



The Impact of Jewish American Identity and Assimilation in the Reform Movement

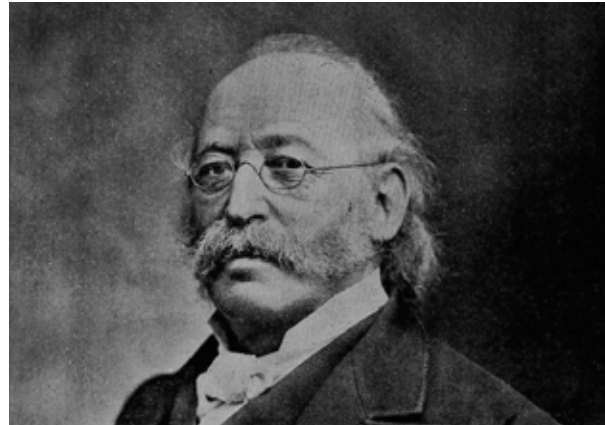
Solomon Sonneschein (1839–1908) was a controversial rabbi in St. Louis; his final rabbinate was in Des Moines, Iowa.
(Image: Modern View, 25th Anniversary Deluxe Edition (1925))

BY TANYA JONES



In 1886, the St. Louis Jewish community was split at its core. Shaare Emeth, the only Reform temple in the area, was divided between those who stayed with the old congregation and those who split to form Temple Israel. This divide was facilitated largely by Solomon H. Sonneschein, who was Shaare Emeth's acting rabbi from 1869 until 1886, when he became the new rabbi of Temple Israel.¹ Throughout his time in St. Louis, he became the clear leader of Reform in the area, but he was also active in Reform as it was emerging nationally. Despite the contentious nature of some of his ideas, the movement in St. Louis remained mostly peaceful, with Sonneschein having popular support from congregants and the board through the 1870s. His efforts transformed Shaare Emeth into the most prosperous temple in the Midwest.² Yet, Sonneschein broke away from Shaare Emeth in a very public scandal, after he had poured so much into creating a new Reform congregation. Publicized episodes of his private behavior—including excessive drinking habits and sexual liaisons—created tension between Sonneschein and the Shaare Emeth board members.³ Sonneschein's increasingly radical attitude also prompted a congregational split. Rather than seek reforms that remained well within the confines of the Jewish faith, as had his earlier reforms, Sonneschein proposed reforms in the 1880s that often conflated Judaism and Christianity. Ensuing tensions eventually divided the temple and the Reform movement in St. Louis. Far from being exclusive to St. Louis, division over assimilation would also divide Reform at a national level. The tensions surrounding Americanization that divided the Reform movement in St. Louis offer a window into the division that appeared throughout Reform Judaism as it developed in America.

The split between Shaare Emeth and Temple Israel was not an isolated event but part of a larger historical development. Judaism was finding its niche in American society amidst rapid social and organizational change in the Jewish communities across America. Baltimore's Har Sinai, New York's Emanu-El, Albany's Anshe Emeth, Chicago's Sinai, even Cincinnati's K.K. B'nai Yeshurun (which was spiritually headed by national Reform leader Isaac Mayer Wise) all experienced temple splits between 1842 and 1855.⁴ While Sonneschein's ideological modifications to Judaism were perhaps the most extreme examples of Reform, he was certainly not the only radical Reformer in St. Louis or America.



Trained in Prague, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) moved to the United States in 1846, and became rabbi in Albany, New York. He introduced a number of innovations and reforms, including family pews in the synagogue and counting women in forming a religious quorum. He was instrumental in forming the Hebrew Union College to train rabbis in 1875. (Image: *The History of the K. K. Bene Yeshurun, of Cincinnati, Ohio, from the Date of Its Organization*, Published by Bloch Printing Co., 1892)

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, there was a great deal of emigration, both Jewish and non-Jewish, from Germany. Reform-minded rabbis found America's laissez-faire attitude toward the establishment of new religious institutions to be liberating from the stifling German laws that were more controlling of religious change.⁵ As American Reform Judaism developed its institutions and doctrines and established more temple associations in the wake of a rapidly increasing Jewish population with more spiritual leadership, Jews in America found themselves collectively deciding what Reform in America would look like, what it meant to be both Jewish and American, and how practice within temples would reflect this newly emerging Jewish-American identity. Defining a "Jewish-American" could entail various levels of assimilation. The task of a definition became even more difficult considering that many Reformed Jews were assimilated in the non-religious parts of their lives, even if they sporadically attended a temple. Nationally, various organizations sprung up to try to fit Reform Judaism under one clear, concise definition. Ultimately, the need to define a Jewish-American identity and the questions surrounding what that identity meant in terms of religious practice and assimilation of temple life into broader American secular life brought about

(Left) Congregation Shaare Emeth, at the corner of Pine and 17th Street in St. Louis, as it looked when Sonneschein arrived. This stereograph view dates from the 1870s; stereographs like this were popular in middle-class parlors as a form of entertainment after the introduction of inexpensive viewers just before the Civil War. (Image: *Missouri History Museum*)



David Einhorn (1809–1879) stood at the other end of Reform from Isaac Mayer Wise. He came to the United States to become rabbi at the Har Sinai Congregation in Baltimore, the oldest Reform congregation the United States. He was forced to flee to Philadelphia in 1861, when he delivered a sermon calling slavery a “deplorable farce” that ran counter to Jewish beliefs. He moved to New York in 1866 and became acknowledged as the leader of Reform Judaism in America until his death. (Image: American Jewish Archives)

division in the Reform movement both nationally and locally.

While the earliest Reform temple was established in Charleston in 1824, Reform Judaism emerged as a prominent religious and social movement in America around 1850. Although Reform was an international movement, in America it broadly sought modernity and to make the temple more adapted to its American home. Issac Mayer Wise articulated this sentiment when he declared, “the Jew must be Americanized.”⁶ Rabbis throughout America, including Sonneschein, followed suit. American Jewish congregations, which organized separately before the Civil War, began to organize themselves at a national level because of the efforts of Wise and other Reform leaders. Nationally, this movement began in 1855 with the Cleveland Conference and continued with subsequent establishments such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) in 1873. The UAHC was to act as a unified centralized body for all member congregations with particular emphasis on religious instruction.⁷ The Hebrew Union College, which was also Wise’s brainchild, was established in 1875 as the first organized rabbinical school in America to provide trained spiritual leadership for a growing Jewish population.⁸ Perhaps most important to Reform on a doctrinal level was the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform. This meeting between prominent Reform leaders set forth a series of resolutions meant to guide congregations. All of these organizations were an effort on the part of Reform leaders to come

to some measure of consensus on the direction and pace of the Reform movement.

As the movement began to organize nationally, division almost immediately appeared over the question of assimilation in America. On one side of the divide was Wise, who championed a more Americanized type of Judaism his entire career. On the other side of the divide was Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore’s Har Sinai. Einhorn was an elitist who believed in a uniquely Jewish identity for a uniquely Jewish mission and history.⁹ While he was ardent in some aspects of Reform, he was unwilling to modify elements of Judaism that he thought would facilitate the loss of a Jewish identity. For this reason he vehemently opposed mixed marriages, for example, calling them the “nail in the coffin of the small Jewish race.”¹⁰ Despite decades in America, Einhorn remained German at heart and was always somewhat ambivalent in his feelings toward America. While he enjoyed the religious liberty of America, he detested the seeming push of Christianity upon the Jews engaged in public life. He saw America as a place where showmanship trumped ideals, and he disdained what he saw as the ostentatious nature of wealthy Americans in an overtly capitalist system.¹¹ Einhorn eschewed Wise’s strategy of creating a uniquely American Reform movement and preferred to look to German Reform and culture for inspiration.¹² To sever Reform from its German origins, including the German language, Einhorn believed would spell catastrophe for Reform as a whole.¹³ This was in stark contrast to Sonneschein and Wise, who readily adopted English as one of the languages in which they preached. While Einhorn saw Americanization as dangerous to Judaism, Wise—and later Sonneschein in St. Louis—welcomed it as strengthening Judaism’s future.

After a failed attempt at unity in Cleveland in 1855 and amidst stiff competition between Wise’s prayer book *Minhag America* and Einhorn’s prayer book *Olat Tamid*, a meeting was called in Philadelphia in 1869 involving Einhorn, Wise, and rabbis who fell in either camp. Sonneschein, having only recently begun his career in St. Louis, was also there advocating for his friend and like-minded reformer Wise.¹⁴ Everyone at the meeting agreed on certain general elements of Reform, including anti-Zionist sentiments and the use of vernacular above the use of Hebrew. However, these agreements were more formal than anything else; both Einhorn and Wise had accepted them well before 1869. The cause of most of the division at the meeting was the rite of circumcision. Einhorn starkly adhered to the necessity of such a rite because “the acceptance of

proselytes [converts of mixed decent], through which Judaism acquires many impure elements, must be made more difficult and it is precisely circumcision which can form a barrier against the influx of such elements.”¹⁵ Wise, on the other hand, true to his accepting nature, believed Judaism should “open the gates” to create a more unified humanity.¹⁶ Although Wise’s vision of Reform would eventually become more prominent than Einhorn’s, the two never reconciled their differences. This debate over direction and assimilation was only one of many more to come, as questions of identity in America would prove to be equally as divisive within local temples as they were in national organizations.

While division concerning a uniquely Jewish-American identity was well underway nationally by 1855, St. Louis up to that point remained virtually unscathed by the question of assimilation because Jewish organized religious bodies headed by Jewish spiritual leaders were still new to the area. If the idea of a collective American Jewish identity was new to America nationally, then it was barely in its infancy in St. Louis. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the Jewish population in St. Louis practiced largely outside of temple life. Although the first documented Jewish immigrant settled in St. Louis in 1807, the first temple congregation in St. Louis, United Hebrew, was not established until thirty-four years later, in 1841.¹⁷ This was much later than many other industrialized cities. While Jewish organizations such as charities, fraternal orders, and cemetery societies allowed earlier Jewish immigrants to be active in their faith, the lack of temple organizations largely made it the responsibility of individuals and families to determine what it meant to be a Jew in America. This also meant that it was largely up to the individual family to decide what Jewish practice looked like outside of the well-defined Jewish communities of Europe.¹⁸

It was not until 1866, in the wake of heavy German immigration, when the first Reform temple, Shaare Emeth, would finally be established in St. Louis. The stated purpose of the new temple was to serve members of the two existing orthodox congregations, B’nai El and United Hebrew, as well as unaffiliated Jews.¹⁹ Born in Hungary and educated in Germany, Solomon H. Sonneschein came from New York to St. Louis in 1869, originally only to give a speech for the dedication of one of the buildings at Shaare Emeth. However, he clearly made an impression on the Reform population of St. Louis. The local press reported, “The Reverend Dr. Sonneschein delivered an elegant prayer and benediction, dedicating each particular part of the temple to its

particular function.”²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Sonneschein became the full-time rabbi. Sonneschein and Wise were personal friends as well as colleagues, and Sonneschein adhered to Wise’s vision of Reform in many ways. However, starting his career in St. Louis he was quite modest in his Reforms, yet by the time he left Shaare Emeth, he was in many ways more radical than Wise.

As Reform began in St. Louis, changes were already happening all over the country. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with the Reform movement, the ascetic customs of external worship began to transform to look more like Protestant worship. This trend had begun by a more conservative Reformer, Issac Leeser, who in 1829 instituted sermons as a legitimate part of the Jewish service.²¹ By 1846, Wise had made preaching part of his weekly service.²² Earlier reforms also saw an increased emphasis on preaching in English as opposed to Hebrew or German.²³ The use of organs and music in worship appeared, as did choirs and congregational singing.²⁴ Service structure began



The United Hebrew Congregation building at 21st and Olive streets in St. Louis around 1880. United Hebrew was the oldest Jewish congregation in St. Louis. (Image: Missouri History Museum)

to shorten and change to make room for a longer sermon.²⁵ These reforms were meant to be engaging to both the immigrant and the native-born Jew. The architecture of the temple also began to change. The once very distinctive architecture of the synagogue began to look more in line with Christian styles of architecture.²⁶ These reforms also broke with

longstanding elements of Judaism that were rooted in tradition and theology. By 1865, family pews were introduced at the temple headed by Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati to accommodate the less rigid attitudes toward gender, rather than the traditional practice of segregating men and women.²⁷ A year later Wise also began holding services on Friday evening to accommodate congregants who worked on the traditional Sabbath.²⁸

As Reform took a more solid footing in St. Louis in the late 1860s and throughout the 1870s, it did so along the same lines that Wise and other Reformers across the country had set. In 1870, during his first full year as acting rabbi at Shaare Emeth, Sonneschein proposed a committee to make a new Reformed prayer book with shortened services and attended a meeting in New York at which he would consider the possibility of prayer with uncovered heads.²⁹ Both were clear breaks from orthodoxy. That

Isaac Leeser (1806–1868) ranked among the most important Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century in the United States. As part of his reform efforts, he published a Hebrew-English version of the Torah in 1845. (Image: Library of Congress)



same year he helped organize a religious school that would become successful as the congregation grew. Sonneschein's first few years as acting rabbi also were characterized by growth in the congregation itself. By 1870, Shaare Emeth, which originally only had 80 congregants, had grown rapidly to 140 members.³⁰ By 1875, the congregation numbered 200 members with 128 pupils in the religious school.³¹ It would seem by the temple's unprecedented growth in the early years of Reform in St. Louis that the Reform population was happy with the changes made and with their rabbi. Later actions on Sonneschein's part would bring Shaare Emeth into the broader St. Louis religious community as well. In 1879, he gave assistance to the Second Baptist Church and let it use the sanctuary to worship while its own church was being repaired from fire damage.³² Although it had always been the Sonneschein's practice to preach in his German vernacular, he had also taken up the practice of preaching in English on Friday evenings by 1882, contributing to the increased sense of Americanization in the temple.³³ Many of the reforms during the 1870s and early 1880s were both religious and symbolic of a Jewish congregation moving rapidly towards Reform, yet they had little documented backlash.

Yet discontent developed in the congregation and publicly expressed itself beginning in 1881. The Sonneschein family took a three-month trip back to their Hungarian home, and upon Sonneschein's return he learned that some members of the board had been working against him.³⁴ Tension between the board and Sonneschein continued to mount even more as Sonneschein's attitude became increasingly radicalized and as his reforms became increasingly in favor of a more Americanized and assimilated temple. The religious trouble began when, during a lecture, Sonneschein suggested that Jews and non-Jews should celebrate Christmas and Chanukah as one national holiday.³⁵ The secular and Jewish press publicized the story, and many congregants were outraged.³⁶ The Christmas-Chanukah imbroglio was not simply a reform to modernize Judaism. It sought to consolidate Jews and non-Jews into one American religious holiday. Indeed, Sonneschein's justification for the suggestion of such a holiday was that it would be common to both Americans and Jews.³⁷ While this scandal would not spell the end of unity for Shaare Emeth, by 1884 fifty-four congregants had petitioned that Sonneschein's contract not be renewed.³⁸ In addition, it demonstrated that while Reform was focused in its efforts to create a Jewish-American identity, there was still the lingering question of how far these Reforms should go. Furthermore, the

Christmas-Chanukah controversy proved that there were obvious limits to the extent of assimilation that even Reform-leaning temples, like Shaare Emeth, were willing to take.

However, division over assimilation grew most prominently in 1885 at a national Reform conference that produced the Pittsburgh Platform, which was one of the later attempts to consolidate Reform Judaism into one clear definition and direction, a movement that had begun at least by 1855 with the Cleveland Conference. The Pittsburgh Platform would have some success, especially compared to the other failed conferences that had come before it. Even though it by no means marked the end of division in the Reform movement, it was the beginning of a more uniform movement. It was presided over by Wise and not surprisingly was a triumph for Reform and the effort to bring Judaism into the modern age. Mosaic and rabbinical laws such as those that regulated diet, priestly purity, and dress were deemed to have developed “under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.”³⁹ The Pittsburgh Platform also stipulated that the observance of such traditions was more likely to “obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.”⁴⁰ While many Reform temples had already done away with their adherence to dress codes and dietary laws, the Pittsburgh Platform represents a substantial step toward codifying reform.

Yet as Reform began the process of successful consolidation at a national level, the local St. Louis Reform movement was ripping at the seams. In 1885, a number of rifts emerged in the St. Louis Jewish community over politics and religion conflated with assimilation. While division was already underlying the community, the rift would become more obvious as Sonneschein pushed more vigorous reforms. The troubles in 1885 began in April when, in its annual message to the *Jewish Free Press*, Shaare Emeth expressed concern for its lower attendance at temple services. Following the path that many other Reform temples throughout the country had taken, it suggested a number of changes to draw in more congregants.⁴¹ To combat this problem, Shaare Emeth proposed changes in leadership, both of the congregational school and of the Ritual Committee.⁴² Among the ritual reforms considered to combat low attendance was the introduction of singing during services as well as the discontinuation of Hebrew in the Congregational school.⁴³ While it is not entirely clear to what extent Jews in St. Louis found Hebrew unimportant for their children’s education, popular reports on the subject of the discontinuation of Hebrew cite this as Shaare Emeth’s motivation.⁴⁴

However, this incited backlash from congregants as well as from Sonneschein. While the Pittsburgh Platform did not directly address the use of Hebrew, prior conferences such as the Philadelphia Conference in 1869 stressed Hebrew as important to religion yet gave it a backseat to the vernacular.

Sonneschein took an active stance against that removal. To remove Hebrew from a Jewish school, he argued in a statement to the *Jewish Free Press*, would be like taking an “iconoclastic hand at the vessel of all religious truth.”⁴⁵ Subsequently, he compared it to forcing practicing Jews to eat pork and noted how the dissolution of Hebrew in religious schools would be unfair to the newer and poorer Eastern European immigrants who did not have the money to get a religious education anywhere else.⁴⁶ Being one of the leading voices for reform in St. Louis, Sonneschein’s conservative stance on Hebrew in Jewish schools was somewhat uncharacteristic. Although he described the removal of Hebrew from schools as an assault on the Jewish faith, other members of the Jewish community would characterize many of the reforms he later suggested and effected similarly. The fact that the man who became radical in other aspects of Reform would cling so vehemently to Hebrew speaks as much to the fluid and divisive nature of Reform as it does the idiosyncrasies of Sonneschein. Although the use of the vernacular over Hebrew was not contested nationally, the unbinding nature of conferences combined with the ambiguous language they often used meant that the precise way in which Reform was instituted in a given temple could be controversial, as was the case with Hebrew at Shaare Emeth’s religious school.

Reform’s general stance against Zionism, a movement to re-establish an Israeli state in Palestine, became an avenue through which Reform leaders attached themselves more closely to America as a homeland. The debate within the Reform movement over the question of a Palestinian homeland began in Germany and later stretched into America. The 1869 Philadelphia Conference asserted that the Jewish purpose was “not the restoration of the old Jewish state under a descendant of David” but rather the “dispersion of the Jews to all parts of the earth, for the realization of their high-priestly mission, to lead the nations to the true knowledge and worship of God.”⁴⁷ The Pittsburgh Platform would commit Reform to an anti-Zionist sentiment even more strongly than the Philadelphia Conference. It accepted Mosaic legislation as historically “training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine [and] accept as binding only its

moral laws.⁷⁴⁸ In addition, by rejecting Zionism as a view “not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization,” the Pittsburgh Platform accepted Judaism as “no longer a nation, but a religious community” and sought to usher in a “modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect [and] the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope.”⁷⁴⁹

There seemed to be a clear consensus among Reform leadership concerning the Zionist movement. Yet, under the surface there was much more debate. The Zionist movement became a facet of Reform through which limits of assimilation were tested. Reform leaders throughout America, including Sonneschein, followed the Pittsburgh Platform and spoke out against Zionism as a political movement. Building on his earlier attempts of more complete assimilation of Judaism, he advocated against Zionism because he believed that “constantly looking to the orient would deny that a high minded ethical community could exist in America.”⁷⁵⁰ Furthermore, he believed that Jewish success in America rested, in part, on whether the Jewish youth can be as “proud of their American Citizenship as they ever were their Oriental aristocracy.”⁷⁵¹ Yet the institutions, which developed themselves as resoundingly against Zionism during Reform, were always more of a loose federation than an agent for binding religious change. Although the national sentiment leaned against Zionism, individual sentiment varied greatly on the matter. Zionist leanings eventually became evident among the students and faculty at the Hebrew Union College.⁷⁵² The anti-Zionist consensus that seemed prevalent throughout all Reform leaders was in actuality so weak that by 1897 the Federation of American Zionists was founded and headed by many Reform leaders. It would also receive funding from national Reform organizations like the UAHC.⁷⁵³

The division concerning Zionism which eventually became apparent nationally appeared earlier in 1885 in St. Louis. Sonneschein’s zeal for the Pittsburgh Platform would get him into trouble with the board when in 1885 he introduced debate-style lectures on the Pittsburgh Platform in place of religious services.⁷⁵⁴ While it was eventually resolved that these lectures take place after traditional religious services in a different building, the controversy surrounding resolutions of the Pittsburgh Platform did not end there. The conflict-ridden nature of the Zionist movement is most obviously demonstrated by Sonneschein’s wife, Rosa. Although Sonneschein was himself opposed to the movement, Rosa was so openly in favor of it that in the debates Sonneschein held in 1885, she publicly argued against her husband

in favor of a homeland for Jews.⁷⁵⁵ Rosa took a more active role in matters of religion than was common for women at the time and would eventually become the creator and editor of the first magazine targeted toward Jewish American women, *The American Jewess*, in 1895. In it, she advocated for many of the same changes that male reformers were urging, such as a national organization and an American homeland for Jews.⁷⁵⁶ She sought to bring women into a more broad national Jewish community and often endorsed organizations that were designed to do so, such as the National Council of Jewish Women.⁷⁵⁷ However, in her magazine she also supported the Zionist effort, both as a way to bring women more actively into their faith and as a way to more broadly unite Judaism.⁷⁵⁸ To her mind, there was “no loftier ideal, worthier of realization than Israel’s dream of nationality.”⁷⁵⁹ Zionism was not only a point of division on a national and local level, but in this instance, also a division between a husband and wife. Both Sonnescheins’ stances on Zionism were part of their overall commitment to an American Jewish community and identity. The division between the

Austrian-born Rosa Sonneschein (1847–1932) married Soloman Sonneschein in 1864 in Croatia; they moved to St. Louis in 1869. She was founder of *The American Jewess*, the first magazine for Jewish women written in English in the United States. (Image: American Jewish Archives)



two over the question of a Palestinian homeland within an American context was an indication of the later division over the same question at a national level.

Tensions in 1885 continued to pile up, not only over Zionism and the use of Hebrew in schools, but also over the fact that Sonneschein had held Sunday services in a German Protestant School.⁶⁰ Later that year he was once again involved in scandal when he invited a Christian minister to preach from the temple pulpit.⁶¹ While all of the reforms exhibited strain over religion, they also held an undertone of stress over the question of the level of assimilation that would be present in a rapidly emerging Jewish American identity as they involved the larger Christian community. Beginning with the Christmas-Chanukah imbroglio in 1883, reforms initiated locally by Sonneschein were blurring the once clear lines of what it meant to be Jewish with what it meant to be a part of a larger and mostly Christian America. By 1885, the board of Shaare Emeth and the congregational members had already expressed discontent over the direction of Reforms by maneuvering against Sonneschein. The tensions that were already very clearly underlying a peaceful façade finally came to a head in 1886. Sonneschein, having by this point become a more radical proponent of assimilation and Americanization, was called to perform a funeral for a Sephardic family at their home. At the funeral he was faced with tradition, something he found increasingly abhorrent. In his distaste for anything that he saw as lacking modernity, Sonneschein, much to the dismay of all present at the funeral, pulled off the traditional coverings on the mirrors for a family in mourning and is reported to have said after completion of the service, “may the God of Truth and Justice in His mercy never visit this house.”⁶² The ensuing tension over Sonneschein’s comment nearly ended in a fistfight between Sonneschein and a congregant present at the funeral. This particular instance, although telling of his temperament, was only the final push for members of the board to more actively campaign against Sonneschein who, amidst hostility of the board, finally resigned in 1886. Although the incident at the funeral alone was enough to upset the board, it also demonstrates that Sonneschein was increasingly eschewing anything that he saw as too traditionally Jewish and therefore not American enough. The events at the funeral and Sonneschein’s resignation were only the beginning of a schism between the board of Shaare Emeth and Sonneschein that reflected a substantial rift in the congregation itself.

Although Sonneschien resigned in April of 1886,

it did not take full effect until October to ensure there was an acting rabbi for High Holy Days at Shaare Emeth. During this lame-duck period, in what would become the most scandalous act of his career, he went to Boston to seek a position at a Unitarian church. Shortly after his return from Boston, he married a Jewish woman to a Presbyterian man despite advocating against intermarriage earlier in his career.⁶³ The scandal broke upon his return and shortly after the marriage. The press, both Jewish and secular, turned on him very quickly. As if the fact that he was an ordained rabbi was not scandalous enough, the fact that he was still the presiding rabbi at a Jewish congregation made the event even more condemnable in the eyes of the public. Several reports of the incident publicized that Sonneschein had sought such a position because “the Jewish pulpit had become too narrow for him.”⁶⁴ The whole scandal was further substantiated by Reverend Minot Savage’s statement in the local *Jewish Free Press*, which was edited by Sonneschein’s own friend-turned-enemy, M.C. Reefer, who eventually became Sonneschein’s strongest critic as he expressed discontent with the fact that for seventeen years Sonneschein was never met “with denial in anything reasonable or unreasonable.”⁶⁵ Upon learning of the scandal surrounding Sonneschien’s involvement with the Unitarian Church, Reefer, in his own editorial piece, warned the Jewish public to defend Judaism “against the encroachment of the enemy” and to “beware of the traitors within our camp.”⁶⁶ As Sonneschein turned even further toward the idea of a more fully merged Jewish and American identity and exhibited the willingness to leave Judaism, even his former friends considered him not only a personal enemy, but also an enemy to Judaism.

While Sonneschien was clearly radical, his reforms cannot simply be written off as the ramblings of one zealous reformer in a much more moderate movement. As the schism between Sonneschein and the board of Shaare Emeth deepened, divisions within the congregation itself came to the fore. Although Sonneschien was pressured to resign in April, only a month later a group of congregants petitioned Sonneschein on May 10, 1886, to re-apply for the position of rabbi, which he did. In June, Sonneschien was called before the board to defend himself. This was the first time a rabbi had ever been so ordered by a temple board in American history.⁶⁷ The board denied the application to reinstate him as rabbi. However, congregants in favor of Sonneschein were not finished fighting to keep their rabbi. On June 3, the board’s denial to re-hire Sonneschein was overturned by a congregational meeting that

voted to keep him.⁶⁸ By September, the board agreed to offer him a one-year extension on his contract, which he denied with the intention of starting his own congregation.⁶⁹ The whole debacle ended when both sides agreed that Sonneschein would finish out his remaining contract at which point he would be awarded \$5,000 and leave Shaare Emeth.⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, Sonneschein and a group of between sixty to seventy congregants of Shaare Emeth broke away to form Temple Israel.⁷¹ Temple Israel took with it just under half of the congregants of Shaare Emeth.⁷² Not surprisingly, in his first sermon, Sonneschien championed radical Reform. Passionately, he proclaimed that the new congregation should do “away with half measures of old, [and] away with complete compromise, crush it under the heel of principal.”⁷³ To Sonneschien, orthodoxy was an “immobile ship in a harbor” which transforms those inside into “big babies.”⁷⁴ The decision for Sonneschien to leave Shaare Emeth ended in a mutual agreement between the two. However, Sonneschien’s exit did not come without a push on the part of the board to rid itself of him, and a pull from some of the congregants to keep him as their rabbi. Furthermore, the fact that the initial gesture to suspend Sonneschien came not from the board, but congregants in the form of a petition, also suggests a disconnection within the congregation itself. While Sonneschein was clearly pivotal in invoking conflict throughout St. Louis Judaism, he was also a figure through which congregants could express either their desire or contempt for further reform by advocating for or against his place as rabbi.

The scandal surrounding Sonneschein’s connection to the Unitarians rang throughout the national Reform and secular community. It was even reported by the *New York Times*.⁷⁵ It also put Sonneschein’s friends in a difficult position. Wise, being Sonneschein’s close friend, decided to cancel the annual conference of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations that year after he realized that many other attending rabbis did not want Sonneschein there.⁷⁶ Although he would excuse the cancellation by attributing it to the death of James K. Gutheim, his real motivation was obvious to anyone in the Reform community.⁷⁷ Despite his pivotal role in the creation of Temple Israel, Sonneschein left St. Louis for another congregation in 1893, only seven years after its

establishment.⁷⁸ His legacy however, was lasting; Shaare Emeth and Temple Israel remained separate even though the rabbi that exacerbated tensions was gone.

The questions surrounding a Jewish-American identity that led to the temple split were the direct result of increased German immigration to St. Louis as well as a nationally organizing movement which sought to define the movement as a whole. However, Judaism in America prior to the mid-nineteenth century had never had any centralized leadership. The institutions that developed to try to guide the Reform movement nationally had little control over Reform rabbis and even less sway over the minds of individuals who attended newly formed Reform congregations across the country. While Reform came about peacefully in St. Louis from 1886 through the early 1880s, as it developed it would have to face the same anxieties over assimilation that the national movement and other communities in other cities had faced since the 1850s. A rabbi who sought to keep pace with a national movement while serving a local congregation that was divided over resolutions agreed upon nationally then exacerbated these anxieties.

In the 1850s, the national Reform movement debated assimilation to its American home through circumcision and the German language. Later in 1885, in the aftermath of one of the most groundbreaking conferences in the Reform Jewish movement, St. Louis would also debate assimilation, although through different avenues. Rather than German language or circumcision, St. Louis debated assimilation of the temple through Zionism, which also was argued nationally at the time. More prominent locally, the use of Judaism’s traditional spiritual language, Hebrew, proved to be quite contentious. Although Sonneschein was confident in his own reforms, for board members and congregants of Shaare Emeth, there was no clear answer as to at what point an assimilated Jewish identity ceased to be truly Jewish and was altogether replaced by an American one. On the other hand, there was also no clear answer as to how long orthodoxy and strict traditions could exist in America without being detrimental to Jewish life in America.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jeffrey Stiffman, *Congregation Shaare Emeth: 150 Gates of Truth, 1867-2017* (St. Louis, MO: Congregation Shaare Emeth, 2015), 26-31.
- ² Benny Kraut, "A Unitarian Rabbi? The Case of Solomon H. Sonneschein," published in *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, edited by Todd M. Endleman (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes and Meier Publishing, 1987), 274.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Alan Silverstein, *Alternatives to Assimilation: The Response of Reform Judaism to American Culture, 1840-1930* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1994), 19.
- ⁵ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 225.
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