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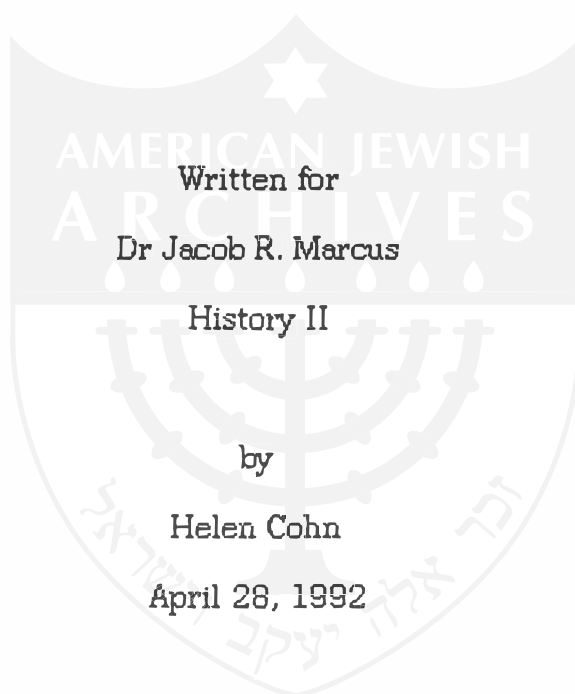
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Archives

RABBI MOSES J. GRIES OF CLEVELAND

A Biography



After members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis had debated emotionally for two-hours, the President of the organization asked to speak. An observer described the scene: "He was a mighty figure as he stood there speaking in an even voice, gesturing rarely, quivering in every muscle. What did he say? Who cares? It was one of those rare five-minute talks that grip your heart and send a lump into your throat. His speech clarified everything, found a common ground for all the controversairs, ended with a laugh that was presaged by his wonderful smile, loosed the wrought-up tension and made everybody content and happy."¹

The speaker was Rabbi Moses J. Gries. At this time, July 1914, he was completing the first of two terms as president of the CCAR. He was at the height of his career and influence, having served for nearly a quarter of a century as Rabbi of The Temple, Cleveland's largest congregation. His reputation was based not only on his ability as an orator and his charismatic presence. He was also widely known as one of the leaders in the Reform movement, early in his career making several radical changes at The Temple which reflected his understanding of the modern, American spirit of Reform Judaism.

EARLY YEARS

Gries was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1868, one of Jacob and Katharina Gries' eight children. His parents were Germanized Hungarian immigrants. His father died when Gries was three years old and his mother died when he was seven.² He came to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in

¹Rabbi Isaac Landma, syndicated article for "The Jewish Independent," July 14, 1914, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

²Newspaper clipping, Box 4, Folder 4, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

1881, and remained for seven years, first attending Hughes High School, then graduating from the University of Cincinnati and receiving ordination from HUC in 1889. His Rabbinic thesis was called "Immortality." In this work he summarized arguments for and against the concept of immortality. The thesis concluded with an appreciation of the "balm of consolation" provided by belief in a future life, balanced by the recognition of our duties on earth.³

His first pulpit was the Mitzpah Congregation in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he served for three years. Although he was merely 21 years old, he was apparently widely read and well informed. The Chattanooga newspaper held a contest: the person who could accurately identify the portraits of 30 national business and political leaders would win a trip to the Chicago World Fair. Rabbi Gries had the only winning entry.⁴

A Passover sermon, perhaps delivered during his first year at the congregation, shows his early thinking on issues related to reform. Using the example of sacrifices in Jewish ritual which turned into public prayer as a way for each person to draw near to God, he said, "...the form passes but the principle remains." He then spoke of the difference between the signs or symbolic acts and the essentials of Judaism. Speaking of the Torah as an example, he said, "It is not essential. We need no sacred Scroll written on parchment. The Bible now is well preserved and the printed page is accurate enough."⁵

This sermon hints at his desire to question even the most dearly held aspects of Jewish ritual, and to reevaluate their usefulness in the light of

³Moses J. Gries, "Immortality," rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1898.

⁴Newspaper clipping, 1890(?), Box 4, Folder 4, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁵*Ibid.*

modern, rational thought. There is no record of attempts on his part to introduce radical change in the Chattanooga congregation. His resignation letter suggests that he might have been biding his time, waiting for the right environment to put his ideas into practice. On November 1, 1892, he wrote to the Mitzpah Congregation's Board of Directors asking for a release from his contract, saying, "I have been honored with a call to an influential congregation in the city of Cleveland, O."⁶

THE CLEVELAND MILIEU

The "influential congregation" was Tifereth Israel which, along with Anshe Chesed, was one of the two most prominent synagogues in Cleveland. This prominence was based on their age, their elaborate buildings and their members' prosperity.⁷ Tifereth Israel was founded in 1850, and was a Reform congregation by 1870. Anshe Chesed also drifted slowly in the direction of Reform during the incumbency of Rabbi Michael Machol (1876-1906), but did not become fully Reform until the arrival of his predecessor Rabbi Louis Wolsey in 1906.

Thus, Gries became rabbi of a congregation which already embraced Reform Judaism. The turn towards Reform had taken place under the leadership of Rabbi Jacob Mayer, who was at Tifereth Israel from 1867-1874. He was "idolized" by the congregation "for his liberal views regarding the Jewish religion, as he so masterly expounded them from the pulpit and nobly defended them outside of it..."⁸

⁶Letter, Moses J. Gries to Mitzpah Congregation Board of Directors, Nov. 1, 1892. MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁷Lloyd P. Gartner, *History of the Jews of Cleveland* (The Western Reserve Historical Society and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), p 142.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 148.

Following Mayer, Rabbi Aaron Hahn continued to introduce reforms during his tenure (1874-1892). He introduced Sunday morning lectures in the synagogue, although no worship service was included. These lectures were secular and wide-ranging, covering topics such as Napoleon, Buddah, Jesus, and foreign cities and countries. In 1875 the congregation forbid hats during worship. The High Holidays were observed with a new decorum. Programs were distributed that listed the "exercises of the day" and congregants could enter and leave only at fixed times.⁹

Not only had Gries been hired by an "influential congregation," he had been hired by one which appeared open to reform, even to the radical version of reform which he was to espouse.

RADICAL REFORM IN CLEVELAND

Gries' reform was made possible in part by the prevailing world view held by his new congregants. Wealthy and established, they no longer felt themselves in exile. America was their home, English was their language, and science and reason were their guides. They were moved by Prophetic Judaism which called for equality and peace among all humans. They shunned the arcane practices of ritual Judaism which would separate them from the non-Jews among whom they lived. Many found their attachment to Judaism weakening as the secular society pulled at them with its demands and attractions.

Gries was to serve as rabbi at Tifereth Israel for 25 years, but all his major reforms were introduced within several years of his arrival. Two of the

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

reforms were specifically ritual in nature, and the third was a radical new concept of the role of the synagogue.

The Torah

The first reform of ritual was prompted by the fact that Tifereth Israel was constructing a new building. It seems that the congregation was considering the discontinuation of Torah reading, for the building committee wanted to know if it should provide for an ark in the sanctuary. Gries spoke of the issue in a sermon. He claimed that a year previously he would have opposed this change.¹⁰ Now, however, he sees that the ceremony of reading from the scroll has lost its meaning for the congregation. "The old ceremony inspires you not....Therefore I say the time has come for this congregation when the thorah [sic] reading has become a symbol without a meaning and hence to be cast aside." He then appealed to the universalistic element of Reform Judaism, saying, "Are we ever to go on confining our Jewish worship to Jews alone? We should cease to be national, we should cease to be tribal but be universal."¹¹

In the end, an ark was included in the new building, but Hebrew reading from the Torah scroll was discontinued.

Sabbath

The issue of the Sabbath was more complex. The question was whether "Sabbath" services were to be held on Saturday or Sunday. Sunday lectures

¹⁰ However, his sermon in Chattanooga regarding ritual in Judaism, mentioned above, indicated that he already viewed the Torah scroll as symbolic, not "essential" to Jewish faith.

¹¹ Newspaper clipping, 1893 (?), Box 4, Folder 1, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

were not unusual in liberal synagogues. In fact, as mentioned earlier, Rabbi Hahn had introduced them at Tifereth Israel years before. The issue now was not lectures, but actual services. At the time, only Reform synagogues in Chicago and Philadelphia had both Saturday and Sunday services. In Philadelphia, the Sunday services were not a success; in Chicago, they replaced the Saturday services.¹²

Sunday services began at Tifereth Israel in 1893, the year after Gries arrived. They were initiated with a mixture of pragmatism, Reform Judaism's willingness to reexamine all aspects of Jewish practice, and the assertion of "principle" over "form."

The format of the first Sunday service was "...an Introductory, a hymn, the mourner's prayer, a soprano solo, scriptural reading that included verses in Genesis related to the creation, and the commandments as given in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and then followed the lecture."¹³ In his sermon, Gries stressed the importance of having services when the majority of the congregation could be present. He stated his deep attachment to "the ancient Sabbath," but asserted that "holiness does not lie in the day, but we sanctify the day with our prayers and devotion."¹⁴

For several years services continued to be held on both Saturday and Sunday, with Sunday services drawing by far the larger attendance. Many non-Jews also attended the Sunday services, as Gries' reputation as a preacher spread. Saturday services stopped in 1898.¹⁵

¹²Newspaper clipping, 1893, Box 4, Folder 1, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹³*ibid.*

¹⁴*ibid.*

¹⁵Gartner, p. 156.

The Open Temple

Gries was a powerful, effective orator. He had a definite vision of the synagogue and of Judaism's role in the world, which he presented in a clear and forceful manner. On the occasion of his tenth anniversary at Tifereth Israel--by then called The Temple--he articulated the two aspects of his vision which had always motivated him. First, to make Judaism alive for the Jews of his day, and second to have the world understand Judaism and accept Jewish principles as the moral law of all humanity.

In inaugurating Sunday morning Sabbath services, he called for "A Judaism not for the past, but for today, for this hour, for this generation."¹⁶ In the same spirit, and consistent with the two aspects of his vision, Gries began a program which reflected a radical new concept of the role of the synagogue: The Open Temple.

Before Gries arrived, the synagogue saw little activity besides worship services and Sunday school.¹⁷ Two years after he came to Cleveland, Tifereth Israel moved from Huron and East 6th Street to a much larger building on Willson Avenue. The space was now available to sponsor a variety of activities within a Jewish environment. The synagogue would not only be the center of Jewish worship and learning, it would also be a social and intellectual center. Moreover, it would be a cultural center for the entire community, not just for the Jews. Thus, The Open Temple promoted Gries' vision of Judaism as a vital part of the modern Jew's everyday life, and of the Gentile's appreciation of what Judaism has to offer.

¹⁶The Jewish Review, Nov. 26, 1993, Box 4, Folder 1, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁷Gartner, p. 147.

As Gries said, the synagogue "should extend an open hand to all, Jew or non-Jew, old and young, rich and poor -- all should be privileged to worship God within its walls."¹⁸

The implementation of this concept was extremely successful. On the tenth anniversary of his arrival in Cleveland, Gries was hailed for "10 years of fruitful work for humanity." Specifically cited was the growth in number of people and organizations within the temple, and its openness to the community. "The building is always at the disposal of and is frequently used by committees formed for work for the public good....No one of good character is debarred from any of the advantages offered. No question as to creed or belief is ever asked."¹⁹

One of the organizations Gries created was The Temple Society, which sponsored a variety of cultural and social events as part of The Open Temple concept. Here is a partial list of its activities for 1909-1910:²⁰

Calender of Events:

- Nov 19: Royal Welsh Ladies' Choir
- Nov 27: "Hamlet and His Interpreters"
- Dec 18: "Acres of Diamonds"
- Mar 26: Temple Quartet Concert Company of Boston
- April 29: "David Copperfield"

Classes:

English novelists, political economy and civics, botany, physics with experiments, anthropology, geology, Current Topics Club

¹⁸Newspaper clipping, 1907(?), Box 4, Folder 2, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

¹⁹*ibid.*, Nov. 28, 1902.

²⁰*ibid.*, 1909.

CRITICISM

Gries' tenure at The Temple was filled with success and adulation. Newspapers and official documents reflect little public criticism of his activities. Although one might expect Jews outside the Reform movement to be critical of some of Gries' activities, it is interesting to read of several occasions when other reformers felt he had gone too far.

Isaac M. Wise was Gries' teacher at the Hebrew Union College. Judging from Gries' words of praise at a CCAR conference, he held Wise in great esteem. However, he found himself under strong attack from Wise regarding Sabbath services on Sunday. When, in 1897, Wise heard of Gries' intention of completely shifting Sabbath services to Sunday, his first reaction was that it was an unfounded rumor. When he was forced to admit it was true, Wise declared it his "duty" to assert that any HUC rabbi who did such a thing, did it on his own responsibility, "he has not learned it in the college." Wise, writing in the *American Israelite*, concluded his article with the statement that "[the rabbi's] duty is to teach, expound, promulgate and preserve Judaism. If he cannot do that, it becomes his duty as an honest man to step down and out."²¹

As mentioned earlier, Cleveland had two prominent synagogues, both of them Reform. As Gries' success at The Temple grew, so did its membership. When Gries arrived in 1892, there were 125 members. Ten years later, there were 500 members.²² The other synagogue, Anshe Chesed, was still under the leadership of Rabbi Michael Machol, and seems to have stagnated towards

²¹*American Israelite*, Cincinnati, Ohio, Dec. 30, 1897.

²²Newspaper clipping, 1902, Box 4, Folder 2, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

the end of his 30 year tenure. In 1907, a year after he retired, Anshe Chesed had only 186 members.²³

In 1906, Rabbi Louis Wolsey, also a young American-educated rabbi, became spiritual leader of Anshe Chesed. Within a decade, Anshe Chesed's membership nearly matched that of The Temple.²⁴ Thus, during the second half of Gries' twenty-five years at The Temple, Wolsey was the local colleague closest to him in ideology and background. This similarity makes their public controversy all the more interesting.

Three years after arriving in Cleveland, Rabbi Wolsey preached a sermon on "The Failure of Reform Judaism." He praised Reform Judaism for its initial work in questioning old forms and rituals, and in re-emphasizing the universal religious and moral ideas of Judaism. However, the reform had gone too far. "Reform has amputated so much that Judaism walks on crutches...we have a Reform from which all the Judaism has evaporated, and into which gentile unitarianism has been gently introduced." He claimed that the path that Reform had laid out would lead to the complete assimilation of the Jew. The sermon also included an attack on the CCAR's recent discussion of intermarriage, which Wolsey strongly opposed.²⁵

Gries reacted promptly, strongly, and publicly. In an open letter to Wolsey published in the Cleveland newspaper, he accused Wolsey of being "unfair and unjust" and "needlessly severe." Gries then listed eight questions that he rather imperiously demanded Wolsey to answer publicly.

²³Gartner, p. 147.

²⁴In 1916, The Temple had about 700 members and Anshe Chesed had 711. Newspaper clipping, 1916, Box 4, Folder 4, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. Gartner, p. 147.

²⁵Newspaper clipping, 1909, Box 4, Folder 3, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Wolsey's response was thoughtful and dignified. He likened the exchange as that between Beth Hillel and Beth Shammai, a debate of issues that went beyond local concerns. He restated his fear that in stressing universalism, Reform Judaism so minimized the particular Jewish aspect of the religion that eventually its very Jewishness would disappear. He then introduced a new concern, "Rabbi worship," which he claimed was taking over many Reform congregations in America. "If you should eliminate the effective speaker, the attractive personality and modern culture from the Reform Jewish pulpit, even what scanty attendance now prevails would be woefully diminished."²⁶

This latter point was perhaps too close to home for Gries. His response was shrill, strident, and *ad hominem*. At this point, Wolsey bowed out of the discussion, saying in a brief Letter to the Editor that he did not care for "the spirit of dictatorialness that runs through [Gries'] whole letter," and that he regretted that Gries did not care to enter into a debate of principles and platforms.²⁷

With this, the "discussion" ceased. However, it had lasted long enough, and been personally challenging enough, to reveal a side of Gries that does not seem to have publicly surfaced often in his career.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One of Gries' major changes at The Temple was in the area of religious education for children. He removed Hebrew, revised the confirmation requirements, and changed the curriculum to reflect what he perceived as the needs of the new generation of American Jews. The new building on Willson

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 5, 1910.

Avenue was closer to the majority of congregants. This fact, along with the changes in the school, dramatically enhanced religious school participation.²⁸

Gries' success is reflected in membership and religious school participation during his 25 years at The Temple.

	<u>1892</u>	<u>1902</u>	<u>1916 (retirement)</u>
Membership	125	501	700
Religious School	80	764	900

From 1902 through Gries' retirement, the religious school was claimed to be the largest Jewish congregational "Sabbath School" in the world.

In addition to his dramatic impact on religious education for children, Gries created a number of organizations at The Temple for the education and enjoyment of the entire community. In 1894, he created The Temple Society, which sponsored a variety of cultural and educational events, some of which were listed above. Four years later he established a temple library. In 1901 he opened a gymnasium, and the following year created an Alumnae Association for people confirmed at The Temple. By his retirement, about 1000 young people had been confirmed. In 1902 he established The Temple Association, a club for young men.²⁹

True to his commitment to the ethical principles of Judaism, Gries was active in a number of community projects, such as the Council Educational Alliance, which was established in 1897 to give aid to poor immigrant Jews in

²⁸Gartner, p. 197.

²⁹These numbers are given in a number of temple and newspaper sources, especially on the occasion of Gries' 10th anniversary with The Temple and on his retirement. See Box 4, Folders 2 and 4, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

the form of educational and recreational facilities. He was president of the CEA board and prominent in its activities throughout his career.³⁰

Gries also played a major role in the CCAR throughout his career. He was a charter member, and the year after he arrived in Cleveland was elected Assistant Secretary of the organization. He was involved with, or headed, a number of CCAR committees during the years, but he did not again hold office until 1909, when he was elected Treasurer. By that year, Gries had been at The Temple for 17 years. His radical reforms were long-established, and the new organizations and programs mentioned above were in place and clearly invigorating Jewish life in Cleveland in a number of dimensions. It would appear that Gries now felt he could devote more attention to national and international issues through leadership in the CCAR.

Directly following a two-year term as Treasurer, Gries became Vice President for two years, then ascended to the presidency of the CCAR, a position he held for two terms, from 1913-1915.

His first President's Address, at the 25th meeting of the CCAR in 1914, stressed a "forward movement" which built on the established and accepted principles of Reform Judaism. After calling for specific actions in such areas as a common prayer book, Jewish education for every child and intermarriage, he ended with a stirring call that epitomized the Reform ideal: "...to march forward, with new enthusiasm and with hope enkindled, to solve the new problems under the new conditions of Jewish life in America."³¹

During his first President's Address he had also called for a single national group to represent Jewish interests in the United States. At the time of his

³⁰Gartner, p. 224.

³¹CCAR Yearbook, Vol XXIV, CCAR, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1914.

second President's Address, the war in Europe had begun. He made the same plea, this time with much greater urgency. "Let the multitude of committees and of leaders surrender their claims to priority and precedence. They must unite to create *one committee*, which shall be *permanent* -- and *thoroughly representative* -- and *duly authorized*, with the right and the power to speak and to act on behalf of all the Jews of America." (his emphasis) One easily infers from this plea the conflicting interests and lack of coordination within the national Jewish community that must have existed at that time. One also senses Gries' thorough frustration with the situation. Always the optimist, he closed his talk with a note of hope: "We still believe in, and await the fulfillment of the Messianic Ideals of the Hebrew Prophets -- the vision of Peace."³²

FAREWELL

This speech appears to be Gries' final formal statement to his colleagues at the CCAR. The following year his name does not appear as a participant at the conference. The next May, in 1917, around the time of the annual CCAR convention, he held his last service as Rabbi of The Temple.

He had chosen the Rosh Hashanah evening service in 1916 as the time to announce his retirement. It was his 25th year at The Temple, his position was secure, he was at the height of his career. The announcement surely came as a stunning surprise to the congregation.

"Now, in justice to myself and in fulfillment of my duty to my wife and children, it is wise that I choose a life less public. It is imperative that I secure Freedom from the drive, pressure and tension of my present life, and

³²CCAR Yearbook, Vol XXV, CCAR, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1915.

particularly from the strain and excitement incident to the enthusiasm of preaching and the earnestness of public address."³³

These words evoke the image with which this paper began: a man speaking in an even voice, barely moving, yet "quivering in every muscle." His intensity and control, especially when speaking publicly, must have exacted a higher price than was apparent to the casual observer. On the occasion of his retirement, many well-wishers specifically spoke of "many more years" of active involvement in the Jewish community. A generous wish in any event, but Gries was just 49 years old, and one wonders if his well-wishers sensed a physical failing that was not openly discussed. On October 30, 1918, a year and a half after his retirement, Gries was taken to the hospital with abdominal pains. He died later the same evening.

Gries' life was characterized by a commitment to the principles of Reform Judaism. The war in Europe had cast a dark shadow over the 19th century optimism in human progress and the brotherhood of all humanity. Gries addressed this deep disappointment in his final sermon at The Temple. He asked if religion was, in fact, "futile and perilous." His deeply-held ideals triumphed over his disappointment. Every human being, no matter how evil, also has some good, and the human race still has the potential of "perfectibility." Rejecting a specific religious doctrine, he asserted again, as he had throughout his life, "the doctrine of human brotherhood" which would unite people and nations throughout the world.³⁴

³³Sermon for Rosh Hashonah evening, 1916, Box 4, Folder 8, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

³⁴Final sermon at The Temple, May 20, 1917, Box 4, Folder 8, MOSES J. GRIES PAPERS, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

From the first days of his career to the last, Moses Gries was an imposing personality. He inspired several generations of Jews in Cleveland, touched many others throughout the United States, and helped lead Reform Judaism into the twentieth century. Although some of his reforms were subsequently abandoned, his ideals, leadership and conviction remain a monument to his name.



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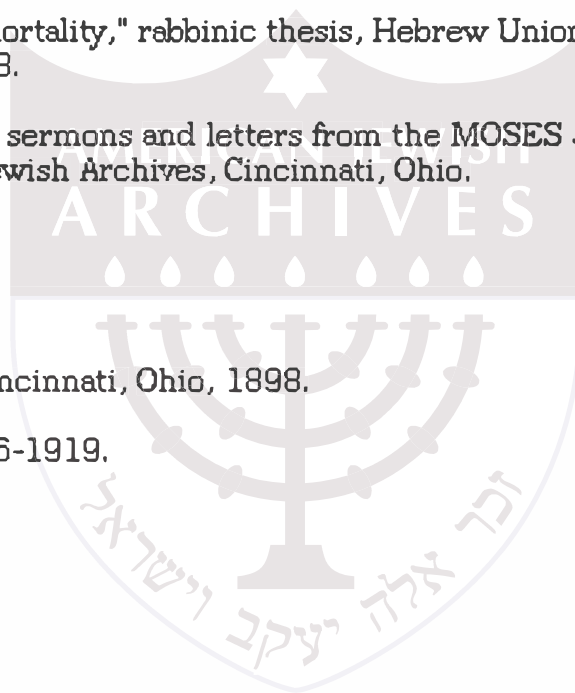
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