

Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) was formed for this singular purpose. Wanting the college to accommodate the full gamut of American Judaism, he sent invitations to every congregation in America, from the most traditional to the most radical. Thirty-four congregations responded in the affirmative, and in 1875 the Hebrew Union College (HUC) opened its doors in Cincinnati.

Why did Wise choose “union” in naming the UAHC and HUC?

The word “union” had a double meaning. First, the Civil War had just been fought to preserve the Union; and second, Wise wished to instill unity among all Jews in the United States, preparing both Orthodox and Reform rabbis to serve the broad spectrum of American Jewry. As he saw it, his modern rabbinical seminary would combine the best fruits of contemporary scholarship with traditional Jewish learning.

That is also why Wise purposely did not use the word “Reform” in naming his institutions. His aspiration was to create an American Judaism—an irony, given that he ultimately became identified as the father of Reform Judaism.

What foiled Wise’s plan for an American Judaism?

By 1883, the year of Hebrew Union College’s first graduating class, Wise realized that his dream of a nondenominational, unified American Judaism would not happen. The number

of Yiddish-speaking Jews streaming in from Eastern Europe would soon surpass the number of German Jews in America, and the cultural gaps between the two groups—in religious practice, language, education, social status, and acculturation to Western norms—were too wide to be bridged.

To celebrate HUC’s first class, a meal was served to rabbis present from every sector of American Judaism. Many guests, including the keynote speaker, stormed out in disgust as the food appeared—shrimp, soft-shell crabs, half-shell clams, and non-kosher meats! Many historians contend that the “Treifa Banquet,” as this incident came to be called, was a caterer’s error, but it may have been intentional, or at least, fortuitous. After all, Wise had the opportunity to apologize publicly for this offense to the more traditional, kosher-observant guests, yet he chose not to. Therefore, regardless of who was at fault for the menu, it appears that Wise decided to use the event to send a message that Judaism was not going to be defined by “archaic” dietary prohibitions. Indeed, two years later, a group of influential Reform rabbis issued the Pittsburgh Platform, proclaiming, “We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress, originated in ages and under the influence of ideas altogether foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.”

What was the Hebrew Union College of the late 1800s like?

Interestingly, all the students were college graduates, which Wise required—despite the fact that during this period high school graduation was not a universal practice; as late as 1910, fewer than 10% of Americans graduated from high school. Younger students attended McMicken College, forerunner of the University of Cincinnati. Another entrance requirement—according to the catalogue—was the mastery of a minimum of 150 pages of Talmud!

Instruction was in English, but the curriculum was modeled on that of the modern German seminary, covering a wide variety of subjects from philosophy to rabbinic literature to history, the latter undergirding the whole curriculum. After all, Reform Judaism taught that Judaism was a constantly evolving religion in which eternal elements of ethics and values were passed down from one generation to another, and only the ritualistic forms embodied in these values were changing from generation to generation. Study of Judaism’s evolution from the biblical to the contemporaneous period thus demonstrated the truth that Judaism was in a constant state of historical flux and development.

Nonetheless, Wise, a traditionalist at heart, insisted that the entirety of the first five books of Moses were delivered by God at Mount Sinai, and he strictly forbade the teaching of biblical criticism at HUC! Notably, Rabbi Louis Ginzberg was invited to teach at the College, but when Wise learned that Ginzberg believed in the documentary hypothesis—the view that the Torah is an edited compilation of texts from different writers—he promptly rescinded the invitation! Ginzberg went on to become arguably the world’s greatest Talmud scholar, teaching at the (Conservative Movement’s) Jewish Theological Seminary, where he served the remainder of his career. When Wise was succeeded by Kaufmann Kohler, one of Kohler’s first acts was to introduce biblical criticism into the curriculum, in accordance with his belief that Judaism is “a universal religion allied with progress.”

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1. If the “elements that bind [the different Jewish movements] are more powerful than those which divide us,” how might Jews of different denominations work together to strengthen Jewish life in North America?
2. Would breaking down barriers between the different Jewish movements be a positive development in the evolution of Judaism in North America? If yes, what might the breakdown of further barriers require? If no, why not?
3. Rabbi Ellenson says that “we have come closer to Isaac Mayer Wise’s dream of an American Judaism” than ever before. Do you think we should reenvision our Movement’s scope—and its name—to encompass the majority of liberal Jewry in North America? If yes, what would you call this Movement? If no, why not?

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