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MS-53: Moses J. Gries Papers, 1850-1934 (bulk 1890-1930).

Series D: Sermons and Addresses, 1893-1917, undated.

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“Dr. Isaac M. Wise,” undated.

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- Dr. Isaac M. Wise -

We do but honor ourselves in honoring the memory of the great who served us; we do but bring honor unto ourselves when we gather here for memorial service in honor of the grandest, noblest figure in American Jewish history. His life story is very full and it is very simple. Born in Steingrube in the year 1819, died in Cincinnati in the year 1900, more than four score years, by reason of the strength of which the psalmist spoke. It is a long period and it is an eventful period since, in the year 1843, on "Shabbath", when those memorable words of the call that came to Abraham were read from the sacred Scripture; it seems to me as if Dr. Wise himself were right, and that indeed it was a special Providence that guided him through life,--that on the very Sabbath when for the first time he could preach the word of God, it should be on that very Sabbath when from the secret scrolls there would be read those great words,--"Get thee out from thy country and from thy father's house unto a land which I will show thee." It seems almost as if the message of God were sent across the sea, that he should get out from his father's house unto the land which God would show him. In the year 1846 he arrived in this land, and very soon after

took up his ministry in the City of Albany, and in the year 1850 he announced his platform of reform. He declared unto American Judaism and unto American Israel what he proposed doing, what was his thought and what was his life work. We do not comprehend it,--we who gather peaceably in our synagogues with uncovered head, with family, with organ and with music,--we, who have had so many reforms in our life, do not understand what it meant in the year 1850 when Dr. Wise preached his reform sermon to his congregation in Albany gathered on the day of Roshhashona, and though there should be turmoil, confusion and struggle in the holy house of God, and by violence Dr. Wise be thrown out of the synagogue in which he preached on the first day of Roshashona, on the ~~second~~^{second} day of Roshashona he organized a Jewish congregation on a distinctly reform platform. It was not the first reform congregation in this land, but it was perhaps the first reform congregation which declared itself directly on the lines which Dr. Wise then perceived were to be the lines of reform in American life. In 1853 Dr. Wise was elected for life as Rabbi in Cincinnati, a thing never before known to have occurred in any Jewish congregation in America. In the year 1854 he started the American Israelite, in the year 1855 the Deborah. In the year

1855 was held here in the City of Cleveland the first Rabbinical Conference held in the Western Hemisphere. How strange when we look back to the Rabbinical Conference of 1855, how marvelous, with the authority of the Talmud at its height,-- how we wonder when forty-five years thereafter, in 1890, here in Cleveland, there should be assembled the Central Conference of American Rabbis. At last is to be realized, at last Rabbinical gatherings established permanently. From 1855 there was a lapse to the Conference of 1859, an active Conference in 1865, then in 1889 the establishment of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in the City of Detroit celebrated its establishment here in Cleveland. But the program and platform announced almost fifty years before, and after years of struggling and opposition, found his hopes fulfilled and realized by the power and earnestness and zeal that had been in him. Fifty years ago he declared the need for the establishment of a Rabbinical College, and not until the year 1871, in the Convention held in Cincinnati, were the foundations actually laid for a union of American Hebrew Congregations not formed till 1873. And after all the years of hope and waiting, not until the year 1875 was the Hebrew Union College estab-

lished. In the year 1883 was the first graduation of students from the Hebrew Union College. In the year 1889 was celebrated the seventieth anniversary of Dr. Wise's birth. In the year 1899 was the demonstration of good will and love from the people of Israel in this land on the celebration of the eightieth birthday of Dr. Wise. Fifty years of life and effort, fifty years since that time in 1850, that Roshashona day, when Dr. Wise was forcibly thrust from the pulpit and out of his congregation; fifty years from that time when he established a choir of men and women, established a ritual, when for the first time in the history of Judaism men and women were worshiping together in the pews. Thirty years ago when he announced to the world his plan of reform, and the plan was that religion was to make man happy and good; and it is that fundamental principle which has been the force and power of his whole life. The purpose of religion was not to teach men doctrines beautiful and ideal, the purpose of religion was not to have worship inspiring, the ultimate purpose was to make men happy and good. Fifty years ago he advocated the College; fifty years ago he advocated the Union; and today, when you look back over the fifty years of his life, what one

of us would dispute his foresight? What one of us would declare that he was not indeed wise in his generation?. The very fathers were all against him; the very teachers of American Israel were opposed to his every movement; the sons of the very men that ~~declared~~ ^{proclaimed} him an apostate lived to declare ^{lived to declare} their error and bring him praise and glory. And we, the children of those who fought Dr. Wise, we, the children of that generation that opposed his every step, we have lived to see the day that the reforms that the reforms he proclaimed and declared fifty years ago were indeed words of truth and words of wisdom. He fought not so much for principles.

It must be said with truth that none there was that fought for Jewish principles and Jewish ideals so vehemently, so long, with greater force or with greater result. He gave up his whole strength and mind not alone to the cause of Jewish truth, but to the cause of Jewish charity. He saw the need of institutions for the fatherless and aged, for the care of the sick and the poor, and gave up his wonderful organizing ability in order that the men and women in this land might care for the unfortunate ones.

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It has been said that he was a leader of reform Judaism. Again and again it was said that Dr. Wise was of a destructive spirit, that he would bring danger and destruction upon Israel. It is true that in some senses he was a destructive spirit; but if we look back over the history of the past fifty years of American Jewish life, then we know it to be the truth that he was the constructive, not the destructive, spirit of American Israel--of the constructive work to which we today point with fingers of pride--that the constructive work of American Israel was indeed due to this leader of reform Judaism.

Three things he had in life. 25 years of labor he gave to this work, in the face of every opposition, superior to the opposition. But in spite of all opposition, he accomplished them all, and during the past 25 years he has lived to see the children of his creation, the children of his soul and heart, grow to strength and to beauty and to usefulness. It is true the past 25 years have been to him years of glory and victory, and to some extent contrasted with the past years of opposition. But we must remember it was peace that came after the battle, it was victory that

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came after years of strife and struggle. He had his enemies, his haters, his slanderers; some of them consistent in their opposition, but most of them of too small mind to grapple the great problems, most of them of too small mind to do the great work he had set himself to do, most of them unable to do the work themselves. We do not fully appreciate his great work. He had honor, he had praise during his life--thank God for that!--but we do not fully understand his great importance to American Israel, unless the truth comes home to us, that now, that he is no more, now that he has passed from the world of activity, that there is in truth no one worthy to stand in his place. There are other great men in Israel, great teachers, great scholars, eloquent preachers; there are other men in Israel with power to organize and with a soul to enthuse, but there are now none worthy to stand in his place. He was President of the College, and though for the past ten or twenty years he has been infirm of body, there is no one to whom he could turn and feel this was the man to stand in his place, to whom the country could turn with full confidence and trust. He was President of the Conference for ten years past; still today, when he has passed from the world, we

cannot find anywhere one who would be worthy to take his place as President of the Rabbinical Conference, who will be, as he was, the recognized teacher and the recognized leader of American Israel. Jews have always looked to him for leadership in those critical periods of our American history. When the Jews necessarily asked for a leader they naturally turned to Dr. Wise. He was the man of action to speak on behalf of the Jews of the United States. It was Dr. Wise who went to Washington and stood before President Buchanan to protest against the recognition of the Republic of Switzerland on account of its treatment of Jews; it was Dr. Wise who went to Washington, in presence of Lincoln, to protest against the language and spirit of Order No. 11, issued by General Grant; it was Dr. Wise who stood in the presence of President Hayes and protested against the treatment of the Jews in Russia, and asked that to the American Jews who went to Russia should come recognition of the rights of American citizenship. He was a natural leader and all turned to him for leadership. He drew men to him. Wherever he went, he made friends everywhere,--made friends not by the refinement of his manner, not by the polished manner of the courtier and diplomat, but by

the power, the earnestness that was in him, the zeal that inflamed his very soul by the sincerity of every word he spoke and act he performed. Therefore men were faithful to him; therefore we may look over the history of the past fifty years and find that fifty years ago he made friends and fifty years thereafter they remained friends to him. I can understand that, perhaps, better than you. I have myself known him for nineteen years. I learned to know him when I was only a boy of thirteen and he was a man of the people. He was a man approachable. He did not shroud himself or cloak himself in the dignity and majesty of his greatness, though he was before nineteen years ago a great figure in American history. He was approachable unto all, and every one of "our boys", as the Doctor always called us "his boys", remembered him and his kindness. He treated us almost as if we were his equals. You remember the old familiar picture of the Doctor sitting in his office in the College. The door was not closed, partially open; any one of us was at liberty to walk into the College to ask any question, and he would unbosom himself and tell us the secret purposes of his heart with the same freedom that he would declare it to the great men and women of

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Israel. It was because of these qualities that he found himself so honored, and people he would speak to felt drawn to him and trusted him, and that all the boys, his students, loved him so truly. I cannot dwell upon these familiar scenes of the Doctor in the College or as he sat in the library so easily and naturally, telling them his plans about the College, what he intended to do at the next Conference, confiding in us mere children; of his welcoming us at his home, telling us that we might come out to his place on College Hill and stay,--always welcome. This was the man, this was the great spirit to attract all the College students to him because of this inexpressible simplicity of the great man. Great men are simple, indeed, but Dr. Wise was simple in his life as he was simple in his death. May we not take that as a lesson to ourselves? Dr. Wise in the rude pine box, no fine ornamentations, no heaps upon heaps of flowers, but Dr. Wise went to his last rest in a rude pine box, with only a few garments brought by his own family. It was his simplicity in the hour of death even as it was his simplicity in the hour of life. There have been other teachers in American Israel, but however great they were as teachers and scholars,

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and however eloquent as preachers and leaders, the enduring work done this past century in this land is associated with his name. He was indeed the former and the founder,-he was indeed the binder, and never again in our lifetime will there arise a man of equal influence. The conditions are not now and the man is not now. He was a giant figure, and giantlike, towered over all. His prominence and supremacy was freely acknowledged. I believe, in truth, that he was the greatest figure, that he was the master force in Israel this past half century--not only in American Israel but in the wide world. And it is due to the work that came from his heart; it is due to the spirit he established in this land that today England and America, once the centers of English life, turned their hearts over across the ocean, looking to the re-birth of Jewish learning in the Western world. Dr. Wise established the Hebrew Union College. Today we boast of the Hebrew Union College. Today its graduates are established everywhere. Now the battle is won and victory has rested upon his banner. But 25 years ago, when the College was founded, there were fears it would be a failure. It was said even that for the College to send forth its graduates they would be nowhere

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received; that no one desired them. Thank God! Dr. Wise lived to see the day that in those very congregations where the teachers of American Israel had fought against and declared the College would be a failure,--that in those very congregations themselves the College graduates were welcomed, and there they preached what was believed to be the truth of God.

Twenty-five years ^{ago it} (of time) needed courage, needed faith to open a college; again, to reopen a seminary without a building, without a library, without funds, with nothing to found it upon except the great soul and will of the indomitable man.

In the face of great difficulties his purposes were strengthened; from defeat itself he wrung new victory. His purpose must be accomplished, and therefore he succeeded in his work. He was never weary of body. Even though from the days I first knew him, nineteen years ago, he halted in his step because one side was paralyzed, and some one saw him on the street who said, "Poor old of a man". But he labored; through all the years he gave himself to toil, at home, in his College, and in his pulpit,--never grew old. He was always strong in hope and in spirit. You may marvel when I tell you,--I mar- 12

veled myself when I heard it: Only last December, when it was

my privilege to spend an evening with him in his home, that man, of more than eighty years, whose step was feeble so that he trembled with every motion, speaking of his College, that his College was in danger, that he needed funds and support for it, and the old man had a plan and he would carry it ~~th~~ through if no other solution were offered. That was the spirit of the man, even to the last, with an indomitable will forming his plans. Thank God that we honored him while he lived! Thank God! as was said in the beginning here, that appreciation and recognition came to him not too late. Unfortunately, it is customary for men and women to give honor only to those who are dead and passed from this earth. I never will forget those words of Mrs. Beecher said concerning her husband after the funeral, when from every quarter of the land and the globe came the outpouring recognition of the ~~work~~ work of her husband, she said, ~~she said~~ remembering what great persecution came upon her husband, what bitter words had been spoken against him,--she said

And I believe it must be a source of satisfaction to every one of the Jews to have learned for whom Dr. Wise lived and

for whom he toiled and that they gave him recognition and that they gave him appreciation while he lived; the seventieth year of his life celebrated as though he was a Prince in the House of Israel, and the eightieth year of his life was celebrated by the gathering of rabbis, friends from everywhere, to show him tributes of honor and of love. Dr. Wise was a great man. His greatness was in his faith, in himself, and in his faith in God. He believed himself appointed of God in a way which you and I would not accept perhaps. Dr. Wise believed himself that God, by a special providence, had singled him out, and that God guided him along the whole way of his life.

Read his own sermon

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He was too modest; he did not believe that he could have done it all. No, it was God that worked in him and God that worked through him; he felt himself appointed of God. And whatever you may think about that, it almost seemed so. When we remember, as I said in the beginning and as I read out from the Bible that passage, that first Sabbath when Dr. Wise preached his first sermon, when we heard those memorable words "Get thee out from thy country, from thy birth-place, unto the land I

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will show thee",--it seems there was a voice calling Dr. Wise to get out of his birth-place to cross the seas to the land which God would show him. And here in this land he found Israel, and formed Israel, and so indeed he brought Israel to redemption. At the last Sabbath he preached the text of his sermon was "The Three-fold Priestly Blession."--This was the theme of his last address. Strange coincidence, is it not? That after all the years of struggle and trial, that the last word that he should speak to his people and to all Israel were the words of the old Priestly Blessing and Benediction upon the Jews of this land and upon the Jews of the world?

But, friends, when the light went out with the setting of the sun on March 26th, it does not seem to me that that was the going out of the great spirit,--does not seem that the light of that great soul had been extinguished. The physical body is laid to rest; but the great soul that was in him, it endures; it will live, even as George Elliot said so beautifully in that poem concerning the great Moses:

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So Dr. Wise lives as law to Israel here; Dr. Wise's life-work has been established, and must endure. And so the duty comes to us and we must carry through that great work which he established. He was the father of the College,--the College is now his orphan child. He gave to it 25 years that have been years of hope and work, and during the last 25 years gave to it the service of his protection and love, even as a father gives to his child. It was the one dream of his life, it was the one hope that kept him alive, that he would live to see the day when the College would be forever established,--when its foundation would be secured and could not be removed. He was its father and now the College is his orphan child; and I believe in spirit he has given it over to the Jews of the United States, and that the duty devolves upon the Jews of the United States, to whom he gave himself in loving services for so many years, that now they must care for the child of his love. I hope Cleveland will do its duty. I hope every community in Israel will do its duty.

The history of Dr. Wise is the history of some of the most important events in our Jewish history.

Scarce a town so small as to gather together a few Jews but at some time or other knew of his presence. First, in the

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the year 1855 at the first Rabbinical Conference; again, at the time of the creation of the Orphan Asylum here; here again in 1890 for the Central Conference; here to preach at the laying of the corner stone of this Temple, the dedicatory sermon of this House of God. So, it seems to me, there has been ^{no} history created in American Israel unless his presence was there. No one can truly measure his influence. He may have been Rabbi in Cincinnati but he was not the Rabbi of Cincinnati. What congregation is there in the land, what Jewish community anywhere in this country which has not felt his influence?

I know it well. Every graduate of the College will confess it freely. However great they may be, whatever works they may have established within these past ten years, even the greatest and most honored of the graduates of the College will freely confess that every one of us are what we are because of what Dr. Wise did for us.

Let Cleveland then show its appreciation,, do honor to his memory with open hand and open heart and spirit, and let us help firmly to establish the work of his heart, of his soul, his loved child, his College.

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He has passed from the world. The light of his eyes
^{has} have gone. His eyes are closed in eternal sleep. He himself
is at rest. But though his light went out, as it were, with
the setting of the sun, I do not believe that his light does
not still shine. It is as he himself described it, as the
motto of his life, as the motto of his paper,--Let there be
Light,--and, as he said in his Deborah, "Forward, my Soul,
with Strength."

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