religious diversification was the fracturing of the unified colonial and federalist synagogue-community into an ethnic complex of competing congregations. The synagogue-community became a community of synagogues. The first congregational schisms within Jewish life occurred in the leading communities of Charleston in 1824 and New York the following year. In both instances, a group of young, Americanized members of the synagogue-community requested permission to split from the main body of the congregation to form their own, more progressive prayer group. They intended to reform their tradition by abolishing the practice of auctioning ritual honors, introducing vernacular language into the service, democratizing synagogue administration, and adding a weekly sermon. As these reformers stressed, none of these efforts were intended to change the essentials of Judaism, but only to modify some of its external functions in order to best preserve the whole. In both Charleston and New York, reformers promoted their modifications without the benefit of religious leadership. New York's Chevra Chinuch Nearim (Society for the Education of the Young) went so far as to state its intention to remain leaderless: "the society intends in no way to create distinctions, but each member is to fulfill the duties in rotation, having no Parness

[wealthy leader of a community] or Chazzan.” Many of the innovative characteristics of the 19th century American synagogue would arise from similar reformation impulses.

Just as religious and cultural diversity created a new era of Jewish growth and migration, breaking up the classic American synagogue-community into a community of synagogues, the Sephardic *hazzan* was now replaced by a new rabbinical figure. While there were many rabbis among the new immigrants, the prototypical figure of this period was Isaac Leeser (1806-1868), a traditionalist, unordained, Ashkenazi *hazzan* who served a Sephardic synagogue in Philadelphia. How did a figure like Leeser so profoundly personify antebellum American Judaism? Moderate by nature, Leeser insisted that American Jews were still part of a worldwide Jewish people and that Americanization could also preserve tradition. As a leader, he was not simply a functionary of the Sephardic synagogue, but a man who set about refashioning the Jewish community by creating a myriad of new social, cultural, and educational institutions. From 1843 to 1868 he published a weekly newspaper, *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, and in 1867, he founded Philadelphia’s Maimonides College as the first American school for rabbis, though it closed soon after his death. He created the first translation of the Torah into English in 1845.